

Bringer of Light: a short life of Henry Martyn - final summary.

Before Christmas John Jones told us about William Tyndale, and how he wanted to make the Bible available to everyone in England in their own language, so that the 'boy at the plough' would understand it better than some people who insisted that God only spoke Latin.

Tyndale's triumph was that, although his enemies had him put to death, his translation ultimately made up about eighty to ninety per cent of the Old Testament in what became known as the King James Bible.

Martin asked me to share something about my own journey with the Bible, but as well as doing that I would like to talk about someone who inspired me on my journey – Henry Martyn, who lived two or three hundred years after Tyndale. Whereas Tyndale was involved in the Reformation in Europe and in getting the Bible into everyday English for England, Martyn had a vision of taking the Bible to nations of the Middle East.

One of the things that inspires me about the Bible is the way we see God's sovereignty over the nations. Martin was praying about Ezekiel's vision in the worship time (Ezekiel chapter one) and it's amazing how the prophets like Isaiah and Ezekiel saw God acting not just in their own country, but also among the nations round about them – and how the superpowers of the day, such as Assyria, Egypt and Babylon rose and fell, and how God finally used Cyrus King of Persia (Isaiah 44:28, 45:1, 45:13; 2Chron 36:22) to bring his people back to the land and to rebuild the Temple.

The first time I was given a complete Bible was when I was eight years old as a boy in Malaysia. It was a King James version, which in the Old Testament is eighty to ninety per cent William Tyndale – so although he died for his faith he work bore fruit in the end. But we need new translations as language changes, and I was reading it in 1968, four hundred years afterwards. I liked the pictures by E.H. Shephard and tried to read starting at the very beginning. I managed to get through the Garden of Eden, the Flood, the Tower of Babel, the call of Abraham. I even got into the Exodus, but somehow or other, I got lost in the desert – a bit like the children of Israel, really – and gave up. By the way, there isn't any desert in Malaysia and it strained the imagination a bit.

Then my parents bought our first black and white TV and, although I was supposed not to watch it until my brother came back from boarding school, in the end I sneaked into the room where it was kept, switched it on and started watching the cartoons. The images of the ancient Egyptians and Israelites were replaced by improbable pictures of Gigantor battling flying robots.

Then I got sent to boarding school.... about which the least said, the better - readers of *Jane Eyre* will understand what I mean – although we did have a good sing sometimes, and I especially remember the hymn, 'The earth shall be filled with the glory of God as the waters cover the sea.' When we sang this hymn I got a nudge from the boy sitting next to me, because my name is John Waters.

When I got out of boarding school I got into a Bible study in a local church. I can remember them studying the book of Ruth, and the leader getting a bit embarrassed about the bit where Ruth visits the barn where the harvesters were sleeping and proposes to Boaz. (Oddly enough, because of the large number of widows left by Saddam's attacks on the Kurds, this was the first book I worked on in Kurdistan and when an audio was made of it, the Muslim ladies reading it suggested that bit be cut out – but that is jumping ahead).

I guess where things really got going with Bible study was when I went to university. The Christian Union organized group bible studies for Christians to through a bible book – and I remember the Bible study leader asked us all to pray through the summer vacation, that we would be the people God wanted us to be and go where God wanted us to go. In my first summer vacation I worked on a local/regional newspaper, but in the in the second summer I joined a teach which was reaching foreign students who came to the language schools to study English. As part of the programme there were evangelistic bible studies in the evenings.

A lot of teamwork went into the preparation for these evangelistic bible studies. We met for prayer and teaching in the morning for ourselves and then got sent out on our bicycles to invite the students at the language schools. We invited them to two separate venues: one was called Henry's which was in the Henry Martyn Hall in the city centre and the other was the Barn, which was a hall attached to St. Barnabas Church in the outskirts.

For the Henry Martyn Hall there were sandwiches sold cheaply and a bit of entertainment – maybe a quick sketch or a thought for the day, when we advertised the evening activities at both venues. In the afternoon we would prepare material such as sketches to get people interested in the evening bible study. I particularly remember some of the startling effects produced by our attempts to do the parables. If you've ever tried acting out the Parable of the Tenants in the Vineyard, for example, you'll find by the end that the stage is piled high with bodies – it's carnage, simply carnage!

After the sketch in the evening people were invited to join the study groups. One team member would lead with questions for group discussion and another would be there in support. We used simple Good News gospels with line drawings which were meant to leave people from different cultures free to use their imaginations to fill in the missing details.

As you will be aware from ministries like contact and the drop in centres, there was an incredible variety of people with huge differences in outlook. One evening we had a German guy whose problem was with the account of creation in Genesis – 'das ist not korrekt,' was the gist of what he said. The Lord led me to say that the book of Genesis is not a scientific textbook – it can't be, since it needs to speak to people in all cultures and all times from ancient times to modern and into the future.

Another man whom I saw sitting at the table in Henry's was a Muslim. I noticed someone who had been talking to him look pale and get up to leave. He suggested I had a go. As soon as I sat down, I discovered that this Saudi's opening gambit with anyone who sat down to practise

English with him was, 'Do you know that you are going in the fire?' Of course I warned to him at once... No, but I hung in there somehow, and bit by bit we inched our way towards talking about what Christians believe, and even reached the Cross – but at that point he suddenly broke off, and said, 'No, I refuse to reason...'. The next day he flew back to Saudi – believe it or not, to work in the Ministry of Tourism.

Both these characters – the German and the Saudi – I met at the Henry Martyn Hall, which I found out later was named after Henry Martyn, a missionary who went to India and Iran and burnt himself out for God. Like Tyndale, he became a bible translator – working in no less than three languages, first Arabic, then Urdu and then Farsi.

HM was originally from Cornwall, where his father had trusted in Christ under the preaching of John Wesley. His mother died the same year she gave birth to his sister, Sally, who was only a year younger than Henry. They lived right opposite Coinage Hall, where John Wesley used to preach on his visits to Truro. Henry went to university at the age of sixteen. He came up to St John's College, Cambridge just 215 years ago in 1797 and was Senior Wrangler (first in his year in Mathematics) in 1801 and later winner of a Latin prize. He wrote in his journal "I obtained my highest wishes but was surprised to find I had grasped a shadow." His sister Sally witnessed to him when he came back to Cornwall on summer vacations. When he was not quite nineteen, his father died, and this prompted him to study the Bible seriously for himself. In 1800 he trusted in Christ.

At Cambridge he met Charles Simeon, who told him about William Carey and the mission at Serampore in northern India. Simeon didn't go himself: he stayed in one place (Holy Trinity Church) for fifty years preaching the gospel and mentoring many who went into mission in many places. In north India the Bible was being translated into many Indian languages and when Henry heard this it prompted him to seek God's will for his life and he came to see that God was calling him to mission in other lands. Meanwhile Charles Simeon put him to work in a village.

'He was elected a Fellow of St. John's, and served as the curate at Holy Trinity with Simeon before sailing for India in 1805. Tragically he left his heart with Lydia Grenfell in his native Cornwall.

Valentine Cunningham, Fellow in English at Corpus Christi College, Oxford, has written recently supporting the theory that St. John Rivers in Jane Eyre is based on the life, if not the character, of Henry Martyn. Charlotte Bronte's father had been helped by him as a young student at St. John's College and Martyn was his hero. He had arranged for Patrick Brunty, as he was called at that time, to receive £10 a year from each of Henry Thornton and William Wilberforce' (Cunningham 1993: 96).

'Having occasioned to stop at a friend's house by the seaside, I walked out alone with Lydia G. and listened with no small delight, as you may suppose, to the remarks which the beauty and grandeur of the scene drew from her pious heart. In the afternoon we read

together some of Watts, but the gloomy moment arrived when I parted with her perhaps for ever in this life' (Letter written from Cambridge 1804).

As it turned out – he did see her again, as the fleet he sailed to India with docked in Cornwall waiting for the right moment to sail while the Napoleonic War was raging. But he barely made it back to the ship in time – he would have missed it if the ship hadn't got stuck out getting out of port... and in the sudden rush their last conversation seems really to have been at cross-purposes. Lydia seems to have understood him to want to be free to marry someone else in India, whereas Martyn meant was that he wanted Lydia to be free to make her own decision, whether or not she joined him later in India.

HM arrived in India in 1806 and lost no time in visiting William Carey and observing his methods of translation. Frustrated to be told to wait in Calcutta he wrote in his journal, 'I have hitherto lived to little purpose, more like a clod than a servant of God; now let me burn out for God. When he wrote those words, he had only six years left to live.

'He burned to bring all men to the same peace with God and service to Him which he himself had for seven years enjoyed. He received many offers to be a minister in Calcutta, even a minister to missionaries – but he remained deaf to the temptation - His call was not to preach even in the metropolis of British India, the centre of Southern Asia; but, through their own languages, to set in motion a force to win North India, Arabia, and Persia to Christ'. (George Smith:REF?).

Martyn prayed and studied in Serampore and preached in Calcutta. For 5 months he waited to find out where the East India Company would send him. Meanwhile he lived in pagoda in the grounds of a friend's house. Marshman suggested staying in Calcutta a year to learn the Bengali language.

He wrote to Lydia, whom he had met back in Cornwall, to ask her to join him, but after a long wait her letter came back answering no - her mother would not consent, and possibly also she was held back because a man she had previously been engaged to had not yet married again.

She never followed him to India and he never made it back to persuade her.

The Serampore trio suggested Henry take up work in collaborating with native speakers on Bible translation. You may be surprised that he was able eventually to work on three languages. Certainly he had a gift for languages, but the role of a foreigner in a team is often to check the translation against the original languages or another language, and make sure the meaning hasn't gone too far adrift. So a foreigner needs to understand enough of the language to tell when what needs checking and to ask the right questions to get the revision done.

So instead of Lydia, Sabat arrived. He came two weeks after her letter, surviving the danger of assassination on the way from Calcutta. For Sabat was an Arab who had become a Christian. As Muslims, he and his friend Abdullah had visited Mecca and then gone to Afghanistan, where an

Armenian lent Abdullah an Arabic Bible. He became a Christian and fled for his life to Bukhara in Russia. There Sabat met him again, denounced him, and witnessed his martyrdom. Sabat then wandered to India, where he too fell in with a copy of the Arabic New Testament, compared it with the Koran, and turned to Christ. In 1804, when he was twenty-seven, he was baptized in Madras. His brother, sent from Arabia to kill him, succeeded in wounding him with a dagger. Sabat then devoted himself to propagating the gospel and joined the translation staff at Serampore, giving good service on the Persian and Arabic Scriptures. When the Baptist missionaries there decided to commit to Henry the translation of the New Testament not only into Urdu, but also into Persian, they sent Sabat to him, along with his wife, who was pregnant.

Soon after Sabat had joined him, a Muslim named Mirza Fitrut arrived from Benares to work with Henry on the Urdu New Testament. But as time went on, friction increased between Fitrut and Sabat. There were faults on both sides. Sabat was jealous and easily angered. Fitrut deliberately vexed him and told lies to discredit him, and Henry was caught in their crossfire.

Daily he toiled at improving the Persian New Testament with Sabat and translating the Urdu New Testament with Fitrut. For relaxation he studied the Persian poetry with Mirza and the Koran in Arabic with Sabat.

He was 'seized with a sudden desire to read Hebrew, chiefly to see language in its purest and simplest state, for it is my belief that language is from God. I remember one night I did not sleep a wink. One discovery succeeded another in Hebrew, Arabic and Greek, so rapidly that I was almost in ecstasy. My thirst after knowledge is very strong, but I pray continually that the Spirit of God may hold the reins.'

This thirst and this gift were harnessed to the task of revising the already completed Urdu New Testament. He drew in five learned Muslims from Delhi and Patna, a poet from Lucknow and a descendant of the royal house of Persia. 'Almost every sentence was altered. I was amazed that they referred to the Persian in order to understand the Urdu, but it was a consolation to find that from the Persian they caught the meaning instantly, expressing their admiration for the plainness of the translation.'

It turned out, however, that the Persian these Indian Muslims admired was written in an Indian style and was full of Arabisms. In the end, Martyn adopted the principle that each translation should be checked in the land of origin of the language.

'His brief career in missionary translation is as telling as any concerning the problematics of words and terms in the transactions of faith. Martyn encountered the 'x into y will-not-go' situation and faced it with a strong equipment of scholarship sustained by steady anguish of spirit. . . ."Grace," "truth," "redemption," "church," "hope," and other vital words in his New Testament currency struggled to fulfil themselves in Indian idiom.

It is evident in Martyn how he was more vitally in encounter with theology-in--philology than any academic professor. For he was made to feel, via his robust *munshis*, or local

scholar-aids, the full strain, and even the venom, of the resistance to meaning implicit in the otherness of words.

"Theology-in-philology" is a fine phrase; it captures the essence of meticulous, sustained Bible translation' (Henry Martyn Centre website).

Concerning his relationships with Indians Martyn wrote in his journal: "I learnt that the power of gentleness is irresistible and also that these men are not fools. Clearness of reasoning is not confined to Europe" (Bentley-Taylor 1975: 72).

Henry Martyn worked in different postings along the Ganges River – at Dinapore for 2 and a half years and Cawnpore for one year and five months, where he preached to beggars and Europeans each Sunday and toiled at the translation work all week with Sabat and Mirza.

Martyn at first focused particularly on translating the New Testament into Urdu and supervised others working on the Persian and Arabic translations. His anarchic, phlegmatic scholar aid, Sabat, however was better at Arabic than Persian. Martyn confides his feelings about him to his journal referring to the memory of a Cambridge University Sermon: "I smile to observe his pedantry. Never have I seen such an instance of dogmatical pride, since I heard Dr. Parr preach his Greek sermon at St. Mary's, about 'to_n'" (Padwick 1922: 209).

Persian was spoken at the Moslem courts in India and was the language of judicial proceedings under the British government in Hindostan. Understood from Calcutta to Damascus, it seemed that a quarter of the globe could then understand the Persian language.

But when Martyn discovered numerous infelicities he resolved to perfect the translation *in situ*. The essential importance of context is not a modern missiological insight. He decided to travel through Persia, Damascus and Arabia on his way to England hoping to improve his tuberculosis and discover scriptural manuscripts. His friends in Calcutta tried to dissuade him but he set out in 1811.

His friend Robert Brown wrote:

He is on his way to Arabia, where he is going in pursuit of health and knowledge. You know his genius, and what gigantic strides he takes in everything. He has some great plan in his mind of which I am not competent to judge; but as far as I do understand it, the object is far too grand for one short life, and much beyond his feeble and exhausted frame In other respects he is exactly the same as he was; he shines in all the dignity of love; and seems to carry about him such a heavenly majesty, as impresses the mind beyond description. But if he talks much, though in a low voice, he sinks, and you are reminded of his being "dust and ashes" (*Ibid.*: 239).

David Brown wrote to Martyn when he first heard about the Arabian plan: "you burn with the intensesness and rapid blaze of heated phosphorus" (*Ibid.*).

Red phosphorous is used to make matches – it burns quickly and brightly. When Henry Martyn said, in 1806, he would burn out for God, he didn't know then that he only had six years to live.

In Bombay he met a learned Persian named Feeroz, who pointed out that the Persian translation was full of Arabisms. Crossed from Bombay to Muscat in Arabia but stayed only a week there. Henry's plan was to go to Baghdad and Aleppo after Persia.

He landed in May at Bushire in Persia and stayed ten days. Then he joined a night caravan to travel 170 miles north into the Zagros mountains to Shiraz. There he found a language helper names Sayed Ali.

January 1-8, 1812. Spared by mercy to see the beginning of another year. The last has been in some respects a memorable year; transported in safety to Shiraz, I have been led by the particular providence of God to undertake a work, the idea of which never entered my mind till my arrival here, but which has gone on without material interruption, and is now nearly finished. To all appearance the present year will be more perilous than any I have seen, but if I live to complete the Persian New Testament, my life after that will be of less importance. But whether life or death be mine, may Christ be magnified in me. If he has work for me to do, I cannot die.

Thomas Thomason, a friend from Cambridge days, chaplain in Calcutta and later translator of the Old Testament into Urdu wrote to Simeon:

In Persia he found he had entirely to retranslate the New Testament. He stayed in Shiraz for a year learning, translating and disputing with Muslim scholars. Samuel Lee, Professor of Arabic at Cambridge, published some of these apologetic tracts in 1824, and the plaque in Holy Trinity Church refers to his "defending the Christian faith in the heart of Persia against the united talents of the most learned Mahomedans".

During Martyn's eleven months residence at Shiraz he was... engaged in a written controversy with one of the most learned and temperate doctors there. He began. I replied what was unanswerable, then I subjoined a second more direct attack on the glaring absurdities of Mahomedanism, with a statement of the nature and evidences of Christianity. The Sufis then as well as himself desired a demonstration from the very beginning, of the truth of any revelation. As this third treatise contained an examination of the doctrine of the Sufis, and pointed out that their object was attainable by the Gospel, and by that only, it was read with interest and convinced many. There is not a single Europeanism in the whole that I know of, as my friend and interpreter would not write anything that he could not perfectly comprehend. But I am exhausted; pray for me, beloved brother, and believe that I am, as long as life and recollection lasts.

I thought at first, what will the Government in India think of my being away so long, or what will my friends think? Shall I not appear to all a wandering shepherd, leaving the flock and running

about for my own pleasure? But placing myself twenty years on in time, I say, Why could not I stay at Shiraz long enough to get a New Testament done there, even if I had been detained there on that account three or six years. What work of equal importance can ever come from me? So that now I am resolved to wait here till the New Testament is finished, though I incur the displeasure of Government or even be dismissed the service.

When he had worked through the whole Persian New Testament and revised it, he sought to present it to the Shah. Travelling north he found that he could never reach the Shah's court or expect to present it to him.

From Shiraz Martyn continued his debilitating journey to Constantinople via Tabriz,

By the time he arrived in Tabriz he was suffering from fever.

August 20. A day much to be remembered for the remarkable recovery of strength with which it pleased God to favour me. I immediately began to... prepare myself for my journey. Learned from Mirza Aga Meer that my work had been read by Mirza Abdul Wahab to the king, who observed to Mirza Boozong, visir of Abbas Mirza, that the Feringees' government and army and now one of their Mullahs was come into the east. He then directed Mirza Boozong to prepare an answer. In consequence of this information Sir Gore told Mirza Aga Meer not to bring me a certain Mullah, who had a great wish to be introduced to me. One day a Mullah came and disputed awhile for Mahomedan, but finished with professing Sufi, sentiments.

Making preparations for my journey to Constantinople, a route recommended to me by Sir Gore as safer, and one in which he could give me letters of recommendation to two Turkish governors. With such advantages held forth, I could not but adopt this plan, and the delightful thought of being brought to the borders of Europe without sustaining any injury, contributed more than anything else, I believe, to restore my health and spirits. Sir Gore wishing me not to travel in the same unprotected way that I had done, procured from the prince a mihmander for me, together with an order for the use of chuprar horses all the way to Erivan. These post-horses I was told were nothing else than the beasts the prince's servants levy on every village; on which I determined not to use them, and began to look out for a muleteer and cafila.

Public curiosity about the gospel, now for the first time, in the memory of the modern Persians, introduced into the country, is a good deal excited here, at Shiraz, and other places; so that upon the whole, I am thankful for having been led hither, and detained; though my residence in this country has been attended with many unpleasant circumstances. The way of the kings of the east is preparing. Thus much may he said with safety, but little more. The Persians also will probably take the lead in the march to Zion, as they are ripe for a revolution in religion as well as politics.

From there he headed west into the Ottoman Empire in an attempt to reach Constantinople and Europe, but he never made it.

His last words were written at Tokat, an Armenian town in eastern Turkey. He was exhausted from hard riding, the heat and fever. The plague was raging in the town at the time.

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 any thing 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.

At Tocat, upon the 16th of October, at the age of 31, Mr. Martyn entered on his rest.

Although Martyn could not present the Bible in person to the Shah, the Shah did eventually receive the NT from the British ambassador and commented on it and later wrote him a letter:

“ In truth (said the royal letter of thanks to the ambassador) through the learned and unremitted exertions of the Reverend Henry Martyn it has been translated in a style most befitting sacred books, that is in an easy and simple diction...The whole of the New Testament is completed in a most excellent manner, a source of pleasure to our enlightened and august mind.^[7]

Charles Simeon wrote to Grant of the East India Company on 18 October 1814,

Mr. Martyn's Persian Testament is safe in Petersburg. The King of Persia admires it much, and has copied it for himself, and had it copied for some of his friends and written a Recommendation of it with his own *hand and seal*. A copy of it is taken by the Bible Society at Petersburg in order to be put to press immediately--Hallelujah! Hallelujah!

Simeon was Henry Martyn's spiritual father and had been close to him since his conversion at Cambridge in 1800.

Sir Gore Ouseley, the British Ambassador in Tabriz who had nursed him, made good his pledge to Martyn by personally delivering his Persian New Testament to the press in St. Petersburg and proof reading it for publication in 1815. Martyn's New Testament was the first translation into Persian since the fifth century.

. He had been a chaplain in the East India Company serving at Dinapore and Cawnpore and had in under five years translated the New Testament into Urdu (then called Hindoostani) and Persian, and supervised its translation into Arabic.

What is Henry Martyn's legacy?

**His translations (which laid the foundations for future mission), - in under five years translated the New Testament into Urdu and Persian, and supervised its translation into Arabic. The Arabic translation went through two editions, the Urdu lasted much longer and was used in schools in Agra in North India. It was read widely by the Muslims so the next generation of missionaries who went to India found the mullahs were already reading Martyn and Fitruts Urdu New Testament. They actually received it before the first Urdu translations of the Qur'an and this 'provided the means to transform the *ulamas*' (Islamic scholars') perception of Christianity (Avril Powell, *Muslims and Missionaries in Pre-Mutiny India* Powell 1993: 102).

A church was planted in Shiraz and in 1936 the church in Shiraz donated a first edition of the Henry Martyn's New Testament to Holy Trinity Church.

It's still being published: only last month I was given a copy of it recently reprinted: Mirza Saiyed Ali Khan and Henri Martyn, *New Testament 1837- The Gospel of John and the Apostle Paul's Letter to the Romans*, published by Persian World Outreach.

So how can we too be creative with the Bible?

*There is one-to-one bible study for discipling a new believer.

*Group bible study where a group of Christians goes through a bible book together and are encouraged to pray for God's guidance.

*Evangelistic bible study led by a Christian, with perhaps another in support, using a simple translation with plenty of discussion questions to draw out a response from those taking part.

And the willingness to go comes from studying the Bible. How?

Jesus said 'Heaven and earth will pass away, but my words will never pass away (Matt 24: 35). Why won't they pass away? Because Jesus Himself is eternal, and Jesus is the Word.

The bible gives you a completely new orientation in life – a glimpse of God's plan, and how we might fit into it – rather than my plan, and obsession with self.

For further reference:

David Bentley-Taylor *My Love Must Wait*, Inter-Varsity Press, Leicester 1975

(John W and Steve Holland have one copy each).

Constance Padwick, *Henry Martyn, Confessor of the Faith*, Inter-Varsity Fellowship, London 1953.

George Smith *Henry Martyn, Saint and Scholar – first modern missionary to the Mohammedans*, The Religious Tract Society, London 1892

Internet sources: Wikipedia, Henry Martyn Centre (and other links).

