

THE ANCIENT CHURCH OF THE EAST IN PERSIA (ca. A.D. 200-500)

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The tiny remnant of the indigenous Christian Church that today continues to exist in modern Iran and in a few other countries² has a history which dates back to the first centuries of the Christian era. Little known to the outside world, its identity is often shrouded in confusion, not the least because of the varying names with which it has been called over the centuries. It has been variously referred to as the East Syrian Church, the Assyrian Church, the Chaldean Church, the Assyro-Chaldean Church, the Syro-Chaldean Church, the Babylonian Church, the Church of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Persian Church, or the Nestorian Church. But the name it took for itself was simply "The Church of the East,"³ an Asian, Syriac-speaking Christianity, which was distinct from the Greek-speaking Eastern Orthodox Churches and the Latin-speaking Church of Western Europe.

With its center at Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the Church of the East by the 4th century A.D. had encompassed the regions of Mesopotamia, Persia proper, the Persian provinces of Elam, Media and Khorassan, the islands of the Persian Gulf, a few enclaves and Christian cities in the Arabian peninsula, and the Christian cities of Arabia, and the island of Socotra. By the early 6th century, if not much earlier, this Asian Christianity had also extended as far as South India and Ceylon.⁴ By A.D. 635, its first known missionary to China had arrived at the T'ang capital of Ch'ang-an [modern Sian, in Shensi Province].⁵

The singular significance of the Church of the East for the history of Christianity in Asia lies in the fact that it served as a vigorous missionary center for early Christian missions to Turkestan in central Asia, Mongolia, China, and for a time, even Tibet. There is also evidence that it had mission churches in the Malay peninsula by about A.D. 650, Sumatra by the early 14th century, and perhaps also Java, Malacca, Ayuthia in Siam and Pegu in Burma.⁶ There is also some evidence suggesting the presence of early Christianity in Korea by the 13th and 14th centuries, if not as early as the 7th century.⁷

Hence, the Church of the East played an important role in the early spread of Christianity in Asia, preaching a faith which was faithful to the doctrines and practices of the New Testament Church, but dressed in the local color of Asian culture, concepts and traditions, in much the same way that the Christianity in the Mediterranean world grew in the context of Graeco-Roman civilization.

The First Church at Ctesiphon

Persian Christian tradition ascribes the founding of the church at Seleucia-Ctesiphon [Koke] to the early missionary Mar Mari. The *Chronicle of Arbela*, however, dates the

beginning of a small congregation gathered at the Persian royal city of Ctesiphon to the third quarter of the 3rd century. No details are given as to how this church began, but its members reportedly included a high-ranking Persian military officer named Ganzqan. The *Chronicle* suggests that ecclesiastical organization had developed to an advanced stage in northern Mesopotamia, which had long-standing bishoprics at Edessa and Arbela, with new ones in the process of formation in Beit Zabdi, Nisibis, and Mosul, etc. About A.D. 280, the bishop of Beit Zabdi was one Mar Shabsa, and by A.D. 290 the first-known bishop of Nisibis was one Mar Yaqub.

Upon Ganzqan's invitation, Mar Shahlufa, bishop of Arbela (258-273), journeyed south to pay the little group of Ctesiphon Christians a visit. He arrived only months later, after escaping from Arab raiders who had kidnapped him and his party while en route.

Early Preaching in Ctesiphon

For two years, Mar Shahlufa reportedly labored among the small band of Christians, encouraging them in their faith and ordaining a priest to minister to their spiritual needs. The bishop preached that "Jesus, crucified by the Jews in Jerusalem, is God, son of God, and that He suffered only of His own free choice, and in order to deliver [men and women] from slavery to demons."⁸ As will be seen later, the idea of the Crucifixion encountered serious difficulties in the context of Mazdaean religious concepts of justice and punishment.

In A.D. 280 Shahlufa's successor, Mar Ahadabui, and the neighboring bishop of Beit Zabdi, Mar Shabsa, also visited Ctesiphon. The former ordained five Persian priests, but after a year had to leave hurriedly as a result of a brief outbreak of anti-Christian animosity, resulting from the imprudent and over-zealous preaching of his companion.

Not long previously, the Persian monarch Varahran II (275-293) had suppressed, with no small measure of cruelty, a rebellion by the governor of Hedayab [Adiabene]. Unmindful of this political event, Mar Shabsa one day addressed a crowd and sought to convince them that one ought not to fear men who can destroy only the body, but rather God who can cast both body and soul into the fires of hell. Carried away by his own zeal and eloquence, the bishop sharply stressed the point, as the *Chronicle of Arbela* puts it, that "the victory of our Lord is really a victory, while what the kings of this world call victory is nothing but pride, pretensions, ills, torments, sufferings and death."⁹

While he was eloquently elaborating on this point, one man in the crowd hurried to report to one of Varahran II's ministers that the Christians were preaching that the emperor would be tortured and tormented by fire, and that his recent victory in Adiabene was nothing but a vain and empty enterprise. A zealous Christian preacher unmindful of the political affairs of this world and an eager informer who heard only what he was ready to believe nearly brought disaster to the early church at the Persian imperial capital.

Earlier on, Varahran II had shown some interest in Christianity,¹⁰ as well as in Manichaeism, though he had since then changed his mind and was now an ardent advocate of the Mazdaean state cult. Not surprisingly, as soon as he heard the informer's report, he went raging mad.

The subsequent rumors of an impending royal persecution of the Christians sent the latter scurrying away to safety, some taking flight into the desert. It must have been at this time that Varahran II reportedly had one of his wives slain for being a Christian, as well as another Christian named Qariba, son of one Ananias.¹¹ Fortunately, the Christians had a friend in another of Varahran's ministers, a man named Radgan, whom they approached and asked to intercede on their behalf. Varahran was eventually soothed with the explanation of what Mar Shabsa really wanted to say; the misunderstanding was cleared and the matter laid to rest.

Thereafter, Christianity rapidly advanced in Ctesiphon, so that by A.D. 291 the adherents were numerous enough to be given their own bishop, a learned Syrian named Papa bar Aggai, who was consecrated by Mar Ahadabui, of Arbela, and Mar Haibi'el, bishop of Susa.¹² The new bishop proved to be a man of commanding personality and great administrative ability. He quickly earned the good will of imperial officials at Ctesiphon and himself became personally known to the emperor.

Persian Christian Apologetics

A subsequent account shows that in proclaiming their faith, the Persian Christians argued that Christ, the Son of God incarnate, was a risen Lord, in contrast to the inanimate sun and fire which the Mazdaeans worshipped. When the Magians [Mazdaean priests] insisted that the sun is alive, for it gives life to all things, and that the fire is likewise alive, for it can burn everything, the Christians countered that this could not be so, for a little shower suffices to put out fire, while the sun yields place to night. When the Magians rejoined that Christians worshipped a dead man who was ignominiously put to death on a cross, this gave the Christians an opportunity to expound on the mystery of the Incarnation, Resurrection, and Redemption.¹³

Growth of the Church in Persian Domains.

No details are available on the manner in which Christianity spread in Persia. But from what can be pieced together from various bits of known information, it would appear that the church at Ctesiphon, located as it was in the imperial capital, served to encourage the growth of other churches in the provinces. By A.D. 310, bishoprics had been established in Edessa, Nisibis, and Beit Zabdi in the northwest, Susa in the southeast, Qatar and at least two other islands [Ardai and Torudu] in the Persian Gulf. There were also other bishoprics by that time in Amida [Diabekir], Batrana, Harbath, Gilal, Kerkuk [Karka d'Beit Selok], Shargerd, Dara, Lasom, Kashkar, and Basra [modern Bosra].¹⁴ Thus, from the headwaters

of the Tigris to the mouth of the Persian Gulf, various Christian communities had begun to sprout and flourish by the early 4th century A.D.

In A.D. 260, whole communities of Christian war captives from northern Syria had been resettled in the Persian province of Susiana. The Christian faith made rapid strides in Persia, so that within a century the metropolitan see of Gundishapur (Jundishapur, or Beit Lapat] would rank second only to Seleucia-Ctesiphon in order of precedence.

Development of the Persian Hierarchy

Early in the 4th century, Mar Papa bar Aggai, as bishop (A.D. 310-317) of the church in the imperial capital, began to claim primacy over the entire Church in the Persian Empire, extending his jurisdiction to embrace the various ecclesiastical provinces into which the Church of the East was then divided, namely, *Adiabene*, encompassing the bishoprics of Arbela, Nineveh and Mosul; *Garamea* (Kerkuk); *Chaldea* (Seleucia-Ctesiphon); *Maisan* (Basra); *Susiana* (Gundishapur); and *Pars* (Rewardesir). Because the recurrent hostilities between Rome and Persia made it difficult and dangerous for contacts with the Churches of the West, Papa bar Aggai held a synod in A.D. 313 or 314,¹⁵ which declared the Church of the East autocephalous. He also assumed for himself the title of "Catholicus of the East."¹⁶

This latter move, however, was seriously contested by other Persian prelates, notably the renowned Miles ar-Razi, Bishop of Susa, and even by some of Papa bar Aggai's own clergy led by one Shimun bar Sabai. An ecclesiastical revolt soon deposed Papa bar Aggai, and brought to office his rival, Shimun bar Sabai. At this point, the former's party appealed in writing to the bishop of Edessa and consulted with other "Western" bishops, i.e., those of Antioch, Aleppo, Tella, Diakibir, etc. in the eastern Mediterranean or northern Mesopotamia. These "Western" prelates intervened by deciding that Papa bar Aggai be restored to his see, and that only upon his death could Shimun bar Sabai (c.325-341) exercise his episcopal functions.

While this decision settled the immediate question of the primacy of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, the implications of the appeal to the "Western" bishops would later cause trouble within the ranks of the Church of the East. Its resentment against its subordination to the Patriarchate of Antioch, would soon foster a gnawing desire to have the metropolitan see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon raised to an equal footing with the other ancient Patriarchates of Antioch, Constantinople, and Rome.¹⁷

Persecution of Christians in Persia

Under the early Sassanid emperors up to the end of Hormizd II's reign in A.D. 309, the Christians of Persia, who had never been more than a small minority of the population, suffered only petty though intermittent harassments, generally at the hands or at the instigation of the Magians. Under Shapur I (240-271), there was a genuine measure of

religious toleration. He extended support to Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, at least for a number of years. But when Varahran I came to power in 273, the new emperor accepted the Magians' insistence that none but Mazdaeism, the official state cult, be allowed to exist. Though Christians still enjoyed comparative peace up to the reign of Hormizd II (302-309), a rigorous persecution policy ensued during the reign of his immediate successor, Shapur II (309-379).

Identification of Christianity with the Roman Empire

The long reign of Shapur II had witnessed a resurgence of warfare between Persia and Rome, and uncomfortably caught the Persian Christians in the tight crush of that conflict. If the calculated conversion of King Tirdat III of Armenia in A.D. 298 already angered the Sassanids, the favor shown to Christianity by the Roman Emperor Constantine in 313 caused the latter to view with doubt and suspicion the growing number of Christians among their subjects. There was thus introduced a new, religious dimension into the perennial conflict between Persia and Rome.

By this time, the Christian faith had spread in all the provinces of the Roman Empire, except for northern England, Brittany, the Balearic Islands, Corsica, Sardinia, and Tingitana [now Morocco]. To the Sassanids, Constantine's espousal of Christianity had virtually identified the latter as a "Roman" religion. What caused serious concern to the Persian rulers was the not unfounded suspicion that Christians in the Roman East exerted a strong influence over their co-religionists in Persian domains, as was demonstrated by the "Western" bishops' support of Papa bar Aggai's episcopacy, though they foiled his aspirations for patriarchal standing.¹⁸

Political Reasons for Persecution

If previously the Christians in Persian domains were subjected to only sporadic and petty harassment, it was largely because they were considered an annoying though generally quite harmless minority whose chief fault was their unflinching refusal to acknowledge the official state cult. The occasional flights into Persia of heterodox Christians from the Roman Empire were not unwelcome by the Sassanid rulers of Persia. But the Armenian King Tirdat III's baptism in 298 and Constantine the Great's conversion in 313 completely reversed the Sassanids' view of their Christian subjects. Thereafter, to be a Christian in Persian eyes was practically synonymous to being a Roman, or at least with having pro-Roman sympathies.¹⁹ Moreover, the open admiration with which some Persian Christians lauded Constantine's conversion promptly placed in question, as far as the Sassanids were concerned, the political loyalty of the entire Persian Church.

Constantine himself also may have adversely jeopardized the lot of Shapur II's Christian subjects, when he unwittingly took it upon himself to be their advocate by writing Shapur II in 333 a long letter, which reads in part:

Imagine, then, with what joy I heard tidings so accordant with my desire, that the fairest districts of Persia are filled with those men on whose behalf alone I am at present speaking, I mean the Christians. I pray, therefore, that both you and they may enjoy abundant prosperity, and that your blessings and theirs may be in equal measure; for thus you will experience the mercy and favor of that God who is the Lord and Father of all. And now, because your power is great, I commend these persons to your protection; because your piety is eminent, I commit them to your care. Cherish them with your wonted humanity and kindness; for by this proof of your faith you will secure an immeasurable benefit both to yourself and us.²⁰

The net effect of all these developments, especially after war subsequently broke out once more between Rome and Persia, was probably only to confirm in the minds of the Sassanids the uncertain loyalty and the potential threat posed by Christians in their domains. It could not have missed their attention that the largest concentration of Christians in Persian territory was to be found in those western provinces dangerously bordering with the Roman Empire.

At that time, the Christians were specially numerous in the provinces of Adiabene, and in what is now Kurdistan, Khuzistan and Luristan, where there were many bishops and where each town of importance had churches with presbyters and houses of consecrated virgins.²¹ Subsequently, these were the very places where persecution was most severe. In fact, what is surprising is that persecution by Shapur II did not immediately ensue.

When Constantine just before his death in 337 resolved to invade Persia, intending to take along with him bishops to pray for victory,²² Persian animosity to Christians in their midst was thoroughly aroused. The situation was aggravated by the fact that Afrahat [Aphraates], one of the bishops in Adiabene and the most prominent prelate in Sassanid domains at the time, declared in a homily that God was on the side of the Romans and that the latter, under the leadership of the Christian Constantine, would surely come out victorious.²³

Though the projected Roman campaign did not, in fact, materialize on account of Constantine's demise in May of that year, nevertheless, irrevocable damage had been done to the cause of the Persian Church.

General Persecution by Shapur II

In 339 Shapur II declared the profession of Mazdaeism, the official state cult, as the ultimate test of political loyalty in his domains. With this encouragement, it did not take long for the Magians, as well as the Persian Jews who seemed eager at this particular time to demonstrate their loyalty to their adopted sovereign, to instigate repressive measures against the Christians.²⁴ The Magians hurled the accusation that there was "no secret" which Bishop

Shimun bar Sabai, Metropolitan of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, did not reveal to the Roman emperor Constantine.²⁵

Initial Limited Harassment

It would seem that some practical mind at first had simply thought it would suffice to impose intolerably oppressive taxes on the Christians, in order to force them to abandon their faith. As Christians in Persia generally were either merchants or artisans,²⁶ this measure was moved not only by purely political or religious motives, but also by expectation of financial gain. After Shapur II's first edict of persecution was issued in April 340, Mar Shimun bar Sabai was then promptly arrested, together with other bishops, priests and clerics. He had been portrayed by his persecutors as "the head of the Nazarenes, who live in our territory, but whose sympathies are with our enemy."²⁷ Christianity was pictured as a foreign religion inimical to Persian life and culture, and especially Mazdaean beliefs and practices.

In a contest of wills and fortitude, Bar Sabai and the other prelates were kept in prison until they agreed to collect from their people the prescribed financial levies. Despite torture, the prisoners remained firm in their faith, but churches were destroyed and altar vessels confiscated by the authorities.

Shapur II had regarded Shimun bar Sabai as a good friend, for the latter's family had been imperial dyers for about a century since the time of Shapur I, fulfilling an important occupation demanded by rulers for the production of the coveted royal purple dye [*purpura*]. But Bar Sabai's personal crime, as suggested by the Jews, was his successful conversion to Christianity of many of the leading Magi, and even more damnably, of Shapur II's own mother, who was Jewish by ancestry.²⁸

This was the first general persecution throughout Persian domains, varying in intensity according to the zeal and imagination of the Magians and the particular disposition of local officials. The chief persecutors were Ardashir, governor of Adiabene, and the *Mobed* Adarnagushnap, and the *Mobed an-Mobed* [Supreme High Priest] Ardishapur.²⁹ It was particularly harsh in the province of Adiabene and the district of Nisibis, where it raged fiercely for six years.

Christians were accused of refusing to pay honors to the sun and to the holy fire, of polluting water through their ablutions, and of burying their dead in the ground, contrary to the venerable Mazdaean practice of exposing their dead to the birds of the air³⁰ — because the air is the domain of the Good Spirit Ormuzd, while the earth is under the dominion of the Evil Spirit Ahriman.

What seemed to have made Christianity seem more sinister and potentially dangerous was that at that time, it had made inroads into the highest places and positions of Persian

society, including the imperial court itself, which was found to have many Christians. The individual names of converts as recorded suggest that conversions were made among both ethnic Persians and the Jews.

Before long, the stiff measures against Christianity began to strike hard into Christians of wealth and distinction. A number of apostasies resulted, and prominent among the apostates was one Guhithazad [in Greek, Usthazanes], reportedly Shapur II's own cousin and foster-father, and moreover, chief chamberlain of the imperial palace. The abjurations, however, were apparently not in sufficient numbers to satisfy the authorities, while the heroic steadfastness of the imprisoned Christian prelates and clergy caused much chagrin to the Magians and their partisans.

Martyrdom for Christian Leaders

It was at this point that Shapur II ordered the execution of the more prominent of Christian leaders. The first to be martyred seems to have been a group of three prominent laymen named Mahanes, Abraham, and Shimun, followed by the bishops Mar Shapur and Mar Izhaq, who, after refusing to sacrifice in the Mazdaean manner, were brutally slain in diverse ways.³¹ For Christians in Persia, this was but the beginning of a long dark night of trials and tribulations.

The sufferings of the martyrs and confessors, however, particularly of Mar Shimun bar Sabai, struck sufficient guilt into Guhithazad, who consequently repented of his apostasy and reaffirmed his Christian commitment. Aghast at this affront to his majesty, Shapur II thought it would strike special awe into everyone that he would not flinch to sacrifice his own foster-father and esteemed palace courtier, and thus promptly ordered Guhithazad's death. Courageously facing his fate, the latter managed to convince Shapur II to concede to him one final request, namely, that it be proclaimed that he, Guhithazad, was losing his head "for no crime or conspiracy, except for his attachment and his belief in the Christian faith."³²

Guhithazad's death, however, so grieved Shapur II, for the former had been "specially beloved" by the latter.³³ Thereafter, the emperor ordered a partial check on the indiscriminate slaughter of Christians, and reserved capital punishment only for bishops, priests, monks, deacons and the "sons and daughters of the covenant." The "Sons of the Covenant" [*B'nath Qyama*] and the "Daughters of the Covenant" were lay men and women who had consecrated themselves to a life of celibacy, which was an idea totally repugnant to the Mazdaean cult. When Shimun bar Sabai, after Guhithazad's death, demanded for himself the crown of martyrdom, Shapur II at first hesitated, on account of their long-standing personal friendship, but ultimately was forced by reasons of political expediency to have the latter condemned to death.

Martyrdom of Shimun bar Sabai

On the fateful day of Good Friday, A.D. 341, which the Magians seemed to have deliberately chosen with calculated irony, Bishop Shimun bar Sabai was forced to watch the execution of some 100 bishops, priests, clerics (including two aged presbyters of his cathedral named Abdechalas and Ananias), and some prominent laymen. The faith of the Persian martyrs, however, held strong, many willingly choosing death rather than suffer the gnawing guilt and indelible ignominy of having denied Jesus Christ.

One good example was the courage of one Pusaik, superintendent of Shapur II's royal artisans, who for sometime had been a secret Christian. When Pusaik saw the presbyter Ananias trembling in fear as the preliminary preparations were being made for his execution, Pusaik, unmindful of the fatal danger to himself, spoke out comfortingly: "O old man, close your eyes for a little while and be of good courage, for you will soon behold the light of Christ." No sooner had he uttered these words, when he was promptly arrested, and having boldly confessed his Christian faith before Shapur II was summarily put to death, along with his daughter who was a consecrated virgin, or "daughter of the covenant".³⁴ Finally, Shimun bar Sabai himself was executed, though the emperor to the very last vainly pleaded for him to change his mind and abjure his faith.

Apparently, more than 200 Christians were put to death on that day, for the church historian Sozomen mentions a total of 300 martyrs.³⁵

New Edict of General Persecution

These martyrdoms of A.D. 341 seemed to have served only to strengthen the faith of committed Christians. During the Lenten season of A.D. 342 (apparently after Christians persisted in holding religious services), Shapur II issued another edict of general persecution, ordering death for anyone who confessed to being a Christian. Not surprisingly, the Magians proved to be the most zealous minions of the imperial authorities in seeking out the Christians.

As in the Roman Empire, those who suffered most the brunt of this persecuting edict were, on the one hand, those Persian Christians of means and position, who stood out by virtue of their personal circumstances, and on the other, those from the lower classes whose lot did not count for very much in the eyes of the authorities. Christians from the lower middle classes were comparatively easily able to blend quietly into the general ranks of society,³⁶ though one should not also unduly dismiss the faithfulness and courage of many among them for whom martyrdom sadly became the ultimate test of Christian loyalty.

Among those who perished for their faith at this time were the sisters of Mar Shimun bar Sabai, both "daughters of the covenant" and *rabbanyatis* ["deaconesses"], namely, Tarbula, a stunningly beautiful and stately virgin, and her widowed sister. Both were ladies in waiting to Shapur's queen, who was persuaded by the Magians to believe that her illness

was caused by the sisters' dark dispositions and-wicked witchcraft. Along with the two also died another Christian consecrated virgin, who was the widow's servant.³⁷ One particularly high-placed Magian high-priest had offered to save Tarbula's life, if she would only accept his sexual advances,³⁸ but she gave not one second to think of his offer.

The Mazdaeans could simply not understand why Christian women of marriageable age would deliberately choose a life of seeming loneliness instead of living a normal family life. In this particular instance, one sees in capsule form the pointed clash of Eastern Christianity and Mazdaean values.

Massacre of the Christian Hierarchy

As noted earlier on, the persecution was most harshly felt in Adiabene, for as Sozomen puts it, it was a region "in which many Christians were located."³⁹ Before this terrible scourge would abate, a good number of other bishops [of whom 23 are known by name — Aicepsimus, Barbasymes, Paul, Gadiabes, Sabinus, Mareas, Mocius, John, Hormisdas, Papas, Romas, Maares, Agas, Bochres, Abdas, Abdisho, another John, Abramins, Agdelas, Sapor, Isaac, and Dauses] were slain for their faith. Along with "a multitude" of presbyters, including two named Aithalas and James, there also died a considerable number of deacons, two of whom were identified as Azad and Abdisho.⁴⁰ Also executed were the *chorepiscopos* ("country-bishop") Mar Abdas, who perished along with about 250 of his clergy,⁴¹ as well as the renowned Miles ar-Razi, the old bishop of Susa, a former Persian officer who had abandoned his military career in order to become a Christian priest.⁴²

The persecutions, which eventually were to span a quarter of a century, roared with special vigor and ferocity in the first decade, with mass martyrdoms recurring now and then. It was sufficient to declare the Christians as treasonous and deserving of death; after that, petty officials and their minions "simply fulfilled" their "responsibilities." For example, on Bishop Shimun bar Sabai's death, he was succeeded by one Mar Shahadost ["King's Friend"], who was arrested and thrown into jail in Ctesiphon late in A.D. 342, along with about 128 clerics, monks, and some nine consecrated virgins. About six months later, in A.D. 343, they were all beheaded at Gundishapur [Beit Lapat], metropolitan city of the Huzaye.⁴³

After Shahadost's death, there was one more attempt to fill the episcopal vacancy in Seleucia-Ctesiphon, and not long thereafter, a new bishop, Bar Barshemin, a nephew of the late Mar Shimun was elected. He in turn ordained new priests and consecrated other bishops, ordering them to disguise themselves as laymen in order to escape detection by the Magians. Bar Barshemin, however, was soon arrested by the authorities, and together with 16 of his clergy was martyred at Ledan, another city of the Huzaye, at the beginning of A.D. 345.⁴⁴ Thereafter, the metropolitan see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon was bereft of a bishop until Shapur II's death in 379,⁴⁵ while many other bishoprics were unfilled, and congregations were either bereft of clergy or reduced to a shadowy existence.

Prolonged Tribulation in Adiabene

The persecution lasted the longest in the province of Adiabene. In Arbela in 345, the Mobed Adursag turned his special ire on a prominent layman named Hananiah, who was tortured to death with the "iron combs." A priest named Daniel and a deaconess named Uarda [Rose], after suffering imprisonment for three months, had their feet bored with irons, and then placed them in freezing water for five days. Still refusing to recant, they were finally beheaded.

Some 120 Christians from Adiabene, all ecclesiastics of various ranks except for nine consecrated virgins, were arrested. But to give them enough opportunity to abjure their faith — which was what the authorities really desired most — they were at first only brought to Seleucia.

Yet this grim period of testing and distress continued to evoke heroic acts of courage, and, as will be seen shortly, also ignominious deeds of cowardice. Thus, at great risk to herself, a noble Christian lady in Seleucia named Jardundoeta, a native of Arbela, found means to succour the prisoners in their filthy dungeon up to the day of their martyrdom.⁴⁶

At the same time, this period of tribulation also exposed the false, the weak, and the cowardly. Thus, when Narses Tamashpur ordered seized in the town of Casciaz five consecrated virgins named Meryem, Martha, another Meryem, Anna, and Thecla, the local presbyter named Rabban Paul, who was a rich man, abjured his faith to protect his possessions. Disappointed at losing Paul's property, Narses Tamashpur, thinking the man was a good Christian after all and would surely retract his abjuration, ordered him to execute with his own hands the five virgins, who, meanwhile had each been given 100 lashes.

But quite unworthy of the Apostle who was his namesake, Rabban Paul choose to save his own life and property, despite his victims' anguished cry: "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?" As if fearful that he would break his resolve, Rabban Paul quickly beheaded each of the victims. As the apostate's conduct apparently scandalized even his persecutors, that same night Narses Tamashpur's guards broken into his prison and slew the unworthy presbyter.⁴⁷

The following year, A.D. 346, Shapur II issued a fresh edict against Christianity, and again a great number perished in several provinces. In 347 a priest named Yaqub of Tell Salila and his sister Mariam, a "daughter of the covenant," were ordered by the persecutor Narses Tamashpur to feed on a preparation of human blood. When they refused, they were ordered beheaded, the executioner being an apostate named Mahdad.

Shapur's Change of Heart

In his later years, however, Shapur II seemed to have mellowed and grown less intolerant of Christianity. When he took Nisibis from the Romans in A.D. 363, he sent for Mar Awgin, the abbot of Nisibis and founder of Eastern monasticism to come before him, and treated the latter with great honor, having heard much good report about the Christian monk. Probably instrumental in Shapur II's change of attitude was the story that shortly before, the Roman emperor Julian the Apostate, Shapur II's adversary, had passed by Nisibis in his advance against Ctesiphon. One of Julian's Christian commanders named Jovian, who was to succeed him after a military coup d'etat, had reportedly asked Mar Awgin to pray to God to break speedily the head of the apostate emperor. By a strange coincidence, Julian died soon afterwards, and this fact must have persuaded Shapur II to regard the Christian abbot with awe and respect.

When Mar Awgin and his monks also won a contest by fire against the Magians, Shapur II was so impressed that he asked the abbot to heal one of his sons, who was diagnosed as being possessed by an evil spirit. When the youth recovered his senses and Shapur II inquired of Mar Awgin as to how he was to be rewarded, the latter only asked that he and his monks be granted permission to build convents and monasteries in Jundishapur, in Khuzistan [Huzaye], and other places by the caravan routes, so that they might minister to travelers and strangers in need.

With a written *firman* [edict] from the erstwhile persecuting Emperor Shapur II, Mar Awgin lost no time in commissioning reportedly 72 of his monks to go and establish monasteries wherever God should lead them. At the same time, Mar Awgin's sisters Thecla and Stratonice also went out to establish convents for "daughters of the covenant."⁴⁸ Thus, in his latter years, Shapur II perhaps unknowingly permitted officially the founding of eventually hundreds of monasteries and convents throughout Mesopotamia and the rest of Persian domains, which subsequently served as the veritable evangelistic centers for the unprecedented missionary expansion of the Church of the East. But this new favorable condition was won only at a terribly great price.

In a sense, the persecuting policies of the Roman Emperor Julian the Apostate [though the period lasted but briefly] and the Christians' rejection of him, may have opened Sassanid eyes to the fact that Christianity was not necessarily equivalent to being a Roman, though it would take a few more generations for this to be firmly demonstrated.

Effects of Shapur's Persecution

In terms of the calculated ruthlessness of his persecution, Shapur II was unquestionably the Decius of Persia. What made it worse for Christians in his domains at this time was the fact that in the current wars, Persia was gaining the upper hand over Rome. In 363, Julian's successor Jovian, defeated in a fresh war with Persia, was forced to accept Shapur II's

humiliating conditions of surrender, by which terms Persia would have control of Nisibis, Armenia and Georgia.

After this submissive gesture on Jovian's part, Sassanid regard for their Christian subjects increasingly improved during the truce that ultimately would hold for about thirty years. A particularly awesome natural calamity also took place not many years afterwards, when a terrible earthquake in July 369 rocked the entire region of the eastern Mediterranean, Mesopotamia and Persia. The resulting tidal wave washed away many coastal cities and their populations. Nicaea was destroyed, as well as three cities in Persia. There was a general belief that this was God's punishment for the wickedness of men.⁴⁹ Apparently, both the oppressed and the oppressors were in different ways but in equal intensity deeply impressed by this event.

But by then, Shapur II's fierce persecution had already severely crippled the Church of the East, which would not be able to recover fully for at least one generation. How many Christians in Persia perished or otherwise suffered for their faith at this time can only be hazardedly surmised. As might be expected, however, there were a good number who took the road of least resistance and apostatized.

Some Persian Christians apparently took flight and made it safely to places beyond the Sassanid empire. Thus, in A.D. 345 some 336 Persian Christian families, led by one Thoma Qnanaye [Thomas, the Merchant], often rendered incorrectly as "Thomas of Cana," arrived with some clerics at Muziris (Cranganore) in South India. Others apparently fled eastward in the direction of Central Asia, and may have been the first to proclaim the Christian faith to the various peoples of the steppes.

There is no question, however, that a great number perished during the decade of the 340's, and this is amply borne by the historical record. In closing his account of this Persian persecution, the 5th-century Greek church historian Sozomen says in his *Ekklesiastike Historia*:

For my own part, I think that I have said enough of [Miles ar-Razi] and of the other martyrs who suffered in Persia during the reign of Sapor, for it would be difficult to relate in detail every circumstance respecting them, such as their names, their country, the mode of completing their martyrdom; and the species of torture to which they were subjected, for they are innumerable ... I shall briefly state that the number of men and women whose names have been computed to be *sixteen thousand*, while the multitude outside of these is *beyond enumeration*, and on this account to reckon off their names appeared difficult, to the Persians and Syrians and to the inhabitants of Edessa, who have devoted much care to this matter.⁵⁰ [*italics supplied*].

So terrible was the persecution that a total of 230,000 martyrs are said to have died for their faith in Persia at this time.⁵¹ Most of those whose names were recorded came from

the city of Ledan, where the records of the martyrs had been preserved. Though the historian Duchesne has claimed that "so far as appears," the apostates were "many fewer than in the Roman persecutions" of the previous century,⁵² another modern church historian has opined that this Persian persecution under Shapur II may have surpassed in intensity and magnitude any similar trial and tribulation suffered by the Church in Roman domains during the 3rd century.⁵³ Judging from the calculated intensity and the systematic conduct of that persecution, latter's historical judgment may not be far from the truth.

Partial Relief and Toleration under Shapur II's Successors

Persecution, though less ferocious and severe, continued under Shapur II's brother and immediate successor, Ardashir III (379-383). But so unpopular was the new emperor that within four years, his troops rebelled and placed on the throne Shapur II's son, Shapur III (383-388). This seemed to have been the prince who was healed by the Christian abbot Mar Awgin. Not until then did Christians in Persia experience relief and peace, continuing through the reigns of Varahran V (388-399) and the very tolerant Yazdagird I (399-420).

Undoubtedly, a major factor contributing to better treatment by the Persian emperors of their Christian subjects in later years was the welcome peace with Rome, concluded between Shapur III and Theodosius I in 384 and ultimately lasting nearly four decades. Shapur III also saw himself as a practical man, and ordered the release of all Christians still in prison. He argued soberly that since most Christians were merchants and artisans of means, their payment of tribute was more beneficial to the state.⁵⁴

The importance that the issue of religion had assumed in Persian-Roman relations by this time may also be seen in the fact that when war broke out anew in 420, it was on account of Roman protection to Christian refugees fleeing a renewed round of persecution in Persia.

Primal Authority and Eastern Identity

It was during the generally peaceful period between 384 and 420 that the Church of the East not only embarked on vigorous theological activity, but was also able to further organize and strengthen its hierarchy. Because of cultural differences, the Church of the East from the start developed its theology along lines of thought quite different from those of the historic creeds of Western Christendom, which arose out of the doctrinal controversies dealt with by the first four oecumenical councils.

The separate theological stance of the Church of the East [which was an orthodox parallel to that of the Church of the West, especially during the first four centuries of the Christian era], may be seen in the writings of Afrahat, a 4th-century monk and bishop [probably of Mosul], who was the first known Christian theologian of Persian descent.

Afrahat, the First Persian Christian Theologian

Afrahat was a comparatively voluminous writer. Between 337 and 345, he wrote 22 homilies, which were not sermons but actually a systematic exposition of Christian doctrine, the first word of each homily corresponding to one of the 22 letters of the Syriac alphabet. Afrahat began writing while the heat of the Arian controversy was still raging, with Athanasius in exile and Emperor Constantine lying on his deathbed. The last homily was composed while the fires of Shapur II's persecution were still alight. Afrahat, however, makes no reference to any of these, but is rather concerned, as it seems, with presenting the basic tenets of the Christian faith, which he forcefully portrays as being founded on Jesus the Messiah, the Rock upon which the whole faith is built.

After his praise of faith, Afrahat goes on to give a creedal statement as to what is this faith. As he puts it:

For this is Faith: —

When a man shall believe in God, the Lord of all,
 that made the heavens and the earth and the seas
 and all that is in them,
 who made Adam in His image,
 who gave the Law to Moses,
 who sent of His Spirit in the Prophets,
 who sent, moreover, His Messiah into the world.

And that a man should believe
 in the coming to life of the dead,
 and believe also in the Mystery of Baptism:

This is the Faith of the Church of God.

And that a man should separate himself
 from observing hours and sabbaths and months
 and seasons,

and enchantments and divinations and
 Chaldaism and magic,
 and from fornication and from reviling and
 from vain doctrines,
 the weapons of the Evil One, and from the
 blandishment of honeyed words,
 and from blasphemy and from adultery.

And that no man should bear false witness,
 and that none should speak with double tongue:

These are the works of the Faith
 that is laid on the true Rock,
 which is the Messiah,
 upon Whom all the building doth rise.⁵⁵

This creed continued to be in use until A.D. 410, when the Church of the East adopted the Nicene Creed of A.D. 325. The fact that it does not contain a trinitarian structure, as in the Western creeds as a result of the various controversies, shows clearly the independent theological development in the East. Afrahat was a trinitarian, and spoke of "the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit," and of baptism [which to him is the true circumcision] "in the Names of the three Persons of the Trinity."⁵⁶ But the Church of the East did not seem to have been deeply involved in the Arian controversy, which set the form and structure of the Nicene-Chalcedonian Creed.

In the ensuing controversies, however, on the question of the person and nature of Christ, the Church of the East would reject the Chalcedonian formula, and thus maintain the theologically independent direction into which culture and circumstances had led its thinking in the beginning.

The Primary of Ctesiphon in the East

The question of primacy was a complicated issue in the Church of the East, because of racial and cultural differences coloring the normal rivalry for prestige and influence among the various metropolitanates in Persian domains. The more important matter, however, was the question of apostolic foundation and the attending issues of order or precedence. While Seleucia-Ctesiphon was the largest and undoubtedly the most prestigious Christian center in the East, its traditional apostolic founder was St. Mari, a disciple of the Apostle St. Thomas. In the eyes of the churches in Persia proper, particularly those of Rewardesir and Gundishapur, whose forebears were originally from northern Syria and Iraq and who considered themselves as belonging to St. Thomas, Seleucia-Ctesiphon, therefore, stood lower in rank and precedence than their churches.

The tragedy arising from these rival claims of precedence is partly seen in the unsuccessful attempt to strengthen church organization in A.D. 345, a most crucial time when Shapur II's persecution was shaking the Church to its very roots. When Bishop Bar Barshemin tried that year to reorganize the whole Church under his leadership, the prelates of Persia proper held aloof. The nascent controversy was abruptly aborted only due to Bar Barshemin's arrest and ensuing martyrdom in 346.

This question of primacy on the basis of apostolic foundation, which dated from the time of Papa bar Aggai, was to break out anew in the 7th century, when Shimun, Metropolitan of Persia, refused to accept the primacy of Isoyabh, Patriarch of Seleucia-Ctesiphon. It would crop up once more during the 9th century, with the schism of the Metropolitan of Rewardesir, who rebuffed the Patriarch-Catholicus Timothy I's pleas for unity with the sharp retort: "We are the disciples of the Apostle Thomas; we have no relations with the See of Mari."⁵⁷

Fortunately, this was not always the prevailing spirit through the centuries. In A.D. 399, the Church of the East reorganized itself and once more took up the question of primatial authority, accepting in the end the primacy of Ctesiphon.⁵⁸

But while the Persian Church might have been autocephalous, initially it was not really fully autonomous. Thus, there lingered long a latent resentment against its subordination to the West, particularly to the Patriarchate of Antioch. The desire for effective ecclesiastical independence not long thereafter materialized in earnest efforts to raise the metropolitan see of Seleucia-Ctesiphon to an equal footing with the Western patriarchates. The Church of the East would eventually achieve this goal, but not without costly pain and trouble.

Yazdagird I's Edict of Toleration

The restoration of peace between Rome and Persia in 384 led to closer links between the Church of the East and the Catholic Church in the Roman Empire, on the one hand, and to the issuance by Emperor Yazdagird I of an edict of toleration for his Christian subjects, on the other.

One man whose contributions on both counts was specially significant was Marutha, son of the Byzantine governor of Sophene in northern Mesopotamia and bishop of Maiferkat [Martyropolis], who had earlier on lived in Antioch, Constantinople, and Asia Minor. Twice sent as a Byzantine envoy to the court of Yazdagird I, first during the latter's accession in 399 and again in 410, Marutha had favorably impressed the Sassanid emperor by curing him of a violent chronic headache, which had troubled him for some time. The Magians tried to discredit Marutha through fraudulent artifice, but the exposure of two clumsy attempts toward this end only served to raise the bishop in the esteem of Yazdagird.⁵⁹

Not surprisingly, Marutha easily succeeded in persuading Yazdagird I in A.D. 409 to issue a *firman* granting toleration to the Persian Church, and in particular, to allow Christians to rebuild their ruined church buildings and to worship freely and openly, to release imprisoned Christians, and to give liberty to the "Sacred Alliance" of the Christian clergy to travel about and preach without hindrance in Sassanid domains. This Persian *firman* of A.D. 409 was as important to the Church of the East as the Edict of Milan of A.D. 313 was to the Church in the Roman Empire.⁶⁰

In seeking to forge closer links between the Churches of the East and the West, Marutha had to tread carefully on precarious ground. It was imperative that the Church of the East should show no more than fraternal, or better still, merely spiritual, links with the Church of the West. Moreover, the Persian Church had to eschew any political stance or involvement that would cause Yazdagird I's suspicion or displeasure.

Somehow, Marutha managed to persuade the emperor to convoke a synod at Seleucia in A.D. 410, to be presided by none less than an imperial official, a *marzban* [provincial governor] who was probably also a Christian.⁶¹

The Synod of Seleucia of A.D. 410

It was at this synod of 410, attended by 38 Persian prelates headed by Mar Izhaq, "Bishop of Seleucia and Ctesiphon, Catholicus and Archbishop of the whole East,"⁶² that relations which had previously atrophied due to lack of communication were temporarily restored between the Churches of East and West. Marutha presented a letter from the "Western" Fathers, namely, Porphyry of Antioch, Acacius of Beroea [Aleppo], Paqida of Edessa, Eusebius of Tella, and Acacius of Amida [Diabekir], urging the Persian prelates to accept [which they did] the creed and canons of the Council of Nicaea of 325, as well as the Western manner of appointing bishops and the regularization of the dates of the Christian festivals.⁶³

In one session of the synod, two of the highest ranking imperial officials, namely, the Grand Vizier Khusrau-Yazdagird and one Mihr-Sabour [perhaps the army general known by this name] came to the assembled prelates and conveyed the following message in the name of the *Shah an-Shah* ["King of Kings"]:

Previously there was a great persecution directed against you, and you walked in secret; now the King of Kings has granted you complete peace and tranquility. Thanks to the familiarity and access which the Catholicus Isaac has to the King of Kings, who has been pleased to establish him as head of all the Christians of the East, and particularly since the day of arrival here of Mar Marouta [Marutha], by the favor of the King of Kings, peace and tranquility are granted to you.

Anyone whom you shall choose, whom you shall know to be fit to govern and direct the people of God, who shall have been established by the bishops Isaac and Maroute, will be head. No one must separate himself from these; whoever opposes them and flouts their will shall be reported to us, and we shall tell the King of Kings, and the malice of such a person shall be punished, whoever he may be.⁶⁴

Moreover, Emperor Yazdagird I recognized Mar Izhaq as the "Catholicus and head of all Bishops of the East," the first time that this ecclesiastical title was attributed to the bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon.⁶⁵ By decree of the Persian Emperor, this Christian prelate was to have primacy over the metropolitans of the five other ecclesiastical provinces of the Persian Church. By order of precedence, these metropolitanates were:

- Seleucia-Ctesiphon, for the patriarchate;
- Beit Lapat [Gundishapur], for the ecclesiastical province of Susiana;
- Nisibis, for the frontier province of Nisibis;
- Pherat [Basra], for the province of Maisan [Mesene];
- Arbela, for the province of Adiabene;

Karka of Beit Selok [otherwise known as Kerkuk, or Beit Garma], for the province of Garama.

Under the Patriarchate and the five metropolitanates were no less than 37 suffragan bishoprics. In accordance with the constitutional practice in the Church of the East, each metropolitanate had not less than 6 but no more than 12 suffragan sees. An increase beyond the latter number necessitated the creation of a new metropolitanate. Moreover, in later years, only the seven highest ranking metropolitanates, namely, those of Gundishapur, Nisibis, Pherat [Basra], Mosul, Arbela, Beit Garma [Kerkuk], and Halwan [Halala], had the privilege of electing the Patriarch-Catholicus.⁶⁶ Interestingly enough, it is also known that the Metropolitanate of Arbela at that time had six suffragan dioceses, namely, those of Ba [Beit] Nuhadra, Beit Bagas, Beit Dasen, Ramonin [Rumini], Dabarinos or Rabarin Hesen, and Beit Mahquart [probably Marga].⁶⁷

Thus, while links with the West were restored in 410, the more immediate significance of that synod was the affirmation of the Persian character of the Church of the East. Unfortunately, some prelates who lived at some distance from Seleucia-Ctesiphon, to whom communication could not reach in time [despite the vaunted efficiency of the Persian postal system], even if they had wished to come, could not be present. Thus were absent the metropolitans of Fars and of "the islands of the Persian Gulf" [Qatar], Media [Tabriz], Beit Raziqaye [Rayy, or Rai; near present-day Teheran], Abrashahr [Nishapur], and Merv in Khorassan, and some others.⁶⁸ In effect, the Synod of 410 was attended only by the prelates of the western ecclesiastical provinces of the Church of the West, and this was to bring trouble in the not too distant future.

Brief Interlude of "Westernization"

The absence of the prelates farther to the East was significant, for it helped allow a brief period of "Westernization" [referring to hellenized Asia Minor and Persia] to creep into the Church of the East. The Catholicus Mar Izhaq had died that same year, and was succeeded by one Mar Ahai. On the latter's demise in 414, Emperor Yazdagird I recognized the election of Mar Yabalaḥa I (d. 420), and four years later sent him as Persian ambassador to the court of the Byzantine Emperor Theodosius II (408-420). The latter replied by sending as his own envoy to Yazdagird another prelate, Bishop Acacius of Amida [Diabekir]. Indeed, from Yazdagird I's reign till the very end of the Sassanid dynasty two centuries later, Christian prelates were the usual envoys between the courts of Byzantium and Ctesiphon.

The bishop Acacius, however, seemed to have acted with misguided zeal, when almost soon after his arrival in 420, he convoked a synod and sought to "hellenize" further the Church of the East,⁶⁹ by introducing the Western canons with respect to regulations for the clergy, passed at the provincial councils of Ancyra [modern Ankara] in 314, Neo-Caesarea in Cappadocia in 314-325, Antioch in 341, Gangres [Gangra] in c.365, and Laodicea in 375.⁷⁰

This interlude of "Westernization," not so much in the adoption of particular Western practices as the subservience to the West that they implied, would soon meet stiff resistance from the metropolitans further East.

Resurgence of Persecution

The "peace and tranquility" which Yazdagird I graciously granted his Christian subjects naturally led to a rapid growth of Christianity in Sassanid domains between 410 and 420, including conversions from the ranks of state officials and other high dignitaries. Even Yazdagird I himself had for a time contemplated Christian baptism, as one report puts it, and persecuted the Magians.⁷¹ But eventually, he changed his mind, and trouble for Christians once more erupted in the closing years of his reign.

The reason for Yazdagird's change of heart was the strong opposition of the Mazdaean clergy and the nobles of Persia, the champions of the national tradition who felt threatened by the rapid increase of Christians in their midst. Yazdagird himself seemed to have been troubled by the large number of nobles and officials who embraced the new religion, so that later he himself tried to convince them to apostatize through inducements, though with little result. One of those who for a time apostatized was a prominent Christian of Gundishapur named Yaqub, who, however, subsequently reaffirmed his Christian faith and died a martyr under Varahran V. Even so, the historical evidence shows that Yazdagird I, who had consistently been personally tolerant of Christians, was forced to take repressive measures only as a last resort, and that it was his son and immediate successor who raised the persecution to fever pitch.

Yazdagird I's action was triggered off by the ill-advised assault and destruction of a Mazdaean fire-temple at Hormizd-Ardashir in Khuzistan by some Christians lead by the over-zealous bishop Mar Abdas. On being appraised of the incident, Yazdagird I, according to the church historian Bishop Theodoret (c.393-c.453), sent for Abdas, and "first in moderate language complained of what had taken place and ordered him to rebuild the Pyreum."⁷² Abdas adamantly refused to heed this command, apparently claiming that he would rather obey God than men. With the Magians all in uproar, Yazdagird then threatened to have the Christian churches destroyed, and when this produced no result, he had no recourse but to have it carried out, after ordering Abdas executed for the crime of *lese majesty*.⁷³

A generation later, church historians would exonerate Yazdagird I, "who had in no way molested the Christians in his domains,"⁷⁴ explaining the persecution as a result of the intrigues of the Magians who exerted a strong influence on Yazdagird's son and successor, Varahran V (420-438). Though there was truth in these historians' claims, it was nevertheless an attempt to conciliate the Persian authorities, and largely left out Abdas' fool-hardy actions. The fact of the matter is that in destroying the fire-temple in an important city, Abdas had attacked a symbol of Persian identity, and this was sufficient to bring to the fore the simmering Magian hatred of Christianity as an un-Persian foreign faith.

Persecution under Varahran V

Indeed, immediately upon Varahran V's accession, the persecution of Christians at once threatened to flare up into a general conflagration. Bishops, priests, and monks were specially sought out, and the most vicious tortures employed on those who had the misfortune to be arrested. The church historian Theodoret speaks of cases where hands or backs were flayed, or heads stripped of the skin from brow to beard, or portions of the flesh torn away by ingeniously arranged split reeds. Others were bound hand and foot and thrown into pits filled with long-starved rats, not to mention other torments and sufferings "even more horrible than these."⁷⁵

Some Persian Christians, perhaps because of their nobility of birth or else their social prestige, were spared the death penalty. But the personal tragedy which they nevertheless suffered may perhaps be illustrated by the torments of one Hormisdas, who belonged to the most noble family of the Achaemenids, and one Suenes, who owned a thousand slaves. When both men adamantly refused to heed Varahran V's command for them to abjure their faith, Hormisdas was stripped of all his rank and possessions and was made a camel-driver, while Suenes was divested of all his properties, half of these being given to his vilest slave, who was also handed Suenes' wife in marriage.⁷⁶

Those who proved most zealous for their faith, whose example was regarded by the authorities as particularly dangerous, were martyred. One particularly brave Christian martyr at this time was Yaqub, of Gundishapur, who as a Christian was widely known in Persia. Emperor Yazdagird I had earlier taken a liking to him and had induced him to apostatize, thereafter heaping upon him many honors and raising him to the dignity of "head of the chiefs of the Persians," probably referring to a military title. But Yaqub's mother and his wife, writing from Gundishapur, reproved him for his apostasy, and in the end he repented, renounced Mazdaeism and returned to Christianity. When the Magians clamored for his death, Varahran V, remembering Yaqub's good services to the empire, at first sought to win him back to the official state cult, threatening if he remained obdurate to have his limbs cut off one by one. Yaqub, however, stood fast in his Christian faith, and was executed in A.D. 323.⁷⁷

Another rich man of noble lineage, one Firuz who was also from Beit Lapat [Gundishapur], had at first apostatized, in order to escape punishment. But when his parents and wife turned away from him in disgust, he returned to the Christian fold. Denounced to the chief Magian Mihr-Shapur, the latter brought Firuz before Varahran V, who was then at Siarzur. When Firuz refused to apostatize the second time, he was beheaded.⁷⁸

The Notary Yaqub and other Christian Officials

There is evidence that Varahran V was not exactly a blood-thirsty tyrant. He was forced to impose the death penalty, only when the continued defiance of the Christians became an affront to his majesty. The case of sixteen Christian officials, including the notary

named Yaqub, who was of Roman lineage from the town of Karka de Ersa, is an interesting case in point. When they refused to apostatize, their goods were confiscated and they were condemned to the lowly task of tending to the royal elephants the whole winter. In spring, when the emperor, according to custom, moved to his summer capital, the prisoners were set to work on road repairs along the route. Still the sixteen held on to their faith, and the persecutor Mihr-Shapur complained to the emperor that the prisoners' constancy was encouraging the other Christians and preventing their apostasy. At a loss as what to do, Varahran V bewailed: "What more can I do to them? Their goods have been confiscated, their houses have been sealed up and they themselves have been tortured."⁷⁹

Mihr-Shapur then suggested his own plan, which was promptly executed. Each night he had the prisoners stripped naked, bound by the hands, taken to the desert, and laid on their backs with little or no water. After a week of this torture, when they were practically near death, even Mihr-Shapur gave up and let them loose. Thereafter they returned to their duties in the palace, Yaqub reporting regularly to the bishops what was being planned against the Christians. When he learned, however, that at the court they were regarded as having apostatized, hence, their "pardon," Yaqub put on sack-cloth and covered himself with ashes.

When brought before Varahran V, Yaqub still stoutly maintained his faith, stating that he had not denied Christianity, nor did he intend to do so, because it was the faith of his fathers. Seeking to convince the emperor to desist from his persecuting policy, Yaqub reminded him that Yazdagird his father had for twenty years reigned in peace and prosperity. But because thereafter he shed innocent Christian blood, he was in death abandoned by all, his body not even receiving decent burial. This naturally enraged Varahran V, who summarily ordered Yaqub, like his namesake from Gundishapur, punished by "the nine deaths" — execution by successively cutting off first the fingers, then the toes, the wrist, the ankles, the elbows, the ears, the nose, and finally the head.⁸⁰

Roman Intervention and Peace

As in previous occasions, the persecution at this time forced many Christians to flee from Sassanid domains, and the flight of a good number over to Roman territory subsequently resulted in several international incidents at the border. To Byzantine protests against Persian persecution of Christians, the Sassanids countered that Mazdaean clergy in Cappadocia were themselves persecuted by Byzantine Christians.⁸¹ Combined with other grievances, the religious issue prompted the Byzantines to invade Persia in 420, shattering the peace achieved in 384. When Theodosius II defeated Varahran V in 422, one of the terms which the Persian ruler was forced to accept was to grant full religious liberty to Christians in his realms,⁸² though, as seen in the case of Yaqub of Gundishapur, the Persian emperor did not fully adhere to this agreement. On the whole, however, the compromised peace, though at first unstable and precarious, brought relief and quiet to the Church of the East.

Brief outbursts of intermittent but violent persecution once more arose in 446 to 456 during the reign of Yazdagird II (438-457), and for a time threatened to recall the days of

Shapur II. Then again, non-Nestorian Christians, particularly Jacobites, suffered briefly in 465. But after Emperor Balas (483-485) granted Christians a new edict of toleration in 484, only one case of general persecution occurred, lasting from 540 to 545 during the reign of the otherwise tolerant Khusrau I (531-579).

Ecclesiastical Independence of the Persian Church

The more than three decades of peace in 384-420 could have led to stronger ties between the Churches in East and West. But what happened instead was a resolve of the Persian prelates to sever their dependence upon the bishops of the West.

When the persecution of 420 broke out, the result was to breed confusion, in which two successors of Mar Yabalaha I were deposed one after the other. In 421 a new Patriarch-Catholicus was elected, namely, Mar Dadisho, son of a high-ranking Persian official. He was supported by Samuel, the bishop of Tus in Khorassan, who had gained favor with Varahran V on account of his help in defending that eastern province from the invasion of the Hephthalite [*Hafiar* or *Haytal*], or White, Huns from Transoxania. But in the ensuing controversy over the catholicate, which was partly a revival of old quarrels and rivalries, Dadisho's opponents succeeded in drawing over to their side some important personages in the Sassanid court, and apparently even some bishops in the Roman East.⁸³ This last circumstance was instrumental in shaping the future course of action of Dadisho's party.

Disgusted by the unseemly intrigue, Dadisho himself gave up his post and left Ctesiphon. His supporters, however, found him in the Arab district of Markabta in Tayyaye [Arabia], and prevailed upon him, now that peace had once more returned to the Church in Persia, to convoke in 424 a synod at that very same place.

The Indigenizing Synod of Markabta

Attended by 6 metropolitans and 36 bishops, with some like Mar Yazdoi and Mar Barsabas coming from as far east as Herat and Merv, respectively, in Khorassan, the synod of Markabta of A.D. 424 was remarkable in two respects. Not only did it represent the greater majority of the hierarchy of the Church of the East, as compared, for example, to but 12 prelates at Mar Yabalaha I's synod of 420; it also strongly represented those elements which ran counter to the "Westernizing" synods of 410 and 420.

Not surprisingly, the prelates at Markabta begged Dadisho to continue as their Grand Metropolitan [Catholicus or Patriarch], and in the same breath declared that henceforth, no future appeals may be made to any patriarch or bishop in the West against the "Catholicus, supreme head of the bishops and governor of all Christians of the East." Moreover, henceforth, "every cause which cannot be determined in the presence of the Catholicus shall be left to the judgment of Christ."⁸⁴ It is equally significant that for the first time, the Persian Prelate was given the title of "Patriarch," thus placing him on equal footing with the Patriarchs of the Western Churches.⁸⁵

named Yaqub, who was of Roman lineage from the town of Karka de Ersa, is an interesting case in point. When they refused to apostatize, their goods were confiscated and they were condemned to the lowly task of tending to the royal elephants the whole winter. In spring, when the emperor, according to custom, moved to his summer capital, the prisoners were set to work on road repairs along the route. Still the sixteen held on to their faith, and the persecutor Mihr-Shapur complained to the emperor that the prisoners' constancy was encouraging the other Christians and preventing their apostasy. At a loss as what to do, Varahran V bewailed: "What more can I do to them? Their goods have been confiscated, their houses have been sealed up and they themselves have been tortured."⁷⁹

Mihr-Shapur then suggested his own plan, which was promptly executed. Each night he had the prisoners stripped naked, bound by the hands, taken to the desert, and laid on their backs with little or no water. After a week of this torture, when they were practically near death, even Mihr-Shapur gave up and let them loose. Thereafter they returned to their duties in the palace, Yaqub reporting regularly to the bishops what was being planned against the Christians. When he learned, however, that at the court they were regarded as having apostatized, hence, their "pardon," Yaqub put on sack-cloth and covered himself with ashes.

When brought before Varahran V, Yaqub still stoutly maintained his faith, stating that he had not denied Christianity, nor did he intend to do so, because it was the faith of his fathers. Seeking to convince the emperor to desist from his persecuting policy, Yaqub reminded him that Yazdagird his father had for twenty years reigned in peace and prosperity. But because thereafter he shed innocent Christian blood, he was in death abandoned by all, his body not even receiving decent burial. This naturally enraged Varahran V, who summarily ordered Yaqub, like his namesake from Gundishapur, punished by "the nine deaths" — execution by successively cutting off first the fingers, then the toes, the wrist, the ankles, the elbows, the ears, the nose, and finally the head.⁸⁰

Roman Intervention and Peace

As in previous occasions, the persecution at this time forced many Christians to flee from Sassanid domains, and the flight of a good number over to Roman territory subsequently resulted in several international incidents at the border. To Byzantine protests against Persian persecution of Christians, the Sassanids countered that Mazdaean clergy in Cappadocia were themselves persecuted by Byzantine Christians.⁸¹ Combined with other grievances, the religious issue prompted the Byzantines to invade Persia in 420, shattering the peace achieved in 384. When Theodosius II defeated Varahran V in 422, one of the terms which the Persian ruler was forced to accept was to grant full religious liberty to Christians in his realms,⁸² though, as seen in the case of Yaqub of Gundishapur, the Persian emperor did not fully adhere to this agreement. On the whole, however, the compromised peace, though at first unstable and precarious, brought relief and quiet to the Church of the East.

Brief outbursts of intermittent but violent persecution once more arose in 446 to 456 during the reign of Yazdagird II (438-457), and for a time threatened to recall the days of

Shapur II. Then again, non-Nestorian Christians, particularly Jacobites, suffered briefly in 465. But after Emperor Balas (483-485) granted Christians a new edict of toleration in 484, only one case of general persecution occurred, lasting from 540 to 545 during the reign of the otherwise tolerant Khusrau I (531-579).

Ecclesiastical Independence of the Persian Church

The more than three decades of peace in 384-420 could have led to stronger ties between the Churches in East and West. But what happened instead was a resolve of the Persian prelates to sever their dependence upon the bishops of the West.

When the persecution of 420 broke out, the result was to breed confusion, in which two successors of Mar Yabalaha I were deposed one after the other. In 421 a new Patriarch-Catholicus was elected, namely, Mar Dadisho, son of a high-ranking Persian official. He was supported by Samuel, the bishop of Tus in Khorassan, who had gained favor with Varahran V on account of his help in defending that eastern province from the invasion of the Hephthalite [*Hafjar* or *Haytal*], or White, Huns from Transoxania. But in the ensuing controversy over the catholicate, which was partly a revival of old quarrels and rivalries, Dadisho's opponents succeeded in drawing over to their side some important personages in the Sassanid court, and apparently even some bishops in the Roman East.⁸³ This last circumstance was instrumental in shaping the future course of action of Dadisho's party.

Disgusted by the unseemly intrigue, Dadisho himself gave up his post and left Ctesiphon. His supporters, however, found him in the Arab district of Markabta in Tayyaye [Arabia], and prevailed upon him, now that peace had once more returned to the Church in Persia, to convoke in 424 a synod at that very same place.

The Indigenizing Synod of Markabta

Attended by 6 metropolitans and 36 bishops, with some like Mar Yazdoi and Mar Barsabas coming from as far east as Herat and Merv, respectively, in Khorassan, the synod of Markabta of A. D. 424 was remarkable in two respects. Not only did it represent the greater majority of the hierarchy of the Church of the East, as compared, for example, to but 12 prelates at Mar Yabalaha I's synod of 420; it also strongly represented those elements which ran counter to the "Westernizing" synods of 410 and 420.

Not surprisingly, the prelates at Markabta begged Dadisho to continue as their Grand Metropolitan [Catholicus or Patriarch], and in the same breath declared that henceforth, no future appeals may be made to any patriarch or bishop in the West against the "Catholicus, supreme head of the bishops and governor of all Christians of the East." Moreover, henceforth, "every cause which cannot be determined in the presence of the Catholicus shall be left to the judgment of Christ."⁸⁴ It is equally significant that for the first time, the Persian Prelate was given the title of "Patriarch," thus placing him on equal footing with the Patriarchs of the Western Churches.⁸⁵

Thus did the Church of the East, in effect, claim for itself equality with and independence from those of the West, the initial step which doctrinal division and political developments would soon propel, launching the former on a separate ecclesiastical existence. The only link which thereafter still remained with the latter was a tenuous one, namely, the fact that the influential theological school at Edessa⁸⁶ continued up to this time to be more or less in concord with the doctrinal positions of the West. But even this last link lasted but a little over half a century, for at the synod of Beit Idrai of 486, the Church of the East would adopt "Nestorianism," thus permanently severing its ecclesiastical ties with the Western Churches.

This declaration of independence of A.D. 424 had the immediate effect of obviating any further Persian persecution on political grounds, and this by-product was not an unwelcome change for a Church that had intensely suffered persecution many times in the past. Indeed, except for one possible exception, future persecutions when they erupted would not be on charges of political disloyalty, but would arise from the continuing animosity of the Magians.

Brief Resurgence of Persecution under Yazdagird II

When fresh conflict broke out anew between Persia and Rome in A.D. 445, as Armenia reaffirmed its independence from Persia, an intense persecution once more overran the northwest Persian frontiers during the reign of the otherwise tolerant Yazdagird II (438-457). It was particularly fierce in Beit Garmai, the ecclesiastical province southeast of Adiabene. No less than 12,000 Christians, including the entire provincial hierarchy, were martyred. Mar Yohannan, the metropolitan of Karka, the bishops Sahrgard, Lasom, Mahosa of Arewan, Harbat Gilal, and Dara, and several leading clergy perished in that holocaust. Many lay Christians from distinguished families were also arrested and summarily put to death. Thousands more suffered for their faith in the social dislocation that ensued in that region.⁸⁷

Yet there were inspiring moments in the midst of these trials and tribulations. In Beit Garmai about 446, an officer named Tahmiazdgerd, who was in charge of the executions and who himself was apparently an inquirer, was so moved by the fortitude in the face of certain death shown by a woman martyr named Shirin and her two little sons that he then and there confessed his faith in Christ.⁸⁸ A month later, he too was to meet martyrdom by crucifixion.

In 447 the persecution spread harshly into Media, with the arrest of a famous evangelist named Mar Pethion, who was a monk from the convent of Beit Sahde of Karka in Beit Garmai. Mar Pethion's followers numbered several from among the most distinguished families in the region, including one high-ranking military officer, as well as the police commander of Shahin. After several days of torture, Mar Pethion was decapitated, and his head displayed on the royal road new Kolwan.⁸⁹

Yazdagird II's Anti-Christian Decree of 449

In 449 Yazdagird II issued a persecution degree, of which a copy of that sent to the Armenian prelates is extant, and is significant for showing the points of issue between Christianity and Mazdaeism at this time.

The decree accuses all who refuse to follow the official state cult as deaf, blind and deceived by the *dev* [spirit] of the evil god Ahriman. It flails Christians for their allegedly confused belief that God is a jealous God [for how can he be jealous, in Mazdaean eyes?], creating death and condemning humankind to it "just for a fig pricked from a tree" [obviously referring to the Genesis account of The Fall]. Christians are also accused of erroneously teaching that one and the same God is responsible for both good and evil, life and death, happiness and suffering, etc., contrary to the dualist tenets of the Mazdaean cult. Christianity is also condemned for teaching that God, who had created heaven and earth, was born of a virgin named Mary, whose husband was Joseph; the truth, however, being that he was the son of Pantherus, by illicit intercourse; and that God had been crucified by men, that He died, was buried, and rose again and ascended into heaven.⁹⁰

It appears from these last accusations that the Magians were familiar with classic Jewish rabbinic literature against Christianity, as evident from the reference to the alleged illegitimacy of Jesus' birth, which is first mentioned by Origen as a Jewish attack.⁹¹ It also shows that Persian authorities and the Magians, in addition to their own accusations, echoed at this point the objections to Christianity posed by the Jews. As a modern historian has recently pointed out, the Persian authorities and the Magians were not ignorant of the doctrines of both the Old and New Testaments.⁹²

In any case, it is clear that the main Mazdaean objections to Christianity stemmed from the wide discrepancy between the philosophical foundations of both religious systems. To the Magians, God cannot be jealous, for jealousy exists only among men, though obviously they were taking out of context the Judeo-Christian idea of God's "jealousy" in the face of human worship of other gods. As the Magians taught that goodness, life and happiness were blessings from the good spirit Ormuzd, while evil, death and suffering were the curses of the evil spirit Ahriman, the idea of the Son of God being at one time subject to the power of evil was a scandalous doctrine to Mazdaean thinking. It recalls the Apostle Paul's acute observation that in the Mediterranean world, the idea of a crucified Christ was "a stumbling block to the Jews and foolishness to the Gentiles" [I Cor. 1:23]. It was simply preposterous to the Magians to think that men could kill God.

Vicissitudes of the Armenian Church

It was during this persecution that the fortunes of both the Persian and Armenian Churches were for a time closely intertwined. When Yazdagird II gave his Christian subjects in Armenia two choices — either to rebut all that was contained in his edict of 449, or else

present themselves before the supreme tribunal, Hovsep (Joseph), bishop of Ararat and Katholikos of Armenia (441-452), and seventeen other Armenian nobles sent back a reply, explaining the true Christian position on the issues raised by the edict.

With the exception of its monophysite christology, the Armenian treatise sent in reply could very well have been written by Persian Christians, and ended with the following firm resolve:

From this confession, none can ever shake us, neither angels nor men, neither sword, fire, or any bitter tortures. All our goods and chattels we commit into your hands; our bodies also are at your disposal. If you choose to leave us in the free exercise of our faith, we on our part will exchange you for no other lord on earth; neither, however, will we own in heaven any other lord than Jesus Christ only, beside whom there is no other God.⁹³

Yazdagird II, however, refused to honor the document and instead summoned to his court nine leading Armenian nobles, whose names he picked personally. The Armenians begged him to recall how since the days of his great-grandfather Shapur III, the Armenians had been most loyal subjects of Persia. But with the emperor's unrelenting resolve to rid Armenia of its "erroneous doctrines," and with the Magians all set with a massive program to proselytize all Armenian Christians within a year's time, war was inevitable.

With the defeat of the Christian army of Armenia in 451, conditions progressively deteriorated, so that all Armenian Christians in 455-456 were ordered to embrace the official Mazdaean cult of Persia. It was at this time that the persecution of Christians once more spread to the Mesopotamian provinces of the Sassanid empire. Fortunately, both the Armenian and Persian Churches were able to weather this storm, the war with Rome came to an end, and the persecution immediately subsided. Finally, in 484 Emperor Balas signed a new edict of toleration for his Christian vassals and subjects, in gratitude for Armenian assistance to him during a recently concluded civil war. Thereafter, no further serious trouble was to beset the Church of the East from the side of the political authorities.

Epilogue

The fortunes of Christians in Persia further improved under the later Persian emperors. Khusrau I Anushiravan the Just (531-579), the greatest of the Sassanid monarchs, was also a close friend of the Nestorian Patriarch-Catholicus Mar Aba I (536-552). Moreover, Khusrau I was apparently the first Sassanid emperor to have taken a Christian woman for his wife, and at least one of his own sons is said to have been baptized by a Jacobite bishop. Khusrau I himself was reportedly a secretly baptized Christian.⁹⁴

His grandson, Khusrau II Parviz (590-628) had several Christians among his leading ministers, including his finance minister Karh Yazdin⁹⁵ and the court physicians Aba of Kaskar, Yuhanna Sendori of Nisibis, and Gabriel of Singar. Khusrau II also had at least two

Christian women among his⁴ queens. One of these was the fair Meryem [Miriam, or Mary], to whom the Nestorians would draft a petition for assistance in A.D. 610; and the other was his most favorite wife, the beautiful Shirin,⁹⁶ a Jacobite Christian for whom he built three magnificent churches.⁹⁷ When Khusrau II turned despotic in his latter years, it was a Christian-inspired revolt, led by his own son Sheroe and Karh Yazdin's son Shamta, which dethroned him in A.D. 628.⁹⁸ Sheroe, a professing Christian, succeeded him as Kavad II, so that towards the end of the Sassanid dynasty, a Christian was actually shah of Persia.

Anarchy and chaos followed Kavad II's death in 629. What is interesting, however, is that two of his successors, namely, his sisters Puran-dukht [Boran] and Azarmi-dukht, were also Christians. In fact, Yazdagird III, the last Sassanid emperor before the Arab Muslims completed their conquest of Persia, was likewise a Nestorian Christian.⁹⁹ If the Muslim Arabs had not taken over Persia, the course of history of Christianity in Asia might have been much different.

1 T. Valentino Sityo Jr. (Ph. D., Edinburgh), former Professor of Christian History and Dean of the Silliman Divinity School, is now Consultant on Theology and History of the United Church of Christ in the Philippines.

2 In 1975 there were 42,000 "Assyrian Christians" in Iraq, 22,000 in Azerbaijan in the USSR, 20,000 in Iran, 10,000 in the U.S.A., 6,000 in Lebanon, 4,500 in Australia, 2,000 in India, and about 1,000 each in the U.K., Sweden, and Turkey, and about 450 in Kuwait. See David B. Barrett (ed.), *World Christian Encyclopedia: A Comparative Survey of Churches and Religions in the Modern World, AD 1900-2000* (Nairobi, Oxford, New York: Oxford University Press, 1982), 155, 378, 390, 393, 446, 452, 649, 682, 695, 706, 721.

3 Placid J. Podipara, C.M.I., *The Hierarchy of the Syro-Malabar Church* (Aleppey: Prakasam Publications, 1976), 17. The designation "Chaldean" was given to those among the remnants of the Church of the East, who after 1551 united with Rome, to distinguish them from the old body of Nestorians. The name "Assyrian Church" [actually, a misnomer] was given the Nestorians by the Churches about 1917. See also Donald Attwater, *The Christian Churches of the East*. Vol. II: *Churches Not in Communion with Rome* (Milwaukee: The Bruce Publishing Co., 1948, 194-195).

4 Thus, the retired Christian merchant Cosmos Indicopleustes writes about A.D. 548-550: "Even in Taprobane [Ceylon], an island in Further India, where the Indian sea is, there is a Church of Christians, with clergy and body of believers, but I know not whether there be any Christians in the part beyond it. In the country called Male, where the pepper grows, there is a church and at another place called Calliana there is moreover a bishop who is appointed from Persia [Gk. *apo persidos cheirotoumenos*]." As quoted by A. Mingana, "The Early Spread of Christianity in India," *Bulletin of the John Rylands Library* [Manchester], X (1926), 29-30. See also Cosmos Indicopleustes, *The Christian Topography of Cosmos Indicopleustes*, tr. and ed. by J.W. McCrindle (London: The Hakluyt Society, 1987), bk. iii, 118-119. For an assessment of the authenticity and accuracy of Cosmos testimony, see James Hough, *The History of Christianity in India from the Commencement of the Christianity Era* (5 vols.; London n.p., 1839-1840), I, 86.

5 See A.C. Moule, *Christians in China Before the Year 1500* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), 65 citing a T'ang imperial edict of A.D. 638, in the 1884 edition of the *T'ang hui yao* ["A Collection of the Accounts of the T'ang Dynasty"], c. 49, fol. 10v. This text was first found by the sinologist Alexander Wylie.

See also the Nestorian Tablet, of A.D. 781, in P.Y. Saeki, *The Nestorian Monument in China* (London: Society for promoting the Christian Knowledge, 1916), 162-180, and his later *The Nestorian Documents and Relics in China* (Tokyo: Toho Bunkwa Gakuin: Academy of Oriental Culture, Tokyo Institute, 1937), 53-77. For another early study of the Nestorian Tablet, see G. Pauthier, "L'Inscription syro-chinoise de Si-ngan-fou, monument nestorien élevé en Chine l'an 781 de notre Ère, et découvert en 1625" (Paris: Librairie de Firmin Didot Frères, Fils et Cie., 1858).

6 See Podipara, *Hierarchy of of the Syro-Malabar Church*, 49 Cf. Fridolin Ukur and Frank L. Cooley, *Jerih dan Juang* [Indonesian] (Jakarta, 1979), 450-457.

7 See, for example, E.A. Gordon, "Some Recent Discoveries in Korean Temples and their Relationship to Early Eastern Christianity," *Transactions of the Korean Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society*, V. 1 (1914), 1-39. Cf. Saeki, *Nestorian Monument in China*, ix. See also Oh Yoon-tae, *History of the Korean Church* 242-290, as cited by John England, "The Early Christian Communities in SE and NE Asia," *Missiology: An International Reveiw*, XIX (1991), 208.

8 *Chronicle of Arbela*, 32-33, in W.B. Young, *Handbook of Source Materials for Students of Church History* (Madras: Christian Literature Society, 1969), 51.

9 *Chronicle of Arbela*, 39-41, in Young, *Handbook*, 273-247. French translation from Syriac in Mingana, S.S., I 117-118].

10 *Histoire nestorienne inédie* [*Chronicle de Seert*], in 2 parts, ed. by Addai Scher, in *Patrologia Orientalis* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Cie., 1907-1919), IV (1907), 237.

11 Ibid

12 *Chronicle of Arbela*, 41, in Young, *Handbook*, 257.

13 See J.S. Assemani, *Acts of the Holy Martyrs of the East*, 135ff. [French summary in Jerome Labourt, *Le Crhistianisme dans l' Empire Perse sous la Dynastie Sassanide* (224-632) (Paris: Librairie Victor Lecoffre, 1904), 41 Cf. Young, *Handbook*, doc. 113.

14 Adolf Harnack, *The Expansion of Christianity in the First Three Centuries*, tr. and ed. by James Moffat (2 vols.; New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1904-1905), II 297-299.

15 James Moffat, in his notes to Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, II 297n.

16 The Title *Katholikos* or *Catholicus*, from Aramaic *gathulik* was a little equivalent to an exarch, and was mid-way between a metropolitan and a patriarch. It had been adopted by the prelate of Armenia before the time of Papa bar Aggai. For more details, see Adrian Fortescue, *The Lesser Eastern Churches* (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1913), 48-49.

17 See J.-B. Chabot, *Notices et extraits des Manuscrits de la Bibliothèque Nationale et autres bibliothèques* publiée par l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles-Lettres, Tome Trente-septième [XXXVII] (Paris: Imprimerie Nationale, 1902), 2. This volume is also known by the title *Synodicon Orientale*.

18 S.L. Greenslade, *Schism in the Early Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, [1952]), 63. Cf. Chabot, *Notices et extraits*, 2.

19 Luigi Pareti, *The Ancient World*, tr. from the Italian By Guy E. F. Chilver and Sylvia Chilver, Vol. II, of *A History of Mankind* (New York: Harper and Row, 1965), 682.

20 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4:13 [tr. by Ernest Cushing Richardson], in *A Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers of the Christian Church*, 2nd series, ed. by Philip Schaff and Henry Wace (New York: The Christian Literature Co., 1890), I 543-544. See also Theodoret, *Hist. Eccles.* [tr. by Blonfield Jackson], in *Ibid.*, I, 554-555.

21 Neale, *The Patriarchate of Antioch*, 130.

22 Eusebius, *Vita Constantini*, 4:56-57, in Schaff and Wace *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, I 554-555.

23 Young, *Handbook*, 277.

24 Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.*, 2:9 [An English translation of Sozomen's work appears in Vol. II, of Schaff and Wace, *A Select Library of Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, 2nd series.

25 Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse*, 46.

26 Kenneth Scott Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity* (7 vols.; New York: Harper & Bros., 1937), II, 271, citing Shedd, *Islam and the Oriental Churches*, 158.

27 Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.*, 2:9 Cf. Labourt, *Le Christianisme dans l'Empire Perse*, 46. Cf. also Young, *Handbook*, 388.

28 *Chronique de Seert [Histoire nestorienne inédite]* (ed. by A. Scher), in 2 parts, in *Patrologia Orientalis* (Paris: Firmin-Didot et Cie., 1907-1919), IV [1907], 297.

29 Labourt, *Le Christianisme*, 69-70.

30 Latourette, *History of the Expansion of Christianity*, I, 228.

31 Mar Shapur was beaten up with clubs and his teeth knocked out. Mar Izhaq was ordered stone to death by apostates; Mahanes had his skin flayed from the top of his head to the navel; Abraham's eyes were bored out by hot irons; and Shimun was buried up to his chest and shot to death with arrows. See *Butler's Lives of the Saints*, ed., rev. and supplemented by Herbert Thurston, S.J. and Donald Attwater (4 vol.s; [London]: Burns and Oates, 1956), IV, 452.

32 Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.*, 2:9-11. Cf. *Histoire nestorienne inédite*, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, IV, 302.

33 J.S. Assemani [*Bibliotheca Orientalis*, I 189] has identified Guhistazad, or Azad, as the eunuch of Artascirus, king of Adiabene and Shapur's cousin. Quite possibly, Azad

had been converted in Adiabene, or perhaps had heard of the Gospel while he was in court of King Artacurus. Afterwards, he himself might have been responsible for other conversion in the court of Shapur II. See also *Select Library of Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, II, 264. Cf. also Jean Maurice Fiey, O.P. *Assyrie Chrétienne: Contribution à l'Étude et de la Géographie ecclésiastique et monastique de Nord de l'Iraq* (3 vols.; Beyrouth: Dar El-Machreq Editeurs, 1965-1968), I, 44.

34 For the martyrdom of Mar Shimun bar Sabai and his companions, see Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.*, 2:9-11. Cf. *Butler's Lives of the Saints* (Thurston & Attwater ed.), II, 141.

35 Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.*, 2:9. Cf. Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas Bishop of Marga, A.D. 840*, tr. from the Syriac and ed. by E.A. Wallis Budge (2 vols.; London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Trübner and Co., Ltd., 1893), II 483. See also Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, I, 188.

36 Harnack, *Expansion of Christianity*, I 491-492. Sozomen, however, says that many Christians "voluntarily surrendered themselves, lest they should appear, by their silence, to deny Christ." See his *Hist. Eccles.*; 2:11.

37 *Ibid.*, 2:11-12.

38 Sozomen reports that the Magian who had been secretly enamored of Tarbula secretly sent her money, along with the promises that she and her companions would be spared from torture and death. For more details on the martyrdom of Shimun's sisters, see *ibid.*, 2:12.

39 *Ibid.*

40 *Ibid.*

41 *Ibid.*

42 *Ibid.*, 2:12-14.

43 Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, II, 483. See also Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, I, 188. See also *Histoire nestorienne inédite* [Scher ed.], in *Patrologia Orientalis*, IV 309-310. Cf. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, I 44-45. Cf. also Louis Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church: From its Foundation to the End of the Fifth Century*, tr. by Claude Jenkins (3 vols.; London: John Murray, 1960), II, 383. *Butler's Lives of the Saints* [Thurston and Attwater ed.], II 39-40, seems to be speaking of the this same event, but gives the date as A.D. 345.

44 Thomas of Marga, *Book of Governors*, II, 483. See also Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, I, 190. The reports are conflicting regarding Barshemin and his martyrdom. Fiey

says the bishop martyred was named Mar Abraham, though this could be the biblical name for Bar Barshemin, But the date is 346. The Duchesne states it was Bar Barshemin, but the date is 346. *The Chronique de Seert*, II [*Patrologia Orientalis*, V, 220] says Barshemin served as bishop for seven years before he was martyred. Cf. Bar Hebraeus, *Chron. Eccl.* [ed. by Abbeloos and Lamy], II 39-41. Cf. also H. Gismondi, *Amri et Slibae de patriarchis Nestorianum commentaris* (Romae, 1897), 12.

Fiey [*Assyrie Chrétienne*, I 44n.], however, says that the bishop who was martyred in 342 was one Yohannan of Galmi, and wonders whether this man was the same "Yohannan, Bishop of Greater India," who was present at the Council of Nicaea in A.D. 325, which in that case would have aggravated his "crime" by entering into collusion with foreigners. See also Bar Hadsaba Arbaya, *Hist. Eccles.*, in *Patrologia Oreitnalis*, XXII-2, 29-30.

45 Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, I, 190. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, I 44f Duchesne, *Early History of Christian Church*, III, 383, who gives the year as A.D. 346.

46 Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 23.

47 Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, I 44. See also Stewart, *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise*, 23-24.

48 Sir Edward E. A. Wallis Budge, *The Monks of Kublai Khan, Emperor of China; or, the history of the life and travels of Rabban Sawma, envoy and plenipotentiary of the Mongol Khans to the kings of Europe, and Markos who as Mar Yahbh-Allaha III became Patriarch of the Nestorian Church in Asia*, tr. from the Syriac by E.A. Wallis Budge (London: The Religious Tract Society, 1928), 18-20. The names of the various monks sent out by Mar Awgin are given in Paul Bedjan, *Acta Martyrum*, III, 473.

49 See *Chronique de Seert* [Scher ed.], in *Patrologia Orientalis*, V, 260.

50 Sozomen, *Hist. Eccles.*, 2:14.

51 *Chronique de Seert* [Scher ed.], Part 2, in *Patrologia Orientlis*, V, 222.

52 Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, III 383.

53 John Foster, *Church History I (A.D. 29-500): The First Advance* (London: SPCK, 1972), 99.

54 *Chronique de Seert* [Scher ed.] part 2, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, V, 261.

55 As quoted by F. Crawford Burkitt, "Early Christianity Outside the Roman Empire" (Cambridge: The University Press 1899), 33-34. Cf. Young, *Handbook*, 183, quoting Apharat, *Demonstrations*, I 9.

56 *Ibid.*, 36, 49 citing Afrahat's Homily XXIII.

57 Bar Hebraeus [Abu'l Faradj], *Eccles. Chron.*, 3:170 as cited by George Mark Moraes, *A History of Christianity in India from Earliest Times to St. Francis Xavier, A.D. 52-1594* (Bombay: Manaktalas, 1964), 76 citing Mari, 69 [trans., 61].

58 Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, III, 381.

59 Socrates Scholasticus, *Hist. Eccles.*, 7:8.

60 William M. Langer, *An Encyclopedia of World History*, 4th ed., rev. & enl. (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1968), 138. Cf. Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia: Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics and Protestants* (London: George Allen & Unwin, Ltd., 1973), 21.

61 For the proceedings and canons of this synod of Seleucia of 410, see Chabot, *Notices et extraits*, 253-275.

62 *Ibid.*

63 For the 21 canons of the synod of 410, see *ibid.*, 263-272. The complete text of the 20 canons of Nicaea (A.D. 325) may be found in B.J. Kidd (ed.), *Documents Illustrative of the History of the Church* (London: SOCK, 1938), II, 16-21. See also S.L. Greenslade, *Schism in the Early Church* (New York: Harper & Brothers, [1952]), 63. For Chabot's French translation of the official Syriac version of the Nicene Creed, see *Notices et extraits*, 262-263.

64 *Ibid.*

65 See I. Ortiz de Urbina, "Storie e cause dello Scisma della Chiesa di Persia," *Orientalia Christiana Perjodica*, III (1937), 469.

66 For more details, see Chabot, *Notices et extraits*, 272-273. Cf. Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, I 380; III, 386. Cf. *Amri et Slibae. de Patri.; eccles.; commentaria* (Romae, 1897), 72-73, as cited by A. C. Moule, *Christians in China Before the Year 1550* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1930), 22.

67 Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, I 48-49.

68 The names of the prelates in attendance, as well as the names of their respective see, may be found in Chabot, *Notices et extraits*, 274-275.

69 Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 21-22.

70 For more details, see Chabot, *Notices et extraits*, 276-284.

71 Langer, *Encyclopedia of World History*, 138.

72 The Syriac *Passion of Abdas* exonerates the bishop and gives as the culprit a presbyter named Hasu, who reportedly confessed his crime before Yazdagird I. In Elisaeus Vartabed's *History of Armenia*, however, it is the bishop Saheg who is interrogated by imperial officials as to whether he has killed the fire in the Pyreum. See Stevenson, *Creed, Councils and Controversies*, 258.

73 Theodoret, *Hist. Eccles.*, 7:8.

74 Ibid. Cf. Socrates, *Hist. Eccles.*, 7:8.

75 Theodoret, *Hist. Eccles.*, 5:38.

76 Ibid.

77 *Chronique de Seert*, part 2, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, V, 382-383.

78 Labourt, *Le Christianisme*, 112.

79 Ibid., 115.

80 Ibid., 115-116.

81 See Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, I 393: III, 388.

82 Socrates, *Hist. Eccles.*, 7:20 Cf. R.N. Frye, "Persian Church," *New Catholic Encyclopedia* (1967 ed.), XI, 159.

83 Chabot, *Notices et extraits*, 296.

84 Ibid. Cf. Kidd, *Documents*, II, 198-199. Cf. also Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, III 388-389. Commenting on the decision of the Synod of Markabta, one modern scholar has observed that the decision was "the manifestation of the national desire of every National Church to be independent of the other Churches which in its eyes are also national. There was a great tendency all over the East for every to be autocephalous ... The Persian decree was to a large extent influenced by the desire to allay the distrust with which the Persian kings watched their Christians' intercourse with their fellow Christians of the Roman Empire and thereby to forestall any unpleasantness." See F. Dvornik, "National Churches and the Church Universal" (Westminster, 1943), 12. [Offprint from *The Eastern Churches Quarterly*, V. (1943)].

- 85 Fortescue, *The Lesser Eastern Churches*, 51.
- 86 Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, III, 17. See also Aubrey R. Vine, *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia from the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians* (London: Independent Press, 1937), 82. For an account of the martyrdom of six leading Armenian Christians, including one Bishop Bardisoy during this period, see Louise H. Gray, "Two Armenian Passions of Saints in the Sasanian (sic) Period," *Analecta Bollandiana* [Bruxelles], LVII (1949), 361-376.
- 87 Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, III, 17. Wigram, in his *History of the Assyrian Church*, 138, 158, speaks of 153,000 being martyred in Karka de Beit Selok. This, however, seems a bloated figure, though it could be appreciably higher than 12,000, which is elsewhere reported.
- 88 See [Paulus Peeters], "Saints Sirin, martyre sous Khosrau Ier Anosarvan," *Analecta Bollandiana*, LXIV (1946), 94, 98.
- 89 Duchesne, *Early History of the Christian Church*, III 389.
- 90 Kidd, *Documents*, II, 295-296, citing Elisaeus Vartabad (d. 840), *History of Armenia*, in V. Langlois, *Collection des Historiens de l'Arménie*, 190ff. Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, 349n.
- 91 Origen, *Contra Celsus*, as cited by Stevenson, *Creeds, Councils and Controversies*, 349n.
- 92 R.N. Frye (ed.), *The Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 4: *The Period from the Arab Invasion to the Saljuqs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1975), 563. Cf. Kidd, *Documents*, 296.
- 93 Vardapet Yeghisheh [Vartabed Elisha], *The Epic of St. Vardan the Brave. An Abridged Translation of the History of Vardan and of the War of the Armenians by the Vardapet Yeghsheh* (Elisha), tr. from the Armenian by C.F. Neumann (New York: Diocese of the Armenian Church in America, 1951), 34-35.
- 94 As cited by P. M. Sykes, *A History of Persia* (2 vols.; London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1915), I 528. See also *Chronique de Seert*, part 2, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, XIII, 540.
- 95 Next to Patriarch-Catholics Mar Aba, Karh Yazdin was the most influential man in Khusrau II's court, a contemporary Christian chronicler calling Yazdin the "prince of the [Christian] believers" and the "defender of the Church, like Constantine and Theodosius." See Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, I, 46; III, 23, citing *Chronique Anonyme*, tr. from Syriac by Duidi, *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, II/Syr. 2, [trans., 21].

96 Michel le Syrien, *Chronique de Michel le Syrien*, II, 372. See also Budge's notes, in Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors: The Historia Monastica of Thomas, Bishop of Marga, A.D. 840*, ed. by Sir Edward A. Wallis Budge (2 vols.; London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Turner and Co., 1893), I, 80n., citing Guidi, *Un nuovo testo siriano sulla storia degli ultimi Sassanidi (Tiré des Actes du 8e. Congrès Internationale des Orientalistes, tenu en 1889 E Stockholm et É Christiania)*, 10.

97 See Budge's notes to Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, II, 80-83. In the *Chronique de Seert*, [Scher ed.], part 2, in *Patrologia Orientalis*, XIII, 486-487, it is said, however, that Khusrau II built two churches for Meryem, and a large church in Seleucia-Ctesiphon as well as Chateau at the Turko-Persian Border for Shirin.

Moreover, in 1928-1929 a German archaeological party excavated two churches, one built on the top of the other on a hillock called Qasr bint al-qadi. The later building was probably the church of the Virgin Mary built by Khusrau II for Shirin. See also Monneret de Villard, *Le Chiese della Mesopotamia*, 1. Cf. also O. Reuther, *Die Ausgrabungen der deutschen Ktesiphon- expedition in Winter 1928-1929* (Berlin, n.d.).

98 As the 9th-century monastic historian Thomas of Marga puts it, "Khusrau died by the sword of the Christian children of the Church." See Budge's notes, in Thomas of Marga, *The Book of Governors*, II, 81, note 4: 89, 113, note 4.

99 Evidence for Yazdagird III's Christian affiliation is provided by a letter sent to him in 628 by Mar Iso-yahb, the Metropolitan of Arbela. See Assemani, *Bibliotheca Orientalis*, III-1, 141. Cf. Fiey, *Assyrie Chrétienne*, I, 60. See also *Corpus Scriptorum Christianorum Orientalium*, XLIII, 76.