THE GREAT VENTURE IN KHORASAN

It was a bold undertaking for Dr. Lewis F. Esselstyn to attempt alone in 1911 to open missionary work in Meshed, in the very midst of most bigoted and fanatical Mohammedans. The city is known as Mashad muqaddas, "Meshed the Holy," and resentment was altogether natural against the teaching of a foreign religion in the sacred city.

But perhaps few people understand why the city of Meshed is called sacred. The Imam Riza, a celebrated saint of Islam and the eighth lineal descendant of Mohammad, died eleven hundred years ago in Tus, the ancient capital of Khorasan. He was buried sixteen miles outside the city and a little mud house was built over his tomb. Three hundred years later, the son of the Sultan Sanjar, a young man who had been suffering from poor health, was hunting nearby this tomb and the gazelle

that he was chasing took refuge inside the little mud house. He tried to persuade his horse to advance towards it but the horse kept shying away from the tomb. Surmising that he was on holy ground the Prince dismounted and walked right into the little mud house. There at the tomb he prayed directly to the saint, the Imam Riza, that he might be healed of his illness. At once he was miraculously cured, according to the story, and from that time on the tomb became sacred and celebrated. The Sultan Sanjar built a shrine where the little mud house had stood. And one hundred years later, when the Mongols came down from central Asia and utterly destroyed the city of Tus, the people who escaped fled up the valley of the Ravi river and took refuge in the shrine. There they were not molested and roundabout the shrine they put up a village of mud houses, and during the last seven hundred years this village grew into the modern city of Meshed. Successive kings and governors have added to the shrine, and now it occupies a vast "temple area" in the center of the city. The hundred thousand pilgrims who come to the sacred city of Meshed every year, come over the hills roundabout, and before they start down into the fertile valley, as they get their first view of the city, it is to see the gold dome of the shrine glistening in the sunlight.

There was certainly an element of adventure and of extraordinary privilege about the opportunity to carry the gospel of Jesus Christ into the city of the pilgrims, Meshed, the famous healing place of Islam.

But bold undertakings are not always successful. When the scouts have reported favorably and with enthusiasm, then comes the command, "Go up and possess it." The work of scouting in Meshed and the vast unoccupied field that surrounds it has been done. It has taken seven years to do it. That it is possible to do the most effective kinds of missionary work throughout all that vast region has been repeatedly demonstrated. The question that faces the church, now is no longer, Can it be done, but, Will we do it? Is the work of the scouts to be met with forty years of lethargy in the desert? It the work at

Meshed to fail on account of the complacent weakness and indifference of folks at home?

The first map shows that the responsibility of other mission stations in Persia has extended, in theory and in practice, as far east as the western border of the province of Khorasan. Now Khorasan has about a fourth of the area and more than a fifth of the population of all Persia. But as yet only about one twenty-fifth of the missionaries in Persia are working in this great eastern province. The inequality is due in part to the newness of missionary work in Khorasan and does not constitute a ground for criticism unless it should be allowed to continue.

If the present force of missionaries in Khorasan should be increased sevenfold, the grand total would still allow only one missionary for every 50,000 people. Five new missionaries a year for the next seven years, allowing for no deaths or resignations, would establish this quota for Khorasan. We realize, of course, that this is an exceedingly conservative estimate if we really "mean business" in Khorasan and later in the neighboring Mohammedan lands of Central Asia, but other parts of Persia are in grave need of reenforcement also.

The large circle on the map represents the isolation of Meshed from other mission stations and also its proximity to countries that have not been occupied by Christian missions. The radius of the circle is six hundred miles and it will be seen to extend far into the neighboring countries of Turkestan and Afghanistan.

Turkestan is a great neglected region with nearly 15,000,000 Mohammadans, of whom probably at least 5,000,000, Tartars and Turkemans principally, live within the region included within the circle. When the chaotic period of the Russian revolution shall have passed, other American missionary societies may wish to help in the work in central Asia. They will find plenty of opportunity in Turkestan. The Trans-Caspian railroad reaches many of the chief cities. The whole region is accessible and visitors to the mission hospital in Meshed, visitors from Turkestan, have repeatedly declared that if scriptures in the Persian, Arabic, Turkish, Rus-

sian and Tartar languages could be brought to Askabad, Tashkend, Merv, Samarkand and other cities in Turkestan, they would be sold literally by thousands.

The situation in Afghanistan may be modified by political developments in the very near future. The old Amir of Afghanistan, recently deceased, was under treaty obligations with Great Britain, (see *Statesmen's Year Book*, 1916) to keep his mountainous state, which is as large as Texas, as a "buffer state" between the Indian and the Russian Empires, to admit no foreigners whatever to his country, and in return for this favor the English were also to stay out of Afghanistan, and the Amir of the Afghans was to receive an annual stipend of \$600,000 from the Indian Empire. During the last two years of the war, German, Austrian and Turkish spies, who had been carrying on their propaganda work in Persia, left Persia when the sympathizers with the Allies got the upper hand in the Persian government. These spies left Persia by the back door and took refuge in Afghanistan. The act of giving refuge to the spies of England's enemies at the time of war could probably have been interpreted as a violation of the treaty between Afghanistan and the Indian Empire, but at the time the British policy seems to have been conciliatory. Precautions were taken, however, to have only native Afghans act as British agents within Afghanistan in order to thwart the possible activity of the enemy refugees, some of whom were expelled from the country, and after crossing into Persia were captured as prisoners.

There is now a new Amir of Afghanistan; under the pressure of war time necessity a new railroad was extended clear through the desert land of Baluchistan to the south-eastern border of Persia; after the collapse of the Russians, British-Indian troops occupied the eastern border of Khorasan in order to prevent a very possible German advance into that part of Persia; the expansion towards India of the old imperial Russian government is no longer to be feared by the government of India; the Afghan people have learned more of foreign affairs and have taken more interest in trade with their neighbors

during the war than ever before; consequently, although a mere statement of these facts is by no means conclusive, they are nevertheless at least suggestive of the probability that it will no longer be to the political, military, or commercial interest of the government of India to keep Afghanistan closed. It is by no means unlikely that the new Amir of Afghanistan would be willing to continue to receive an annual stipend from the government of India, not to keep his country closed to foreigners, but as the price of a right of way for a British railroad directly across Afghanistan to Meshed, thence to the Trans-Caspian railroad, so that India would be directly connected by rail with Europe. Certainly, when Afghanistan is opened, among the first to answer the invitation, "Come over and help us," will be the missionary doctors and nurses, ministers and teachers, who are now working on the Persian and Indian borders.

The fact that the people of Afghanistan read and speak the Persian language is already giving missionaries of Khorasan a unique advantage. Pushtu, the distinctive dialect of Afghanistan, has approximately the same relationship to Persian that Scotch or Gaelic has to English. Persian books and newspapers are read much more widely than one would imagine in that still closed land. From the American mission hospital in Meshed, in one year, 1791 copies of scripture, most of them in the Persian language, were sold to visiting merchants from Afghanistan, and by them were taken across the border and sold among their countrymen.

Afghanistan has three principal cities, Herat, Kabul, and Kandahar. At one time, in the Meshed hospital, there were four hernia cases in one room. They had all come from the city of Herat, one hundred and seventy miles from Meshed.

Six tall, vigorous young Afghans came to the Meshed hospital together one morning, and one of them said, "We are brothers, last year our father came here and bought a book which he reads back home at nights. He told us to come and get more of those books." The missionary asked, "And where did you come from?" The answer

was, "We are from Kabul." Another glance at the first map will show the reader what that means. Kabul is farther from Meshed than Joseph was carried down into Egypt, farther than Joseph's brothers went for corn, and there were those six Mohammedan brothers who had made a longer journey at their father's request, to buy scriptures. May they not have carried back the very Bread of Life?

And from Kandahar, three hundred miles from Meshed, there came one day a poor blind old grandmother. Her eyes had cataracts. When she was able to return however, she went back to her distant home, happily convinced that it was true that the Christian doctor could give sight to the blind.

The city of Meshed is compactly built and contains the sacred tomb of the Iman Riza, the Moslem saint, the precincts of whose shrine only Mohammedans are allowed to enter. The mission hospital was started in a rented Persian house, about ten minutes walk from the shrine area. More and more of the pilgrims that visit the shrine, many of them disappointed and robbed of all they had, are coming to the hospital both for treatment and to buy scriptures. Dr. Rolla E. Hoffman is treating about 15,000 patients a year in this hospital. A second doctor will soon be there to help him, and a trained nurse. The first modern hospital building has recently been provided for, so that the wonderful opportunity in Meshed for medical mission work will be met with greatly improved facilities in the very near future.

While Meshed is the first great sacred city of Islam in which Christian missionary work has been established, the opposition of fanatics has been much less noteworthy than the splendid appreciation that thousands of the people have shown. A striking example of this is the fact that a full two-thirds of the entire expense of the medical mission work so far has been paid by the Persian people.

The American hospital took the lead in feeding the starving multitudes of Meshed during the recent famine, and last year, when one of the missionaries, Dr. Lewis

F. Esselstyn, the founder of Meshed station, died of typhus fever, after he had given himself unsparingly to relief work, the people said of him, "He gave his life for us."

The vast region in Persia that has been left to the little mission station at Meshed is as large as all France. There were never more than five missionaries in Meshed but they have undertaken to do extensive evangelistic and medical itinerating throughout the whole extent of Khorasan. The dotted lines on the map of Khorasan show how extensive these journeys have been. Only two large cities, Tun and Tabbas, are still unvisited. They lie far to the south, across the desert, in a district that is famous for its dates and oranges. All of the other cities and more than 300 villages have been visited, many of them repeatedly, and the people have bought hundreds of copies of scriptures. They have shown also a friendly interest in Christian preaching, and in many cases have urged the missionaries "to come and stay." In Sabzevar and in Nishapur, Karez, Naratabad, Neh, and Turbat substantial offers of help have been made if mission work could be started also in these places. About seven very promising new stations could be started at once in Khorasan if the missionaries were available.

In the meantime, while the little station at Meshed goes on struggling with the problems of a whole new mission, a very considerable advantage is now afforded them from the fact that the main trades routes in north-eastern Persia have been so improved by British-Indian troops that automobiles can be used. This method of travel will be in great contrast to the long and wearisome journey of eight hundred miles, on pack mules and running camels, which was made a year ago from Meshed to the terminus of the new English railroad. More rapid means of transportation will be of great help in holding the Meshed sector.

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Meshed, Persia.