

BRIDGES IN BAGHDAD (Circa 814)

Ties Between Nestorian Christians and 'Abbasid Muslims

Samuel Moffett

Excerpted by permission from Samuel Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume 1: Beginnings to 1500*, Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998, pp. 348-354.

Editor's note:

Comparing the cities of the world in 814, the Times Atlas of World History notes, "The most astonishing phenomenon was the stupendous growth of Baghdad, which ... by 814 covered an area of approximately 10 by 9 km, the equivalent of modern Paris within the outer boulevards. The West had still a long way to go before it caught up By 814 [Baghdad] was probably the world's largest city." Within this context, between 750 and 850, Nestorian Christians served under the early 'Abbasid empire of Islam, as described below by mission scholar Samuel Moffett.

The 'Abbasids ruled Islam in Asia for the next half a millennium, from 750 to 850 as "the most celebrated and longest-lived dynasty in Islam...." They claimed to be more strictly orthodox than their predecessors and proved to be more aggressively Muslim in the treatment of religious minorities than the practical-minded Umayyads....

**The truth must be taken
wherever it is to be
found, whether it be
in the past or among
strange peoples.**

– *al-Kindi, Baghdad, 801-873*

The new dynasty moved the center of government out of Syria, which had been the power base of the Umayyads, eastward into Iraq (Mesopotamia) and in 762 its second caliph, Mansur (754-775), built a magnificent new capital at Baghdad some twenty miles upstream from the ancient Persian capital of Seleucia-Ctesiphon on the Tigris, which he plundered for its brick and marble. He chose the site not only for its military advantage but also, as he said, "because it will put us in touch with lands as far as China"....

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The emphasis on true religion did not at first worsen the treatment of Christians in the empire or further exacerbate friction between Sunni and Shi'ite Muslims. The third caliph, Mahdi, opened his rule with a determined effort to appease the Iranian Shi'ite opponents of Baghdad orthodoxy, and in an unusually irenic gesture toward Christians staged a famous debate that brought him face to face with the Nestorian patriarch Timothy I (779-823)....

Timothy I (779-823, or 778-821), who came from Adiabene, the ancient seat of the earliest Persian Christians, was the greatest of all the patriarchs who served under the caliphate. The year of the debate, probably 781, was also the year that saw the erection of the Nestorian monument in China and so may well mark not only a peak in intercommunication between Islam and Christianity, but also the height of Nestorian influence in the second half of the first Christian millennium in Asia's two greatest empires, 'Abbasid Arabia and T'ang China....

[Timothy] was also a strongly missionary-minded patriarch, not content simply to teach and defend the faith but eager to expand it. He appointed a bishop for Yemen at its old capital, San'a, despite earlier Muslim precedents of stringent prohibition of Christianity among



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Arabs. He prayed openly before a Muslim caliph, as we have seen, that Christians might share “the pearl” of the gospel with Muslims, adding with evangelistic directness, “God has placed the pearl of His face before all of us like the shining rays of the sun, and everyone who wishes can enjoy the light of the sun”

His patriarchate coincided with the great age of Muslim intellectual ferment and inquiry that P.K. Hitti calls “the epoch of translation” (ca. 750-850), a time when Islamic thinkers were first discovering the world of Greek science and philosophy and the church in the West was in the process of forgetting it. One of the greatest contributions of the Asian church to the history of human thought was its key role in transmitting to the Arab empire the heritage of the Greek classics and, through the Arabs, preserving them for rediscovery and transformation of the West in the Renaissance and Reformation.

Arabian education remained in debt to the scholars of the Christian *dhimmis* [religious enclaves] all through the first hundred years of the 'Abbasid dynasty. One of the reasons Caliph Mahdi welcomed Timothy to debate was undoubtedly because Timothy was a zealous patron of education, familiar with Aristotle and well versed in Greek and Syriac texts. “Remember that the school is the mother and nurse of the sons of the church,” he once wrote.

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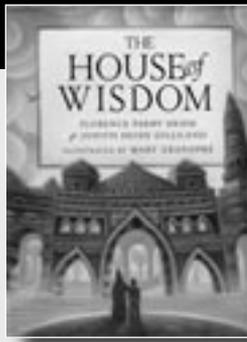
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Thanks in large part to pioneering Christian translators, the Arabs, who hitherto had been little schooled but were possessed of quick and inquiring minds, were propelled into an intellectual revolution. As Hitti puts it, “In only a few decades Arab scholars assimilated what had taken the Greeks centuries to develop.” Some astronomical and mathematical works were brought to Baghdad by travelers from India but the earliest and by far the most important source was classical Greece communicated through Christian Greece to Christian Syrians and Persians and passed on by them to the Arabs. 🌐

To help children understand related topics ...



- Read *The House of Wisdom*, by Florence Parry Heide and Judith Heide Gilliland, New York: DK Publishing Inc., 1999. The House of Wisdom is *Bayt al-Hikmah*, the famous learning institution, library, and translation bureau that drew scholars from many traditions to ninth-century Baghdad.
- Utilize “Abbasid Baghdad: Intellectual Capital of the World,” part of the “Iraq in the Classroom – from Mesopotamia to Modernity” curriculum guide offered by Mercy Corps on the Internet at mercycorps.org/pdfs/1082069429.pdf.