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THE SYRIANS OF PERSIA AND EASTERN TURKEY.

BY

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It is the purpose of this paper to describe as briefly and accurately as possible the origin, the condition, and the numbers of the so-called Syrian Christians living in the vilayets of Van and Mosul, in Turkey, and in the regions adjoining Lake Urumia, in Persia. It is difficult to get an altogether suitable national designation. Perhaps the name most commonly used has been Nestorians; but this is a religious name. In the past, at least, many Nestorians were of other races, and large numbers to-day are not Nestorian at all. The name Assyrian has also been used, but never by the people themselves. It depends upon a historical hypothesis that is very likely correct, but which is not capable of absolute proof. The people call themselves *Surayi* or *Suryayi*, and the name Syrian is therefore the natural one to use, though it is objectionable on account of the confusion likely to arise from its connection with the country of Syria. This may be partially obviated by using the term Eastern Syrians.

Their origin is an interesting and obscure historical problem. We may dismiss at the outset the attempted identification with the Ten Tribes of Israel. This theory, which was started by the pioneer missionary Dr. Asahel Grant, has, in the minds of some, invested the people with a fictitious, sentimental interest. It is based on a supposed tradition among the people themselves and upon certain resemblances in customs to the Jews. The alleged tradition, however, is very infrequently met with, and nothing in Syrian history supports the conjecture. The data on which to base a theory are tradition, language, monuments, and literature. The Syrians living in Persia appear, whenever they have any tradition

on the subject, to say that their ancestors were immigrants from some other locality, and generally from the Kurdish mountains, very commonly either Jilu or Shemisden. In a few cases tradition points to emigrants from Maragha, on the eastern side of Lake Urumia. The Syrians living in Turkish Kurdistan have traditions of various migrations from one district to another within the general region, showing that the population has shifted in the past centuries. The most ancient centres of population—*i. e.*, the points from which migrations seemed to have emanated largely—are Jilu and Tiari. One also finds a widespread tradition that their ancestors came from the plain of the Tigris, in the region of Mosul and Arbil; while, so far as I know, the Syrians of the Assyrian Plain have no traditions of immigration into that region. There is also a general belief that the mountains were entered for the sake of refuge from persecution. All speak the Syriac language, though the dialects used differ considerably, and all differ so much from the classical Syriac that scholars incline to the view that the spoken Syriac is not directly derived from the written Syriac of former ages. The Syriac centres of learning were Edessa and Nisibis, so that the literary Syriac was in agreement with dialects spoken west, and not east, of the Tigris, and in the old literature there are references to dialectical differences then existing. The dialectical differences of the spoken Syriac are reducible to a few groups. One is the dialect of the Tigris plain, with various subdivisions. Another is the dialect of the southern mountain districts, centering in Tiari, and including some branches within the region generally occupied by the third group. This group centres in Jilu, and includes the northern districts in Turkey and all of those in Persia. It will be seen that tradition and language agree in pointing out Tiari and Jilu as ancient centres of population. The monumental remains are all churches, and contain very few inscriptions. The age assigned by tradition to these churches is very unreliable. The old churches in Persia are not numerous, and none of them can be proved, I think, to be older than the Mongol period; and possibly none is even as old as that. The literature remaining in old Syriac has been too imperfectly examined to make it possible to speak dogmatically of the evidence contained in it as to the Christians of the regions we are considering.

The following facts are collected mainly from that treasury of Syriac lore, *Assemani Bibliotheca Orientalis*. The Nestorian Metropolitan bishopric of Azerbaijan does not appear to have been as ancient or as prominent as others within the present

bounds of Persia, or farther east, especially Khuzistan, in southern Persia, and Merv and Khorasan, in the east. The latter are mentioned frequently from the beginning of the Moslem era, but the first mention of the former is in the tenth century. It is altogether likely, however, that the Christian religion was introduced at an earlier date, for in the beginning of the ninth century Nestorian missionaries were very active in Dailam, Ghilan, and Moghan, to the east and north of Azerbaijan. When Tabriz and Maragha became capitals of the Mongol power the importance of this diocese in both the Nestorian and the Jacobite churches increased, and large churches in Tabriz, Ardebil, and Urumia, which have been converted into mosques, probably date from this period. The Nestorian episcopal dioceses of Urumia, Salmas, and Ushnuk are first mentioned in the twelfth or thirteenth centuries. That there were Christians in the Hakkari district of the Kurdish mountains in Turkey is evident from the early references to the bishops of Baghash, the ancient Syriac name for the region; but there is no reason to infer that the diocese was considered important until the present line of patriarchs took refuge there in the seventeenth century. The most probable conclusion from these scraps of evidence would appear to be that the Syrian Christians living in Persia are mainly descendants of immigrants from what is now Turkish territory, that these immigrants came within the last three centuries, and that some are descendants of Christians who have lived in these regions for perhaps a thousand years. Those of Turkey are, similarly, the descendants of refugees from the Tigris valley and of Christians who have lived in the mountain districts, near the upper Zab, from very early times. These migrations have been caused by political conditions and by religious persecutions. The mountains have offered refuge from the anarchy that has so often devastated the plains of Nineveh, and the Persian plains have offered comparative quiet to the sufferers from Kurdish lawlessness. Ultimately, therefore, the Syrians of these regions are descended from the Semitic, Syriac-speaking people who lived in ancient Assyria, and are of the same race as the Syriac and Arabic-speaking Christians now living in the valley of the Tigris. Inasmuch as the present Christian population is the remnant of a much larger Christian body, which included some of Turkish and Kurdish race, it is likely that they are not purely Semitic; and to this fact may be due the rather large variety of physical types observable among them.

The Syrians may be divided, with respect to their political con-

dition, into four main groups: those subject to the Persian Government, the semi-independent mountain tribes that are partially subject to the Turkish Government, those living in mountain districts that are completely under Turkish rule, and the Syrians living in the Tigris valley. The last group we shall not notice further.

The first mentioned live in the three plains of Urumia, Salmas, and Sulduz, bordering on Lake Urumia, and in the three little plains of Mergawar, Tergawar, and Baradost, just under the lofty mountains that form the boundary between Persia and Turkey. The largest number are farmers, working the lands of the feudal nobility. The direct taxes paid by them are insignificant in amount, but the amount that goes to the landlords is excessive. In irrigated lands the amount paid by the farmer is generally two-thirds of the produce of grain fields, if the seed is furnished by the landlord, and one-half if he furnishes the seed himself. In lands not irrigated the rule is that the farmer furnishes his own seed and gives to the landlord one-eighth of the grain. Besides this, he has also to furnish the landlord a very indefinite amount of unpaid labour. This last, and the fines assessed by the landlord and the regular Government officials, with the bribes demanded by them, are the most prolific sources of injustice. The vineyards, which make up a large part of the wealth of the Christians, and contribute largely to its increase, are held by a tenure much more favourable to the cultivator. The raisins, which are the most valuable product of the vineyards, are exported to Russia, and, in lesser quantities, to western Europe, *via* Trebizond. A considerable number of the Syrians are masons and carpenters; but very few engage in trade, being, in this respect, in marked contrast to the Armenians, and also to the Syrians of Mosul. The most marked feature of their industrial condition, to which is due much prosperity and also much demoralization, is the wholesale migration of the men to Russia for temporary employment. Every year thousands of Syrians cross into Russia to find work. The development of Transcaucasia, with the building of the cities of Tiflis, Batum, and Baku, has created a demand for labourers, skilled and unskilled, and Syrian carpenters, masons, and day-labourers have found lucrative employment. Not a few, too, have become contractors and employers of labour, some on a large scale. The recently-completed Tiflis-Kars-Erivan railroad was built very largely by Syrian workmen and Syrian contractors, who are now looking forward eagerly to the extension of the line to the Aras river, and ultimately across the border into

Persian territory. Others find work as porters and water-sellers in various Russian cities. Hundreds more are small shopkeepers or itinerant peddlers. Another occupation is begging. The credulity, religiousness, and kindheartedness of the Russians make their country a peculiarly rich field for pious frauds, who travel all over that great land, from Kiev to Vladivostok, in various and shifting guises. Some are just arrived from Jerusalem, and display holy relics to enforce their appeals; others tell tales of Moslem oppression, which, very likely, have a foundation in fact; others simply beg their bread and small sums of money from door to door. The excursions of the more enterprising are not confined to Russia, nor, indeed, to any country. Some of them, as eye-witnesses, told queer tales of the fighting of the allies in Peking, and of affairs in Manchuria. The effect of such a life, separating the men for months and years from their families, and subjecting them to most demoralizing influences, may easily be imagined.

The mountain region between the upper course of the River Zab and the Persian border is very rugged, and contains only very deep and narrow valleys, except the lofty plain of Gawar. These valleys are inhabited by Kurdish and Syrian clans that own their allegiance to the Sultan within their mountain country only by paying an irregular and very inconsiderable tribute. Disputes between individuals and communities are settled by a primitive code of tribal law, enforced by the strong arm of the people themselves. Their wealth consists almost entirely in sheep, and these are the objects of frequent inter-tribal raids. Unlike the Kurds, none of the Christians are nomadic, although they spend the summer months as much as possible in the mountain encampments, where the sheep are kept. The narrow valleys are terraced, and so fields are made, which are sown with millet, Indian corn, potatoes, and other products. The fields are popularly measured by the number of hatfuls of seed required to sow them. In some of the valleys rice is also cultivated to a considerable extent. The people of Tiari seldom go out of their own territory, but in the other districts an industrial condition obtains not unlike that already described. Instead of going to Russia for work, the men go for the winter to the plains to the south and find work in the large cities, from Mosul to Aleppo and Damascus, especially as stonemasons and basket-makers. Some, again, are vagrant beggars. One village in Jilu supports itself almost entirely in this way. It would be hard to find anywhere another such community as this village of Mar Zaya. In a most picturesque and rugged valley, in the shadow of a massive old church, reputed by

tradition to be fifteen hundred years old, apparently shut off from the world as completely as in a prison, one may hear the men tell of their adventures in every part of the world—Australia, America, China, Africa, and Europe. In order to show that this is in no way exaggerated, let me add that the present writer has seen letters from or concerning these men from Austria, England, America, Dahomy, Cape Colony, India, and South America. In general, it is impossible for these communities, living in such rugged regions, maintaining a precarious independence of Government control, and constantly embroiled in tribal wars with each other and with the Kurds, to prosper in material resources.

Most miserable of all are the Syrians living in or near the mountain districts under more complete Government control. During the past fifty years the Turkish Government has gradually extended its authority in the mountain districts. The power of the great Kurdish chiefs has been broken, and, one after another, districts have become *rayat* instead of *ashirat*. The result ought to be increased security and prosperity; but, unfortunately, it is not. Taxation is heavier than before, and is strictly enforced, the intricate procedure of law courts is substituted for the rude and summary process of revenge, the towns are garrisoned with disciplined troops, but the Kurdish robber is as rapacious, if less conspicuous, than before. The consequent state of affairs is deplorable in the extreme, and not a few districts are becoming depopulated of Christians. In general, the industrial condition is most wretched. Many, of necessity, become beggars in the more prosperous Christian villages of Persia or the Tigris valley, or they obtain Persian passports and wander off to Russia. Many an old church, either deserted or sheltering in its shadow a handful of wretched people, bears mute but eloquent testimony to former and happier days.

As a whole, the Syrians have not been slow to avail themselves of opportunities to improve their condition; and it may confidently be expected that in the opening of the projected Bagdad railroad they will profit far more than the Kurds and Arabs of the regions traversed. Both in Turkey and in Persia the Governmental conditions are growing worse with time; but even more rapidly the Christians are growing in sensitiveness to wrong as they grow in intelligence. From this, more than any other cause, arises the desire to emigrate, and each year families remove to Russia, and the tide is beginning to flow towards America as the freest of all lands.

Without making any claim of more than approximate accuracy, it is believed that the following estimate of population is not far

from the truth. It is based on lists of villages and numbers of families, derived in most cases from more than one source, either from intelligent natives or from missionaries who have travelled through the regions under consideration.

I. PERSIA :

|                      |            |           |              |           |               |        |
|----------------------|------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|---------------|--------|
| Plain of Urumia..... | 90         | villages. | 4,900        | families. | 24,500        | souls. |
| " " Sulduz.....      | 8          | "         | 100          | "         | 500           | "      |
| " " Salmas .....     | 4          | "         | 400          | "         | 2,000         | "      |
| " " Tergawar.....    | 18         | "         | 800          | "         | 4,000         | "      |
| " " Mergawar.....    | 6          | "         | 100          | "         | 500           | "      |
| " " Baradost.....    | 2          | "         | 50           | "         | 250           | "      |
|                      | <u>128</u> | "         | <u>6,350</u> | "         | <u>31,750</u> | "      |

In the above the families have been reckoned as containing five heads in each one. Below they will be reckoned at seven each, as there is far less division of sons from their father or brothers from each other among the mountain than among the plain Syrians. In many villages in Persia the Syrians live beside Moslem neighbours; but in Turkey this is rarely the case, and the villages are entirely Christian or entirely Moslem.

II. TURKEY—SEMI-INDEPENDENT TRIBES:

|              |           |           |              |           |        |        |
|--------------|-----------|-----------|--------------|-----------|--------|--------|
| Jilu.....    | 14        | villages. | 555          | families. |        |        |
| Baz.....     | 7         | "         | 375          | "         |        |        |
| Diz.....     | 11        | "         | 170          | "         |        |        |
| Tkhuma ..... | 5         | "         | 750          | "         |        |        |
| Tal .....    | 6         | "         | 230          | "         |        |        |
| Tiari .....  | 40        | "         | 1,720        | "         |        |        |
|              | <u>83</u> | "         | <u>3,800</u> | "         | 26,600 | souls. |

III. TURKEY—DISTRICTS UNDER GOVERNMENT RULE (RAYATS):

|                                                      |            |           |              |           |        |        |
|------------------------------------------------------|------------|-----------|--------------|-----------|--------|--------|
| Region of Gawar.....                                 | 21         | villages. | 680          | families. |        |        |
| " " Bashkala and Van.                                | 22         | "         | 520          | "         |        |        |
| " " Julamerk.....                                    | 10         | "         | 200          | "         |        |        |
| Nochea, etc. (near Persian border south of Gawar)... | 15         | "         | 270          | "         |        |        |
| Rakan, Chal, etc. (north of Zab, near Amadia).....   | 14         | "         | 310          | "         |        |        |
| Region around Amadia south of Zab.....               | 45         | "         | 1,205        | "         |        |        |
|                                                      | <u>127</u> | "         | <u>3,185</u> | "         | 22,295 | souls. |

These figures give a total of 338 villages, 13,335 families, and 80,645 souls, to which may be added some 30,000 living in the valley of the Tigris, making a total of about 110,000 souls, though I cannot vouch for the correctness of the figure for the Tigris valley.