

## CHAPTER 18

The girls clustered around Emily's desk intently studying a new magazine “borrowed” from Mr. Dell's desk. *Archaeological Diggings* made the ancient past come to life in glossy full-color pictures taken from historical sites around the globe. Looking at the photographs, the girls tried to imagine some wealthy lady from long ago using the elegant perfume bottles, ornately decorated silver mirror and wearing the fabulous golden necklaces found in a recent “dig”.

Just then Mr. Dell walked in. “Hey, you are stealing my presentation, young ladies,” he said with mock severity. “I found an interesting article that I want to share with the class. You may look at the magazine during the lunch break if you wish, but right now we'd better get our class started.”

Calling the class to order, Mr. Dell said, “Let's have a little quiz this morning. Who can name the king who was responsible for the collapse of the mighty Babylonian Empire?”

“Darius,” chorused the class.

“Which king signed a decree that landed Daniel in the lion's den?”

“Darius.”

“Excellent. Today we are going to learn a bit more about that Biblical king.

“In Iran, at a place called Behistun, there is a mountain face that has detailed carvings along with many cuneiform inscriptions.



[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun\\_Inscription](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun_Inscription)

“On the road linking the ancient capital cities of Babylon and Media there is an impressive limestone cliff that is today a UNESCO World Heritage Site. One hundred meters (300 feet) up the cliff there are carvings which tell the story of Darius the Great who began to rule in 521 BC. To give you an idea of the stupendous size of the carvings keep in mind that Darius' head alone is 5'8” high! The inscriptions on the cliff are written in three languages – Elamite, then Babylonian, and finally in Old Persian. These inscriptions were the key for archaeologists to unlock the cuneiform language in much the same way the Rosetta Stone solved the mystery of the Egyptian hieroglyphics.

“Perhaps fearful of his kingdom being forgotten, King Darius commissioned these carvings and inscriptions to record his accomplishments. Inscribed in limestone are nineteen battles fought by Darius (including a list of the kings he took captive).

“The massive carvings portray Darius as a spiritual man. The largest figure on the cliff pays

homage to Auramazda, the supreme god of the Persians. Carved in stone is Darius' declaration that Auramazda 'granted unto me this empire'. The king issued a royal proclamation: 'Thou who shalt see this tablet, which I have written, or these sculptures, destroy them not, but preserve them so long as thou livest!' Here is a close-up picture depicting Auramazda:



[www.arteyespiritulidadrahmadominicana.blogspot.com/2008/10/aur-mazda.html](http://www.arteyespiritulidadrahmadominicana.blogspot.com/2008/10/aur-mazda.html)

“For visitors who are extra adventurous there is a difficult trail that leads right up to the Behistun inscriptions. It would be quite a thrill to be standing beside thousands of years of history, wouldn't it?” asked Mr. Dell as his class nodded appreciatively.

“Perhaps one of the reasons for the excellent condition of these carvings is that Darius declared a curse on anyone who harmed his carvings or inscriptions. Be sure and remember that if you ever have a chance to visit this ancient site!” cautioned Mr. Dell as the class chuckled.



[www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun\\_Inscription](http://www.en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Behistun_Inscription)

“Here are maps that show the area we'll be learning about in our chapter today,” Mr. Dell said as

he passed out the handouts. “This map show the location of Baku - a sacred city for fire worshippers.



[www.chessbase.com/newsdetail.asp?newsid=4576](http://www.chessbase.com/newsdetail.asp?newsid=4576)

“On the next map please note where Antioch, Syria is. As I'm sure you remember, Antioch became the center for early Christianity and it was there that Lucian founded a school that trained youth to resist the apostasy coming from Rome.

“Please highlight the cities of Edessa and Nisibis on your map – two very important cities in our story of the Church of the East. Edessa was the first major training school for the Church of the East. It was famous for its medical school that trained many celebrated physicians and facilitated ground-breaking medical research. And of course Edessa also had a strong theology department that taught the students how to be competent and caring Christian missionaries.

“Eventually, because of persecution, the college at Edessa had to be moved to Nisibis. For many years that school continued to flourish and provide a strong, well-trained group of Christian leaders for the Church of the East.”



[www.gbgm-umc.org/um2/bible/translation.stm](http://www.gbgm-umc.org/um2/bible/translation.stm)

Picking up the Bible book, Mr. Dell began the new chapter entitled:

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## Fire Worship versus God Worship

As has already been mentioned, a new chapter began for the Church of the East when the Persians conquered the Parthian kingdom in AD 255. Contending with Rome's displeasure was one thing, but suddenly the Church of the East also faced hostilities from much closer to home. The Persian religion, Zoroastrianism, was essentially fire worship. One of their ancient holy sites was located near the city of Baku, Azerbaijan located on the Caspian Sea. Even today followers of that ancient religion make pilgrimages to Baku. As night falls tourists and pilgrims alike gather to watch in fascination as areas of land around the bay come to life with flickering fires fed by huge oil and gas reserves deep under the sea. Zoroastrians claims to have a holy flame that has been burning for 3000 years. Tradition says that that the "Eternal Fire" has burned since the time of the flood and will continue to light the night sky until the end of the world.

No doubt Papas saw many similarities between the Hebrew religion and Zoroastrianism. Some have suggested that Zoroastor (believed to be a contemporary of Daniel – around 600 BC) borrowed doctrines from the Jews to begin his new religion. Angels and an after life were important teachings, along with a resurrection of the dead and a judgment. Foods were divided into clean and unclean meats, a tithe was paid to support the priesthood and they taught that one day in seven was to be sacred.

Many colorful ceremonies and grand processions attracted the people and Zoroastrianism's appeal spread rapidly. Today, the ruins of its fire temples show how widespread that religion was throughout ancient Iran, Iraq and India.

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Pausing, Mr. Dell laid down his book. "Let me show you a few pictures of the amazing fires that appear to set the countryside on fire. The area around Baku is sitting on a huge field of natural gas. In this first picture, taken in the area of Yanar Dag (or "Fire Mountain"), you can see how impressively the natural gas burns as it seeps up through the rock. Visitors come from all over the world to see the spectacular fires.



[www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=959842](http://www.skyscrapercity.com/showthread.php?t=959842)

“If you travel through Iran, Iraq, India and Azerbaijan you will find many fine examples of the fire temples that dotted the countryside and show how widespread were the 'fire religions' of the East. Their traditions teach that 'the Earth was born out of cosmic fire and at the end will be consumed by cosmic fire. Fire purifies everything.'

“Here are a couple of fire temples to give you an idea of what their structures looked like.



[www.travelpod.com/ad/Zoroastrian\\_Fire\\_Temple-Yazd](http://www.travelpod.com/ad/Zoroastrian_Fire_Temple-Yazd)



Abbas Soltani, iranian.com

“This is a coin of Shapur II from around AD 240. Here, cast in bronze, you can see a depiction of traditional fire worship. We will be hearing more about Shapur II in a moment.”



[www.Iras.ucalgary.ca/~volk/sylvia/FireTemple.htm](http://www.Iras.ucalgary.ca/~volk/sylvia/FireTemple.htm)

Mr. Dell picked up his book and continued reading:

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Mithra, the ancient Iranian god of light, was absorbed into Zoroastrianism and eventually became its most important deity. Since Sunday was traditionally devoted to Mithra it was considered appropriate to appoint “the venerable day of the sun” as the Zoroastrian's holy day of worship. Each Sunday the people gathered together to celebrate their life-giving god. The priests declared that Auramazda (their number one god) had said, “I created him [Mithra] to be as worthy of sacrifice and as worthy of prayer as myself.”

Over the centuries Mithra worship gradually became a mystery cult which only initiated men into its mysteries. Since Mithra was the favorite god among the Roman soldiers, sun worship gained widespread prominence as Rome expanded her dominion into new territories. This acceptance of Mithra worship eventually facilitated the transition from the seventh-day Sabbath to Sunday sacredness in both Europe and the East.

Refusing to reverence the “venerable day of the sun” brought persecution on the Church of the East - especially her leaders. Mar Shimun, the Catholicos who served after Papas, found himself in trouble with a childhood friend - the king! The Persian Shah Shapur II (AD 335- 375) demanded that the Christian leader force his congregations to pay taxes for a war being fought between Persia and Rome. “[Mar Shimun] 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 were immediately ordered. He was arrested at Seleucia-Ctesiphon and taken to Karka d'Ledan where the king was. ...

“He was offered freedom, not only for himself, but for his ‘melet’ of 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.” ([www.oxuscom.com/persecution.hutm](http://www.oxuscom.com/persecution.hutm)).

Zoroastrian priests often stirred up trouble against the Christians. Since Persia was at war with the Roman Empire the king feared a conspiracy between the Christians of Rome and those in Persia. The priests were quick to excite the king’s prejudices of the new religion. They accused the Church of the East of undermining their ancient religion and despising their one-thousand-year-old beliefs by honoring the Jewish Sabbath. They also complained that Christians buried their dead in the ground - something Zoroastrians believed defiled the sacred earth. So much reproach brought persecution on the Church of the East. Church buildings were destroyed and many of the leaders suffered martyrdom.

Nevertheless, in spite of persecution, Christians remained strongly committed to evangelizing throughout the East. As in Ireland and Scotland, true education played an important role in building up the Church of the East. Training schools educated and equipped the youth to become successful soul winners. However, there were challenges. In AD 489 the college at Edessa was closed by the Roman emperor because it did not teach Rome’s theological beliefs. Courageous Syrian leaders then moved the school to Nisibis where the college continued to flourish.

Students of today would have felt rather familiar with the courses offered at ancient Nisibis. Students studied science, philosophy, medicine, astronomy, law, Bible theology, geometry, music, arithmetic, dialectics, grammar, and rhetoric. They also became fluent in the Greek, Syrian, Chaldean and Egyptian languages. This thorough education produced intelligent, resourceful and dedicated Christian missionaries who skillfully spread the gospel into foreign fields. The Church of the East is credited with teaching the Turks how to write in their own language and we know that the Syriac characters were the basis for the Mongolian, Manchu [a language spoken in northeast China] and Soghdian [a nearly extinct Iranian language] alphabets.

The students at Nisibis were taught to look at their educational skills simply as tools which would develop respect and trust in their employers. After winning their employer's heart, the Christian looked for opportunities to present the gospel to them. Many powerful government leaders and imperial representatives hired the Christian graduates because of their excellent language, secretarial and mathematical skills. Natural medicine was also well developed and court physicians were often members of the Church of the East.

It took extensive planning to coordinate the educational, evangelistic and organizational needs of the rapidly growing church. One of the more colorful Catholicos at that time was Aba. Aba had been a Magi before his conversion and anyone of the “brotherhood” who converted to Christianity was looked upon by the Persian priests as a traitor. They inflicted horrible tortures - often locking the “offender” in prison to starve to death. Aba was not exempted from their cruelty. The story of his life is an object lesson in courage, steadfastness, and faithfulness to duty.

When Aba became the new Catholicos in AD 538, he quickly felt the Magi's wrath. The Zoroastrian leaders accused him of being an apostate and making new converts to Christianity. When brought before the king Aba admitted to the charges. In his response to the king he said, “I am a Christian. I preach my own faith, and I want every man to join it; but of his own free will, and not of compulsion. I use force on no man.”

The king apparently liked Aba and promised him freedom if he would stop converting Zoroastrians to Christianity. When Aba politely refused the king's generous offer he was taken back to prison and placed under the care of the Magi. Knowing the hatred of the Magi, Aba's friends were afraid for his life. Aba realized that eventually their conspiracies to kill him would succeed so he, accompanied by a couple of his friends, fled to the king. You can imagine the king's amazement as he saw Aba standing before him!

Aba said, "I am the king's servant, ready to die if that is your will. But though I am willing to be executed at the king's order, I am not willing to be murdered contrary to his order. Let the king of kings do justice!" Anxious to keep the Magi happy, the king commanded Aba to be taken back to prison, but ordered that he must not be killed.

Through the intervention of the king Aba was placed under house-arrest where he had freedom to continue his duties for the church. From his safe haven he wrote letters, received visitors, consecrated bishops and helped settle problems that arose in the church. The Magi were understandably angry at Aba's freedom which allowed him to continue with his duties as Catholicos and kept him safe from their plots on his life.

One summer the king commanded Aba to accompany him on a royal tour throughout the kingdom. This journey proved to be a blessing both to Aba and the Church of the East. At each stop along the way, faithful Christians flocked to catch a glimpse of their spiritual leader and receive his benediction. Many of them petitioned the king for Aba's release and soon after their return to Seleucia the king gave the Catholicos an unconditional pardon and set him free.

As may be imagined, the powerful Magi were most unhappy about that development! They waited until the king left the city then quickly whisked Aba away to prison. When news of their action reached the king he sent a strongly worded message demanding that Aba be immediately released. The Magi complied, but the nine years of persecution had worn down his health and Aba died shortly after his release from prison.

Although persecution took its toll on the Church of the East, truth continued to march forward. Fascinating stories were told at the Catholicos's yearly convocations as onlookers listened to reports brought by various representatives of the Church of the East.

Those yearly sessions must have been quite a history and geography lesson to the hushed assembly. They learned that the sprawling country of China was divided into four kingdoms known as the Tartar kingdoms. Each division had a Christian king who ruled over approximately 400,000 families. Imagine the thrill of the listeners as they recognized that within those four kingdoms there were perhaps eight million people - all followers of Christ!

Hearts would have been lifted in praise to God as the Metropolitan, Adam, told about a large marble monument that had been erected in China's capital city, Chang'an. How it would have thrilled the Catholicos to think that the emperor of the most advanced country in the world had ordered the erection of that imposing monument to Christianity. Adam would no doubt have read to the hushed assembly some of the basic tenants of Christianity that had been carved into the black "speaking stone" along with the names of various church leaders.

Those assembled would have rejoiced when a representative from the Lake Baikal area of Siberia related an unique conversion story. One wintry day the Kerait's king became lost on a high mountain during a violent snowstorm. He was convinced that he would die until a giant Being appeared to him in a vision. The Being promised to lead him home if he would accept Jesus as his Lord and Saviour. True to his pledge, the king searched out Christian merchants as soon as he returned to his people. Through those pious men the king learned about the



great God of heaven and His Son Jesus Christ.

Today, we often think of the Far East as decidedly anti-Christian. However, for hundreds of years Christians in high-ranking homes helped influence the laws of their land. For instance, in the early thirteenth century, “the scourge of God” – Genghis Khan - appeared as the leader of the Turko-Mongol peoples. It is a little known fact that one of his wives was a Christian. Some time after his father’s death, Genghis’ son, Ogotai, was elected as ruler. He favored the “Nestorian Christians” and under his son Kuyuk's reign Christians were respected and well treated.

Even secular history verifies the wide-spread influence of the Church of the East. The famous traveler and writer, Marco Polo (who traveled from his home in Venice, Italy all the way to the Orient between 1271 and 1295) tells of meeting large numbers of Christians who were under the leadership of the Catholicos at Baghdad rather than the pope at Rome. He found large centers of Christianity in what today are modern Sri Lanka, India, Pakistan, northern China and Iran.

Perhaps you wonder how the gospel could spread so quickly and with such power in heathen lands. The Church of the East knew there were two things vital for true evangelism: (1) They must have sound doctrine and live out the deep truths of God’s Word and (2) They must then share that truth with others. Those two components will never be separated in a healthy and growing church. That is good counsel for all who want to be effective in spreading the gospel to all the world.

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“How come we've never hear any of this history, Mr. Dell?” questioned Emily as her classmates nodded. “I've been telling my parents about some of the things we are learning and they say it is new to them, too.”

“Maybe part of the answer is that we grew up in the West where Rome wrote much of our history,” replied their teacher. “Like we learned in our story about Patrick – the victor writes the history. When paganism again flourished in the East, most of the records where wiped out. I am grateful to a scholar like Dr. Wilkinson who researched this almost forgotten history and presented us with these little-known stories.”

B.G. Wilkinson, *Truth Triumphant: The Church in the Wilderness* (Teach Services, Brushton, New York, 1994) Chapters 17

([www.oxuscom.com/persecution.hutm](http://www.oxuscom.com/persecution.hutm)).

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Mithra>

<http://brow.ca/Books/Religion/Religion6/html>

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