

Integrative Project: Research Materials

The Kurds

Excerpts from Various Authors

[Ethnic Realities and the Church](#) - page 2

[A History of Kurdistan](#) - page 22

[Kurds Around the World](#) - page 24

[Religions of Kurdistan](#) - page 29

[Profile: Kurds in the Middle East](#) - page 33

[Profile: Kurds in Turkey](#) - page 37

ETHNIC REALITIES and the CHURCH: Lessons from Kurdistan

A history of mission work, 1668 - 1990

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Page 17

Introduction

Kurds are a fragmented people. Occupied by stronger powers on all sides, divided from within, guilty of shedding the blood of Christians, the Kurds are, as Jesus said of the multitude, "harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd." A Kurdish proverb laments, *kurdu heval nînen*, "Kurds have no friends." Few outsiders, it seems to the Kurds, understand them or offer them friendship. In the 19th and 20th centuries, perhaps 200 missionaries lived in Kurdistan; few of these, however, spoke Kurdish or even had Kurdish acquaintances! Missionaries hoped to re-light the mission candles in the historical churches. These churches, in turn, would be a light to the Kurds. The plan failed for three reasons. First, because the minority churches derived fabulous advantages from the missionaries, which history destined them to hoard instead of share. Second, missionaries could obtain neither local Christian permission nor government permission to evangelize Kurds; and in those exceptional moments when missionaries did work with Kurds, death brought their work to an end. Finally, Kurds, Turks and Persians resented the missionaries for empowering the church "tribes," a not unreasonable resentment. For these reasons, Kurds in the 19th and 20th centuries continued to live without light.

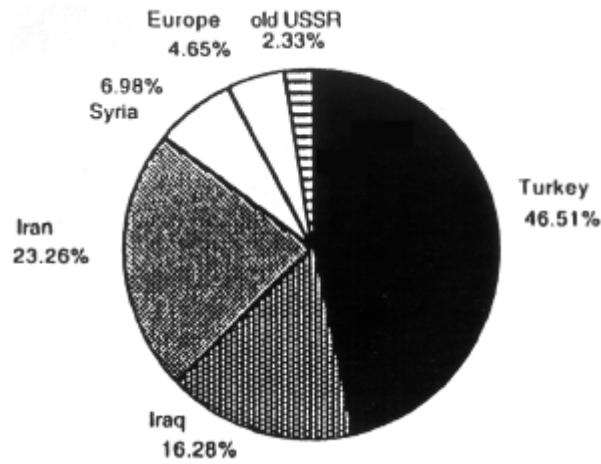
The rugged Kurdish mountains have bred a rugged people. Since the time of Xenophon (died c. 355 B.C.), foreign armies have complained of the *karduchoi* who harassed them in the mountain passes. Kurds were a bother even back then! Their mountains form a buffer

separating Turks, Arabs, and Persians. These stronger powers continue to play Kurdish factions against each

Page 18

other. However, the game goes both ways; Kurdish groups know how to auction their loyalty to the highest bidder.

*Table 2
Where the Kurds Are as of 1997*



Kurdish population statistics are imprecise. Occupying countries diminish the numbers, while Kurds may exaggerate them. Figures given are median.

Turkey	13 million	Old USSR	0.5 million
Iraq	3.5 million	Israel	125,000
Iran	5 million	Lebanon	75,000
Syria	1.5 million	USA	20,000
Europe	1 million	Australia	10,000

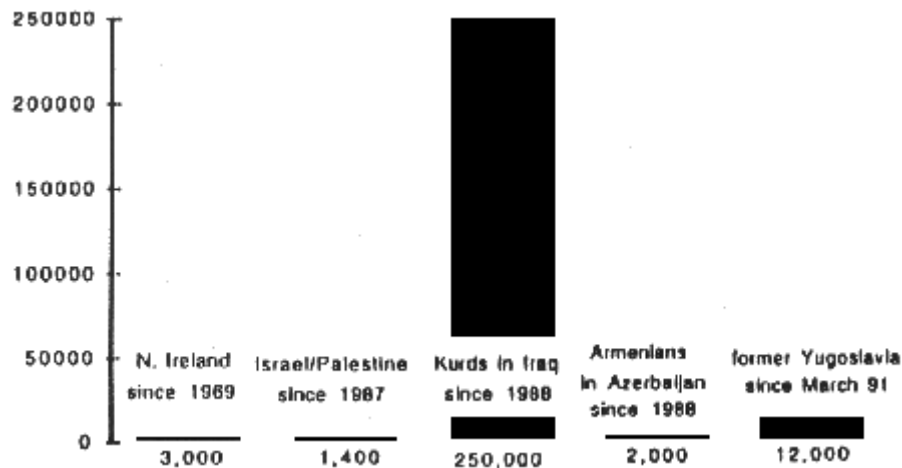
THE WAY OF THE SWORD HAS BROUGHT MISERY

Kurds have resisted the occupying governments of Turkey, Iraq, and Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini promised Kurds a part in his new government if they would help him topple the Shah. However, after consolidating his power, Khomeini ordered Sunni Kurds to become Shi'a before they could take part as full citizens. Kurds felt betrayed. The Iranian government killed thousands of resisters. In their homes pictures of Kurdish corpses replaced the picture of the Ayatollah; Iranian Kurds swore an oath of vengeance to their dead (Gardiner 1982:4).

Page 19

Meanwhile, in Turkey, Kurds sustain a hit-and-run guerrilla war against government forces. In retaliation, Turkish troops have destroyed 2,800 villages in the eastern (Kurdish) part of the country. A million Kurds have migrated to Istanbul and other Turkish cities where they hope to start over. Millions more, with no political wishes, are caught between deadly aims of Kurdish separatists and government special forces in southeastern Turkey.

Table 3
Deaths of Selected Minorities in Conflicts



Kurds in the security zone of northern Iraq fear the day that Arabs re-assert control over them. However, if Saddam is patient, the Kurdish factions will fight one another and lose the sympathy of the West.

Syrian ruler Hafez al-Assad meets every dissent with brutal repression. Kurds in Syria await another day to pick up their swords again.

Kurds have one attraction: the West pities them for the abuse they suffer at the hands of the Turks, Arabs, and Persians. That one attraction has dimmed since the Kurds have logged their own record of brutality. Amnesty International has documented the record of torture and

murder in northern Iraq since 1991 (Amnesty 1995). Sadly, Kurds are doing to one another as others have done unto them. Islam, which all the players in the region

Page 20

have in common, has not overcome the ethnic divisions of the Middle East.

Rare is the leader who acts for the public good in Kurdistan. Each chief seems to hope that his weapons will give him a victory in his struggle for supreme leadership. The way of the sword has cut the Kurds into ribbons of poverty and ruthless disregard of people beyond their kin.

THE WAY OF CHRIST HAS NOT BEEN TAKEN

What other people has so proved that sinful living reduces them to the "dreadfully wicked conditions" which Judith Grant found upon her arrival in 1835 (Kaplan 1993:25)? Every word of Jesus Christ bears hope for the Kurds. The gospel, which commands men and women love their neighbors and their enemies, must now come in power to Kurdistan.

Page 21

Map of Kurdistan



Page 193

Chapter 6
A Brief Missiology for Workers

A book on the history of mission to the Kurds would be slender indeed. But a history of mission in Kurdistan is twenty times larger. The difference illuminates our thesis: missionaries continued for a hundred years to "pass through the wilderness of Kurdish mountains, seeking in the most remote corners of the land the little companies of Christians" (Richter 1910:316).

Sift through the record, like a prospector panning for gold, and the occasional reference to evangelizing Kurds jumps off the pages. I fear that concentrating these references in one place, in this book, may dull the readers' feelings to how rare these nuggets are.

We must think about the failure to establish churches among the Kurds. We do not judge any missionary for his or her work; the reward for faithful service is not seen in this world. However, the mission in Kurdistan failed, as measured against Eli Smith's inaugural words, to find "the lever which would overturn the whole system of Mohammedan delusion" (Joseph 1961:44).

THREE REASONS FOR THE FAILURE OF THE MISSION

For three reasons Protestant missions—our main subject here—failed to evangelize Kurds. First, missions continued to invest almost exclusively in historical churches. By this, missionaries washed out any bridges to the Kurds. Second, missionaries

Page 194

among Kurds died. Third, missionaries believed that the time of mission work among Kurds had not yet arrived; perhaps in a later day, God would bring multiplied numbers of Kurds into His church. We will develop these reasons in the pages that follow.

1. The Churches of the East Did Not Evangelize the Kurds

What happened to the hope that Armenians and Nestorians would evangelize the Kurds? The ABCFM had "commenced with the expectation that the revival of gospel light and influence among the Nestorians 'would rekindle their ancient missionary spirit'" (Joseph 1961:44). The mission followed a logical plan: local Christians would more naturally, more numerically, and more economically preach to their Kurdish neighbors than would foreigners from across the sea. However, the experiment failed. It failed after ten years; it failed after 50 years; after a hundred years of Protestant mission, the Great Experiment proved only that it could not be done. To be sure, a Protestant church was carved from the soft belly of the historical church. William Miller, missionary to Iran, tells what happened next:

Foreign missionaries then became totally occupied serving these new churches they produced. Occasionally, one of these Protestants became a zealous and courageous evangelist to the Muslims. But, *for the vast majority of believers, the walls of dialect, custom, prejudice and fear*

which have existed between Christians and Muslims for more than a thousand years were too high to scale and too ponderous to move. The "evangelical" churches have done little more than the Catholic or Orthodox churches had done to confront Muslims with the claims of Christ (Miller 1971:232, italics mine).

Mission leaders might reply that Ottoman and Persian laws prevented work among the Muslims. This is fair enough. The Ottoman and Persian Empires granted official permission to the Protestants to work among the Armenians and Syriac Orthodox and the Nestorians (Assyrians). All the Christian communities, however, were united by a common opposition to any mission to the Kurds. Protestant and Catholics continued to devote every missionary dollar and every brick school house and every hour of language study to the Kurd's "hereditary enemies," the Chris-

Page 195

tians, who had "as little desire to be the bearers of the Gospel to the Moslem neighbors as the Moslems have to receive it of them" (Stead 1920:147).

The Historic Churches Opposed a Mission to the Kurds

Evangelism of Muslims failed because the historical churches opposed it.¹ Armenians, Assyrians, and Chaldeans were happy when missionaries learned their language, educated their children, employed their graduates, and defended their rights. However, a mission to Kurds was not on the church's agenda. When the Catholic mission in Aleppo gained quick success among Yezidi Kurds, Armenians became jealous; they opposed the mission to Yezidis. As a result, Yezidis stopped coming to worship. Catholic mission among Kurds ended. Catholics never again worked in Kurdistan except to convert the historical Christians. Never did the historical church envision what the missionaries intended, to love their enemies and offer them the Kingdom of God. What do Middle Eastern Christians say when allowed to speak for themselves?

[The Kurds] are a people without literature and without history.... It is amusing to notice them on their way to their work, dragging along their sluggish limbs as though they might drop asleep at any moment. They will waste two hours before they even start to work. After an hour of pretended labor, in which they have really accomplished nothing, they will have to sit down

¹ David Barrett writes, "This failure to impact the non-Christian world has several causes. Chief among them are (1) the older foreign mission boards and societies of Europe and America no longer place missionaries among unevangelized peoples without an invitation to do so, having decided to engage in mission only in cooperation with their overseas partner churches; and (2) these agencies and their overseas partners respond in most cases exclusively, to formal requests for foreign mission resources submitted by church leaders, missionaries or local Christians. But among World A individuals there are no churches and no persons who are likely to request mission resources or church planters, so none get assigned to World A contexts (1997:24).

Page 196

and smoke awhile. Poor creatures, they are good for nothing. . . . Robbing is their business, and they believe that God created them for this purpose only. I myself have conversed with many of them, and asked them why they steal. They answer that every man has some occupation. One is a judge, one a merchant, one a farmer, and "we are robbers." . . . Like Cain, their hand is against everybody, and everybody's hand is against them. (Yonan 1895:6-8).

Yonan bleeds for his Armenian people, but he feels steel-cold rage toward Kurds:

The Koords are profoundly ignorant and stupid, with neither books nor schools. Of the whole race, not one in ten thousand can read. . . . The name Koord is a terror to the Christians, who are treated by them as a wolf would treat a lamb, robbing them of their property, sometimes murdering them, and often burning their villages (1895:11, 12-13).

Missionaries worked alongside church leaders who referred to the Kurds as "profoundly ignorant and stupid, good for nothing, with sluggish limbs, without literature and without history." Nestorians demanded all the attention for themselves.

The Historic Churches Still Oppose a Mission to the Kurds

Protestants planned to evangelize Kurds by first revitalizing the Assyrian church; this was like trying to start a fire with wet matches. For example, a "brilliant future" for Euphrates College in Harput was threatened when missionaries tried to admit a few Kurds and Turks into the student body. Faculty members and well-to-do Armenians, who had begun to support the school, objected (Daniel 1970:107). Even today the historical church has no mission to Kurds. The church remembers every wound inflicted by the hands of Kurds. After I spoke at a church in San

Mateo, California, a woman introduced herself as an Assyrian from northern Iraq. She admired the work we were doing. "But we could never do that," she said, "because the Kurds have hurt us too badly." She remembers Kurds as her enemy; her church does not imagine how it can co-exist with Kurds, so the members are emigrating to the West. Inviting Muslims into the Messianic feast is not on the to-do list for the church in Kurdistan.

Page 197

"The Kurds Don't Want It"

Each Sunday for more than two years I visited Iraqi Christians living in a refugee camp in eastern Turkey. I transported a Chaldean priest who conducted Sunday mass. After worship one day, a Chaldean said to me, "You have to help me get to America." We knew each other quite well, so I answered, "You have to help me stay in Kurdistan." He said, "You don't understand; I am willing to sell my house, my car and give up my job if I can go to America." I answered, "You don't understand; I gave up my house, my car, and my job to get to Kurdistan." He asked, "Why?" I replied, "Because the Kurds all around us do not know the blessing of Jesus Christ, as you and I do." He did not know what to say, so he blurted out, "The Kurds don't want it." I didn't know what to say, so I answered, "Let the Kurds decide whether they want to know Jesus Christ."²

At the world missionary conference held at Madras in 1938 the church's opposition was described in more general terms: "Too often [these] churches seem indifferent to Muslim enquirers, or look upon them with suspicion as to their motive in becoming Christians" (Joseph 1961:230). When the Great Experiment failed, the missionaries had no Plan B.

2. Missionaries to the Kurds Died

The second reason that the mission to the Kurds failed is that its workers, and their wives and children, died. Grant, age thirty-seven succumbed to typhoid. Samuel Audley Rhea died of cholera, age thirty-nine. Kurds killed Immanuel Damman just a few months after he arrived. During the attack, Detwig von Oertzen was wounded and consequently left the field. L. O. Fossum died of exhaustion after the First World War. Kurdish raiders murdered Bachimont the week he preached his first sermon in Kurdish. Roger Cumberland was shot in the back. The Presbyterian Church did not replace Cumberland; as he said, few if any envied him. The

Presbyterian mission returned to its regular work alongside the Assyrian evangelical church. The Lutheran Orient

² That man got his wish; he lives near Detroit, with thousands of other Chaldean immigrants. Happily, I got my wish too, and stayed in Kurdistan another five years.

Page 198

Mission Society never recovered from the loss of its early missionaries.

3. The "Time" of Mission among Kurds Had Not Yet Arrived

The third reason that the mission to Kurds failed may have been that the right time had not yet come. Perhaps the missionaries knew instinctively that God's time for the Kurds was "not yet." John Joseph says that in Persia "the missionaries arrived at a difficult time for their spiritual campaign, for on this eastern front the Russo-Persian conflict had already intensified the religious animosities" (1961:45). In Turkey, successive Sultans and then Young Turks applied ever tighter bonds on the overburdened Christians. A mission to Kurds needed to wait for another time.

The lesson of God's timing, His *kairos*, has elsewhere helped the church to explain the failure of its mission. St. Francis explained his failure to win the Sultan of Egypt in terms of God's timing.

Saint Francis and the "Not Yet" of Christ's Mission to Muslims

Francis lived while Europeans fought Muslims in the Fifth Crusade. Francis renounced the sword, and preached the refusal of power. He asked for an audience with the Sultan in 1219. To reach the Sultan, Francis crossed through the no-man's land separating the Christian army from the Muslim army. Francis and the Sultan met over a period of two weeks. When the Sultan bade farewell, he bestowed gifts upon Francis, who is said to have given away all but one (a prayer rug?). Francis worried that he did not see fruit. He viewed his mission as a failure. This troubled Francis and caused him to seek God for the reason. His followers came to believe that time (*kairos*) for Muslims had not yet come. The Franciscans who gathered at Assisi on the 8th centenary of Francis' death wrote:

When Francis speaks of mission, he is primarily thinking about the Muslims (Saracens). . . . At the same time Francis writes in the rule of 1221 that his brothers explicitly proclaim the Gospel only when it pleases God.

Page 199

We feel that, through the signs of the times, God is telling us that *the "when" of Francis' directive has not yet arrived*. In many countries the open preaching of the Gospel is not possible; Islam is renewing itself. Do these facts not show us that, as Francis waited for God's pleasure, we too have to place ourselves in God's hands? (Franciscan Mission 1982:1, 13, italics mine).

Missionaries to Kurdistan would agree with the Franciscans: open preaching of the gospel in Kurdistan was not yet possible. This predicament was partly due to the law in Turkey and Persia, and largely to the depravity of Kurds. Missionaries, including Franciscans, "waited for God's pleasure" to open the door to work among the Muslims. This waiting was an act of faith. They lived in hope that the "not yet" would give way to the "now" of mission to Kurds.

New Testament Examples of God's "Not Yet" in Mission

As recorded in the book of Acts, God's time for mission to some places is "not yet." Paul was prevented from preaching here and there (Ac 16:7); other times he was expelled from the region (Ac 13:50) and on occasion he fled for his life (Ac 14:6). In a similar way the missionaries had to wait, as Francis waited, "for God's pleasure." In some way, God Himself seems to have blocked the Kurdish mission for long seasons. How could the missionaries work among Kurds in the Ottoman Empire when the law forbade conversion to Christianity? Or in Iraq, where, though lawful, local sentiments endangered Cumberland? Paul went to where he could, that is, to where there was "an open door" (Ac 14:27). The missions in Kurdistan of the 19th and 20th centuries did the same.

We have tried to explain the reasons for the failure of the mission to the Kurds. We turn now to suggest some ground for new workers among the Kurds to cover.

THE MISSIONARY MUST PAY ATTENTION TO KURDISH DIVERSITY

Many kinds of Kurds exist; they are divided by terrain, by tribe, and by language. Wycliffe identifies at least four Kurdish

Page 200

languages that need a Bible translation. When Kurds evangelize other Kurds, they will encounter barriers of language, tribe, and class. These barriers define homogeneous groups in which the gospel will spread.

Kurds from Every Tribe

To the outside world, Kurds present a common cause. However, narrower tribal loyalties bind Kurds more intimately, and fracture Kurds more obviously, than the slogans that cry for a unified homeland. Tribes separate Kurds into opposing politics. "The very fact that a certain chieftain *participated in the nationalist movement was often sufficient reason for his rivals to oppose it, and most commoners followed their chieftains without question*" (van Bruinessen 1992:7, italics mine). If one tribe would consider a movement to faith in Christ, a rival tribe may even more vehemently resist. When the gospel comes to the Kurds, it must come to Kurds who will reach Kurds in other tribes.

Tribal loyalties are pre-eminent.³ This loyalty defines one's friends and the borders of those friendships. Bride and groom usually come from the same tribe. Political parties seem to spread through a tribe, but no further. From Turkish Kurdistan, van Bruinessen relates a story of tribal factionalism from the 1970s:

Down to the smallest towns, branches were opened, political tracts read and discussed. *Ideological difference and in particular personal rivalries caused many splits in the organizations; by the end of the decade there were about ten of them* (1992:33, italics mine).

Even in large cities of Kurdish Iraq political loyalties run along tribal lines (Barzani, Surchi, Zêbari, Doski, Mizuri). The historian for the Lutheran Orient Mission Society was right: "The Kurds have little regard for any government further away than their own tribal chiefdoms" (Jensen and Oberg 1985:5). When the gos-

³ Less so in Turkey, home of half the Kurds. The 19th century Ottomans and 20th century Kemalists banished tribal leaders and replaced them with government agents. This line greatly diminished tribal awareness in Kurdistan of Turkey.

Page 201

pel comes to the Kurds, it must cross the barriers that men have built. Kurds must accept the commission of taking the gospel to every tribe. Every tribe must confess that God upends the last to be first and the greatest to be servant of all.

Kurdish Tribal Chiefs are Leaders in Community Decisions

Kurdish tribal chiefs are called *aghas* or *shaikhs* depending on the area. Martin van Bruinessen has definitively described their importance in his book, *Agha, Shaikh, and State*. In that book, the author describes the declining influence of the agha, as the modern states of Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria reward those tribal leaders which adhere to state policies, and replace rebellious aghas.

The village head man (*mukhtar*) acts as judge in disputes and representative of the village when visitors arrive. He is keeper of the peace. When the gospel comes to an entire village, it will likely come from discussions that take place in the house of the mukhtar.

Kurds Make Group Decisions

The decision-making process often takes place in the group, not as individuals. Kurds believe, "we are, therefore I am":

The concept of "I" hardly exists in the context of a tribal culture's value system: "we" (the tribe) predominates. Individuals define themselves entirely in terms of their tribe. They are first a member of this or that tribe, then a Muslim, a Yezidi, or a Christian (Chaliand et al. 1980:24).

Therefore, when the gospel comes to the Kurds, we try not to extract individual young men or women from their family roots; we should wait for multiplied conversions that will happen in extended families. In a 1938 statement freighted with western worldview, the Near East Christian Council mentioned as a hindrance to Muslim evangelism: "In the thought of the Muslim a change of religion is primarily a change of group-communication and group-loyalty"

(Joseph 1961:230). This group-loyalty is normative, and need not be negativized. Muslims should normally become followers of Jesus in company with others in their group.

Page 202

Kurds from Every Class

Kurds are class-conscious, ever aware of insiders and outsiders. Town-dwellers whose family moved from villages (*gund*) even forty years previously are considered outsiders (*gundee*). Look at the village or town and you will find wealthy Kurds and poor Kurds. Wealthy Kurds own land and animals. A landowner rents his land to peasants who work his land and tend his animals. The peasants retain half the crop or herd; the other half belongs to the owner.

Some Kurds have amassed a fortune by trading. They are absorbed in their wealth, more covetous by far than the poor peasants around them. When the gospel comes to the Kurds, it must require a repentance from these rich traders. Indeed, it would be better for some to "sell everything" to follow Jesus.

Most Kurds are poor, and do not know where their bread will come from tomorrow. They own a house and some animals, but that is all. Their sons cannot afford the dowry, so a marriage arrangement is made with the family of a poor girl. Roland Allen says that they poor make good church members: "Illiterate members often bring to the church a profound spiritual knowledge, and a sense of the practical application of Christian truth to daily life, which is hidden from the accomplished student" (1962:148). When the good news comes to poor Kurds, it must offer them Christ and His spiritual blessings. Followers of Christ must remember the poor in their charity.

Religious Leaders as Well as Known Sinners

Some Kurds are religious, and society respects their status. The religious family or even the religious tribe is proud of its reputation. If a Kurd makes the pilgrimage to Mecca, the title of *haji* (pilgrim) is applied even to his sons for as long as they live. I know of no Kurdish women who have made the pilgrimage.

In some families, one young man or (more often) woman seems to take the role of keeper of the faith. (Other family members may feel no religious impulse.) He or she says the five prayers,

reads the Qur'an, and preserves the family religion. When the gospel comes to the Kurds, it must face almost certain opposition

Page 203

from the conservators of Islam. They may even imagine they are friends of God if they persecute, or deceive, the followers of Jesus.

Other Kurds are sinners, recognized as such by society. Some are prostitutes (never talked of in polite company). Some are men who visit prostitutes. One Kurdish woman in our knowledge was murdered by the men in her family for suspected adultery. Among Kurdish men are gamblers, drunkards, thieves, wife-beaters, and homosexuals. Among women are mothers-in-law who break their sons' wives through battering and contempt. There are traitors to their family or tribe, who have served the dictatorship for money, as surely as did the tax-collectors with whom Jesus broke bread. These are the outcasts, the public sinners. When the gospel comes to the Kurds, it must heal many sinners who know they need a Physician.

God-Fearing Kurds

Some Kurds worship God with fear and awe. They seek Him with their hearts. God has planted in their souls a longing to know Him. Other Kurds gather around a holy man, or they gather in his memory. Sufis feel the intimacy of God's love. God-fearing Kurds may recognize followers of Jesus as fellow pilgrims on a spiritual path. God-fearing Kurds want to read the Bible. They will more likely decide to follow Jesus apart from their family approval. When the gospel comes, it must soon attract many God-fearers whom God has prepared to belong to Himself.

Kurds who have come to faith have one quality in common; they were on a personal journey to find God. These few elect souls wanted to know God, and they had an extraordinary desire for the truth. They would understand an old hymn:

I sought the Lord and afterward I knew
He moved my soul to seek Him, seeking me.
It was not I that found O Savior true.
No, I was found by Thee (Hymns 1976)

Dr. Sa'eed says that his search for truth led him to Christian faith. He once regarded the food of Christians to be unclean (Rasooli and Allen 1957:26); later he accepted their food and their faith

as clean, an act that Sa'eed's biographer described as a bomb exploding in his father's house. When the gospel comes to the God-fearing Kurds, they are first fruits of a harvest.

Page 204

Nomadic Kurds

Mehrdad Izady estimates that two centuries ago a million Kurds lived as nomads, about thirty percent of their population. In the mid-nineteenth century Henry Layard called the Kurds a nomadic people. However, today less than three percent of the Kurds live as nomads (Izady 1992:229). Ismet Vanly writes, "The 'nomad tribes,' which are still equated with the Kurds in Western minds, do not in fact exist in Kurdistan" (Chaliand et al. 1993:144).

But Kurdish nomads in eastern Turkey still pitch their black wool tents in pasture land for a season and then move on. So we can still quote Freya Stark, who traveled a century ago and paid exquisite tribute to the Kurdish nomad:

The life of insecurity is the nomad's achievement. He does not try, like our building world, to believe in a stability which is non-existent; and in his constant movement with the seasons, in the lightness of his hold, puts something right, about which we are constantly wrong. His is in fact the reality, to which the most solid of our structures are illusion; and the ramshackle tents in their crooked gaiety, with cooking-pots propped up before them and animals about, show what a current flows round all the stone erections of the ages. The finest ruin need only be lamented with moderation, since its living essence long ago entered the common stream. No thought of this kind is likely to come into the head of the Turkish nomads; they are happy to shelter their goats in the warmth or the shade that they find, whether the ruins be of Nineveh or Rome. Their women were cheerful and fierce, unlike the peasant, and dressed in brighter colours—equals of their men or of anyone, as one may be if one lives under the hardness of necessity and makes insecurity one's refuge (Darke 1987:268).

Besides nomads, semi-nomadic Kurds have two homes, one in the mountains where they live during the summer grazing. They return to villages when summer ends. Only the most determined Christian worker imagines himself or herself traveling with Kurdish nomads. It has never happened to my knowledge.

Mountain Kurds and City Kurds

Terrain divides Kurds between those whose home is in the mountains, and those who move to the plains (and thus to cities)

Page 205

and towns). Distrust separates the two. Izady is the best source here. He cites Siaband (1988), that "the relation between a Kurd and his mountain habitat is like a farmer to his farm; one has no meaning without the other" (Izady 1992:188). And this description: "To a Kurd the mountain is no less than the embodiment of the deity: mountain is his mother, his refuge, his protector, his home, his farm, his market, his mate, and his only friend" (1992:188).

On the other hand, modern Kurds settle in the cities on the plains; they assimilate into the surrounding culture. The cities on the plain is the world of politics, and successful Kurds who go there may not be trusted to be the leaders of mountain Kurds:

It is as if he has lost his virtue by leaving the apron of mother-mountain and living among the crafty plains people. . . . To know the secrets of the mountains, the passes, rivers, and caves; to know the tribal customs; and to be brave, are essential characteristics of Kurdish chiefs and leaders (Izady 1992:189).

This distrust of the society outside the mountain fastnesses figures in two ancient stories that Izady summarizes. In both tales, a warrior man from the mountains is tempted by, and then betrayed by, a woman from the plains. These stories, told around the evening fires, would teach a lesson to every mountain boy: Don't go down to the plain, or it will make a fool of you. Conversely, when mountain Kurds come to the big cities, they may appear as simpletons to street-smart urban Kurds.

The political rivalry between Kurds in northern Iraq can be divided between mountain Kurds (Barzani) and Kurds who moved to the big cities on the plain (Talabani). When the gospel comes to the Kurds, it must take root in the mountains and also on the plains. From its beginning, the gospel in Kurdistan must bless all the families of the earth, even those families that the fathers and grandfathers taught their children to avoid.

Kurdish Women Will Hear and Believe

Mistreatment of women begins early: boys do little work, girls do all the work; a teenage girl is forced to live in her house and seldom goes out until she is transferred to the home of her husband. Teenage boys, on the other hand, do as they please; orders

Page 206

from a sister or mother carry no weight. A woman can carry as much firewood as a donkey and still make dinner in the evening; women suffer a lifetime sentence of chores and mothering and eating leftovers. They sit in the unheated back room while the men drink their tea and complain about the service. When the gospel comes, it must end the way men mistreat women.

Kurdish society seems patriarchal, but take another look. Women find ways to influence their families and to a lesser extent the society that oppresses them. Women are not left without power. They can make the home life pleasant or painful for the men. They have complete care of the children. Society expects women to preserve the family religion; wives remain faithful to Islam even when their husbands do not. Women also maintain the honor of the family, even when the men do not. Thus, women are a conservative influence; they are not change-agents. Henny Hansen, an anthropologist, says,

In view of the great part that conformance with the rules of Islam plays in the life of Kurdish women, her positive attitude toward the five pillars of Islam, *any change in her life pattern in this quarter would involve a complete transformation*. It is not surprising that *the altered life of women in Turkey has had to proceed hand-in-hand with a sustained offensive on all things Arab* (1960:183, italics mine).

For some women, the practice of the five pillars *is* the religion of God. All else may fail her, but the woman of Islam can rely on the unshakable pillars. Should an outsider suggest that a woman give up her practice, she would cry, "Blasphemy!"

Kurdish Women Who Are Not Muslims

In non-Muslim religions—Alevi,⁴ Yezidi, and Jewish—Kurdish women and men mix more in the religious life of the community. Kurdish Jews allow more freedom for their women, and this "gave rise in the 17th century to the first woman rabbi, the famous Rabbi Asenath Bârzâni" (Izady 1992:195).

⁴ Alevi is probably a form of Shi'ite Islam, but rejected as perfidious by Sunni Kurds.

Page 207

MISSIONARIES SHOULD BEGIN A MISSION ORDER

Missionaries usually think of gathering believers into congregations; however, *missionaries should start mission orders*. By mission orders, we mean groups of men or women who make a commitment to the task of evangelism and discipleship.

When they plant only congregations, missionaries neglect the *means* by which they themselves obeyed the Great Commission. The congregation invites like-minded people to join: children of members and culturally-near neighbors. However, the mission order blesses the strangers outside the homogeneous unit. This has been God's missionary plan since He blessed Abraham to be a blessing to all the families of the earth. Mission orders extended Christian faith through the Middle East and into Persia, Afghanistan and China.

Crucial to the missionary's task is his or her awareness that *there are two structures to God's redemptive mission*. Ralph Winter has described these as the warp and the woof:

Just as it is impossible to make cloth without threads going both crosswise and lengthwise, it is crucially important to regard these two structures working together as the warp and the woof, the fabric being the Christian movement—the people of God, the *ecclesia* of the New Testament, the church of Jesus Christ. Therefore, to make either of the two structures central and the other secondary, as the term para-church seems to do, is probably unwise (1977:1).

So two structures comprise the church: the congregation and the missionary band. The *ministry* of the congregation was given to elders and deacons. However, the work of the church—going into all the world to make disciples of the ethné—was given to the apostolic order:

While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul *for the work* to which I have called them." So after they had fasted and prayed, they placed their hands on them and sent them off (Ac 13:2-3, italics mine).

When the gospel comes to the Kurds, the Holy Spirit will set apart some to the work of the apostles. These join the missionary order described below.

[End of excerpt]

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A History of Kurdistan

by Marli Brown

Islamic era

By the end of the 8th century the Kurds again ruled Kurdistan politically. Kurds from overpopulated areas continued to migrate and between the 10th and 12th centuries Islamic Kurds extended their rule from Yemen and Libya to Central Asia. They defended the Middle East against the Byzantines and the Crusaders, shaping the course of Islamic history. During this era they excelled in the arts and sciences. The religious movement Mazdak had begun emerged in the early AD 800s and led to a century of uprisings against Islamic rule. Several independent Kurdish dynasties ruled western Iran and later the entire Fertile Crescent.

Between 932 and 1062 AD the Kurdish dynasty of Daylamites spread from the Indian Ocean to Anatolia. Daylamites practiced the Cult of Angels mixed with some Shi'ite influences. Some of the Daylamite leaders tried to wipe out Islam, but they lost their lives in the attempt. In AD 1169 the Islamic Ayyubids, under Kurdish Saladin, defeated the Crusaders and gained power over much of the Middle East until the late 15th century. These medieval Kurdish dynasties were very tolerant of Jews and Christians.

Kurdish dominance in the Islamic world faded in the beginning of the 13th century, and for the next four centuries the Turks took control. Turkish nomads moved through Kurdistan to wipe out many of the cultures of the Middle East. Small Kurdish kingdoms continued to exist but paid taxes to the Turks. The major Kurdish powers disappeared. The Mongol invasions that followed seemed mild compared to the ruthlessness of the Turks.

Yet, while the Kurds languished politically, the Cult of Angels nearly swallowed Shi'ite Islam under the guise of being the true Islam. The Cult of Angels, now called Alevism, spread until the Sunni Ottoman Turks rose up against it. Around AD 1600 Shi'ite Islam made a comeback but has never been able to completely eradicate Alevism.

Kurdistan fades

In AD 1497 Vasco da Gama rounded the Cape of Good Hope, and international trade routes soon shifted away from the silk road, leaving the once important Kurdistan economically isolated. In AD 1501 the Persian Empire revived and the Persians and the Ottomans battled on Kurdish territory. Kurdistan was torn between the two powers, both of which brutally oppressed the Kurds. The warring empires literally burned off the land in the north and west, destroying agriculture and leaving only the nomadic *Kurmanj* to scrape a living off the land. A large number of Kurds was deported and resettled in Persia and Anatolia. The once progressive society had become impoverished and devastated.

Wearied by the destruction, nationalistic attitudes took root and grew until the Kurds were able to achieve a degree of autonomy in the 1600s. In AD 1639 the Ottomans signed the Treaty of Zahab leaving

the area calm for 80 years. When the Persian Safavids fell in AD 1722, all of Kurdistan came under Ottoman rule. The Kurdish Zands rose to power and ruled a large area of Kurdistan until AD 1794. In AD 1750, Persia again rose under the rule of the Afsharids, who challenged the Ottomans. This time southern, eastern, and central Kurdistan became a battleground, and the entire region was plunged into a darkness that lasted until the 19th century. Much of the original culture was lost during this time. Many of the Kurds were forced to relocate, and large numbers were deported to Khurasan, where there is still a significant enclave of Kurds.

During the 16th and 17th centuries the population shifted from primarily sedentary, *Pahlawani*-speaking Kurds to nomadic, Sunni Muslim, *Kurmanji*-speaking Kurds which now typify Kurdish identity. This shift was a result of continual destruction of the land during wars and the decline of the silk road's use for trade. During the 19th century the Kurdish population in Armenia grew until nearly two-thirds of northern Kurds lived in historical Armenia.

After the Russo-Persian War in 1828, a treaty was signed placing a large number of Kurds under the rule of the Russian Empire. Russia then took a Kurdish section of the Ottoman Empire, ending Kurdistan's long period of isolation. In the middle of the 19th century the last elements of local government among the Kurds was eradicated, and with it traditional religious tolerance disappeared. Religion became a weapon among the Kurds in Turkey, and many of the Yezidis were massacred. In 1842 the massacre of 5000 Assyrians opened a campaign against Christians, then turned against Shi'ites, Alevis, and Jews.

World War I again made Kurdistan a battleground, this time between Russia and the Ottomans. Hundreds of thousands of Kurds died. This war altered the face of Kurdistan, again leaving it divided between Turkey, Russia, French Syria, British Iraq, and Persia. Kurdistan was too weak and devastated to become an independent state and has been shaken by uprisings and independence movements ever since. Deportations and resettlements have continued to plague the Kurds since 1900.

The Kurds continue to remain culturally distinct from their neighbors. Many of the people who have moved into Kurdistan over the past 5000 years have become thoroughly assimilated into Kurdish culture, but they have also influenced it. Once one of the important political and commercial centers of the world, Kurdistan now is virtually isolated from the rest of the world. It is too early to ascertain whether the present exposure that the Gulf War gave the Kurds is the beginning of the end for this isolation, or whether it is a window of opportunity that will soon fade.

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Kurds Around the World

Although the world's attention has recently been focused on the Kurds of northern Iraq, Kurds live in numerous other countries of the Middle East, Central Asia, Europe, and North America. Kurdistan is the geographic area which is home to the majority of Kurds. It was named for the first time in the twelfth century by the Seljuk Turks to identify the region under their control which was inhabited by Kurds. If the Middle East map were to be redrawn to give the Kurds their own boundaries, Kurdistan would be as large as France, stretching over 200,000 square miles and encompassing six countries. Of the world-wide population of nearly 30 million, over 25 million Kurds are unevenly distributed between Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, Armenia and Azerbaijan. Kurdistan is a rugged, mountainous region, much of which is covered with snow for over half the year. Three large river systems, the Arax, Tigris, and Euphrates create fertile valleys where Kurds farm and pasture sheep, goats, and cattle. Much of the oil in these countries is found in Kurdistan.

Kurds in Turkey

Turkey has the lion's share with about 40% of the world's Kurds living in the southeast of the country and comprising 20% of Turkey's population. It is the agricultural section of Turkey which produces most of Turkey's meat, grain, vegetables, and dairy products. On the average Kurds are poor with 80% of them landless or owning only very small plots. About 75,000 still live as semi-nomadic shepherds, settling only during the coldest part of winter. Driven by poverty and the need for work, a large segment of the Kurdish population has established itself in independent communities in the western portion of Turkey. Over half a million now live in Istanbul alone, 75 miles from their homeland.

Several Kurdish dialects are spoken in Turkey. The majority speak *Kurmanji*. Until recently, speaking Kurdish in public was a crime. The vast majority of Kurds in Turkey are Sunni Muslims. A few, however, are members of the Alevi sect which Sunnis despise and persecute. The Turkish government hopes to dilute the Kurdish population, which it sees as a threat, and to assimilate Kurds into Turkish society through forced resettlement.

Kurds in Iran

Iranian Kurds make up 12% of the population. Since 1960, land reform has allowed 30% of the Kurds to buy land. A high percentage live in an urban setting and work in industrial jobs.

Kurds of eastern Iran live along the Central Asian and Afghan borders more than 600 miles from their traditional homelands in northwestern Iran. Under the Persian Empire in the 1500s, these Kurds were relocated to their present homes to serve as border guards against Turk and Mongol invaders. They have good relations with their Turkmen neighbors, and many speak Turkmen or Persian as their first language.

Along the western border, in the most rugged part of Kurdistan, Kurds reside in small villages of under 2000 people. A few maintain the semi-nomadic lifestyle of their ancestors. Due to water shortages and

high population density, the area faces persistent problems with malaria, tuberculosis, and trachoma. In general, the area is wooded and twice as densely populated as the rest of Iran. The majority of Kurds in Iran are Sunni with pockets of Shi'ite and other minority sects.

Kurds in Iraq

The Kurds of Iraq live along that country's northeastern borders with Turkey and Iran. Most are farmers and all but a few thousand have given up the semi-nomadic lifestyle of the past in favor of settled farming. This region of Kurdistan is fertile with cold and snowy winters.

The Kurds of Iraq form more than 20% of the population. They have been allowed more cultural freedom than in other parts of the Middle East. For instance, the Kurdish language is still officially taught in schools and Iraqi Kurds are free to talk and write in their mother tongue. Although other dialects are used in Iraqi Kurdistan, *Sorani* which utilizes the Arabic script is the language officially used in schools. Due to the relative freedom to speak and write in *Sorani*, Iraqi Kurds are proud to have preserved the cultural and literary heritage of Kurdistan. A great many scholars have emerged in northern Iraq. They have written and published books in Kurdish on a variety of subjects such as the history, geography, and culture of Kurdistan. A number of magazines and newspapers have also been published. However, Iraq has been the scene of some of the worst persecution of the Kurds.

Iraq's Kurds are mostly Sunni. Beside the nearly 4 million Kurds who live in the north of the country, more than half a million live in Iraq's major cities of Baghdad, Mosul and Kirkuk.

Kurds in Syria

The Kurds of Syria make up about 10% of the population. They live in two separate enclaves along the northern border with Turkey. In an effort to dilute the Kurdish population, Syria has deported large numbers of them, perhaps 100,000 or more, into southern Syria and settled Arabs among them. Many were removed from Kurdish areas near the Turkish border and their land was resettled by Arabs. A large number have also been placed in Syria's cities. By forcing Kurds to resettle outside their home areas, the Syrian government hopes to assimilate them into the larger Arab society and thus avoid their potential threat.

Besides the Kurds who were displaced against their will, a large segment of the Kurdish population has established itself in independent communities in Syria's major urban centers in search of work. On the average, Kurds are poor and they work for wealthy Syrians in menial jobs as servants, gas station attendants, and garbage collectors. Most of these Kurds speak the *Kurmanji* dialect, which utilizes the Latin script. Pressure to learn Arabic has increased greatly, and many in the cities no longer speak their mother tongue. Today, an increasing number of these Kurds are well on their way to being assimilated into Arab society. Arabic, not Kurdish, is their primary language. They have lost their ties with their homeland and have become permanent residents outside Kurdistan. Major concentrations of Kurds are found in Damascus, Hama, and Aleppo. The vast majority of Kurds in Syria are Sunni Muslims.

Kurds in Central Asia

Although some Kurds moved to Turkistan in the 1500s, large numbers of Kurds emigrated in the late 1800s and early 1900s as refugees from the wars between Ottoman Turkey and Tsarist Russia. The distinct Kurdish communities of Central Asia are separated by religion, place of origin and vast distance. However, many still look toward Kurdistan, maintaining traditional customs and dress.

Armenia has become an international center for Kurds, with radio broadcasting in the *Kurmanji* language, Kurdish language education and a publishing house.

The Kurds of Central Asia are among their nation's most prosperous citizens. They face no discrimination and many hold high political offices. They enjoy utilities, roads, housing, and medical facilities. Illiteracy disappeared among them in the 1930s. However, they are caught in a tense area where ethnic rivalry is increasing and violence occasionally breaks out.

The Kurds of Armenia and Georgia originated in Turkey and Iran. Most of them are Yezedis. They chose to settle here to avoid further persecution by Azerbaijani Muslims. A large number of Sunni Kurds from Turkey and Iran reside in Azerbaijan, but there is little interaction between them and the Yezidi Kurds of Georgia and Armenia.

The Kurdish communities of Kazakhstan and Kirgizia originated in northwestern Iran and Turkey. In the 1930s many were deported to the China-Soviet border regions for political reasons.

The small Kurdish community of Afghanistan was moved from their traditional homeland in northwestern Iran over 400 years ago by the Persian Empire. Many now speak Turkmen or Dari as their first language. However, they maintain an awareness of their Kurdish heritage.

Kurds in Lebanon

The Kurdish community in Lebanon went there from Turkey via Syria due to persecution in the early 1900s. Before the Lebanese War in the mid 1970s, there were perhaps half a million Kurds in Beirut and Tripoli alone. Lebanon often became a haven for Kurdish political dissidents who were persecuted in their homeland. Here they formed their political parties and published their newsletters. However, since the Lebanese War started, most Kurds have moved out of Lebanon to Syria and other countries.

Kurds in Jordan

The small Kurdish community of Amman, Jordan is made up mostly of those who have fled from Iraq following the Gulf War. They do not exceed 10,000 in number. Most were farmers, but have had to adapt to city life. They are refugees in a city of refugees, because Amman also has large communities of Palestinian refugees. Though *Sorani* is still in use, most of Amman's Kurds speak Arabic as their primary language.

Kurds in the West

Over half a million Kurds live and work in Europe, for the most part in Germany. The majority are unskilled laborers who have migrated in search of work and to escape persecution and discrimination in their homelands. Kurds make up a certain percentage of Turkish immigrants and refugees in European countries such as England and Bulgaria.

The Kurdish communities of Europe serve to some extent as a voice for their people, drawing Western attention to the political and social issues of the Kurds.

Since the recent Gulf War between Iraq and Western allies, some five thousand Kurds have entered North America as refugees. The largest concentrations of these are in Dallas, where about a thousand live, Detroit, and other major cities.

About 15,000 Kurds are reported to have immigrated to Australia.

Distribution of the Kurds

Mainland Kurdistan		Displaced in Middle East	
Turkey	13,650,000	Western Turkey	2,000,000
Iraq	4,500,000	Lebanon	500,000
Iran	6,600,000	Kuwait	255,000
Syria	<u>1,160,000</u>	Jordan	<u>10,000</u>
Total	25,910,000	Total	2,765,000
Central Asia		The West	
Turkistan	60,000	Europe	590,000
Armenia and Georgia	70,000	North America	5,000
Azerbaijan	175,000	Australia	15,000
Khazakistan and Kirgizia	25,000		
Afghanistan	<u>20,000</u>		

Total 350,000 World-Wide 29,355,000



Religions of Kurdistan

by Marli Brown

Kurds practice a wide variety of ancient religions. Some practice forms of Zoroastrianism, Baha'ism, and Indian religions, often clothed in their own indigenous Cult of Angels. Others adhere to Judaism or traditional Christianity. Most, however, have converted to Islam. Nevertheless, many do not practice Islam because it is the religion of their oppressors.

Islam

Very few Kurds converted to Islam before the 12th century. Muslim forces entered Kurdistan in the 7th century but only had superficial influence. Muslim invaders considered Kurds to be polytheists (*mushrikin*). Those who converted lived along the borders of Kurdistan. The rest resisted Islam until wars devastated the mountains, and most of the farmers were replaced by Kurdish nomads who were Sunni Muslims.

Today the majority of Kurds are at least nominally Muslim. Sunni followers make up three-fifths of the population. A little more than 5% are Shi'ite.

Sufi Mysticism

The majority of Muslim Kurds and even many non-Muslims follow mystic Sufi movements. Many of their practices do not seem Islamic. Sufi leaders have promoted themselves as both *avatars* and *caliphs*. Sufi lodges are more common than mosques throughout Kurdistan.

Judaism

Jewish presence in Kurdistan goes back to the 9th century BC when Assyrian king Shalmeneser III settled deported Jews in the area between 858 and 824 BC. In the first century BC, Jewish teachers gave their congregations the freedom to proselytize which resulted in many Kurds converting to Judaism. By the beginning of the 2nd century AD, Judaism was well established in Kurdistan Jewish presence continued until the middle of this century when the modern state of Israel was formed.

In the 17th Century AD Rabbi Samuel Barzani founded numerous seminaries and schools in Kurdistan. Even in this century, in the early 1900s several Jewish schools were open for both Jewish and non-Jewish Kurds. These schools remained in operation until shortly after the formation of the Jewish state in 1948. Since then many Kurdish Jews have moved to Israel where they live in Kurdish enclaves and maintain their ethnic customs. Many older Kurds still carry memories of their Jewish neighbors and friends.

Christianity

By the early 4th century the Kurdish kingdom of Adiabene began converting to Christianity, following the lead of the royal house. By the time Muhammad established Islam, central Kurdistan was largely Christian, in spite of persecution by the Persian Sasanian Empire. Kurds in the western regions of Pontus,

Cappadocia and Cilicia converted to Christianity before the 7th century and had lost their Kurdish identity by the 12th century. The Kurds in far eastern Turkey resisted conversion to Christianity, and as a result were deported and exiled under Byzantine rule.

When Islam moved across the area, Christianity was suppressed but survived in the Nestorian and Jacobite churches. The scripture had not been translated into Kurdish and by the 14th century most of the clergy were Assyrian. As a result, most of the Christian Kurds adopted the Armenian identity and no longer saw themselves as Kurds. Since the 15th century a few missionaries have gone to Kurdistan.

Today Kurds who are affiliated with these ancient denominations number less than 100,000. Very few, if any, have a vital relationship with Jesus and a true understanding of faith. They have no interest in seeing their Muslim neighbors converted to Christianity.

The Cult of Angels

A large number of Kurds still practice ancient indigenous religions. They are often assumed to be Shi'ite but actually have more affinity with Zoroastrianism. They have a long history of being persecuted which continues to give them a strong sense of unity even across international borders.

Those who still hold to some form of the ancient Cult of Angels believe in seven luminous, angelic beings who protect the universe from seven dark forces of matter. The fully detached, all-encompassing, universal spirit (*haq*) has been uninvolved in the material world except for manifesting himself to the supreme *avatar*. This supreme *avatar*, called the lord god and thought to be the second of the seven angelic beings, created the material universe. The remaining five angelic beings (*avatars*) maintain the universe. These seven ruled throughout the first of seven epochs of universal life. Each time the *avatars* transmigrate into new *avatars* a new epoch comes about, but the number seven is always maintained. A few humans, such as Mirza Ali Muhammad, the founder of Baha'ism, are believed to be lesser *avatars* whose influence is limited to their time period.

Followers of all branches of this cult believe in the transmigration of the soul through numerous reincarnations. *Avatars* are thought to be reincarnations of deities.

Universalistic in nature, the Cult of Angels believes that all religions are valid ways of expressing faith in the spirit. Because of this, followers of the Cult have little difficulty associating with other religions, even claiming to be insiders. They have also been especially apt at infiltrating other religions by claiming to be the true form of those religions. This occurs through grassroots movements that form new branches of the Cult, claiming the leaders of the other religions as *avatars*.

Only three branches of the Cult still exist, but it still influences all Kurds culturally. All over Kurdistan shrines can be found beside springs, and the feast of *Khidir* is celebrated in the spring. *Khidir*, the living green man of the ponds, is honored by many Kurds, and many ponds are considered sacred.

One of the remaining branches, *Alevism*, is found mostly among the Dimila Kurds and their *Kurmanji*-speaking neighbors in Turkey. Thirteen percent of Syria's Arabs also follow Alevism. Kurds, once

numerous in Syria, made many Arab converts before becoming completely assimilated into the local culture. Alevism was formed to combat Shi'ism at the beginning of the 15th century. Its followers revere Ali as the most important *avatar* of the universal spirit. Their exaltation of Ali has led most people to believe that they are Shi'ite, yet their beliefs contradict Islam on every important point.

Another branch of the Cult, Yarsanism, found mostly in Iran and Iraq in southern Kurdistan, also elevates Ali. The *Ahl-i Haq*, a major segment of this group, have been increasingly identified with mainstream Shi'ism, although they follow a book entitled *Burhan* which was written by a mystic. Another segment of this group, the *Tayifasan*, is less interested in associating with Shi'ism. The majority of the Yarsan are village people who cling to the ancient religion. They claim both Muslim and Biblical figures as *avatars* but believe that the Jewish *avatars* along with Sultan Sahak are the most important- They believe that the soul is journeying toward becoming fully human, which is its ultimate goal.

Yezidis make up the third group- They represent only 5% of the Kurdish population and are scattered in small pockets all over Kurdistan. They place a special emphasis on angels and even exalt Lucifer to the position and nature of the other angelic beings (*avatars*), although he remains more powerful than the others. Birds play a central role in their view of creation. Peacocks and roosters are revered as sacred. The supreme deity is often represented as a bird. During the 17th and 18th centuries a bird was carried at massacres of the Yezidis who refused to convert. This forced many to flee to the Caucasus area.

Folk religions

Folk religious practices carry elements of Zoroastrianism and Islam but are not firmly rooted in the ancient Cult of Angels.

The title of *sheikh* often describes a man who has become well known for his piety and miraculous powers. These men use charms, interpret dreams, and tell fortunes. Some of these men claim to be descendants of Muhammad's tribe. When these miracle workers die, shrines are established at their graves where animal sacrifices are performed for those seeking healing. Anyone who is seeking good fortune may visit the shrines. Religious rites are celebrated at the shrines with exuberance and dancing.

When rain is needed, a religious leader prays, purifies himself and then is submerged in a pool of water to encourage rain. Every cave, old building and high bridge is believed to be the home of *jinn* (evil spirits). Elves are believed to live in wells and dwarfs in the mountains. Springs of water are used to perform ritual washings.

At marriage, lumps of sugar and honey are brought for good luck. When a bride enters her new home, either a bird is released over her head or else an animal is slaughtered to prevent evil spirits from entering the home.

When a child is born, a woman is called to read the Quran. The mother is considered unclean for 40 days. If the newborn is a boy, relatives guard him for 7 days against the attack of *jinn* (evil spirits.) They lay a knife, a large needle or an onion leaf beside the baby's bed.

By the 16th century, Islam had been adopted by the majority of Kurds, yet they tended to be pluralistic in attitude until the middle of the 19th century. Today religion creates divisions among the Kurds. However, most of them are not fanatical. Since the Gulf War both Muslims and followers of the Cult of Angels have become more open to Christianity.

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Profile: KURDS - MIDDLE EAST

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PLEAD WITH GOD FOR THE HIDDEN PEOPLES

'We have always been hated,' bewails a young Kurd to his friend. Even today, the Kurds of the Middle East are victims of political repression, imprisonment, and military campaigns. For political reasons, the governments of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the USSR seek to minimize Kurdish strength and annihilate memories of Kurdish language and culture.

Although they have no nation-state of their own, the Kurdish population is greater than Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and many other Middle Eastern countries. No absolutely reliable statistics are available, but there are at least 9 million and perhaps as many as 20 million Kurds.

The largest number of Kurds live in Turkey* (comprising 13.20% of the population) where it is illegal to publish anything in Kurdish. As late as the 1970s Amnesty International documented a widespread use of torture by the Turkish government against the Kurds. In 1971 the Turkish Prime Minister denied even the existence of a Kurd language!

Only the New Testament has been translated into only one dialect of Kurdish. Work has been done in Southern Kurdish, but no work has begun on the northern Kurdish language. Only a few scattered attempts are being made to reach the Kurds for Christ.

Pray for a door to open for Christians to live and witness among Kurds in closed countries. Pray for witness to Kurds in West Germany and Middle Eastern countries where missionaries can enter. Pray that more Bible translation work can be initiated in the Kurdish languages.

*The following is from March '91 Gospel Recordings' TOGETHER IN PRAYER.
HIDDEN PEOPLE PROFILE*

With our attention focused on the Middle East these days, we should not forget that the conflict there is also affecting the minority peoples in the countries involved. One of these groups is the Kurds. Their homeland, Kurdistan, extends over parts of Turkey, Syria, Iraq, Iran and the USSR. They are the largest ethnic group in the world without a country of their own. There are differences of dialects and customs

among the Kurds, but in each of the lands where they live they have suffered discrimination and persecution; the most severe instance is the use of chemical warfare against them in Iraq.

Many Kurds have left their homeland, and a large number of them are now living in Germany where the government is helping them relocate. Since the countries they come from are not open to missionaries, perhaps this is the Lord's way of bringing them to where they can hear the Gospel. Only a few of the Kurd dialects are recorded. Pray that recording opportunities will open up, especially among these Kurds that are relocating. Although traditionally Islamic, they have become disillusioned by the treatment they have received from fellow Moslems, and this has given them an openness to the Gospel. Pray that they will hear and receive this message whether in their homeland or abroad.

GPD INSIDE COVER OF THE MARCH, 1994 ISSUE THE KURDS: A PEOPLE WITHOUT A FRIEND

'The Kurds have no friends.- This resounding cry depicts the Kurdish mindset. As a chess pawn has no 'friends' and sacrifices to serve the King, so the friendless Kurds continue to serve as pawns to larger political interests.

Most readers know the great heartaches the Iraqis caused their Kurdish countrymen before and after the Persian Gulf War. The Kurdish refugee camps in northern Iraq continue to serve as a reminder, but that does not tell the story of the prison torture cells in Diyarbakir, the capital of Turkish Kurdistan, and the colonial mandates after World War I. These mandates outlined in the Treaty of Sevres promised the Kurds a land of their own. Yet the Kurds remain a people without a country.

WHO ARE THE KURDS?

Since the Greeks attacked the area in 401 B.C., soldiers and others have portrayed the Kurds as tough and proud bandits. In the early 1900s, British military attaches described the typical Kurdish man as a heavily armed reckless horseback rider from the mountains, dressed in colorful flowing robes. When forced to choose between a colorful sash and food, it is said the Kurd will spend his last "dollar" on the sash. The women exercise more freedom than their Muslim sisters in other lands. Dressed modestly, they do not wear the veil over their face.

Physically, the Kurds remain unmixed with the invading nations, resulting in perhaps the most handsome people in the Middle East. The many invaders left their marks on other indigenous people, while the mountains protected the Kurdish bloodlines from these raping and pillaging armies.

Today, the Kurdish lifestyle varies greatly, ranging from city dweller, rural villager and peasant to nomad and semi-nomad. The many Kurds living in the mountain villages raise sheep and farm. This pastoral and farming lifestyle hinders formal education. Official Iranian estimates in 1975 show 70 percent of all Kurds and 80 percent of the women are illiterate.

WHERE DO THEY LIVE?

The map portrays what scholars call Kurdistan, the 'nation' of the Kurds-. (See map on page 2, March, '94 GPD.) Turkey, Iran, Iraq, the former Soviet Union and Syria contain portions of Kurdistan and the largest Kurdish population. Kurd refugees poured into Germany and other nations as well.

Possibly 25 million Kurds live scattered worldwide. It is difficult to number the Kurdish population. The Turkish government estimates 8 million "mountain Turks" live there, while the Kurdish nationalists estimate the number at 12 million. For the sake of-unity, the Turkish government legislates there are only Turks in Turkey. One member of Turkey's parliament was sentenced to two years of hard labor after declaring he was a Kurd. The Turkish government is not unique in its desire to reclassify the Kurds. The estimated 800,000 Syrian Kurds are officially recognized as Arabs though they stem from the non-Arabic Persians. Yet the government has moved real Arabs into the Kurdish traditional homeland. You will read the details on day 3, March '94 GPD.

Prior to the Persian Gulf War, ten percent of the 3.2 million Iraqi Kurds lived in Baghdad, though most lived in their autonomous region bordered on the north by Turkey and on the northeast by Iran. Since the war, nearly two million official recognition of the Kurds and freedom for the Kurdish press. Starting in 1961, the Iraqi army consistently has battled the Kurds. When the Iran-Iraq War began in 1980, some Kurd forces fought with the Iraqis hoping to keep the Iraq-supplied weapons after the war. Siding with the enemy is not anathema to them. The Kurds historically sell their killing abilities to the highest bidder.

A Kurdish leader, Massoud Barzani, admits violence from differing parties will not give the Kurds their own homeland. Perhaps they need to put their priorities elsewhere. As Christians, we know that this friendless people needs to pursue a relationship with the Prince of Peace, Jesus Christ, with the same diligence with which they now seek a kingdom of their own on earth. Then they would finally have a friend in Jesus. Meanwhile, will you be a friend of the Kurds by praying for them every day this month?

*Note: See: c:\Mid. Eas\Turkey\Kurds; c:\Mid. Eas\Iran\Kurds; c:\Mid.Eas\Iraq\Kurds; c:\Mid.eas\Syria\Kurds

GPD 11/5/87 THE PLIGHT OF AN ORPHANED KURD GIRL

Thick black smoke billowed skyward as the fire crackled and hissed. From a distance sirens screamed as ambulances and fire-trucks rushed to the burning bus. Among the passengers killed in the accident were the parents of a pretty eight-year old girl named Melek. She herself escaped physical injury, but because none of her relatives could be found, she was placed in a girls' orphanage in a large city in this Middle Eastern country.

That was eleven years ago. Now, at nineteen, Melek, lovely in face and form, has to leave the orphanage. For most girls nineteen is an exciting age. most have prospects of marriage and look forward to having homes of their own. But few families will accept Melek as a bride for their sons since in her

country orphans are considered social outcasts. As a result, for survival, many orphan girls turn to stealing or prostitution.

'What can I do?' Melek pondered day and night. "I don't want to become a prostitute. I want a good job. I She f found one f or a short while in a stationary shop, but quit when her boss demanded sexual favors. She searched in vain for some other way to support herself honorably, but could find none. Finally, following weeks of hunger and desperation, she gave in to the advances a girl of her beauty faces when not accompanied by another women or family member.

"This is the fate Allah has written on your forehead," a Muslim religious leader told her when she turned to him for help before resigning herself to a life of prostitution. How gladly she would escape if only a way would open up.

Heavenly Father, lead someone to Melek and other young women like her.

Profile: KURDS - TURKEY

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MARC ID:	180.
ALTERNATE NAMES:	Mountain Turks
SIZE OF GROUP:	4,000,000
LOCATION:	Also in Iraq, Iran, Syria.
DISTINCTIVES:	Language, ethnicity.
SOCIAL CHANGE:	nr.
LANGUAGES:	Kurdish (Kurmanjiki or Zaza); Kurdish (Kurmanji). 55% bilingual in Turkish.
SCRIPTURE:	Kurmanji: New Testament 1872; portions 1856-1953. Work in progress. Kurmanjiki: No Scripture. Work in progress.
RECORDINGS:	None.
RELIGION:	Islam 95%; Secularism 5%.
CHURCHES & MISSIONS:	Syriac Evangelical.
OPENNESS TO RELIGIOUS CHANGE:	Somewhat closed.
RECEPTIVITY TO CHRISTIANITY:	Indifferent.
GROWTH OF CHRISTIAN COMMUNITY:	nr.

The Kurds are the third most numerous people in the Middle East and number about four million in Turkey. They have occupied the same area for 3000 years, an area that is now part of five different countries: Turkey, Iraq, Iran, Syria, and the USSR. The migration of the people in this area, disregarding

established national boundaries, has kept them from assimilating with other nationalities and often contributed to their conflict with those national governments.

The Kurds are varied people. many are nomadic herdsmen, some are farmers; some engage in a variety of occupations in the cities. They have a tribal, kinbased socio-political structure, characterized by a distinction between nobles and commoners. The Kurdish language is closely related to Persian and is very important in Kurdish unity. "Kurdistan" is a beautiful mountainous land which includes the biblical city of Nineveh in the south and Mount Ararat in the north.

Turkish authorities have tended to deny that the Kurds have a separate ethnic identity. They are not called Kurds but "Mountain Turks, I for the government accepts no other 'nation" as living in Turkey except Turks. The Kurdish areas of Turkey are far less developed economically than the western provinces. There are far fewer vehicles and roads and almost no industrialization. Schools are poor and most Kurds do not speak Turkish.

Religion has a very important influence among the Kurdish tribes. About two-thirds of Turkey's Kurds are thought to be Sunni Muslims. The remainder are Alevi Muslims. There are also small numbers of Kurdish Yazabis who are adherents of a secretive faith combining elements of paganism, Islam, Christianity, Judaism, and Zoroastrianism.

The Syriac Evangelical Church is one of the few groups known to be working among the Kurdish people. Literacy training, effective translation, and distribution of the Bible are needed for the spread of Christianity. Marxism and the rugged and secluded area in which they live are the primary hindrances to Kurdish evangelism.

*Material from UNREACHED PEOPLES '79 -- David C. Cook, pub. co.

*The following is taken from the 2/12/85 issue of GLOBAL PRAYER DIGEST
Frontier Fellowship, Inc., P.O. Box 90970, Pasadena, CA 91104*

**PLEAD WITH GOD FOR THE HIDDEN PEOPLES
PRAY FOR THE 5,000,000 MUSLIM KURDS IN TURKEY.**

'Arabs! do not deny your excellence ... but Saladin who took the world was of Kurdish stock!" Even a young Kurdish country girl in Turkey can quote the 19th century Kurdish poet, Sheikh Riza Talabani, spokesman for the indomitably proud spirit of his kinspeople. Like most other Kurds, she is fair-skinned with dark hair, reserved with outsiders, but displaying a strong sense of humor among those who know her. Even today her people are mainly herdsmen since little of the Kurdish countryside has been industrialized. Even though in recent years some Kurds have gone abroad to study in western universities, they are still closely tied to their people through their social structures which are tribal, based on kinship and the Muslim religion.

Today's 10 million-Kurds form one of the world's largest 'nations,' yet they are without a country. They live in a kidney-shaped region which includes areas in Turkey, Iran, Iraq, Syria, and the USSR. Since the 12th century, the Kurds have been fighting to gain their own country, constantly in conflict with the governments of most of the countries they inhabit.

Almost 5 million Kurds live in Turkey where the government for years has refused to acknowledge their existence as a separate people group or the uniqueness of their language. Although national policies in the other countries where they live have been to assimilate them into the general population, the Kurds have proudly retained their own ethnic traditions and resisted blending with other groups.

Heavenly Father, send Your Light to these large numbers of Kurds who live in spiritual darkness. May they too join in the inheritance of the heavenly kingdom!

GPD 10/13 /87 PRAY FOR THE OVER 3,000,000 KURDS OF TURKEY

The officer marched the four young Germans into the cell then stepped out and locked the door. The men were being imprisoned for handing out Christian literature in the language of the three to five million Kurds in Turkey.

Not to be defeated, these courageous witnesses for Jesus began testifying to the Kurds with whom they shared their cell. One young man, there for political resistance, was argumentative. "Don't tell me about your Jesus! We have our own religion," Ahmet would challenge them time and again. When brought to trial months later, two of the four Germans opted to go back to the Turkish prison rather than quit speaking about Jesus. "You told the judge what?" exclaimed the young Kurd when they reappeared in the cell. "We said what the apostles said," answered Johann. "Whether it is right in the sight of God to listen to men rather than God, you must judge. We cannot but speak of Jesus." (Acts 4:20, 21).

Now Ahmet was ready to listen; he admired the Germans' conviction for truth which led them to sacrifice -freedom. "Tell me, how does a person become a Christian?" he asked. Soon Ahmet was asking God to release him from anger and fill him with Christ's joy.

Upon his release from prison, Ahmet sought his Kurdish friends. They all longed to have their own Kurdish nation and protested whenever they could against the Turkish government. But Ahmet told them about his discovery of true life. Since then, they too have begun to believe. Now a group of up to twenty Kurdish believers meet quietly each week for fellowship around the Word of God.

Father, we rejoice with the angels in heaven for these new believers among the Kurds. May the whole Kurdish 'nation' come to hear of Jesus.

GPD 5/4/91 PRAY FOR A CHURCH AMONG THE 12,000,000 KURDS OF TURKEY BY THE YEAR 2000.

'It's not a holy day nor a family feast. Then, why am I being kissed by my uncle?'" In late January, Kurdish columnist Gungor Mengi wrote this proverb, reflecting the surprise and distrust of Turkey's Kurds when President Ozal suddenly lifted the long-time government ban on the use of the Kurdish language. Speaking it, writing it, or publishing or possessing any Kurdish literature has long been a grave offense punished by stiff fines, prison or even death. The Kurds, a proud and independent mountain people, always felt the government was determined to destroy their culture. Why the sudden change? No wonder they were suspicious.

In Turkey alone, the Kurds number 12 million and make up almost one-fifth of the total population. Their 3000-year-old homeland also includes parts of Iran, Iraq and Syria where they are also persecuted in varying degrees. That is why they dream the impossible dream of having their own autonomous Kurdistan. In spite of government restrictions, Kurdish publications and protests have never stopped, and in the beautiful but impoverished southeast mountains of Turkey, Kurdish Marxist guerillas continue a dirty war with Turkish troops, with Kurdish villages ravaged by both sides.

Today, a few people of God, either so-called "tentmakers" or visitors with greater freedom of movement, bring the Good News to these oppressed Sunni and Alevi Muslims in their heartland. Although Turkish Kurdeistan has a higher response rate to Bible correspondence courses than the rest of Turkey, follow-up is harder than in western cities, where most Christian workers are concentrated.

Lord, prepare the hearts of the Kurds for Your love. In Jesus' name, raise up more disciplers, we pray.

GPD 3/5/94 PLEAD WITH GOD FOR UNREACHED PEOPLES.

'If we say we are Kurds, we die. If we say we are Turks, we die. The question is not of a Kurdish state, but of a free and decent life, I said Remzi. A leader of several Kurdish nationalists, he was explaining the problems of his people to his American friend, Bob, while they stood in the ruins of a Kurdish village in Turkey.

He continued, 'About 7,500,000 of us live here in Turkey today. In the 1920s, there was an attempt to form an independent Kurdistan. We have never been assimilated into Turkish life. Many of us are refugees from Iraq. Hatred and all-out fighting have developed between us and the Turks, here and even in Germany. Thousands have lost their lives. Our people have suffered pain, torture, death-squad murders, burning and mutilation. What can we do but to fight back? Our only hope is the PKK (Kurdistan Workers Party). We are tired, Bob, but we cannot give up. I pray that Allah will finally hear the agony of our hearts and grant us justice.*

Most Kurds in Turkey are Sunni Muslims and closed to the gospel. They put their hope in violence against the Turkish government, and have even attacked Turkish government buildings in Germany. Translations of the New Testament in Kurmanji, the largest Kurdish dialect, is now complete, and thousands have been distributed, but not in Turkey. Christian witnessing is difficult among these Kurds.

Lord, we pray the Sunni Muslim Kurds of Turkey will open their hearts to You this year. May they know You as their true friend.

GPD 3/16/94 PETITION FOR PROMISING BREAKTHROUGHS.

Childish laughter interrupted Nese and another young Kurdish woman as they talked. Nese glanced up at the three-year-old playing with a ball of thread nearby and smiled to herself. somehow he had managed to find fun even in the midst of a Turkish refugee center. Then she turned her attention back to the boy's mother, and the two continued the discussion Nese had begun about Jesus.

Although the 7,500,000 Kurds make up 14-19% of the population of Turkey, they have historically been oppressed. violent nationalistic movements on the part of the Kurds have given the government an unfavorable view of them. In fact, a few years ago, admitting that one was a Kurd was a crime punishable by three years in prison! The Kurdish tongues in Turkey, Kurmanji, Kirmanjki and Zaza, were finally legalized in 1991. There is a need for four translations of Scriptures for Kurdish peoples in Turkey.

Most Kurds are Muslims. Many follow the Alevi teachings, a mystical branch of Shi'ite Islam which gives very high regard to Jesus Christ. They have shown some degree of receptivity to the gospel. There are also 200 Christians among the Yezidis.

Recently a young Kurdish woman named Nese came to Christ and was discipled by Turkish Christians. Now she shares Christ with Kurdish refugee women and children. Because of the government's attitude toward Kurds, this is a very sensitive and potentially dangerous ministry.

Lord Jesus, please protect Nese and give her wisdom as she seeks to bring Your light to her people. Give these refugees an openness to the truth that Nese shares with them.

GPD 3/18/94 PETITION FOR PROMISING BREAKTHROUGHS

The nightmares began when Thomas was four years old and lasted for ten years. Every night he saw the bodies of his mother, other relatives and people he knew in his dreams. He was three- and-a -half when 77 people were killed by the Kurds in the church built by his grandfather. Missionaries had started churches in the mid-1800's in Turkish Kurdistan. Then starting 70 years ago, all the Christians and missionaries in that area were killed or forced into exile in other countries.

When he was ten years old Thomas was sent to America. As decades went by, .he had a new dream of seeing his church in Eastern Turkey reopened. When Millions of Christians were praying for the peoples of the 10/40 Window in October '93, his dream came true. At 82 years of age Thomas went with a few others to Turkey to pray, forgiving the Kurds and praying for their salvation in his boyhood church on October 10th! This is one example of prayers of fo , forgiveness stripping the enemy of his power and freeing Kurdish souls so they may hear and receive the good news of Jesus Christ.

This story is being written in November, as we are beginning to hear news from the prayer teams that went into each of the 10/40 Window countries in October. One team leader, who is a longtime worker in Turkey, writes, encouraging intercessors who prayed at home: "Never in my years of service have I found ministry in the Spirit so easy."

We praise You, Lord Jesus, for Your power at work through prayer. Let ancient and recent churches in Eastern Turkey be reopened and flourish in outreach to Kurds and the other peoples there.

GPD 3/22/94 PRAY FOR A STRONG CHURCH AMONG THE 100,000 MUSLIM KHURASAN KURDS OF TURKEY BY THE YEAR 2000.

"My fortune in exchange for these flowers," thought the man as he smiled and cut them for his wife. After gathering them and walking along the stream's edge, all he could smell were the many fragrances wafting through the air. The variety of colorful flowers danced with the cool wind before him. He remembered kissing his wife for the first time near this stream, and now his own daughter would soon be old enough to kiss for the first time. After daydreaming further, he scurried home to deliver the flowers. he placed them next to the radio, which his wife had recently painted red.

The Kurds love flowers. On archaeological digs, Kurdish laborers have been known to attach flower bouquets to their axes and picks, water trucks, and walls, and to themselves. Normally, these flowers clash dramatically in color with clothing Kurds wear, but they care little for such matters in light of the beauty of flowers.

Here in Turkey, the colorful attire worn among the nearly 100,000 Khurasan group resembles clothing found in medieval Turkey because these Kurds originated in northwest Iraq and Turkey, but fled during the bloody 16th and 17th centuries. The love of color itself probably originates from their respect of their colorful mountain environs, with its multi-colored rocks and lichens. The Khurasan tribe, as well as most Kurds of Turkey, speaks Bahdinani, the north Kurmanji dialect, the most common Kurdish dialect.

Father, thank You for creating this colorful people. Reveal to the Khurasan Kurds that they should be thankful to You, not only for the beauty of Your creation, but also for Your Son, Jesus Christ.