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THE MESSAGE OF VARTANANTZ

Vartanantz illustrates what people can accomplish when they let God direct their lives and influence their thoughts and actions. The message of Vartanantz applies to each of us today. It is not my intention to go into great detail, but in order to appreciate this event, let us take a look at what was going on in Armenia prior to the confrontation with the Sassanids of Persia.

To put the battle of Vartanantz into a proper context, we must remember that Byzantium and Persia signed a treaty in 387 A.D., the same year that Vartan Mamikonian was born, dividing Armenia between them. One Armenian vassal state was under Persian rule and the other Byzantium, the Hellenistic Roman Empire with its capital in Constantinople.

Persia acquired the great part of Armenia and the feudal system continued to be in Armenia as its social and political organization. Persian Armenia was ruled by *marzbans* appointed by the Persians. During the time of the Vartanantz battle, Vassac was the *marzban*. Next in the hierarchy came the *nakharars*, the Armenian word for the hereditary heads of the princely houses.

The *nakharars*, such as Vartan Mamikonian, ruled over their fiefs, or estates, within which they enjoyed almost complete fiscal, judicial and administrative autonomy. They also raised and controlled their own armed forces. The *nakharars* took an oath to the king to furnish cavalry troops in time of war. Occasionally the Persian King would call them in assembly to seek their advice. In other words, a *nakharar* was a nobleman, a warrior, a vassal and a lord—all at the same time. He was a nobleman because he was born into the noble class. He became a warrior when he decided to do his service in the military. He became a vassal when he promised to serve the king for a fief, or estate. Finally, he was a lord when he gave part of his own fief to his son.

In 414 Persia was under the rule of Yazdegerd I. He gave freedom to the Christians and Jews in his empire and allowed them to have their own religious organization. The nobles of his realm had him killed in 420 because of his liberal ways. They feared the Armenians were aligning themselves with Byzantium. Gradually the Persian rule became more oppressive and a process of Iranization of



Armenia was attempted mainly through the channel of religion. Yazdegerd II came to the throne in 438. He decided to force the conversion of Armenia to Mazdeism, the worship of the sun and of fire.

The Church, the nobility and the people rallied around their religious and national leaders. The Persian edict of 448 commanded acceptance of Zoroastrianism. The council of the Armenian Church convened in 449. It was from this meeting that the poignant answer based on the following from Romans 8:38 and 39 was sent to the Persian king: "For I am sure that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God in Jesus Christ our Lord."

Yazdegerd was furious. He summoned the most important Armenian nobles. Vartan and the others decided they would announce a temporary sham apostasy, in order to escape from the king and to return to Armenia to protect their homes and churches. Vassac, the traitor, informed the Persians of the plan. The Persian order was given for the churches to be changed to pagan temples. The noble women and the rest of the populace abhorred the thought.

After the bitter cold of winter had passed, both Armenian and Persian armies had advanced to the field of Shavarshan near the village of Avarayr north of Van on opposite banks of the river Deghmout, a tributary of the river Arax.

Yeghishe, the author of the Vartanantz epic, writes "not only valiant men but gallant women as well came out fully armed with helmets on their heads because generally all men as well as women were equipped with the same militant spirit, wearing the same armor of faith in Christ. The night before the battle the devout prayed incessantly and the voices of the clergy never ceased to sound psalms, and the reading of scriptures." Catechumens were baptised, and communion was administered.

Priest Ghevont, who was an inspiring speaker, offered a short prayer: "Lord, open our eyes that we may see and comprehend that issue which is greater than saving our lives. We are fighting to uphold the sovereignty of God and maintain the spiritual values in which we believe. Look with mercy upon our voluntary self-offering and deliver not the Church into the hands of the heathen!"

Vartan also spoke to his men. He said, "We have fought many battles together. Those who bravely thrust themselves forward won fame for their bravery and received great rewards from the king who is himself only a mortal...Now, if we performed these acts of bravery for the mortal commander, how much more should we do for our Immortal King who is the Lord of the living and of the dead and who will judge men according to their works..."

When dawn broke, the Divine Liturgy was celebrated by the Armenians before the battle commenced. The battle of Avarair lasted one day. It was fought on Saturday, May 26, 451. Three thousand five hundred forty-four enemy lives were taken. Vartan fell with one thousand thirty-five of his inspired warriors. Just as Christ's death on the cross was a victory over death, so was that of Vartan and his brave followers. For as Yeghishe has said, "Death, when not comprehended, is death, but death, if comprehended, is immortality."

Yes, the battle lasted only one day but the Armenians

were now imbued with unquenchable religious and national fervor. After the battle, thirty-six of the Armenian princes, clergy and many others were taken into exile. They were kept from their homeland for twelve years except for the leading clergy, Catholicos Hovsep, Priest Ghevont and Bishop Sahag, who were secretly martyred. Vassac, the Judas of our story, died a horrible death in a Persian dungeon.

The others went into the mountains to continue guerilla warfare. Yeghishe gives us an account: "I am unable to give the exact number of the wives and widows of the men in bondage or fallen in battle. The ones I am not acquainted with are many more than those I know. I recognize about five hundred by name, some of highest nobility, but many of lesser rank..."

"Although all of them had maid servants, it was no longer clear who was the mistress and who the lady's maid. The garments were all alike, and they all slept on the ground. No one made the bed of another, because they could not distinguish one pallet from another.

"These women of nobility no longer had chefs to prepare special delicacies for them, nor private bakeries to provide them in the manner to which the nobility had been accustomed. No soap ever came into the hands of the graceful ladies and no fragrant oils were offered as in time of festive merriment. They acted as if they had never had foster nurses or beloved kin. The delicately bred ladies of Armenia went on foot, bare-footed to the houses of worship, making vows and offering prayers untiringly, that they might be able to endure their great suffering. The skins of their bodies darkened, because in daytime they were burnt by the sun and all through the night they lay on the ground.

"They forgot their feminine weaknesses and assumed masculine virtue in spiritual warfare. They conquered cunning with simplicity and cleansed the bluish stain of jealousy with holy love. They severed the roots of avarice so that the deadly fruits of its branches withered. They vanquished arrogance with humility and reached celestial eminence with the same humility."

Shooshan, daughter of Vartan, married a Georgian noble who denounced Christianity and tried to force his wife to do the same. She, the mother of four children, stood fast to the faith of her great grandfather, her grandmother and her father; St. Sahag, Sahaganoosh and St. Vartan, respectively. After seven years of imprisonment, she was martyred in 458 A.D.

One chapter remains. In 485 Vahan Mamikonian, son of the great Vartan's brother Hmayak, inherited his uncle's rights and titles. Vahan's mother Zuvig was well known by her contemporaries for her intelligence. It was she, along with her sister and Vartan's daughter, Vartanoush, who opened the school where Vahan received his education. Vahan, in military and moral struggle regained autonomy and freedom of our Church and culture with the treaty of Nuvarsak: the first treaty in history made for freedom of conscience. The Persians realized at long last that the indomitable spirit of the Armenians must be granted freedom. Vahan became *marzban* and spent his life in reconstruction of Armenia.

Yeghishe's history of Vartanantz, which is our main source of information, styles his epic to the history of the Maccabean wars, which tells the story of the resistance of