

## THE KURDS

If prevailing opinion regarding the Kurds is anywhere near what mine was before coming to Mosul, two years ago, the word *Kurd* makes a strong bid for the prize as modern bugbear. It is designed to connote in rather dim outline (mystery is fearsome to most people) a sort of terrible Turk that roves abroad in his mountain fastnesses somewhere in the Near East, armed to the teeth, seeking whom he may devour. Those who remember their "Anabasis" may delight in computing how many stones the Karduchi have rolled down on the heads of their enemies from that time to this; for they are probably the same people. But as a matter of fact, I have found the Kurd a lavish host, an amiable companion, and excellent raw material—very raw.

Who are the Kurds, anyway? No one seems to have given a very satisfactory answer. Undoubtedly they are of Aryan stock, fairly pure, as might be expected from their isolated geographical position. Many of them are blue-eyed, and have almost European features; occasionally a man of distinctly Semitic type is seen. The fact that Sayids flourish among them nearly as profusely as among the Arabs, would seem to indicate that there has been a mixture at some time, though I conjecture that, in accord with other Oriental usages, sufficient payment may have been the origin of the pedigree in some cases. As to language, it is Aryan. It is often said that Kurdish is either the progenitor, or the descendant of Persian. Major E. B. Soane, who probably knew the Kurds better than did any other European, advanced the theory that they are the descendants of the ancient Medes in both race and language.

The question, Where is Kurdistan? cannot be answered

much more definitely. Of course, it is not a political division, with definite boundaries; and the proposal sometimes heard, that such a state should be established, seems to some of us rather wild. At any rate, the problem of establishing a reasonable boundary would not be the only difficulty. But that one would be almost insurmountable, for there are Kurds in Irak, Persia, and Turkey, and probably half of them are in communities where either the majority or the ruling minority are of another race. Mosul itself is not far from half Kurdish, but they are the *hamals*, "the hewers of wood and the drawers of water." Such cities as Van, Bitlis, Diarbekr, Mardin, and Kermanshah have very large Kurdish populations; yet it is difficult to imagine any of those cities under a Kurdish government, at least until such time as the Kurdish people have progressed along the road to civilization. The typical Kurd is not a city man, but a dweller in stone-built villages snugly nestled in the rugged ravines in which the mountains of this region abound. The scenery in these mountains is magnificent. I, who come from California, admit it! And the people live about as close to nature as one can get, tilling the narrow fields that, during countless generations, have been terraced above the streams, and pasturing their flocks of goats and fat-tailed sheep on the steeper slopes above. There are, too, a few tribes of nomads, called Kochers, who are to the Kurds what the Bedouins are to the Arabs, who, with all their possessions, follow the seasons to the mountain, or to the plain. And lock your stable when they are in the neighborhood.

Another undetermined question is, how many Kurds there are. If the Old Testament taboo on census-taking still maintains, these people have at least one claim to piety. Somewhere around two million seems to be the best guess.

This article began by calling in question the reputed ferocity of the Kurds. In rendering an opinion, I must,

of course, acknowledge my limitations: in time, only two years; in extent of acquaintance, chiefly with those to the north of Mosul as far as Zakho and Amadia, although in the summer of 1923, I went four days' journey north of Amadia, and last summer, through the Rawanduz region to Saujbulagh and other cities in northwest Persia, returning by way of Sakkiz, Bijar, Kermanshah, Kirkuk, and Arbil. Yet the most severe limitation has been that of language; for a good share of the time I have not been quite sure whether they have been blessing or cursing my invasion of these unfrequented regions. But I do know that they never failed to give me their best accommodations. It was no forced hospitality that I received, such as a government official might get, or one who travels with a large retinue of servants, like the local chiefs; for I usually travel alone. My present verdict, always subject to revision, is that the Kurds are not especially fierce, only simple. The inhibitions that hold most of us to the straight and narrow path (more or less) are simply not present in the individual or in the social group of these people. *To like* is to put everything at the disposal of the one liked; *not to like* is to set all against him. The Kurds are reputed to be violent haters; yet it is interesting to note that they themselves have no word for *hate*. To be sure, the man of whom they say, "*Az has zhwi nakem,*" (I don't like him) is in danger of his life, but not because another man *hates* him, but only because the feeling of *not-liking* tends to take its natural course of removing the undesired object as expeditiously as possible. And we can hardly expect anything else from those who live as they do.

The Kurds raise their own cereals, produce their own meat, milk, and wool, their fruit, vegetables, and tobacco; they do their own spinning and weaving, and make their own shoes: any social concept is difficult for such independent individuals. Perhaps they make a trip or two a year to the "outside," to trade raisins, wool,

tobacco, or honey for what they may need—some extra wheat, probably, and gorgeously colored cotton cloth, and buttons, and maybe tea and sugar, though these are rarely found in the homes of the common people. The men generally do the ploughing and the harvesting, but such work as weeding rice and tobacco is done, or at least shared, by the women, who do also the household work, and bring the water from the village spring, and clean the stables, and take care of the ever-present baby. The men are champion sitters; some of them get up often enough to say their prayers. And that is about all there is to life, unless one can join a raiding party, or mayhap, attempt defence against one. Personally I find it hard to blame them very severely; better join a neighborly raid than die of ennui. The remedy is to give them something better to do. As matters stand, illiteracy is almost universal, and several of the dialects have never been reduced to writing. They have no incentive and no equipment for mental adventure, and their totally ritualistic Mohammedanism furnishes no spiritual urge. So they have been century after century, and will continue to be until some new power enters their lives.

I am indebted to Dr. E. W. McDowell, who has spent over thirty years in Kurdistan, himself of Scottish descent, for what seems to me a valid analogy. It is not many centuries since the canny Scot was a rough and ready freebooter, much like the Kurd of today. Both countries are rugged and breed rugged men. And Scotsmen today are occupying many of the most important positions in the English-speaking world. A like leadership in the Orient is open to the Kurdish, if they have a like power working through them. The day of the Kurdish Knox seems far distant, but it will come. The few Kurds who have gone "outside" and gotten in touch with cosmic currents have made their mark. Saladin is perhaps the best known, but there are several others; yet the notable part of the history of Kurdistan still lies in the future.

As to the religion of the Kurds, they would give but one answer: Islam. To be sure, there are the Yezidis, or devil-worshippers, who speak Kurdish and appear to be of the same race; but neither would acknowledge the other to be better than a dog, which, for present purposes, is sufficient ground for regarding them as separate. But the Mohammedanism of the Kurds (they are Sunnis) is a purely formal affair. In general, they are very punctilious in their observance of the prescribed procedures. On coming out here, I was impressed by the story of an *agha*, who said, "We are really more like Christians than like Moslems: we take only one wife, we do not veil our women, we don't pray, and we drink *arak*." It makes a good story, and he may have spoken truly for himself; but observation prompts me to offer a few commentaries on that text. The Christians used as the basis for comparison were those of the Oriental churches, which have a glorious history and a feeble hold on life at present. As for taking only one wife, the reason is economic; only the rich can afford more, and they do. As for veiling, they don't. My observation indicates that most of the common people do not go through all the prayers, but that in every village there are a faithful few, usually the *agha* and those others who have no reason for exercise except their prayers, who never neglect their devotions morning and evening; and some devotee may usually be seen at each of the five appointed times. Of course, the prayers must be in Arabic to be acceptable, and not one in a hundred knows what it is all about, and even to my untrained ear, the Arabic that proceeds from Kurdish mouths is atrocious; but that is no worse than their neighbor Nestorians, whose litany is all in Chaldee, now a dead language, or our own neighbors who must pray in Latin. As for the fourth topic mentioned by the *agha*, the drinking of *arak*, a powerful native firewater in great demand by the neighboring "Christians" and Yezidis, I have yet to see a Kurd in-

toxicated. They either don't drink, or else carry it well. In fact, it is said that they are pious enough in this regard to be able to severely censure their Persian neighbors and the Arabs of Irak, among whom the custom is rapidly spreading since the British occupation.

But their strictness or laxity in their observance of the official religion does not indicate to any great extent what their *effective* religion is, any more than saying in America whether a man is a Fundamentalist or a Liberal, tells how much of a Christian he is. As has been said, the Kurds are a simple people, and among such, an intricate theology is not likely to thrive. They may repeat the prescribed formula, "God is Great," the required five times a day; but when it comes down to hard facts like crops and flocks and marriage and sickness and death, the words may be *Allah kerim*, but the actual determiner of destiny is some charm or bit of magic. Their religion is primitive. What matters it what form the charm assumes? The power in it is magic. I had been only a few months in this country before witnessing a scene that perhaps started by thoughts in this direction. It was in Tiari, a Nestorian community with Kurdish neighbors. The day was announced as sacred to *Mar Kuriakos*—what that saint's name is in English, I have not yet discovered. A few people attended the early morning mass in his honor, but the whole village was there when the celebration began out on the hillside, where the old folks sat in the shade of the trees and talked and smoked, while the young bloods, selecting a place more or less level, danced the *Sheikh Ani* all day—a form of amusement common to this whole region, the charm of which I am still unable to comprehend. The music (spare the mark) was furnished by a pair of Kurds with fife and drum, and several Kurds from the nearest village joined in the celebration for the saint with apparently as much spiritual fervor as was manifested by the Christians. Particularly was I impressed that a Christian saint should be celebrated by

Kurdish songs; and I have since learned that this was not done in deference to the Kurdish guests, but is a regular feature of most Nestorian celebrations—also that the songs could not be published in an unexpurgated edition. The point I am trying to clear up is this: the religion of the mountain people, whether nominally Christian or Moslem, is essentially about the same: powers of magic working through charms and amulets and incantations, and imposing certain taboos. It is difficult to distinguish between them by their daily manner of life.

But for the missionary, all these considerations are subordinate to the central task, and are significant only as they may affect the progress of the Kingdom. The real question for us is, Can the Kurds be evangelized? Thus far, but little has been done towards it. So far as I know, the missionaries at Mardin and Diarbekr gave the Kurds some attention; and Mr. Andrus translated portions of the Scripture into the dialect that prevails there. An effort was made in 1923 to establish in Mardin a mission to the Kurds, but the Turkish Government did not allow it. I understand that the British and Foreign Bible Society has published portions in the Kermanshah dialect, but know of no one who is devoting his attention to spreading the Word there, except in Persian. The one outstanding mission to the Kurds is under the auspices of the Lutheran Orient Mission, a small American society with the total field force at Saujbulagh, in northwestern Persia. They selected a strategic location, for Saujbulagh is one of the very few Kurdish cities, and the surrounding region is studded with typical Kurdish villages. For nearly twenty years they have worked there, often under serious handicaps; they have endured persecution and jeopardized their lives; but the Word of God is not bound. A good share of the New Testament has been translated into the vernacular; a small hymnal has been printed; a hospital is maintained; and the meetings are

well attended by the people of the city and of the surrounding villages. The only other work especially for Kurds that I know of is projected by the United Mission in Mesopotamia, a new organization with a joint committee of representatives of three American denominations as its "home base." Most of the work of this mission is, of course, for Arabs; but one man stationed at Mosul has been assigned to the Kurdish field.

What are the prospects for these and other efforts that may be made to bring the wild Kurds into the fold? Apparently, they are not open to evangelization; for, as has been noted, they are staunch Moslems, with all the fanaticism of ignorance. The recent revolution in southeastern Turkey, demanding the return of the Caliph, may perhaps be taken as typical of their sincere devotion to Islam. There is no Macedonian call here. But the one in the deepest darkness is the one that most needs the light. The British administration has brought good order and safety to a region where banditry was formerly popular. If government schools are started in Kurdistan and maintained for a sufficient time, some degree of open-mindedness will necessarily result. Medical missions are, of course, always a good approach to Mohammedans. To me, simply living among them and showing them something better than what they have that can be had "without money and without price," perhaps helping them in methods of cultivating their crops, and certainly speaking the Word in due season, seems the best approach. But "approaches" and "methods" will never save them; here, as in all things, our confidence must be in Him who said, "Other sheep I have, which are not of this fold; them also must I bring, and there shall be one fold, one shepherd." He must bring them, for He alone can. And in His fold there is a place, also for these wild mountaineers.

*Bagdad.*

ROGER C. CUMBERLAND.