

## **EARLY CHRISTIANITY IN PERSIA:**

By: Mathias Mundadan.

Christianity in Persia has a chequered history. It has assumed several names in the course of history. It is called Persian Christianity because it exists and had existed in those regions which is called the Persian Empire. The great rival of the Roman Empire till the rise of the political power of Islam; it is the Church of modern Iraq and Iran. This part of the world was ruled successively by the Babylonians, the Assyrians, the Chaldeans and the Persians, and it was known in history by various names: Assyrian, Babylon, Chaldea, and Persia. Also the Church in this part has been called by all these names, such as East Syrian Church (in opposition to West Syrian or Antiochene) and Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon (after the twin capital cities under the Persians). The region as well as the Church is also known after Mesopotamia, the Euphrates-Tigris valley, the seat of one of the most ancient civilizations which had its parallel in the early Nile valley civilization.

### **Political Developments:**

It is relevant to give a little of geography before going into the political background to situate the topic of this paper in context. The famous Greek Geographer Strabo wrote in about A.D. 20, his well-known book 'Geographica', which was a fruit of a life time of study. It presented to the world of the apostolic Church a better picture of the planet than its people had ever before possessed (cf. Moffett 1998: 4). This apostles and disciples of Jesus Christ who had the Master's command, "Go ye into the whole world and preach the gospel" (Mk 16:15), who became witnesses to Christ "in Jerusalem, in all Judaea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth" (Acts 1:8), had no precise idea about "the ends of the earth". Half of Strabo's inhabited world was the continent of Asia, which extended from Don to the Ganges, from Arabia to "the land of the Seres", i.e. China. He divided Asia into two sections, one south of the great ranges of the roof of the world-Himalayas, Pamirs, Hindu Kush, and Urals, the Atali, and Tien Shan Mountains-and the other to the north. The southern section was the familiar territory: Arabia, Syria, and Asia Minor in the far west, Assyria and Parthian Persia, and India to the east. Four waves of empire that swept across this broad expanse left, like tidal marks on the beach of the first century, four strands of civilization stamped upon its surface: Greco-Roman Asia. Iranian (Persian) Asia, Sinic (Chinese) Asia and Indian Asia (cf. Moffett 1998: 6).

The concern of this paper is about Iranian/Persian Asia. The City States under Sumerians (before 2400 B.C.). The Sumerians were followed by a Semitic people called the Acadians (from 2400 B.C.) who had to surrender their power to another Semitic people, the Babylonians, who under their great ruler Hammurabi established the Babylonian Empire (18c11 century B.C.) with their capital Babylon situated on the Euphrates, north of Sumer. The Babylonians in their turn had to surrender to the Hittites who were later overthrown by other peoples and finally power fell in to the hands of another Semitic people, the Assyrians, who with Ashur as their centre, founded the Assyrian Empire (8<sup>th</sup> century B.C.); but after a century they had to make way for the Chaldeans, also a Semitic people, who with Babylon as their capital, again formed the Chaldean or the second Babylonian empire. At the close of 6<sup>th</sup> century B.C. the Persians under Cyrus overthrew the empire of the Chaldeans and established their own the Persian Empire.

It is important to remember, however, that even though the rulers changed and politics shifted, students of history note a continuation of the Babylonian civilization, as we may call it, which was essentially a Semitic civilisation. Even after the conquest of the Persians this civilization was not destroyed but passed into a new admixture and assumed a new development. The geographical position of the location of this civilization, which was central between east and west, north and south, gave it its commercial importance especially because the north-south and east-west land routes of trade passed through these regions. These trade routes generally facilitated the activities of the missionaries of the East- Syrian Church. The language of the commerce here was Aramaic and it continued to be so even after the takeover by the Aryan Persians. Hence probably, the merchants and traders (and later on, missionaries) from these parts were known in Kerala by their language as Arameans, and their country was known as Aramea. But the Portuguese seem to have confused these names with Armenians and Armenia (cf. Hasten 1936: 35f).

It is with Cyrus II, the Great that the Persian Empire had its beginning. The Dynasty, to which he belonged, was that of the Achaemenids, which ruled from 549 to 330 B.C. By the close of the 5<sup>th</sup> century B.C. they had conquered the whole of western Asia and even crossed over to Europe. This is the first dynasty of the Persians. The second was that of the Seleucids (312-238 B.C.) of Greek origin. These Greek rulers, as heirs of Alexander the Great carried the culture of the Athens into central Asia as far as Afghanistan and across the borders of India. In fact, a Greek connections may have been as important as the Jewish one for the early Christian advance eastward. Edessa, Ecbatana, and even Taxila in India all had Greek military colonies. Greek trade routes from Antioch through Persia to Afghanistan and onto Patna on the Ganges remained open into the Christian era as inviting avenues of approach for Christian traders and evangelists. The dynasty, the Parthians (247 B.C – A.D. 226) took Persia back from the Greeks and made it Asian again. It was in Parthian Persia and on its border with Roman Asia that Asian Christianity as distinguished from Western Christianity grew and began to develop a related but eventually separate existence. In 53 B.C. the Romans met with a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Parthian archers under the command of a brilliant young general, Suren, from the Indian border. From that day on, R.N. Frye points out, Western writers divided the world between Rome and Persia. It was in the time of the Parthians that Christian faith moved beyond the Roman Empire into oriental Asia.

The Parthians, like their rivals the Romans, screened their border with a patchwork of protecting client-kingdoms. Three of the vassal Principalities figure prominently in the traditions of early Asian Christianity: Osrhoene, Adiabene, and Armenia. Osrhoene, with its capital Edessa (modern Urfa), guarded the crossings of the Euphrates at its great northern bent not far from the lower border of Armenia and sheltered what became the mother Church of organized Asian Christianity. Farther East, the little kingdom of Adiabene stood on the upper waters of the Tigris River near old Nineveh (Nisibis). Its capital, Arbela (modern Erbil), was to become the centre for Christian missionary advance into central Asia (cf. Moffett 1998: 12).

Under Alexander the Great, the Persian Empire was brought under the rule of the Greeks but the national character of the government still continued. At the dawn of the Christian era, Persia was ruled by the national dynasty of the Arsacids (242 B.C. – A.D. 226) who liberated the country from the Greek rule and successfully resisted the Romans. In A.D. 226, the Persian Sassanid dynasty overthrew the Arsacids and ruled Persia for four centuries (A.D. 226 - 642), that is, till the rise of the Arabs who overran the country in A.D. 642 and established the rule of Islam. The Sassanians introduced changes

both in political and religious policies. Regarding the political situation, the sixth century chronicle of Arbil has this to say: the Persian “had vanquished all the kings of the East, and had replaced them by governors and mazbans who were subject to them. Ardushir, the first king of the Persians, deputed a governor named Adur-zad to rule our country”. This means that the rule was to be much more centralized. The new power too laid great emphasis on nationalism and patriotism in a way the Parthians had never done, and Zoroastrianism, as the State religion, was the symbol of this. This meant that inevitably there would be a clash with Christianity, sooner or later.

The Muslim rule which started in A.D. 642 continued under different dynasties such as the Abassids, the Bujids and the Seleucids, till A.D. 1220 when the mohols invaded the land and after a period of confusion established the Mongolian dynasty of the Likhans (A.D. 1265 - 1349). Towards the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century Timur Leng (Tamerlane) ruled the country. At his death (A.D. 1405) the Turchemans and the Ottoman Turks divided the land between themselves. Later on, the eastern half of Persia came under the Safavids (A.D. 1502 - 1736), the rivals of the Turks.

Till the coming of the Persians, Babylon appears to have been the main city. After the subjugation by the Persians and before the Greek invasion, Persepolis became the capital and under the Greeks the twin towns of Seleucia (on the right bank of the Tigris) Ctesiphon (on the left bank of the Tigris), quite frequently called simply the ‘Royal cities’ came into prominence. The Arabs built a new town, the town of Bagdad (wrongly believed to have been located where the old town of Babylon stood before). This still remains the capital of Iraq, while Iran has as its capital Teheran, which was founded by the Quagiar dynasty (18c).

The religious life of Persia under both the Arsacids and the Sassanids was dominated by the Magi or Magians with their astrology and divination, and the Zoroastrians with their two absolute principles of good and evil: Ahura-Nazdam the light and creator of all good things, and Ahriman the darkness and creator of serpents, insects, plague, war death, and all evil things. They emphasized “right thoughts, right words, right deeds” and particularly that men should be dependable and honest. The Zoroastrian religion was the State religion, and for this reason the Magians occupied a high position in the nation and at the royal court. The ruling Persians often adopted the attitude that if a man was not a Zoroastrian he did not love his country, and that anyone who abandoned Zoroastrianism and accepted another religion was worthy of a traitor’s death.

### **Beginnings of Christianity:**

The beginning of Christianity in Persia are shrouded in legends. There seems to be no contradiction in supposing that the first messengers of Christianity in those regions were the ‘Parthians, Medes and the inhabitants of Mesopotamia’ who were in Jerusalem on the day of Pentecost and heard St. Peter speak in their own languages (cf. Acts 2: 9), if not the Magi before them. For other details relating to early history we have to depend on some Syriac accounts, the reliability of which is not acceptable to all historians. The substance of all the accounts, legendary or otherwise, can be summed up thus: Addai, the Apostle of Edessa, one of the 72 disciples of Jesus, either personally or through his disciples Agai and Mari, evangelized the regions beyond the eastern boundaries of the Roman Empire.

Although no serious claim to the apostolate of St. Thomas is put forward by the Persian Church, the apostle is, however, considered to be intimately connected with their Church (cf. Moffett, *ibid.*: 46-90).

According to Eusebius, writing about the year 324, it was Thomas who sent the first recoded Christian mission across the Roman border into Asian Osroene. He tells how the apostle asked one of his disciples, a man named Thaddeus (or Addai, in Syriac), "one of the seventy" mentioned in Luke 10:1, to answer a request for healing by the king of Edessa, Abgar V, called "the Black" (Eusebius: 1. 13,6-10).

In all the early Syriac documents, whether legendary or authentic, Thomas is the apostle who initiated the spread of Christianity to the regions beyond the eastern borders of the Roman Empire, whether it is Osroene with its capital Edessa (the Greek form of the original Syriac Urhai, which is today known by the Arabic word Urfa), or Adiabene with its capital Arbil or Arbela. The legendary account called The Doctrine of Addai Addai (Thaddeus), a missionary chosen by Apostle Thomas is said to have evangelized the eastern regions, centred around Osroene; when he died his disciple Aggai took over as guide the ruler of the Church and appointed Paul a deacon. We find in Odes of Solomon, considered to be the earliest extant Christian hymn book, perhaps Christian hymns written in Syriac almost as soon as the Church was planted outside the Roman Empire.

Bardaisan or Bardesanes, a sportsman, nobleman, poet, philosopher, and friend of King Abgar VIII of Osroene represent Syriac literature of the late second century. Perhaps he was the author of Acts of Judas Thomas. Another great witness to Syrian Christianity is Tatian (A.D. second century), a remarkable Biblical scholar, Linguist, and ascetic, who took pride in calling himself as an Assyrian and tried to project Asia-the non-Roman world-as excelling the Greeks and Romans in all aspects. Probably this follower of Encratism, meaning "self-control " but considered as a heretical tendency signifying abnormal self-denial and an insistence on the separation of the Christians from the world, bequeathed an exaggerated emphasis on the merits of radical asceticism to the Eastern Church. Jerome called Tatian the very violent heresiarch of the Encratites. Strangely enough it is the ascetics become pioneer missionaries in eastern Persia. In the very earliest Christian documents of the East, the call to ascetic self-denial is almost always associated with the call to go and preach and serve. This seems to have been the most striking difference between Syrian and Egyptian saint-ascetics. Egypt, more solidly agricultural, valued stability and tended to withdraw from outside contacts and movements. Its saints ignored the world and retreated to their caves and cells. Syria, on the other hand, with its travel and trading traditions, stressed mobility and outreach. Its ascetics became wandering missionaries, healing the sick, feeding the poor, and preaching the gospel as they moved from place to place. R. Murray describes them as "homeless followers of the homeless Jesus on... ceaseless pilgrimage through this

Addai, who refused to receive silver and gold from the king of Edessa, saying that he had forsaken the riches of this world "because without purses and without scrips, bearing the cross upon our shoulders, we were commanded to preach the gospel in the whole creation", is known in the Doctrine of the Apostles as the pioneer missionary of Edessa and Nisibis (Soba), and in Arabia and the borders of Mesopotamia. His disciple, Aggai is described as the apostle of "the whole of Persia of the Assyrians and Armenians and Medians, and of the countries round about Babylon, the Huzites and Gelai [i.e. on the Caspian Sea], even to the borders of the Indians, and even to the country of Gog Magog". Another line of tradition centres around the missionary, Mari, another disciple of Addai. It is interesting to note that Addai and indirectly Aggai and Marti are all disciples of Apostle Thomas from the early sources.

An East Syrian (or Persian) Bishop, probably Mar Jacob, told the Portuguese the following story in 1533. St. Thomas, St. Bartholomew and Judas Thaddeus, by the command of Jesus Christ were sent

to parts of Babylon. St. Thomas and Judas Thaddeus went first to Babylon and hence en route Bassara to the North in Qualex-qadaqa, where Judas Thaddeus settled down. He converted many to Christianity and built houses of prayer. St. Bartholomew proceeded to Persia and there he was buried in Tarao in a monastery across Tabris. Leaving Judas Thaddeus behind, Apostle Thomas went to Soeotra and then continued his journey to India and China. The Bishop said that he had heard this story narrated in Babylon and Malabar.

Christianity thrived during the Parthian Arsacid times. The Sassanid dynasty which seized power from the Arsacids in 226 began reviving what they thought to be the old religion, Zoroastrianism. They believed both the ancient religion and State had been dissipated by the easy going Parthians. They tightened the alliance of religion and state by appointing a chief priest (mobadanmobed or magi) to advise the Shah (emperor) and to preside over the village priests. Or mopedes. Zoroastrianism was enthroned as State religion and soon attempts were made to eliminate all other religious faiths. That spelled the end of the three hundred years of toleration that Christianity enjoyed. But the change had not come at once. It is somewhat surprising to find little evidence of any persecutions of minorities during the reign of the first eight Sassanian monarchs. The fight of the State at this time was rather against Manichaeism. Only in the reign of Varahran (Bahram) II, who ruled from 276 to 293, that the Christians faced a limited persecution the causes of which were not perhaps the difference of religion.

### **Church Organization:**

Till about A.D. 270 the capital city, Seleucia-Ctesiphon had no Bishop, though in northern Mesopotamia there were the Dioceses of Arbela and Susa. According to the disputed account of the History of Church of Adiabene, the Christian Seleucia-Ctesiphon begged Shaklupa, "Bishop" of Arbela, who was visiting them, to choose and ordain their first priest, which he did. Later, perhaps between 280 and 290, the two Bishops of Arbela and Susa, deciding that it was now fitting that the capital city should have its own Bishop, elevated its own priest, Papa bar-Aggai, to the rank of Bishop. Once Papa became Bishop of the royal city, he began claiming primacy over the other Bishops, which claim others contented. A council was convened in 315, the 'Synod of Seleucia', Ctesiphon bluntly rejected Papa's pretensions to primacy. It deposed him and he revolted against the decision. But soon a compromise was arrived at and Papa was re-instated. His proposal of a national Church with clear lines of authority had a logic of its own. It eventually came to be accepted. Even if Seleucia-Ctesiphon had no apostolic right, its importance for contact between a minority Church and the highly centralized monarchy was recognised. However, the faction continued. It was at the counsel of Bishop of Edessa that the Persian clergy were persuaded to accept as the nominal head of the capital city. Later documents refer to "Western Fathers" (West Asian Bishops) as playing a decisive role in the first organizational crises in the Church of the East. These "Western Fathers" later to be falsely interpreted as Bishops of Antioch and Jerusalem. Moffett is of the definite view that if there was any Western influence in the compromise that averted a schism in the Persian Church it came probably from Edessa and Nisibis, not Antioch and Jerusalem. In the eyes of the Persian clergy Edessa was still the mother missionary church and still more Persia than Roman whatever the fortunes of war had done to it (cf. Moffett: 122).

Papa died around 327 and Simon bar-Sabba' e his archdeacon who had already been consecrated Bishop when Papa rebelled, succeeded. Simon was martyred together with a number of other Bishops, priests and lay Christians in the 'great persecution' under Shapur (Sapor) II. The death of the martyrs,

in particular that of Bishop Simon, is said to have wiped the slate clean for a while of the petty bickering of church politicians. More than that, it gave the Persian Christians a martyr and a hero to follow in the painful years that ensued, years which saw the Church as a national organization destroyed.

While the Bishops were sometimes praying and sometime quarrelling their way toward a national unity, at the other end of the ecclesiastical spectrum a very different quest for a satisfying organisational structure was occurring where it might be least expected. The radical ascetics, with much the same mixture of piety, necessity, and fractious human behaviour displayed by their Bishops, were beginning to move out of their separate, isolated orbits into community. The fourth century saw the rise in Persia of organized monasticism. Jacob of Nisibis (early 4th century) and Aphrahat or Aphraates (mid-4<sup>th</sup> century), both of whom started as recluses, as 'sons of the covenant', came out of their rocky dwellings and gave leadership to organized monasticism, similar to what Pachomius had done in Egypt (cf. *ibid* : 122f.).

### **Great Persecutions:**

The fortunes of the Church were much affected by the changing politics of the country. When the Rome became Christian in the 4<sup>th</sup> century, Christians of the Persian Empire were suspected of divided loyalty by its Rulers, the Sassanians. A violent persecution broke out under Shapur II (A.D. 310 – 379) and many Christians were martyred. A modicum of freedom was granted under Jasdgard I (A.D. 399-420). Persecution broke out again in the 5<sup>th</sup> century under Bahram V (A.D. 420 - 24) and his son Jasdgard II (A.D. 445 - 48); and then *modus vivendi* was worked out between the Christians and the Sassanians towards the end of the century. The persecution were due mainly to the amicable relations of the Christians with the Roman Empire, and their permanent geographical and political isolation vis-à-vis the bulk of the Christians in the Roman Empire. Though the religious motives (the zeal to jealously guard the national religion, Zoroastrianism), were not unrelated, the primary cause of the persecution was political. When Rome became Christian, its old enemy Persia turned anti-Christian. Shapur II received about 315 a letter from Emperor Constantine I of Rome. This was written out of his concern for the welfare of fellow Christians in Persia: "I recommend them to your care, and leave them in your protection". It is this letter, which probably triggered the beginnings of an ominous change in the Persian attitude towards Christians (cf. *ibid*,: 138: 138; Young 1969: 26).

### **Towards Autonomy:**

However, the persecution fostered among the Persian Christians a tendency towards centrifugalism- the desire for forming a 'national' Church, independent of the Church in western Asia, which was situated within the Roman Empire. The Christological controversies of the 5th century further contributed to the spirit of independence. The Synods of 410, 424 and 486 are particularly important from this point of view. In the 410 Synod of Seleucia or of Isaac the Bishop of the twin cities was declared the chief ecclesiastical authority for the Persian Church and in that synod or a little or a little prior to that, he assumed the title of 'catholicos' that is the 'Bishop for the whole'. Canon 12 of the Synod says:

We accept of our free-will, as we have been commanded by Yazdgard, King of Kings-we, all the Bishops of the East, and those who shall come after us to obey, in all things right and prescribed, the

Bishop, Catholicos, Archbishop, Metropolitan of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, until Christ shall come that is to say, every Bishop who shall sit on the sublime throne of this Church of Kohke.

In the synod of 424 held in Markabta of Tayyaye or the Synod of Dadisho, the Bishops took the decisive step of repealing all appeals to the 'Western Fathers' (thus if there was any dependence on the Churches of West Asia, it was ended): the Chief Bishop, who has already been given the title of catholicos, was made independent and supreme. Another step, more radical, was taken towards independence and autonomy in the synod of 486 or of Acacius held in Seleucia-Ctesiphon. In it a diphyssite Christological formula of faith was adopted, a formula which almost overstressed the two natures in Christ, and which followed closely the guidelines set forth by the theology of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the acknowledged master of the East-Syrian theological school of Edessa-Nisibis. This formula apparently served the Church of Persia to demonstrate its independence from Roman West Asia, which was now fermenting with what is called the 'monophysite' tendencies of Alexandria.

### **Independence and Growth:**

These two events are looked upon by many authors as 'schism' and the acceptance of Nestorian 'heresy'. But there are many others who for very good reasons refuse to subscribe to such a view. In any case, the Church of Persia, now placed beyond any suspicion of disloyalty to the motherland and enjoying more or less permanent peace with the Sassanid rulers of Persia, developed from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century according to its wishes. All the ecclesiastical institutions began to assume a national character. It built up its own diphyssitic theology, with Theodore of Mopsuestia as the master-a Theology, in which their clerics were trained first in the school of Edessa and then the Nisibis. The Church law too evolved in the same national spirit. A large body of ecclesiastical literature was produced. Monastic life flourished and the monks, unlike those of other Eastern Churches, undertook missionary activity in a commendable manner. By the efforts of these monks the Church developed, within and without the Persian territories.

The conquest of Persia in the 7<sup>th</sup> century by the Islamic forces from Arabia does not seem, at least in beginning, to have much perturbed the tranquillity and prosperity of the Church. Actually the East-Syrian Church witnessed its greatest missionary expansion under the Arabs in the 8<sup>th</sup> century. But in course of time the burdens imposed by the Muslim rulers on the Christians became so onerous that the Church declined and many of the missionary enterprises ceased. A second flowering of the Church took place under the Mongols, who made religious tolerance their policy. Patriarch Jaballaha III (1284-1317) was very influential with the Mongol rulers. He maintained good relations with other Christian communities and the Latin missionaries. Under him the Church attained its greatest expansion.

But the second efflorescence did not last long, and actually after Jaballaha III very little is heard about the Church till the 16<sup>th</sup> century. The political chaos, especially in the wake of the invasion of Tamerlane (end of the 14<sup>th</sup> century) seems to have battered the Church considerably. Also the Turks who captured Bagdad in 1534 did not make life easy for the Christians. Although conditions may be said to be better in the modern period, still Christians in Persia are citizens only of the second rank as in all the other Islamic states, although in Iraq they enjoyed a better position under Saddam Husain.

The residence of the primate, who is referred to indiscriminately as catholicos or patriarch, was first at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, which had been the capital of the Sassanians. When Bagdad became the capital under the Arabs, the catholicos shifted his residence to Bagdad. It continued to be his residence from

the close of the 8<sup>th</sup> century till the end of the 13<sup>th</sup> century, From that time the primate began to be known as catholicos patriarch of Babylon. In the 14<sup>th</sup> century different residences were chosen by the patriarchs, such as Maragha, Arbela and Karamalis. Then Mosul became the residence for a century (from the end of the 14<sup>th</sup> to the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century), and four patriarchs resided there in succession. Later Djizireh became a temporary residence, and subsequently Rabban Hormizd an almost permanent residence till the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century.

### **Division of the Church:**

The East-Syrian Church was looked upon by the western Christians as having drifted into 'schism' and 'heresy' from the end of the 5<sup>th</sup> century. However, there were occasions (especially from the time of the Crusades), when the Church maintained good relations with the Latin missionaries and Rome. But it is in the middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century that the event, which is generally regarded as the 'reunion' of the 'Nestorians' with Rome took place. From 1450 onwards the office of the catholicos or patriarch of Babylon had become hereditary, passing from uncle to nephew. When in 1551 Simon VII bar Mamma died, his nephew Simon was not acknowledged by a section of the clergy and laymen, who elected John Suid Sulaqa as catholicos and sent him to Rome to be confirmed by the Pope. In Rome, after his profession of the Roman Catholic creed he was confirmed by Pope Julius III as patriarch and he returned home accompanied by two Maltese Dominicans and took up residence at Diyarbakir.

### **Mission and Expansion:**

Reference has already been made to the missionary activity of the Church of Persia under the Persian, Arabs and the Mongols. Such activity might have been greatly helped by the fact mentioned earlier, namely, the commercial importance of Mesopotamia and the regions around Missionary expansion had begun under the Sassanians, whose persecutions made the Christians flee to the eastern parts of the Persian Empire and evangelize those parts. In the beginning of the 5<sup>th</sup> century we find Christians with their bishops in the extreme eastern provinces, and at the close of the century the Turks and Huns near Oxus were evangelized. Not long after, missionaries entered the Transoxanian regions and in the beginning of the 8<sup>th</sup> century Samarkand was a bishopric. China began to be evangelized in the 7<sup>th</sup> century and this evangelization was commemorated by the erection of the His-an Fu stele. Under Timothy I the Great (780 - 823), these missionary activities expanded and peoples in central Asia en masse with their kings accepted Christianity. In all these activities the monks were in the foreground, and the Christian merchants, accompanied by priests, played their part well in diffusing the Christian faith. These intensive activities slumped in the 10<sup>th</sup> century and were resumed only under the Mongols when, as it was pointed out earlier, there occurred a second blossoming of the Church. The Central Asian and Chinese missions again broke up in the 14<sup>th</sup> century after a period of more friendly regimes of the Mongols in Persia and China ended.

What about the missions of the East-Syrian Church in the south and south-east of Mesopotamia? There is no doubt that the zealous missionaries of the Church, whether they were professional missionaries or Christian merchants, who had always the cause of the faith at heart, penetrated very early into some of the islands of the Arabian Sea, the subcontinent of India and a little later, also the islands and peninsulas south-east of China, such as Malacca, Java and so on. Cosmos Indicopleustes in his 6<sup>th</sup> Century Christian Topography mentions small but flourishing communities of Christians not



only along the coast of India, but also in Socotora and Sri Lanka (Taporobana or Ceylon), all of which were taken care of by clergymen who were ordained in Persia.

In the Island of Socotora there are many Christians of that generation, which was converted by St. Thomas. They have churches and crosses and their mode of worship is similar to the Chaldean. On the whole, they live as Christians. They have monogamous. In course of time certain errors crept in for want of instruction and doctrine. The moors (Muslims) are their neighbours with whom some of them intermarry.

There are few testimonials about them during the first half of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Some Jesuits made an unsuccessful attempt to restore them to the status of a full-fledged Christian community.

Another community is mentioned by St. Francis Xavier in and to the south of China, but details as to their life and practices are so few that it is difficult to say whether they were Christians at all. Since China and its South and South-East Islands and Peninsulas were once evangelized by the East-Syrians, it is very probable that a few Christians (maybe there was a very loose form of Christianity at this time) might have remained in those parts. It is significant that the four East-Syrian bishops who came to India some time in 1504, were entrusted with the mission by their patriarch "to go the countries of India and the Islands of the sea, that are between Debags (Java) and Sin (China) and Masin (Mahachina or Great China)". It is not impossible that one or two of these bishops (one a metropolitan) proceeded to East Asia not long after their arrival in India. However, we do not have any mention of these Christians in any other document of the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Compared to these communities the lot of the Christians of India was far better.

### **Relations of the East-Syrian Church with India:**

The various sources of tradition are unanimous in evidencing that the original community constituted by Apostle Thomas suffered a decline in course of time. But it was reinvigorated by groups of Christians who came from 'Babylon' (Persia). Many such immigrant groups of East-Syrian Christians are mentioned. Two of them are better known: one is associated with Thomas of Cana (4<sup>th</sup> century), and the other with two saintly men, Sapor and Prot 9/10 century).

### **End Notes:**

1. The Persians are a group of the Aryans of Central Asia who migrated to the mountains north and east of Mesopotamia in 2000 B.C. Hence, the names of Iran and Iranians (Aryana), cf. Reither 1947:27.
2. Schurhammer thinks the error is the outcome of a geographical, ethnical and linguistic confusion, see G. Schurhammer, "Armenian Bishop in Malabar?", in *Arquivos do Centro Cultural Portugues*, Vol. IV, Paris 1972, pp.141-48, R.Gulbenkian in another article in the same volume, pp. 149-76: "Jacome Abuna, An American Bishop in Malabar (1503-1550)", thinks that Mar Jacob was a real Armenian, and all the bishops as well as others coming from Persia came to have been known as "Americans". This last opinion is difficult to endorse.
3. For this survey of Mesopotamian region, see Reither 1949: 15-12, 27-30; Messina 1947: 35ff.; Young 1979; De Vries 1951: 29ff, 40ff.; cf, also *Lexikon fur Theologie und Kirche*, words: "Persien", "Seleukia", "Bagdad", Cf. also Moffett 1998: 11-13.

4. Patriarch Timothy I wrote: "If Rome is accorded the first and highest rank because of the Apostle Peter, how much more should Seleucia and Ctesiphon on account of Peter's Lord. If the first rank and position is due to the people who confessed on Christ before all others, and believed in him, then we Easterns were the ones to do so. We showed our faith openly in the persons of our Twelve Envoys, who were guided by a star, and in the gifts which they offered to Christ-gold, as to the King of all kings and the Lord of all Lords; frankincense, as to the One who is god over all; and myrrh, to signify the passion of his humanity for our sake... Thirty years before all others we Easterns confessed Christ's kingdom, and adored his divinity". Timothy, Letters, 15, quoted in Young 1974: 3.
5. The following legendary works are acknowledged sources for the beginnings of Christianity in Persia: Acts of Tadeus, Doctrine of Addai: more important is Acts of St. Mari. Cf. also J. Tixeront 18898; and Urbina 1937; and Messina 1947: 35ff.
6. J.R. Harris, The Odes and Psalms of Solomon, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1909.
7. Jerome, Commentary on Galatians. It is interesting to note that the great champions of asceticism like Tatian, Tertullian were also great nationalists.
8. Mar Jacob arrived in Kerala in 1504 and served the Christians here for about 50 years, i.e. till his death about 1552, cf. Mundadan 1967: 82ff. He gave this testimony in the 1533 inquiry organized by the Portuguese about St. Thomas and the tomb at Mylapore, cf. Roman Archives of the Society of Jesus, Goa 31: f. 18f.
9. It is derived from Zoroaster who lived probably before 1000 B. c. He has always been revered as the Iranian prophet of Persia's heroic age. His teachings were handed down orally for over a millennium or more before they were finally collected into a sacred book, the Avesta. It is conjectured that this was done in a Sassanian reaction to the spread of the Christian Scriptures in western Asia. How far Zoroastrianism of the Sassanians resembled the ancient faith they thought they were reviving, no one knows.
10. A religion syncretic in content, which the young burning prophet Mani was propagating in Persia. It came into confrontation with the Zoroastrian priests. E.G. Browne in his A Literary History of Persia (London: T. Fisher Unwin, 1909) contrasts Zoroastrianism: and Manichaeism: The first was national, militant, materialistic, imperialist, the second quietist, ascetic, unworldly.
11. For the following sections cf. Mundadan 200 History I: 84-90.
12. Narsai or Narsetes was the founder and director of these famous schools. About them cf. Mundadan 2001 " Dharmaram Patrimony": 18f.
13. Cf. Mundadan 196: 24-28.
14. The relation of the Indian Church with the East Syrian Church ended in 1600. It was partially restored at the close of the 19<sup>th</sup> century by the Thrissur based Church of the East.

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