

INTERCEDE

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The Kurds: Noah's Ark to post-Saddam Iraq



by Dr. Robert Brenneman

Most of the world “discovered” the Kurds in the winter of 1991 when they watched multitudes of strangely dressed people climbing snow-covered mountains to escape the wrath of Saddam Hussein. For most, this was their first glimpse of something that had happened many times; in fact, as recently as three years before. During Saddam’s plundering Anfal Operation of 1988, 180,000 Kurds were killed, 4,000 villages were destroyed, and millions were driven to refugee camps in Turkey and Iran. Needless to say, for years the Kurds longed to be free of Saddam’s regime.

Their opportunity finally seemed to come in 1991. By the end of the first Gulf War, Saddam’s forces had taken a severe beating. The Kurds, along with other Iraqis who opposed the regime, rose up in revolt. At first, many battles were won by the Kurdish Peshmerga troops, forcing

Saddam’s soldiers out of northern Iraq, part of unofficial “Kurdistan.” Saddam, however, counterattacked with some of his best troops. One city after another was retaken by the Iraqi army, and the Kurds had no choice but to flee once again to the mountains. It was another example of why the most famous of all Kurdish proverbs states, “The Kurds have no friends but the mountains.”

Yet God was not silent during this time. While two million Kurds were cold and hungry, and thousands were dying in the mountainous border regions of Turkey, Iran, and Iraq, the body of Christ began to intercede for the hitherto unknown Kurdish people. The question many asked was, “Who are the Kurds and why does Saddam want to destroy them?” Fortunately, since I had been working with the Kurds in a neighboring country for 10 years previous to the

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Until All Have Heard

How then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? – Romans 10:14

Jim Bennett, Director
Center for
Ministry to Muslims



While the post-Saddam era has produced social progress for the Kurds, especially in northern Iraq, the majority still live in small villages in remote mountain regions – and are stretched across Turkey, Iran, Iraq and Syria. A typical Kurdish house is made of mud-brick and a wooden roof. In the summer, Kurds sleep on the roof where it is cooler. Some homes have underground rooms for use in escaping the winter cold. There is rarely indoor plumbing. Water is carried into the house in jars and cans from a central village well. There is no central heating.

Islam spread among the Kurds in the seventh and eighth centuries. Muslim beliefs were mixed with pre-Islamic cults associated with lakes, stones, graves, trees, fire, and an ancestor cult. Thus, it is easy to see why the Kurds

present a uniquely difficult missiological challenge.

At first, the Kurds resisted the Islamic invasion, but gave in after the Islamic victory near the modern-day Iraqi city of Sulaimaniya in A.D. 643. Most Kurds are now Sunni Muslims, the major branch of Islam. About one-fifth are Shia Muslims, the second largest branch of Islam. Most Shia Kurds live in Iran.

Many Kurds belong to Sufi (Islamic mystic) brotherhoods. They meet to chant and dance together to worship Allah. The Sufi brotherhoods are very important in Kurdish village life. There are about 1 million Kurdish Alawis (a secretive faith based on and distinct from Islam) in Turkey.

Among the spiritually darkest hybrids of Kurdish Islam are the Yezidis. There are about 40,000 to 70,000 Yezidis, located mostly in Armenia and Azerbaijan. Yezidism combines aspects of Islam, Judaism, and Christianity.

The beliefs and rites of the Yezidi Kurds are strictly clandestine; no one who is not born a Yezidi can have access to them. The Yezidis recognize the existence of two principles – a good one, embodied in God; and an evil one, embodied in Malek-Tauz. They have sub-cults associated with fire, the moon, trees, water, stones, and the sun. Their founder, Sheikh Adi, lived in northern Mesopotamia (Iraq) in the 12th century. His temple is located 70 kilometers from the modern city of Mosul. The Yezidis have their own sacred books, written in the 13th century: the *Kitabe Jilva* (Book of the Revelation) contains the essence of Yezidi dogma, and the *Maskhafe Resh* (Black Book) sets forth the legend of Yezid, and the various rites and customs.

As you can see, the Kurds present a formidable prayer task. Please take time to read our lead article – and be challenged and inspired to “take on” this gigantic prayer burden. Whether you are using *Intercede* with a Jumaa Prayer group or in your private devotions, thank you for spending sustained prayer time in the next few weeks for the spiritually dark plight of the Kurds.





Muslim World News

Pakistan

TALIBAN-INSPIRED ATTACKS HIT CHRISTIANS

As Taliban control hits pockets of Pakistan, Christians worry their province could be the next to fall under Islamic law near the port city of Karachi – nearly 700 miles from the Swat Valley, where the government officially allowed the Taliban to establish Islamic law. As members of a congregation erased pro-Taliban graffiti on their church in Taiser, near Karachi, armed men intervened to stop them. Soon, 30-40 others arrived as support and began to fire indiscriminately at the crowd; among those seriously injured were three Christians, including a child. A representative of the Muttahida Quami Movement regional party told *Compass* that after firing on the crowd, Taliban fighters went through Christian houses, ransacked them and burned one down. He said they also burned Bibles and beat women on the street. Reports of two execution-style killings of Christians could not be verified. — *Compass*

Indonesia

CLERGYMAN AND WIFE KILLED WITH MACHETES

Police found Reverend Frans Koagow, 64, and his wife Femy Kumendong, 73, at their home, dead, killed with machetes. They lived in Manado, capital of North Sulawesi province. Malayang Police Chief Anthony Wenno said the murderers had not yet been identified, but that they were looking for two men who came to Reverend Koagow's home around 7:00 a.m. Police also said that nothing was stolen from the two murder victims, so theft or extortion can be ruled as motives. Witnesses said that when the suspects came to Reverend Koagow's home, they were told that he was not there but in a nearby kiosk. The two men met their victim there and after eating together, they accompanied him home and killed him. Tensions between Christians and majority Muslims on Sulawesi Island have been high; over the past few years clashes and violence have become commonplace. — *Asia News*

Europe

EU JUDGES WANT SHARIA LAW APPLIED IN BRITISH COURTS

An EU plan is calling for family courts across Europe to hear cases using the laws of whichever country the couple involved have close links to. Judges could be forced to bow to Sharia law in some divorce cases heard in Britain. An EU plan calls for family courts across Europe to hear cases using the laws of whichever country the couple involved have close links to. That could mean a court in England handling a case within the French legal framework, or even applying the laws of Saudi Arabia to a husband and wife living in Britain. The Centre for Social Justice think tank attacked the so-called Rome III reform as ludicrous. The report calls for a simpler solution, with each country applying its own laws and cases being heard in the country where the couple have the closest connection. At least nine EU states – not including the UK – are said to want to push ahead with the Rome III plan. — *Daily Mail*

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1991 Gulf War, I was able to answer their questions.

The Kurds in the Bible

Kurds have been stateless and scattered for most of their history. Even today, unofficial "Kurdistan" comprises parts of Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria. Since it has mostly been passed down orally, the Kurdish people have had little opportunity to formally study their own history. Nevertheless, countless times Kurds have reiterated to me a common theme: We are related to the Medes of antiquity!

Turkey contains almost half of the world's 35 million Kurds, and until recently the government referred to them as "Mountain Turks." It was officially denied that the Kurds were a distinct ethnic group with roots going back to ancient times. In Iraq, Kurds were acknowledged as distinct from the Arabs, but were forcibly assimilated into Arab culture and discouraged from any sense of distinct identity.

It came as quite a surprise when I began to tell Iraqi Kurds in 1991 that their roots go all the way back to Noah, whom both the Bible and the Qur'an acknowledge as a great man of God who survived the flood. Genesis 10 records the descendants of the sons of Noah, including Japheth. One of Japheth's sons, Noah's grandson, is named Madai, the father of the Medes. Examining a biblical map from this time period, we can see that Madai's descendents settled in the areas that are now called "Kurdistan." In fact, the Mountains of Ararat, which expand from eastern Turkey into Iran, even today are mainly populated by Kurdish people.

The Medes and the area they settled enter the biblical narrative several more times. When the Jews of the Northern Kingdom were exiled from the promised land (II Kings 17:6), the Bible states that they dwelt in the land of the Medes along the Habor River. No doubt Kurds and Jews intermarried during the hundreds of years of shared history, leading to the tens of thousands of Kurdish Jews in Israel to this day. Coincidentally, the Habor is the same river on which my family and I lived during our four years of serving the Lord in Iraqi Kurdistan.

Most of us are familiar with the story of Daniel in the lion's den, but not many remember the name of the king who was tricked into throwing Daniel into the lion's den. His name was Darius the Mede, who upon seeing Daniel supernaturally preserved from the mouths of the lions, declared that the God of Daniel was the true God and that all the people of his domain should worship him (Dan. 6:25-28). At that point, many if not most of the Kurds began to follow the religion of the Jews.

The biblical Magi were mysterious wise men of the East. They were led by a star to the Christ child in



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Bethlehem. Many scholars say the Magi were Zoroastrians from Persia. More specifically, the Magi were from the Median (Kurdish) region of Persia, today's Iran, and were well-known astronomers. This would mean that Kurds were the first non-Jews to acknowledge the baby Jesus as the hope and savior of the world, the long-awaited Messiah.

It is interesting to study the peoples and languages of the various ethnic groups mentioned in the book of Acts on the Day of Pentecost. One of the unknown languages spoken that day was the language of the Medes. Many

Jews would have traveled from northern Iraq to Jerusalem in order to celebrate the Day of Pentecost. Imagine their astonishment when they heard some of the disciples speak in Kurdish – without ever having had a Kurdish lesson. No doubt, this was one of the key events that led to many Kurds embracing the message of Jesus. Even today, after over 1,000 years of Islam, there is still a small remnant of Christian Kurds who resisted forced conversion to Islam during the early days of Muslim expansion.

The current situation

The Kurds have lived in the region between the borders of Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria for millennia. They have always been known as fierce warriors and independent mountain people. They are famous for hospitality and honor, yet feared for their fighting prowess and banditry. At the end of World War I, U.S. President Woodrow Wilson wanted to carve out an independent homeland for the Kurds from the ruins of the Ottoman Empire. The Treaty of Sevres was drawn up, but never ratified. Eventually, the region inhabited by the Kurds was divided among the newly-drawn borders that would create the modern nations of Turkey, Iran, Iraq, and Syria. It often seems that these four countries share a common determination that, at all costs, the Kurds must not be allowed to move toward independence. Thus today, the Kurds remain the largest stateless people group in the world.

Yet all is not dark. Northern Iraq, now openly called Kurdistan, is thriving. Since 1991, with the help of the world community, particularly the U.S., Kurdistan has thrived. They have rebuilt much of what was destroyed, established universities and a market economy, and even built amusement parks. My family and I had the joy of assisting in this effort, working with a Christian humanitarian organization, Shelter for Life, building thousands of shelters, schools, and clinics, and being involved in various aspects of other humanitarian efforts.

All of this took place in the midst of terror attacks by the enemies of the Kurds, plus the experience of living for years without electricity in a totally destroyed

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infrastructure. It is truly amazing to see how much the Kurds have advanced. They are very grateful to the United States for their protection and help, and consider both former presidents, George H. Bush and George W. Bush, as friends of the Kurds. The Kurds are proud



that not one American soldier has died in the Kurdish part of Iraq during the ongoing war. And a largely unknown fact is that a Kurdish church has begun to emerge in various places.

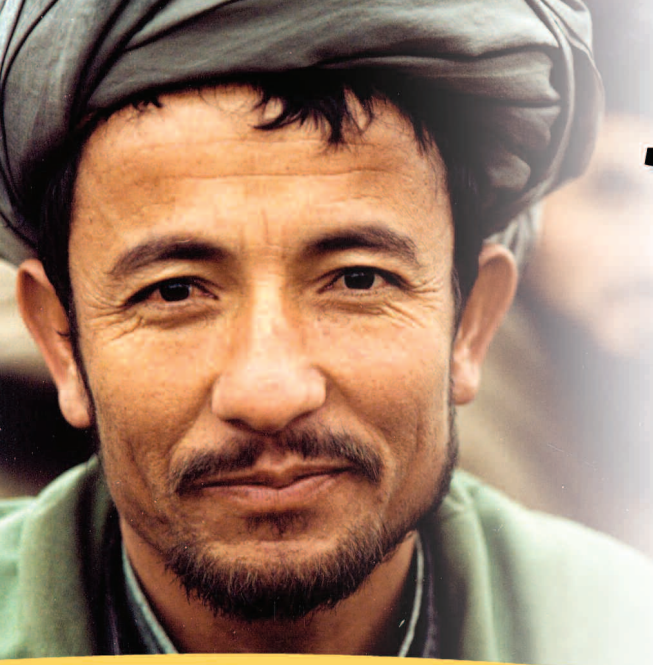
In Turkey, thousands of Kurdish villages were destroyed by Turkish troops in the war against Kurdish rebels seeking an independent state, resulting in the loss of at least 35,000 lives and billions of dollars over a period of many years. In the midst of this terrible conflict, however, some good has come. Many Kurds are working through the system for greater freedom of cultural expression, and some forms of media are now allowed in the Kurdish language. While skirmishes still break out from time to time, hopefully the worst of the conflict is over. Thousands of displaced Kurds have settled in the cities of Turkey outside of the Kurdish homeland, and although they often face very difficult conditions, their children are being educated and in many cases are thriving

While there are no Kurdish churches in Turkey, there are Kurds who have come to Christ in various fellowships throughout the land. And in Iran, tens of thousands of people have embraced Christ – and there is every reason to believe that Kurds are represented in that number.

The future

From ancient times to the modern cities of Europe and the United States, the Kurds have proven to be survivors. Pray that the Kurds will have the opportunity to learn about their biblical roots. Pray specifically that they will have access to the truth about Christ. Just as their Magi ancestors followed the star to the Christ child, may they follow revealed truth and find Christ. Pray that as Jesus' disciples praised God in Kurdish on the Day of Pentecost, the Kurds will offer their praise to the Lamb of God who desires that they be among those of every tribe, tongue and nation around the throne.

Editor's note: If you would like to learn more about the Kurds, Dr. Brenneman's book, *As Strong as the Mountains, A Kurdish Cultural Journey*, can be ordered through CMM.



JUMAA PRAYER FELLOWSHIP

*Praying for Muslims
Around the World.*



Friday, July 3, 2009. Please pray

...for MBBs (Muslim Background Believers) in Egypt. Legislation punishing apostasy with the death penalty remains a focus of government councils.

...for the people of Pakistan. Al-Qaeda activity is increasing, and appears to be taking deeper root.

...for the Muslims of Afghanistan. The Taliban remain a genuine threat to any future stability in the country.

Friday, July 10, 2009. Please pray

...for MBBs in Sudan, where the threat of persecution and death is genuine and pervasive.

...for Malaysia. The government has plans to add more power to Sharia courts.

...for continued opportunity in Algeria, where 22 churches have recently been allowed to open.

Friday, July 17, 2009. Please pray

...for a Ghanian released early from prison in Libya. He'd been sentenced in 2001 to 25 years for importing Bibles.

...for increasing numbers of Muslims to hunger for spiritual truth and the possibility of knowing God personally, being assured of salvation, and having sins forgiven.

...for Christians in Indonesia. Local governments continue to pass Sharia-inspired laws. Pray for religious freedom.

Friday, July 24, 2009. Please pray

...for six Egyptian Christians arrested during Ramadan of 2008 for opening their cafe. They have been sentenced to three years in prison.

...for continued protections for Christians in Kazakhstan. A highly restrictive religious law was rejected by the Constitutional Council.

...for an ease of religious restrictions in Sudan. A non-profit aid group was expelled from Darfur after thousands of Bibles were discovered in its office.

Friday, July 31, 2009. Please pray

...for peace in the Philippines, where Muslim groups have been waging a decades-old insurgency to set up an Islamic state in the Southern Philippines.

...for Muslims in Jakarta, Indonesia. There are approximately 23 million people in the greater Jakarta area, and 80 percent are Muslims.

...for protection of the Church in Nigeria. Violence between Muslims and Christians continues.

***I URGE, THEN, FIRST OF ALL THAT REQUESTS, PRAYERS, INTERCESSION AND
THANKSGIVING BE MADE FOR EVERYONE. – 1 TIMOTHY 2:1, NIV***



JUMAA PRAYER FELLOWSHIP

*Praying for Muslims
Around the World.*



Friday, August 7, 2009. Please pray

...for a change in the Maldives. Legislation currently prohibits church gatherings and evangelism.

...for the gospel of Jesus Christ to be heard by Muslims in Jordan.

...for MBBs and Christians in Pakistan's Swat Valley. It is a Taliban stronghold where Sharia rules.

Friday, August 14, 2009. Please pray

...for the people of Angola where Islam is expanding.

...for the Muslims of Saudi Arabia to hear witness of Jesus Christ. Pray that despite severe restriction, the gospel would be heard in this land.

...for radio and satellite broadcasts reaching Muslims. Pray for a genuine move of the Lord through this medium.

Friday, August 21, 2009. Please pray

...for Muslim Turks in Berlin, Germany. Their number is estimated at 200,000. Three small churches have been started among them.

...for MBBs across the Muslim world. They face court battles, threats of violence, and death as they testify about Jesus.

...for Christian workers in the U.S. and Canada. Pray they would seize opportunities to witness to Muslims that might not otherwise hear about the love of Jesus.

Friday, August 28, 2009. Please pray

...for an untold number of MBBs being persecuted in the Middle East.

...for the millions of Muslims attending mosques today. Pray the Lord would reveal his love to them in miraculous ways.

...for indigenous Christian pastors across the Muslim world.

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