



PRESIDENT BAK'R CREATES HISTORY

“And the Lord God planted a garden Eastward in Eden; And there he put the man whom he had formed. And out of the ground made the Lord God to grow every tree that is pleasant to the sight, and good for food; the tree of life also in the midst of the garden, and the tree of knowledge of good and evil. And a river went out of Eden to water the garden; and from thence it was parted, and became into four heads. The name of the first is Pison: that is it which compasseth the whole land of Havilah, where there is gold; And the gold of that land is good; There is bdellium and the onyx stone. And the name of the second river is Gihon: The same is it that compasseth the whole land of Ethiopia. And the name of the third river is Hiddekel: That is it which goeth toward the East of Assyria. And the fourth river is Euphrates”. (Genesis 2: 8-14)

From such luminous hints as are contained in this Biblical reference to the

first abode of Man, scholars have tried to fix the location of the Garden of Eden. All available indications show that the sacred writer had an ideal locality in mind when he described the site of the Eden Garden and that he meant to assign to it some definite terrestrial position.

Hiddekel of the Bible is Idikle, the Sumerian name of the Tigris. The Euphrates was the Sumerian Pura or 'water' which became Purat (Heb: perath) in Semetic Babylonian. The Greek name Euphrates came through the Persian Ufratus. The identification of Biblical Hiddekel with the Tigris is generally accepted, and it is the great river of Daniel by the side of which he saw some of his most important visions. The identification with any known rivers of Pison and Gihon has proved extremely baffling to scholars and commentators. It has been suggested that they were branches of the Lower Tigris or the Lower Euphrates which became silted up or that

they were rivers which disappeared in the Deluge. Successful identification of these two rivers of Eden has not been reached so far; but Scholars are unanimous that two of the rivers of Eden are undoubtedly the Tigris and the Euphrates.

Scientific studies have shown that the Persian Gulf once reached up to about where the city of Baghdad stands today, and it is also known today that even at the beginning of the post-glacial period, the shore-line of the Persian Gulf was at Hit, some miles above Babylon. Perhaps the 'river' which became four 'heads' is the Persian Gulf into which the Tigris and the Euphrates with the other two rivers originally flowed. Soil washed down by the Tigris and the Euphrates has filled part of the Persian Gulf, and most of the soil of ancient Babylonia was carried there by these two rivers. Thus Eden was very probably in southern Mesopotamia—in the alluvial plains of Babylonia, which is one of the ancient names for the southern part of the Tigris - Euphrates river valley in modern Iraq. It may be noted too that the plain of Babylonia was called 'Edin' in the ancient Sumerian language of the country and the word was adopted by the Semetic Babylonians in the form of 'Edinu'.

Babylon was the captial of Babylonia, located about 60 miles south of the site of modern Baghdad. The name Babylon means 'gate of the god.' The Biblical word for Babylon was Babel. It was here, in this great Metropolis of ancient Mesopotomia, the Apostles St. Peter and St. Thomas established the First Church during their early Apostolic missions. It may therefore be said that the Church of the East was born in the land where God planted the Garden of Eden with the Paradise for Adam and Eve; in the land where Abraham lived, and from where he led his kindred into the land of Canaan under God's command.".....and they went forth with them from Ur of the Chaldees, to go into the land of Canaan;" (Genesis 12:31)".....and they went forth to go into the land of Canaan; and into the land of Canaan, they came". (Genesis 12:5)

Among the chief factors which made the Christian Gospel more easily understood and accepted by the Assyrians than by other races, is the fact that the Christian faith is of Semetic origin and revealed through prophecies in that language; namely the Aramaic, a language common to both the Assyrians and the Jews in the time of Christ. Thus the Holy Faith spread in Assyria and Babylonia, and was spread in other countries of the East by the missionaries of the Church of Babylon. Speaking about the missionary enterprise of the Church of the East, Dr. John Stewart says; "The amazing thing is not where they went, but rather where did they not go?" (Nestorian Missionary Enterprise.)

The part played by the Church of the East in the cultural field is no less remarkable than that of its missionary enterprise. The famous college of Edessa which became the centre of diffusing knowledge and learning both East and West, was founded in early part of the third century, A. D. as a monastic institution. By the end of the fourth century, its fame had travelled throughout the Christian world. Great saints and scholars, such as Mar Aprim and Mar Narsay, known as the harp of the spirit, were the products of this College and later became its Principals. The names and fame of a host of other saints and scholars, trained in all the knowledge and sciences of the day, products of the college of Edessa, and that of Nisbin, have passed into history.

The Church of Babylon flourished in the rich Mesopotomian plains, and through the centuries, it flourished in the alluvial soil of its glorious missionary enterprise throughout the length and breadth of the vastness of Asia. History records that the growth and development of this ancient Church was far from smooth and unhampered. It was subjected to ruthless persecutions, and the persecutions unleashed by the Roman and Persian Emperors against the Holy Church of the East have great lessons for the historian of Christianity.

The persecutions which the church had to endure through the centuries fall mainly into five periods: under the non-Christian Roman Emperors; under the Monophysites of the Roman Empire; under the Persian Emperors; under the Mangol Khans, and in modern times. The Roman persecution of the Church of the East preceded and the Monophysitic persecution followed the Persian persecutions under Sapor II - A. D. 339 - 379, Bahram v A. D. 420, and Yezd'gerd II in A. D. 438. The final test of the faith of these Christians came in the year 339 A. D., and the Catholicos Patriarch of the day, Mar Shimun Bar Sabai along with five Bishops and a hundred clergy and other faithful, sealed his testimony with his blood.

The persecution which took place under emperor Yezd'gerd in the year 448 A. D. was perhaps the worst of the Persian persecutions. According to authentic accounts of the martyrdoms which took place in Karkha D'beth Slukh, now known as Kerkuk in Iraq, on a mound outside the city, ten bishops and 153,000 others suffered martyrdom for their faith in Christ. The redness of the gravel of the hillock, in contrast to the surrounding soil, is said to have been caused by the blood of the martyrs of the Church of the East.

The importance of the Persian persecutions can scarcely be overestimated as a contributing factor in the marvellous expansion of the missions of the Church of the East that took place in the fourth, fifth and subsequent centuries. This period in the history of the Church marks the greatest surge in its missionary enterprise. The faithful took refuge in countries beyond the borders of the Persian Empire, and wherever they went, they were one and all the missionaries of the Cross.

John Stewart, author of 'Nestorian Missionary Enterprise', speaking of these martyrs, says:

"Nowhere in the history of the Christian Church is there any body of men and

women to whom may more fittingly be applied the words of 'Hebrews 11: 33-38'. John Stewart adds: "These are the men whom the arrogance of Rome has branded as heretics all down the centuries. Would to God that the Churches and missions of today might be inoculated with the same brand of heresy if it but led to such a mighty work of grace as was wrought through these missionaries of the 'Church of the East', the Nestorian Church of the sixth, seventh and subsequent centuries of the Christian era!"

It might be safely asserted that the religious persecutions which wrecked the Church of the East from the third to the fifth century, and from the 12th to the 13th Century and which left it but a remnant of its past glory in central and eastern Asia were re-enacted in some parts of the Continent in the 17th century and in the first half of the present century. In India, in the seventeenth century, the Church suffered terribly from the intrigues and persecutions launched by the Portuguese imperialists. In the name of Christianity, in the name of the Catholic Church of Christ, they used fire and sword to destroy the Chaldean Syrian Church in India; and when the 20th century was born, this ancient Church which had once churches from Kashmir to Cape Comorin shrank into the limits of a town and its suburbs in the north of the erstwhile Cochin State. But it exists to this day.

In the land of its birth, in Mesopotamia, the fate of the Assyrian Church was not very different; in a way, quite different, for there, by the time, the present century was three decades old, the Assyrian community found itself nailed in a valley of tears and sorrow. Persecutions of the past had driven its headquarters to the mountains of Kurdistan, and the organisation of the Church had suffered heavily from the consequences of those cataclysms.

The establishment of Arab power in Central Asia after the fall of the Persian Empire gave the Church of the East some

peace for some time. In spite of certain restrictions, the Church in the Caliphate was recognised as a separate national group and was granted legal protection. The scholars of the Church of the East played a prominent part in the formation of Arab culture and the Patriarchs occasionally gained influence with the Rulers. After the foundation of the new Capital, Baghdad (762 A. D.) under the Abbasid dynasty, the Ecclesiastical See of the Catholicos Patriarch of the East was transferred there.

From Caliph Omar, the Patriarch secured a guarantee of protection for the Assyrian Christians on condition of their paying a certain tribute. From Omar, he subsequently received a charter of a more favourable character by which the tribute was remitted. Omar's successor Caliph Ibn Abi Taleb confirmed these concessions and privileges in a charter expressive of high esteem for the Christian religion, at least in its 'Nestorian' form. Milne Rae in his book 'The Syrian Church in India' writes:

" In fact, some of the earlier Mohammedan princes carried their good will towards the Nestorians beyond mere protection, so that they enjoyed in several ways the preference of the Caliphs, who favoured their commerce, employed them as secretaries and physicians and raised some of them to Municipal dignities" Since these Neo-Chaldeans were famous scholars, the Caliphs employed them to render among other works, those of Aristotle and Galen, besides original works from Chaldee, Persian and Egyptian, and sent many of them to Syria, Armenia and Egypt to collect manuscripts. But as Rae points out "with all these instances of patronage, yet under the dominion of the Saracens, which endured for six hundred years, the Church had often to maintain its existence through oppression and injury from the fickleness or cruelty of the reigning potentate----"

It is not far from the truth to say that the injury and oppression, the Church in

Iraq endured in the terrible years of the First World War, and again in the years 1930-1933 were but the culmination of all the jealousies and animosities which had been simmering against the Church of the East for years. It was World War 1 that hastened this cataclysmic culmination. The turmoil that came after the War generated governmental hostility against the Assyrian Church and the Patriarchate of the East. Iraq in those days had a monarchical regime, and in the high drama of persecution that was enacted in the "alluvial plains of Mesopotamia" the Assyrians were ruthlessly hunted out. Thousands of them were massacred; hundreds of their villages were destroyed and the Community was most hopelessly scattered. It was nothing short of a genocide.

This persecution was two-pronged; it was directed not only against the Assyrian community and its organised strength, but also against the Holy see of the East. Finally, most tragically, in 1933, the Iraqi Government deported the Patriarch His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun into Cyprus.

The second half of the present century witnessed the coming of radical socio-political changes in the Arab world. The wind of progressive republicanism began to blow over West Asia from 1950, and the new socialist, republican regimes that came to stay in some of the countries of the region took effective and energetic measures to undo the wrongs which the predecessor-governments had done in several spheres. Iraq is one among them.

Admittedly, the situation in Iraq in respect of the Church of the East was on many counts complex and complicated. To add fuel to fire, the suspended Metropolitan Darmo went to Iraq in 1968, and the sorrows of the Church grew bigger and deeper in consequence. So hopeless was the situation that emerged that the children of the church had nothing to do but to raise their eyes and their hands in prayer to Heaven, and Heaven responded, for Heaven

shall never allow this most ancient Church to be blotted out of existence on this earth.

The Socialist Republican Government of Iraq under His Excellency Ahmed Hassan al Bakr studied the situation most earnestly. The ends of the Iraqi Revolution demand that justice should be done to all sections of the population; internal peace and happiness demanded the settlement of all major domestic questions. All religions are news and word of the Almighty, channels through which God discharges His grace and grandeur into this world. The Revolutionary Government of His Excellency Bakr, in their anxiety to strengthen the forces of revolution and to transform their great nation into a mighty centre of peace and progress, took a revolutionary, socialistically realistic look at the whole Assyrian question, and deft diplomacy and cool statesmanship enabled them to solve this question in March-April, 1970.

By their March Manifesto of 1970, the Iraqi Government revoked the ban on His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun's entry into his beloved homeland, and restored to the Patriarch his Iraqi nationality. It also restored to His Holiness' delegate in Iraq all the churches and properties of the Church and recognized Mar Eshai Shimun as the Supreme Head of the Assyrian Church and the Community. These were inspired acts of supreme magnanimity, and the year 1970 would pass into the history of modern Iraq as a significant land mark, for in this year, BAK'R CREATED HISTORY.

The Church of the East celebrated in April last year the Golden Jubilee of His Holiness Mar Eshai Shimun, and the children of the Church most earnestly believe that it was the will of God that the historic event of His Holiness' apostolic visit to Iraq coincided with his Golden Jubilee. They also whole-heartedly believe that the Divine Omnipotence chose to manifest itself gloriously in the great and gracious decision of President Bakr of Iraq to do justice to the Assyrian Church in his country. The faithful would thank the President and his Government for all the

courage and kindness and sagacity and magnanimity shown by them in studying and solving the Assyrian question justly.

We, the sons and daughters of the Church in India, have always felt inspired by the loyalty of the Assyrians to the countries in which they live. Our leadership has always endeavoured successfully to keep our community in the main stream of Indian nationalism. Hence, we were thrilled to learn that the Revolutionary Government of Iraq was pleased to welcome Mar Eshai Shimun in last April as the Supreme Head of the Church of the East and to give the Church a glorious 'New Deal',



Representatives of the Indian Church met the Hon'ble Minister of Iraq.

1st. row: A. Paul Padavan, Aziz Sherim (Hon'ble Minister of Justice, Govt. of Iraq), Rev. V. T. Rappai, A. V. John, 2nd row: O. I. Thomas, T. L. Porinchu, M. O. Varoo, A. V. Kadavi, C. C. Timothy (now Ven. Archdeacon)

Mr. Aziz Sherim, Minister of Justice in the Iraqi government, who was in India last year with members of the world Peace Council was kind enough to meet at Trivandrum therepresentatives of the Church who had gone to convey the gratitude of the Church in India to the President and Government of Iraq. The Honourable Minister told them that the problems relating to the minorities in general and the Khurds its particular have been solved satisfactorily

To the world Council of Churches which adopted an intensely pro-Darmo stance and to others who did their best to black out the news of the Patriarch's historic visit to Iraq; these words of His Holiness may be most fittingly addressed:

"This once great Church of Asia, now only a shadow of its former self, and with its spiritual body covered by wounds of

twenty centuries of endless martyrdom, has very little to offer in the way of numerical contribution to the world Council of Churches, of which she is a proud member. But its contribution as the bastion of the Christian Faith in Asia and the fact that it has preserved throughout the storms of history the Scriptures in their original, is, we think, the greatest Contribution, it can make to the world Council"

(Light From the East-August-September 1954)

These historic events have sent into the Church of the East a spring of hopes and aspirations. God's ways are mysterious; His purposes are great; His grandeur is man's strand. The children of the Church in India pray most fervently that the Almighty God in His infinite power and wisdom may bring the Government and people of Iraq all peace and progress and happiness.



"To make no mistakes is not in the power of man; but from their errors and mistakes, the wise and the good learn wisdom for the future"

Plutarch.

"The whole world is my country, all man-kind are my brethren, and to do good is my religion."

Thomas Paine.

