

CHAPTER 10

FAR REACHING EFFECTS OF PENTECOST: PERSIAN MISSIONARIES TO ASIA

Most Christians are fairly familiar with the missionary expansion of the Western world. The Book of Acts tells us that the Apostle Paul took the gospel of our Savior to Crete, Turkey, and Rome. Through the centuries Christianity spread throughout Europe and later America. Today we think of non-Christian people mostly living within the 10/40 Window, that vast region of the world that spans across North Africa, the Middle East, and into East Asia. However, in the early centuries of the Church, the gospel had a strong influence in Egypt and North Africa. It also spread eastward throughout the Middle East in Iran and even into parts of Asia such as China. Remember, God so loved the world! Let's take a look at how He worked through the nation of Iran to help spread His good news.

Remember we discussed the Magi (wise men) mentioned in Matthew 2 (Christmas Customs Chapter 13). They had come from the East to worship Christ. Let's take a look at who else came from the East to worship. Read Acts 2: 1-9.

A. WHY WERE PERSIAN JEWS AT JERUSALEM?

Scripture tells us that the Holy Spirit came down upon the believers. In Acts 2:5 we see that God-fearing Jews had come to Jerusalem from every nation. "Now there were staying in Jerusalem God-fearing Jews from every nation under heaven." Why were Jews from various parts of the world in Jerusalem for the day of Pentecost? God, in Deuteronomy 16:16 commanded male Jews to go to Jerusalem for the religion feasts. One of these feasts was the Feast of Weeks or Feast of Harvest when the first fruits of the crops were offered to the Lord 50 days after the Unleavened Bread (Exodus 23:16; 34:22; Leviticus 23:15-21). In the New Testament it is called Pentecost, which in Greek, means fiftieth. They were to go to Jerusalem for the feast of Passover and the feast of Tabernacles, too.

B. WHAT HAPPENED ON PENTECOST?

1. According to Acts 2:6-9, notice the languages that the disciples of Jesus spoke?
"When they heard this sound, a crowd came together in bewilderment, because each one heard them speaking in his own language. Utterly amazed, they asked: "Are not all these men who are speaking Galileans? Then how is it that each of us hears them in his own native language? Parthians, Medes and Elamites; residents of Mesopotamia, Judea and Cappadocia, Pontus and Asia."
2. The Elamite, Parthian, Medes, were descendants from people such as Ezra, Esther, Daniel and Nehemiah or perhaps they were Persians who became Jews

during the time of Esther (Esther 8:17). They had come to Jerusalem for Pentecost. The first three language groups in Acts 2:9 are of Persian origin. Parthians from Pars came from a region now known as the province of Fars in southern Iran (the Parthian Dynasty ruled in Iran from 124 B.C. to 224 A.D.). The Medes (remember the Medo-Persian Empire) came from central Iran; and the Elamites came from what is now southwestern Iran, where the former ancient capital city of Shushan is located.(See Chapter 9)

3. We learn from Acts 2:41 that on the day of Pentecost some 3,000 people accepted Jesus Christ as the Messiah, Son of God, and their Savior. They were saved and baptized. “Those who accepted his message were baptized, and about three thousand were added to their number that day.” It’s not unrealistic to believe that some of these were Persian Jews, who soon returned to Persia as baptized Christians!

C. THE SPREAD OF THE GOSPEL IN IRAN AFTER PENTECOST

Church history tells us how the gospel was spread further in Iran. Tradition says that Andrew went north to the Black and Caspian Sea areas. Matthew, in turn, went among the Parthians.

Christianity in Iran prospered in the early centuries, particularly under some of the kings of the Sassian Dynasty (224-642 A.D.). An early center for Christianity under king Shahpur I (240-272 A.D.) was the city of Shush, where Daniel saw his visions and Nehemiah served the king’s cup. Some believe that many of the Christians of Shush were Roman soldiers, along with a bishop, taken captive in successful battles waged against the Roman Empire.

Early in the fourth century, Shahpur II began persecuting Christians, whom he believed were politically tied to the Roman Empire. He strongly promoted Zoroastrianism as the national religion, and about 16,000 Christians died. The ruins of early churches have been found in areas around the Persian Gulf.

By the sixth century, the Church had expanded vastly throughout the area we know today as the unreached 10/40 Window. A traveler observed that Christianity had been preached among the Bactians, Huns, Persians, Medes, Elamites, Persarmenians, and Indians and that, the Church had spread from the Persian Gulf to the Caspian Sea. But the East was not immune to the struggles of doctrine and identity that plagued the early Church fathers.

The teachings of a man named Nestorius, Patriarch of Constantinople, were brought before the Church Council of Aphesis in 431 A.D. Nestorius taught that Christ had two separate natures or personalities, one human and one divine. One of his arguing points was that church liturgy should not refer to Mary as the “Mother of God” but rather “Mother of Christ.” The Council, however, concluded that indeed Christ was simultaneously fully God and fully human and thus declared Nestorius’ teaching wrong. Nestorius fled eastward, influencing the theological schools of the day. Slowly, his teaching infiltrated the Persian Church, which developed a similar hierarchy to the Roman Church. Instead of a Pope, it had a Patriarch with more limited

powers. Assyrian Persian Christians today detest the term “Nestorian” and prefer other references, such as “Church of the East.”

D. MISSIONARY OUTREACH OF THE PERSIAN CHURCH

Christianity in Iran was comprised mainly of the Syrian minority, known for its involvement in commerce. These Persian merchants were active in spreading the faith, as they traveled abroad and traded with pagan peoples. The famous church historian, Latourette, said, “Christians in the Sassanian and Abassid realms were more active as missionaries than were Christians from any other land from the 5th to 16th centuries in which civil rulers were non-Christians.” Notice the amazing results:

1. Churches, Christians, and bishops existed in all lands surrounding Iran.
2. Central Asia from the Caspian Sea to China was said to be predominantly Christian for two centuries.
3. In Singanfu, China, a large stone monument dated from 781 A.D. lists Persian and Chinese names along with a creed similar to the Apostles’ Creed.
4. The Mar Thomas Church in South India, traditionally linked to the Apostle Thomas, has been traced by some to the influence of the Persian church’s evangelism of southern India.
5. Persian outreach has impacted areas of Tibet, Vietnam, Korea, and possibly Japan.
6. Marco Polo mentioned the Christian communities which he encountered in his famous travels from Italy through the Middle East and central Asia to China in the 1200’s.

The Arab influence over the Persian Empire beginning in the mid seventh century was slow yet permeating. With it came the dilution of the Persian Church. Under Muslim invaders from Arabia, the first persecutions were against the followers of the state religion which was replaced by Islam. Christians at times were even a protected minority.

E. THE DECLINE OF THE PERSIAN CHURCH

Persecution against the Church eventually came in varying degrees from local and state leaders. Extra taxes were demanded of Christians. Conversion from Islam was prohibited. The cross was banned from public display. The 13th century invasion of Genghis Khan and his Mongol raiders almost eliminated the dying church from the face of Persia. Only a remnant survived, fleeing to the western mountains of Iran. Why did the Persian Church fail?

1. A perception arose that the truly spiritual people were those who lived in monasteries, separated from the world.
2. The Syriac language rather than vernacular Persian was the official language of the Persian Church.
3. The religious hierarchy of patriarchs and bishops drained the strength of the Church.
4. Doctrinal error weakened Church integrity.
5. Church fervor for dynamic witness was lost.
6. The Church could not remain politically loyal to the state.
7. Church standards were being compromised.
8. The cross could not be displayed.
9. Muslim men could marry Christians, but Christian men could not marry Muslims.

F. THE SINGANFU STONE

The Anglican Church of St. Simon in the southern Iranian city of Shiraz houses a replica of the famous stone tablet of Singanfu, the former capital of China. The stone was discovered in 1623 A.D. This stone tablet was carved around 781 A.D. and is 9 feet high, 3 and ½ feet wide, and 1 foot thick. It has some 1900 Chinese characters and 700 Syrian names with Chinese translations. (Exact replicas are also found in the Lateran Museum in Rome and Mount Koya in Japan.)

The stone records Persian and Chinese Christian activities following the arrival of the Persian missionary, Alopen, at the Court of the Emperor in 635 A.D. According to the Stone, the Emperor built a monastery for Alopen and 21 monks. (Alopen was his Chinese name. His Persian name was possibly Abraham or Yabh-allaha.) He was warmly received by the Chinese emperor Tai-tsung. Alopen was declared to be a highly virtuous man by the emperor who investigated “the way”. The emperor was convinced by his good character and truthfulness and gave orders for the propagation of his faith as well as translation of some of the scriptures into the Chinese language. In 1638 the first Christian church was built in the capital Changan which claimed to be the largest city in the world at that time. In the following years there is a record of at least eleven other such churches but there may have been many more. A reference which might have been exaggerated, states that there was a church in every district area of China which means there were 368 churches. Different Persian and Chinese documents show that these Chinese followers believed in the basic Christian doctrines such as original sin, the substitutionary atonement, the virgin birth, the cross, the Ten Commandments, repentance from

eternal punishment, and salvation by faith not works. They knew they must be subject to governing authorities, feed the hungry, clothe the naked, and care for widows and orphans.

The title of the stone was “A Monument Commemorating the Propagation of the Tachin (Syrian) Luminous Religion in China”. The entire English translation can be found at www.jacobs-source.net/hestorian_stone_translation.html. Listed below is a poetic rendering of one section of the Stone:

One Holy Person of the Trinity, the Christ of God,
the light of heaven and earth,
As man appeared among the sons of men;
concealed His glorious majesty and worth,
The angels in the world above rejoiced:
the vault of heaven rang with joy and mirth
To shepherds watching in the fields at night
they brought the tidings of His Holy birth

From a pure virgin by Divine command
appeared the light that lighteneth man’s days.
A brilliant star proclaimed the glad event:
in the far heaven shone its ardent blaze.
The Persian Magi saw the effulgent star,

illuminating the sky like solar rays.
Towards Bethlehem with joyful steps they sped
to offer Him their precious gifts and praise.

Because of Persian missionaries, China received witness of salvation through our Lord Jesus Christ for several centuries. few hundred years after the Singanfu stone was inscribed the Christian community in China disappeared. Some probable reasons for this were the persecution of the church and possible religious, theological, mythology, and political problems. The book, A History of Christianity in Asia, volume I by Samuel Hugh Moffett gives the detailed historical background along with some sources.

G. FURTHER RESOURCES ON PERSIA IN BIBLE AND CHURCH HISTORY:

Pakizegi, Zarin Behravesih. History of the Christian in Iran. Wheaton, IL: William Carey Publishers. This book gives a history of the Persian Church from its ancient roots until today. Chapter 15 Persecuted for Christ in Persia: Past and Present tells of Christian martyrs under the Islamic republic from 1980 -1995. Orders may be obtained through Dr. Behzad Pakizegi, P.O. Box 600476, San Diego, Ca 92160 or Phone: 610-283-0880.

Waterfield, Robin E. Christians in Persia. London: George Allen D Union LTD, 1973.

This book provides a continuous narrative of Christians in Iran from the second century A.D.

until 1970. Details are given of the rise and fall of the early Persian Church as well as later Roman Catholic and Protestant missionary ventures among Persians in the 19th and 20th centuries.

Yamauchi, Edwin M. Persia in the Bible. Grand Rapids: Baker Back House, 1990.

A scholarly guide to the historical background of the Middle East and particularly Persia, Yamauchi's book contains over 100 photos along with archaeological information. This is an indispensable guide to understanding the books of Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Esther, and Nehemiah.

Moffett, Samuel H. A History of Christianity in Asia volume I from the beginning to 1500 AD San Francisco: Harpor 1991. This scholarly 560 page book gives great details about this little known section of church history. Almost half of the book refers to the early Persian Christian church.

H. MAKING A PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. God has used Persian Christian believers in the past to evangelize much of Asia. If you are a Persian Christian believer and part of a Farsi speaking church, maybe God will give you and your church a burden and desire to spread the good news of Jesus Christ in places such as Tajikistan and Afghanistan. Languages such as Tajik, Dari, and Hazai are very similar to the Farsi language. Are you willing to pray and reach out to the many different ethnic groups in Iran?