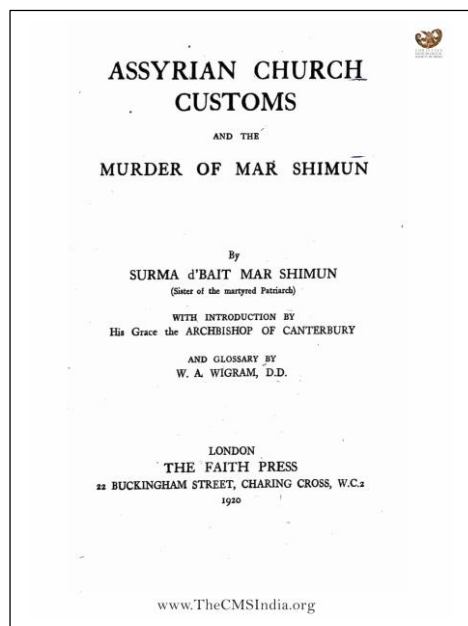


Assyrian Church Customs And the Murder of Mar Shimun



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ASSYRIAN CHURCH CUSTOMS

AND THE

MURDER OF MAR SHIMUN

By
SURMA d'BAIT MAR SHIMUN
(Sister of the martyred Patriarch)

WITH INTRODUCTION BY
His Grace the ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

AND GLOSSARY BY
W. A. WIGRAM, D.D.

LONDON
THE FAITH PRESS
22 BUCKINGHAM STREET, CHARING CROSS, W.C.2
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PREFACE

BY HIS GRACE THE ARCHBISHOP OF CANTERBURY

THIS remarkable little book has for me, and will have for many others, a peculiar and a vivid interest. It gives an outline picture of the daily life and the story of a Church and nation about which most of us have known very little ; and it gives the picture from their side, not from ours.

For more than thirty years the "Mission of the Archbishop of Canterbury to the 'Assyrian' Church " has had a place in the thoughts and prayers of a limited circle of friends, but it has not been largely under the public eye. The purpose and work of the Mission are described succinctly by Surma Khanim herself in her narrative, and I will not anticipate her pointed and appreciative words. During these thirty years, the remarkable series of devoted men who have been our missionaries (or, as the Assyrians call them, our "Apostles"), have reported constantly to Lambeth, and there have been few reports which have not made reference to the steadily growing influence and authority of the gracious and capable

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lady who has now, in her thirty-fifth year, given us this book.

Herself a member of the ruling family, niece of the Patriarch Reuil Mar Shimun, and sister of his two successors, Benyamin and Paulus Mar Shimun, Surma Khanim—who is technically set apart as a “religious”—has been in close touch from her childhood with matters national and ecclesiastical, and has grown by degrees to be our trusted counsellor and friend.

She owes to one of our most devoted mission priests (“ Rabbi Doctor Browne,” as she calls him) an education more thorough than that of any of her countrywomen in Assyria. It includes, as this book shows, a good knowledge of English. Doctor Browne (whose death in Qudshanis in 1910 was caused by an accident) has frequently expressed to me the high hopes he cherished for his pupil. These hopes have been abundantly realized, for it would be difficult, I think, to exaggerate the importance of what Lady Surma has been able to do for her people.

Her influence began when she was almost a child, and it has reached its culmination in these last tempestuous and fearful years. Undismayed herself, and inspiring confidence and respect in all, she found it possible to act as a veritable leader, where leadership was wanted, even in such days of horror and

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confusion as those which witnessed the murder of her brother the Patriarch, and the recurrent massacres of her people. In the hours of actual fighting, such unwonted responsibilities as the care of the ammunition stores and the like, were assigned to her by acclamation.

In her own fashion she wielded authority in at least one perilous and bloodstained march or flight, and in the great camp of refuge at Baqubah she held an undisputed place of honour. It was almost a matter of course that she should be chosen as the delegate of her people to come to Paris and to London, in these anxious and perplexing months of consultation, and public testimony has been borne in the British Parliament to the value of her aid.

In these circumstances, nothing can be more appropriate than that this lady should, while in England, give us from her own standpoint such an account of her people, religious and secular, as these pages present. In its straightforward simplicity lies its strength; those who, on reading it, desire an ampler knowledge of the historic and political setting of the picture given us, or of the ethical and theological questions involved, will turn to such books as "The Cradle of Mankind," by Dr. W. A. Wigram (A. & C. Black); "Our Smallest Ally" (S.P.C.K., 1920); "The Assyrian Church,

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100-640 A.D.”; or to the papers published by the Committee of the Archbishop’s Mission. But I believe that in the compilation of this modest little book, which, as standing by itself in the literature of the subject, will be welcomed both in England and America, Surma Khanim has rendered to her people not the least of the services for which she will, in years to come, be held in grateful remembrance.

RANDALL CANTAUER.

LAMBETH,

Easter, 1920.

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INTRODUCTION

BY THE REV. W. A. WIGRAM, D.D.

THE Assyrian Church, with which this book deals, is a very ancient type of Christianity, representing (with the "Jacobite" Church, its neighbour) the extension of the Faith among the Syriac-speaking peoples to the east of Palestine, the subjects of the Parthian and second Persian (Sassanid) empires.

Assyrians say that "the Gospel was brought to our fathers by the apostles Adai and Mari," and their tradition identifies the former with Thaddaeus, the apostle of Christ, who is also claimed as its founder by the Armenian Church. There is good historical evidence that an "apostle" of that name, who may quite possibly have been one of the "seventy," as another version of the tradition declares him to have been, was working in Adiabene by the year 100 A.D.

This Church "of the Easterns" (i.e. of the Christians dwelling to the east of the Roman empire of the day) had always a most isolated existence, as shown by the fact that it was forgotten at the council of Nicea, and never had any official

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INTRODUCTION

knowledge of the Creed put forward by that council till the year 411, when it fully accepted it as in accord with what it had always taught. Individual bishops had knowledge of the council, of course, but not the Church in its corporate capacity.

This isolation was emphasized by the fact that the body had to insist on a measure of distinctness from the Church of the Roman empire, as a means of self-preservation. When the Roman empire became Christian, all Christian subjects of its Persian rival (who had been tolerated previously) became suspect, as Christians were in Turkey in later days, and a series of massacres or persecutions were inflicted on them. Hence, it was natural for them to put stress on any point that would distinguish them from "Roman Christians," in order to be able to say, "We are not the same brand of Christian as those others, and so need not be persecuted every time the Shah-in-Shah has a quarrel with the Roman Emperor."

Thus it was that they were accused of Nestorianism, a charge to which colour was given by the facts that they did not accept the council of Ephesus, used the title "Mother of Christ" as their official name for the Blessed Virgin, and honoured the name of Nestorius.

On the other hand, the fact that they accepted the council of Chalcedon is evidence that they did

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not teach what Nestorius was 'condemned for teaching, and in later days they have declared that the "Quicumque vult" is an adequate statement of their doctrine on the Person of the Lord, and that by their title "Mother of Christ" for the B.V.M. they mean, "Mother of Jesus Christ, our Lord and our God."

They were, in fact, kept out of touch with the Church of Constantinople by the infection of the latter with Monophysism, until such time as the rise of the flood of Islam swept both out of one another's ken.

Under the rule of the Arab Khalifs, this Church had a wonderful history, extending its missions to China, Afghanistan, and India, in the latter of which the Church they founded exists to this day. At one time, as many as twenty five Metropolitan Archbishops owed allegiance to the Patriarch of the Chaldeans or Assyrians in Baghdad.

This great Church was, however, absolutely forgotten by the west, so that when an ambassador from it, as stated in the text, arrived at Rome, he found himself regarded as a visitor from another planet.

Evil days came on the body with the fall of the Baghdad Khalifate and the rise of the Turkish power, app. 1400 A.D. The civilization of Mesopotamia (already on the decline) received a

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terrible blow from the ravages of Timur the Tartar, and Turkish misrule spread its blighting influence over the land which had prospered under the Arabs.

The Christian Church in the land sank with the general level of life in it, and the divisions of the body into Roman and Protestant sections diminished its vitality still further. In the nineteenth century it was but a shadow of its former self. Hence it was that the authorities of the Church asked help from the Church of England, holding that she could help them as a sister, and that they would trust her to respect their independence. It must be owned too, that even if the level of spirituality in this Church has sunk as low as its severest critics assert—and we think that fact unproven—still it cannot be denied that it retains what it has always had in abundance, the capacity for producing martyrs.

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ASSYRIAN CHURCH CUSTOMS

CHAPTER I

The Assyrian Nation

MANY have asked me to write down shortly some of the various customs, whether ecclesiastical or belonging to common life, of that part of our "Assyrian" nation which dwelt in Kurdistan, before the great war. First, let me say that it is our belief that we are of the blood of the ancient Assyrians of Nineveh.

This may be proved by comparing the physiognomy of many of the men of our mountains, and more particularly the men of Tiari, with the faces of the Kings, and other Assyrians, in the British Museum. It is also true that our language gives the same sort of evidence. Many of the commonest words, such as the names for dog, horse, ox, donkey, camel, leopard, eagle, soul, brother, servant, and the names of the months of the year, are the same in our Syriac as in the inscriptions of ancient Assyria. Still, for

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CHAPTER II

Baptism, the Churches and their Ornaments

BAPTISM is, of course, one of the Seven Mysteries of the Eastern Church of our Fathers, and is always administered in church. Properly, children are brought to Baptism when eight days old only.*

The sponsors must make ready beforehand a white cloth, in which they present the baby to the deacon, and also a crown for its head, of white silk riband. On this there should be embroidered the words of the Psalms, "Thou hast crowned him with glory and honour" and "He asked life of thee, and thou gavest him a long life." Three tiny tassels are sewn to the crown. One, which is black, hangs down over the forehead, as a symbol of death, which is always to be before his eyes. On the right hand hangs the white tassel, as symbol of Baptism; and on the left a red one, as a symbol of violent death. In some villages the crown is made only of white and coloured silken threads.

When all is ready, the sponsors with the babies stand before the gate of the Baptistery, while within

* This is, of course, a following of the Circumcision precedent. In practice, Baptism is sometimes postponed for lack of a priest, for some months or even years in isolated villages.—Ed.

CHAPTER III

Fasts and their Customs

I SUPPOSE that there is no nation in the world which fasts so rigorously as does the Assyrian. Not only are the fasts numerous, but the rule for fasting is far more strict than with you, seeing that we abstain not only from meat, but from everything that is animal, including milk, fish, butter, and eggs. Only vegetable food and vegetable oil may be taken. According to this rule we observe the 25 days of Advent, and the 50 (not 40) days in our Lent. In this latter period, indeed, many will go without food until the evening, on every day except Sunday; and I have known Priests and Deacons who would fast for two days, and eat only on the third day, throughout Lent.*

Many fast regularly till 3 p.m. through Lent, and most, excepting children, till about noon. The Book of Canon Law in our Church (the Sunhadus)

* The Editor wishes to say that this is the fact, to his personal knowledge. Further, these men were doing their ordinary manual work the while. He has known one man, who ate only on Sundays through all Lent, and no great amount even then. Certainly, this man was not doing manual work, however.

CHAPTER IV

Easter and the Eucharist: How we Keep the Resurrection.

IN some places vigil is kept all night but we, in Qudshanis, used to begin the vigil at midnight; the *Nakusha* was struck and the village Reis would let off his blunderbuss from the roof of his house in honour of the night. So for midnight all the church would be adorned with lights, and prayers would begin then and for the part of the service that we call "*Kyamtha*" (Resurrection) all will go into the churchyard singing hymns: at the end of each hymn they say, "Our Lord has risen," and, "Glory be to Him," and at the end of this all the congregation clap their hands. Such a noise! and then the Leader of the prayers gives the Salutation of the Resurrection. He first and all after him will kiss the Cross and he gives to each a little lighted taper; each salutes another saying, "The Resurrection of Our Lord," and the other replies, "The Resurrection and Life and Renewal be upon you."

Then we have the custom that each should visit the graves of his own family and light tapers which

CHAPTER V

Festivals, Pilgrimages, Monks and Nuns

WE have seven festivals which we call "the Feasts of our Lord." The Feasts of the Nativity, Epiphany, the Resurrection, Pentecost, Ascension, Transfiguration, the Feast of the Invention of the Cross.

1. The Nativity. On the preceding day there is Holy Communion at the eleventh hour of the day. After that the fast is broken. At the hour of prayers there is a custom of making a very small fire in the court of the church, called the Fire of the Shepherds: the deacon carries this through the church. It represents the fire by which the shepherds were watching their flock. By another custom after prayers, the priest gives to each worshipper a walnut or other fruit; these are called "Bizqi d'Maran," i.e. Our Lord's chips or pebbles.

The origin of this custom is as follows:

When a baby is born they call the neighbours in and eat sweetmeats or fruit for joy of the little one: so we do the same for joy of our Lord's birth. The prayers begin at 9 p.m. and continue till 5 a.m. but between 11 and 12 people rest. Then

CHAPTER VI

Magic Arts, Marriages, Funerals

SOME of our people will indulge in the practice of magic, though the rules of the church forbid it. Thus many will use, and wear, charms against the "evil eye," and will put them on their children, and animals. A string of blue beads is said to be of use for this! Then there are ways of telling fortunes, usually by means of the letters of the name. With us, every letter of the alphabet has its numerical value, and if you write down the value of each letter of a name, add them up, and then divide by some number which is thought mystical, then you can draw omens about the life of the person from either the quotient or from the remainder. Then there are other ways of drawing omens, from the twitching of the eyebrow, from the burning or itching of the ear, and so on. No doubt it would be easy to find habits like this among the ignorant in every land—and in particular, I think that there is no land on the earth where the belief in the "Evil Eye" is not found.

CHAPTER VII

The Nine Degrees of the Clergy and the Seven Sacraments

WE count the number of Orders among the clergy as nine and not three, as do the Westerns. To be more accurate, we divide each one of the three orders universally recognized and received, into three "internal grades," thus organizing and arranging what has been left rather undefined elsewhere.

Thus we have three orders of Episcopal rank, viz. Patriarch—Catholicos, for we use those two words indifferently, Metropolitan or Matran, and Bishop (Abuna).

Our ancient documents show that the premier Bishop in our church has used the title of Catholicos or Patriarch at least from the year 424 A.D. It does not seem that any other see used the title regularly and officially at so early a date, and our Patriarch has used it regularly ever since.

Thus, the use of it goes back to a time previous to the arising of any of the disputes about doctrine that have divided the church.

CHAPTER VIII

Ordinary Dress, Handicrafts, Laws

As every district has different customs, so in each somewhat different clothes are worn. So I take as an example two mountaineers, a Tiari man and a Tkhoma woman.

The Tiari man will wear wide trousers woven of wool, finely spun by women; the colour either white or red, or often many-coloured, generally striped, and round the ankle worked with colour. He also wears a shirt, waistcoat, and short open coat with long sleeves, the latter having "revers" worked with colour; a wide sash woven of cotton, generally blue; and above the coat a sleeveless zouave jacket of white or black felt. Instead of this he may have a knitted or woven jacket of fine black wool, embroidered with red or gold; this has half sleeves. On his head a conical cap of white felt with a little embroidery of red threads and a black feather.* Some tribes wrap a black silk handkerchief, called the pushîa, round the felt cap. They used to wear two thick plaits

* The conical felt cap is a familiar object on Assyrian sculptures.—ED.

CHAPTER IX

The Patriarch and the Nation

It was the custom that the Patriarch, during every three years of his patriarchate, should visit the six tribes who are independent of Turkish Rule. Notice was given of his arrival on the preceding day so that the people could gather to receive him and give a salute with rifles.

The priests and deacons would precede him in procession, singing hymns accompanied by cymbals, and swinging censers. He would be the guest of the village Reis or of the priest. In whatever apartment the Patriarch should spend the night, a light would be kept burning and a guard would be stationed before the door although there was nothing to fear. In whatever house he was a guest, all who came from afar to meet him would be entertained in that house to the number of 200 at a time.

When the Patriarch arrived, e.g. near the frontier of Tkhoma, a Malik of that country would take his silver water goblet from a servant, showing that henceforth he would serve the Patriarch. When

CHAPTER XI

The Great War

HITHERTO, we have spoken of those parts of our nation that were "Ashiret" in status; those "tribes"—to give the translation of the name—into whose territory the power of the Ottoman government had never extended itself, and whose position was rather like that of the Highlands of Scotland, two hundred years ago.

Their lot indeed was difficult (for life in our mountains is never easy) but it was not too hard to bear, and it had its advantages and pleasures. The fact that, by ancient right and custom, these clans bore arms and could defend themselves, gave them the chance of protecting their families and property against both Kurdish raider and Turkish official. Very different was the lot of those who were "rayat," i.e. directly subject to the Ottoman government, and to the caprices of its minor officials.

It would be too long to recount all the acts of oppression and slaughter of which the Turks were guilty, before the great war, to those Christians who were entirely under their law; nor can we

GLOSSARY OF SYRIAC TERMS USED

By W. A. WIGRAM, D.D.

ABUNA		Bishop.
AGHA		Chief of a Kurdish tribe or clan.
ASHIRET		Tribe or clan. From an Arabic root meaning "ten" (cf. Deut. i. 15).
BAIT. BAITA		House. The word refers either to the family or to the fabric.
BA'UTHA		Prayer or petition. The term is specially applied to the three "Rogation Days" of the Assyrians.
BUKRA		"First-born." The word is used (1) of the "pain beni" distributed after the Eucharist, which is a reminiscence of the "Agape," and (2) at times, loosely, of the Eucharistic bread also, in allusion to Christ, "the first-born of all creation."
D'-		The preposition "of," like the French "de."
GEZZA		"Treasury." (1) A service book, giving the variable parts of the Church Service for all Saints' days. (2) An "aumbray" in the sanctuary of the church, in which the "Melka" (q.v.) is kept.
GURNA		Font.
GNUNA		Bridal chamber. From a root meaning "to protect," or "hover over."
HAIKLA		The nave of a church. In ancient Syriac, a temple.
HULALA		A liturgical division of the Psalter. There are 21 Hulâli in the book of Psalms.
IDTA		Church (i.e. the society).

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KARUZUTHA	..	Lit. "Proclamation." A sort of Litany in the Assyrian services.
KHUDRA	..	Lit. "Circle." A collection of the variable parts of the Church services on all ferial days throughout the "circle" of the year.
KHARASHUTHA	..	Magic.
KESHKUL	..	Prob. "Kanish Kul," or "General collection." A service book.
KAIM-MAKAM	..	Local governor. The third rank in the hierarchy of Ottoman provincial officials.
KOR-EPISCOPA	..	"Chor-episcopus." The highest of the three "presbyteral" grades of the ministry in the Assyrian Church. It is not counted as Episcopal.
MADBEKHA	..	"Altar." In common use, the whole sanctuary of a church.
MALIK	..	The paramount chief of a district among the Christian tribes. It is often used as a title of honour to one who does not actually hold office.
MAR	..	"Lord." It is a title used both for Saints and for Bishops. "Mar Shimun" (Lord Simon) is the hereditary title of the Patriarch.
MARMITA	..	A liturgical division of the Psalter. Three "Marmyâti" make one "Hulâla," and there are in consequence 63 in the book of Psalms.
MATRAN	..	Metropolitan, or Archbishop. The title is given in the Assyrian Church to the second dignitary in their hierarchy, the Metropolitan of Shamsdin. In the modern use of the Chaldean body, which has become subject to the pope, "Matran" is used, with some disregard of etymology and history, for an ordinary bishop, and "Abuna" for a priest.

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MADRASHA	..	A doctrinal hymn (cf. Hebrew "Mid-rash," commentary.)
MA'APRA	..	The priestly Eucharistic vestment. It resembles a cope, but is of square, not semicircular, outline, and is ornamented with crosses. It comes from a root meaning "to veil."
M'AMUDITHA	..	Baptism. From a root meaning "to dip" or "dive."
MELKA	..	Lit. "King." Liturgically, the fine flour mixed with the dough at the baking of the Eucharistic bread, and reserved in the sanctuary for that purpose. For the tradition connected with its use, see p.
MILLET	..	A Christian subject nation in the Ottoman empire, organized (as they always are) in a church, and often having its own language. From a root meaning "to speak."
MUTASERIF	..	A provincial deputy governor in the Ottoman empire.
NATAR CURSYA	..	"Holder of the Throne." The recognized "heir" of a Bishopric, according to the semi-hereditary system of the Assyrians in mediæval and modern days.
NAQUSHA	..	The board beaten with a mallet (the Greek "semantron") which serves the purpose of a church bell. Rt. "to knock."
NSHIPA	..	Fine flour made from picked wheat, and intended for the Eucharistic bread. From a root meaning "to pulverize."
NUSARDIL	..	A Persian word said to mean "the New Year," but not so used in modern times. It is used in the Khudra for a church feast, that "of the Apostles."
ORARA	..	The stole worn by the clergy. It is shorter than the western type, reaching hardly below the girdle, but it resembles it otherwise.

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- QDAM-WATHAR** .. "Before and after." The common name of the book of Daily Services (the Breviary) in the Assyrian Church. It is derived from the liturgical arrangements made in it, between the two choirs.
- QANKI** The sacristy or vestry of a church. Etymologically, the word means "the apse," and is derived from the Greek "concha," a shell; thus, it should refer to the sanctuary as a whole, but in practice it has the meaning given. Assyrian churches are not usually apsidal in form.
- QANKAYA** One who has charge of the "Qanki." So, the "Rector" of a church.
- QASHA. QASHISHA** A priest.
- QURBANA** .. The Eucharist. From the root q-r-b, "to draw near," to "offer."
- RABBAN. RABBANTA** A celibate. A Christian monk or nun. (Pl. Rabbanyati)
- RAYAT. RAYAH** A Christian subject of Turkey. The Arabic word means "flock," "cattle," and it expresses their status.
- RAZA** Mystery, Sacrament.
- REIS** The head-man of a village, Christian or Moslem.
- RISH** Head. The word is used either literally or metaphorically.
- SHAMASHA** .. A deacon.
- SHEIKH** Lit. "Elder," "old man." Among Arabs, a chief. Among Kurds, the word implies religious chieftainship also.
- SHLAMA** "Peace." The usual greeting between Christians, except in Holy Week.
- SIAM-IDHA** .. "Laying on of hands." Ordination.
- SHKINTA** Lit. "The abiding place." Heb. "Shechinah," the visible glory of the divine presence. Among Assyrians, the table on which the cross—the symbol of the divine presence—rests in the church, for salutation by all who enter.



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