

## **TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 17**

### **Aba and the Church In Persia**

In the sixth century, according to the report of a Nestorian traveler, Christianity was successfully preached to the Bactrians, the Huns, the Persians, the Indians, the Persarmenians, the Medes, and the Elamites: the barbaric churches, from the Gulf of Persia to the Caspian Sea, were almost infinite... The zeal of the Nestorians overleaped the limit which had confined the ambition and curiosity both of the Greeks and Persians. The missionaries of Balch and Samarcand pursued without fear the footsteps of the roving Tartar.... In their progress by sea and land the Nestorians entered China by the port of Canton.<sup>1</sup>

PROMINENT among the dauntless leaders who spread the faith from the Tigris eastward is Aba (c. A.D. 500-575). He is identified with that great church which has been called the Waldenses of the East. For centuries the followers of Jesus in Asia generally were called Messiahans, or Messiah people. Many renowned Messiahans who withstood the fierce opposition of the Persian state religion, or Mithraism, carded primitive Christianity to India, central Asia, China, and Japan. Outstanding among them was Aba. If the victory of Christianity over Mithraism in the Roman Empire was a European triumph, the victory of the Church in the Wilderness over this counterfeit in Persia was still more outstanding. Mithraism was proud not only of her sway in Persia, but also of having adapted Zoroastrianism to the western world; thus having paved the way for this form of sun worship to become a universal religion in the Roman world.<sup>2</sup>

The two centuries and a half which spanned the time between Papas (A.D. 285), the first catholicos, or supreme head over the Church of the East, to Catholicos Aba (A.D. 538), were alternating years of peace and persecution. One must recall that the supreme head of the Church of the East was called "catholicos" and his incumbency, a "catholicate." A former chapter related how in this same year the Papacy was securely seated in the city of Rome. During the intervening decades there were many bright luminaries over the Assyrian Church to guide the faithful. Some of these sealed their witnessing with their blood. Persia at war with Rome naturally spelled persecution. The Persian commanders in chief did not distinguish between the papal Christianity of the Roman Empire and the Church of the Messiah. All Christians were alike to them whether the believers were of Persia or of Rome. The Iranian lords feared collusion between Persian evangelicals and Rome, and also suspected the existence of spies. Moreover, Mithraism sought to secure any occasion to attack the simple but ever-expanding Church in the Wilderness.

The sun was sacred to Mithraism, Persecutions fell upon the believers who lived and worked in the presence of the sun worshipers, and the Christians dared not say that the sun was not a living being. Mithraists imitated Bible ceremonies.<sup>3</sup> The Church of Rome which, according to some authorities, had imbibed much of the lure and philosophy of Mithraism, was very near to it in spirit.<sup>4</sup> The Christians in Persia refused the sublimated idolatry of the Iranians and suffered because they did so.

The first persecution of magnitude after the union of all districts of the Church of the East under Papas was launched by the Persian king, Shapur II. It began during the catholicate of Shimun (Simeon) and continued through forty years (A.D. 335-375). King Shapur was ambitious to recover all the territories ruled over by King Xerxes of the early Persian Empire. He launched his attack as soon as he deemed the

time favorable. But church members refused to serve in the army, and the exasperation of the king knew no bounds. He was enraged not only at the defeat of his campaign, but also because the courageous defenders in the great fortress of Nisibis had withstood his attacks and had been kept alive by James, the resident bishop appointed by the church at Rome. On his return to Seleucia, the capital, the king determined to exact retribution from the Persian Christians.

The mobeds, the priests of Magianism, were at hand to arouse the wrath of the king. The first firman of persecution laid a double tax upon the Messiahans to defray the expenses of the war. Shimun, the catholicos, was ordered to collect it. He refused on the grounds of religious scruples and because of the poverty of his people. Though Shimun was a personal friend of the king, nothing now was to stand in the way of teaching the Christians a lesson. The destruction of church buildings throughout the empire was commanded, and the catholicos was arrested. He was offered freedom for himself and his people if he would adore the sun but once. Upon his refusal, he, with five associates over districts and one hundred other clergy, was put to death.

Forty years of trial by fire now descended upon the children of God. Provincial governors had the power to condemn or acquit. In the case of a kind and just governor, the church fared well; but such was not usually the situation. The popular complaints sufficient to keep alive resentment against the Christians would run something like this: "They despise our sun-god. Did not Zoroaster, the sainted founder of our divine beliefs, institute Sunday one thousand years ago in honor of the sun and supplant the Sabbath of the Old Testament which the Jews in our land then sanctified? Yet these Christians have divine services on Saturday. They desecrate the sacred earth by burying their dead in it and pollute the water by their ablutions. They refuse to go to war for the shah-in-shah; and they preach that snakes, scorpions, and creeping things were created by a good God."

The intention of Shapur II to deal effectively with the followers of the New Testament did not stop with the death of Shimun. The next catholicos, elected as his successor, followed him to a martyr's grave. And when another head of the church was chosen and was also put to death, the office remained vacant for twenty years. Naturally the main objects of the attack were the clergy, but the bitterest feelings were displayed against converts from Magianism. While it was true that the Church in the East did not have monasteries in the sense of the celibate life which had spread over Egypt and Europe, nevertheless there were those who believed that they could work more effectively by remaining single. Those who have lived for many generations in nations of liberty and light can little appreciate the desperate opposition which the heralds of the cross met in different lands throughout the early centuries. In the East, Christianity encountered Buddhism, a religion carried on largely by monks and nuns. To cope with such powerful antagonists as Buddhism and Zoroastrianism, there were those who naturally felt that they could do it more effectively by not marrying.

Advocacy of an unmarried clergy never had the ascendancy in the Church of the East. Such houses of celibate life would not have been able to endure in Persia. The persecution was bitter enough against the eastern theological training centers, and it was furious against unmarried clergy. The Mithraic faith was strong in advocating marriage and the presenting of children to the state who could serve in the army and be of other service.

After the death of Shapur II there was a lull for a time in the sufferings of the church. Finally, the believers gathered up strength to elect another head. Then the catholicos and leading clergy took advantage of the time of peace to reorganize the church. There was now a greater demand for

stronger organization, for persecution had fired the zeal of the believers. Many of the oppressed had fled eastward to other lands, there to found new churches. It was not long, however, until in the subsequent reigns of Yazdegerd I, Bahram V, and Yazdegerd II, waves of death and destruction swept over the Persian believers. These were not as long as under Shapur II, but they were much more severe. The facts concerning the outbreak of persecution under Yazdegerd I, the first of these kings, are given by DeLacy O'Leary.

The Persian bishop of Susa, who was given to impetuosity, destroyed one of the fire temples of the Zoroastrians. Complaint being made to the king, the bishop was ordered to restore the building and to make good all damage that had been done. When the bishop refused, Yazdegerd I threatened to destroy every church in his dominion. Such orders were issued and were carried out eagerly by the Zoroastrians inflamed with jealousy against the believers. Before long the destruction of the churches developed into a general persecution. Yazdegerd I died in 420, and his son, Bahram V, increased the afflictions of the church.<sup>5</sup>

Clergy and laity alike were subjected to the most horrible tortures. Their feet were bored with sharp irons, and some experienced what is called the "nine deaths," where bit by bit their bodies were cut to pieces. It was quite common under the different monarchs to confiscate the wealth of the well to do and to pillage their homes.

Had there been no state Christianity in the Roman Empire, probably in Persia there would not have been persecutions of Christianity. Zeno, the Roman emperor, closed the Assyrian church college at Edessa because it did not agree with the theological views then prevailing in the state religion. A powerful leader in the Church of the East moved the school to Nisibis, a strong fortress city in which the college developed into one of the intellectual centers of the world.

The phenomenal work and influence of the new college at Nisibis, opened by Barsumas, reached to Oxford, Cambridge, and Paris. Thus W. A. Wigram writes:

When we remember how much of the culture of medieval Europe was to come to her through the Saracens, and that the 'Nestorians' were the teachers of the Saracens, one is set asking whether Oxford, Cambridge, and Paris do not owe an unsuspected debt to Bar-soma, though the road from Nisibis to those centers may run through Bagdad and Salamanca.<sup>6</sup>

Persia later became tolerant of Christianity; liberty was increased there while it was vanishing in Europe. If Mohammedanism had not conquered Persia, the Christians would probably have gained complete religious liberty.

### **Persian Christians Escape Theology of Rome**

The Christianity of Persia existed not only as a challenge to Mithraism, but it also differed widely from the ruling church in the Roman Empire. The forty years of persecution by Shapur II made impossible any contact between the believers in the two dominions. The revolutionary events which centered in the Council of Nicaea and in the angry controversies which followed that gathering were unknown to the churches beyond the Euphrates. They had no part in the fierce disputes concerning the Godhead. They had grown in strength and had performed miracles in spreading the gospel eastward before the contest arose over Nestorius. Nestorianism, according to Samuel Edgar, is a dispute about words.<sup>7</sup> It is a misnomer to call the Church of the East, Nestorian. Even to this day communions so labeled resent

the name.<sup>8</sup> The Church of the East in India also was free from the controversies of imperial Christianity. This fact reveals the separation between the Church of India and the Western hierarchy.

To note some points of difference between the Church of the East and the Papacy, it may be observed that the first rejected the use of images, and interposed no mediator like the Virgin Mary between God and man. The Church of the East also dispensed with candles, incense, relics, and many other usages of imperial Christianity. They had a different Bible than that of Rome; for their Bible they used the Peshitta, evidently the work of the school of Lucian.<sup>9</sup> Assyrian Christians (the name often given to the Church of the East) rejected the supremacy of the bishop of Rome. At this time Seleucia, the church headquarters, was full of Jews,<sup>10</sup> and many Christians throughout the East were of Jewish blood.

Of the Persian Christians, W. F. Adeney writes:

They have no doctrine of transubstantiation, no purgatory; they do not sanction Mariolatry or image worship; nor will they even allow icons to be exhibited in their churches. Men and women take the communion in both kinds. All five orders of clergy below the bishops are permitted to marry.<sup>11</sup>

### **Missionary Expansion from Papas to Aba**

"In the early Christian centuries there was a system of roads and posts between the cities of central Asian plains (as lately shown by the recovery of documents in some of the unearthed cities), and there was no pass unknown to the Chinese pilgrims - not only the direct routes but all the ways which linked up the Buddhist centers."<sup>12</sup>

"When the Persian King, Kawad (A.D. 498), because of rebellions in his kingdom, twice took refuge with the Huns and Turks, he found Christians there who helped him to reconquer his land."<sup>13</sup> When he had regained his throne, he killed some Mithraists, incarcerated others, but was benevolent toward the Christians because a company of them rendered service to him on his way to the king of the Turks.<sup>14</sup> About this same time the Assyrian Christians were credited with having taught the Turks the art of writing in their own language. In commenting upon their expansion eastward, Wigram indicates their influence over Tibet: "The seventh century was the period of missions to China; and the strangely Christian-like ceremonial of modern lamas was quite possibly borrowed from Assyrian sources."<sup>15</sup>

The scholar, Alexander von Humboldt, reveals how thorough were the education and organization in the Church of the East before Aba. He also shows how this same church taught arts and sciences to the Arabs:

It was ordained in the wonderful decrees by which the course of events is regulated, that the Christian sects of Nestorians, which exercised a very marked influence on the geographical diffusion of knowledge, should prove of use to the Arabs even before they advanced to the erudite and contentious city of Alexandria, and that, protected by the armed followers of the creed of Islam, these Nestorian doctrines of Christianity were enabled to penetrate far into Eastern Asia. The Arabs were first made acquainted with Greek literature through the Syrians, a kindred Semitic race, who had themselves acquired a knowledge of it only about a hundred and fifty years earlier through the heretical Nestorians. Physicians, who had been educated in the scholastic establishments of the Greeks, and the celebrated school of medicine founded by the Nestorian Christians at Edessa in Mesopotamia, were settled at Mecca as early as Mohammed's time, and there lived on a footing of friendly intercourse with the Prophet and Abu-Bekr.<sup>16</sup>

In 549 the White Huns, inhabiting the regions of Bactria, and the Huns on both the north and south banks of the Oxus River, sent a request to Persia to Catholicos Aba that he would ordain for them a director. The Persian king was astonished to see these representatives of the thousands of Christians in that distant land coming to him; and being amazed at the power of Jesus, he concurred. The spiritual director was ordained, and he returned with the mission.<sup>17</sup> A. Mingana gives a list of twenty-one towns and provinces west of the Oxus River which had spiritual leaders ordained to rule the churches in them and mentions especially those leaders of the fifth and sixth centuries. He also maintains that the majority of the two powerful divisions of the eastern Turks, the Uigurs and the Keraites, were Christians, and that the gospel of Christ had penetrated into the mighty confederacy of Naimans comprised of nine powerful clans.<sup>18</sup> These missionaries had also converted a fourth conglomeration of tribes of Turkish stock with an infusion of Mongolian blood, called the Merkits.<sup>19</sup> All these vigorous peoples lived far away to the northeast in Asia. As to supplementary records of this expansion, Mrs. E. A. Gordon says: "Dr. Aurel Stein recently discovered in the loess in Chinese Turkestan, thousands of rolls of precious MSS."<sup>20</sup>

Claudius Buchanan, who has left a thrilling account of his own experiences and life in India about 1812, declares that he saw in that land a Syrian version of the Bible which according to popular belief would date probably as far back as 325, the year of the Council of Nicaea.<sup>21</sup> There is no doubt that the fierce forty-year persecution of King Shapur II of Persia hurried many Christians away into India. One supreme head of the church wrote that the book of Romans was translated into Syrian (c. A.D. 425) with the help of pastor Daniel from India.<sup>22</sup> The Syrians in the fifth century in India as elsewhere were well trained not only in church services, but also in learning, and India was under the catholicos of Seleucia. Marco Polo, the famous Venetian traveler, speaks of the large island of Socotra in the Arabian Sea near the Gulf of Aden, possessing many baptized Christians who had nothing to do with the pope at Rome, but were subject to the catholicos at Bagdad. Some writers find a connection between that island's Christianity and the Abyssinian Church.<sup>23</sup> Of this widespread missionary endeavor, P. Y. Saeki writes: "The famous Bar Somas, bishop of Nisibis from 435 to 489 A.D., did much to spread Nestorian teaching in the East - in central Asia, and then in China."<sup>24</sup>

Mingana reveals the civilizing influences of these missions: "We need not dwell here on the well-known fact that the Syriac characters as used by the Nestorians gave rise to many central Asian and Far Eastern alphabets such as the Mongolian, the Manchu, and the Soghdian."<sup>25</sup>

These facts reveal that the missionaries of the church in Asia were the makers of alphabets as well as the creators of a Far Eastern literature. In fact, there still exists a voluminous Syrian Church literature which, with research, yields thrilling facts of the past.

All directors of ecclesiastical districts were expected to report to headquarters annually. Those from distant Oriental lands were required to report to the catholicos not less than once in six years. It must have been an astonishing sight to the Persian king to see the representatives from so many different countries arriving at Seleucia upon official missions.

There are in the writings of Cosmas, the traveled geographer of about 530, some thrilling descriptions of Assyrian churches in lands eastward from Persia. Cosmas was of the same church and of the same land as were Papas and Aba. He lived at the same time as Aba and was a personal friend of the catholicos. His explorations being in many Asian lands, he has been called "Indicopluestes," or India traveler, because of his voyages in the Indian Seas early in the sixth century. He believed that the earth

was shaped like Moses' Tabernacle, and he engaged in research far and wide in studying his thesis. His book, entitled *Topographia Christiana (Christian Topography)*, contains an omnibus collection of remarkable facts, many of which are of real value. From it can be learned how widely extended were the worshipers in the Church of the East.

In the sixth century, according to the report of a Nestorian traveler, Christianity was successfully preached to the Bactrians, the Huns, the Persians, the Indians, the Persarmenians, the Medes, and the Elamites. The barbaric churches, from the Gulf of Persia to the Caspian Sea, were almost infinite; and their recent faith was conspicuous in the number and sanctity of their monks and martyrs. The pepper coast of Malabar and the isles of the ocean, Socotra and Ceylon, were peopled with an increasing multitude of Christians; and the bishops and clergy of those sequestered regions derived their ordination from the catholicos of Babylon.<sup>26</sup>

### **Aba Comes to the Catholicate**

Aba came to the catholicate after years of confusion caused by the quarrels and laxness due to rival claimants for the position. He was a convert from Zoroastrianism. While still a worshiper of the sun, his learning and ability had advanced him until he was a teacher of the Magi. After his conversion he studied for a while in the celebrated college of the Assyrian Church at Nisibis. Later he took a voyage farther west to observe the state of Christianity in Syria and at Constantinople. Upon his return he was called to be a teacher in the Christian college at Nisibis. For further incidents of his life the following excerpts from the splendid work of W. A. Wigram are given:

The work of organization and reform had not been accomplished too soon; for not many weeks can have elapsed after the patriarch's return from his tour when his persecution at the hands of the Magi began - a trial that was to continue until his death.<sup>27</sup>

Naturally it was not long before an "apostate" so conspicuous as the patriarch was attacked; he being accused to the king by the mobed mobedan in person, and charged with despising the national "din," and with proselytizing...

The patriarch was arrested, and tumultuously accused as an apostate and a proselytizer, both of which charges he fully admitted, and was threatened with death.<sup>28</sup>

Aba was given no opportunity of defending himself, but was declared guilty and worthy of death. On this he appealed to the king, who had by this time (for the proceedings took time) returned from the war to Seleucia.

Chosroes heard the case, the mobeds demanding the death of the enemy of 'the religion,' and called on the patriarch for his answer. 'I am a Christian,' he said; 'I preach my own faith, and I want every man to join it; but of his own free will, and not of compulsion. I use force on no man; but I warn those who are Christians to keep the laws of their religion.' 'And if you would but hear him, sire, you would join us, and we would welcome you,' cried a voice from the crowd. It was one Abrudaq, a Christian in the king's service, and the words, of course, infuriated the mobeds, who demanded the death of the blasphemer.<sup>29</sup>

Still a false accuser was found and produced in court - where he broke down utterly and ignominiously, confessing himself that all his accusations were false. Such an end to such a charge against a man who

had done Aba's reforming work is as high a testimony to the character of that work as could well be given.<sup>30</sup>

Shortly afterwards Chosroes met Aba in the street (the patriarch was apparently allowed a measure of personal liberty), and to the horror and rage of the Magi returned his salute with marked friendliness, and summoned him to an audience. Here he told him frankly that, as a renegade, he was legally liable to death.... "But you shall go free and continue to act as catholicos if you will stop receiving converts, admit those married by Magian law to communion, and allow your people to eat Magian sacrifices." Obviously the mobeds had been influencing the king; but the royal offer sheds an instructive light on the rapid growth of the Church, and on the position of the patriarch as recognized head of his melet. To the terms, however, Aba could only return his steadfast non possumus, and the king, annoyed at the attitude, ordered him to prison under the care of the Magi. This was equivalent to a sentence of death, though it was probably not so intended; for when he was in prison it would be easy to dispatch him by the hand of some underling, and represent that an act of possibly mistimed zeal towards a notorious apostate ought not to be judged severely.<sup>31</sup>

Amid the passionate grief of all Christians he departed, and reached the appointed province; but the local rad, Dardin (a man selected for his notoriously hard character), soon showed such respect and regard for the patriarch that he was removed thence, and sent to 'Sirsh,' the very center and stronghold of Magianism.... Here his confinement was purposely made very severe at first, in the undisguised hope that his death would be caused by it; and the hard winters of the high Persian plateau must have been a further trial to one bred in the land of Radan, which is practically the Babylonian plain. Later, however (perhaps in response to a hint from the court), he was allowed to live in a house of his own, where he furnished a room as a church, and his friends were allowed to visit him. Here for seven years he continued in a captivity which may without irreverence be compared to that of St. Paul; and acted as patriarch from his prison in the Magian stronghold. He consecrated bishops, reconciled penitents, governed by interviews and correspondence. Men came in numbers to see him, and 'the mountains of Azerbaijan were worn by the feet of saints' who came either on Church business, or on what tended to become a pilgrimage to a living saint.<sup>32</sup>

Finally his persecutors, disappointed no doubt at the failure of their double plan, to deprive him of his power or to compass his death, determined to be done with him forever. An assassin was hired, one Peter of Gurgan, an apostate Christian priest; and a plot formed for the murder of Aba, who, it was to be explained, had been cut down in attempting to make his escape. The plot failed, and was discovered, and the wretched instrument fled. Aba, however, recognized that the attempt would be repeated, perhaps with better fortune, and took a bold resolution. He left his place of exile with one or two companions, but went, not to any place of concealment, but straight to Seleucia and the king, before whose astonished gaze he presented himself. The Magians, were of course, delighted, thinking that their enemy was at last delivered into their hands. The patriarch was, of course, arrested; and the amazed Chosroes asked what he expected, after thus flying in the face of the royal command. Fearlessly Mar Aba replied that he was the king's servant, ready to die if that was his will; but though willing to be executed at the king's order, he was not willing to be murdered contrary to his order. Let the king of kings do justice! No appeal so goes home to an oriental as a cry 'to the justice of the king.'...

Now he heard the stream of accusations that the Magians poured out, and then addressed the patriarch. 'You stand charged with apostasy, with proselytizing, with forcing your melet to abstain from

marriages that the state accepts, with acting as patriarch in exile against the king's order, and with breaking prison - and you admit the offenses. All the offenses against the state I pardon freely; as a renegade from Magianism, however, you must answer that charge before the mobeds. Now, as you have come of your own accord to the king's justice, go freely to your house, and come to answer the accusation when called upon.' The decision shows at once the strength and weakness of the king: he could pardon offenses against himself, and he could respect a noble character; but he dared not defy the Magian hierarchy....

Still fear of the mobeds prevailed with the king, and he allowed them to arrest the patriarch and convey him to prison secretly, for fear of riot; though it must be owned that he gave strict orders that he was on no account to be killed. For months Aba remained in prison and in chains; though, as is usual in Oriental prisons, his friends were allowed to visit him (probably by grace of the great power Bakhshish), and he was allowed even to consecrate bishops while in confinement. Still a captive, he was obliged to accompany the king on the whole of his 'summer progress;' though at every halting place Christians crowded to see him and receive his blessing, and to petition the king for his release. Even mobeds respected him, and promised to intercede for his pardon if he would but promise to make no more converts.

Finally, soon after the royal return to Seleucia, his patient constancy was victorious. Chosroes sent for him, and released him, absolutely and unconditionally. It is true that when the king left the city, soon after, the mobeds pounced on their prey, and the patriarch found himself in prison once more; but though Chosroes might hesitate long, he was not the tool the mobeds imagined him to be, and this open contempt of the royal decree roused him. A sharply worded order for the instant release of the prisoner came back, and Mar Aba, worn in body and broken in health, but yet victorious, came out once more, and finally, from his prison. Nine years of persecution and danger had been his portion, but he had endured to the end, and he was saved.<sup>33</sup>

Shortly after this Aba passed away. He is presented as a type of those patriarchs who ruled the Church of the East during the eventful days when the religion of Mithra dominated the throne of Persia. Aba was called to his heavy task in an hour when the cause needed the hand of a strong leader.

### **From Aba to the Moslem Conquest**

The individual history of the successors of Aba in the two centuries which elapsed between his catholicate and the overthrow of the Zoroastrian government by the Mohammedans are full of interest. The people who followed the Bible lived on. The hills of Persia and the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates re-echoed their songs of praise. They reaped their harvests and paid their tithes.<sup>34</sup> Not burdened with the superfluity of observances which obtained with the hierarchy of the West, they concentrated their attention on the words of Holy Writ. They repaired to their churches on the Sabbath day for the worship of God.<sup>35</sup> In their foreign missionary societies the youth of the faith offered themselves as ready to go to Turkestan, Scythia, Mongolia, Tibet, Manchuria, China, or wherever God would call. These people with their simplicity of faith and worship and deep reverence for the Scriptures; with their opposition to images, icons, the confessional, purgatory, and the adoration of the host, were the Protestants of Asia.<sup>36</sup> Reformers before the Reformation, they sent gifts and messages of truth and light to the submerged believers of Europe, who during the Dark Ages were praying and dying for the triumph of Bible Christianity. Concerning their missions to central Asia,

India, China, and Japan during the supremacy of the Moslems, the recitation of these eventful hours is reserved for following chapters.

Jacob, the organizer of another eastern church protesting against the innovations of Rome, was called to be the leader of the Jacobites the same year that Aba was made catholicos of the Assyrian Christians.<sup>37</sup>

The Jacobites constitute a large sector of the dissenting Eastern millions who recoiled from Rome's speculative analysis of the divine nature. Because of the doctrines passed on by the Council of Chalcedon (A.D. 451), the Ethiopian Church, the Coptic Church of Egypt, the Jacobite Church of Syria, and the Church of Armenia broke off all connection with Rome. It is remarkable how these bodies through the centuries were kept free of the accumulating beliefs and practices of Rome which later were rejected by the Reformation. It is true that in spite of the comparative purity of the apostolic faith which they maintained during the supremacy of the Papacy, they gave way at times to some papal or heathen practice.

Sir E. A. Wallace Budge, in commenting on the controversy over the two natures of Christ, writes: "It is very difficult to find out exactly what Nestorius thought and said about them, because we have only the statement of his enemies to judge by."<sup>38</sup> The interference of the state in religion had put things on a tension among the Jacobites. Great masses of believers were bitter over the situation into which state-dictated religion had forced them. They were ready for a leader when Jacob Baradaï appeared, and he imparted to them an enthusiastic organization which has persisted to this day. The cause of the Jacobites, and even that of dissenters in other lands, was made strong by the hands of Jacob Baradaï.

Edward Gibbon, showing the preference of the Eastern Church for Turkish rule rather than papal rule even under dire conditions, wrote: "After a period of thirteen hundred and sixty years...the hostile communions still maintain the faith and discipline of their founders. In the most abject state of ignorance, poverty, and servitude, the Nestorians and Monophysites [another name for the Jacobites] reject the spiritual supremacy of Rome, and cherish the toleration of their Turkish masters."<sup>39</sup>

While it would be incorrect to say that the Jacobites and the Church of the east agreed in doctrines, organization, and practices, nevertheless their differences fundamentally were not great. The Church of the East, growing up in an entirely Oriental environment, never was under Rome. The Monophysites, in all their branches - Abyssinians, Copts of Egypt, Jacobites, and Armenians - though citizens of the empire until their break with Rome, early refused to go along with the religion of the Caesars. The believers located in the valleys of the Tigris and Euphrates escaped many of the beliefs and practices which the Papacy later adopted.<sup>40</sup> When, from about 650, both bodies passed more or less under Mohammedan rulers, their afflictions were less severe than those experienced by evangelicals in the Gothic ten kingdoms of western Europe when brought under papal rule. Assyrian Christians and Jacobites suffered comparatively little at the hands of the Moslems, but later much more so at the hands of the Jesuits. These later afflictions had a tendency to draw them together. As an illustration, witness the Assyrian Christians of India, when the devastating persecutions of the Jesuits had laid them low, accepting the leadership of a Monophysite bishop who happened at the moment to arrive on the Malabar Coast. There have been already noticed in detail many fundamental differences between these two bodies on the one hand and the church of the empire on the other. In the further history of the expansion of the Assyrian Church during the Moslem rule in Persia,

authorities will be cited as evidence that the Sabbath of the fourth commandment was observed by both Monophysitism and the Church of the East in their separate areas in near and far Asia.

### **Rise and Conquests of the Mohammedans**

Like the smoke out of the bottomless pit,(Revelation 9:1-3.) darkening the sun and the air, the new religion of Mohammed suddenly issued from Arabia. Like a whirlwind from the desert, it swept furiously over rivers and plains until all of western Asia, northern Africa, and the southern extremities of Europe had been conquered. Three factors contributed to the sudden and amazing conquests of the Arabians. The first was the new national awakening among the Arabs. The second was the exhaustion of the Roman and Persian Empires caused by four centuries of constant warfare between themselves plus the gigantic invasions of the Goths which had overrun the western provinces of Rome. The third was Mohammed himself.

In the days of Aha and his successors new movements were stirring the Arabians. They were throwing off their old idolatry and longing for a monotheistic religion like the Jews and other powerful neighbors. They had a strong urge toward national unity. Several forays accompanied by success had convinced them of the weakness of both the Roman and Persian Empires. All they needed was a leader, and that leader was Mohammed.

Of course, it took some time for this obscure camel driver to convince his fellow countrymen of his pretended revelation from heaven that there is but one God and Mohammed is His prophet. Born about A.D. 570 at Mecca, he rose from an ordinary laborer until he married a wealthy widow in whose employ he was. With deepening religious fervor he began to see visions and to dream dreams, but for some time his success was limited to converting his immediate relatives and servants. His growing progress excited the hostility of Mecca. So when, about the year 622, he fled with his most trusted companion to the city of Medina, where he was received as a prophet, this flight, the Hegira, was chosen as the first year of the Mohammedan era.

The new prophet and his belligerent disciples began by attacking rich caravans. Strengthened by the riches and arms of their plunder, they began the subjugation of Arabia, which was accomplished by the time of the death of Mohammed. Under the impetuosity of his immediate successors, abu-Bekr, Omar, and Othman, it was not long before Syria, Egypt, and Persia were subdued. When the Arabian empire was fully established, it built up Bagdad, its magnificent new capital. The Church of the East, still recognizing the importance of having its headquarters at the center of the secular government, removed its spiritual capital from Seleucia to Bagdad, where it remained for approximately the next five hundred years.

Nevertheless, great conquests for God were accomplished by the Church of the East while Mohammedanism reigned in all lands stretching toward the Pacific. This will be the theme in succeeding chapters.