

TRUTH TRIUMPHANT: CHAPTER 4

The Silent Cities of Syria

The ancestry of the Reformers is to be found in the godly men and women who, even in the darkest days, by their simple evangelical piety, kept the fire on the altar from going out altogether. 1

IN THE early ages of the Christian Era the flourishing cities of Syria were the first to occupy a commanding position in the development of the doctrines and missions of the true church. It is an impressive fact that many of these silent and deserted cities still remain in a remarkable state of preservation. For many centuries after the Jewish Christians migrated north when they were driven out of Jerusalem, they continued to augment the membership of this already virile Christian region whose chief city was Antioch. 2 Syria is a district, little known, but full of significance respecting the history of the true church.

Because of the hatred for the Jews who had rebelled against Rome and were duly suppressed, the emperor forbade them, in 135, to enter the city of Jerusalem. This, of course, excluded Christians of Jewish descent. This act also contributed to the building up of new Syrian centers of Christianity. Today one finds the splendid remains of the villas, churches, inscriptions, and public buildings in Syria which were established in the early Christian centuries. 3 Here church organizations and mission enterprises took permanent shape under the hands of the apostles and their immediate successors. From this new base, streams of light went out to the ends of the earth.

However, before describing that which research can find in many of these cities, attention is directed to the historical and archaeological background of this early Syrian civilization which formed the earliest base for missionary work, both in the West and in the East.

Historical and Archaeological Background

Jerusalem's fall produced its greatest moral effect upon the millions of Jews who did not reside in Palestine. Stunned by this event, they listened to the gospel, and untold numbers turned to Christ. These did a great work in establishing the church in all parts of the world. 4 As they had not been under the fanatical legalism of the Jerusalem rabbis, thousands of them were open to the convincing fulfillments of prophecy preached by the leaders of the church.

The victories of the Roman armies aroused the Christian Jews in Palestine to obey the command of Jesus to flee from Judea when the fall of Jerusalem was imminent. The first region to receive beneficial influence from this transfer of population was that portion of Palestine lying to the east of the Jordan, referred to in the Bible as Decapolis, 5 a word meaning "ten cities." Upon these cities the Roman Empire had bestowed special citizen rights and had lavished huge sums of money to beautify and embellish them. It was Rome's purpose to exalt alluring Grecian culture and philosophy in the hope of leading the Jews into pagan art and thought. 6

In the days of the apostles this trans-Jordan region was a fertile land, enriching its inhabitants by varied and abundant harvests. The Christian Jews fled here to escape the terrors of the Roman war (A.D. 66). The book of Acts would lead one to believe that there were many thousands of them by this time. (Acts 21:20.) Possibly from seventy to ninety thousand Christian Jews fled from Palestine eastward. Many

Gentile Christians also escaped. According to Eusebius these refugees fled to the city of Pella. 7 The same historian again mentions Pella in connection with the widespread rebellion of the Jews in 135, after which the emperor Hadrian plowed Jerusalem under, changed its name to Aelia, and forbade the Gentile Christians there to have a leader of Jewish descent.8 Pella, at this time, was one of the famous ten cities. Arriving in such a region of culture, wealth, and liberality of thought, the fleeing Jewish Christians, stirred by having recently seen the fulfillment of one of Christ's major prophecies, could hardly have failed to exercise an irresistible influence upon their new neighbors.

The exiles who settled here multiplied in numbers throughout the following years. Their converts and their descendants formed large and learned Christian communities. The land of these pagan ten cities, or Decapolis, suddenly found itself producing a strong effect upon Christianity.

Another remarkable migration then began from Decapolis to the region about Antioch. Decades had passed since Paul and Barnabas had raised up churches in that part of Syria which lay directly north of Decapolis. There numerous converts to Christ existed among the Gentiles and Jews. The majority of the new believers, however, in the northern Syrian region were from among the sons of Israel. This latter community beckoned to the dwellers in Decapolis. Consequently, descendants of those who originally fled from Jerusalem left Pella and its regions to enrich and multiply Christian centers to the north as far as the Euphrates River. 9

Syria had early attracted the attention of the cultured as a region in which to erect the magnificent in architecture. It was the richest and most prosperous province of the Roman Empire. 10 It was also famed for culture and learning. In this section are found the grandest temples erected by the Roman emperors for the worship of the sun-god. In the midst of this land stood Antioch, the capital city. Later, when the emperor Justinian wanted, about 530, to build in Constantinople the finest church in the world, he searched diligently throughout Greek and Latin civilizations to secure a gifted builder, but was obliged at last to turn to Syria. Here he found the skill he sought.

The school of Antioch at that time surpassed almost every other in scientific and literary repute, and its methods dominated all the East. Justinian, in the middle of the sixth century, wished to rebuild the cathedral of Constantinople, and from the school of Antioch he drew both his architects, Anthemius of Tralles and Isidore of Miletus. 11

Concerning the unrivaled skill and scholarship of Syria, one historian says: "Now the primary characteristic of Byzantine architecture is its development of the method of roofing with domes. The most perfect specimen of this work is the great church of St. Sophia at Constantinople, which it was the pride of Justinian to have built. Two earlier churches had been burnt - Constantine's church in A.D. 404, at the time of Chrysostom, and its successor in A.D. 532. Strictly speaking, Justinian's St. Sophia - still standing and now used as a mosque - is not typical Byzantine architecture. It is quite unique. Nothing of the kind had preceded it; it was never successfully imitated. Its famous architect, Anthemius, has the proud distinction of having produced a work without peer or parallel in all the ages of building. "St. Sophia," say M. Bayer, "has the double advantage of marking the advent of a new style and reaching at the same time such proportions as have never been surpassed in the East. 12

In tracing the Celtic Church in Ireland, scholars are much impressed with the influence which these new styles, introduced by the Syrian architects, had on Western architecture. The connection of this style with the West is well established. The new principles of Syrian architecture were adopted in Ireland.

From Constantinople Byzantine architecture rapidly passed westwards. Greek art was dead. Roman art was dead. In the sixth century, the only living, powerful, vivifying art was the art and the architecture of Byzantium. I have now to show you two things: first, how Byzantine art and architecture passed over to Gaul; and then, how from Gaul it passed to Ireland. In the first place, as to the transition of Byzantine architecture from Constantinople to Gaul, the time and place of transit are easily determined. 13

The splendor of the civilization built up in Syria can still be seen. The glory that remains is described in Howard Crosby Butler's article, "A Land of Deserted Cities":

Few people appreciate the fact that today, at the dawn of the twentieth century, there are still parts of the old Roman Empire where no traveler of modern times has been; that there are ancient towns which no tourist has seen, temples and towers that no lover of classic architecture has yet delighted in, inscriptions in ancient Greek that no savant has as yet deciphered, whole regions, in fact, full of antiquities for which no Baedeker has been written, and which are not shown upon the latest maps.

Let the reader for a moment imagine himself withdrawn from the luxuriant landscapes of forest-capped hills and fresh green pastures with which he is familiar, and set down in this wasted land of barren gray hills, beneath a cloudless sky, and let him see before him in the distance a towering mass of broken walls and shattered colonnades, the mighty remnants of a city long deserted by civilized men, silent, sepulchral, with gates wide open and every house within untenanted even by wild beasts. Let him recall that this now lonely city was in existence before the days of Constantine the Great, while Rome was still mistress of the world and the Antonine emperors still sat upon the throne, that its magnificent churches were erected while our ancestors were bowing to Woden and Thor, that its spacious villas and its less pretentious, though still luxurious abodes, were built while the Anglo-Saxon was content with a hut of branches and skins, and then let him reflect that this once wealthy and thriving town has stood uninhabited for thirteen centuries, that no hand has been raised to add a single stone or to brace a tottering wall in all that time, and he will grasp something of the antiquity and something of the desolation of these dead cities. 14

These silent cities of Syria differ in many respects from the ruins and remains of the archaeological past found elsewhere in the world. The monuments are not the work of some foreign invader, but are indigenous the work of the inhabitants themselves. Furthermore, the stones were skillfully fitted together without cement or mortar. The construction and arrangements for sanitation were of the highest order and betoken an advanced degree of civilization. Some authors state that the arrangements for health and sanitation would be superior to those found in many places in the Western world today, even in Europe and America.

Tangible remains of their civilization indicate that the people who inhabited the greater number of these smaller towns in northern and southern Syria composed a large, well-to-do middle class. They seem to have had no superiors living near them, for there is only one residence of special magnificence in northern Syria, and one in the south, and these may have been the houses of the local governors. 15

The apostles foresaw that the future success of the gospel would see many indifferent members coming into the fold. Paul declared that even in his day false brethren had entered in unawares.

In their stand for the pure doctrines of Christianity, the churches of Syria were horrified at the license which many so-called Christian teachers took with the Scriptures, and they rebelled against the

doctrines of Gnosticism which arose in the corrupted Christianity of the church in Alexandria. "The school of Antioch led a revolt against the Alexandrian exegesis of Holy Scripture, and founded a more critical method." 16 Lucian, the famous evangelical leader and scholar, was obliged to contend against both Gnosticism and Manichaeism, but more especially against the former, which was the older of the two movements.

As opposition to the allegorizing tendency of the age centered in the theology of the school of Lucian, it later found a home in the Church of the East. 17 Emphasis should be placed upon the fact that the Syrian type of theology had great influence, endured until the Reformation, and kept its apostolic stamp. The inscriptions found on many of the buildings indicate that Syrian Christianity compassed a goodly portion of the territory in which the silent cities are found today.

It is perhaps interesting to note that the inscriptions from this region (treated by Wm. Kelley Prentice), covering more than three centuries, show, in their phraseology, a primitive Christianity in that they are dedicated to "God and His Christ," sometimes with mention of the Holy Spirit or the Trinity, but without invocation of the saints or even of the Virgin Mary. In this region, as in the Hauran, there are almost no Mohammedan remains, the prosperity of both regions having evidently ended with the Mohammedan conquest. 18

El-Bara and Other Cities

El-Bara, one of the silent cities on the road between Aleppo and Lattaquia, near Antioch, still contains villas, churches, funeral pyramids, and other edifices giving evidence of the past culture and education. Monograms cut in stone disclose the builder's faith in Christ as the Alpha and Omega. 19

At Djebel Barisha may be seen many inscriptions and monuments of the second century after Christ. Some prominent inscriptions on these buildings are in Greek, some in Latin, some in Syrian. A few of them as recorded by an American archaeological expedition, read as follows:

If God be for us, who can be against us?

Our Lord Jesus Christ, the Son, the Word of God, dwells here; let no evil enter.

The Lord shall preserve thy going out and thy coming in.

Upon this rock I will build My church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 20

Baouda contains the ruins of a large market town. To reach it, the visitor passes over an old Roman road built evidently before the days of Christ. Baouda betrays the marks of having been a strictly commercial, financial, and transportation center. The stone edifices provided for the store below with a dwelling apartment above for the proprietor. A short distance from Baouda is Babiska. Here are two churches, large and small public baths, with spacious inns near them. The buildings show great care and architectural ability in their construction. The fragment of another large building, probably a temple, dates from 225. 21

Why Silent and Deserted Cities

To understand why these cities are silent and deserted, one must notice the policy of Imperial Christianity during the centuries prior to the time when the scourge of Mohammedanism fell on the Roman Empire in Asia. Immediately after the Council of Nicaea, 325, the inroads of the northern Goths became serious and demanded the attention of the Roman emperors. The victories of these invaders

cut off much of the empire in the West and reduced it in Europe to only about one third of its original territory. In order to survive, it was necessary to closely unify that which remained. In addition, imperial Christianity made the punishment of heresy a serious part of its program. Then terrible persecution fell on those who rejected the Church of Rome.

This started a movement among the believers in Syria, long a part of the Roman Empire, which caused them to flee into those Eastern regions already alienated in spirit by imperial exactions. The scourge of heresy hunting had fallen upon the Eastern provinces. Entire Christian populations migrated from the areas of the silent cities and from that part of Assyria near the headwaters of the Euphrates and Tigris Rivers which was included in the Roman Empire. When the emperor Justinian in 532 began his policy of subjecting everything to imperial Christianity, the devout, learned, and industrious portions of the population had already left these parts to find a refuge within the boundaries of the restored Persian Empire. 22

Imperial Christianity, on the other hand, was wholly unprepared for the Mohammedan hordes which appeared unexpectedly out of Arabia about one hundred years after Justinian. Mohammedanism issued from Arabia following 622 with the suddenness and force of a tornado. When Islam had finished its onslaught against Asia Minor and the eastern provinces, it had wrenched away the Roman Empire's possessions in Asia, north Africa, and Spain. In the first onrush of this new fanatical religion, Palestine was captured. Then followed the overthrow of the Roman emperor and his army on a battlefield in Syria. Followers of Mohammed pursued their work of slaughter, devastation, loot, and deportation. The Christian population that remained in the land of Syria evidently worked its way farther east, leaving behind them their cities, silent and deserted.

Further historical recitals involving the Church of the East reveal that those first six and a half centuries of Syrian Christianity were marvelous in establishing the New Testament church, not only in the East, but also in the West. The mingling of the large Gentile and Jewish gospel communities in this region, coupled with the splendid spiritual background of training which the Jews under the Old testament had in things divine, richly endowed this fruitful soil for the spread of Christianity. Finally, the persecutions carried on by the imperial church, followed by the devastations of the Mohammedans, left the area depopulated and robbed of the gospel church of Syria. The protecting hand of God was over His truth, and the churches far to the west in Europe, and also to the east in Asia, were strong enough to carry forward the light.

A Church Evangelical, Not Papal

The fact that the East was full of Jews, and that the preponderance of converts in the early gospel communities was for a long time from among them, 23 would indicate that the character of the beliefs and observances held by the Church of the East were modeled after the churches of Judea, not after Rome. Early believers for a long time called themselves Nazarenes, a title found in the words of Luke, who reported that the accusers of the apostle Paul said, "For we have found this man a pestilent fellow, and a mover of sedition among all the Jews throughout the world, and a ring-leader of the sect of the Nazarenes."(Acts 24:5.)

They also called themselves Beni-Israel, or Sons of Israel. They usually spoke of our Lord as the Messiah, and therefore were called Messiahans. Many of their rites and ceremonies were performed in such a way as to reveal their connection with the Jews of earlier times.

The majority of writings preserved by the Church of Rome supports the contentions of that ecclesiastical system. Light is thrown on the actual beliefs of the early Christians by studying the fundamental instructions concerning the organization of individual churches as given by the apostle Paul. The great apostle to the Gentiles made it distinctly clear that the churches which he founded in his missionary labors were modeled after the Christian churches in Judea. Thus he says, "For ye, brethren, became followers of the churches of God which in Judea are in Christ Jesus: for ye also have suffered like things of your own countrymen, even as they have of the Jews."(1 Thessalonians 2:14.)

Paul did not pattern the plan of the local church after the heathen temple or after the Gentile models he might have found in his travels. The pattern given him was of God. What was that pattern? It was the first Christian church at Jerusalem and its duplicates in Judea.

It would be difficult to imagine that the apostle Paul, laboring in regions all the way from Babylon to the western borders of Asia Minor, would organize the churches upon any other model. His congregations also were but repetitions of the original Christian communions in the province of Judea, particularly of the churches in Jerusalem. For some time, groups of Christian believers continued to meet in the synagogues on the Sabbath day with the Jews. 24 This fact indicates that the apostolic church, in its primitive organization, did not cast away everything connected with the synagogue. A confirming indication of this is found in the decision of the Apostolic council recorded in the book of Acts, where the assembled delegates voted that they would not pass any ordinances other than the four which they had already sanctioned, because, "Moses of old time hath in every city them that preach him, being read in the synagogues every Sabbath day."(Acts 15:21.)

The Gnostic theology of Alexandria which was followed by the Church of Rome, was hostile to anything Jewish, even Jewish Christianity. Therefore it is safe to conclude from these historic developments that primitive Syrian Christianity was not organized after the pattern of the Church of Rome, but followed an evangelical Judean and Biblical type of church organization.

The thoughtful student cannot but be impressed with the heroic exploits achieved by the missionary churches, offsprings of the Syrian parent communion church, throughout vast domains. Here one finds the spiritual leadership of Lucian of Antioch, of Vigilantius, reputed to be the first supreme head of the Waldenses, and indirectly of Patrick, organizer of Celtic Christianity in Ireland. These leaders are presented fully in succeeding chapters.