

NESTORIAN
MISSIONS

MAR APREM

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By

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NESTORIAN MISSIONS

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FOREWORD

by the Rev. Dr. Akbar Abdul Haqq., M. A., Ph. D.

The greatest commandment in the Mosaic Law says, "Love the Lord thy God, with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind." Such a love which pre-occupies the whole life of a believer was the main reason for the existence of the chosen people on a planet in rebellion against God. The second most important com-



mandment called for the people of God to love their neighbours like themselves. This neighbourly love was not meant to be a sentimental humanitarianism that is characteristic of guilt-ridden people without God. It was, rather, a concern on the part of a believer to first share his best with those around him and then his other posse-

ssions. The best inheritance a believer has is the unconditional, all-encompassing love for God. Hence when he proposes to love his neighbour like himself, he dare not deprive him of the best — the

love of God. Thus the second commandment is missionary in its outlook.

Under the New Covenant the supreme love toward the unseen God is rendered fully personal, warm and real due to His Incarnation, the Lord Jesus Christ. Therefore the true Israel of God, His Church, is called upon to love the Lord Jesus Christ absolutely and unconditionally. It is so imperative for a true Christian that St. Paul makes the amazingly bold statement:

“If any man love not the Lord Jesus let him be anathema. Maranatha.” (1 Cor. 16:22). The crucial significance of this love is fully supported by the Lord of the Church Himself. For example, in His message to the Church in Ephesus He is more anxious to receive their first love than all other outstanding works they did for Him. (Rev. 2:1–5) A loss of the first love involved the most serious possibility of rejection of the Church by her Lord.

These days not much emphasis is laid upon the primacy of the first commandment of the Covenant of grace—first love toward the Lord of the Church. It can be said that to the extent the Church today has become an alienated lover of Christ, she has her problems and woes. Both in the West as well as the East the Church is pre-occupied with works, programme, organization, strategies, finance, spiritual experiences and gifts

as means to use in the Kingdom of God. One hears precious little about a need to return to the first love for the Lord Jesus Christ.

One sure way of returning to and abiding in the love of the Lord is to begin by obeying His commandments. The Lord puts it plainly:

“If you love me keep my commandments.” This Keeping of his commandments of the part of a disciple is both the cause and the effect of a living and growing love for Him. On the other hand, not keeping His commandments is no neutral ground. Rather, it is the dangerous ground of shameful disobedience to our Lord who has purchased us with His precious blood. The second significant commandment of the New Covenant is what is known as the Great Commission. It concerns the neighbourhood.

“Go ye in to all the world, and preach the Gospel to every creation.” (Mk. 16: 15) There was a church in the Orient which lived up to this commandment for several centuries during the early part of the Christian era, because she obeyed the first commandment and loved her Lord in the real sense of the word. Her laymen and clergy both turned into missionaries with an undying passion for the extension of the kingdom of God. Through their instrumentality the Lord touched Asia—the cradle of world religions, with His life and light in a phenomenal way. The breath-taking

missionary outreach of this mighty Church in the East finally succumbed to the onslaughts of Islam from without and a degenerative spirit of compromise within that plagued the Church. Mar Aprem has undertaken the task of writing a popular history of this great Church of Christ, the Nestorian Church in the East. It is a timely contribution to the future of the Church in the Orient today.

On the Asian scene these days, we are witnessing the end of the Western missionary enterprise which started with the founding of colonial empires. As a result, the church in the Orient is passing through a deep spiritual and organizational crisis. She has become self-centered and introspective, making only uncertain sounds to the non-Christian world around which is knocking at her doors shouting, "Sir, we would see Jesus." The most neglected area of her concern currently is the great commission from her Lord. It appears that she is under the spell of a pernicious inferiority complex due to the small numbers of her ranks compared to the overwhelming majority of her non-Christian neighbors. Such a feeling of insecurity has not been helped at all by the departure of the foreign missionary and stoppage of aid from abroad. Moreover, the current activity of Western Christians in terms of evangelistic conferences, missionary strategies and neo-missionary organizations, has left the Asian Christians with a

feeling of their own helplessness in comparison to their Western brethren, in the field evangelism. They expect therefore to maintain a status quo depending still on the resourcefulness of the Western Christians to complete the task of world evangelization.

At such a spiritual juncture in the history of the church in the Orient, it is time to hear from her long-forgotten past—the thrilling story of the Nestorian Missionary enterprise during the early centuries of the Christian era. These Christians did not have great material means nor were they able to engage in planning great missionary strategies computerized and perfected in world-conferences to win the world in our time. Yet, they carried the torch of the Gospel all across the vast Asian continent, at the cost of great personal suffering and often martyrdom for untold numbers. Laymen and clergy alike were led by the Holy Spirit to push the frontiers of the Kingdom of God far and wide.

Mar Aprem is eminently suited to write a popular history of the mighty Nestorian Missionary outreach. Apart from his academic qualification he is the right person for the undertaking on account of his own spiritual heritage and ecclesiastical position. He is the present head of the Chaldean Church in the East—a church which has descended directly from the great Nestorian Church in the

East. It is my opinion that this remnant church in India with a glorious history of evangelism during the centuries gone by, is destined to play a vital role in awakening the rest of the Church in the country to her current evangelistic responsibility and bringing India and the Orient to Him whom to know is life eternal.

I commend enthusiastically, Mar Aprem's book to fellow Christians all over India and the world. May it be used of the Lord to hasten the day when every member of His living Church today will be transformed into a missionary firebrand like Nestorians of old who set the whole of Asia on fire once upon a time. Amen.

INTRODUCTION

I have spoken about the history of the missionary expansion of the Nestorian Church in many places. During a conference in Sattal Ashram at the foot of the Himalayan mountains in October 1975, Dr. Akbar Abdul Haqq, a world evangelist, suggested to me that I should write a short book on the history of the missionary expansion of this great missionary church. The Church of the East was a great missionary Church once. But not now. In order to educate our people about our past heritage it is necessary to write a short history. The present work is meant to do that.

There is already a book entitled *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, the story of a Church on fire, written by the Rev. John Stewart M. A., Ph. D., who was a missionary of the United Free Church of Scotland in Madras, India. When this book was published in 1928 in Great Britain and Madras, it created a great interest among scholars. When the Viceroy of India Lord Irwin visited Kottayam in 1929, Mar Abimalek Timotheus Metropolitan (1878-1945) personally presented to him a copy of this book.

Ever since 1928 this remains the only book for this church to be given to outsiders to give

information about this church. In 1961 when the World Council of Churches met in New Delhi the Church of the East took permission from the original publishers to make a reprint. Thus the church was able to provide to the leaders of Christian communities from abroad a history of the Church. Although a few copies of this book are still available at Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, there is a need for a shorter book which can provide the missionary history of this Church. This book is meant to serve that purpose.

When John Stewart wrote the history of the Church of the East, he could not find a better title than "Nestorian Missionary Enterprise". He called it "the story of a church on fire". He rightly described this church as the "most missionary of all churches".¹

This church started from Edessa and spread in the Persian empire. Suffering the persecutions of the Persian Kings Sapor II (A. D. 339-379), Bahram V (A.D. 420) and Yezdgerd II (A.D. 448), this missionary minded church grew. Its monastic movement and evangelistic zeal expedited the missionary endeavours.

The church spread to Arabia and central and eastern Asia. A King of the Turks was converted to Christianity in the year A. D. 781, during the

1. John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, p xxxiv.

Patriarchate of Mar Timotheus I. ¹ This Patriarch ordained a Metropolitan for the Turks and was about to do the same for Tibet. ²

Mission to India does not have to be described in detail. The Indian Church had received several bishops from the Nestorian patriarchs. Ceylon is also believed to have been its missionary field. Japan too received Nestorian missionaries. ³ It spread to Java too. ⁴ And there was a great mission in China since the seventh century.

About the magnitude of the missionary expansion of this ancient Church of the East, John Stewart has this to write :

There is evidence that there were Christians in Japan before the close of the eighth century. That there were not only strong Christian communities, but Christian Kings and Christian generals in China and in the countries adjoining, before the middle of the seventh century, is equally well authenticated. The same is true of Mongolia, Siberia in the neighbourhood of lake Baikal, India north as well as

1. A Mingana, "Early Spread of Christianity", *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library*, Vol. IX. p. 306. cf. J. Stewart p. 83,

2. *Ibid.*

3. P. Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China*, Tokyo: Maruzen, 1930; pp. 444-447.

4. *Ibid.*

south, Ceylon, Burmah and the straits of Malacca. Indeed the difficulty is to find a place in all Asia where Nestorian Christians or missionaries had not gone. They occupied positions of influence and importance, and one at least of the Mongol emperors is known to have been a Christian, while the wives of several were Christians and exerted a wholesome Christian influence.

This work is not meant to be a substitute to the book of the Rev. Dr. John Stewart. This is a sincere effort by a member of this Church to tell the story of the missionary heritage of his own forefathers. It is said out of his own convictions. The author is one who not only preaches but also practises what our Lord Jesus Christ has commanded us to do i. e., to preach His Gospel to all the nations. He breaks the barriers of denominationalism when he preaches the Gospel. He is conscious of his failures in preaching the word of God as effectively as he should. He is also aware of the lethargy of the members of his own church in preaching the Gospel to all the people. This book is meant to shake them up from the coolness and set them on fire to be made useful for the Lord.

This book is written amidst the many responsibilities of Church administration and preaching.

Hence it is not the outcome of any extensive research. It has drawn considerably from the book of Dr. John Stewart referred to earlier.. Instead of postponing the writing of this book to a time of convenient study and research, the author felt it his duty to make these facts available to the people interested to know of the missionary tradition of his church. Unfortunately there are no historians of repute in this church. Whatever the author has been able to gather on this subject, from various books he read during the last two decades, he has brought out in this book. It is his hope that the reading of this small book will stir many people to action to do the Lord's command to preach the word of God.

Metropolitan's Palace }
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13 June 1976. }

Mar Aprem.

CHAPTER I

ORIGIN OF THE CHURCH

The Church of the East is known by various other names such as the East Syrian Church, Babylonian Church, the Persian Church, the Edessan Church, the Nestorian Church, the Seleucian Church and the Chaldean Syrian Church. Regarding its origin we have a very interesting story about King Abgar recorded by the first ecclesiastical historian, Eusebius of Caesarea. Since this story may sound incredible to some of his readers, after recording the story, Eusebius explains:

You have the proof of these facts also in writing, taken from the record office at Edessa, then a city ruled by Kings. Thus, in the public documents there, which contain ancient matters and those connected with Abgar, these things have been found preserved from that day until now. But there is nothing like hearing

the letters themselves, taken by us from the archives and literally translated from the Syriac as follows: ¹

Therefore it is clear that Eusebius is not just repeating some hearsay accounts.² He has done enough research in the available documents before copying this letter of Abgar³ and the reply of Jesus.⁴ The letter of Abgar runs as follows: —

“Abgar Uchama, toparch, to Jesus, gracious saviour, who has appeared in the region of Jerusalem greeting. I have heard of thee and of cures as having been brought by thee without medicines or herbs. For, by a word thou doest make the blind to receive their sight, the lame to walk and doest cleanse the lepers, cast out unclean spirits and devils, heal them that are tormented with long sickness, and raise up the dead. And when I heard all this concerning thee I was convinced of one of two things either that thou art God and doest these things, having come

1. Ecclesiastical History I., 13:5.

2. J. B. Segal thinks that “*The Syriac Acts of Thaddeus*” was perhaps the source of the account of Abgar in Eusebius. The Ecclesiastical History was completed in 324 or 325 A. D. The *Acts of Thaddeus* was composed probably in the end of the third century. J. B. Segal: *Edessa, ‘The Blessed City’*, Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970, p. 62 Footnote 3.

3. Verses 6, 7 and 8.

4. Verses 10.

down from heaven or that, because thou doest them, thou art the son of God. Therefore for these causes I write and beseech thee to trouble thyself to come to me and heal the disorder which I have. For verily I have heard that even the Jews are murmuring at thee and wish to do thee harm. But I have a very small city. Yet Stately one; which will suffice us both."

To this letter, Jesus wrote a reply and sent it through the hand of the courier Ananias. Members of this church often take pride in the fact that it is the only letter believed to have been written by Jesus himself. Not even the Holy Bible contains any letter written by Jesus. There is no reference anywhere that he ever wrote anything except what he wrote in the sand in the description of the story of the woman taken in adultery. Jesus writes:

Blessed art thou who didst believe in me, not having seen me. For it is written of me that they who have seen me will not believe in me, even that they who have not seen me may themselves believe and live. But as to that which thou didst write to me that I should come to thee, I must fulfil all things for which I was sent hither, and having fulfilled them be

received up immediately to Him that sent me. And when I am received up, I will send thee one of my disciples to heal thy disorder and bestow life on these and those with thee. ¹

The above story is self explanatory. But its genuineness is not accepted by many historians today. Eusebius is not always considered as a critical historian. He believed almost everything he heard. Particularly because this story refers to an event in the first century, he had to depend on the tradition prevalent in his time in the fourth century. Geographically too the place of this story was a distant matter and could not easily verify it.

W. F. Adeney considers it a mere legend rather than a historical event. He writes "The legend of Addai and King Abgar, which could carry back to the times of Christ's life on earth, is manifestly unhistorical". ² The same author further observes: "Apart from the absence of earlier testimony and the inherent improbability of the story, it is condemned by obvious anachronisms." ³

But this letter of Jesus cannot be easily dismissed. It is an important document which throws light into that otherwise obscure history of the

1. *Ibid.*

2. W. F. Adeney: *The Greek and Eastern Churches*, Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1908, p. 461.

3. *Ibid.*

origin of Christianity in Edessa. Even Adeney who considers it only as a legend admits: "Although we have no ground for admitting this letter to be genuine, it has become a historic composition because of its wide acceptance and immense veneration with which it has been regarded. ¹

In addition to its reference by Eusebius it is also found in the *Doctrine of Addai* an apocryphal book of "Act" written before Eusebius wrote his Ecclesiastical History, perhaps in the end of the second or in the beginning of the third century.

Although several historians consider the story of King Abgar a mere legend, we cannot deny the fact that the church got established in Edessa, in the first century of the Christian era. It is from Edessa that the message of the gospel spread. John Stewart begins the first chapter of *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* drawing the attention of his readers to the significance of this missionary centre at Edessa.

The Missionary propaganda of the 'Church of the East' is a subject of absorbing interest. In order to understand the enthusiasm that characterized it and the rapidity with which it spread throughout Asia, one must first examine its home base, viz., the church in Persia in the

1. *Ibid.*

fourth and fifth centuries A. D. This was the centre from which the evangel was carried to the furthest limits of China, Mongolia, Siberia, Japan and India. ¹

Edessa was a small kingdom at that time. As a buffer state between the Roman and Parthian empires it had a strategic position at that time. It is known in modern times as Urfa in northern Mesopotamia, seventy-eight miles south west of Diarbekir. Until 216 A, D , Edessa, the capital of the small state of Osrhoene maintained its semi-autonomy within the suzerainty of Parthia. Then the Roman empire conquered it and made it a colony.

1. John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, Reprint, Trichur, 1961, p. xxxi.

CHAPTER II

THE CHURCH IN PERSIA

According to a tradition the gospel spread in Persia due to the missionary labour of Mar Mari, a disciple of Thaddeus. Mar Mari was sent to Persia by his fellow workers in Edessa. This evangelist did not find any welcome in Persia. He wrote to his fellow workers that he was planning to leave Persia and go elsewhere. But his partners in the missionary enterprise replied him to sow and till "those hills and mountains so that they might bring forth fruit for an offering to the Lord." Thus Mar Mari laboured in that vineyard as well as in the province of Adiabene. It was a great joy for him to see the fruits of his labours. The inhabitants of Adiabene accepted Christ in large numbers. This area is between the Lesser and Greater Zab rivers. Arbel was its capital. It became the seat of a bishop from the first century even to the twentieth century.

Alphonse Mingana, the famous Syriac scholar of the last generation, writes:

The city of Arbel played for the countries extending east, north and south of the Tigris a role, no less important (if somewhat less known) than that played by Edessa in the Trans-Euphratic provinces of the Roman and Persian empires in particular, and in Syriac and Palestine in general. ¹

Sozomen, the church historian, states that the majority of the inhabitants of Adiabene were Christians. In the end of the first century there was a bishop named Pkidha in Arbel. Most of those converts in the Persian empire were of Zoroastrian religion.

In the second century this church began to be organized. The church in Edessa had four gospels in Aramaic. A scholar named Tatiah in the second century made a harmony of the four gospels called Diatessaron.

The church at Edessa in the second century concentrated on preaching rather than constructing churches. These preachers went to the Persian empire.

In the third century the church in the Persian empire had to take care of the refugees from the

1. Mingana, *Early Spread of Christianity*, Bulletin of John Rylands Library, Vol. IX. No. 2, P. 300.

Roman Empire, who were persecuted fiercely by Emperor Decius in 249 A. D. The Christians in the Persian empire welcomed these refugees into their fellowship.

One element which must have tended to strengthen the missionary activity of the "Church of the East" in the early centuries was the stream of refugees which turned towards Persia to escape the persecutions in the Eastern Roman empire. It is said that during the reign of Decius, A. D. 249, a great multitude of Christians in all the Roman provinces were cut off by various punishments and sufferings in a persecution "more cruel and terrific than any that had preceded it. Immense numbers being dismayed, not so much by the fear of death as by the dread of long continued tortures, professed to renounce Christianity!

In the time of Diocletian, A. D. 303-304, there were insurrections in Syria and Armenia, the blame for which was laid upon the Christians, and 'a great number of excellent men were either capitally punished or condemned to the mines'. In these days the persecution of Christians in Persia had not yet begun: Christianity, as already stated, being recognized by the

state as a subject 'melet'. It was not until Christianity became the official religion of the Roman empire that trouble arose in Persia. We cannot doubt, therefore, that as happened in France consequent on the revocation of the Edict of Nantes, numbers of the very finest Christians, especially those in the eastern provinces of the Roman empire, must have saved themselves by crossing the border into Persia where they were sure of a welcome by those of their own persuasion. This was repeated a century and a half later after the Nestorian controversy and the development of Monophysitism in the Byzantine portion of the empire.¹

From about 280 A.D. Mar Papa was the Metropolitan of Seleucia. He organized the Persian Church. Thus the Metropolitan seat of Seleucia became the headquarters. Now, the city is in ruins.² It is now known as Salman Pak, about 60 miles from Bagdad.

In the fourth century the theological school at Nisibis was transferred to Edessa. Mar Aprem (Saint Ephrem the Syrian) taught in this seminary at Edessa. Saint Ephrem's friend Mar Jacob, bishop

1. John Stewart, *op. cit.*, pp. 7. & 8

2. The present writer visited the ruins of the church at Seleucia in October 1968.

of Edessa did great service in building up the church and the seminary.

In this century the church in Edessa became very strong. During the first ecumenical council at Nicea in 325 A. D. Bishop Mar Jacob and Mar Aprem, who a young deacon then, represented the Church at Edessa. In the following year Mar Aprem played a great role in the literary and religious life of the Syriac speaking Christianity. That is the reason why he is recognized not only by the East Syrian Church (Nestorian) and the West Syrian church (Jacobite) but also by the Roman Catholic church which declared Saint Ephrem as the doctor of the universal church.

In the fifth century the Nestorian controversy concerning the unity of the divine and human natures in Christ had far reaching consequences in the Persian Church. As a matter of fact the Persian Church was not directly involved in this controversy. It was a theological dispute within the Roman empire.

John Nestorius was not a Persian, nor did he know the Syriac language of the Christians of this church. He was a native of Antioch and the Patriarch of Constantinople from 428 to 431 A.D. His rival Cyril was the Patriarch of Alexandria. Therefore the members of the Persian church say that they do not have anything with the Nestorian controversy. It was several years after the controversy

of 431 A. D. and even after the death of Nestorius in 451 A. D. that the Christians of the Persian empire heard about the controversy. They declared that the stand taken by Nestorius was in agreement with the view always maintained by the Persian church.

What is relevant to us here is not the merits and demerits of the christological controversy of the fifth century, but the effect of the persecution of the followers of the position upheld by Nestorius. The Persian Christians were branded as Nestorian heretics and persecuted in the Roman empire. In the second half of the fifth century and in the early part of the following century, many Christians had to flee from the Roman empire. They found refuge in the Persian empire. The Christians in that empire of the non-Christian King welcomed the refugees persecuted by the Christian emperor.

Referring to the exodus of these Christians during the reign of Emperor Justinian in 527, John Stewart remarks:

The 'bigotry of Justinian was punished by the emigration of his most pious and industrious subjects. They transported into Persia the arts both of peace and war.' 'Like the Huguenots who after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes brought the silk trade to England, like the Pilgrim

Fathers who carried the best of Puritan energy out of England to found a new world, the Nestorians came to Mesopotamia with the arts and crafts of life—carpenters, smiths, weavers, the best of the artisan class. They came to start industries and lay the foundations of manufacturing prosperity in the land of their adoption.' 'Nor did they go merely as exiles. Their very trouble converted them into missionaries'

These new refugee Christians travelled from place to place and won people to Christ. As they were willing to give up their homeland for the sake of the Christian faith which they believed to be true, they were willing to make sacrifices for the Lord. They went as itinerant preachers. They were blessed abundantly in their missionary labours. John Stewart observes the two significant results of this influx of new blood to the old Christians of Persia.

The result was twofold: firstly, 'The increase in numbers and the zeal and devotion of men who were exiles for their faith stimulated the churches', and made them still more so, centres of missionary propaganda; and secondly, their advent led to a change of policy on the part of

1. John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, pp. 8 and 9.

the Persian government towards the Christians. ¹

It must be noted that these Nestorian refugees did not have to suffer as some Christians in the Persian empire as well as in the Roman empire in the earlier decades. When the supporters of Nestorius entered the Persian empire, Piroz (457-484) was told that these Christians from the Roman empire were the foes of the Christian Roman Emperor. In order to obtain the fidelity of his own Christian subjects, Piroz granted assylum to the victims persecuted by the Roman emperor and supported the established church in that empire who supported the emperor.

Another development of the fifth century is the unilateral declaration of independence by the Church of the East. In the council of bishops held at Markabta in 424 presided over by Dadisho it was decided that the Persian Church is independent of Antioch and other churches of the East. Nobody in the Church of the East was allowed to appeal against their patriarch to the West. This decision of the Synod of Dadisho is sometimes interpreted as the claim of infallibility by the Patriarchs of the Church of the East. But a more probable interpretation is that the church in the Persian empire wanted to convince the Persian rulers that the Christians in the kingdom will not be under

1. *Ibid*, p. 9.

the Christians in the Roman empire. This was once again emphasized in the council held in 484 because the church at Antioch had already supported the opposite view of the Christology of Nestorius.

The headquarters of the church, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, was at a strategic place. The twin cities of Seleucia-Ctesiphon were on both banks of the river Tigris. This was the centre of trade and travel between Europe and Western Asia on the one hand and India and China on the other. This was a convenient geographical location for the spread of the gospel.

By the middle of the 6th century the Church of the East had spread into Egypt, Syria, Arabia, Socotra, Mesopotamia, Chaldea, Persia, Media, Bactria, Hyrcania, India and Ceylon. There were nine metropolitan sees at this time under the Patriarch. John Stewart writes:

There were bishoprics at Anbar or Enbar, a city of Chaldea belonging to the territory of Bagdad, at Sena and Elsen at the mouth of the Lesser Zab on the Tigris and at Badraia near Seleucia. One writer says the number of churches 'from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea was almost infinite and their faith was conspicuous in the number and sanctity of their monks and martyrs.'¹

1. *Ibid.* P. 14.

CHAPTER III

THE PERSECUTIONS IN PERSIA

Although it is true that the persecution in the Roman empire helped the Church in Persia to grow, the persecutions in the Persian empire caused the Persian church to suffer much. But it helped the church to grow again within the Persian empire as well as outside. There were three major persecutions, in the Persian empire. These persecutions took place under Persian kings namely Sapor II (339-379) Bahram V (420), and Yezdgerd II (438).

These three Persian persecutions contributed to the strengthening of the faith and witness of the people of Persia. As the persecution of Christians in Jerusalem in the first century expedited the expansion of the message of Christ, the Persian persecutions helped the churches to grow rapidly.

1. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'empire perse*, P 58.

The persecution under Sapor II extended for a long period in the fourth century. When Constantine became a Christian, he wrote to the Persian king Sapor II asking for the protection of Christians in Persia. But the King commenced war with the Romans.

King Sapor II ordered the Christians to pay double tax to bear the cost of the War. The Patriarch of the Church of the East, Mar Shimun Bar Shabai was asked to collect this double tax from his faithful followers. The Patriarch refused to be a tax collector as his people were too poor to pay the double tax. The Patriarch was arrested. The churches were destroyed. The Patriarch prayed and blessed his followers as follows.

May the cross of our Lord be the protection of the people of Jesus. May the peace of God be with the servants of God and establish your heart in the faith of Christ, in tribulation and in ease, in life and in death, now and for evermore.

The Patriarch was offered freedom for himself and all his followers, if he worshipped the sun only once. He refused to do so. His reply was that "The sun went into mourning when its creator died." The king pleaded with the Patriarch to save himself from persecution in the name of his personal friendship with the Patriarch. Still the Patriarch refused to yield. In the year 339 A. D.,

on the first day of the feast of the unleavened bread the Patriarch was martyred along with five bishops and a hundred clergy.

The martyrdom of the Patriarch led to the conversion of a high official in the palace, a prefect by the name of Pusaik or Pusak. When Hanania, one of the companions of the Patriarch began to waver, Pusak, who was one of the on-lookers, encouraged him to face the martyrdom, by shutting his eyes. Pusak was seized immediately. The king questioned him.

'Have I not given you work to do? Why then do you ignore my orders and stay to look at the punishment of these good-for-nothings?' Pusak replied, 'would to God that my work might increase through their idleness and that my life might be changed by their death. As for the work you have given me to do: I esteem it not because it is full of cares, and I value the punishment to which you have condemned them because it is full of joy.' Incensed, the king replied: 'You ask death in place of your work? You wish to be treated like them?' The happy man answered, 'I am a Christian, I believe in their God. That is why I envy their punishment and despise your dignity.' The king, greatly angered by this, cried out,

'May he not die like the others, but, because he has despised my majesty, and has spoken with me as an equal, seize his tongue and tear it out by the roots through his throat so that those who are living may fear me because of him.' ¹

Pusak was put to death cruelly. Many such persecutions followed. The persecution began at Susa and spread throughout the kingdom. The officials took pleasure in persecuting the Christians. Satraps and Heads of Villages at their pleasure imprisoned and persecuted the Christians. Some provincial governors put Christians to death without proper questioning or trial.

Not only the Patriarch Mar Shimun Bar Sabbai but also his two successors wore the crown of martyrdom within six years. Then that office remained vacant for twenty years. Tarbo, a sister of the martyred Patriarch Mar Shimun Bar Sabbai, also was murdered. This was done because the Jews had reported that the illness of the queen was due to the sorceries of Tarbo, who was avenging the death of her brother the Patriarch. Many men and women suffered for the sake of Christ.

In 345 a layman named Hanania was persecuted by torturing him with iron combs. Before his death he reaffirmed his faith in Christ. Daniel a presbyter and Warda (Rose) a consecrated Virgin,

1. John Stewart, *op. cit.* P. 21.

were placed in freezing water after having their feet bored with sharp irons. Then they were beheaded.

In the province of Adiabene, one hundred and twenty Christians were massacred. When they were put in a filthy dungeon in Seleucia before their martyrdom, a noble Christian lady named Jardoeta from Arbel took care of their comforts.

In 346, a fresh edict against the Christians was issued. Many were massacred. One James and his sister Mary were arrested by Narses Tamaspur, a violent persecutor. When these Christians were asked to partake of some preparation of blood, they preferred to die. They were beheaded by one Mahdades, an apostate noble.

There was a rich presbyter named Paul in the little town of Casciaz. Narses Tamaspur, the violent persecutor, seized this presbyter and five consecrated virgins.

They were Thecla, Mary, Martha, second Mary, and Anna. The virgins stood fast in their faith; but the rich priest denied his faith and thus saved his property. Tamaspur thought that the priest would not persist in his apostasy if he was appointed the persecutor of these five consecrated virgins. But the priest preferred his property to his conscience.

The priest did not mind the awful disgrace of killing the consecrated virgins who practised the

faith which he had preached. This Judas Iscariot wanted to keep his thirty pieces of silver. So, he became the executioner of these dedicated Christian virgins in order to preserve his perishable property. When the virgins were handed over to him to be slain after having received 100 stripes each, they asked "Are we to be made a sacrifice by those very hands from which so recently we received that holy thing, the sacrifice and propitiation of the whole world?"¹ Still the priest beheaded these virgins to save his property. But the same night the guards of Tamaspur entered the prison and killed the greedy and miserable priest.

Sapor II died in 379 A. D. His brother Ardasher II succeeded him. Persecution continued in a modified form for four years. After his death in 383, peace ensued in the Persian empire. A synod was held in Seleucia in 410 A. D. and the Christians were able to obtain certain privileges from the King Yezdegerd I. This peace did not last long.

Bahram V succeeded his father Yezdgerd I in 420 A. D. The new king persecuted the Christians throughout his empire in the most inhuman way. Theodoret, Bishop of Cyrus, writes of this persecution as follows:

1. John Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, Reprint, Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, 1961, pp. 25, 26.

It is not easy to describe the new kinds of punishment that the Persians invited to torment the Christians. They flayed the hands of some and the backs of others. In the case of others again, they stripped the skin of the face from the forehead down to the chin. They tore their bodies with broken reeds causing them excruciating pain. Having dug great pits, they filled them with rats and mice and then cast the Christians into the pits first tying their hands and feet so that they could neither chase the animals away nor place themselves beyond their reach. The animals themselves having been kept without food, devoured these Christian confessors in the most cruel way. ¹

Not only the Christians but also the church buildings became the objects of this persecution. The churches and furniture were seized. The building materials were used for the construction of bridges, canals etc. Precious metals were added to the royal treasury.

Labourt writes of three martyrs named Hormizdas, Suenas and Benjamin. The first two were of noble birth. The story of Hormizdas is narrated as follows by Labourt:

4. *Ibid*, pp. 27 & 28.

The king divested Hormizdas of all his dignities and made him an ordinary army camel-driver. Some days later he ordered him to be brought before him and had him clothed in linen garments. Then thinking he would be softened not only by the troubles which he had endured but by the kind treatment now being shown to him, the king addressed him as follows "Do not be so obstinate. Deny the son of the carpenter." Hormizdas, fired with zeal, tore the linen robe from his body in the presence of the king and said "If you think that I will abandon piety for such a gift, keep your present with your impiety." The king seeing this drove him from the palace quite naked. Suenas was robbed of all his wealth which was very considerable and obliged to obey the most wicked of his slaves. He had even to abandon his wife, but notwithstanding, remained firm and immovable. ¹

The martyrdom of Mar Yakob (St James), known as *M'paska* (cut to pieces) took place in 422 A. D. He was a Christian official of King Yezdgard I. Allured by the precious gifts of the king, Yacob renounced his Christian faith. His

1. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l' empire perse*, p.111.

wife and mother came to know of his apostasy when the matter was announced in the streets. They informed him that they would not have anything to do with him as he renounced his Christian faith. This made him open his eyes. He began to read the Holy Bible. He re-affirmed his faith in Christ in front of the king.

The king became angry, and threatened to kill Yakob. The king reminded Yakob of the persecutions suffered by his predecessors in Christian faith. Yacob expressed his willingness to die as they died. Thus the king condemned Yakob to death. As soon as the death sentence was pronounced, Yakob was taken to the place of execution.

At the place of execution, Yakob took permission from his executioners to say a final prayer to the Lord Jesus Christ. He turned to the east and fixing his eyes on the heaven he knelt.

“Lord, hear the request of thy servant at this moment. Save the son of thy handmaiden who prays to thee. Show a good sign so that I will be counted in the company of all those persecuted and afflicted because of thee. Let my enemies be put to shame seeing that I too am crowned like those martyrs who became victorious due to Thy strength. Let my enemies be put to shame when I am crowned like

those who were martyred for loving Thee. Because thou hast helped and comforted me."

Immediately they laid hands on him. They were impatient to cut him into pieces. They asked him to think twice whether his body should be demolished into small pieces or escape this death by one word. The nobles present there wept looking at his beautiful body and his firm stand. They said with one voice "Don't destroy your body. Live by pleasing the King. Later you can return to your religion." But the brave man replied that they should not cry for him. They should cry for themselves. By small worldly comforts they were inheriting eternal damnation.

The dignity and peace with which Yakob faced the martyrdom infuriated the non-Christian executioners. They commanded the soldiers to kill Yakob cutting one limb after another. After cutting each limb they persuaded Yakob to renounce Christ. When his limbs were removed and his body fell on the ground he praised the Lord again. Then he was beheaded.

A rich noble man named Peroz of Beit Lafat was decapitated when he refused to deny Christ. One James the notary from the town of Karka d' Ersa, at the age of twenty, was imprisoned along with fifteen fellow servants of the king Bahram.

They were persecuted severely by Mihrásbur, the wicked governor who hated the Christians. But James never renounced his faith. Mihrasbur asked James "have you not denied the faith of the Christians?" James boldly replied: "I have not denied the faith of the Christians, nor do I intend to do so. It is the faith of my fathers." Then he was again brought before the king. James reminded the king that his father Yezdgerd was loved by his subjects as long as he loved the Christians. But when Yezdgerd began to shed innocent blood he was abandoned by all. He did not even receive burial. This remark of James infuriated king Bahram. He condemned James to "The nine deaths." He was cut immediately into nine pieces in the following order.

1. The fingers of the hand,
2. The toes,
3. The wrist,
4. The ankle,
5. arms above elbows,
6. Knees,
7. ears,
8. nose and
9. head.

Several Christians tried to escape from the persecutions by hiding or running away to the border areas. Then Mezdeans called in the help of the nomad subjects of the king of Persia such as bedouin. They hunted down the Christians. But on the other hand, one of the Arabian princes named Aspebite, aided the Christian fugitives. The persecution by Bahram officially ceased in 422 A. D., when a treaty between Rome and Persia was made.

In 448 A. D. persecutions broke out during the reign of Bahram's successor Yezdgerd II. It was very severe in the province of Beth Germai. The worst massacre was in Karka of Beit Sluk, now known as Kirkuk. On a hill near Kirkuk ten bishops and one hundred and fifty three thousand Christians were slaughtered. Even now the Christians in Kirkuk (now in northern Iraq) believe that the redness of the hill near the town is due to the blood of these martyrs. About this persecution, John Stewart remarks:

Some were crucified, others stoned, and some again beheaded. Clergy and laity alike suffered the most refined tortures. Incidents recorded as having taken place in connection with the massacre are also probably historically accurate, e. g., that of the woman called Sirin, who, with her two sons, came of her own accord to seek the martyrdom which she received.¹

An officer named Tamesgard who took delight in persecuting Christians was himself converted, witnessing the endurance of the martyrs. He too received the crown of martyrdom. The memorial church there is called after this convert.

It is interesting to know the history of a young man named Dindui. When he saw John the Metropolitan of Karka being led to his execution, the

1. John Stewart, *op. cit.* P. 34.

young man encouraged the Metropolitan to be of good cheer. The bishop turned to the young man and declared him to be the fit person to be his successor. Thus the young man was instantly made a Metropolitan. The new bishop too received the crown of martyrdom within one or two days.

Many persecutions have been recorded. But when the bishops and the laity are beheaded others came forward to bear witness to the faith in Lord Jesus Christ. Despite the intensity of the persecutions the Christians did not decrease. The persecutions could not stop or retard the growth of the Christians. The blood of the martyrs gave additional strength to the church to exist in Persia as well as to expand abroad.

CHAPTER IV

MISSION TO ARABIA

Arabia is not a land of Christians today. But there were many Christians in Arabia once. The rise of Islam eclipsed Christianity in that part of the world. Christianity in Arabia was a branch of the Church of the East which expanded faster than other Christian denominations in the early centuries.

Christians spread to Arabia owing to the persecutions in Persia. Christian refugees during the time of the fierce persecutions in Persia fled to the independent kingdoms in the Arabian peninsula. It was mainly to the south and to the centre of Arabia that the refugees of this church fled, although some Christians went to the northern Arabia too. The land in Arabia was fertile at that time and the Christians could cultivate that land.

Hirtha (modern El Hasa) plays a significant role in the history of Christianity in Arabia. The kingdom of Hirtha was founded by the people who ran away from the province of Aram after a huge dam had burst, soon after the time of Alexander the Great. Hirtha was nearer to Persia than to Yemen.

In the fourth century Emperor Constantine asked deacon Theophilus of Nicomedia, who was an ardent supporter of Arius, to accompany an embassy to the coast of Himayar. Theophilus succeeded in converting the king of Himayarites to Christianity. He built churches at Zafar (or Dhafar), at Adea, at Sana, the capital, and at Hormuz in the Persian Gulf. Four bishoprics were established. Aden was the gateway to Yemen where there was a Roman colony. Thus Christianity found its foothold in the country of Yemen also.

G. A. Sale in his book entitled *The Koran* lists the following principal tribes which accepted the message of Christ:

Hamyar, Ghassan, Rabia, Taghlib of Mesopotamia Bahra, Tonuch, part of the tribes of Tay and Kodea, the Arabs of Hirtha, and the inhabitants of Nejd. (Nejd was the Arabia of the poets, some of whom were Christians). Zwemer adds the Beni Harith of Najran and other tribes between Medina and Kufa. ¹

1. *Ibid*, P. 55.

As early as 380 A. D., there were Christians at Hirtha and Kufa. There was an Arabian queen named Mavia who was a Christian. She invited a bishop named Moses to live among her people. Many converts to Christianity destroyed their idols. One of them Noman Abu Kaws proved his sincerity of faith by melting down a golden statue of the Arabian Venus worshipped by his tribes and distributed the proceeds among the poor.

The Book of the Himyarites made up of fragments of a Syriac work, edited with introduction and translated by Axel Moberg (published in Lund, Sweden, in 1924) gives us details of the persecution of the Christians in Najran and Yemen in the first quarter of the sixth century. This book written in old Jacobite script is dated 932 A. D. But it is possible that it goes back to as early as 525 A. D.

According to the book the message of Christ was spread in the land of Najran of Yemen by the activities of a tradesman named Hayyan, who lived during the days of Yezdgerd I in the early part of the fifth century. It was at Hirtha, that Hayyan got introduced to the message of Christ. He was baptized there. When Hayyan returned to Najran he persuaded his family and friends to accept Jesus Christ. Some of these new converts were so enthusiastic that they carried on evangelistic

activities not only in Najran but also in the adjacent areas of Abyssinia.

Al-Mundhar, king of the Arabs of Hirtha embraced Christianity in 512 A. D. His sister Henda was baptised at the same time. She founded a coenobium and lived a monastic life. They were baptised by the Metropolitan of Hirtha, there were other bishops at Kufa, Beth Raman, Bassora and Perath Messenes.

Apart from a reference to the martyrdom of one Azquir in 467 A. D., there does not seem to have had any persecution in Najran or Yemen until the sixth century. But in 523 A. D. a severe persecution of Christians took place. It was due to the hatred of a Jewish king of the Himayarites named Dhu Namas, who was known as Masruq.

The persecution by Masruq was due to the antagonism of the Jewish people against the Christians who were fast spreading. The over zealous Christians probably had done something to provoke the Jews. One Christian martyr glorified in the fact that her father had set fire to one of the Jewish synagogues.

Already in 519 there was a persecution which led to the co-operation of these Christians with Abyssinian Christians. The persecuted Christians of Hirtha appealed for help to Elesbaan, also known as Kaleb, king of the Abyssinians. The Abyssinians defeated the Jewish king who took

refuge in the mountains. But after the Abyssinians had returned to their own land, there was a renewed conflict between the Christians under the leadership of the king of Najran and the Jews under Masruq, king of Yemen. The king of Najran was killed and his country was annexed by Yemen. The Abyssinians withdrew. Masruq persecuted the Christians:

He wrote a letter to Najranites assuring them that justice would be done to them if they submitted themselves to him. Then he summoned one hundred and fifty notables and took gold and silver from them. Then he ordered a cross to be thrown to the ground. He asked the Christians to spit on the cross and become Jews. Otherwise he threatened to throw them into fire. The Christians refused to renounce their faith. Masruq found out the details of these Christians and tried to persuade the foreigners to deny Christ. But one of them, Presbyter Moses of Hirtha replied "I will not deny Christ but confess Him that He is God, the Son of God, indeed". Masruq killed all of them. He made an immense pyre in the church and burnt four hundred and twenty seven Christians. The notables as well as many men and women were put to death in the same fashion. There was another persecution in the town of Hadramant. The persecution at Najran took place during November 20—28 in A. D. 523.

John Stewart describes one instance of the persécution in Najran.

One of the first to suffer was a native of Najran who was met on the road by some of Masruq's myrmidons. "Are you a Christian?" he was asked. 'Yes. I am a Christian,' he replied. 'Then hold up your right hand.' He held it up and at once it was cut off. 'Are you a Christian?' again he was asked. 'Yes.' 'Then hold up your left hand.' It too was immediately cut off. 'Are you still a Christian?' they asked. 'Yes' he replied, 'in life and death I am Christian'. Enraged at this obstinacy they cut off both his feet and thus he died. ¹

The wives were not behind their husbands in witnessing for Christ. They longed for martyrdom as a privilege. When they were brought before Dhu Yazan, co-prosecutor of Masruq, they demanded that "as our husbands died we may be deemed worthy to die, we also, for the sake of Christ, God." ²

There was a woman named Habsa. She prayed God that she should not be excluded from the rank of martyrdom owing to her sins. About her martyrdom, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise* describes:

1. John Stewart, *op. cit.* P. 65.

2. *Ibid*, P. 66.

When, later, she was brought before Masruq and was asked who she was, she answered 'I am the daughter of Hayyan of the family of Hayyan, the teacher, him by whom our Lord sowed Chirstianity in our land. But Hayyan my father once burned your synagogues.' She and two others with her were then tied as camels are tied and beaten almost to death with rods; they were then tied to wild camels and sent forth into the desert. Thus they yielded up their spirits to their Lord and were crowned by this glorious confession. ¹

When the persecutions persisted, the Christians prepared a petition against Masruq 'the crucifier' and sent it through a Christian named Umayyah to bishop Euprepios and to King Kaleb of Abyssinia. Kaleb's army fought a decisive battle against Masruq near the Red Sea. When his forces were defeated, the persecutor Masruq jumped into the sea and was drowned.

King Kaleb also known as Eiesbaan stayed in the land of the Himayarites for seven months, during which time his soldiers persecuted the Jews. Some Christians too suffered as they could not identify them as Christians owing to their ignorance of the Abyssinian language. Consequently the

1. *Ibid.*

Christians began to tattoo the sign of the cross on their hands

The Abyssinian king before his departure from the land of the Himayarites Selected one of the nobles of the land. He asked the priests to baptise him. The king then appointed this his spiritual son as king over the land of the Himayarites.

Although the churches were destroyed during the persecution, Christianity emerged as a stronger force during the Abyssinian regime. Churches were rebuilt.

Some years later the Christian king of the Himayarites made an unsuccessful attack on Mecca. Some think that it was king Abraha, appointed by king Kaleb of Abyssinia. But John Stewart concludes with reason that it is not the king appointed by Kaleb, but one of the successors. About this unsuccessful attack John Stewart writes:

'In the year A. D. 567' we read, 'Abraha the Christian king of Yemen built a new cathedral at Sana with the intention of making it the rival of Mecca for the Arab pilgrimage. On the very night prior to its intended dedication, the church was defiled by pagan Arabs from the north, supposed to be members of the Meccan tribe of Koreish. Then followed the famous expedition of Abraha against Mecca and his defeat by the Koreish, for

ever celebrated in chapter CV of the Koran on the elephant. A more detailed account of the incident is to be found in Zwemer's *Arabia the Cradle of Islam* (p. 308), but the year mentioned there is A. D. 568.

Prophet Muhammad was born three years after this attack on Mecca. The Arabian countries were in a turmoil in those days. A certain Saif C, Dhu Yazn (perhaps a member of the family of Dhu Yazan, companion of Masruq) went to Hirtha and was introduced by the king of Hirtha the Persian court. He persuaded the Persians to send an army to suppress the Abyssinians in Yemen. Thus Jews gained some control in Yemen. The Christians, however, continued to be in the majority in Najran. The defeat of Yemen created anarchy in the whole of central Arabia. About this critical nature of the time when Prophet Muhammed was born, John Stewart observes:

The country was ripe for a great national movement which would be entirely independent of foreign control, whether Abyssinian or Persian. All that was needed was a leader who would be able to bring about a fusion of the different national parties and lead the way in the formation of a homogeneous state. The rise of Muhammad furnished the leader

requested and coincided with a great national opportunity. ¹

The rise of Islam hit Nestorians hard. The Christians at Mecca, Medina and even in the tribe of Koreish were Nestorian Christians. In the preparation of Koran a Nestorian monk named Sergius surnamed Behira, the experienced, is believed to have helped.

Muhammad was born in 570 or 571 A. D. He was friendly to Christians and hostile to the Jews. Muhammad found it profitable to accept the help of Christians in order to suppress the Jews. Muhammad's immediate successor Abu Bekr, the first Khalif (632-634 A. D.) too received the support from the Nestorians. A Christian tribe named Beni Namr helped Mothamma one of Abu Bekr's generals. A Christian belonging to another tribe Beni Taghlib fought most gallantly on that day.

Although Prophet Muhammad used Christians for his benefit, he demanded from them annual tribute. His dying command was that "throughout the peninsula there shall be no second creed!"

Large scale conversions of Christians to Islam took place in Bahrein, in Mazoum or Oman, in Fars, in the south west, and also in the centre of Arabia. Many Christians accepted Islam in order to keep their property. Therefore the Nestorian

1. *Ibid* p 71.

Patriarch in about 650 A. D. wrote "Where is the great people of the Mazonites (the people of Oman) which has precipitated itself into the great gulf of apostacy for the love of half its goods? Where are the sanctuaries of Karmania and of Fars?"¹

The fourth Khalif, Ali, used force to convert Christians when other methods failed. It was for the sake of material wealth that many Christians were converted to Islam. John Stewart writes:

That worldly motives played an important part in the early conversions to Islam is admitted even by Muhammadan historians. 'When for example the Arabs of the pathless desert, "fed on locusts and wild honey", once tasted the delicacies of civilization and revelled in the luxurious places of the Khosroes they said, "By Allah, even if we cared not to fight for the cause of God we could not but wish to contend for and enjoy these, leaving distress and hunger henceforth to others'²

Thus in the seventh century Nestorian Christianity declined in Arabia.

1. *Ibid*, p. 75.

2. *Ibid*, p. 76.

CHAPTER V

THE CHURCH IN INDIA

The Church in India has connections with the Persian Church since the early period of Nestorian era. Several missionaries crossed the sea and worked in India. The historical references are scanty in the early period. Whatever evidences are available they do prove the fact that the Church in Persia used to send missionaries to India. Probably all the bishops who served the Indian Church until the 17th century were Persians sent by the Patriarchs of the Church of the East.

The fact that the Church in India used to receive missionaries from the Persian Church does not mean that the Church in India was founded by the missionaries from Persia. The church in India is of apostolic foundation. St. Thomas is believed to have founded the church in India in 52 A. D.

Two views regarding the origin of the Christian church in India are held by scholars. It is beyond the scope of the present study to enter into a discussion of the merits and demerits of the two views. Nevertheless, some general conclusions reached by scholars on this subject are pointed out

The first view of the origin of Christianity in India is the tradition of Apostle Thomas arriving in Malabar in A. D. 52. It is questioned by some scholars. But in general, Indian historians agree that it is difficult to disprove the tradition, though it is not altogether possible to support it by historical evidence.

The second view is that Christianity was introduced to India by the East Syrian traders who came to the Malabar coast, particularly by a merchant named Thomas of Cana in the fourth century. Those who advocate the first view do not deny the mission of Thomas of Cana and other East Syrian merchants. Both the views bear testimony to the existence of the Christian Church with East Syrian connection in the south west coast of Malabar within the first four centuries.

The first view mentioned above cannot be easily dismissed as some above tried to do. The tradition of St. Thomas is based on various sources. There are two traditions regarding the founding of

Christianity in India by Apostle Thomas. According to the Malabar tradition, St. Thomas landed at *Muziris* (now called Cranganore) in A. D. 52 and converted some Brahmin families to Christianity after performing miracles. He founded seven churches. ¹ He was martyred at St. Thomas Mount, at Mylapore near Madras in A. D. 72. He was probably buried in Mylapore where his tomb is seen to day at the Cathedral in Mylapore.

According to another tradition St. Thomas came to the kingdom of King Gundaphor (or Gondophores) along with one Habban. He converted many including the royal family. Later he suffered martyrdom under a King Mazdai. This tradition recorded in the *Acts of Thomas* is considered as a second century work and full of legendary material. Nevertheless, the excavation near Taxila in the former Punjab province have unearthed coins bearing the name of Gondophores. This King has been identified as a ruler of Parthia around A. D. 46. This discovery gives credence to the North Indian tradition. It is also possible that this mission to Parthia was prior to the Malabar mission claimed to have taken place in A. D. 52.

It is possible for us to see the evidence of the existence of a Christian Church in South India from early centuries of the Christian Era. Credit

1. Palayur, Cranganore, Parur, Cokkamangalam, Chayal, Niranam and Quilon. The first one mentioned is in the extreme north and the last one in the extreme south. The distance between there is 130 miles only the south west coast of India.

goes to Alphonse Mingana who has brought to light some unknown evidence to prove the existence of the Church. ¹

The first historical reference to the Indian Church may be found in the *Chronique de Seert*. It says that David (Dudi), Bishop of Basra, Assyria, visited India towards the very end of third century it is written in the *Chronique de Seert*. ² "That during the Patriarchate of shahlupha and Papa, say about A. D. 295-300, Dudi (David) Bishop of Basra on the Persian Gulf, an eminent doctor, left his see and went to India, where he evangelised many people." ³

In the Council of Nicea of 325 A. D. one John affixed his signature as "Bishop of Great INDIA and PERSIA." ⁴ According to Mingana, John may have been a Bishop in a town in North India close to Persia. According to a strong tradition, Thomas of Cana, a syrian merchant, in 345 A. D., visited India. Mingana refers to Giamil, who speaks of a Bishop Joseph of Edessa, who in 345 A. D. was sent by the Catholicos of the East to the coast of Malabar.

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1. Alphonse Mingana: *The early Spread of Christianity of India*. John Ryland Library, Manchester 1926.
 2. This is an Arabic book written probably in 13th century, it was published in 1907 1919 by Mar Addai Scher in *Patrologia Orientalis*.
 3. *Patrologia Orientalis* IV, pp. 326 & 392 Cf. Mingana; *Op. cit*, p. 18
 4. *Labbe's Sacrosancta Concilia* II, 235 See also *Patrum Nicaenorum Nomina* (Bible Teubner)
 5. S. Giamil, *Cenuine Relationes*, p. 578.9, Cf. Mingana, *Op, cit*, p. 64

St. Ephrem the Syrian (died in 373 A.D.) refers to St. Thomas and his Indian mission in his Syriac poems. He writes: "Lo in India are thy miracles, O Thomas and in our land is triumph, and everywhere thy festival.....".² He writes in another poem as follows:

The sunburnt India thou hast made fair.....
 A tainted land of dark people thou hast purified.
 More than snow and white linen,
 the dark bird of India thou hast made fair.....
 the cross of light has obliterated India's
 darkened shades.³

A prayer for St. Thomas Day on July 16 at Vespers reads as follows:

"The India inhaled the odour of life by the doctrine, O Thomas, and discarding all pagan customs at heart and externally, they commenced to cultivate chastity."⁴

And in another passage from the prayer of the same day we read:

"The Lord has designed to grant saint Thomas to his faithful church as a treasure found in India.....who for the faith was by a lance pierced".⁵

1. Mingana, *Op. cit.* p. 44.

2. *St. Ephremi Hymni* (Edit. Lamy) IV. p 703 Cf. Mingana, *Op. cit.* p. 18

3. *S. Ephremi Hymni* (Edit. Lamy) IV. p. 701, Cf. Mingana, *Op. cit.* p. 18.

4. *Holy Khudra*, Vol. III, Mar Narsai Press, Trichur, 1962, p. 625.

5. *Ibid*, pp. 626-7.

In Canticle we read:

“As Christ had anointed Peter to the High Priesthood of Rome, so thou (O Thomas) today among the Indians hast received the same honour¹”.

In the Nocturn we read:

“Thomas took the route to India to demolish the temples of demons, and to extirpate immorality prevailing among men and women”.²

In another stanza we read:

“As Sun which shines the earth Thomas shone in the home of the Indians and drove away the darkness of deception (heresy) by the blessed light of his teaching and turned the INDIANS from the heresy of idol worships and became the blameless sheep.”³

There are several stanzas found in the prayers of the memorial day of St. Thomas found in the Holy Khudra which are used in the East Syrian Churches. These passages will be enough to prove that the Churches in East Syria in the early centuries knew of the tradition of St. Thomas preaching to the Indians and converting them to the teaching of Jesus Christ.

1. *Ibid*, p. 634.

2. *Ibid*, p. 639.

3. *Ibid*, pp. 629-30.

The mission of Theophilus the Indian in 354 A. D. is doubted by some. Mingana, however, thinks it to be correct. He writes:

"A much more important and trustworthy account is that concerning Theophilus the Indian, the head of a mission which the emperor Constantius equipped and sent about 354 to the Sabeans of South Arabia, to Abyssinia, to Ceylon, and to India. The sole historian of the mission is the Arian Philostorgius, as quoted in Photius's *Bibliotheca*".¹

It reads:

"Thense (i. e. from the Maldives) he sailed to other parts of India and reformed many things which were not rightly done among them; for they heard the reading of the Gospel in a sitting posture, and did other things which were repugnant to the divine law: and having reformed everything according to the holy usage, as was most acceptable to God, he also confirmed the dogma of the Church".²

A Syriac book called *Life of Hermit Yonan* was written about 390 A. D. by Sadoe who calls himself priest, monk and Archmandrite of the

1. J. P. Migne; *Patrologia Graeca* Ixv pp. 481-89.

2. Cf. Mingana *Op. cit.* pp. 26-27.

monastery of St. Thomas in India. In that work we read that Mar Yonan came from Anbar (Bagdad) into India to visit the said monastery.

In a colophon to his commentary on the Epistle to the Romans, Ishodad writes as follows:—
 "This epistle has been translated from Greek into Syriac, by Mar Komai, with the help of Daniel the priest, the Indian" ¹. Mingana calls this an "Important passage."

He thinks it proves that the Church of India was existing about A. D. 425.

"In close relationship with the East Syrian Church, at the very beginning of the latter's scholastic life, which began at Edessa with the translation of the works of Aristotle." ²

A closer connection between the Indian Church and the East Syrian Church is found during the time of Bishop Mana of Edessa who around 470 A. D. wrote in Persian (i. e., Pahlavi) religious discourses, canticles and hymns. He also translated the works of Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia and sent them to India. *Chronique de Seert* mention that:

"And the despatched to the islands of the Sea (Bahrasain) and to India, all the books he had translated." ³

1. *Horae Semiticae, The Commentaries of Ishodad of Merv*, Vol. 34
 . (Edit: Miss. Gibson)

2. Mingana, *Op. cit.* p. 27.

3. *Chronique de Seert* in Pat. Or. VII. 116-17

According to J. S. Assemani, there was a Syrian priest named Bod who acted as a visitor to Christian communities in India and Persia.¹ E. R. Hambye states that "Unfortunately, the text is not completely authenticated."²

The first unquestionable historical reference to the Church in South India is a passage in the *Christian Topography* of Cosmas Indicopleustes, who travelled widely between 520 and 525 and published his book about 535 A. D. This travelogue provides very useful information on the early history of Christianity in India.

"Even in the island of Taprobane in Inner India where the Indian sea is, there is a Church of Christians with clergy and congregation of believers as well as in the land called Male where the pepper grows. In Kalliana there is a bishop appointed from Persia, as well as the island of Dioscoris (Socotro), in the same Indian Sea."³

When Bishop Maruta was sent to Seleucia-Ctesiphon as ambassador of the Byzantine Emperor Maurice (582-602) to the Sassanide Emperor Khosrau II (582-602), he met Patriarch Sabrisho I (596-604). He was presented with perfumes and

1. J. S. Assemanie, *Bibliothica Orientalis*, Rome, 1719 28, III. p 219-232

2. Hambye E. R.

3. Cosmas Indicopleustes, *Christian Topography*.

gifts sent to the Patriarch from India. Hambye draws the inference that it is the tithes sent in kind to the Patriarch by his Indian Christian subjects.¹

Next important reference to the relation between East Syrian and Indian Church is the controversial correspondence of the Nestorian Patriarch Isho Yabh (550-60) and Simeon Metropolitan of Riwardshir, who revolted against his Patriarch in regard to sending bishops to India. Patriarch Isho Yabh referred to this dispute in one of his letters.

"In your district, from the time you showed recalcitrance against ecclesiastical canons, the episcopal succession has been interrupted in India, and this country has since sat on darkness, far from the light of the divine teaching by means of rightful bishops; not only India that extends from the borders of the Persian Empire, to the country which is called Kalah, which is a distance of 1200 parasangs, but even your own Fars."²

In 823 A. D. two bishops namely Mar Sabrisho³ and Mar Pirus came to India, sent by Nestorian Patriarch. Sabrisho is usually referred to as Sapor. But Mingana thinks it is a mistake.⁴ About the date of the arrival of these bishops there is

1. Hambye E. R., *Op. Cit* P. 137

2. Letter No. 14. 8 (P. 182) C. S. C. O., Second Series, Vol. 63. Paris 1905. (ed) R. Duval

3. Sabrisho means Hope of Jesus in Syriac

4. Mingana, *Op. Cit* p. 66.

difference of opinion among the scholars. Assemani¹ puts it as 992 A. D. while Lequinen² tentatively fixes it as 880 A. D. Mingana, however, thinks that it is 823 A. D.³

Another interesting reference is a reply Patriarch Timothy I (A. D. 780-820) made to the newly consecrated Metropolitan of Sarbaziyah, who would need some money for his travels. "Many make voyage to India and China with only a stick and a purse Consider yourself to have gone by sea with as much money as they had".⁴ During the period of Timothy I, we read about the possibility of inter marriages between Christians of Mesopotamia and of India.⁵

In 1547 A. D. a cross with inscription in Pahlavi, the language of the Persian Empire at the time of the Sassanian dynasty was dug up by the Portuguese in St. Thomas Mount at Mylapore near Madras. It is assigned to 7th or 8th century. There is a similar cross with the same inscription at Kottayam, Kerala. The translation is as follows:

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1. *Orins Christians* IV 442.
 2. *Ibid*, II. 1274 Quoted from Mingana *Op. Cit.* P. 66
 3. Mingana, *op. cit*, p. 66.
 4. Themotheus, *patr 7Epiulse C. S. C. O.* text 74 p 107, trans. 75 p. 70 (Cf. Hambye *Op. cit.* p 188)
 5. J. Labourt, *De Thimotheis 1-et. Christianorum Orientalum Condicibe Chalifs Abbaside*, Paris. 1904. quest. XXXI, p. 63. ff

“In punishment by the cross (was) the suffering of this One; He who is the true Christ, and God alone, and Guide ever pure.”¹

Two letters are found in the collection of Abulferang Ibn-at-Taiyib, who was secretary to the Patriarch Elias I (1028-49). One letter that belonged to the Patriarch Timothy I states that the Indian Christians must not follow the King's advice but that of the Patriarch; only after the approval of the Patriarch, the affair should be directed to the King.² Nothing is stated here whether the king is a Christian or a non-Christian. Nevertheless, the question of E. R. Hambye is relevant. “Could we find here a confirmation of the constant local tradition of a Christian king in Malabar?”³

The second letter also of Timothy I⁴ refers to the abuses that crept into the Indian Church concerning the ordination of holy orders. It is addressed to 'Arkn' the head of the faithful in India. E. R. Hambye thinks that 'Arkn' is an abbreviation of Archdeacon just like Metran stands for Metropolitan.⁵

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1. *The Indian Antiquary* Vol. III, 1874. pp 308-316. Article by A. C. Burnell also see W. Adeney *The Greek and Eastern Churches* p. 519.
 2. Ibn-at-Taiyib, *Fiqh An-Nasraniya Das Recht der Christenheit* C. S. C. O. text. 16p. 119. trans. 16. p. 121 (Hambye p. 189)
 3. E. R. Hambye, *Indian Ecclesiastical Studies* Vol. 9, No. 3, p. 189.
 4. Ibn-at-Tay-An-Nasraniya, Cf, Hambye, *Op. cit.* p. 189.
 5. E. R. Hambye, *Op. cit.*, p. 189,

Archdeacon was strong and powerful. He knew the language of the people which the East Syrian Bishop did not know. E. R. Hambye thinks that there is a second reason, i.e., "his office seems to have been hereditary in the Pakalomattom family. "There is no wonder therefore", writes Hambye, "that until the 17th century we find the Archdeacon of the Syrian Christians of Malabar signing letters with the title of 'Archdeacon of the whole of India'. This last title corresponded almost exactly to the one given to him by Patriarch Timothy I."²

We do not have sufficient information regarding the establishment of an Indian hierarchy. From the above mentioned correspondence of Patriarch Isho Yabh III with the Metropolitan of Riwardshir, mentioned earlier, it is obvious that there was no Metropolitan See for India yet. According to Ibn-at-Tayyib the Indian Metropolitan See was erected by Isho Yabh.³ It is either Isho Yabh II (628-644) or Isho Yabh III (650-7).

Mingana thinks that Patriarch Isho Yabh II (A. D. 628-43) created a Metropolitan see for India with some six to twelve suffragan bishops. Neither Ibn-at-Tayyib, nor Abdisho mentions the city or town of the Metropolitan seat in India. Mingana

1. *Ibid*

2. *Ibid*, p. 190.

3. Ibn-at-Tayyib, *Op. cit*, Text 167 p. 121. trans 168, p. 123.

writes: "They have in this respect rendered us disservice, which we feel reluctant to forgive and forget. It is only from late Syriac and European sources that we even hear of Malabar as a flourishing centre of Christianity in South India ¹.

The Syriac Manuscript which contains the Epistles of St. Paul kept in Vatican Library has a colophon which states that it was completed in June 1301, near the church of Malabar, by the priest Sacharias Bar Joseph Bar Sacharias. The names of Yabalaha III the Patriarch (1281-1318) and of the Indian Metropolitan Mar Yaqob are mentioned. A second Malabar MS written in March 1510 identifies Sengale with Crangannore.

John of Monte Corvino stayed for about a year in Malabar on his way to China in A. D. 1291. Marco Polo stayed on the Coromandel (Southeast

The observation of E. R. Hambye is probably correct that Perhaps it was created to prevent the Indian Christians from falling a prey to the intrigues of the Metropolitan of Riwardshir. (Hambye, *Op cit.* p. 199). It is also possible that the Patriarch wanted to weaken the growing power of the Metropolitan. William Young also thinks that Mingana's observation that Isho Yabh II created a Metropolitan for India is wrong. He argues: "In fact, it seems almost certain that it was Isho Yabh III who created a separate Metropolitan for India." Due to the controversy with Simon, the Patriarch divided his vast Province of Riwardshir into three, and appointing separate Metropolitans of Qatar and India" (William G. Young: "The Church of the East in 650 A. D. Patriarch Isho Yabh II and India." *Indian Church History Review*, Vol II, No I, June 1968 P. 63)

1. Cf. Hambye; *Op. cit* p. 191.

ost of India in A. D. 1293. He has described the place where St. Thomas was buried. In 1321, Odoric of Udine, another friar, visited Quilon and Mylapore. He found fifteen Nestorian families there, whom he described as "Vile and pestilent heretics."

In the year 1324 the Odoric of Pordanore who visited Mylapore records the following:

"From this realm (Minibar-Malabar) it is a journey of ten days to another realm which is called mobar. and this is very great and hath under it many cities and towns. And in this realm is laid the body of the blessed Thomas the Apostle. His Church is filled with idols, and beside it are some fifteen houses of Nestorian." ¹

Jordanus, a friar, stopped in India on his return from China. He was consecrated at Avignon by the Pope as the Bishop of Quilon and sent to India in A. D. 1328. An Arab historian Ame, son of Mathey, has written that "Thomas" tomb is in the island of Meilan (Mylapore) in India on the right hand side of the altar, in his monastery (dair)." ²

In 1349 A. D. Bishop John de Marignoli, Papal Legate to China, visited the Apostle's tomb

1. Yule-Cordier *Cathay and the Way Thither*, 3:141-2. Cf. A. C. Perumalil. *Op. cit.* p. 74.

2. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*. V. 34 Mingana p. 23 Medlycott. p. 96, Perumalil; *Apostles in India*. p. 54.

in Mylapore. He writes: "The third province of India is called Malabar, and the Church of St. Thomas which he built with his own hands is there, besides another which he built by the agency of workmen." ¹ From the 6th century to 13th century we have no definite evidence of the existence of the Apostle's tomb in India except the reference to King Alfred of England who in 883 A. D. sent offerings to St. Thomas in India. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle makes a reference to St. Thomas in India.

"And in the same year, Sighelm and Aesthalstan conveyed to me the alms which the King had vowed to send thither, and also to India to St. Thomas" ²

The friars carried rumours to Europe of a Christian ruling house and Pope Eugenius IV sent envoys to the India Christian King with a letter which commenced: "To my most beloved son in Christ, Thomas, the illustrious Emperor of the Indian, health and the apostolic benediction: There has reached us a constant rumour that your kingdom are true Christians." These messengers never reached India.

The Italian trader, Nicolo de Conti, described conditions in India about 1440. According to

1. Yule-Cordier; *Cathay and Way Thither* Vol. 3; p. 249 or 51.

2. B. Thorp's *The Anglo-Saxon Chronicle*. 2. 66, quoted by Mingana, p. 21. A. I. p. 118.

him about 1000 Nestorians lived around the church of St. Thomas in Malapare, where they venerated Thomas's tomb and these Nestorians are scattered all over India, as the Jews are among us.

Another Italian traveller Ludovico di Varthema spoke of the Christians at Kayamkulam (north of Quilon) in 1505. He said: "In this city we found some Christians of St. Thomas, some of whom are merchants and believe in Christ, as we do. Every three years a priest comes to baptise from Babylon."

"All these Christians", says Paoli, "in 1502, at which period Vasco de Gama came a second time to Malabar, were Nestorians

"The sacrifice of the mass, was established according to the manner of the Nestorians. The wine which they consecrated, was palm wine (arrack): the host consisted of some wheaten flour, mixed with salt and oil: and it was always let down from a hole above the altar, when the priest, was to bless it " 1

The colophon of the Syriac MS No. 25 of Paris, 2 throws some light on the history of Christianity in India around 1504 A. D. Mingana translates it as follows:

1. Francis Day, *The Land of the Perumals or Cochin, its past and its present*, Madras: Adelphi Press, 1863, p. 218.
2. Folio, 7 (R. O. C., 1912, pp. 82-3)

This book was written in the year 1815 of the Greeks (1504 A. D.) - and glory be to the Lord - with the hands of the stranger Jacob. Let it be known to thee, my Lord the reader, that in the above mentioned year, we arrived in the Indian countries at the town called Cananore, in which we found our true brethren the Franks called Portuguese, who were greatly pleased with us. Let it be known also that in the year 1813 (A. D. 1502) at the beginning of the month of September our common father Mar Simon the Catholicos of the East, left this world of miseries. The bishops assembled near our father Mar John, the illustrious Metropolitan, and ordained by Elijah Catholicos and Patriarch to the throne of the East And his Father Mar Elijah ordained the following bishops for India: Mar Yabh Alaha, and Mar Thomas as Archbishops, and Mar Dinha and me, the humble Jacob as bishops¹

In this passage there is no difficulty in identifying the religious affiliation of the Patriarch Elijah mentioned in the above document. Because this is prior to the split of 1552 A. D. There was only one Catholicos Patriarch on the throne of the

¹ Mingana, *Op. cit.*

Church of the East. Moreover the prelate named Elijah mentioned here was elected to the Patriarchate of the East Syrian Church in 1502 A. D. as we find his name in the list of Patriarchs found in the Syriac *Marganeetha*.¹

One thing is clear that at the time of the arrival of the Portuguese in India in 1498 A. D. there was a Christian Church in Malabar with bishops occasionally coming from Persia or what was usually referred to as Babylon or Mesopotamia. The bishops who came in the 16th century Mar John, Mar Yabalaha, Mar Thomas, Mar Denha, and Mar Jacob. Of these, Mar Jacob ruled Malabar for a long time,

The arrival of the Portuguese was a turning point in the history of the Church of the East in India. The Portuguese people compelled the Syrian Christians to pay allegiance to the Pope instead of to the Patriarch of the Church of East. This was led to constant quarrels between the Christians in the South West coast of India and the Portuguese,

In 1599, at a synod held at Diamper, they submitted to the Portuguese; but in 1653 many of them rebelled and took an oath at Coonon Cross. Within a few years several Christians who took

1. Mar Abdisho, *Marganeetha*, Trichur: Mar Narsai Press, 1955, p. 75, According to this list the death of Mar Shimon, IV occurred in A. D. 1450 and Mar Elijah V came to throne in A. D. 1491 and continued until A. D. 1504.

the oath were won over to the Roman Catholic side. In 1665 a large section of the Syrian Christians who liberated themselves from the Portuguese yoke, accepted Mar Gregorius of Jerusalem, a West Syrian bishop. Today they are known as the Jacobite or the Orthodox Syrian Church in India. A reformed section of the Orthodox Jacobite church is known as the Mar Thoma Syrian Church in India.

A small group of Syrian Christians remain to this day as the Chaldean Syrian Church in Trichur¹. Until recently they received bishops from the headquarters of the Church in Iraq. The last missionary from the Middle East to India was Mar Thoma Darmo who worked in India from 1952 to 1968. In recent years there has been a movement of the Holy Spirit to remind the Church of its missionary past and the urgency to preach the Gospel today.

1. A detailed history of the Chaldean Syrian Church from the first century to the present day is given in the forthcoming book of the author '*The Chaldean Syrian Church in Trichur*'.

CHAPTER VI

MISSION TO CHINA

China should be dealt with in some detail. There, this great missionary church flourished since A. D. 635 and declined suddenly in the 14th century. It is there that a large stone tablet stands at Hsi-an-Fu, erected in A. D. 781, telling the story of the missionary enterprise of the Nestorian Church in China from A. D. 635 to 781.

The Monument of Hsi-an-Fu gives us very valuable historical information about the mission of Alopen who went to China in A. D. 635. It has been suggested that he came with an embassy from Khotan or some other Central Asian Kingdom.¹ The emperor Tai Tsung sent his brother to receive Alopen while he was still on his way. Raymond Oppenheim who made a detailed study of this subject thinks that the Emperor did not

1. Raymond L. Oppenheim, *The First Nestorian Mission to China and Its Fallure*. Berkeley: Shires Bookstore, 1971 p. 29.

have any diplomatic reason for such a great interest in Alopen, since he had already completed the conquest of the people in the North-West. ¹

The Emperor had a spiritual concern. Alopen could be useful for "keeping watch over the increasing power of Islam." ² The Monument gives us the information that Alopen, working in the Palace library produced translations of the books he had brought with him. As a result of three years of work in the royal residence, the following edict of toleration was issued by the Emperor in A. D. 638.

The way had not, at all times and in all places, the self same name; the sage had not, at all times and in all places, the self same body. Heaven caused a suitable religion to be instituted for every region and clime so that each one of the races of mankind might be saved. Bishop Alopen of the Kingdom of Ta-chin, bringing with him the Sutras and images, has come afar and presented them at our capital..... so let it have free course throughout the Empire. ³

When Emperor Tai Tsung died in A. D. 649, his ninth son Kao Tsung ruled for thirty four

1. *Ibid.* p. 32.

2. *Ibid.* p. 34.

3. Quoted from Oppenheim, *Op. cit.* p. 35.

years with great prosperity. He built several monasteries and churches. Kao Tsung "promoted Alopen to be Great Spiritual Lord, Protector of the Empire."¹ Though the rule of Kao Tsung was a prosperous period for the church, after his death in A. D. 683, his wife Wu Ho, who was formerly his father's concubine and later a member of a Buddhist monastery, attempted to force a total conversion to Buddhism upon the Chinese people."²

The Christians survived the difficult time of about half a century. After Wu Ho had abdicated in A. D. 705, one of her deposed sons, Hsuan Tsung, came to the throne in A. D. 712. His reign was important for the Christians as a period for rebuilding. A bishop named Chi-lieh³ was honoured by the Emperor in A. D. 732, and his relationship with the court probably continued.⁴ The church regained the ground it had lost under Wu Ho during the reign of Hsuan Tsung which lasted until his abdication in A. D. 756.

The church entered a new phase during the reign of Su Tsung son of Hsuan Tsung. He rebuilt

1. Quoted from Oppenheim, *op cit.* p. 37. The above statement is found on the Monument itself. This statement is believed to be equivalent to an appointment of Alopen as Metropolitan of China by the Patriarch Yeshuyab III (A. D. 650-660) cf. J. Foster *The Church of the Tang Dynasty*, London: S. P. C K, 1938, p. 63.

2. Oppenheim, *op. cit.* p. 38.

3. Probably the Gabriel mentioned in the Monument.

4. Oppenheim, *op cit.* p. 46.

the Ling-wu monastery and four others. in A. D. 762, Tai Tsung succeeded his father Tai Tsung, It was in his time the Monument was erected at Hsi an Fu. ¹

At the top of the stone tablet ² is seen in big letters the caption. "The Tablet of the spread of the Tachin (Syrian) Illustrious Religion in China." The main inscription of the tablet is in Chinese language. However, small portions above and below the main inscription are in Syriac language on the extreme right of the tablet. The Chinese inscription reads "The Tablet of the spread of the Illustrious religion in China Eulogy with Introduction." In the next column it is recorded "composed by Ching-ching, monk of the Ta-chin (Syrian) monastery." Then there is the first Syriac writing on the Tablet as follows: Adam, Priest, Corepiscopos and Faqshi (teacher of the doctrine) of Sinestan (China)."

The inscription on the Monument ³ has 250 lines and the verse given at the end is of ten

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1. He is spoken of as "Chien-chung" in the text of the Monument cf. Oppenheim, *op. cit.* p. 50.
 2. This tablet was discovered when trenches were being dug for the foundations of a small building in March 1625 near the district city of Chow-chin. The workmen saw the great slab of stone buried beneath the surface of the ground. This seems to be the most probable account.
 3. A. C. Moule gives the description of the tablet as follows: The monument is formed of one slab stone. The upper part contains the title in nine large characters surmounted by the

stanzas. After the verses the date of the writing is given:

"In the great T'ang dynasty, the second year of Chien Chung (A. D. 781), astronomically the year being Tso. O the first month, and the seventh day, (this Tablet) was erected, when the monk Ning-shu Hnanisho was Patriarch¹ administering the illustrious congregations in the east² ..

Under this there are inscriptions of the man who actually wrote it. The Chinese inscription declares: "Written by Lu Hsui-yen, honorary assistant secretary of state, and former officer of Public Works in Tai "Chou." After some inscriptions written in both Syriac and Chinese alternately we reach the left face of the Monument where the names of 70 monks and priests are given in both the languages. The only name of a bishop among the seventy is of Mar Yokhannan in Syriac or the Bishop Yao-chan in Chinese.

In the Eastern part of Hsi-an-fu, which is known as Hsien-ning, there is place called "Pei-in" which means the "Forest of Tablets", where

cross and enclosed in entwined dragons. The lower part containing the inscription and lists of names on the front face and the two edges measures about 3 ft 4 in thick by 10.5 in. at the top and is about 6 ft 5 in high. The height of the whole stone is about 9 ft 1 in. It is called, as will be seen a "grand tablet" (feng pei) "A. C. Moule, *Christians in China before the year 1550*, pp. 31, 32.

1. Mar Thimotheus I, was the Patriarch since A. D. 778. The news of the death of the Patriarch Hnanisho perhaps had not reached China.
2. J. Foster, *op cit.* p. 148.

the Chinese keep not only all the precious stone monuments of the city and its neighbourhood, but also some from other cities. Since October 2, 1907, our famous monument has lain in the Pei-lin, well protected from wind and rain as well as from the mischievous hands of children.

Of this monument, three replicas have been made; first by Dr. Frits Von Holm, which stands in the Metropolitan Museum of Arts in the city of New York. Second replica was set up on the 21st September 1911 at the top of Mount Koya in Japan. The third replica was prepared for the Museum of Calcutta.

The stone at Hsian Fu speaks of the fall of man and man's helplessness to save himself from the fallen state.

The original nature of Man was pure, and void of all selfishness unstained and unostentatious, his mind was free from inordinate lust and passion. When, however, Satan employed his evil devices on him. Man's pure and stainless nature was deteriorated; and the perfect attainment of goodness on the one hand, and the entire exemption from wickedness on the other, became alike impossible to him. ¹

1. Mrs. C. E. Couling. *The Luminous Religion*, London, 1924, p. 5

The the stone gives a description about the Messiah. It refers to the Virgin birth of Jesus.

Whereupon one person of our Trinity, the Messiah who is the Luminous Lord of the Universe, veiling His true Majesty, appeared upon earth as a man. Angels proclaimed the Glad Tidings. A Virgin gave birth to the Holy One in Ta ch. in. A bright Star announced the blessed event. Persians saw the splendour and came forth with their tribute. ¹

The ruling authority was praised profusely by the writer of this inscription. The author of this stone commends the eight point programme of the government.

Our present emperor (who named the present period "Chien-chung" when he ascended the throne in 780 A. D.) is most sacred and august alike in the works of Peace and War. He developed the "Eight" (objects) of Government, and degraded the unworth whilst he promoted the deserving. He exhibited the "Nine divisions" of the grand scheme of Imperial government; and thus imparted new life and vigour to his own illustrious Mission. Conversion (i. e., the transforming influence) leads (the people) to the

understanding of the most mysterious Principles. There is nothing to hinder us from offering our thanksgiving prayers for him. ¹

Towards the end of the eighth century, Christianity in China was at its zenith. But in the ninth century it began to decline. After the edict of 845 A. D., two or three thousand monks were sent back to civil life. But what happened to the Christian population is not known. Mrs C. E. Couling in her book *The Luminous Religion* suggests the following possibilities.

1. The Nestorians may have merged themselves in the Mohammedan community which was larger and less molested. Their common worship of the One True God would tend to draw the two sets of religionists together, especially in time of trouble; and it is said that the increase in the number of Chinese Moslems, who do not proselytize, has been much greater than natural increase could account for. Another consideration is that in those times the Saracens in Persia were very friendly with the Christians, who were indeed highly in favour at Bagdad.

2. A better-known suggestion is that the Nestorians after they fell from favour

1. *Ibid* p. 57.

hid themselves in certain secrets, such as the "White Lily", and the "One Stick of incense" sects, and very specially in the "Chin Tan Chiao" the Pill-Immortality sect—which claims to have even to-day ten or eleven million followers.

.....

3. If none of the Nestorians actually turned Buddhists, there is proof that they greatly influenced Chinese Buddhism. There is abundant evidence that Buddhists and Nestorians were on very friendly terms in Hsi An Foo: the very man who composed the inscription on the Nestorian Tablet—Adam, otherwise Kingtsing—is found shortly afterwards helping an Indian monk to translate a Buddhist sutra into Chinese. The Emperors, it is well-known, were friendly with both cults for a long time.

The Nestorian influence on Chinese Buddhism, it is claimed, is shown in the great impetus given in China at this very time to the Buddhist All Souls' Day, and to the Pure Land School of Buddhism.

.....

But suppose all these suppositions true; that many Chinese Nestorian Christians

entered Islam instead of reverting to paganism—that others hid their teaching in secret sects—that an immense influence from them was felt by Chinese Buddhism and new elements introduced into Chinese thought—do we not all agree that it is a poor, paltry, pitiful result, of two attempts to Christianize the Middle Kingdom? Can we say other than that they failed? ¹

Unfortunately there is no monument to give us the details of the period after A. D. 781. However, we know something of the latter period from the imperial edicts. After the Tang dynasty the Nestorian Missionary Enterprise died out in China. Nevertheless Christianity did not disappear completely.

John of Monte Corvino, who arrived in Cambalac (Pekin) in A. D. 1294 speaks of the Nestorians as a powerful community. He managed to convert King George, a descendant of Prestor John. "When King George, died, his brothers and all his people reverted to Nestorianism again, or as Corvino puts it, "to their original schismatic creed." ² A Nestorian called Mar Sergius was governor of the province of Kiang Su in China during A. D. 1278-1280 and is said to have built two churches. ³

1. Mrs C E Couling, *The Luminous Religion*, p. 34, 35, 3., 38 4

2. John Stewart, *Op. cit*, p. 193,

3. *Ibid*, p 195.

By the end of the 13th century the Nestorian Church was widely spread. Assemani gives a list of no less than twenty seven Metropolitan seats extending over the whole of Asia at this time. Two hundred bishops were connected with these mission areas.³ In the year A. D. 1369 Ming dynasty replaced the Tartar dynasty of the Mongols. This resulted in the final eclipse of Nestorianism in China.

1. Assemani. *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, III, ii, p. 503.

CHAPTER VII

CHRISTIANITY IN JAPAN

The *Imperial Chronicles* of Japan speaks of a visit of a Persian named Li-mi-i with some others to the emperor of Japan. Li-mi-i is said to have received favours from the emperor. It is difficult to identify this Li-mi-i. But he was probably mi-li (Milli) the physician. Milli was the term used for medicine. The two parts must have become transposed. In Chinese there are many Li-mi, just as in Persian there are many Mi-li.

Professor P. Y. Saeki who made a detailed study of the famous monument at Hsi-an-fu thinks that this Li-mi who visited Japan in 736 A. D. was probably the father of Yesbuzid, the Chorepiscopa who erected the famous monument at Hsi-an-Fu in 781 A. D.

Japanese scholars speak of a physician called Rimitsu who lived at the court of the Japanese

Emperor Shormu, during the period 724-748 A. D. This physician might have been Limi or one of his colleagues. It is a fact that at that time some Nestorian Christians were famous physicians to important persons including the Khalifs.

Not only the physical sickness but also the spiritual defects were attended to by the physician. Consequently the Japanese empress embraced Christianity. Empress Komyo was known as a great saint. Several miracles were done by her

Princess Chujchima, the great niece of the Empress, entered a convent at Tacmadera. This convent was in Central Japan, halfway between Aji and Yoshimo. The princess is believed to have had a vision of heaven. She depicted it in a large piece of embroidery which still exists.

Kobo Daishi, Dengyo Daishi and {37 other Japanese scholars went to China where they received a copy of the gospel of St. Mathew, the ten commandments and other Christian literature from the Nestorian missionaries stationed at the Taishui Keikyo Church in Chang-ah-at. They landed at Sakoshi. About the early years of these pilgrim Fathers of Japan a recent Assyrian American Protestant missionary K. Joseph working in Japan writes:

Their first care was to build a simple split-log Church, with narrow slits for windows

and a tramped clay floor. A sheepskin mat lay before the altar, a wolf's hide curtain was door and the darkness was diluted by a slush lamp.

The head missionary, robed in the finest woven cloth of white, red and gold led the others on Christmas Day as they commemorated the Birth of Jesus Christ in Japan's first church with no pictures or idols, only a rustic Cross that reminded them of the reason of their Saviour's Birth. Buddhism was being introduced into the Japanese courts then, but didn't seep down to the lower strata of society. Without name or ritual it posed no opposition to the newcomers who moved near Kyoto. They, there at Kadona, in 603 A. D. built another church and the Japanese joined them in their worship.

The "Seventeen Articles of Injunction" the famous Constitution drawn up by Regent Prince Shotoku in A. D. 664 granted Nestorians "full liberty and personal rights" and this they enjoyed until, they were tempted to compromise their Biblical faith and merged with the general populace. ¹

1 Voice of the East, Trichur, January, 1970 pp. 5, 6.

In 730 A. D. these Nestorian missionaries established the first Leprosarium in Nara. Empress Komyo also attended to the lepers at this place. In spite of all the activities, Nestorian Christianity declined in Japan in the ninth century.

Ask the respectable historian, "What of the Nestorians?" and he points to the Triangular Torii, the remains of David's Shrine, "the Well of Israel", the peculiar burial mound, great influence left on the teachings of Buddhism and Shintoism like salvation by faith, the "omikushi" ark of the covenant, Shrine Layout, the Kyushu "Jizo", the "Ushi Matsuri" and the "Mizutori ceremonies."

He will tell you that the very name of that suburb of Kyoto, "Uzumasa" where they lived is a corruption of the Assyrian word "Ishoo M'chikkha", means alias "Hata" or "Kunyue" people. The sociologist echoes these sentiment when he investigates the great social welfare work that sprang from those first simple Christians who worshiped in that dingy chapel that first Easter Sunday 1,400 years ago. ¹

Today very little is known of the Christianity in Japan. At present the Church of the East is not known in that country. There is no trace of that great missionary church in Japan, still there are some stones which are discovered by archaeologists. These stones do tell the story of the great missionary heritage.

1. *Ibid* p. 7

Dr. Sakae Ikadae, a professor of Ryukoku University in Kyoto, Japan, claimed to be a faithful remnant of this ancient Church. The learned professor did research to unearth more information on the past history of this church in Japan. He and his wife in recent years propagated this Church in Japan. He was therefore appointed as the honorary resident commissioner in Japan of the Nestorian Patriarch.

Soon after Mar Thoma Darmo took charge as the Metropolitan of Malabar and India he opened correspondence with Dr. Sakae Ikadae for re-starting our mission in Japan. When he read about the missionary work in China and Japan, he wanted to start work in Japan. On 17 November, 1953 the Metropolitan wrote to Dr. Ikeda.

You know that we had once given you to understand of our intention to visit Japan. We are now very serious on the matter and would, therefore, ask you to advise us on the procedure we ought to adopt for securing the necessary visa to Japan. We would, further, like to ascertain whether we can get the services of some youths there, for the church. We will ordain them as Deacons and Priests and, if necessary, consecrate a Bishop to that place on our visit thereto. We have an ardent desire to do all and everything

in our power and as far as possible, to promote the progress of that branch of the holy apostolic and catholic church of the East, which once after flourishing for a time, had the misfortune to become extinct. It is our ardent desire and earnest prayer that by divine grace it may be revived again to its former status.

Nothing could be achieved by way of practical measures to revive the ancient Nestorian Christianity in Japan. Professor Ikade however continued to propagate this church. He made all efforts to do research into the past history of Christianity in his native land. The following letter written by him in 1970 to the present writer is an example of his interest in the research. It also reveals some pertinent historical conclusion crucial for our understanding.

Dear Sirs, Kyoto, April 9th
 Hearty thanks for you sending monthly periodical, the "Voice of the East."

I am very happy to inform you herein that Miss Yoko Tomita received, on 26th ultimo, a degree of Master of Laws from the Graduate school of Kansai University after applying for the master degree by presenting a thesis named, "Syro-Nestorian influences upon the Political History of Japan", which had been

examined by me. The Principle of the Church of the East is, as you know, called "Syro-Nestorianism" by Englishman and "Keikyo" by us Japanese.

It is especially noteworthy that in her above thesis Miss Tomia, Master of Laws, succeeded in identifying Rev. Milis with Hirai-Tenjin, to whom a shinto shrine in Nara is dedicated.

Hirai-Tenjin is a proper noun, which etymologically means a tenjin or heavenly God who came flying, while Rev. Milis was a Keikyo missionary and physician, who came to Japan in 736 from Bactria. I highly appreciate Master Tomita's success in thus proving that Rev. Milis was enrolled by the Imperial Court of Nara among Gods in Shintoism by virtue of his merits.

Very truly yours,

(Sakae Ikeda), Doctor Legum,

CHAPTER VIII

EXPANSION IN FURTHER ASIA

Nestorian missionaries spread among the Mongols, Turks, Tartars and Tibetans. Bishops and Archbishops (Metropolitans) were appointed to the important centres. In the codification of canon law made in 1291 A. D. by Mar Abdisho Metropolitan of Suva we find the Metropolitan of the Turks placed tenth in the list of the Metropolitans taking precedence over China, Armenia, and others. Java is placed fifteenth in rank. In another list probably of a later date, the order is reversed. China is fourteenth, India fifteenth, Samarkand twenty-first, the metropolitan of the Turks twenty second and so on. The Metropolitan sees in the Further Asia' were at Samarkand, Kashgar, Khatai, Tangut and Khon Balik. Various dates have been mentioned concerning the establishment of the hierarchy. The earliest is A. D. 410 - 415.

Perhaps it was during the time of Patriarch Isho Yabh in the middle of the seventh century.

In the second half of the eight century, the Christian Uigur Turks were all-powerful in Eastern Asia. Their capital city was called Karakoram. Their King was known by the word Idi Kut (Lord of the kingdom). The exact date of the expansion of the Christian faith to the Turco—Tartar tribes is unknown. It may be the seventh century and perhaps even earlier.

There is a Syriac letter believed to have been written by Mar Philexinus bishop of Mabbug to Abu Afr, military governor of Hirtha of Numan. In this letter, Philexinus of Mabbug who lived in the early part of the sixth century, makes frequent references to the Christian Turks. Perhaps the latter part of that letter was added by somebody after the death of Mar Philexinos. The second part refers to large Christian communities already in existence.

Philexinos was a Jacobite bishop and claims a share in the evangelisation of the Turco—Tartar tribes. But Alphonse Mingana who edited and translated the above work of Philexinos of Mabbug does not admit such claim. He gives the credit of carrying the Gospel to the Turco—Tartar tribes of central and eastern Asia entirely "to the untiring zeal and the marvellous spiritual activities of the Nestorian Church." Mingana observes:

We cannot but marvel at the love of God of man, and of duty which animated those unassuming disciples of Christ..... who in utter disregard of all discomforts of the body and in the teeth of the strong opposition and terrible vengeance of the Wizards of Shamonism and the mobeds of Zoroastrianism literally explored all the corners of the eastern globe 'to sow in them the seed" of true religion as it was known to them.

There were four powerful Christian kings. Their names are Gawirk, Girk, Tasahz and Langu. They were contemporaries. They were called Tartars, and their country Sericon, the name by which Ptolemy designated China. About the approximate number of the Tartar Christians under these four kings, John Stewart makes the following observation:

Each one of these kings is stated to have ruled over four hundred thousand families. Computing five persons to each family, this means a total community of two million people under each king, all, or almost all, subject to a rule based upon the teachings and precepts of the gospel of Christ. It is a marvellous record and one which it would be difficult to beat.

The dwelling place of these Christian Turks was five days distant from Karakoram which is spoken of as 'the border town,' and whose king as stated already was known by the sobriquet Idi Kut or 'Lord of the Kingdom.'¹

It is possible that these four kings may have been the heads, or Khakans, of the four Turco-Tartar tribes, namely Keraites, Uigurs, Naimans and Merkites. If the name of the fourth tribe is doubtful, Uriyangakit tribe can be substituted. But at the same time another tradition says that the first king of the Keraites became a Christian in the beginning of the eleventh century. Howorth in his *History of the Mongols* argues that the Keraites were Christians. He quotes Rashidad-din the Muhammadan historian of the Mongols, who says "The Keraites had their own rulers and professed the Christian faith."²

Not only the Keraites, but also their neighbours in the Chinese province of Kansu were Christians. Marco Polo states that Karakoram was in the territory of Naimans. Prester or Presbyter John was Christian king of these regions. Howorth thinks that Prester John was the king of the Keraites. Another scholar Oppert opines that he was the king of Gurkhan of the Kara Kitai.

1. John Stewart, *Op. cit.* pp. 144 & 145.

2. Howorth, *History of the Mongols*, Vol I, P. 542.

3. *Ibid*, P. 534.

The most important Turco - Tartar Christian tribe after the Keraites is Uigurs. They were Christians for a long time and was very influential in the 13th century. That is evident in the history of the two prominent Uigurs namely Marcos and Sauma.

Kublai Khan sent a Nestorian monk called Rabban Sauma on an embassy to the West in A. D. 1287.¹ Marcos, one of the members of the embassy sent by the Mongol Ilkhan, Arghun, to Europe, was ordained Metropolitan of the See of Khatai and of Oug in North China by Patriarch Denha in A. D. 1280. Rabban Sauma's friend Marcos became Patriarch Yawalah of the Church of the East in A. D. 1281. He is the only Turk ever to become a Patriarch in this Church.²

Sauma visited Constantinople and then proceeded to Naples and Rome. By the time he reached Rome, Pope' Honorius IV had passed away on 3rd April 1287. Cardinal Jerome of Ascoli, who later became Pope Nicholas IV on 20th Feb. 1288, received Sauma. After visiting Tuscany and Genoa he reached Paris and was welcomed by King Philip the Fair. He later met the king of England at Gascony. On his return journey Sauma

1. The detailed story of his visit is told in E. A. T. Wallis Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan*.

2. Marganneetha, which gives the list of all patriarchs of this church writes after his name, *bar Thurqaye*, meaning son of a Turk. *Marganeetha*, *Op cit.*, p 75 (Syriac numbering.)

was privileged to meet his old friend Cardinal Jerome as the new Pope. He then returned to Arghun at Bagdad. He died on 13th November 1317 at the age of seventyfive.

Naimans was the name given to nine Turco-Tartar tribes that lived in the "mountains of Tarbagatai on the upper Irtysh."¹ They became Christians. Persian writers refer to them as "Tarsa," a name applied to Christians. Merkites is the fourth group of the tribes who were Nestorians.

Uriyangakit is the fifth group. This tribe had a Christian queen in 1298 A. D. John Stewart makes the following comment about this tribe.

Confirmation of this is found in the colophon at the end of a Syriac lectionary of the gospels in the library of the Chaldean (Nestorian Uniate) Bishop of Diarbekir. It is in letters of gold on a blue background and indicates that the lectionary was written in the year A. D. 1298 for Queen Arungai, sister of Georges, king of the Christian Turks called Ganatu Uriyang. Blochet in his *Introduction to l' Histoire des Mongols*, page 181 is of opinion that 'the name represents the powerful Turkish agglomeration of tribes called Uriyan-gakit who must thus have

1. Rockhill, *Rubruck's Journey to Tartary*, pp 110, 116.

been undoubtedly Christian' in the year mentioned ¹

Kangli is yet another tribe which is known to have been Christian. Similarly there were Christians among the Kitans whose sway extended from the Caspian sea to the Gobi desert. But all the Kitans were not Christians. Kitans tolerated all religions including Islam. John Stewart thinks that "Christianity spread more freely among the Kitans than among those who were subject to the rule of Islam."²

He further observes:

That there were considerable numbers of Christians among the Kitans indicated by the fact that the Patriarch Elias II, A.D. 1176-1190, is said to have appointed a Metropolitan to Kashgar which was one of the residences of the Gurkhan of the Kitans. Amr describes the Metropolitan of Kashgar as of Kashgar and Nuakit.³

The daughter of the last Gurkhan, the wife of the usurper Kutschluk, was believed to have been a Christian.

Moal or Mongols is probably the last Turkish tribe to be influenced by Christianity. Although all the Turkish tribes mentioned earlier are called

1. John Stewart, *op. cit.* p. 154.

2. *Ibid*, p. 157.

3. *Ibid*.

the Mongols, there was a separate tribe known as Moal. They were later known as Moguls or Moghuls. The sixth successor of Tamarlane named Babar founded a Muhammadan dynasty in India which ruled until the British took over India in the last century.

This Mongol tribe had many Christians. More than one of the emperors and viceroys were Christians. Jenghiz Khan and his son Ogotai, though not Christians, had granted freedom of worship to Christians. Ogotai's son Guyuk was said to be a good Christian. The church historian Bar Hebraeus writes:

He was a true Christian and in his days the prestige of the numerous Christian bodies in his dominion was very high. His camp was full of Bishops, priests and monks.¹

It was this Guyuk who wrote a letter to Pope Innocent IV, in reply to a letter he received from the Pope in 1240. In this letter Guyuk protested to the Pope against the invasion of his kingdom by the Latin missionaries. He concludes:

and if thou sayest I am a Christian, I adore God and reject other religions how does thou know whom God absolves and in favour of whom he dispenses mercy?

1. Mingana, *Op cit.* p. 312.

How art thou so sure of these things as to pronounce such words?'¹

Hulaku a cousin of Guyük, was a supporter of Christian religion. Hulaku's brother, Mangu, described as a "follower and defender of the religion of Jesus." Sarkutti Bagi, mother of Mangu, Hulaku and Kublai Khan, was said to be a true believer.

According to Assemani, Nestorians throughout the provinces of Kashgar, Nuakit, Turkestan, Sunda and Tangut. The last mentioned province had its capital city by the same name had a large Christian population.

That the city of Tangut had a large Christian population is evident from the fact that when Rabbans Sauma and Marcos came there on their way to Jerusalem, the Christian inhabitants, men, women and children, turned out to meet them, because the faith of the Tangutians was very staunch and their heart pure. Isho Sabran, Metropolitan of Tangur, was one of those who consecrated Yahbalaha III.²

Mingana mentions that Christian influence is found even in Manichean writings. The Mongol kings such as Abaka and Arghun had minted coins

Descriptive letter from Rome, *Madras Mail*, November 7, 1925.
Quoted from John Stewart, *Op cit.* p. 160.

John Stewart, *Op. cit.* p. 163.

with the cross and the inscription "In the name of the Father, the Son and Holy Ghost, one God."

Mingana observes:

'The influence which the Nestorian Christians exercised on the Turks, even on those among them who were Muhammadan, is evidenced by the fact that about A. D. 1200 one Sulaiman of Bakirghan in the Khanate of Khiva, inspired by Nestorian writings on the same subject, composed in Turki a poem on the death of the virgin.¹

Let us conclude this chapter with the words of John Stewart.

At the beginning of the eleventh century the power of the Nestorian Patriarch extended from China to the Tigris and from lake Baikal to Cape Comorin. And all this was accomplished without any of the elaborate machinery that we have come to look upon as necessary for the carrying on of the missionary work of the twentieth century.²

1. Mingana, *Op. cit.*, p. 339.

2. John Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 167.

CHAPTER IX

INSCRIPTIONS & CROSSES

It is a sad fact that in many countries where Nestorian Churches once flourished, one has to depend today on cemetery inscriptions to find any trace of the missionary saga. But at the same time we should be grateful for whatever evidence that has been unearthed from the cemeteries. we are grateful to Prof: D. A. Chwolson, who in the last century, gave information concerning the cemeteries in the province of Semiryechensk in Southern Siberia.

The two cemeteries containing tombstones of Nestorian Christians have been discovered. They are fifty-five kilometres apart. The smaller of the two was discovered in the year A. D. 1885 by Dr. Porjakow. It is south of the village of Great Tokmak, very close to the ruins of an old burnt-brick fortification called Burand, on the Alexander

road. All the stones have crosses on it. Some stones have inscriptions too.

The graveyard was discovered later by a surveyer named Andrew. It is near Pishpek. It contains 611 stone. Tokmak is near the outflow of the river Chu. It is close to lake Issyk-kul in the province of Semirychensk. This was a densely populated area prior to the Mongolian period. About this graveyard and its tombstones, John Stewart says as follows:

The greater part of the large graveyard has been cultivated, the stones having been removed to higher ground. In some graves more than one body has been interred and on some gravestones more than one name is inscribed. The Kirghiz who inhabit that part say that there are other large stones with crosses, and the remains of many old settlements, to be found in the valley of the Chu to the north-west of Pishpek. Specimen stones and copies of the inscriptions on others, were sent to different societies in Paris, St. Petersburg and other places, in the hope that the members might be able to assist in the work of deciphering. This was in some cases very difficult on account of the mixed nature of the characters in which the inscriptions were

written, some of the names appearing both in Syriac and in Turkish. One large inscription of eleven lines had a number of peculiar Turkish names.¹

The inscriptions indicate that the majority of the tombstones belonged to Nestorians of Turkish descent. Mingana states: "gravestones in the form of a cross have also been discovered in Manchuria, and Nayan, king of that country, was a Christian and had inscribed the sign of the cross on his banners "

Much can be learned from these inscriptions on the tombstones. John Stewart admits that the records in these inscriptions are authentic and trustworthy. Nestorians at that time had educated teachers and earnest preachers. About the nature of these inscriptions we get an idea from the following words.

'This is the grave of Pasak — The aim of life is Jesus, our redeemer', runs one inscription. Pious wishes for the future life of the dead, for their everlastings remembrance, and for the rest of their souls in the company of the pious and the righteous, are frequently found on tombs. Often the deceased persons are described on the stones as being wise and learned, and reference is also made

John Stewart, *Op. cit.* p. 202

Mingana, *Op. cit.* p. 203.

on some to the part played by the person referred to in the political life of the community. One of the persons thus commemorated is described as the renowned Emir, and the title of General or commander-in-chief had evidently been in his family for to generations.¹

Clergy and such ecclesiastical dignitaries were buried in this cemetery. Since the clergy married the names of the wives and children had been mentioned. Mingana writes as follows:

'The Christian community of that almost lost corner of the earth must have been fairly considerable, because among the about three hundred gravestones of men published by Chwolson there are nine archdeacons, eight doctors of ecclesiastical jurisprudence and of biblical interpretation, twenty-two visitors, three commentators forty-six scholastics, two preachers and an imposing number of priests.²

No bishop's name is found in this list. It is because the headquarters of the bishop was in Almalik. Or, bishops were buried in the church premises and not in a cemetery with ordinary clergy or laity. This is the canon law.

1. John Stewart *Op. cit.* pp. 206 and 207.

2. Mingana *op. cit.* p. 334.

Some of them had genuine Turkish names. Probably the Christians who lived close to the cemetery were Turkish Christians. Nevertheless, some of the names mentioned in the following paragraph speak of the universality of Christians.

A woman is described as 'Terim the Chinese', a priest figures as 'Banus the Uigurian', a layman as 'Sazik the Indian.' Then we have 'Kiamta of Kashgar', Tatta the Mongol' and 'Shah Malik a son of a George of Tus.' 'All these names imply a constant intercourse between the different Christian peoples of Central Asia and the Far East' which enables us to understand how in a single cemetery there lie, side by side, people from China, India, East and West Turkestan, Mongolia, Manchuria, Siberia and Persia.¹

The inscriptions give us glimpses of the high spiritual qualities and intellectual acumen of some of the people who are buried there.

Different persons are prescribed in the inscriptions as church administrators and one as a renowned church administrator. Of others it is said that they zealously sought the welfare of the church. One is spoken of as a renowned exegete and preacher. Their wisdom is extolled. Of

1. Mingana; *Op. cit.*, P. 335.

another it is said that his voice in preaching was lifted up like a trumpet.¹

Three inscriptions dated in the years 1338-39 A.D. tell us that those people died of plague. The earliest date found in the cemetery at Pispék is 1249 A. D. and the latest is 1345 A. D. It is possible that all the stones are not properly examined. But at the same time it is believed that Christianity in East and West Turkestan, as well as China ceased to exist in the 14th century.

Let us conclude our study of these tombstones by quoting some of the deciphered inscriptions.²

No. 66 (138) 'This is the grave of chorepiscopus Ama. In the year 1556 (A. D. 1255) he departed from this world in the month of July on Sabbath. May our Lord unite his spirit with those of the pious and upright. Amen.

No. 83 (127) 'In the year 1503 (A. D. 1272) that is the ape year. This is the grave of the priest and general, Zuma—a blessed old man, a famous Emir,—the son of General Giwargis. May our Lord unite his spirit with the spirits of the fathers and saints in eternity.

No. 84 (218). 'In the year 1584 (A. D. 1273). This is the grave of the church visitor Pag-Mangku, the humble believer.

1. John Stewart, *op. cit.* pp. 210 and 211.

2. *Ibid*, pp. 214-216.

No. 123 (155). 'In the year one thousand six hundred and twelve (A. D. 1301, the bull year). This is the grave of the priest Taki who was very zealous for the church

No. 18. 'In the year one thousand six hundred and eighteen (A. D. 1307) that is the sheep year.' (Turkish, koi=sheep). This is the grave of the charming maiden Jujia, the betrothed of the chorepiscopus Johanan.

No. 39 (192). 'In the year one thousand six hundred and thirty-nine (A. D. 1338) that is the dragon year. This is the grave of Pesoha the renowned exegetist and preacher who enlightened all cloisters through the light-Extolled for wisdom and may our Lord unite his spirit with the saints.

No. 50 16(30). 'In the year one thousand six hundred and fifty (A. D. 1339) the hare year. (Turkish, tabischkau=hare). This is the grave of Kutluk. He died of plague with his wife Mangu-Kelka.'

'In the year one thousand six hundred and twenty-seven (A. D. 1326) which is the year of the dragon. (Turkish "lowu"). This is the grave of Shliha the celebrated commentator and teacher, who illuminated all the monasteries with light; son of Peter the august commentator of wisdom. His voice rang as high as the sound of a trumpet. May our Lord mix his pure soul with the just men and

the fathers. May he participate in all heavenly joys'.¹

Three crosses in Tibet

Three crosses are seen in Tibet. On the top of the cross there is a Syriac inscription which reads Ishow. The three crosses on the left hand side of these three crosses, there are Syriac inscriptions written in vertical lines.

A Photo block of this rock with crosses and Syriac script is given at the end of this book. It is reproduced from page 189 of *Ladage Rgyalrabs Chimed Ster* (History of Ladakh) by Yoseb Gergan, edited by his son S. S. Gergan.¹ The present author is grateful to Mr. S. S. Gergan for giving permission to reproduce the photo. Mr. S. S. Gergan was kind enough to translate what he had written in Tibetan language. The original inscriptions is in Syriac. Since it is difficult to decipher the inscription from the photograph the present author is reproducing below what Mr Gergan has written in Tibetan language having been properly deciphered by somebody earlier as follows:

In the year of our Lord Jesus 800 after His death, Nestorian Christians of Syria have arrived this place from Samarkand (leader Charansar). In one year changed

215 camps to arrive Tangtse in Ladakh district about 60 miles east of Leh, after crossing 18 000 ft high from Leh.

The veracity of the above inscription need not be doubted. It is a historical fact that Samarkand was a flourishing centre of Nestorian Christians. Around 800 A. D. it was the seat of a Metropolitan. As a matter of fact in the neighbouring centres such as Kashgar, Nuakith and Gandispur there were Metropolitans. There were bishop Khotan; and Yarkand. The zealous Christians under these bishops and Metropolitans could undertake an ambitious mission to Tangtse near Leh. Although the name of the leader is mentioned i.e., charansar, the inscription does not give more details regarding the number of persons in this team and the extent of work of this mission near Leh

Was there a bishop in Tibet? John Stewart conjectures that the seat of the bishop in Tibet was probably the city called Tangut.¹ He thinks that its elevation to the rank of a Metropolitan see may date back to about 790 A. D. But it was not from Tangut, the missionaries came to Tangtse. The inscription definitely states that they came from Samarkand. Tangut covered an area of Upper Tibet and probably Hsi-an-Fu where the Monument was discovered, belonged to the jurisdiction of the Metropolitan of Tangut²

¹ John Stewart, *Op. cit* p 163.

² *Ibid*, p 164

The second photograph is of the complete rock. Mr. Gergan was kind enough to give the present writer a copy of the photograph with permission to print it in this book. Mr. Gergan says that a Buddhist monk named Lo-Zang-Chhos-Kye-Nganima (Tibetan name), whose Chinese name is Thuo-Koan in his book "*History of the Religion in Central Asia with specific reference to Buddhism in Tibet, China and Mongolia*" edited in 1802 A. D. in Tibetan language¹ speaks of Isho as the saviour of the world.

It is unfortunate that we do not know the details of the mission of 800 A. D. Even the three Persian crosses found on that rock are being erased by children playing in its vicinity. Christianity has completely disappeared in Tibet.

The present author happened to make an acquaintance with this Tibetan Christian Mr. S. S. Gergan quite accidentally in the All Saints Church in Srinagar. About that visit Mr. Gergan writes:

In a miraculous way, that I made your acquaintance here in Srinagar! I never knew that a Nestorian church, and a bishop existed in South India. What a pleasure to meet you, and your zeal in your research work."

1. Tibetan is spoken from Volga river in the North to Central Nepal in the South (Himalayas) and the border of China and Tibet in the east to the border of Pakistan and Bharat in the West. It covers an area of 5000 miles.

There may be many crosses and inscriptions lying buried. Some may be unknown to us because it is under non-Christian control. A zeal to search is not enough. By such discoveries we can be aware of our glorious past. But if it does not persuade us to fulfil the command of our Lord to preach the gospel to all the world, the study of Nestorian missions will be a mere intellectual exercise. Should we go to cemeteries to look for evidence of the existence of this Church? Or, can we answer the challenge by doing what our forefathers did?

CHAPTER X

CAUSES OF DECLINE

1. Persecutions.

The persecutions were mainly by the Muham-madans who were antagonistic to Nestorian missionary expansion. Some caliphs were friendly to these Christian neighbours. At the time of the origin of Islam the Patriarch of the church Isho Yabh made agreement with Prophet Muhammed. He granted a charter of protection to Nestorian Christians.¹ Later Caliph Omar also gave similar concessions and privileges to the members of this denomination.

Many Nestorian Christians got prominent places under the Caliphs in the middle of the seventh century. But when Caliph Omar defeated the emperor of the Sassanian dynasty, several Nestorian Christians in the Persian empire, like

1. Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, III, II, p. 95.

their fellow Christians in Arabia, ran away from their homeland. Others became Muhammadans.

Caliph Harun (786-809 A. D.) changed the policy of the Caliphs towards Christians. Caliph Muttawakkil (847-861 A. D.) persecuted Christians severely. The Muhammadan rulers even nominated Nestorian Patriarchs, whether they were approved by the Metropolitans or not.

Towards the end of the tenth century, the Seljuks began to play a significant role politically. They became Muhammadans and saved Islam from being destroyed by the Christian crusaders. One of the Seljuk rulers named Alp Arselan began to persecute Christians. He fixed a large iron collar on the neck of every Christian who refused to change his religion.

In the 12th century one Salladian succeeded to the throne of Egypt and all Syria came under his control. Islam spread in Turkestan through trade connections and conquests. After Turks and Mongols had become Muhammadans, they began to combine religious and political motives in order to strengthen the solidarity and power of the nation. About this phenomenon which hastened the decadence of Nestorian Christianity, John Stewart concludes as follows:

As Muslims they were no longer neutral in religious matters, especially when it

coincided with their Political aims. Convinced too, not only that it was their duty, but that the larger the number of Christians they could by force or persuasion turn from Christianity to Muhammedanism the greater the reward they might expect from God, it can easily be understood how these perverts of Islam became its most fanatical supporters and proved an important factor in the decay of Nestorianism in those regions where they exercised a controlling power.¹

As far as India is concerned the invasion of Islam did not affect the Southern part very much. But in North India the invasion begun by Mahmood of Ghazni in 1001 A. D. resulted in the conquest of most north India by the time of Muhammad Tuglak in the 14th century. John Stewart is of the opinion that the disappearance of Nestorian Christianity from North India is due to these Muhammadan conquests.

It is probable that not later than A. D. 1344, as the result of these Muhammadan conquests, Christianity had practically disappeared from the whole of India north of the Vindhya mountains, and from a considerable part of the Deccan on their southern side, the Christian kingdoms

1. John Stewart, *Op. cit.* p. 233.

mentioned by Marco Polo as existing at the end of the thirteenth century being amongst the number of these submerged by the Muslim deluge.¹

Under the Moghul dynasty, Babar, the founder, was tolerant to Christians. Akbar and his son Jehanghir too followed a similar policy. Akbar had a Christian wife. Shah Jehan, the son of Jehanghir, persecuted Christians and Hindus. Aurangzeb did the same.

As late as 1784 A. D. Tippu Sultan of Mysore forcibly circumcised thirty or fifty thousand Christians and removed them to the country beyond the Western Ghats. He harassed Christians and threatened to cut their nose and ears, if they refused to embrace Islam. It is possible that many of the Moslems in North Kerala may be decendants of those Chistians who were forcibly converted to Islam.

2. Deception

Another factor that caused the decline of this great missionary church was deception. John Stewart states that Ashoka legend and Krishna cult are examples of the above statement. In the early centuries Brahminism and Buddhism worked together. On the authority of a scholar named Wall who wrote *Ancient Orthography of Jews*, Stewart states that the inscriptions attributed to

1. *Ibid*, P. 234.

Asoka are not of the period before Christ but to a period after Christ not earlier than the end of the third century. He further remarks: "The inscriptions might have been written by an Indian Christian who still retained part of his pagan superstitions."¹

The idea of the descents of the deity called avatars, under various names and forms particularly that of Krishna, is a great blow to the expansion of missionary labours of Christians. Stewart states, quoting from Bentley's *Historical View of Hindu Astronomy*:

Seeing that the Christians acknowledged that Christ was an incarnation of the deity, and that God the Father had sent him down to earth to show special favour to men, and to redeem them from sin, 'the Brahmins invented, not one but several incarnations and descents of the deity as having taken place among them at various times, thereby making it appear that they exceeded the Christians, and all other nations, by far, in point of favour of the diety.'²

1. John Stewart *Op cit* p. 241.

The remarks about Asoka inscriptions is the opinion of some Western scholars. This conclusion is debatable. It is included here just because John Stewart deals in detail on this point.

2. *Ibid*, p. 245.

According to Bentley and Stewart the earliest possible date for the inventions of Krishna legend is 7, August 600 A. D. and the latest is probably 750 A. D. Bentley is of opinion that the Krishna legend is the fabrication of the Brahmins who were vexed at the progress of Christianity in India. He further observes:

“Therefore, as Christ and Krishna were one and the same deity, it would be ridiculous in them being already of the true faith, to follow the imperfect doctrines of a set of outcastes who had not only forgotten the religion of their fore fathers but the country from which they originally sprang.”¹

The fact that there are striking parallels between Gita and the gospel of St. John have been shown by many scholars beyond doubt. Dr. Hopkins, Professor of Sanscrit at Yale University, in his *India Old and New*, pp, 155-7, conclusively proved that Gita is indebted to the New Testament.

Several legends connected with Krishna indicate their indebtedness to Christianity.

Take for instance, the statement of the Vishnu Purana, that Nanda, the foster father of Krishna, at the time of the latter's birth, went with his pregnant wife, Yasoda

¹. Bentley, *Historical View of Hindu Astronomy*, p, 113.

to Mathura to pay his taxes: or the pictorial representation of Krishna in the cow stall or shepherd's hut, that corresponds to the manger: and of the shepherds, shepherdesses, the ox and the ass, that stand round the women, as she sleeps peacefully on her couch without fear of danger. Then we have the stories of the persecution of Kamsa, of the massacre of the innocents, of the passage across the river (Christophoros), or the wonderful deeds of the child, of the healing virtue of the water in which he was washed, etc.¹

There are other similarities in other books of Hindu Scriptures which cannot be ignored. John Stewart concludes with the following statement.

From all this it seems evident that, so far, at least, as India is concerned, the introduction of the Krishna cult, combined with the development of the caste system, in the centuries subsequent to A. D. 600 must be included among the factors that contributed to the decay in the virility of Nestorian Mission.²

1. Weber, *Indian Literature*, p. 86 Quoted from John Stewart. *op. cit.*, p. 250.

2. John Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 252.

3. Compromise

The gradual growth of a spirit of compromise among the members of this great missionary church is a significant factor which contributed to its decline. Many sects such as Manichean exerted influence among Christians.

It was in 1142 A. D. that Abdisho II, (Ebed Jesu) Patriarch of this ancient church, made a concord with Dionysius, Patriarch of the Jacobites. From that time on, the two churches which were opposing each other, on account of their disagreement on Christology, granted mutual recognition to each other, at every opportunity. John Stewart thinks that it was from that time Nestorians began to show tolerance to other sects too. He remarks:

This date probably marks a definite stage in the falling away from the high ideals which had previously distinguished them, with a corresponding diminution in missionary activity and a lessened ability to resist the persecution of the later Mongol rulers after they had been won over to Islam, and the still more terrible devastation wrought by Tamerlane.¹

In the Lamaistic Buddhism of Tibet one can find that "the teachings of Pythagoras were combined with those of Christianity after the manner of Neo-Platonism."² In the worship of the Tibetan

¹ *ibid*, p. 255.

Lamas, traces of some strange parodies of church ritual are visible.

The Buddhism of China and Japan borrowed from Christian doctrine even to the extent of emphasizing salvation by faith. It is possible that Buddhism might have exerted its liberalising influence on the Christians, in the same way as Christianity influenced Buddhism. This spirit of compromise was its doom. John Stewart concludes:

Not perhaps that there was any formal departure from, or denial of, fundamental doctrines, but less emphasis was probably laid on these than their importance demanded, and the influence of the Nestorians on the non-Christians among whom they lived and their power to exert a restraining influence on the Mongol storm about to burst on Asia was correspondingly decreased. The note of urgency and definiteness which had been so characteristic of their message in the early centuries had disappeared, the Laodicean period in their history had set in. The result was that in countries such as China and Japan, which had escaped the Muhammadan deluge, Buddhism became largely the dominant religion, even

2. *Ibid*, p 256.

if it shared its power with other less virile systems, and Christianity was blotted out as with a sponge.¹

The additional factors that contributed towards the final extermination of Nestorian Christianity in central and northern Asia were the growth of the Mongol power and absorption by Roman Catholics.

1. The Mongol Power

The Mongols who tolerated Christians in the early centuries began to attack Christians severely after Jenghiz Khan came to power. He himself was not antagonistic towards Christians. But after he had conquered Herat, the neighbours had it appear that the people of Herat were guilty of treachery towards Jenghis Khan. Then Jenghis Khan took terrible vengeance on the inhabitants of Herat. In seven days 16,00,000 had been slain.

The severity of the Mongol persecution is clear from the following statement.

Never in all history had there been calamity which approached or came near by to it. Those whom the Mongols massacred in a single city exceeded in number, it is said, the whole of the Children of Israel who went out from Egypt. City after city fell into their hands, Kashgar,

1. *Ibid*, pp. 257, 258.

Balasaghun, Samarkand, Bokhara and the like, the inhabitants being slain and the cities plundered and destroyed.¹

But the final destruction came in the days of Ameer Timoor, known as Tamerlane. In 1390 A. D. Timoor invaded Persia. One of Timoor's armies went as far as the borders of China. Another went to Western China. A third reached the Volga. In 1392 he again invaded Persia. Timoor reached Russia and plundered Moscow. He conquered Afghanistan and a major portion of Mooltan. In 1398 Timoor sacked Delhi. He took the city of Smyrna. He planned his expedition to China. But before he could accomplish his mission he fell sick and died in the town of Otrar, near Samarkand, on April 1, 1405.

Since Tamerlane was a fanatical Muhammadan he destroyed Christians. As he was a Sunnite, he persecuted the Shiahs too. The atrocities he committed against Christians who refused to become Muhammadans are unparalleled in history.

The following paragraph from Huc's *Christianity in China* gives us an idea of the intensity of his atrocities.

'Tamerlane passed over like a devastating scourge, cold, cruel, imperturbable; he was accessible to no sentiment of pity or

¹ John Stewart, *Op. cit* p. 265.

commiseration, and after having laid waste thousands of towns and destroyed countless numbers of men he left a great part of Asia a desert, covered with human bones and bloodstained ruins.¹

2. Absorption by Roman Catholics

With the rise of Islam, Christianity, whether Nestorian or Catholic, disappeared from certain areas. But the story of Japan, Burmah, South India and Ceylon is different. At least in South India and Ceylon Nestorians became Roman Catholics. They continue to this day as Roman Catholics.

Ochia in the island of Nippon, Japan was mentioned as the seat of a Roman Catholic bishop in the fourteenth century.

In China since the end of the thirteenth century, the Roman Catholics (Franciscans under John de Monte Corvino) began to work.

The clearest evidence of the absorption of Nestorians by the Roman Catholics is available in the case of South India. The credit goes to the Portuguese who in the sixteenth century, used all available resources to bring Christians on the South West coast of India under their control. Now there are more than two million Syrian Catholics in Kerala, subject to the Pope. In the state of

1. Huc, *Christianity in China*, Vol I, p. 421. Quoted from John Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 290.

Tamilnadu, several Roman Catholics found today, are probably descendants of Nestorian Christians.

It is partly true even in North India. John Stewart thinks that in the present day Roman Catholic Bishopric in Simla there may be some ex-Nestorians. Similarly under the present Catholic Bishop of Patna there must be some descendants of Nestorian Christians, for, there was a Nestorian Metropolitan in Ulna or Patena in A. D. 1222. The above author argues:

From what has been said we are justified in assuming that the Christian communities formed in India as the result of Nestorian missionary activity prior to the thirteenth century did not cease to exist, but were, with the exception of the Syrians, simply merged in Roman Catholicism and continued as before under their new designation.¹

Not only in North India but also in Ceylon none of the Nestorians found in the sixth century by Cosmas are seen today. A large number of Roman Catholics found in Ceylon today is not the result of the Roman Catholic conversions from the pagans.

1. John Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 300.

CHAPTER XI

CONCLUSION

When Christianity disappeared totally from central and northern Asia owing to the Muham-
madan persecution and the conquests of the
Mongols and of Tamerlane, its influence also was
lost. Nevertheless, that is not the case in countries
such as China, Japan, Burmah etc. John Stewart
rightly remarks:

In these countries there are echoes of
Christian teaching and relics of Christian
customs which carry us back unmistakably
to those early Nestorian missionaries
who alone furnish us with the key to
much that would be not only puzzling
but otherwise inexplicable.¹

Professor P. Y. Saeki claims that China of the
Tang dynasty in 618-845 A. D. was under strong

1. John Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 301.

Christian influence. He states that the leaven of Nestorianism had penetrated the whole of Chinese literature. He further argues that the adverse edict of 845 A. D. ordering the suppression of Nestorianism, Buddhism and Muhammadanism checked the growth of Christianity in China. It is probable that due to the edict of 845 A. D. many Nestorians may have become Muhammadans. More have joined in the fourteenth century during the time of Tamerlane. According to the same scholar the descendants of those Nestorians who did not join the Muhammadans must have joined the secret societies such as Chum-tan-chiao, which has a membership of eleven million.¹

Shan - tao (Zendo) who died in 681 A. D. taught salvation by faith in Amitabha. Saeki states:

How he got the idea of a vicarious Saviour or of 'eternal life' by faith in Amitabha is suggested by the fact that he lived at the time when the Nestorian mission flourished in China and that both Nestorians and Buddhists were then on friendly terms and met at the imperial court of the T'ang emperors.²

In India Christian influence is found in *Bhagavad Gita*; Some scholars think that it can not have been written earlier than 600 A. D. Bhakti

1. *Ibid* p. 33.

2. Quoted from John Stewart, *op cit*, p. 306,

evotion) was introduced into South India by Manuġa in the twelfth century. Kabir, a Muhammadan, started a sect which has much in it that derived from Christianity. In the teachings of Jasi Das we can find the influence of Christian teachings. The Karens of Burmah is another sample of the by-products of Christianity.

Nestorians were great missionaries. They extended rapidly. Asia was widely covered by their simple but dedicated missionaries. They were not like modern missionaries. They had no funds to support their mission station financially. They did not have any salary. There were no Mission Boards to direct their activities.

Some were itinerant preachers. They were volunteers. They had no financial backing. Some were even refugees. But where-ever they went, they preached the Word of God. In the eighth century they doubled their number of bishops of the fourth century. They were a fastspreading church.

The strength in the 11th century was the record number. This church was the single largest Christian denomination at that time. John Stewart writes:

Whole peoples with their rulers had become Christians and been taught, in a measure at least, the principles of Christianity, and it seems certain that there

were very few places in the whole of Asia that were not reached at some time or other as the outcome of the marvellous activity of that wonderful church which extended from China to Jerusalem and Cyprus, and in the eleventh century is said to have outnumbered to Greek and Roman churches combined.¹

John Stewart draws our attention to the special feature of the missionary activities of these early evangelists:

If one compares the outcome of the missionary activity of the 'Church of the East, with the results of the more highly developed organizations of today one may well ask if the missionaries of these early centuries have not, even yet, something to teach us as to the methods and conditions that are essential for the gathering out and building up of a Christian community which shall be not only self-supporting and self-governing but, most important of all, self-propagating as well.

When the missionary enterprise failed in China in the 14th century, there was a general decadence of the missionary activities of the Church of the East. We have seen the three factors led to the

1. John Stewart, *Op. cit.* p. 198.

2. *Ibid*, p. 167.

decadence of Nestorian missionary endeavour. They were persecution, deception, and compromise.¹ Two additional factors were the extermination by Mongols and Tamerlane as well as the absorption by Roman Catholics.

The remnant which escaped the persecutions of Tamerlane finally found refuge in the mountains in Kurdistan. The split caused by Patriarch Sulaqa in A. D. 1552 further weakened this church. Further, persecuted by the Kurds and Turks, the Church of the East became still weaker. In the 19th century they were not able to send a single bishop from the Middle East even to India except consecrating an Indian, Anthony Thondanatta who went to Kurdistan.²

The first World war in 1914-18 further weakened this church. This denomination was estimated to be about two hundred thousand strong before A. D. 1914. Now the population in Iraq, Iran, Syria, Lebanon, U. S. A. and the Chaldean Syrians in India would come to only about two hundred thousand.³

This general decadence of the Church made her forget its past missionary heritage. The decline of the monastic movement also contributed to the total annihilation of the missionary movement in this "most missionary church the world

1. *Ibid*, pp. 217 - 260.

2. This consecration took place at Kudshanis in A. D. 1862.

3. This is the estimate of the present writer based on personal knowledge. There has never been a correct census of Nestorians.

has ever seen.”¹ With special reference to the Chaldean Syrian Church of the East in India the continual litigation is considered a basic cause of its decadence. There have been no resources for meeting the primary obligation of the Church in regard to its mission.

Still signs of hope are becoming visible recently among the young men who felt in their blood the call for missionary work. It is quite possible, with the revival of the monastic movement in this Church, that many young men will go out to take up the work carried on by their forefathers. The evangelistic activities of the various denominations in Kerala at present provide the incentive for the members of this ancient missionary church to participate in the evangelization of the people in India and abroad.

John Stewart concludes his book with the following remarks which should naturally inspire and encourage members of the Church today.²

The present writer fervently hopes that the imperishable memory of the innumerable missionary martyrs of the Nestorian Church will provide an incentive not only to the “more highly favoured churches today,” but to the members of this ancient church, the heirs of this great tradition.

1. John Stewart, *Op. cit.*, p. 313.

2. *Ibid*, p. 329.

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CHURCH IN TRICHUR
12. NESTORIAN CHRISTOLOGY



The Most Rev. Dr. Mar Aprem (formerly, George Mookken) was born in Trichur, Kerala, India in June 1940. Educated in India, England and America he specialised in the field of Church History. He was the President of the Church History Association of India.

He holds two master's degrees in Church History one from the United Theological College, Bangalore (M. Th., of Serampore, 1966), and the other from the Union Theological Seminary, New York (S. T. M. degree, 1967). He was a candidate for Doctor of Theology (Th. D.) degree at Princeton Theological Seminary, USA when he was made bishop at Bagdad, Iraq in 1968. Later he earned his D. Th degree from Serampore University near Calcutta.

Since 1968 he is the head of the Church of the East in India with his headquarters in Trichur. He is active in several religious and social organizations, all over India.