

MESROB MASHDOTZ

Mashdotz was born in the village of Hatsekatz in the province of Daron some time in the late 4th century.

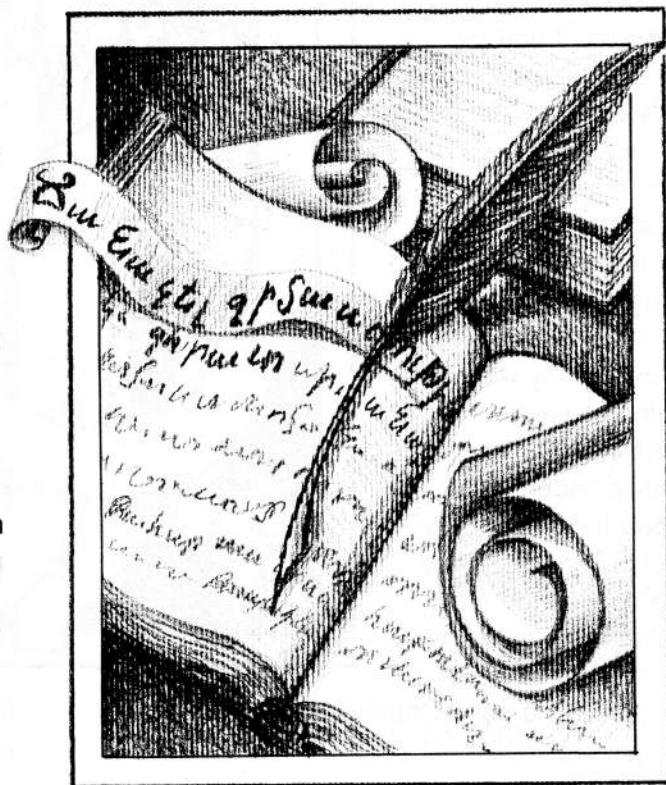
His father, Vartan, sent him to learn Greek literature when he was a child. Eventually, he served in the royal court of Armenia directly under the military governor, Arvan. Mashdotz was greatly admired by the princes for his understanding of law and military matters, but he still found time to read the Bible and the works of Christian philosophers. He was eager to learn more about God. In fact he was filled with such love for his faith that he left his duties in the court, became a monk and, for a time, lived alone on a mountainside with little to eat or drink. He hardly slept, praying day and night, thinking about his new life. Soon he had a group of young followers who wanted to learn from him. Word of his goodness and wisdom spread throughout Armenia.

With his students, Mashdotz went to the province of Goghthn, a place still untouched by Christianity. He taught the people there about Christ and they eagerly accepted his instruction. Mashdotz was overjoyed to see a new life blossom in these people as they rejected their superstitions and fears. He was so moved by this transformation that, after many tears and worried prayers, he was more determined than ever to do what needed to be done.

Mashdotz went immediately to his spiritual father, Catholicos Sahag. This great man had the same concern, and they prayed together for strength to carry out their plan. First of all, they called a special council of priests to see what might be done to develop an alphabet for Armenia, since they would need to read and learn in their own tongue. Even Vramshabouh, the King of Armenia, was asked to help, and he did so by providing a set of Armenian letters created by the Syrian bishop, Daniel. Unfortunately, tests with children in various parts of Armenia showed that they were not adequate. A new set of letters had to be found.

With the blessings of the King and Catholicos Sahag, Mashdotz sent his pupils on a mission; some were to learn Syriac in Edessan schools while others were sent to Samosata to learn Greek. These were the two languages in which Armenians of the time learned about God. These were the alphabets used in worship and in Bible reading. It was important for the young Armenians to learn as much as they could about these languages so that they could be better translators.

While his students were eagerly training for the work ahead, Mashdotz withdrew from the world and prayed day and night for help from God. It seemed an impossible task to devise an alphabet out of absolutely nothing, to create written letters for the beautiful sounds of his beloved tongue. Only God could create! Saint Mesrob, who had given his entire life to the service of his people and was praying now for God's help to make it just a little bit easier, was granted that help at a time when he felt so desperate, when he needed God so badly. God



gave him an idea—as He had done for so many men and women who had worked and prayed for the key to a mystery—and out of the love and hope of Mashdotz himself, came all the letters of the Armenian alphabet. They came to him in a vision, a vision from his very heart and soul. In it he saw a hand writing the letters on rock and they were all as clear and well-defined as if they had been traced on snow.

Mashdotz found a Greek scribe, Roupanos, who was able to draw all the letters with the right curves and lines. Once this miraculous set of letters was finished, Mashdotz brought his pupils together at once to translate the Holy Scriptures into the new written Armenian. They began with the proverbs of Solomon. Not surprisingly, the first words written in the brand new Armenian letters were, as tradition tells us,

“that men may know wisdom and instruction, understand words of insight . . .”

Immediately they began to teach others the alphabet and set out translating at a feverish pace.

Returning to Edessa, Mashdotz showed the bishop the new Armenian alphabet. His fine achievement and the work of his energetic pupils were applauded and they were encouraged to continue. And at last, after a full year of prayer, study, and training, Mashdotz and his followers set off for Armenia. They were gratified to see the city of Vagharshapat, capital of Armenia, loom just beyond them, and overjoyed to know that they were bearing the most precious of gifts to their people, a language of faith that would bring Christ closer to every Armenian heart.

Even Moses, who came down from the mountain with the ten commandments in his

hands, could not have been happier than Mashdotz was at that moment. For Moses brought commandments to a people who had forsaken God and needed laws to bring them to Him again. Mashdotz bore this gift of God to a people who were eager to receive Him. When the king and bishop knew their beloved friends were returning, they went to greet them. With huge throngs of people and all the nobles of the city, the king and bishop filed down to meet them in a welcoming procession. After warmly embracing their returning heroes, they all sang hymns and prayed and returned to the city, singing and dancing.

With that first small success in the shadow of Ararat, a new feeling came over Mashdotz and his pupils. The gospel was being read, written, taught in Armenian! Though the people of this land had been visited by the great Illuminator, Gregory, less than a hundred years before, they had not yet taken the faith into their hearts. And how could they have! How could they have made their own a faith that was articulated in the sounds and letters

of other lands? Now they were beginning to worship, read Scripture, and learn all the profound concepts of their faith for the first time. Mashdotz' heart overflowed with love for God and his people.

A great teaching movement began: young men were taught the Armenian alphabet and sent off to teach both the alphabet and the faith to their countrymen all over Armenia. And in turn, people from all over Armenia came to study these letters and the Word of God.

Mashdotz and Sahag, like Moses the law-giver and Paul the missionary, sent teachers to the four corners of Armenia, spreading the Word of God.

