

encouraging remarks and the passionate instruction to all present to learn their faith and to allow it to reflect in everything they do and say. "Now we have a book about the beautiful blessing services of the Armenian Church; before we had nothing on the subject for today's readers. We can only hope and pray that as these materials are produced, our faithful will read them and take their contents to heart. Because the more we know about our Church, the more we will want to know and the more a part of its family we will become."

The Primate commended all involved in the project, with especially warm words for Yeretzgin Rose. *Bless, O Lord* is available through the St. Vartan Bookstore for \$8.95 plus \$1.50 postage. Inquiries can be made directly to the Bookstore or the Department of Religious Education at (212) 686-0710.

JONAH

2 Kings 14:25 is the only other mention of this prophet, and that would place him in the mid-8th century B.C. Nineveh, capital of powerful Assyria (Israel's enemy) and subject of this book, was destroyed by the Babylonians in 612 B.C. If Jonah did not write the story himself, it was probably written after this date (see 3:3). Whether we take the book as 'history with a moral' or as parable (and the Bible contains many parables, though none as long as this), there is no doubt about the main message. God's concern extends beyond Israel to the whole world. Jesus focused attention on two further points: the parallel with the three days between his own death and resurrection; and the ready repentance of the Ninevites in contrast to his hearers (Matthew 12:40; Luke 11:32).

1 Jonah runs away

4:2 tells us why. Jonah was not afraid to go to Nineveh (verse 12 shows plenty of courage!). But he knew God: he knew that if the Ninevites changed their ways God would forgive them. And Jonah wanted this cruel threatening enemy nation destroyed. So in deliberate disobedience he sets out in the opposite direction. By trying to save his life, the heathen sailors display more humanity than the man of God (13).

A great fish (17): although sperm whales and large sharks capable of swallowing a man are not unknown in the eastern Mediterranean, this incident is clearly intended to be seen as a miracle. It is one of the many things God "appoints" in the story (see 1:4; 4:6-8). Arguments over this must not be allowed to blind us to the whole point of the story.

2 Jonah's prayer

This psalm records Jonah's cry to God when he was at death's door ("the belly of Sheol," 2). At last he comes to his senses, remembering his 'true loyalty' (8). And God, who has already saved him from death, gives him a "second life."

3 Nineveh's response

Given a second chance, Jonah leaps to obey. And his message produces a remarkable effect. The whole city, from the greatest to the least, repents. And God spares them.

Three days' journey (3): this applies to the district of

Nineveh as distinct from the city: "Greater London," so to speak.

God repented (10): see Amos 7:3.

4 A hard lesson for Jonah

Jonah wanted God to confine his love and mercy to Israel. Let the heathen get their deserts. Far from being delighted that his message provoked such a fantastic response, he was furious. And it wasn't simply that he didn't want to look a fool. There was no spark of compassion for the people of Nineveh in Jonah's heart. And so God used a plant (the shady castor-oil plant) to make him feel something of his own pity for men and women: "Should I not pity Nineveh?" Verse 11: the city could well have housed this number of people. The inner wall formed a circuit of 7 3/4 miles. Not knowing their "right hand from their left" expresses their utter innocence of God and His laws.



THE MESSAGE OF VARTANANTZ

Vartanantz is about Armenian clergy, noble men and women and peasants but mainly it is about what people, great or small, male or female, can accomplish when they let God direct their lives and influence their thoughts and actions. And this message applies to each of us today in our modern setting with different causes and different problems as much as it did in days gone by. I find several parallels between the Bible and this episode in the history of an ancient and noble race to which we all belong in one way or another. I try to point them out as we come to them.

The Battle of Vartanantz took place over 1500 years ago when a band of 66,000 Armenians valiantly and willingly met the foe of 300,000 Persians for the sake of freedom of conscience and the Christian faith. 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 this battle into a proper context it would help to know that Byzantium and Persia, or Iran, signed a treaty in 387 A.D., the same year that Vartan Mamikonian was born. Armenia was divided between them, with one Armenian vassal state being under Persian rule and the other Byzantium, the Hellenistic Roman Empire with its capital in Constantinople.

Persia acquired the greater part of the country and the feudal system continued as its social and political organization. This part of 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 had been 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 land to those who promised to serve him. The Mamikonian fief, which was passed on from father to son, included the position of commander-in-chief of all the armed forces of Armenia.

Next in the social order after the *nakharars* were the *sebouhs*. They were the princely cadets. Then came the *azats* who were the minor nobility, the vassals of the king or of the *nakharars*. The *ramiks* were the lowest order in the feudal system, which included the common city dwellers and free peasants. In time of war they formed the infantry. They paid taxes in service or in grain and other farm products but received no pay and had no share in the spoils of battle.

The life of the nobles centered around fighting. In peacetime they practiced for war and were entertained at banquets by musicians and dancers. Hunting was the favorite pastime of the nobility. Some rulers planted large forests and stocked them with wild animals as hunting preserves.

Before I started in earnest to research for this paper, I envisioned the women pampered and protected, waited upon and served, and ill prepared for the challenge that would come their way. I was very happy and pleasantly surprised to discover that the delicate women of nobility were not idle at all. The women had private quarters within castles and homes of the wealthy. Most likely they were trained to sew, spin and weave, and to rule the household servants. They, as well as their husbands, adorned themselves with jewelry and the latest fashions and concerned themselves with the customs of the day and entertainment. They attended the theater with their spouses and were often present at the banquets given by their husbands. They controlled a certain amount of wealth and owned property. They were instructed in church history and the Christian faith. I would venture to say that beneath their lives of relative ease they were wise and strong, influenced the decisions of their husbands and most certainly helped to mold the Armenian character from the cradle.

The clergy were included in the class of freemen (*azats*) or the minor nobility and received fiefs. The see of the Catholicos was in the royal domain and at that time his lineage was still from St. Gregory the Illuminator. When Christianity had been brought to Armenia by Sts. Thaddeus and Bartholomew during the first century Armenia was torn by civil discord and numerous wars and the people were disillusioned with their pagan gods and goddesses. Thad-

deus' message of a loving, personal God who gave His son to die for man's salvation was taught to many. Princess Sandoukt, the daughter of King Sanatrouc, was converted and baptized by St. Thaddeus. Her father ordered her death because she would not deny Christ. She was the first Armenian of noble rank to die for Christianity. In fact this young girl of no more than 18 years of age is the first martyr of the Armenian Church. Before St. Gregory had baptized King Dirdad in 303, the king had martyred the nun St. Hripsime, her sister nuns, and their superior Gayane. They died for their faith because they felt as St. Sandoukt that "anyone who has seen the light of Christianity can no longer live without it."

As you recall it was King Dirdad's sister Khosrovidoukt who saved the life of St. Gregory the Illuminator by advising her brother that this man could cure him of his madness and remorse for his evil ways.

St. Ashkhen, the wife of King Dirdad, as well as his sister, were able to live for their faith. Queen Ashkhen encouraged the construction of the shrines which were built upon the relics of the martyred nuns. While the Cathedral of Holy Etchmiadzin was being built she, along with her husband and St. Gregory, personally helped to dig the ground for the foundation of the sacred Holy See. After her husband's death Queen Parantzeme bravely defended the Kingdom of Ardakerze for over a year. Finally she was taken prisoner by the Persian king Shabouh who put her to death. Ten years later in 380, Princess Hamazashouhie Mamigonian was hung by her feet until dead by her first cousin, an earlier Vahan, a collaborator with the Persians, because she would not deny Christ. Each of these women was a source of inspiration for the women of Vartan's day, an example to follow.

The Church was the center of learning especially with the invention of the Armenian alphabet in 406 by St. Mesrob under the sponsorship of King Vramshapouh and Catholicos Sahag, the son of Nersess the Great and the grandfather of St. Vartan. It is interesting to note that our history was recorded when clergy wrote the events that were taking place as they made copies of the Bible: history was recorded with the illuminated manuscripts. While Europe was entering the Dark Ages these men opened the Golden Age of Armenian Letters with the translation of the Bible and all important Greek books of philosophy, science and history. Life in Armenia underwent a complete change.

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.

Vartan Mamikonian, the hereditary leader of the Armenian forces, received his early education in patriotism and religious instruction from his mother Sahaganoosh who was the daughter of Catholicos Sahag. He had two brothers

Hamasaysp and Hmayak. St. Sahag must have been delighted with his grandson. Besides Armenian, Vartan mastered the Greek and Persian languages. The Bible was translated when he was still a young man. The Bible became his most precious source of inspiration. He read and re-read its passages. He quoted from it. He lived it. Vartan married and had two daughters, Varteni-Shooshan and Vartanoosh.

After successfully resisting, with the assistance of the Georgians and Caspio-Albanians, the Persian edict of 448 commanding 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 VIII: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. Vartan knew after several communications that there would be no help from others. His course of action became clear.

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, wore 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 in 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.

And what of the women? They and 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 of all were 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 bakeshops 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.

"While they worked with their fingers to feed themselves their minds and inner souls were filled with psalms and they saved their allowances appropriated for them by the king, and from year to year sent the accumulated amounts to their husbands for consolation."

The words of Yeghishe are expressive and informative. They reveal what these women endured for the sake of Christianity and national freedom. The women, as the clergy and men, met the challenge they encountered and became strengthened by love that issued from a pure heart, a good conscience and a sincere faith. All of them had been tempted as Jesus was in the wilderness but, as the Apostles in the Upper Chamber, they had been filled by the Holy Spirit with an undefeatable will.

There is little left to tell, but, before the story ends one more name must be added to the list of women martyrs.

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. She, after seven years of imprisonment, 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 national 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.

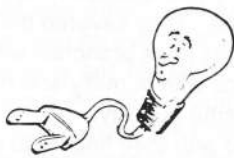
Yeghishe's history of Vartanantz, which is our main source of information, styles his epic to the history of the Maccabean wars which tells the story of the resistance of the Jews to the Romans who were trying to make them lose their national identity.

Yeghishe knew that if the Armenians based their religious faith on victories they would lose it because this world does not guarantee immediate success to the righteous. He wanted to prepare the Armenians for potentially long centuries of lost national independence by strengthening the spiritual kingdom within them.

He knew that the Armenians with God as their king could survive even though they had no earthly king. He realized that God could take the Armenian people, great and small, and make them heroes of the Christian faith. This strength that comes from God is part of our own tradition.

This message applies to each of us today in our modern setting with different causes and different problems as much as it did in days gone by.

Yeretzgin Rosalie Papazian



BROKEN CONTACT:

A Team Reflection for Lent

Principle: Sin separates us from God's power.

Food for Thought: 2 Samuel 22:17-28; Isaiah 59:2; Hosea 5:4-6; 1 John 1:6, 7

Lesson: When we are in fellowship with God, we have love and joy in our lives. We feel clean. We also have the power necessary to live the Christian life as God intended us to live it. Sins separate us from that power. Even "little" things like bad attitudes, a dirty or mean thought-life, or cruel words can separate us from fellowship with God. Keeping close contact with God is essential if we are to have His power in our lives.

Materials Needed: An extension cord, a double-pronged

plug-in light socket, a 40 watt light bulb, facial tissues or plastic wrap.

Instructions: Practice the object lesson (as described below) before the session. Arrive early so you will have time to set up before group members arrive. Plug the extension cord into an electrical outlet. Place the tissue, light bulb, and plug-in light socket out of sight. In the middle of your talk about fellowship with God and how sin breaks our contact with Him, plug in the light socket and screw the light bulb into it. The light will shine. Demonstrate broken contact (hindered fellowship) by unscrewing the light bulb and taking it out of the socket. Unplug the extension cord. Show the group the tissue or plastic wrap. Then place a small piece of tissue or plastic wrap over the contact in the bottom of the light socket. Ask the group if they think such a thin piece of material will keep the light bulb from shining. (Many will say no.) Screw the light bulb back into the socket *very lightly* and plug in the extension cord. The light won't shine. The object lesson illustrates how "little" sins can break our contact with God.

FEBRUARY CALENDAR

Saturday, February 3

Remembrance of St. Gregory the Enlightener and sons and grandsons

Sunday, February 4

Paregentan of the Fast of Catechumens

Friday, February 9

The Prophet Jonah

Saturday, February 10

St. Sarkis the Captain

Sunday, February 11

Sunday of Catechumens

Wednesday, February 14

Presentation of the Lord to the Temple

Saturday, February 17

St. Sahag Bartev

Tuesday, February 20

St. Ghevont and companions

Thursday, February 22

Vartanantz

Saturday, February 24

The 150 Fathers of the Council of Constantinople

Sunday, February 25

Poon Paregentan

Monday, February 26

First Day of Lent

DRE BULLETIN

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