

Kurdistan Update

A Brief Synopsis on the Kurds and Kurdistan

Today, there are nearly 25-30 million Kurds in the world. The roots of the Kurdish people are linked to the Medes of Persia and the ancient religion of Zoroastrian. Although most Kurds are now Sunni Muslim, the Kurdish people have maintained a separate and distinct identity from their Arab neighbors and generally are not as attached to Islam. Following World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, the Kurdish people were promised national autonomy, but this promise was not fulfilled. Rather, today Kurdistan is a geographical region making up parts of Syria, Iran, Turkey, and Iraq. All of these countries are located within the 10/40 Window. The Joshua Project reports, "The Kurds are the largest ethnic group in the world without a state of their own."

We returned to the Kurdistan Region of Iraq this month. The Kurds make up roughly one-third of Iraq's population. Recent in their national memory are the events of the Anfal genocide. After supporting Iran in the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988), Saddam Hussein sought revenge on the Kurds. Subsequently, nearly 200,000 Kurds were killed and most of their villages were destroyed. The Kurdistan Region located in Northern Iraq today consists of Kurds, Turkmen, Chaldeans, Assyrians, Syriac and Yezidis among other minorities. Despite the ongoing war in Iraq, Kurdistan has been relatively quiet since 2003. Now, more than 65% of its villages have been rebuilt, and the region is attractive to foreign investment. Many Iraqi Christians have fled to Kurdistan in the wake of persecution. The government, led by the region's Prime Minister Barham Salih, is open to Christians, even granting refugees a small living stipend.

By God's grace, we were able to distribute His Word while we were in Iraq. The Kurdish languages (related to Persian) consist of three dialects: Sorani, Kurmanji and Behdini. The New Testament is complete in both Sorani and Kumanji, and the Behdini translation of the New Testament is in its final phase.

A Report from a Member of Our Team in Kurdistan:

We arrived in E. after 12 hours on the road from D. and we were able to give out Injils [New Testaments] en route which were well-received by each person. Upon arrival we took a taxi to a hostel where we met a man from B. who now lives in S. with his wife and family.

He's a Christian now, but prior to this he practiced Mandaism (the Mandaens claim to be followers of John the Baptist) and spoke the Aramaic tongue. He joined us on our first day walking through the streets of E. giving out New Testaments. This gave opportunity for us to speak with various people. We met a number of Catholics who happily received the NT from us.

Later that day we went to meet with a contact called Faisal whom we had met on his previous trip in January. F. is a Kurdish man who speaks English

well as he has visited England and learned the language there. Later that day he took us all to his village which is situated near the mountains and is 50% Catholic/Orthodox and 50% Muslim.

In S. we shared the Gospel with a group of Catholics outside their Church building. Some listened intently and thanked us. F. took us all back to where we spent the night. The next day we again walked through the streets and met some U.N. soldiers who originated from Fiji and all of whom confessed to being believers. We spoke with a man who said he was the captain of the police and who appeared very keen to speak with us further. In the evening we were invited to a believer's home where we met with his family. Afterwards, he took us out for a meal. He shared that he would like to go to the States as he is fearful of what may happen to both himself and his family. We encouraged him in his walk with the Lord, and he was pleased that we had spent time with him.

On Sunday we travelled to Z. and were joined in the taxi by two adult Muslim ladies and one of their granddaughters. One of the ladies was initially very reticent about answering our questions regarding faith and then became decidedly troubled and stated that she didn't want to answer any more. However she softened later and invited us all, including the taxi driver, to her home for a cup of tea. We stayed for a short while and said that if we were able, we would return for a meal of Dolmas (stuffed vine leaves), which we did the following day accompanied by a Pastor who serves the evangelical community both in Z. and D., a village close to the T. the lady from Z. is a history teacher in the local college.

We then travelled onto D. where we visited the local evangelical congregation and stayed for the Sunday evening service, which was translated to us by a team member. The visiting Pastor from Z. told us that he'd come to Kurdistan from Baghdad. He had pastured a church there which was bombed by Muslims. During his visit with us to Z. the following day, he received a phone call from a man threatening to shoot him.

We spent some time with S., her mother and niece who had been looking forward to seeing us again and when it came time to leave, we gave them a New Testament in Kurdish and Arabic as she speaks both languages. We were told that many schoolchildren no longer learn Arabic in school but only their own dialect of Kurdish and now English. We returned back that evening to Dohuk where we spent three nights in total.

We made two visits to Z. and spoke with various people. We met with a leader of six local churches who left us with useful information on the country and much cross-cultural advice. His desire was to not just love in word, but in deed, and encouraged us in that as well. The overall impression that we received from local Christians is that some missionaries that come from overseas tend to be separated from most of the local church activities and are considered by them to be more or less unhelpful. We need to search our hearts and be willing to

change our tactics in order to make a more helpful impact.

On the way home that evening our taxi driver informed us that his sister spoke English well and invited back to their home. We were made welcome and were offered a drink and fruit. His sister shared some details of her life which saddened us. Several years ago she requested from her father permission to marry an American soldier from the Iraqi war. She was quickly denied. She communicated frustration from the felt oppression and lack of freedom expressed in various ways that women have in their culture.

She is now married with two young children. Her husband is her first cousin so her mother-in-law is also her aunt. This is a common practice among many in the Muslim community, however this also appears to increase the possibility of genetic abnormalities. This meeting was a good opportunity and, Lord willing, we will contact her again in the future. She has the NT to read until that time. We met an American one afternoon that has been living in the area of Z. for seven years and was interested to hear what we were doing there. It was an arranged meeting with him. He is assisting in the translation of the Scriptures into the local dialect of Kurdish, which covers southern Turkey, eastern Syria and northwestern Iraq.

That night was our last night in D., which was spent searching for a place to buy food, however we met with a young American man who was in D. to teach English to the local young people for an eight-week period. Details were exchanged and some NT's were given to him to distribute to whomever the Lord led him. Wednesday was our last day. We spent it partly with the local Pastor and partly walking around the streets trying to locate the old Jewish area. We were invited to a cafe which displayed numerous photos of people and the local places of a bygone era. Again we met a man who spoke English and shared that he was returning to Doncaster via Manchester that same night.

We left D. that night at 9:30 pm and travelled by taxi, first to the border with Turkey and then onward to D. for our flight to Istanbul. The latter part of the journey was undertaken by a driver who was in need of a good night's sleep!

We were blessed throughout the whole time by the opportunities that the Lord gave us to distribute the Scriptures, speak with people and share in the natural hospitality of both the Christian and Muslim communities.