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**The**  
**Assyrian Church of the East:**  
**A Panoramic View of a Glorious History**



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**Bishop Mar Awa Royel**



## *The Assyrian Church of the East: A Panoramic View of a Glorious History*

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### *Apostolic Origins and Beginnings*

The beginnings of the Assyrian Church are to be found in the very first decades of the apostolic era. With the revelation of the Son of God in the flesh, the salvific message of the Gospel was open to all peoples of diverse tongues and cultures. The Gospel-writer St. Luke records in the book of *Acts* the events of the growth and spread of the Christian Gospel in the Holy City and abroad, to the outer limits of the Roman Empire.

We read in the Acts 2 the wondrous happenings surrounding the Pentecost feast celebrated at Jerusalem by our Lord's disciples. The promise of the Holy Spirit given to disciples before Jesus was taken up to the Father gave hope to the fledgling Christian community at Jerusalem (cf. John 16:13; Acts 1:4). This promise was fulfilled on the day of the Jewish feast of the Pentecost, which took place at Jerusalem 50 days after the Lord's Resurrection. Luke records:

*And there were dwelling at Jerusalem Jews, devout men, out of every nation under heaven. Now when this was noised abroad, the multitude came together, and were confounded, because that every man heard them speak in his own language. And they were all amazed and marveled, saying one to another. Behold, are not all these which speak Galileans? And how hear we every man in our own tongue, wherein we were born? Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites, and the dwellers in Mesopotamia, and in Judea and Cappadocia in Pontus, and Asia... (Acts 2:5-9)*

Among those who had gone up to Jerusalem in order to be present in the Holy City for the Pentecost feast, there were Jews from Mesopotamia. Those who received the Gospel on the day of Pentecost early on spread it among the Assyrians who were dwelling in Mesopotamia: "...then they that gladly received his word were baptized; and the same day they were added unto them about three thousand souls" (Acts 2:41).



Another ancient tradition recorded in the Gospel of Matthew tells of the wise men who had come from the East—certain Magi who had followed the star which led them to the Holy Child in Bethlehem. The evangelist Matthew tells us: “Now when Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea in the days of Herod the king, behold, there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem, saying: ‘Where is he that is born King of the Jews? For we have seen his star in the east, and are come to worship him,’” Matthew 2:1-2. According to the tradition of the Fathers of the Church, such as St. John Chrysostom (died 407) these wise-men were Persians who had come from the East searching for the Child born under the star, thus following the ancient tradition of their prophet Zoroaster.

### ***The Spread of the Gospel to Mesopotamia***

Missionaries from the Holy City of Jerusalem came to preach the Gospel among the Jews in the Diaspora present in Mesopotamia and the Persian Empire. The Acts of the Apostles only records the first Christian missions *within* the limits of the Roman Empire. Therefore, it is the holy tradition of the Assyrian Church, coupled with historical evidences, that records the spread of the Gospel *outside* of the limits of the Roman Empire, namely within the Persian Empire—the second superpower of its day.



*Edessene Coin of Abgar*

Since the fall of the Assyrian Empire in 612 B.C., the inhabitants spread far and wide across Mesopotamia. The fact that the remnants of the ancient Assyrians spoke the Aramaic language in the day of Christ—which was the very language of Christ himself and the *lingua franca* of the East—the Gospel found fertile ground. So it was that in the first decades of the Christian era the Apostle Mar Addai (St. Addai), who is equated sometimes with the ‘Thaddeus’ of the Twelve, was sent by St. Thomas the Apostle to the city of Edessa (Osroene), which was dependent upon the Roman Caesar and acted as a buffer-zone between Rome and Persia.





The missionary work of Addai came about through a promise given by our Lord to its vassal king Abgar the Black. According to the annals of Church history recorded by the great historian Eusebius the bishop of Caesarea, Abgar had sent emissaries to Jerusalem asking that Jesus—the good healer whom he had heard about—would come and cure him from his illness. Abgar’s *Letter to Jesus* reads:

*Abgar Ukkama [the Black], the Toparch, to Jesus the good Savior who has appeared in the district of Jerusalem, greeting. I have heard concerning you and your cures, how they are accomplished by you without drugs and herbs. For, as the story goes, you make the blind recover their sight, the lame walk, and you cleanse lepers, and cast out unclean spirits and demons, and you cure those who are tortured by long disease and you raise dead men. And when I heard all these things concerning you and I decided that it is one of the two, either that you are God, and came down from heaven to do these things, or are the Son of God for doing these things. For this reason I write to beg you to listen to me and to heal the suffering which I have...*

Our Lord replies to the king through the emissary whom Abgar had sent to Jerusalem to meet with Jesus by the name of Hannan (Annas):



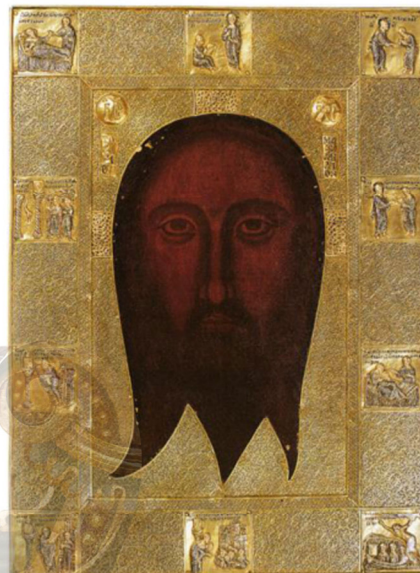
*1st Century Christian Mosaic at Edessa*

*Blessed are you who did believe in me not having seen me, for it is written concerning me that those who have seen me will not believe in me, and that those who have not seen me will believe and live. Now concerning what you wrote to me, to come to you, I must first complete here all which I was sent, and after thus completing it be taken up to him who sent me, and when I have been taken up, I will send to you one of my disciples to heal your suffering and give life to you and those with you.*





The emissaries also brought back with them an image of Christ, which was drawn by Hannan and blessed by Jesus. The image has come to be called the 'Holy Image of Edessa.' It is mentioned in the *Doctrine of Addai* and by the late-fourth century pilgrim to Edessa, the Iberian nun Igeria. We read in the *Doctrine*: "When Hannan, the keeper of the archives, saw that Jesus spoke thus to him, by virtue of being the king's painter, he took and painted a likeness of Jesus with choice paints, and brought with him to Abgar the king, his master. And when Abgar the king saw the likeness, he received it with great joy, and placed it with great honor in one of his palatial houses" (*Doctrine of Addai* 13). It is believed that the Holy Image was later taken to Constantinople by the Byzantine emperor Romanus I in 944/45, where it was kept and a copy made. The image is now kept in Genoa, Italy, from at least the 14<sup>th</sup> century when it was sent as a gift from the Byzantine emperor John V Palaeologus to the doge of Genoa.



Thus, the apostle Addai was sent to Edessa about 3 years after the Resurrection and preached the Gospel not only to the Jewish inhabitants of the city, but the divine Message was received by citizens who were descendents of the ancient Assyro-Babylonians. The emissary of King Abgar, Hannan, had brought back with him an image of the Lord known as the 'Image of Edessa' which was miraculously composed.

Another early tradition of the Church attributes the evangelization of the Assyrians to the missionary activity of the apostles in the region of Adiabene, modern-day Arbil in northern Iraq. This area, in essence the whole strip of land between the mighty Tigris and Euphrates rivers mentioned in Genesis, was called 'Assyria' by the famous Greek topographer Strabo of Amasia (64 BC-23 AD) in his famous work of the year 20 A.D.—the *Geographica*. He mentions Assyria and





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