

Reaching the People of the Magi

The Kurds are the fourth-largest people-group in the Middle East, yet they have no land of their own. But God hasn't forgotten these persecuted descendants of the ancient Magi of Bible times.

It is a story of the Christmas manger and of age-old mystics, a story voiced across the world in nursery rhymes and high-church hymns, a story performed in Sunday school plays and on the professional stage. It is the story of the Magi—those wise men of the Bible who appeared as if from nowhere, following the star of Bethlehem and seeking the infant Son of God. When they found Him, they worshiped Him in a stable and presented costly gifts to Him, then quickly departed as they arrived—cloaked in mystery.

For 2,000 years, history has kept their secret well. To this day, the biblical Magi remain anonymous—numbered and named by tradition only. Who were these wise men? Simply stargazers who practiced astrology—a belief outlawed by God in the strongest terms? Why did Matthew include them in the first Gospel of the New Testament without naming them and their country of origin?

One of their modern descendants believes he has the answers. And unlike his Magi ancestors, his identity is far less mysterious. In fact, he can be reached by cell phone and speaks English fluently. His name is Kemal, and his story adds pieces to the puzzle about the biblical Magi—while uncovering one of the most intriguing moves of God's Spirit in the original Bible lands of the Middle East.

Kemal says the story of the Magi was included in the Scripture to give hope to their descendants—the Kurds of the Middle East—whose identity, unlike that of the Magi, has not been

kept secret by the march of time. They are known as “history’s losers.”

Kemal lives in Turkey, but he is not a Turk. Kemal is a Kurd, too, and a follower of the Messiah—to use the term for Jesus he himself prefers.

“I don’t like being called a Christian,” Kemal says. “Most Westerners call themselves Christians, whether or not they fear God. Who am I to be compared with if you call me a Christian—Madonna?”

In his 40s, Kemal is unmarried and a vivacious, dynamic, expressive man. He is a lover of folk dance but a despiser of makeup. “God created us the most beautiful creatures. If you put makeup on, you tell Him you don’t like what He made,” he’ll tell you.

If you need a dollar and he has but one left, he will give it to you. He has lived the last 15 years in physical pain and has a hard time sleeping soundly. His maladies are the lasting effects of four years of torture in a Turkish prison where he was an inmate in the 1980s—a particularly dreaded facility in the city of Diyarbakir that Amnesty International branded at the time as the worst in the world.

Most important, Kemal is God’s apostle to the Kurdish people. He is the key that is opening the hearts of many thousands of Kurds to the gospel. Kemal became a believer in 1987, and at the time he was the first and only known follower of Jesus in Kurdistan in modern days.

But he is not the last.

The Magi and the Messiah

The Kurds are one of the largest people-groups in the world without a state of their own. They forcibly were converted to Islam a thousand years ago but have been persecuted by Muslim

regimes ever since. Some 25 million Kurds live in Turkey, Iraq, Iran and Syria.

In the 1980s Saddam Hussein's Iraq destroyed 4,000 Kurdish settlements, displaced 500,000 Kurds and killed 200,000. In Turkey, home to 13 million Kurds, government forces have since the 1980s evacuated 3,000 Kurdish villages, razing many of them, and displaced 3 million Kurds, according to Turkish government figures. All Kurdish areas in Turkey are under military law.

Small wonder that the Kurds, under such circumstances, are less than zealous adherents of Islam and desperately in search of a future that offers them hope.

Hope is coming to them through what Kemal discovered in 1987 and what he now tells his people while traveling across Turkey. It is that the Magi of Matthew's Gospel were Medes, or spiritual heirs of the Medes—ancient Kurds who both anticipated and found the Messiah.

He tells modern Kurds that until their ancestors' forced conversion to Islam about A.D. 900, they practiced the Mede religion Zoroastrianism. It foretold the coming of a righteous man, born by a virgin, who was to usher in a "new day" on which the creator of good would defeat all forces of evil.

This Messianic anticipation had been the focus of the Mede New Year celebrations for centuries before the birth of Christ. These forebears of the Kurds became the first Gentiles to recognize and worship the Messiah. Medes even were among the 3,000 converts on the first day of Pentecost in Jerusalem (see Acts 2:9).

But God's involvement with the Medes goes back even further. In 539 B.C. they conquered Babylon and allowed the captive Jews to return to Jerusalem. The Bible states that the Medes were God's chosen instrument. The Scripture calls the Medo-Persian ruler Cyrus a "messiah"—one anointed by God—the only

Gentile ever given that title.

Today's Kurds listen spellbound to this story. It reawakens for them a long-forgotten destiny. They sense it might be the key to re-establishing the national identity that has been denied these persecuted people for a thousand years—and still is today.

Kemal preaches about the Magi and the Messiah wherever he can. An ideal setting is a Kurdish wedding, which lasts for days. He preaches at political rallies too, but most of the time he meets with people in homes and cafés or on street corners. No formal church services are allowed.

The Kurdish church is young but actively involved with humanitarian aid and social development. Supported by the St. Paul, Minnesota-based Lutheran Orient Mission Society, it sponsors a carpet factory for Kurdish women. Scholarships are provided for high school girls who otherwise would be doomed to illiteracy, marriages arranged for money and a lifetime of meager chores.

The social involvement is an important way for Kurdish believers to show Christ's love. After the major earthquake in Turkey last summer that killed more than 17,000 people, Kemal became known as the Mesiji, Turkish for "Messiah's guy."

More than 60,000 copies of a booklet titled Who Are We?—which presents the story of the Magi and the possibility of the Medes-Kurds having a place in God's salvation plan—have been distributed. It was written by Matthew Hand, an American who is Kemal's mentor and co-worker in Kurdistan. Hand is the person who first told Kemal about the biblical heritage of the Kurds and Medes.

Literate Kurds run for the booklet, although mere possession of it can lead to charges of treason or torture and imprisonment. All things Kurdish—humanitarian, religious and political alike—are generally forbidden in Turkey.

When asked about the number of Kurdish believers, Kemal comments that under the current social conditions there is no way to satisfy the Western appetite for statistics. He estimates some 500 Kurds are “moving along the way of the Messiah” under his personal mentorship.

In addition, tens of thousands have accepted the booklet, he says, at high personal risk. A leading Kurdish politician, now a believer, said a few years ago that “a hundred thousand Kurds [would] come to faith in five years or less” if the church made a “genuine commitment of people, time and money.”

Hand, who also is a director in the Lutheran Orient Mission Society and the Israeli-Kurdish Friendship League, confirms that “a majority of Kurds under [age] 40 are negative to Islam and actively seeking for a new religion.” He adds that he is “very impressed” with the level of commitment to “exploring and trying out” the gospel truths among Kurds in Turkey today.

“I wonder how many American evangelicals would keep Christian books if they risked torture for it,” says Hand, who lived in the Middle East between 1982 and 1999. “In Turkish Kurdistan we cannot print our booklet on the Magi fast enough to satisfy the demand.”

Charisma recently accompanied Kemal, Hand, and president John Snider and directors Marvin and Eileen Palmquist of the Lutheran Orient Mission Society from one end of Turkish Kurdistan to the other. It was a journey steeped in biblical history. These are the lands of the Garden of Eden and the fall; the flood and Noah’s ark; the captivity of God’s people; and the cradle of man-made, or Babylonian, religion.

An Uncertain Future

The Tigris and Euphrates rivers spring from Kurdish east Turkey, winding their way through the old Mede mountains and on through today’s Iraq, the Babylon of old. Haran, the place

where Abraham lived before moving to the promised land, and the place where both Isaac and Jacob got their wives, is now in Turkish Kurdistan, on the Syrian border.

Our group travels through one of Turkey's main Kurdish areas, the Ararat Mountains, along the border of Armenia and Iran. Few places on earth have seen as much bloodshed. In the early 20th century, 15 million Armenians—the ancient Christian people in the Middle East—were killed here and around Turkey by Turkish troops. To this day Turkey denies the massacre.

During the last several decades the Ararat Mountains became Kurdish guerilla land, the rocky maze of jagged lava blocks providing ideal passes for the Kurdish rebel group PKK—the Kurdistan Workers' Party—and other Marxist groups moving into Turkey from their bases in Iran.

Kemal was born and raised in these mountains. In the 1970s, while he was still a Marxist and before his imprisonment—after which he found his Messiah—he slipped through the mountains with his secessionist team several times.

"My team never killed anyone," Kemal points out. "Our propaganda against the Turkish government was very tough, but we never killed anyone."

There are many stories of PKK holdups and abductions along the Ararat border road, and there is no Turkish driver willing to take us on it. We hire a Kurdish driver, and after countless hilly curves and many Turkish-army checkpoints we reach Van, the city of Kemal's conversion, and an important trade center—primarily for heroin being smuggled from southwest Asia to western Europe.

In the last 10 years there has been an influx of displaced Kurds into Van, the 250,000 to 500,000 refugees nearly tripling the city's population. On the green fields below the city's historic castle we have tea with a family that moved in just a few years ago. Under our feet—literally—are the

overgrown remnants of the Armenian city of Van, demolished 80 years ago.

The patriarch of our Kurdish hosts, while seeing to it that one of his daughters keeps the samovar boiling and the tea glasses filled, tells his family's story of recent violence and destruction.

"We used to live in the mountains north of Iraq," he says. "Along our road the Turkish army demolished 30 villages just a few years ago. We had no option but to move here."

With strong intensity, the father explains that he used to own 500 sheep, a fortune in a land where even a 100-sheep family is considered well-off.

"We are doomed to trumpery vending in the streets," he says of his family's life now. His message is clear: Poverty, as bad as it may be, is bearable, but the humiliation is not.

During an all-night dinner interrupted by spontaneous folk dancing in a Van restaurant, Kemal adds to the ongoing tale of violence against the Kurds by relating his own experience with an evil so inhumane that it forced him even as an atheistic Marxist to start reckoning with an unseen, spiritual reality.

In the early 1980s Kemal was arrested and charged with "Kurdish terrorism." For 90 days, during interrogations, he suffered daily torture. Afterward he was sentenced to a four-year term at the Diyarbakir prison—"The worst of them all," he says.

His torturing never ceased—"It turned monthly rather than daily," Kemal says—but he explains that he was not crushed by what was done to him personally. "They destroyed me in another way," he adds, lowering his voice and eyes.

It happened one day when Kemal and the other Kurdish inmates were forced to witness the prolonged torturing of a young

Kurdish woman, who was stripped naked, humiliated and tormented beyond description by the Turkish soldiers.

"We got wild," he says quietly. "We just lost it."

The prisoners rioted and set fire to the prison. As a result, treatment improved for a while, but Kemal makes it clear something died within him that day.

After his release he met Matthew Hand on a Van street corner—and hope returned to his heart. He recalls that one of the first Bible passages to catch his attention was Jesus' command to love your enemies. He had not seen a statement like that before.

"There is no such thing in any other religion," he says, "nor any place around."

For Kemal, because of his personal background and the sociopolitical conditions of his people, the gospel deals as much with everyday life as with life after death. He preaches a lifestyle of righteousness, peace, sharing and purity. Over and over again he condemns the violence against his own people, but he also speaks out against the flourishing narcotics trade in Van and other places in Turkey. Hypocrisy and lack of integrity upset him—wherever he spots it.

"In the mosques the Muslims sound OK, but on the outside it is all forgotten," he says.

The materialism and lack of sexual decency in the West appall the Kurdish apostle, especially their presence in the Western church. When John Snider asks a couple of the Kurdish high school girls who are sponsored by the Lutheran Orient Mission Society whether or not they watch television as much as American girls do, Kemal jumps in. He paraphrases Philippians 4:8, exhorting the girls not to "fill themselves up with crap" but to "choose the good and the pure."

If these girls and the rest of the young Kurdish church keep making that choice, Matthew Hand dreams of big things happening. Hand sees the potential these nomadic people have to spread the gospel beyond Turkey. He envisions a day when Kurdish believers will be sent out to touch the entire conflict-laden Middle East with the conciliatory love of the Messiah.

“The Kurds are at home in most of the nations of the Middle East,” he says. “Culturally, they would be the ideal lifestyle evangelists.”

Pointing others to Christ comes easy for these people who proved centuries ago that they know how to find the Son of God. It was 2,000 years ago that the first Magi of these lands pursued and found the Messiah. Today their descendants—the Kurds of the Middle East—are doing the same. *

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Risky Faith in Turkey

It's not easy for those who are called to pastor churches among the displaced Kurds

A man named Nusret pastors a rare fellowship within the Kurdish underground church in Turkey. It is one that meets for ordinary church services and has a modest facility of its own.

During Charisma's recent visit with pastor Nusret in Turkey, he was baptized by the Rev. Marvin Palmquist of the U.S. Lutheran Orient Mission Society. Baptisms are high-risk in

Turkey and still relatively rare, but Nusret says that he “feels secure” nonetheless. Recently, in fact, he says he saw the Lord in a vision.

“In my vision Jesus was tall and dark, with a wild-looking hair style! He looked like a [traditional] Kurd and had a Kurdish staff in his hand,” Nusret explains.

At first, Nusret did not recognize the man in his vision and says that he “did not look like the pictures of Jesus that I had seen in Western literature.” But when the man sat down next to him and stroked his hair with “fatherly love,” Nusret says, his eyes were opened, and he saw that it was the Messiah and that He was embracing him and his people.

Nusret’s fellowship is in western Turkey, not in Kurdistan proper, and security controls are less harsh. “I meet regularly with some 15-20 Kurds for worship and Bible study,” he says. Evangelism is relationship-based.

“Everybody I meet with and everybody who drops by my office hears about my faith,” Nusret says. “I tell them that Islam is not the original religion of the Kurds. I tell them about the Magi, and I tell them about the Messiah.”

Nusret says that educated people, including many Kurds serving as Muslim priests, or imams, “catch on easily, and respond readily” to his message. He ranks “ignorance and lack of education” as the main obstacles to the gospel in Kurdistan. This, he explains, is because to the illiterate, his message of history and national identity doesn’t always seem relevant at first.

Nusret found his Messiah through a God-scheduled appointment about seven years ago. He was hanging out in a Kurdish refugee slum area one day when he noticed a group of foreigners clustering on the next street corner. All kinds of gatherings are outlawed in Kurdish areas, and Nusret knew the Turkish military might show up any minute.

Wanting to help the group avoid trouble, he quickly called the foreigners into a nearby café. They turned out to be Christians who were on a prayer tour.

“We were aware of the risk to be spotted by one of the military patrols, but sensed that we should remain in that corner all the same,” one of the foreigners, American Matthew Hand, recalls. Hand is the author of a booklet titled Who Are We? which presents the story of the Magi and the belief that the Medes-Kurds have a place in God’s salvation plan. More than 60,000 of the booklets have been distributed to Kurds.

“Well, then Nusret turned up seven copies,” Hand says . He immediately asked us if we knew about Zoroaster and the Magi. I showed him the booklet on the Magi and the Messiah that I had written.”

Nusret gave his life to Jesus and soon developed into a leader in the Kurdish church.

“Politically and socially my people have little to hope for,” he told Charisma, “but in the Messianic perspective the next 10-15 years are bright indeed.” *