

PERSECUTION OF THE PERSIAN CHURCH UNDER THE SASSANIDS

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The first “firman” of persecution [under the Persian Shah Shapur II] ordered all Christians to pay double tax as a contribution to the cost of the war [between Persia and Rome], and the Catholicos or Patriarch [of the Persian Church], as representing the church, was ordered to collect the amount. This Mar Shimun, the Catholicos [like the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church], refused to do so, on the grounds that his people were too poor to pay and that he was not a tax-collector. His arrest and the destruction of all Christian churches was immediately ordered. He was arrested at Seleucia-Ctesiphon [the Sassanid capital] and taken to Karka d’Ledan where the king was. His farewell blessing to his flock has been handed down to us: “May the cross of our Lord,” he says, “be the protection of the people of Jesus. May the peace of God be with the servants of God and stablish your hearts in the faith of Christ, in tribulation and in ease, in life and in death, now and forevermore.”

He was offered freedom, not only for himself, but for his “melet” or people, if he would worship the sun only once. “The sun went into mourning when its creator died,” said Shimun. The king begged him by the memory of their personal friendship to yield, but the Catholicos remained firm, and on the morning of the first day of the Feast of Unleavened Bread, in the year AD 339, along with five bishops and a hundred minor clergy, he sealed his testimony with his blood. Mar Shimun, the last of the company to suffer martyrdom, died for two of the noblest causes for which it is possible for man to suffer: his faith in God and his duty to his people.

When the martyrdom of Mar Shimun and his companions was taking place, one of those under condemnation, named Hananiah, seemed to waver. At the sight of the sword which was about to fall he trembled and appeared as if about to yield. At this moment a high official in the palace, a prefect by the name of Pusak, called out from the midst of the crowd of onlookers, “Do not be afraid, Hananiah. Shut your eyes a little that you may open them on the light of Christ.” Hardly had he said these words when Pusak was seized by the guards and dragged to the palace before the king. Shapur, annoyed by the intervention of this nobleman and afraid perhaps of finding himself surrounded by officers won over to this new doctrine and who might avenge the death of their co-religionists on his own person, angrily asked Pusak, “Have I not given you work to do? Why then do you ignore my orders and stay to look at the punishment of these good-for-nothings?”

Pusak replied, “Would to God that my work might increase through their idleness and that my life might be changed by their death. As for the work you have given me to do, I esteem it not because it is full of cares, and I value the punishment to which you have condemned them because it is full of joy.” Incensed, the king replied: “You ask death in place of work? You wish to be treated like them?” The happy man answered, “I am a Christian; I believe in their God. That is why I envy their punishment and despise your dignity.” The king, greatly angered by this, cried out, “May he not die like the others, but because he has despised my majesty, and has spoken with me as an equal, seize his tongue and tear it out by the roots through his throat so that those who are living may fear me because of him.” The orders of the king were immediately carried out, and Pusak was put to death most cruelly.

Three martyrs named Hormizdas, Suenas and Benjamin are specially mentioned. The first two were of noble birth. The king [Bahram V] divested Hormizdas of all his dignitaries and made him an ordinary army-camel driver. Some days later he ordered him to be brought before him and had him clothed in linen garments. Then, thinking he would be softened not only by the troubles which he had endured but by the kind treatment now being shown to him, the king addressed him as follows "Do not be so obstinate. Deny the son of the carpenter." Hormizdas, fired with zeal, tore the linen robe from his body in the presence of the king and said "If you think that I will abandon piety for such a gift, keep your present with your impiety." Seeing this, the king drove him from the palace, quite naked. Suenas was robbed of all his wealth, which was very considerable, and obliged to obey the most wicked of his slaves. He even had to abandon his wife, but notwithstanding remained firm and immovable.

Even more interesting from the historical point of view is the case of James the notary. Originally from the town of Karka d'Ersa, at twenty years of age he and fifteen fellow-servants of the king were cast into prison. They were threatened with confiscation of goods unless they apostatized and when they refused to do so, they were condemned to look after elephants the whole winter. After Easter, when, according to custom, the king moved to his summer quarters, they were set to repair and look after the roads on the royal route, including cutting down trees and breaking stones. From time to time, the king chastized them for their stupidity, but they replied, "Everything that comes to us from your majesty is an honour except apostasy."

The summer being over, Bahram began his return journey to Seleucia-Ctesiphon. Mihrsabur [the chief of the Magi, the Zoroastrian priests] informed the king that the constancy of the Christian captives encouraged the other Christians and prevented their denying their faith. "What more can I do to them?" said the king. "Their goods have been confiscated, their houses have been sealed up and they themselves have been tortured." "Would that your majesty would command me, without blows and without murder, to make them apostatize," answered the wicked Mihrsabur. The king delivered them up to his discretion, forbidding, however, to put them to death. Mihrsabur stripped them naked, bound their hands behind their backs and ordered them to be taken each night to a desert place in the mountains where they were laid on their backs and given only a little bread and water. After they had undergone these tortures for a whole week, Mihrsabur called the guards and asked where the "miserable Nazarenes" were. "They are very near death," replied the guard. "Go and tell them," he said, "that the king orders them to obey his wish and to worship the sun. If not, I shall put cords on their feet and will have them dragged all through the mountains until their flesh shall separate from their bones so that their bodies will remain among the stones and only the tendons attached to the skin will be left."

The guards carried out the instructions. Some were unconscious; others, overcome by pain, weakened. The governor loosed them without compelling them to worship the sun or the fire and led them back to Seleucia-Ctesiphon. When they had recovered from their wounds, they fasted, wept and prayed for their apparent defection. James, being of Roman extraction, had remained strong in the faith. He returned to his duties and reported to the bishops what was said in the palace and what Bahram meditated against the Christians and their churches, at the same time encouraging and comforting them. When he learned that in the court he was considered as having apostatized with his fellow servants, he returned to the town, clothed himself with sackcloth, and covering himself with ashes, gave himself to exercises of penitence.

One of the servants betrayed him. He had seen him reading the book of the gospels. Mihrsabur assembled the sixteen confessors. Questioning the first fifteen, he asked if they had not recanted and carried out his wishes. They replied, "We have lost the life which you asked of us once. Do you ask us to apostatize a second time?" He released them and sent them to their homes. Then addressing James, he said, "As for you, have you not denied the faith of the Christians?" "I have not denied the faith of the Christians," said James, "nor do I intend to do so. It is the faith of my fathers." Bahram, irritated by this, condemned James to the punishment of "the nine deaths" and thus he died.

The person who took the most active part in the persecution [at Kirkuk] was Tamasgerd, an officer of the king, who was said to be so moved by the endurance of those who were put to death and so convinced that the faith which gave them strength to endure was from God, that he joined himself to them and received the crown of martyrdom with them. The place of martyrdom and the memorial chapel are both still called, not by the name of any of the bishops who perished there, but by the name of this convert from the ranks of the persecutors who was baptized in his own blood.