

THE TRAVELLER.

THE NESTORIANS, OR THE LOST TRIBES.

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CHAP. VI.

Nestorians.—Churches; Worship; Sabbath.—A Tale.—Preservation of the Scriptures.—Strife with the Koords.—Pastoral Life.—Resources.—Character. Females.

"The sound of the church-going bell
These valleys and rocks never heard."

OCTOBER 20.—*Sabbath.* A thin piece of board was struck rapidly with a mallet, to call the villagers to church at the rising of the sun. Each person, on entering the church, put off his shoes, and testified his reverence for the sanctuary of God, by kissing the doorposts or threshold, and passed on to kiss the Gospels lying upon the altar, then the cross, and finally the hand of his religious teacher.

The church, like all I saw in the mountains, was a very solid stone edifice, with arched roof, and might stand for ages. Others that I saw had stood for more than fourteen centuries, according to their ancient records. For the narrow door, (which would not admit a man without much stooping,) the usual explanation was given, "Strait is the gate," &c., a truth of which they wish to be reminded when entering the sanctuary. The prayers, and the singing or chanting of the psalms, were all in the ancient Syriac language, and quite unintelligible to the common people; but one of the priests read a portion of the Gospels, and gave the translation into the vulgar Syriac spoken by the Nestorians: and this constituted the preaching. Sometimes the reading is accompanied by some explanations or legendary stories, of which they have many.

It was a sacramental occasion; and the bread and wine were consecrated in the sanctuary or "holy place" of the church, and then brought out by a priest and a deacon, while each member of the church went forward in rotation, and partook of a small piece of the bread from the hand of the priest, who held a napkin to prevent any particles from falling, as he put the morsel into the mouth of the communicant; and then he drank of the wine, which was held with great care by the deacon, so that not a drop should be spilled. But there was none of that idolatrous adoration of the host, so characteristic of the mass of the Romanists, and of the other Oriental churches. On the contrary, there was almost a scriptural simplicity in the observance of this solemn ordinance.

The priest who had officiated in the prayers and instruction of the congregation first partook of the sacred elements, and then invited me to partake. Hitherto I had never partaken of this ordinance with the Nestorians; but to have declined under present circumstances would have done as much injustice to my own feelings as to theirs. For many months I had not been privileged with coming to the table of the Lord: God had in great mercy preserved me through many perils, and brought me among a people who had received the Gospel from the apostles and immediate disciples of our Saviour, and had preserved its doctrines with a great degree of purity; and though there was painful evidence of a great want of spiritual life, I was encouraged to hope that some almost smothered sparks of vital piety were still burning upon these altars. I could not but regard it as a branch of the true church of God, though immersed in the darkness of gross ignorance, superstition, and spiritual torpor, yet not of death. But there was still much in their character and circumstances of deep and lively interest; my heart was drawn out towards them in warm affection; and seldom have I commemorated the dying love of Christ under circumstances more deeply interesting, than among these primitive Christians, in the wild mountains of ancient Assyria.

There was great stillness and propriety of deportment in the congregation, and all retired without noise or confusion. In passing out, each person received at the door a very thin leaf of bread, rolled together, and enclosing a morsel of meat. This was the "love-feast" of the early Christians of the first and second centuries.*

Several of the people then went to the house of the church steward, and partook of a more substantial but plain repast, retiring soon after to their houses or calling upon their more immediate friends. The day was observed with far more propriety than I have seen among other Christians of the East. There was a general stillness throughout the village, such as I have noticed in few places in more highly-favoured lands. There was no noisy merriment, no attention to secular business; and the social intercourse of the people was nothing more than what was practised in the ancient Hebrew Church. Formerly they are said to have regarded the Christian Sabbath with so much sacredness, as to put to death persons for travelling on that holy day.

In the evening many of the people again assembled for worship at the church, and morning and evening prayers are offered there through the whole week. But, unlike what I have seen any where else in the East, many of the people say their prayers in their own dwellings, instead of going to the church during the week; and a small wooden cross may be seen hanging from a post for them to kiss before prayers—a practice which they regard as a simple expression of love to Christ, and faith in his death and atonement. The cross, however, is not considered, in any sense, as an object of religious worship.

Oct. 21.—At dawn of day the people came in great numbers for medical aid, and I soon became so thronged by them that I was obliged to stop my prescriptions till they should retire to a distance, allowing no more than three or four to come forward at once. Many of the applicants came from other villages. There were many suffering from bilious affections, intermittent fever, &c., the consequence of the rice-fields, and extensive irrigation of the gardens in the village, together with the great heat of summer, which must become oppressive from the concentration of the sun's rays in these narrow vales. The mountains rise so abruptly that most of the soil is prepared for cultivation by forming artificial terraces. These are supported by a stone wall on the lower side, while one terrace rises above another, and the houses are dispersed among the gardens.

At a short distance from Lezan, a precipice is pointed out, where the people say their forefathers, before the Christian era, were in the practice of carrying up their aged and helpless parents, and throwing them down the mountain to relieve themselves of the burden of their support. At length, the following incident put an end to the horrid practice:—A young man, who was carrying his aged father up the precipitous mountain, became exhausted, and put down his burden to rest; when the old man began to weep, and said to his son, "It is not for myself, but for you that I weep. I well remember the time when I carried my father up this same mountain; but I little thought then that my turn would come so soon. I weep, my son, to think that you too may soon be dashed down that dreadful precipice, as you are about to throw me." This speech melted the son's heart; he carried back his venerable father, and maintained him at his own home. The story was told to others; it led to reflection, and from that time the practice ceased. This may serve as a specimen of the fables of the country, if it be no more than a fable.

It was about ten o'clock before I could prescribe for the numerous applicants for medical aid, though I had most of my medicines folded in separate portions, so that I could deal them out with great facility. I then proceeded up a creek which here empties into the Zab, and before night arrived at the village of Asheetha, (or avalanche)—so called from the circumstance that avalanches are remarkably frequent here. The remains of some of them were still to be seen in the ravines just above the village, from which it is said they never disappear.

We travelled for four or five miles through an almost continuous village, from which the people often came out to salute us or ask for medicine. At one village of about one hundred houses, on the side of the mountain, there were said to be no less than forty men who could read, which was regarded as a remarkably large proportion for a population of a thousand or more souls! Probably but a small part of them can read intelligibly the ancient Syriac, their only written language.

At Asheetha, I became the guest of priest Abraham, (Abraham,) who is reputed the most learned

Nestorian now living. He has spent twenty years of his life in writing and reading books, and has thus done much to supply the waste of, if not to replenish, the Nestorian literature. But even he had not an entire bible; and though the Nestorians have preserved the Scriptures in manuscript with great care and purity, so scarce are the copies, that I have not found but a single Nestorian, and that one the patriarch, their spiritual head, who possessed an entire bible: and even that was in half a dozen different volumes. Thus divided, one man has the Gospels, another the Epistles, the Psalms, the Pentateuch, or the Prophets. Portions of the Scriptures are also contained in their church liturgy or ritual. The book of Revelation, and two or three of the shorter Epistles, they did not possess till furnished with them by our mission; and these portions of the Bible appear not to have reached them when their cannon was made up. But they readily received them upon the testimony of other Christian nations, and the internal evidence of their authenticity.

The Nestorians attach the greatest value to the Scriptures, and are desirous to have them multiplied among their people, in a language which all understand; and when I told priest Auraham of the power of the press to multiply books, his keen, expressive eye was lighted up with a new brilliancy, and he manifested a strong desire to see it in operation here.

Seeing me taking the catalogue of his small library, he begged me to write down his application for the Scriptures he had requested; and others, following his example, said, "Write down my name;" "Write my name, that I may have the Gospels too;" referring to the four Gospels in the ancient Syriac, which is the only portion of the Bible printed in the Nestorian character.

This priest may yet prove an efficient aid in our future efforts for the improvement of his people. His twenty years' toil, in copying the few words of the Nestorian literature, are beyond all commendation, when we think how small was his encouragement, and that he stood almost alone in the work. No wonder that he was deeply animated, or, I might rather say, almost electrified at the prospect of seeing a power in operation which could do his twenty years' work in a less number of days, and at a far less expense than what he had paid for his paper and parchment. His style of writing with the reed was truly beautiful, and the glossy lustre such as can scarcely be equalled by type. He was very desirous to see schools established for the education of his people; and said that great numbers would attend, if we would open a school in the village.

The people here say they can bring a thousand armed men into the field; and, estimating them as one to five of the whole population, this would give five thousand souls to this single village, the largest in the mountains. About half of the people spend the summer with their flocks upon the mountains, living under tabernacles of reeds and bushes, or in tents; while the remainder cultivate their gardens, and follow other employments at home. In these villages, where the whole population remains through the winter, the people dwell in entire security; but they are sometimes brought into collision with their Koordish neighbours while pasturing their flocks in their immediate neighbourhood. Such was recently the case with the Nestorians of this village.

While they were pasturing their flocks on one bank of the Habor, a powerful tribe of Koords from the other side surprised them in the night, and drove away about 5000 of their sheep. The Nestorians then took possession of a pass, that led to the winter-quarters of the Koords. The latter, finding themselves shut in where they could not long find subsistence, sent to the head chief of the Hakary tribes of Koords, to ask his interference; and this chief sent a liberal present to the patriarch, hoping in this way to induce the Nestorians to relinquish their advantage. To prevent open hostilities, and keep on good terms with the Hakary chief, the patriarch acceded to the proposition, but intimated to his people here that they might obtain redress at another time. Consequently, the Nestorians suffered the Koords to return to their winter-quarters, taking their booty with them, and the Nestorians came back to their village. Thus stood the case when I visited them; but, while I was at the patriarch's, I learned that the Nestorians made an incursion into the villages of these Koords, and drove away about 4000

* Mosheim's Ecclesiastical History, vol. 1. p. 54.