

The Assyrian Church in the Mongolian Empire as Observed by World Travelers in the Late 13th and Early 14th Centuries

Stephen Andrew Missick

In the late 1100's fierce horse mounted warriors thundered out of the barren wastelands of Central Asia into history and created the largest empire on land the world has ever known, the mighty Mongol Empire. The fear and dread of the armies of Genghis Khan shook the world. Stories of carnage and shocking brutality committed by the Mongol hordes were spread across Asia, Europe and the Middle East. Any army that opposed the Mongols was speedily crushed. Many of the tribes and warriors of the Mongols were professing Christians. Several tribes had been Christian for centuries. The Mongol Christians belonged to the Assyrian Church of the East, which is also known as the Nestorian Church and the East Syrian Church. The Church of the East was concentrated in the Middle East, especially in the region of modern Iraq and Iran. Early in the Christian era, Assyrian missionaries spread the Gospel of Jesus Christ throughout India, China, and Mongolia.

The Rise of Assyrian Church in the Far East

Due to the missionary endeavors of the Assyrian Christians of the Middle East, Christianity was established in China over 300 years before Russia embraced Christianity and at a time when most of northern Europe was still pagan. Evidence of this was uncovered in the 1600's when Jesuit missionaries discovered in Xian, China an inscribed column that was erected in the year 781. It states in Chinese and Syriac that a Christian sage it calls "Al-lo-pan" arrived in 625 AD preaching about Jesus and his "Luminous Doctrine". It contains a brief statement of the fundamentals of Christianity. According to the monument the emperor received Al-lo-pan, approved of his doctrine and commanded it to be spread throughout the T'ang Empire. Al-lo-pan translated the Bible into Chinese for the Imperial library and established Churches and monasteries with Imperial approval.¹

Al-lo-pan [also known as Alopen] belonged to the Nestorian Ancient Assyrian Church of the East. This church originated among and was dominated by Syriac speaking people of the region of modern Iraq and Iran. The Church of

¹ James Legge, *The Nestorian Monument of Hsi-an Fu in Shen-Hsi China relating to the Diffusion of Christianity in the Seventh and Eighth Centuries* (London: Truber & Co. 1888), 2-31.

the East traces its origins to the evangelistic ministry of the apostle Saint Thomas and Mar Mari and Mar Addai [Thaddeus], who were among Christ's seventy disciples.² In practice, the Assyrian Church has much in common with the Eastern Rite and Eastern Orthodox Churches. The term 'Nestorian' refers to their Christological doctrine that stresses the reality of the human nature of Jesus and that distinguishes it from his divinity. The word 'Nestorian' comes from Nestorius (c.381-451), the Patriarch of Constantinople who enunciated these doctrines.³ Nestorius held that Christ's human and divine natures were distinct. This caused his opponents to falsely accuse him of believing Christ had two personalities. The controversy arose over Nestorius's opposition to the expression 'Mary the Mother of God'. The word in Greek is *Theotokos*, meaning 'Birthgiver to God'. Nestorius felt this was inappropriate because Mary is the mother of Christ's human nature and physical body but not his divinity. Nestorius taught that Mary should be called 'mother of Christ' or 'mother of God, mother of Christ' but never just 'Mother of God'. The Egyptian Patriarch Cyril accused Nestorius of heresy. Nestorius was condemned as a heretic and banished to a monastery near Antioch. From there he was exiled to the Great Oasis in the Sahara Desert. After the storm of controversy abated, the Byzantine Emperor Marcion decided to pardon and release him, but the news arrived as Nestorius was laying in his deathbed. Many Christians who spoke Syriac were attracted to the teaching of Nestorius and those of his teachers, Diodore of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. The Church of the East adopted Diodore, Theodore, and Nestorius as the authorities of church doctrine. Theodore of Mopsuestia is now recognized as one of the greatest Bible scholars in church history. Today many Assyrian Christians object to being referred to as Nestorians. The reason, they argue, is that Nestorius did not found the Church of the East and that the term 'Nestorian' sometimes refers to a heresy that was never held by Nestorius nor by the Church of the East, that being the belief that Christ's human and divine natures were two separate persons within Christ. However, until recently, Assyrians referred to themselves as Nestorians. Also not all members of the Nestorian Church were Assyrians; in fact, many were Indian, Mongol, and Chinese and only used Syriac as a liturgical language. Being accused of heresy by the west was beneficial to the Nestorian Church. Before Christianity was legalized in the Roman Empire many Christians sought

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Baker Book House, 1989), 44-47. And William Barnstone *The Other Bible* (San Francisco: Harper & Row, 1984), 464-479.

³ Nestorius, *The Bazaar of Heraclides*, Frank N. Magill *Masterpieces of Christian Literature in Summary Form* (New York: Harper and Row, 1963), 162-165.

refuge in the Persian Parthian Empire, Rome's traditional enemy. When Constantine ended the persecution of Christians and claimed to be a Christian himself, Persia began to suspect the loyalty of its Christian subjects. When the Assyrian Christians demonstrated that the church in the west had condemned them as heretics, the Persians once again showed the East Syrian Church tolerance. With Persia as its base, the East Syrian Church began to spread out across the Silk Road and throughout all of the Far East.

The West Syrian Church is the other branch of the Syriac speaking Church. This church is also known as the Jacobites and the Syrian Orthodox. A Jacobite is a member of the Syriac Church tradition that rejected the teachings of Nestorius, they believe that Christ's human nature was insignificant and was absorbed into and overwhelmed by his divinity. They are called Monophysites. The term Jacobite comes from Jacob Baradaeus [died 578]. The East Syrian Church was dominant in the East, but wherever Nestorians went the Jacobites often followed. The Jacobite church has survived as the Syrian Orthodox Church.

Al-lo-pan was a native of modern Iraq. Assyrian Christians, like Al-lo-pan, speak Syriac, a form of Aramaic, which is one of the original languages the Holy Bible was written in and was the language Jesus used in teaching and in daily discourse. Both the East and West Syrian churches use Syriac. Syriac is a Semitic language and is closely related to Hebrew, Arabic, and certain Ethiopian languages. Aramaic is important as a language of ancient civilizations and of religion. Aramaic was the language of the early church and first century Judaism. Several of the Early Church Fathers, such as Ephraim and Tatian, wrote extensively in Syriac. In Central Asia and the Far East Syriac was the language of Assyrian merchants and the language of worship for Nestorian Christians. It was also used in diplomacy and on monuments, such as the Xian monument, which is written in Chinese and Syriac, and on tombstones and other memorials. Messages from Europe to the rulers of Mongolia were often written in Syriac. For example, William of Rubruck, a Franciscan priest, traveled across Asia with correspondence from European sovereigns to Mongol overlords which were written in Syriac.⁴

Trade along the Silk Road led to the intermixing of different cultures and religious beliefs. Many different religions coexisted along the Silk Road. Among these were Nestorian Christianity, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, Judaism, Confucianism, Taoism and the Shamanism of the steep nomads. Al-lo-pan had traveled the Silk Road to China preaching the Good News of Jesus Christ along the way. For several centuries brave Assyrian Christians transversed

⁴ Nigel Cameron, *Barbarians and Mandarins: Thirteen Centuries of Western Travelers in China* (New York & Tokyo: Walker/Hill, 1970), 42.

the entire breadth of the Silk Road spreading the message of hope and salvation in Jesus Christ. Many missionaries traveled the entire length of the Silk Road taking the Good News by foot to China and Mongolia.⁵

Around the year 1,000 AD the Mongol tribe of the Keriats became Christian. The tribe numbered over 200,000 men. The story of their conversion was recorded by the Jacobite Bar-Hebraeus and by the ecclesiastical chronicler of the Assyrian Church and can be found in *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia* by Laurence E. Brown.⁶ The chieftain of the Keriats became lost in the wilderness during a hunt and despaired for his life. Suddenly an apparition appeared before him. The supernatural being identified himself as Saint Sergius and promised to show him the way home if he would place his faith in Jesus. Miraculously the chieftain found himself back in his camp. Immediately he sent for some Assyrian merchants he knew of and when they arrived he submitted to Christ and requested religious instruction. This incident shows that Assyrian merchants and traders participated in spreading Christianity as they bought and sold along the Silk Road.

Christianity thrived in China for several centuries. Many relics and artifacts of Christian origin have been found in the Far East mostly along the Silk Road and in the heartland of the Mongolian Empire. Crosses, Christian tombstones and Christian books and tracts in Chinese and Syriac have been found. Some of these antiquities discovered have been dated from the 600's to the 800's AD. The remains of churches and even of some Christian paintings have also been discovered.⁷ Marco Polo mentions visiting hundreds of churches during his travels and seeing thousands of Christians during his travels throughout the Mongol Empire from 1271 to 1295. The Assyrian Church reached its height during the Mongol Empire and was on the verge of becoming the dominant religion of the Empire but unfortunately declined in power due to opposition from Muslims and Roman Catholics and internal weaknesses, notably nominalism. The decline began as certain warlords, including the infamous

⁵ Information on the Silk Road was gleaned from: Aghaghia Rahimzadeh, *The Silk Trade* <http://sorrel.humbolt.edu/~geog309/ideas/agh silk.html> and *Jewels of the Silk Road* <http://pheonix.groucher.edu/~mnash> and *The Silk Road Parts I & II* Central Park Media and UNESCO available from PBS Home Video. Produced by the UN with the Peoples Republic of China.

⁶ Laurence E. Browne, *The Eclipse of Christianity in Asia: From the Time of Mohammed until the Fourteenth Century* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1967), 101-103.

⁷ Nestorian paintings are featured in the following book. Mario Bussagli, *Treasures of Asia: Central Asian Painting* (New York: Skira, Rizzoli, 1979).

Timurlane, began converting to Islam. Timurlane declared a Jihad, Islamic holy War, against the Christians of the Far East and virtually destroyed Christianity in Central Asia.

Before the year 600, the Assyrians had sent missionaries and established Christian communities throughout the Far East. Starting from what is now northern Iraq they spread into Iran then across Central Asia and finally into China. They also sent missionaries to Ethiopia and India.⁸ According to Edward Gibbon in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*,

In the sixth century, according to the report of a Nestorian traveler [Comas Indicopleustes of Alexandria]⁹ Christianity was successfully preached to the Bacterians, the Huns, the Persians, the Indians, the Persarmenians, the Medes, 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 for those sequestered regions derived their ordination from the catholic [the Catholicos, the Assyrian Patriarch] of Babylon.¹⁰

By the year 800 Christianity was widespread in the Far East and a majority of the Mongolian tribes of the Naiman, the Keriat, the Ongut and a large number of the Uighur and the Kara Khitai (from which the word ‘Cathay’ was coined) were Assyrian Christian.¹¹ It was to keep these and other Mongolian tribes from invading their territory that motivated the Chinese to build the Great Wall of China.

The Mongolians fought among themselves and were not much of a threat to the outside world until they were united by a great leader who forged them into

⁸ Chris Prouty and Eugene Rosenfils, *Historical Dictionary of Ethiopian and Eritrea 2nd Edition* (Metuchen, New Jersey: Scarecrow Press), 295

⁹ Cosmas Indicopleustes, *The Fourth Book of the Christian Topography of Cosmas Indicopleustes* <http://ccat.sas.upenn.edu/awiesner/cosmas.html>.

¹⁰ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. iv (New York: Peter Fenelen Collier, 1899), 564-565.

¹¹ Volkmar Gantzhorn, *The Christian Oriental Carpet* (Tubijan, Germany: Eberhard-Karl-Universitat, 1991), 152.

an unbeatable military force. After being protected by the Keriats, Temujin (1167-1227), overcame them and renamed himself Genghis Khan, meaning “Universal (or 'Oceanic') Ruler” in 1206. Genghis Khan was one of the most influential men in history during the second millennium of the Christian era. His armies created the largest land empire in history and his expansion led to the Black Plague being spread in Europe and the European discovery of the Far East. Genghis Khan was barbaric. He is reputed to have said; “The greatest joy a man can have is victory: to conquer one’s enemy’s armies, to pursue them, to deprive them of their possessions, to reduce their families to tears, to ride their horses, and to ravish their wives and daughters.”¹²

The Secret History of the Mongols which is the oldest and most important account of the life of Genghis Khan,¹³ offers a wealth of detail on Temujin’s rise to power. Professor Larry Moses of Indiana University has argued that the author of *The Secret History* “may have been a Christian of the Nestorian sect” due to Biblical allusions he has traced in the text 16. While the author was almost certainly a Nestorian Christian, *The Secret History* is not at all a Christian religious book. It has only one vague reference to the Christian rituals practiced by the Ung Khan, the ruler of Mongolia before Genghis Khan, who was his ally for a while. The biblical allusion mentioned by Professor Moses is to the *First Book of Samuel* Timujin corresponds to David, Jamukha, Timujin’s blood brother to Jonathon and Toghrul the Ung Khan, the Nestorian ruler of Mongolia, to King Saul. The similarities are obvious to the Bible student who reads *The Secret History*.

Ghenghis Khan was deeply religious. His god was *Mongke Koko Tengr*, the “Eternal Blue Sky” and his religion was animism.¹⁴ Animism is the belief in which “natural phenomenon and things animate and

¹² *The Mongolian Conquests: Time Frame 1200-1300 AD* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time Life Books, 1989), 13.

¹³ Three versions of *The Secret History* are available, an easy to read paraphrase by R. P. Spuler, an Elizabethan English translation by Francis Woodman Cleaves and a contemporary English translation by Paul Kahn.

¹⁴ Michael Hoang, *Genghis Khan* (New Amsterdam, New York: 1988), 157-159.

inanimate are held to possess an innate soul.”¹⁵ The spirits they worshipped lived in the world all around; in wind, in fire, and in water and were to be treated with respect.¹⁶ The Mongolian religious leader was the Shaman. (The word ‘Shaman’ is of Mongolian origin.) A Shaman is a witchdoctor or a medicine man. They were believed to have the power to cast out evil spirits, to cure diseases, and to have “direct contact with the spirit world often through dreams or trances.”¹⁷ Some Mongols followed Buddhism, which like Christianity and Islam, is a missionary religion. In the beginning of the Mongolian Empire Christians outnumbered the Muslims among the Mongol tribes.

Before the Mongols converted to Islam they were basically tolerant of diverse religions. Mongke Khan described various faiths to William of Rubruck as “various fingers on a single hand.” Mongke Khan told him, “God has given you the Scriptures... He has given us [Shamans], and we do what they tell us and live in peace.”¹⁸ According to Peter Jackson and David Morgan,

*It was possible, in their view, that any religion might be true: the best course was to secure the goodwill of the ‘religious class’ within each group or sect and thereby seek to guarantee Heaven’s favor towards the dynasty by every means possible. Christian monks and priests, Buddhist lamas and Islamic lawyers, judges, and religious foundations were exempted from forced labor and from payment of taxes. But it was nevertheless important that the Mongol ruling establishment should not become more closely identified with any one religious group...Whatever the religious sympathies of any individual Mongol prince or general, his prime commitment was the maintenance and extension of the Mongolian empire.*¹⁹

¹⁵ *The American Heritage Dictionary*, 2nd College Edition (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co. 1991).

¹⁶ Paul Ratchnevsky, *Gengis Khan: His Life and Legacy* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 155-157.

¹⁷ *World Book Encyclopedia*, (Chicago: World Book, 1994).

¹⁸ Peter Jackson and David Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck* (London: Hakluyt Society, 1990), 195.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 24.

Stories of Ung Khan, the ruler of Mongolia who preceded Genghis Khan, and other Nestorian Christian rulers of Mongolian tribes made their way to Europe and gave birth to the legend of Prester John.²⁰ The European legend held that a powerful priest-king reigned in 'India', meaning the Far East. Somewhere in the Far East, they believed was the magnificent King John of India, known as Prester John of the Indies. He was immortal, fabulously wealthy and also eager to join with Europe to fight a crusade against the Muslims. The legend of Prester John had three historical sources; The Saint Thomas Christians of India, the Christian Empire of the Ethiopian Coptic Christians, and the Nestorians of Mongolia and Central Asia. When accounts of Christians in southern India, east Africa or Central Asia reached Europe they became garbled and confused and eventually became the legend of Prester John. This was due to the fact that Europe at that time had no accurate knowledge of world geography. For centuries Europeans thought that Africa, India and China were all the Indies. The original source of the legend was various Nestorian princes and kings who ruled in Central Asia. Marco Polo, Bar-Hebraeus and William of Rubruck all attempted to identify Ung Khan as Prester John. John of Montecorvino believed that his convert from the Assyrian Church, King George, was a descendant of Prester John.

Nestorians were important among the Mongols in numbers and influence. According to Gibbon, "the Nestorian church was diffused from China to Jerusalem and Cyprus; and their numbers, with those of the Jacobites, were computed to surpass the Greek and Latin communions."²¹ Several Nestorian women from the Keriak tribe had great influence in the affairs of the empire. Samuel Hugh Moffet in *A History of Christianity in Asia*, refers to some of these important ladies:

Genghis' daughter in law, the Nestorian princess, ...Sorkaktani-beki...was one of three Christian sisters each of whom played a noteworthy part in the history of the Mongol empire. The eldest

²⁰ The story of Prester John is dealt with in the following sources:

Robert Silverberg, *The Realm of Prester John* (New York: Doubleday & Company 1972).

Meir Bar-Ilan, *Prester John: Fiction and History*

<http://students.biu.ac.il/~barilm/prejohn.html>

The Catholic Encyclopedia "Prester John"

<http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/12400b.html>

Medieval Sourcebook: Otto of Freising: The Legend of Prester John

<http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/source/otto-prester.html>

²¹ Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. iv, 564-565.

*Ibaka-beki, became the wife of Genghis Khan,; the second Bektutmish, was the senior wife of Genghis oldest son, Jochi. But Sorkaktani, who married the fourth son, Toliu, was destined for yet greater things, she became the Christian mother of three imperial sons, an emperor (Great Khan) of the Mongols [who was Kublia Khan], and emperor of China, and an emperor (il-khan) of Persia.*²²

James Montgomery describes the importance of these Nestorian queens:

*Halagu and his brothers the two khans Mangu and Kublai, and another Arikbuga, had a Christian mother [Sorkaktani], a woman of great force and character. Huluga had a Christian wife, Dakuz Kathon..., She played an important part in favoring the Christians against the Muslims, and through her influence Hulagu had a Christian church attached to his camp... She died the same year as her husband, and [Bar Hebraeus] records, "The grief of the whole Christian world over the departure of these two great lights and champions of the Christian religion."...These Christian queens played their part in religious politics...Abaga's son. King Arghun (1258-1291), had a Christian wife, to whom Pope Nicholas IV addressed a formal letter.*²³

Volkmar Gantzhorn describes Sorkaktani as "a Christian whose vast influence has not been appreciated to this day."²⁴ He describes her authority as immense and says:

She is to be credited in particular with the spread of the Nestorian faith in Asia on the one hand, and also with the Khan's anti-Moslem sentiments... Her influence as 'first lady' on the other women and also on the children only comes out indirectly in the source material. Following her death in 1265, her niece succeeded in continuing her aunt's mission work until the death of Kublai Khan in 1294.

After this period important Mongol leaders began converting to Islam.²⁵

²² Samuel Hugh Moffet, *A History of the Church in Asia* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 402.

²³ James A. Montgomery, *The History of Yaballaha III and of his Vicar Bar Sauma* (New York: Octagon Books, 1966), 6.

²⁴ Gantzhorn, *The Christian Oriental Carpet*, 152.

Rumors of an impending Mongol invasion of Europe spread soon after the Mongols devastated Russia and Hungary. Matthew Paris recorded the alarm and stories of the Mongolians in his histories.²⁶ The Pope together with secular leaders became alarmed and sent ambassadors and missionaries to the Mongolians to find out how serious the threat to Christendom was. Many Franciscan monks and friars were sent and traveled across Asia to the heart of the Mongolian Empire. The crusader King Louis IX, who later canonized as Saint Louis, sent Father William of Rubruck and other priests to visit Mongke Khan. Marco Polo also traveled throughout the Mongolian Empire during this era. Many of these travelers recorded their journeys and frequently referred to the Nestorians they encountered. Nestorian monks also traveled as envoys for the Mongols to Europe. Of the Nestorian monks only the travel diary of Rabban (Syriac for Monk) Bar Sauma has been preserved. Through these primary sources we can get a good picture of the strengths and weaknesses of the Nestorian church in the Mongolian Empire.

Soon after Friar Odoric of Pordenone was ordained, he went out to the Far East as a world traveler and perhaps a missionary as well. He started sometime between 1316 and 1318, returned to Europe before the spring of 1330, and died in 1331.²⁷ He is reputed to have baptized more than 20,000 persons. His story is recounted in *The Eastern Parts of the World Described by Friar Odoric the Bohemian*. He refers to the Nestorians as "vile and pestilent heretics" and as "schismatics and heretics".²⁸ He mentions seeing "houses of the Nestorians", several Nestorian churches and Nestorians in the service of the Khan.²⁹ He also visited the Nestorian Saint Thomas Christians in India.

Rustichello of Pisa wrote a book entitled *The Travels of Marco Polo* in which he recounted the stories told to him by Marco Polo the Venetian. Marco Polo traveled with his father and uncle on a trading mission throughout Asia from 1271-1292. The Polo's were also hoping to spread Catholicism during their

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Jackson and Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, 195.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Micropedia Vol. 9 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1992), 877.

²⁸ Odoric of Pordenone, *The Eastern Parts of the World Described*; Henry Yule, *China and the Way Thither*, vol. 11 (London: Hakluyt Society, 1967), 264.

²⁹ Odoric of Pordenone, *The Eastern Parts of the World Described*, 186.

journeying. Marco Polo claimed that he was favored by Kublai Khan and was made to serve the Imperial family as a government official and ambassador. *The Travels of Marco Polo* is filled with references to the Nestorians. Marco Polo tells us where he saw Nestorian Churches, who some important Nestorians were and which cities had significant numbers of Nestorians. He considered the Christians of the Far East heretics because they did not adhere to the Roman Catholic Church. He first describes them saying;

*There are people who observe the law of Christ, but not according to the ordinances of the Roman Church, for they are at fault in several points. They are called Nestorians and Jacobites. They have a Patriarch, whom they call the Catholicus. This patriarch makes archbishops and bishops and abbots of every degree and sends them out everywhere, into India and Cathay and Baghdad, just like the Roman pope. You must understand that all the Christians you will meet in these countries I am describing are Nestorians and Jacobites.*³⁰

Marco Polo also refers to the Nestorians on Socotra island and the Nestorian Christians of Saint Thomas in Southern India and he mentions Kublai Khan's protection of the Nestorians.

Frances Wood in *Did Marco Polo Go To China?* refers to the incident of Marco Polo (or his sources) discovering followers of Mani and mistaking them for Christians.³¹ This was due to their use of Christian scripture and their special reverence for Jesus Christ. Starting in the year 241 a young man named Mani began teaching a new religion in the Zoroastrian³² Parthian Empire. Mani taught that all religions were true, and that Zoroaster, Buddha and Jesus were great prophets that he had succeeded them as the greatest of the prophets. Mani's religious background was Assyrian Christian. Manicheanism was heavily influenced by the Assyrian church. The success of Manicheanism was due to its building on the foundations laid by Assyrian missionaries. The constant references to Jesus and the honor given to him in these texts attest to the strength of the Assyrian church in Central Asia. The followers of Mani attempted to follow in the steps of the Assyrian missionaries and seduce their Christian

³⁰ Ronald Latham, *The Travels of Marco Polo* (London: Penguin Books, 1958), 51.

³¹ Frances Wood, *Did Marco Polo Go To China?* (London: Secker & Warburg, 1995).

³² Zoroastrianism is the ancient religion of Persia. It is dualistic, which means it holds two gods, a god of good and a god of evil. Zoroastrians worship Ahura Mazda, the good god, whom they believe will ultimately triumph.

converts into embracing the false religion of Mani. Manicheanism completely died away and no longer has any adherents.³³

Many Nestorian priests served as ambassadors for the Mongolians. Rabban Simeon, Rabban Ata met with Andrew of Longjumeau, a European envoy. This monk sent Pope Innocent IV a letter requesting him to be tolerant towards Nestorian Christians and urging him to make peace with Fredrick II. This letter is preserved in the Vatican archives.³⁴ The Nestorian general Eljigidei sent two Nestorian priests to King Louis IX on 14 December 1248. The priests were Dawoud and Markos. Eljiadei wished Louis success in his war against the Muslims and requested he "avoid discriminating between Latin and non-Latin Christians, since under Mongol rule all sects were held to be equal."³⁵ Around the year 1255, two Uighur Mongolian Monks from the city of Khanbalik (modern Beijing) left the city to go on foot on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The monks were Rabban Marcus and Rabban Bar Sauma. They were unable to reach Jerusalem because of warfare there and had to remain in Baghdad. While there, Rabban Markos was nominated as the new Catholicos of the Ancient Church of the East. He was renamed Mar Yaballaha III and ruled the Church of the East from 1281 until his death in 1318. He is the only Mongolian patriarch in history. In 1287 the Il-Khan of Persia, Arghun, who was a Christian sympathizer, sent Rabban Bar Sauma on a diplomatic mission to Western Europe to drum up support for a new crusade. Arghun wanted his Nestorian armies and Catholic Europe to team up for a two front assault that would drive the Muslims out of the Holy Land. While in Europe Bar Sauma met with Emperor Andronicus II Palaeologus of Byzantium, King Phillip IV of France and King Edward I of England. They were all too wrapped up in internal European affairs to have much interest in crusading. Bar Sauma also met with Pope Nicholas IV.³⁶ The

³³ Manicheanism is dealt with extensively in the following two works:

Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Gnosis on the Silk Road: Gnostic Texts from Central Asia* (San Francisco: Harper, 1993). Part of the UNESCO study of the Silk Roads: Roads of Dialogue Project.

Rudolph, Kurt, *Gnosis: the Nature and History of Gnosticism* (Harper San Francisco 1987).

³⁴ Jackson and Morgan, *The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck*, 30.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, 33-34.

³⁶ *Encyclopedia Britannica, Micropedia* Vol. 8 (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, 1992), 682-683.

high authorities of the Roman Catholic Church interrogated Bar Sauma to find if he was a heretic. In his defense he said,

*Mar Thomas and Mar Addai and Mar Mari taught our religion and we hold to the ordinances they gave us until now...many of our Fathers went to the lands of the Mongols and Turks and Chinese and taught them. And today there are many Mongol Christians. Indeed some of the children of the King and Queen are baptized and confess the Christ. And they have churches with them in the Camp. And they honor the Christians greatly, and there are also many believers among them. And the King, since he is assiduous in affection for the Catholicus and is desirous to conquer Palestine and the lands of Syria, desires your help because of the Captivity of Jerusalem.*³⁷

Bar Sauma's writings have been incorporated into *The History of Yaballaha III and His Vicar Rabban Bar Sauma*.

Grigor Yohannan Abu al-Faraj Bar 'Ebhrya, known as Bar-Hebraeus (1225-1286), was a Jacobite priest who wrote profusely in Syriac and Arabic. He authored *Makhetebhanuth Zavne*, a history of the world from the creation till his own time. In his history Bar-Hebraeus mentions the favor shown to Christians, both Jacobite and Nestorian, under Mongol rule. George Lane in "An Account of Gregory Bar Hebraeus Abu al-Faraj and His Relations with the Mongols of Persia" states that Bar-Hebraeus's praise of his Mongol masters is measured and in no way excessive. The Syrian Orthodox Church undoubtedly prospered and experienced a period of stability under Hulagu and Abaqa. Bar Hebraeus stated, "[Under early Mongol rule] the church acquired stability and protection in every place."³⁸

Father William of Rubruck was sent by King Louis IX of France to the court of the Great Khan Mongke in 1253-1255. He was a brave, courageous and sincere man. His account is one of the most important of that era for cultural and historical insight. He traveled not only as a messenger of Europe but also for Christ. William of Rubruck wrote a very detailed account of his experiences for King Louis. Like Marco Polo's, his book is filled with references to the

³⁷ Montgomery, *The History of Yaballaha III and of his Vicar Bar Sauma*, 56-57.

³⁸ George Lane, "An Account of Gregory Bar Hebraeus Abu al-Faraj and His Relations with the Mongols of Persia," *Hugoye: Journal of Syriac Studies*

<http://syrcom.cua.edu/Hugoye/vol2no2/HV2N2GLane.html>

Budge, E.A.W. *The Chronology of Gregory Abu'l Faraj, the Son of Aaron. The Hebrew Physician Commonly Known as Bar Hebraeus Being the First Part of His Political History of the World* (London: Oxford University Press, 1932).

Nestorians. Tim Severin summarizes Father William's opinion of the Nestorians in *In Search of Ghenghis Khan*,

Rubruck was very disappointed that the representatives of Christianity were so poorly prepared. The Nestorian priests, he complained, did not understand their own texts, which were written in the Syriac language. Furthermore, they were usurers, polygamists, and simoniacs who demanded money for religious services, and they took to the bottle. Because their bishop arrived on such a remote location about every fifty years, Rubruck claimed the bishop had the presumptuous custom of going around and anointing all the children, even down to the smallest baby, thereby guaranteeing a future supply of priests.³⁹

Father William's attitude towards the Nestorians matches that of other Catholics of the time. However, when the Great Khan called for a debate of all religions, Father William noted that the Nestorians who participated in the debate were well versed in the Scripture. He records that the Nestorians had the last word in the debate and that they silenced the Buddhist, the Muslims and the Shamans.⁴⁰ He was disappointed that after the debate no one was converted to Christianity and that afterward "the priests of [the diverse] persuasions sat down afterward for a heavy drinking session that lasted the rest of the day."⁴¹

Pope Nicholas IV sent Friar Giovanni da Montecorvino to the great Khan in 1295. Later Pope Clement V appointed him archbishop of Khanbalik. The Catholic's began to make converts in the Far East, mainly from the Nestorians. Friar Giovanni mentions converting a Mongol king named George from the Nestorian faith;

*A certain king of this part of the world, by name George, belonging to the sect of the Nestorian Christians...attached himself to me and to the truth of the Catholic faith...he brought over a great part of his people with him to the true Catholic faith.*⁴²

³⁹ Severin, *In Search of Genghis Khan* (New York; Atheneum, 1992), 152-153.

⁴⁰ Christopher Dawson, *The Mongol Mission* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1950), 194.

⁴¹ Severin, *In Search of Genghis Khan*, 230.

⁴² Alfred J. Andrea and James H. Overfield, *The Human Record: Sources of Global History Volume I: to 1700* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1990), 347-349.

In his writing he often complains about the opposition he faced from the Nestorians. The Nestorians understood that the Catholics were dividing and weakening the Christian community in the Far East. The Catholics were converting people from an indigenous religion to what would seem to the masses to be a foreign sect. Catholics continued to work against the Nestorians for centuries. Later Francis Xavier (1506-1552) would continue to make converts from the Nestorians. In the 1550's the Portugese forcibly converted the Saint Thomas Nestorians to Catholicism. They arrested Syriac priests and sent them to the inquisition in Europe. When the Portuguese left the Saint Thomas Christians quickly renounced the Catholic Church and joined the Jacobite Church.⁴³ Guyuk Khan sent a letter to Pope Innocent IV in which he responded to the scorn Europeans held towards other races and other Christians. He said;

*You men of the west believe that you alone are Christians and despise others. But how can you know to whom God deigns to confer his grace? But we worshipping God have destroyed the whole earth from the East to the West in the power of God.*⁴⁴

Decline of Assyrian Church in Far East

Scholars have offered various explanations for the disappearance of the Assyrian Church in the Far East. *The Encyclopedia of World Art* blames the bubonic Plague:

*In central Asia... the so-called "Seirech'e cemeteries" are known, Four of these were found near the metropolis of Nawakath: two to the west near Fruze....Tombstones found at these sights bear crosses and Syriac inscriptions ranging from 858 to 1345 -the latter year being the probable date of the bubonic plague epidemic that decimated the last survivors of these communities.*⁴⁵

The Black Plague was a contributing factor; however, it was not the primary cause. Samuel Hugh Moffet believes the Nestorian Church disappeared

⁴³ Stephen Neill, *A History of Christian Missions* (London: Penguin Books, 1964), 122-128.

⁴⁴ Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 83.

⁴⁵ *Encyclopedia of World Art*, vol. x (London: McGraw Hill, 1965), 570.

because it was weakened by "isolation, superstition, and syncretism."⁴⁶ There were internal weaknesses in the Nestorian Church which caused it to be devastated by the opposition it faced from the Catholic church and more importantly, Islam. After the death of Kublia Khan many Mongols began to convert to Islam. The Jacobite historian Bar Hebraeus described this change,

*Since the Mongols noted among the Christians sincerity and charity they held the Christians in the early stages of their rule in high esteem. But, later their affection turned to hatred; they could no longer approve of the Christians when many of them [the Mongols] changed over to the Muslim faith.*⁴⁷

The beginning of the end was the conversion of the Il-Khan Ghazan (1271-1304) to Islam in 1295. The Assyrian church lost its Imperial favor and protection. The Mongols began to fight their wars with a new purpose, of *jihad*-holy wars fought for the propagation of Islam. The most notorious Mongolian Muslim warrior is Tamerlane, or Timur the Lame, who lived from 1336-1405. He conquered a huge piece of Asia, covering modern Turkey, Central Asia and India. He used the brutal methods of Genghis Khan. His cavalry rode over children and his armies made pyramids of decapitated enemies. He closed prisoners of war in the walls of the cities he built and buried others alive.⁴⁸

Timur made genocidal attacks on the Christian Armenians and the Georgians. Edward P. Sokol mentions how:

*Christians in the path of Timur's were also slaughtered in great numbers. In Mesopotamia, the Nestorians and Jacobites had since that time been only pallid reflections of their former selves. Nor did Timur show any greater mercy to the Hindus and Zoroastrians he encountered in India and Iran.*⁴⁹

King Henry III of Castille sent Ruy Gonzalez de Clavijo as a diplomat to visit Timur in 1403. Clavijo wrote his experiences in *Embassy to Timorlane*. In

⁴⁶ Samuel Hugh Moffet, **A History of the Church in Asia** (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 411.

⁴⁷ Bertold Spuler, *History of the Mongols Based on Eastern and Western Accounts of the Thirteenth and Fourteenth Centuries* (New York: Poursat Press, 1972), 40.

⁴⁸ *The Age of Calamity: Time Frame AD 1300-1400 AD* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time Life Books, 1989), 73-93.

⁴⁹ Edward P. Sokol, *Tamerlane* (Lawrence, Kansas: Coronado Press, 1977), 234.

many ways it resembles the writings of other travelers to the Mongolian empire. The main difference is that it lacks in references to the Nestorians in comparison with the others. He refers to Nestorian "Chinese Christians" who requested audience with Timur.⁵⁰ The other reference is to the Nestorians Timur had imprisoned. He says:

*So great therefore was the population now of all nationalities gathered together in Samarqand that of men with their families the number they said must amount to 150,000 souls, of these nations brought here together were to be seen Turks and Arabs, and Moors of diverse sects, with Christians who were Greeks and Armenians, Catholics, Jacobites and Nestorians, besides those [Indian] folk.*⁵¹

Timur persecuted Muslims as well as Christians and was willing to form an alliance with Europe to strengthen his empire. However, his actions and those of other Mongolians who took up the sword of Islam devastated the Nestorians. According to *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages* Tamerlane's victories led to the destruction of Nestorian centers of learning and resulted in the eventual reduction of the Nestorians themselves to a handful of refugees in the mountains of northern Iraq and Persia.⁵²

Despite centuries of missionary work and hundreds of thousands of conversions and perhaps millions of adherents, the Nestorian Church of Mongolia died away. There are many reasons why this happened. Perhaps William of Rubruck was right in that the church leadership was corrupt. However, similar abuses were common in Europe and the Assyrian Church in Mongolia was strong enough to produce important historical personalities such as the Ung Khan, Sorkaktani-beki, Mar Yaballaha III and Rabban Bar Sauma. Many were perhaps Christian in name only. It is hard to conceive of a devout Christian participating in the atrocities the Mongols committed, but then again Europe had its crusaders. When William of Rubruck visited the Christian Mongol Chief Sartach he was told by Sartach's representative, Cioac the Nestorian, "You must not say our lord [Sartach] is a Christian. He is not a

⁵⁰ Ruy Gonzales de Clavijo, *Embassy to Tamerlane* (London: Harper and Brothers, 1928), 235.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 288.

⁵² Joseph R. Strayer, *The Dictionary of the Middle Ages* (New York: American Council of Learned Societies and Charles Scribners Sons 1986).

Christian but a Mongol.”⁵³ Sartach worshiped as a Christian and had Assyrian priests attending to him but he considered his identity as a Mongol more important than faith in Christ. Perhaps this cultural idolatry also weakened the Assyrian Church among the Mongols. Divisions in the church also weakened it. Nestorians contended with the Jacobites and then the Catholics came to join the inner communal strife. Islam is also beset by factions but the Muslims stood unified in their effort to eradicate Christianity in Asia. The Nestorian Church in the Far East is not the only church in history to have completely died away. North Africa was also largely Christian and produced such giants as Tertullian and St. Augustine. The church in North Africa (except for the Coptic Church in Egypt) has perished. Internal weaknesses plagued that church too but both the church of North Africa and the Nestorian Church in Mongolia and China died away for the same reason, they were victims of the Islamic Conquest. Figures such as Timurlane arose and propagated Islam with the sword. The Nestorians made the mistake of over relying on the preference given to them by ruling dignitaries. They concentrated on securing positions of favor, such as serving as ambassadors or positioning themselves to be honored by the Christian queens, instead of working to spread the faith and strengthen the congregations. The leadership of the church never imagined falling out of favor. This was a serious blow. Due to the loss of their place of honor and the Islamic *Jihad*, the Church was cut off from its missions. The scattered Mongol churches became isolated and lost contact with the mother church in the Middle East. Then they were hit by the plague, war, and persecution. The church began to shrink and then began slowly dying away. Many converted to Islam imagining it to be a similar religion and saw conversion as a way to escape the stigma of being a Christian. As the Mongol Church died away the Church in the Middle East suffered as well, but despite the troubles has survived till today.

Even though the Nestorian church in the Far East vanished, it did not disappear without a trace. John of Plano Carpini (1180-1252) traveled to the Mongols capital in the 1240s. He was the first papal envoy to travel to Mongolia. Upon his return he wrote *Historia Mongolarum* in which he describes the Mongol's culture, character and history. Most of his information came from interviewing Russians and Turkish Nestorian Christians during his travels. He mentions the Uighurs who he says were “Christians of the Nestorian sect.” He says, “The Mongols took their alphabet, for they had no written characters; now, however, they call it the Mongol alphabet”⁵⁴ The Uighur alphabet and the Mongolian alphabet are altered forms of the Syriac alphabet. These adaptations

⁵³ Cameron, *Barbarians and Mandarins*, 42.

⁵⁴ Dawson, *The Mongol Mission*, 21.

of the Assyrian's alphabet are still used in Mongolia and in the Autonomous Region of Inner Mongolia in China. Aziz S. Atiya in *History of Eastern Christianity*, notes the influence of Nestorian practices on Tibetan or Lamaistic Buddhism, which is the Buddhism of the Dali Lama. He says,

*One relic of Nestorianism in the heart of Asia is said to be the survival of its ritual in a debased form in the Lamaism of Tibet [this ritual includes blessing of bread and wine in a communal meal]. The striking resemblances with Lamaist Monasticism, the use of holy water, incense and vestments of a similar character to Nestorian practices, must be traced to the days of the Nestorian missionary in the high Middle Ages.*⁵⁵

As the Manicheans had before them, the Lamaists also felt compelled to add Christian practices from the Assyrian church to their ritual in order to win more converts. In *Christianity Meets Buddhism*, Heinrich Dumoulin mentions how that many scholars have debated that Nestorianism may also have influenced Amidism and the Tantric School of the "True Word." Amidist Buddhism "because of its amazing spiritual similarity to Christianity, has often been the subject of conjecture concerning a direct [Nestorian] Christian influence."⁵⁶ Amidists believe in salvation through faith alone, in the name of Buddha. Volkmar Gantzhorn in *The Christian Oriental Carpet*, traces the design of the cross, which can be seen in many oriental carpets to the Nestorians and the Armenians.⁵⁷

Conclusion

Even though Christian monasteries were established in China for a time, Nestorian Christianity was much more successful among the Mongolian tribesmen than among the Chinese. Many of the former dominions of the Mongols have converted to Islam; however, Inner and Outer Mongolia have become Lamaistic Buddhist nations, although Shamanism has also survived amongst them. There are very few Christians in Mongolia today none of whom are Nestorians. The Ancient Assyrian Church has survived only in the Middle East and in southeast India. Around 400,000 Assyrians belong to the Ancient Assyrian Church of the East. Most Assyrians converted from Nestorianism to the

⁵⁵ Aziz S. Atiya, *History of Eastern Christianity* (Notre Dame, Indiana: University of Notre Dame press, 1956), 263.

⁵⁶ Heinrich Dumoulin, *Christianity Meets Buddhism* (LaSalle, Illinois: Open Court, 1974), 63-65; 72-73.

⁵⁷ Gantzhorn, *The Christian Oriental Carpet*, 152.

Chaldean Rite of the Roman Catholic Church in the 1600's. There are about 1 million Chaldeans. Assyrians live in Iraq, Iran, and Syria many of whom are immigrating to America. This is causing further depletion of their already small numbers in their homeland, and further loss due to rapid assimilation of American born Assyrians into American culture. The current Catholicos is pursuing union with the Roman Catholic Church. The Saint Thomas Christians of India are now Syrian Orthodox and make up one fifth of the population of the state of Kerala, India. Without dedication and hard work towards the preservation of their language and way of life, the history of the once great Assyrian Church of the East may soon draw to a close. The Assyrians are now facing the danger of disappearing from history as their church vanished from the lands of the Mongols long ago.

