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A Journal dealing with the Syrian Church in India  
and the other Eastern Churches.

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## CHRISTIANITY IN KURDISTAN

X

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Like all West Asia (of which it forms the mountainous heart) Kurdistan is a country at the cross-roads of world history since times immemorial. And so it is from a religious point of view. Among its neighbours in the Caucasian North

there is Armenia, oldest Christian country in the world and in the South, Kurdistan is bordering on the Arabs, the bearers of Islam in two continents.

Since centuries, Kurdistan is a predominantly Sunnite Moslem country but there are several educated (non-Christian Kurds) who believe it would have been better if the Christian Gospel had won Kurds instead of the Qoran. Most foreign observers agree that Islam has not too deep roots among Kurds and the latter are very proud of what they call the Kurdish tradition of tolerance. As among other nations of the Iranian family (Persians, Pushtu, Tajiks etc.) Kurds preserve many a custom of old Aryan (Iranian) paganism. The most important day of the Kurdish year is Newroz. This is New Year, the Beginning of Spring and the National Day all at the same time.

The Kurds claim to be descendants of the ancient Medes and the Mukri dialect in Persian Kurdistan is indeed still very akin to the language of the old Medes. Zoroastrianism seems to have been common among the proto-Kurds and Zoroaster (Zerdest in Kurdish) is said to have been born in the Mukri area. The "Parthians and Medes and Elamites" mentioned in the Acts of the Apostles II, 9 who came to Jerusalem to hear the Gospel can safely be considered as the ancestors of present Kurds. According to the legend, the Apostle Thomas was the first of Jesus' disciples to carry the Gospel into Kurdistan itself. It was Addai who later came to St Thomas assistance and Addai was followed by Mari who preached between the river Tigris and the little Zab and had Erbil as his centre of operations. (Erbil = ancient Arbela is one of the oldest continuously inhabited places in the world and was within the scene of the Kurdish-Qassimist war this summer).

The plain of Erbil, with its citadel-like capital, was an ancient seat of kings and at Shahrgeret, between Dakouka and Erbil, Mar Mari of Ourfa (who died 226) converted a monarch and his people "who worshipped trees and sacrificed to an image of copper." Seleukia-Ctesiphon, later the famous seat of the Catholicos of the East, was already an important Christian centre in the third century. The next century brought a terrible persecution of Christians under Sapor II (309-363). Those "Persian Martyrs" as they are generally referred to, came from practically all parts of what is now called Kurdistan. After a thorough reorganisation of the Nestorian bishoprics etc. in Kurdistan, many of the latter were represented in Seleukia in 410. In spite of renewed persecutions of Kurdish Christians shortly after that (under Behram V, 420-440) Mar Saba succeeded in converting Kurdish sun-worshippers. In 486, a year after Mar Saba's death, Patriarch Acacy convened the

Synod at Beit-Adhr'e, later on the seat of famous Kurdish Yezidi emirs.

Kurdistan, like West-Asia and the Orient in general, also contributed to Christian monasticism. Many later patriarchs were monks first. Religious research was also done in Nestorian Kurdistan, including research on surrounding religions. So Aba I, Patriarch 540-552, wrote an essay on the matrimonial customs of the Zoroastrians. It was the Zeal to convert non-Christians that-as has often been the case-gave birth to the study of other beliefs. As in Turkistan, that vast country in the heart of the Eurasian continent, flourishing Nestorian christendom suffered incredibly from the conquests of the great Timur (= Tamer-lane, 1335-1402). Numerically, the main victims of this Islamic Turkistan ruler were neighbouring Moslem nations. Only very few monasteries are still left in present-day Kurdistan and Christians (Nestorians and Syrio-Chaldeans) are a very small minority only among Kurds nowadays.

In 1514, most of Kurdistan was conquered by the Osmanli Turks who gradually crushed the feudal petty states of Kurdistan. Foremost among them was the principality of Bohtan, which existed from 837-1848. Three years before its foundation, the oldest now known Kurdish literary document was written and Bitlis, capital of Botan (now a city in Turkish Kurdistan still) became famous through "Sheref-Nameh," work of Sheref-Khan (of Bitlis) in 1596.

Russian expansion into the Caucasus and Western antagonism to the Islamic Ottoman empire awakened European interest in the Christians under Moslem rule, especially those under the Turks. Consequently Roman Catholicism, Protestantism and Eastern Orthodoxy, in the 18th and 19th century especially, rediscovered, though slowly, the remainders of the once flourishing Nestorian Christian church in Kurdistan too.

Armenians, the Kurds' northern neighbours who remained both Christians and patriots in spite of many catastrophes, often served as intermediaries. Before World War 1, the Kurdish and the Armenian ethnic areas on Turkish territory were intermingled to a very high degree and even to-day the Armenian Socialist Soviet Republic has the largest of the small Kurdish enclaves in the USSR. (Arrarat, the mountain on which Noah's arc is said to have stranded, is still especially dear as Kurds and Armenians). In the Vatican it was the "Congregatio de Propaganda Fide" who tried to develop the first Latin alphabet for the Kurdish language and it were Italian Dominican fathers who wrote the first European "area study" of Kurdistan (1818) and the first Western-language text book of Kurdish (1788). Protestant interest in Kurdistan set in with the development

of the Bible Societies. The oldest Kurdish translation of a Bible section was printed in Constantinople (Istanbul) in 1856 by the "British and Foreign Bible Society." It was the Gospel of St Mathew, translated by an Armenian called Stephan, who had been employed by American missionaries in Diarbekir. Printing was done in the Armenian alphabet and next year, all the four Gospels were published the same way.

In 1872, the "American Bible Society" published the N. T. in full, again in Istanbul and American sponsored Kurdish translations of the New Testaments or parts of it in Armenian characters continued till 1914. In Persian Kurdistan, British-sponsored (Mukri and Kermanshahi dialect) translations of Bible sections appeared between 1894-1919. The latest one was done by a Lutheran missionary of Norwegian descent, the American Dr I. O. Fossum. He also wrote a Kurdish Grammar and a Kurdish songbook. The latter contained the first endeavour to create a Kurdish national anthem, written to the tune of "Onward Christian soldiers." Some of Fossum's group stayed in Persian Kurdistan and it was from one of them that the late President of the "Autonomous Kurdish Republic of Mehabad" (1945-46), Ghazi Mohammed, learnt English. Ghazi Mohammed was the Supreme Islamic Religious Judge of all Persian Kurdistan and later on hanged by the Persians because of "separatism." The same "Lutheran Orient Mission" of Minneapolis that sent out Dr. Fossum is now planning to work in Persian Kurdistan again.

After World War one, which resulted in a further partition of both Kurdistan and West-Asia as a whole, the first Kurdish Bible section translations in Arabic characters appeared. BFBS and ABs printed St Luke's and St John's Gospel in it in co-operation. This was in 1919. Three years later Rev. Riggs brought the Mathew's, and Mark's Gospels in Kurdish, Arabic script, in 1923 that of St Luke.

A Latin-transcribed translation of a Bible part followed only after World War II. In the later twenties, Jeladet Bedir-Khan (of the ousted royal family of Botan) had developed a Latin transcription for Kurdish, very similar to the Kemal Atatürk introduced for Osmanli-Turkish, Kurdish being an Iranian (Indo-European) language, can be written better in Latin (or Cyrillic) characters than in Arabic ones. Now a Latin and an Arab transcription are competing for nation-wide use in Kurdistan, as are the Kurmanji dialect (spoken by 60% of the Kurds, mainly those in Turkish-Kurdistan) and the Sorani-dialect (spoken by 9%, mainly the Kurds round Sulaimaniyah in Iraqi Kurdistan). Most Bible translations are in Kurmanji. Solomon's Proverbs appeared in Kurmanji-Kurdish under the title "Metheloken Herrete

Sileman " in Beyrouth in 1947 and have been reprinted since then. The translation was made by a non-Christian Kurd and a French professor (Dominican father) and publishing was done by ABS and BFBS together. So there was a real Oikumene.

The Old Testament has never been translated into Kurdish and the plan of publishing a new Kurmanji-Kurdish version (in Latin characters) of the New Testament was recently dropped by the ABS. The ABS is "editorially responsible" since years for Kurdish Bible translations but after studying the said idea carefully it decided to wait as there is only extremely small demand for Kurdish Bibles.

This indicates much of the situation of Christianity in partitioned Kurdistan to-day. It may be added that Panislamism is against Kurdish patriots Arab chauvinism is so too. "Peaceful coexistence" of Kurds and Arabs in Iraq and Syria would certainly add to a new climate of tolerance in general, in which Christian activities too could flourish. Modern Kurdish leaders are in favour of linking up their cause with that of small national and religious groups in West-Asia (Armenians, Assyrians and others). It was Thuraya Bedir-Khan, who first organised the Kurdish national movement on modern political lines who came out in favour of cooperating with the Christian Armenians in the twenties. Assyrian-Kurdish relations are good also. In Turkey, where Islamism and anti-clericalism are competing (it is one of the big issues) the situation for Christianity seems to be nearly as disadvantageous as it is for Kurds. In Iran, things are somewhat different. Even to-day, there are still Kurds writing Christian poetry. As far as the writer can judge this movement, chances for Christianity in divided, oppressed and underdeveloped Kurdistan depend greatly on active international Christian solidarity with that unhappy nation as a whole. The Kurds have a fine 'instinct' to feel who is their friend or foe and only people with non-egoistic purposes can approach them without "backthoughts" and win their hearts and minds:

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