

## CHAPTER 14

### PRESENCE OF CHRISTIAN GROUPS IN PERSIA FROM 30 A.D. TILL NOW

In Chapter 10, Far Reaching Effects of Pentecost: Persian Missionaries, we mentioned the early church which began after Persian Jews who accepted Jesus Christ as their Messiah, on the Day of Pentecost returned to Iran. On the day of Pentecost the disciple, Peter, preached giving many examples from the Old Testament of the promises of the Messiah to come. Finally in Acts 2:36-37 he said, “Therefore let all Israel be assured of this: God has made this Jesus, whom you crucified, both Lord and Christ.” When the people heard this they were cut to the heart and said to Peter and the other apostles, Brothers, what shall we do?” Although the church peaked and then declined, there are still about 35,000 ethnic Assyrians today who live in Iran and trace their roots back to the early Christian church in Iran.

The largest group of current professing Christians in Iran today is made up of about 190,000 Armenians. This is an ethnical group of people, not to be confused with the doctrinal teaching imitated by Jacob Arminius (1560-1609) called Arminianism which opposed some of the doctrines of Calvinism in Europe.

#### A. THE ARMENIANS

The Armenian people’s last names end with a “yan” or “ian” usually. Their origin is traced back to the country of Armenia, an area between the Black Sea and the Caspian Sea. Previously, Armenia was a province of the USSR, but now it is a separate country. During its early history it was the first country in the world to embrace Christianity officially.

There has been a strong Christian witness in Armenia since the first century. Gregory, the Illuminator, as he was called, was from the royal family. After he became a Christian he persuaded king Tirdat to accept Christianity around 300 AD. From then on, the king and nobles supported Christianity. Pagan shrines were transformed into churches and there were conversions “en masse.” Some call this a “people’s movement.” Harold W. Cook in his book, Historical Patterns of Church Growth, published by Moody Press refers to this movement as one of five “people’s movements” picked from significant movements throughout church history where entire groups of people became Christians. Around 400 AD, the Bible was translated into the Armenian language.

Now almost 1,700 years later Armenians continue to profess Christianity. However, much of their Christianity is centered in Armenian nationalism along with a nominal acceptance of Christian truths. Such a rapid wholesale conversion of so many at one time must have been superficial, but slowly Christian beliefs, customs, and traditions were passed on to the people.

Situated between the Persian and Roman Empires, Armenia became a buffer zone invaded different times by both empires. The Armenians struggled to keep their own national identity and

consequently, did not have much of a missionary outreach. Later on they were invaded by the Turks and Mongols and were attacked by various Islamic forces.

In 1604, the king of Iran, Shah Abbas, who ruled over Armenia forced masses of Armenian people to leave Armenia and go to Iran. About 120,000 settled near the Caspian Sea and around Tabriz. About 75,000 settled on the south bank of the River Zayandehrud near Isfahan. They built a settlement called New Julfa which is still an Armenian section of Isfahan today. There were many craftsmen and tradesmen among the Armenians which is why the Shah Abbas wanted them in his kingdom.

According to the book, Christians in Persia, in 1629 King Shah Abbas passed a law that any Christian who became a Muslim could claim the property of any of his relations back to at least four generations. Many Christians denounced their faith (one estimate said 50,000), but only a few of these were Armenians. One persecution after another swept over the Armenian church.

The final great persecution of the Armenians occurred during World War I in the northwest corner of Iran when the Armenians and the Assyrians were caught between the forces of the Russians and the Turks. The Muslim Turks and Kurds literally slaughtered hundreds of thousands of Christians. Many fled from this area to central and southern Iran for safety.

Today 3,378,000 Armenians live in Armenia which was part of Russia formerly. Older Armenians living in Iran and other countries often desire to return their homeland to die. The Patriarch of the Armenian Orthodox Church (Gregorian) lives in Armenia.

## **B. MISSIONARY HISTORY AND OUTREACH TO IRAN BEFORE THE 20TH CENTURY**

### **1. Roman Catholics**

The Roman Catholics were the first to send missionaries to minister to the nominal Christian communities of the Armenians and Assyrians since they had some similarities in doctrine and organization. These Eastern churches always had contact with the Church of Rome and by the 1300's a minority among these Christians claimed allegiance to Rome.

During the 1600's there was a resurgence of missionary activity. Today among the 160,000 Armenians in Iran most are still part of the Armenian Apostolic Church, called the Gregorian Church, but about 2000 claim to be part of the Armenian Catholic Church.

The Catholics were more successful in their work among the Assyrians. The Assyrian Church of the East claims a membership of 13,500 families while the Assyrians Catholics claim about 14,000 communicant members.

## **2. Church of England**

Henry Martyn, a godly young Anglican priest, sailed from England to India in the early 1800's. While there he did translation work in some of the languages including Persian. Later he traveled to the city of Shiraz in Iran to finish translating the Persian New Testament and presented a copy to Fath-Ali Shah in Tehran in 1811. Martyn died in Turkey on his way home to England when he was in his early 30's. He had fulfilled his own motto, "Let me burn out for God."

The Church of England ministered in the southern part of Iran mainly in cities such as Isfahan, Shiraz, Kerman, and Ahwaz. Their missionaries concentrated on reaching the Muslims and Jews. The Church of England in Iran belongs to the Near East Council of Churches and through its connection with the Anglicans is a member of the World Council of Churches.

## **3. Presbyterian Church**

The first missionaries under the American Board of Commissioners (Presbyterian and Congregational Churches) went to Iran in 1832. Originally, they worked among the Assyrians in Rezayieh hoping to promote a spiritual awakening among these nominal Christians. However, when a revival took place with some of the nominal Christians being born again, these believers were forced to leave the ancient church. As a result, the Evangelical Church came into existence in 1855. The Presbyterians limited their work to the northern part of the country in such cities as Tabriz, Rezayieh, Tehran, Hamadan, Kermanshah, Rasht, and Mashad.

In 1978 there were 18 congregations and 12 ordained ministers with a membership of 2,897 in the Iranian Synod of which 55 percent were Assyrians, 21 percent were Armenians, and 24 percent were Jews and Muslims converted to Christianity. Originally, the Presbyteries were formed in different geographical areas, but recently, were reorganized according to language groups. In addition, the Presbyterians started various schools which were nationalized later on. The church is a member of the World Council of Churches, the World Alliance of Reformed Churches, and the Near East Council of Churches.

## **4. Other Christian Outreaches in Iran**

In giving just a few highlights of some of the other outreaches in Iran, I would like to mention Dr. Sa'eed born in 1863. He was a Persian physician from a Kurdish background who accepted Christ in Iran, went to Europe to receive further education, particularly in the area of eye care, and then returned to Iran. He served Christ faithfully until he died in 1942. His witness to all Iranians and his godly life was well-known to all. His life story has been written in Farsi and English in the book "Beloved Physician". It can be ordered from [www.farsinet.com/ici](http://www.farsinet.com/ici) or [www.farsinet.com/pwo](http://www.farsinet.com/pwo).

Various charismatic groups from Sweden and later the United States have ministered in Iran. There are Assembly of God churches scattered in many of the major cities in Iran with their own bishops and pastors. During the past years several of their leaders have been martyred for the sake of our Lord Jesus Christ.

Other interdenominational agencies, such as Campus Crusade, International Missions (Christar), Child Evangelism, Operational Mobilization, and others labored faithfully over the years in Iran, too. The Southern Baptists missions in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution was primarily among the ex-patriots English speaking community. An exerted outreach to the Jewish population of Iran dates back to the early 1800's. For more information, refer to a book written by Mrs. Pakizegi entitled History of the Christians in Iran. This gives a full history of the Christian church in Iran.

### **C. HISTORY OF THE PERSIAN TRANSLATION OF THE BIBLE**

I am deeply indebted to Dr. Kenneth J. Thomas and his article, "History of the Persian Translation of the Bible", which was published in Encyclopedia Iranica. This article gives a list of translations from the 4<sup>th</sup> century to the present day Iran.

For example, in the 4<sup>th</sup> century a Christian leader John Chrysostom around AD 391 wrote, "the doctrines of Christ had been translated into the languages of the Syrians, Egyptians, the Indians, Persians, and the Ethiopians." Also, in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century some ancient documents, Psalms 94-99, and Psalms 119-136 were written in the ancient Pahlavi script which has been translated from the Syriac.

The article by Dr. Thomas gives a detailed list of the many translations completed through the centuries. For example, in 1814 the New Testament was translated by Henry Martin, chaplain of the Eastern India Company, with the help of Mirza Sayd Ali Khan of Shiraz and was published in St. Petersburg by the Russian Bible Society in 1814.

The current Bible translations in use in Iran today are:

1. The Standard Bible translation which was translated from Hebrew and Greek with revisions was first printed in 1895 and published by the British Foreign Bible Society. Recently, in 1996 it was reprinted by Elam Ministries for better reading through modern typesetting since in the original edition the "kaf" and the "gaf" could not be distinguished. Punctuation marks, section headings and cross-references were included, too.
2. In 1976 the New Testament, Today's English Version, was translated into modern Persian from the Greek text. It was published in Tehran by the Bible Society of Iran.
3. Using the Greek and Hebrew manuscripts, a new commentary edition of the New

Testament was printed in 1979 and the entire Bible in 1995 by the International Bible Society.

Currently, several translating projects are in process to produce a clear, accurate and up-to-date Farsi translation.