

CHRISTIANITY IN THE FIRST 1000 YEARS:

**AN EASTERN FAITH IN ORIGINS
AND EXPANSION ACROSS ASIA**

by Steve Cochrane

PHILOS
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FOREWORD

Philos Primers are brief studies on key topics that go to the heart of our mission to promote positive Christian engagement in the Near East. This installment looks at the critical yet untold story of the first thousand years of Christianity.

Most of us know how the gospel spread from Jerusalem into Europe, but few know what took place in the other direction. In the pages that follow, missionary-scholar Steve Cochrane introduces us to some of the fascinating people, ideas, and institutions of Eastern Christianity in a brief but wide-ranging study that gives new perspective on Christian history and new respect for the Asian believers who preserved the faith under perilous conditions.

Near Eastern Christianity may have fallen on dangerous times, but Cochrane ends with a message of hope. “There are stirrings of renewal in the middle of great pain still in the Church in the region, recognizing its deep historical roots there and honoring the same longings that were once in such great abundance,” he writes. “It is perhaps easy to be pessimistic about the future, yet at the same time the faith that follows a Master who went to a cross and rose again is not a faith of the triumphant, but one that rises again from continual seeming deaths.”

INTRODUCTION: AN ALTERNATIVE STORY

The history of Christianity in the Middle East is an alternative story – one told not from the perspective of its origins and strong spread to the East throughout the first few centuries, but rather a story reduced to providing an account for its spread to the West. Yet this is a flawed history, not because it is completely wrong but because it is simply incomplete. In my own study of Church history, I began to see the strong bias to a westward story of the spread of the faith, disregarding or heavily minimizing the greater spread of the faith to the East by a Church that did not have the power of empire behind it. In a recent book by an Oxford professor on the Silk Roads in history, there is a quote by an anthropologist named Eric Wolf calling the usual story of the faith's spread to the West by the Church, "the accepted and flawed view of history." Wolf goes on to describe this view of history as one where, "Ancient Greece begat Rome, Rome begat Christian Europe, Christian Europe begat the Renaissance, the Renaissance the Enlightenment, the Enlightenment political democracy and the industrial revolution. Industry crossed with democracy in turn yielded the United States, embodying the rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." (Frankopan 2016).

This view of history is Western-centric and incomplete. It leaves out many of the stories of countless Christians who lived and died in the Middle East and Asia in the early centuries of the Church. As Sri Lankan Vinoth Ramachandra has written, "The Christian Church had its beginnings in Asia. In earliest history, its first centers were Asian. Asia produced the first known church build-

ing, the first New Testament translation, perhaps the first Christian king, the first Christian poets, and even arguably the first Christian state. Asian Christians endured the greatest persecutions. They mounted global ventures in missionary expansion the West could not match until after the thirteenth century. By then the Nestorian Church exercised ecclesiastical authority over more of the earth than either Rome or Constantinople. The full history of indigenous Christian communities which lived outside the centers of global power still waits to be written."

In Ramachandra's quotation above, he uses the word "Nestorian" for the Church in Asia that spread so extensively across Asia. Though still used today at times for a particular branch of the Church of the East, it is rarely used by those Middle Eastern Christians themselves. Using the name "Nestorian," after the Bishop of Constantinople Nestorius, is highly problematic. The theological roots of the Church extend before Nestorius to Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428) considered one of their most important Church Fathers. Indeed, the Church could easily be called 'Theodoran' rather than 'Nestorian.' During the Pontificate of John Paul II, in 1994, a Common Christological Document was agreed upon by representatives of the Catholic Church and the Church of the East signaling a new era of relations. The Churches of the East grew from Edessa with their Christological position consistent with the stance of Antioch, believing in both the divinity and humanity of Christ but attempting to articulate that mystery in their own linguistic and theological terms.

In an article by Sebastian Brock (1996), the issue of nom-

enclature is discussed. Brock calls for an end to using the term 'Nestorian' for the Church of the East, writing that it is a 'lamentable misnomer' and even 'pejorative.' Mar Aprem, the present Metropolitan of the Trichur, India-based Church of the East has also advocated for the usage of this name to end. He wrote this of the Church in 1967:

We believe in a Christ who is a perfect man and perfect God. How the union of these two natures has taken place is an open question. If we attempt to understand exactly how Godhead and manhood are united, in the one person of Jesus Christ, we reach the inevitable conclusion that the problem of Christology is insoluble.

The term 'Church of the East,' shortened from the present full title of 'Holy Apostolic Assyrian Church of the East' can also be used interchangeably with 'East Syrian Church,' a *Diaphysite* [dual nature of Christ] Church which brings out the theological, geographical, and linguistic differences with the 'West Syrian Church' – a *Miaphysite* [single nature] Church that uses the West Syriac dialect. West Syrians also had monasteries that were centers of learning and scholarship based primarily in the Tur Abdin region of Northern Mesopotamia. They were involved in outward activities of witness but not with the same scope across Asia of the East Syrians.

The theological diversity of the Churches of the Middle East continues to this day, of course. Yet right from these early centuries, as the Church also spread to the West in the Roman Empire, there was the labeling of this indigenous Christianity as "heretical." This would contribute to

a sidelining and an ignorance that only grew in later centuries.

In addition to theological differences, another reason for the Church of the East being relatively unknown is that they spread to the east in the second century from their initial centre of Edessa and were outside the borders of the Roman Empire. Deep animosity and occasional wars between the Romans and Persians helped establish a cultural and relational distance between the Churches of West and East with the Church of the East growing primarily within the Persian sphere.

Geographical ignorance has also been discussed by Andrew Walls, who focused in part in his writings on the need for more awareness of the history of the global Church. In his article, "Eusebius tries again: Re-conceiving the Study of Christian history" (2000), Walls writes of the need to learn and teach more of the history of the Churches of the East in the Middle East and Asia, including in curricula of modern seminaries and colleges. He writes, "If we place Edessa at the western end of the map, and pigeonhole the Roman Empire for a while, we can observe a remarkable alternative Christian story."

The alternative story of the Church's growth from the Middle East into Asia is important because it tells of a period when the Church lived in a context of restrictions on their practice of faith, similar to the Muslim-majority contexts in which many Christians live today. In this engaging in mission, the Church of the East's story has continued relevance to areas where Christians live as minorities seeking to survive in hostile contexts while still

desiring to be effective witnesses to their faith in Christ.

THE FIRST SEVEN HUNDRED YEARS

As Christianity began to spread from its Middle Eastern home through Edessa and to the East, monasticism was one of the primary ways it happened. While not drawing a strict border between inward and outward dimensions, the concept of monks withdrawing in ascetic practice to inaccessible islands, mountains, and deserts to worship God and battle demons has been a normative pattern in Christian history. Egyptian monasticism in the early fourth century became a popular model of monastic withdrawal from the world, due largely to the example of Saint Antony (d. 356) documented by Athanasius (d. 373) in his *Life of Antony* in 357 C.E. Yet at a similar period of time a Mesopotamian Syriac-speaking variety was also emerging. It is not certain if there were connections between the two, though E.A.W. Budge attributed to Mar Augin (d. 363) from Egypt the founding role for the Mesopotamian version. An important figure in Church of the East and Syriac studies, Sebastian Brock, disputes this and claims a more indigenous emergence separated from Egypt. Even though the origins and relations of both versions are unclear there did seem to be a difference in how they related to the world. As T. V. Philip surmises, "In Egyptian monasticism, the saints ignored the world and retreated to the desert in caves and cells. By contrast, Syrian ascetics became wandering missionaries, healing the sick, feeding the poor and preaching the gospel." Moffett writes of this early Syrian/ Mesopotamian monasticism saying, "The ascetic communities became the major dynamic for missions in Asia from the

third century on, continuing the work of the wandering missionaries of the first two centuries."

Murray (2004) calls Syrian Christianity 'authentically Semitic, a true native growth, the spontaneous response of hearts touched by grace, without any constraint of foreign forms.' It is also possible to connect the Middle East monasticism of Egypt, Syria, and Mesopotamia back to the New Testament world of John the Baptist and Jesus and the requirements of cross-bearing discipleship combined with the impetus of the Great Commission to the ends of the earth in Matthew 28:18-20. Ascetic communities that were emerging particularly eastwards from Antioch and Edessa in Syria and Mesopotamia in the first two centuries of the church provide glimpses of a developing 'proto-monasticism.'

Other influences on Syrian monasticism in these early centuries were coming from farther east. Buddhism with its emphasis on a missionary monasticism may have had some influence on early Christian versions. It may have come particularly through the Persian mystic Mani (d. 276) who possibly witnessed the Buddhist form on a trip to the Indian subcontinent in 240 or 241 C.E. Buddhist monasticism reached its peak in the period 606-647 C.E. in India with more than one thousand monasteries and perhaps as many as fifty thousand monks. Monasticism, having an outward dimension of witness and service, was never solely a Christian phenomenon. In fact, it is quite probable that the origins of monasticism lie in Buddhism in its Indian homelands. Many Buddhist monks and nuns traveled across the Indian subcontinent as well as into Central Asia and China, founding monasteries with an emphasis on study and witness.

Mani went on to found his own religion, Manichaeism, which developed its own missionary monasticism in Mesopotamia and Persia and was a direct rival for several centuries to East Syrian Christianity. It seems likely that Syrian missionary monasticism was shaped from both Western and Eastern directions while developing its own indigenous version. The East Syrian variety took advantage of its geographical position to receive a 'cross-pollination' from various directions.

Early church historian Sozomen (d. 450) wrote of the advance of Christianity into the east beyond Edessa, particularly focusing on the period 323-425. Sozomen brought together in his history the lives of Syrian missionary monks in these early centuries. A representative of the Syrian proto-monasticism that Sozomen describes was the Persian sage Aphrahat (d. 345 C.E.). Much of his work is not extant but among his surviving writings are twenty-three *Demonstrations* [a 'showing forth' or 'argument'] composed between 337 and 345. It includes *Demonstration 6* which deals with the centrality of Covenant [in Syriac the word *qyama*] and the Sons and Daughters of the Covenant [*bnay qyama* and *bnat qyama*]. In an extensive series of admonitions and expositions of Scripture passages Aphrahat provides a rule of life for those called to intentionally live together in faithfulness to God's call.

Two streams in Syrian monasticism from the beginning were coenobitic [living in community] and *anchoritic* [living separate but often near community]. Reading Aphrahat's sixth chapter indicates that both streams were included in his conception of monastic life. It also included the spiritual elite as well as the more common

believer.

Monastic community was encouraged by the dividing of 'the spirit of Christ' and it being poured out 'on all flesh,' quoting from the Old Testament prophecy of Joel repeated in Peter's sermon in the New Testament Book of Acts. A pouring out so it can be divided even more was not without an emphasis on suffering and even martyrdom. In *Demonstration 21*, Aphrahat extols the importance of the tradition of martyrdom from Jesus and the Apostles:

Great and excellent is the martyrdom of Jesus. He
surpassed in affliction and in confession all who
were before or after.

And after this, Apostles in turn had been martyrs.
And also concerning our brethren who are in the
West, in the days of Diocletian there came great
affliction and persecution to the whole Church of
God, which was in all their region. The churches
were overthrown and uprooted, and many con-
fessors and martyrs made confession. And the
Lord turned in mercy to them when they had
been persecuted.

The tradition of martyrdom about which Aphrahat wrote continued in the Churches of the East in the coming centuries representing not only the end of earthly life due to persecution but also the daily life of sacrifice. It involved both virginity and holiness, two qualities important to East Syrian monastic identity.

A key Syriac word that encompassed these two qualities

of virginity and holiness as well as both the *coenobitic* and *anchoritic* streams was *ihiduyuta*. This word had at least three converging meanings of singleness: singleness in a physical celibate sense, single-mindedness in devotion, and a special relationship to Christ in singleness as the Heavenly Bridegroom. Singleness in all three meanings characterized the wandering ascetics of the Syro-Mesopotamian world, called *Messalians* [those who pray] who also engaged in mission witness. With a similar theme as Aphrahat in his emphasis on the witness of a martyr Church, Robert Murray describes these monastic witnesses as 'deliberately homeless followers of the homeless Jesus on their ceaseless pilgrimage through the world.'

Also in the fourth century, an important Father of the Church from Edessa, Saint Ephrem (d. 373), whose writings would have a deep influence on many traditions including the Churches of the East until the present day, combined a commitment of devotion to Christ with rich poetic imagery contributing to a growing emphasis on monastic communities that mirrored heavenly realities. The richness of his imagery provided strength and nourishment for the Church to live in faithfulness to its call of both inward devotion and outward witness.

Theological foundations for the monastic mission of the Churches of the East can be seen not only in the work of Aphrahat but also in the sixth century Church leader Narsai (c. 520). Along with Saint Ephrem and Theodore of Mopsuestia (d. 428), Narsai provided some of the most important religious and intellectual roots for the school system of the East Syrians. The homilies also provided a wealth of Biblical exposition used in Nisibis and other

monasteries and schools of the Church. One of Narsai's homilies that described the calling of the Church to outward witness is his *Homily to Paul and Peter*. In this homily, one that also espouses the value of martyrdom, the emphasis on the Spirit's empowering is included in more than fifty-five references. Sunquist in his PhD thesis of 1990 writes, "Narsai's theology must be understood within the missiological framework of its original context. We might have expected this dimension to his theology judging from the rapid and extensive spread of the East Syrian Church, but little has been said about the theological foundation for the geographic spread."

In another homily of Narsai, *Metrical Homilies on the Nativity, Epiphany, and Ascension*, he writes:

Your [task] is this: to complete the mystery of preaching. And you shall be witnesses of the new way which I have opened up in my person. You I want to seal with your signature, the testament which I have written in blood for the sons of Adam. You I send as messengers to the four quarters [of the earth] to convert the Gentiles to kinship with the House of Abraham. By you as light, I will banish the darkness of error; and by your flames, I will enlighten the blind world. Go forth, give freely the freedom of life to mortality!

In this exposition of Acts 1 in the New Testament, Narsai imagines the commission of Christ to his disciples that describes elements of involvement in mission activities. Included are 'the mystery of preaching,' being 'witnesses of the new way which I have opened up in my person,' and being sent 'as messengers' to the whole earth. The

Church is called to be light by which darkness will be banished and as flame to 'enlighten the blind world.' Narsai has Christ's closing words to be 'Go forth' and they will 'give freely the freedom of life in mortality.'

Missionary dimensions in Narsai's theology included martyrdom for Christ, a special calling of Christians to be a witness to the world, the importance of the teacher in that calling, and the universal nature of that mission call to the whole earth. Of that universal calling, Narsai writes:

In the temple of Jesus' body, He willed to receive the worship of men; and in his visible [nature], to show the universe the power of his [hidden] nature. Mortality, filled with passions, I have sought to examine; because it has suddenly become a spring that pours forth life to the universe. He fulfilled the will of his Sender by [His] redemption of men; and accomplished [His] active work [or salvation] for the universe.

The above elements in Narsai of martyrdom in witness and the calling to universal mission are also seen in a letter of Isho-yahbh III (d. 658) who was Patriarch of the Church in the period of Islam's early growth stage:

The perfect life of the Christians is proved by two indications: by a holy life, and by Divine miracles which they can perform; and above all by this, that they match a faithful life with a faithful death.

They wondrously achieve these three things, because they first received the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism. But the Spirit

Himself is rightly and justly given by the priestly power for the Holy Church of God, conferred by the laying-on of hands and the Apostolic succession, which is imparted canonically in the Holy Church of Christ our Lord.

Isho-yahbh's exhortation to Christians is that a 'faithful life' is to be matched with 'a faithful death.' Believers can achieve this in part by receiving 'the power of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Baptism,' continuing a similar emphasis in Aphrahat and Narsai that included the calling of martyrdom with the giving of the Holy Spirit for service. In the Patriarch's letter, the 'perfect life' is proved by both inner and outward dimensions: the life of holiness and the performing of 'Divine miracles.'

In examining the foundation and theology of monastic mission in the Churches of the East, various models of response can be seen from monasticism to the surrounding cultures and faiths they encountered. A helpful list of five is given by a historian of Asian missions, Samuel Hugh Moffett. First is the *Hermit on his Holy Hill* with an emphasis on hostility to culture, personified by St. Simon Stylites who would sit on an elevated platform near Aleppo praying, preaching, or just being silent. Hundreds of these platforms existed in the region of Syria and Palestine but were much less common further east in Mesopotamia and Persia. An emphasis on withdrawing from society whether to a platform above the ground or to a lonely place was a common perception of the monasticism found in Egypt. It was also similar in perception to the harsher forms of Syrian monasticism particularly in its West Syrian version. It is not that it was unknown in East Syrian monasticism but less common.

A second model was the *Bishop in his Blessed City* with an emphasis on drawing people for witness and wisdom. Monasteries in this model were places of hospitality and while there the traveler or visitor received various forms of solace or advice. As Islam began to develop, Muslims began to be aware of and wrote about these monasteries around them.

Third was the model of the *Teacher in his School* with the school often within or next to the monastery. Though common to both West and East Syrian branches as well as the Copts in Egypt, this model would become particularly important to the latter and be combined with training for monastic activities in witness.

The fourth model was the *Patriarch in his Christian Ghetto*. The nature of being a *dhimmi* community within Islam created at times separation into their own worlds and realities. In the early Abbasid period, the influence of Patriarch Timothy I with the Muslim rulers would provide the Churches in the East with a realm of stability and peace though living under various restrictions.

Fifth was the model of the *Missionary to the Ends of the Earth*. As has been seen in the first seven centuries, the Churches of the Middle East were spreading across Asia, serious in their obedience to the missionary call.

A sixth model that Moffett does not mention, but which should be added and would have importance across the Indian Ocean to India and China in the first ten centuries of the Church spreading from the Middle East, was *The Merchant across Asia*.

THE ERA OF PATRIARCH TIMOTHY

One of the most important Christian leaders in history is also one of the most unknown. He ruled from Baghdad no fewer than one fourth of all the Christians in the world, and lived to the age of 95 until the early part of the ninth century. His name was Timothy 1, the Patriarch of the Church of the East. His life and commitment to mission, while living under the rule of the Muslim Abbasid Empire, provides a vital example of a Middle Eastern Christian faith virtually unknown today.

Fortunately, Timothy was a letter writer, communicating to the far-flung Christians across Asia. However, only fifty-nine of perhaps two hundred of Timothy's letters still exist. Several of them comment on monastic mission and Timothy's role in it. In one of his letters to his friend Sergius, who was Metropolitan of Elam, a province of Persia, the Patriarch gives specific appointments for specific places. Written near the end of his life, Timothy closes the letter showing the extent of the mission spread and ecclesial structure he was overseeing in the first two decades of the ninth century. The section begins with a more personal appeal to his friend:

Pray for me: my frame is weak, my hands are not very good at writing, and my eyes are feeble. Such things are indications and messengers of death.

Pray for me that I may not be condemned at our Lord's judgment.

The Patriarch then goes on to detail some of the appointments made in the East including for Turkestan, Tibet,

Persia and closer to home at Beit Abhe:

The Holy Spirit recently appointed a Metropolitan for Turkestan, and we are making preparations to anoint another for Beth Tuptaye (Tibet). We have sent another to Shiarzur and another for Radan, since Nestorius the metropolitan of Radan has died. We are also making preparations for another at Ray (Tehran region), since Theodorus has died; another for Gurgan, another for Balad-Cyriacus of Beth 'Abe; another for Dasen since Jacob has sunk into the pit from which there is no resurrection; another for Beth Nuhadra, which has no bishop.

Timothy's letter provides important evidence for the geographic spread of the Church in this period and the connection back to Baghdad including places like Turkestan in Central Asia, Tibet, and several locations in Mesopotamia and Persia. His wording is that 'The Holy Spirit' had 'appointed' a Metropolitan for Turkestan. Reflected here is a continued understanding of the role of the Spirit in Church of the East theology present in Narsai's homilies as well. The difference in wording in how both of the Metropolitans are being appointed is interesting also as one is appointed by the Holy Spirit and the other for Tibet is anointed by the Patriarch. The process for Timothy of ecclesial appointments was a combined one with Divine and human involvement together.

The example of Patriarch Timothy in his encouragement of monastic mission activities to the East is seen in his *Letter 13*, written in the last decade of the eighth century. It is a fascinating example of the Church in the Middle

East involved in mission to other parts of Asia. Timothy writes to his friend Sergius, the Metropolitan of Elam, about a problem with a newly appointed Metropolitan:

And when, after long efforts, they had persuaded me to go ahead with the ordination, I told him not to wait even for an hour in the Royal City, or in Basra or Huballat, but to set off at once to the place he was sent to. "I need expenses," he said. "Many monks," I told him, "cross the sea to India and China with nothing more than a staff and a begging-bag. Get it into your head that you are just as well-off as they are: you are setting out across the sea with ample resources!"

In this letter a rather humorous and biting side comes out as he addresses a Metropolitan for an area of Persia that 'can't keep a secret' of his own appointment. Perhaps in a semi-serious tone the Patriarch writes: 'If he can't keep a secret' then 'I would never lay hands on him to impart the Holy Spirit.' The new leader, Hanan-ishu, then gets his friends to pester Timothy who reluctantly agrees to ordain him but with the push to get going to his assignment. Again, the reluctant leader annoys the Patriarch with his request this time for his expenses which then provokes the rebuke: 'Many monks cross the sea to India and China with nothing more than a staff and a begging-bag. Get it into your head that you are just as well-off as they are: you are setting out across the sea with ample resources!'

While noting with caution that Timothy may have been employing a certain degree of overstatement about the 'many monks' with a lack of resources as a form of reb-

uke, several things can be noted from this reference. First, Timothy does describe the monks going to the east as 'many' implying that it was more than a few, with the Latin for this phrase *multi-monachi* or 'many monks.'

Secondly, Timothy also writes that these monks were crossing the sea rather than taking branches of the Silk Road. By this time of the late eighth and early ninth century the land routes had lessened in importance for trade and travel purposes in favor of the Indian Ocean both via the Red Sea as well as the Persian Gulf. The battle at the Talas River in 751 just a year after the Abbassids had come to power had limited routes to the East from Mesopotamia and Persia. The sea route had already been growing in importance in the lead-up to the early Abbasid period. By the first few decades of the ninth century there were fresh links developing in trade between the Abbasid Empire of Mesopotamia/Persia and China via India. Timothy also specifically attests in this letter that these monks were moving east to India and China, areas that were ecclesiastically part of the Church of the East and under his jurisdiction. The reference does not refer to their activities in these places but that they were clearly monks may imply similar involvement in mission activities consistent with other monks being sent out from monasteries like Beit Abhe.

Lastly, he comments that these monks were going out with 'nothing more than a staff and begging-bag.' The phrase is vague and the general context for it is not given in the letter but Timothy may be employing this kind of wording in a rebuke not only to Hanan-ishu personally but also to the *Messalians* [those who pray], a group that he had condemned in the Synod of 790 C.E. as heretics.

Their simplicity of faith and practice was attractive to many Christians but they refused to give allegiance to the Baghdad ecclesial structures. Timothy reserved some of his sharpest comments for this group and his affirming of these monks going to the east in his letter may have countered some of the *Messalian* model that others were trying to emulate. By that affirmation the Patriarch is emphasizing that monks under his leadership were truly going out in simplicity of witness but not affiliated with a heretical group.

Timothy's ability to lead his far-reaching Church and give encouragement to monastic mission activities while managing relationships with five different Caliphs must have demanded not a small degree of subtlety and shrewdness. Yet this was true of many Church leaders throughout the first ten centuries in the Middle East and Asia, having to live under non-Christian rulers especially after the seventh century when Islam began. Skills of negotiation and persistence, combined with subtlety that helped him attain his leadership role, would be well-honed in the years ahead as Patriarch dealing with different Caliphs.

Overseeing an ecclesial organization that stretched across Asia at the dawn of the ninth century was an aging Patriarch, and he wrote to his friend Sergius about the year 800 C.E. that now the 'Holy, Holy, Holy of the Eucharist liturgy was being sung in different languages by Persians, Turks, Indians, Tibetans and Chinese.' The Patriarch was Timothy I, the leader of the Church of the East that stretched from his homeland of Mesopotamia in the Middle East all the way to India and China.

There is no obvious indication in Timothy's letters that the monastic mission activities of the Church were in any way limited or pressured by the situation of being in a Muslim-ruled region. It does not mean that he did not feel that pressure, but that it may have not been prudent to allude to it. Instead, Timothy links the mission of the Church to the call of Christ to 'send out labourers for His harvest.' Monastic mission of the East Syrian Church as led by Timothy was consistent with its theology and history and not dependent on the context in which it lived as a *dhimmi* community. This is not to say that it wasn't affected by that context and the limitations imposed, as well as the growing challenges to its continued survival, but that it continued mission to the East as well as in Mesopotamia regardless.

Up to his death in 823 C.E., Timothy would navigate the difficult tensions of leading a *dhimmi* people under the Muslim Abbasids while encouraging their mission calling. The calling was not only to other parts of Asia but also to the Muslims around them, albeit in a highly restrictive environment for that witness. The difficulty of that calling continues today for the Churches of the Middle East.

CONCLUSION: THE CHURCH IN ASIA AT 1000 C.E.

In 1000 C.E., less than two centuries after Timothy's death, there were still 250 Church of the East Bishops in Asia, overseen within 20 Metropolitan sees, with perhaps 12 million Christians. (These numbers are cited by Moffett in his work of 1998 quoting an estimate in the World Christian Encyclopedia. The authors, David Barrett and Todd Johnson, give the 12 million Christians number out

of perhaps 50 million Christians worldwide, and an overall global population of 270 million. Also in 1000 there were 68 cities with churches in the Persian Empire, but this would fall to 24 by 1238, and after the Uzbek conqueror Timur's rampages by 1380 there would be only 7 cities left with churches.)

These numbers in 1000 must be balanced by the fact of there being no known believers in China at the time, and the steadily constricting pressures in West Asia resulting in continued conversions to Islam. It was a long and slow process, as indeed into the 14th century large pockets of Asian Christians continued to exist. Moffett makes the valid point that due to the sympathetic nature of the Mongols to the Christian faith in the 13th century, it was possible that there could have been in Asia a "continental embracing of the Christian faith" in the period from 1251-1295. These hopes were largely based around the person of Kublai Khan, but when he died in 1294 without converting and when, in 1298 the Persian Mongol ruler Ilkhan Ghazan converted to Islam, there was never again such a possibility. Indeed a century of devastation was to follow for the Church in Asia. According to Assemani, at the end of the 13th century there were 200 Bishops and 27 Metropolitans, but he does not give an estimate on numbers overall of Christians in Asia.

In the almost thirteen centuries since Patriarch Timothy died in 823, with the Church of the East at its largest geographic spread with perhaps its greatest number of churches and monasteries in existence, to the present days where the Church in the Middle East has only a handful of monasteries left, it has been an extremely long decline and twilight. Yet there are stirrings of ren-

ewal in the middle of great pain still in the Church in the region, recognizing its deep historical roots there and honoring the same longings that were once in such great abundance. It is perhaps easy to be pessimistic about the future, yet at the same time the faith that follows a Master who went to a cross and rose again is not a faith of the triumphant, but one that rises again from continual seeming deaths.

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