Henry Martyn
1781 - 1812

“Scholar Missionary”, Bible Translator, Living Epistle of Grace and Truth

by C. P. Hallihan

Part II

The Burden of Translation: Martyn must leave India

Henry Martyn’s lament to David Brown, which closed the first part of this article (see Quarterly Record 562), was grounded in Brown’s 1807 request that Martyn translate the New Testament into Hindustani, Persian and Arabic. Martyn was well suited for this demanding task, being competent in at least six languages, joyously enthusiastic in Hebrew, and always looking to God’s glory in the conversion of souls. His vision was extensive, as he records, “We shall now begin to preach to Arabia, Syria, Persia, India, Tartary, China, half of Africa, all the south coast of the Mediterranean and Turkey”. By ‘preach’ in this connection he refers to the distribution and use of the printed New Testament.

Hindustani, or Urdu, resulted from the Islamic penetration of North India, and is a mingling of regional Hindi, Arabic and Persian, producing ‘zaban i urdu’, or ‘language of the camp’, an everyday tongue in common use across many of the linguistic and cultural differences in India. (You will see from this the interdependence of the three New Testaments which occupied Henry Martyn.) Used by millions even then, Urdu was essentially a spoken rather than a written language, and once again, as had happened before in the field of Bible translation, it is the Bible which becomes the fountainhead of the literature in the language. To translate the New Testament and Psalms into Persian was also highly useful, because it was not only the language of Persia (Iran), but also the language of Muslim Courts in India and very widely understood. This would be the first Persian translation since the 5th century. Martyn’s interest in Persian had, in the providence of God, been stimulated by the past experiences of his helper, Sabat. Ironically, although Sabat’s Arabic was excellent, his Persian was not, and Henry’s frustration and dismay grew to the point where he concluded that, thoroughly to purge their Persian New Testament and adequately to revise the Arabic, he needed to go, alone, to Persia and Arabia. He needed different advice, and needed to feel for himself the context of the languages. Leaving Cawnpore he arrived in Calcutta in November of 1810, and had to wait until January 1811 until he could take ship to Bombay on the opposite coast of India.

A Birthday in Bombay

The journey was via Colombo and Goa, and Martyn notes of a social gathering in Colombo, “much is said that need not to be remembered”. Goa, the hub of Portuguese colonial administration in the East, was happier, because he was able to dispute with the Portuguese friars, as in San Salvador seven years before. His ship arrived in Bombay after a six-week journey, on his birthday, February 18th. There he confided to his diary, “This day I finish the thirtieth year of my unprofitable life, the year that the Saviour began his ministry, and John the Baptist called a nation to himself, an age in which Brainerd had finished his course. He gained about a hundred savages to the Gospel; I can scarcely number the twentieth part.”

To put this in context we should remember that in his years in India, he had translated the New Testament into Hindustani and begun to do so in Persian, revised an Arabic translation of the New Testament, translated the Psalms into Persian and the Prayer Book into Hindustani. Who can tell,
mountains. Personal contact was inevitable for this winsome saint, and after the short five-day stay in Arabia he was able to give an Arabic Gospel to an Arab soldier and his slave, who “carried it off as a great prize”. Four turbulent weeks’ sailing up the Gulf of Oman brought Henry Martyn to land at last in Persia, at the port of Bushire (Bushehr), May 21st 1811. Although he had plans to return, he never set foot in Arabia again.

Persia – Shiraz. Revising the New Testament

One of Martyn’s first tasks in Bushire was to order Persian clothing, with an enormous sheepskin hat, his travelling outfit for the next, and final, eighteen months. Awaiting completion of this, he was engaged, as ever, in discussions with local scholars about their languages, their religion, the Gospel and his translations. They approved highly of the Arabic New Testament, but were very unsure of the Persian. Martyn responded to this with a series of masterful and courteous tracts, news of which even reached the Shah in Tehran. All this time, work on refining and polishing the Persian

Shiraz was a medieval town ruled with absolute authority by a Prince-Governor, and full of Muslim scholars and poets. Rumours of Martyn’s excellent Persian and his teachings soon spread about, and leading Muslim clerics, as well as literary men, came to debate with him, and to drink coffee with this young man whose door was always open to them. His wisdom and serenity engaged many in a sympathy towards Henry’s religion, but always the great divide was the Deity of the Lord Jesus Christ. Not everyone looked kindly on this first Christian ‘Scholar Missionary’ to reach this ancient Persian centre, and a ‘definitive’ rebuttal of his Christian teachings was prepared by the leading orthodox Muslim theologian. Martyn responded to this with a series of masterful and courteous tracts, news of which even reached the Shah in Tehran. All this time, work on refining and polishing the Persian
New Testament was going on, but as a one-time classical scholar, Henry Martyn could not pass up the opportunity to visit the site of Perseopolis, destroyed and looted by Alexander in 331 BC. His grander plans were to travel to Baghdad, Damascus, then back through Arabia seeking ancient manuscripts, but local travel difficulties, and in the end his own ill health, prevented this.


At last, on February 24th 1812, the Persian New Testament was considered finished. During the long months of final revision, Martyn had not only extended his grasp of the language and the Muslim mind, but had also seen salvation amongst his local contacts. For the New Testament to be acceptable in Persia it must be presented to the Shah, so two very special copies had been prepared, of the finest penmanship and presentation. Henry Martyn joined a convoy travelling north across the Plateau of Iran, hoping to arrive in Tabriz where the British Ambassador lived. The plan was that Sir Gore Ousley would arrange for him a personal audience with the Shah, but the plans went awry. Henry never did meet the Shah. He met, instead, the Shah’s Vizier, in an unpleasant and hostile gathering, where he was challenged to speak the Muslim creed – “Say ‘God is God and Mohammed is the Prophet of God’”. There was a silence, then our man of God replied, “God is God, and Jesus is the Son of God”. In the ensuing uproar Henry Martyn was glad to come away without injury, and his precious Testament safe. Not surprisingly, the Vizier utterly refused to present him to the Shah.

In yet a further kindness, the Ambassador, Gore Ousley, subsequently did present the Persian New Testament to the Shah of Persia, who received it with satisfaction, and commended it to his people. More immediate kindness was needed for Martyn, as the Ambassador and his wife nursed him almost from the brink of death in Tabriz. All other plans were now laid aside, and his heart became set on a return to England. He sought leave from his ‘masters’, the East India Company, to go to England, and began to make arrangements to join a small party headed for Constantinople. From there he would take ship for Malta, and so on to London.

The Last Journey

Henry Martyn’s small group set out in September 1812 along the ancient Royal Road of Persia, on a journey of over 1,200 miles. His state of health was such that twelve miles might have been considered too taxing, but he records again his solid trust – “I cast all my care upon Him who hath already done wonders for me”. Travelling each day between midnight and dawn, they journeyed north, followed Xenophon’s route across the River Aras, and passed under the shadow of Mt. Ararat. There he thought on Noah, and wrote in his journal, “Here the blessed saint landed in a new world; so may I, safe in Christ, outride the storms of life and land at last on one of the everlasting hills”.

Ambassador Ousley had supplied him with letters to the authorities in Yerevan, Kars and Constantinople, but although he met with some kindesses on the way, he was generally not well treated, even his supposedly trusty servants taking advantage of his growing weakness. They entered Turkey, passed through Kars, and heard rumours of plague in Constantinople. This seemed to excite his servants to push on with the journey at any cost, and be done with their task. Poor Henry was brutally hustled on and on, beyond his strength, but writes “O Lord, Thy will be done! Living, dying, remember me”. He was probably aware of traversing the very roads along which the exiled Chrysostom had been hurried in similar hurtful, fatal fashion in 407 AD.

There came a day of unexpected rest, and the dying man found time to make his last record in the journals, October 6th 1812.
No horses being to be had, I had an unexpected repose. I sat in the orchard and thought with sweet comfort and peace of my God; in solitude my Company, my Friend, and Comforter. Oh! When shall time give place to eternity! When shall appear that new heaven and new earth wherein dwelleth righteousness! There, there shall in no wise enter in anything that defileth: none of that wickedness which has made men worse than wild beasts; none of those corruptions which add still more to the miseries of mortality, shall be seen or heard of any more.

After ten more days, of which we have no account at all, on October 16th 1812, Henry Martyn died, in Christ, to rest from his labours, his works following (see Revelation 14.13). He was buried by his friends of the Armenian Church there in Tokat, and several years later a tomb was constructed. This inscription stands there in English, Armenian, Persian and Turkish:

**REV HENRY MARTYN, M.A.**
**CHAPLAIN OF THE HON. EAST INDIA COMPANY,**
**BORN AT TRURO, ENGLAND, FEBRUARY 18, 1781,**
**DIED AT TOKAT, OCTOBER 16, 1812.**

**He laboured for many years in the East, striving to benefit mankind both in this world and that to come.**

**He translated the Holy Scriptures into Hindostanee and Persian, and preached the God and Saviour of whom they testify.**

**He will long be remembered in the East, where he was known as a Man of God and disputes about the faith… but talks on all subjects, sacred and profane, and makes others laugh...**

A Good Report
(I Timothy 3.7)

One of Martyn’s dearest friends said that his favourite hymn was Isaac Watts’ paraphrase of Psalm 72: ‘Jesus shall reign where’er the sun doth his successive journeys run...’. Certainly his life was lived as if wholly motivated by just such a Christ-centred vision. His own ‘rule’ for missionary life was quite simple, “knowledge of men and acquaintance with Scriptures... communion with God and study of my own heart”. Simple as they are, these words were rigorously reduced to practice by Henry Martyn, so that he was loved and admired by all who had fellowship with him in the Gospel of the Lord Jesus Christ. “He shines in all the dignity of love, and seems to carry about him such a Heavenly majesty, as impresses the mind beyond description”, was the report of an old Christian friend in Calcutta.

Equally striking is the affection and esteem with which he was regarded by so many others with whom he was in contact, who had no real sympathy with his religion. It was not only the poor and needy who loved him for his selfless ministrations where he found them, but men of power and influence and standing in the society of those times. “We have in Martyn an excellent scholar, and one of the mildest, cheerfullest and pleasantest men I ever saw. He is extremely religious, and  

How wounding is the surprise of the Armenian Bishop Serrafino, who found in Martyn not only all the accomplishments of a good education, but also the inescapable character of an eminent Christian – “all the English I have hitherto met with, not only make no profession of religion, but live seemingly in contempt of it”. The fire of Martyn’s own communion with God is sharply brought into view in his rueful diagnosis of the root of his fellow labourer’s lack of ‘moderation in all things’: “Sabat lives almost without prayer, and this is sufficient to account for all evils that appear in saint or sinner.”

Christian workers in all the lands from Constantinople to Calcutta have entered into Martyn’s Bible labours, reaping what he sowed at the willing cost of his own life. Many of them will bewail that this great work was not adequately pursued. There is such great need now for those of Martyn’s spirit to hold forth the Word of Life, to lift up the Lord Jesus Christ, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord in these same lands. There is such need for those of strong Christian convictions to catch the vision of Bible Translation as something other than a poor or even inconsequential part of fulfilling the Great Commission. Let Martyn’s motto be the last word: ‘to believe, to suffer, and to hope’.

Postscript

In Turkey, near Tokat, Henry Martyn died, October 16th 1812. In Turkey, in the town of Izmir (Smyrna), John William Burgon was born, August 21, 1813. But that is another story.

Endnotes:
1 Martyn was not without assistance, but the saga of his helpers, their relationship with him, and their hindrance of the work (some readers may know of Sabat!), is its own rich story, not covered here.
2 This chimes harmoniously with the Aims of the TBS: To be instrumental in bringing light and life, through the Gospel of Christ, to those who are lost in sin and in the darkness of false religion and unbelief.
3 After their want of the Gospel, and a vernacular Bible, Martyn rated the next great misfortune in the races and cultures about him to be without the Sabbath and without the Book of Common Prayer.
4 His reputation was such that some sea captains were afraid that his religion would cause trouble on their ships. The actual testimony of each of his voyages was that his religion bore very good fruit.
5 Christine Osborne / Lonely Planet Images
6 A Professor of Arabic at Cambridge published some of Martyn’s tracts in 1824. A plaque in Holy Trinity Church, Cambridge, refers to Martyn’s “defending the Christian faith in the heart of Persia against the united talents of the most learned Mahomedans”.
7 Gore Osuley also took a copy of this New Testament to St. Petersburg in Russia, and the Russian Bible Society published an edition of it in 1815, a year sooner than the copies Martyn had sent to Serampore appeared in print.
8 In all his journeying, in India, Arabia and Persia, Henry Martyn had come into contact with Armenian churchmen, and the last occasion to ‘come apart and rest’ was for five days at the Armenian Patriarchate in Echmiadzin.