

CHAPTER 13

A PERSIAN PERSPECTIVE ON CHRISTMAS

Since you are reading this book in Farsi you probably understand the customs and life in the Middle East and have a knowledge of the rich background of Iranian culture and history. You are able to understand the story of the birth of Jesus Christ and the Christian celebration at Christmas more than those who live in the western world. Originally, God gave the prophets all the words he wanted in the Old Testament in Hebrew and the ones in the New Testament in Greek. However, in translating words into another language such as English, German, or Japanese, it is often hard to translate a word or concept to give the true meaning of a custom. As we look at the Christmas story there are some different things listed below which you might want to share with an English speaking friend. You can go to the web site at www.farsinet.com/persiansinbible/ and download this section in English which was my original writing and pass it on to your English speaking friend around Christmas time. Even though I made some changes before this section was translated into Farsi, the text is the same basically.

A. MARY - HER RELATION TO JOSEPH

1. Matthew 1:18 and Luke 1:27 in the English translations state that Mary was pledged to be married (NIV) or espoused (King James) or betrothed (NASV) or engaged to be married (LB) to Joseph. The problem with any English translation is that there is no word in English which can be used to translate accurately Mary's relationship to Joseph.
2. In the West usually there are three steps in a relationship - first friendship, then engagement and then marriage. The engagement is entered into by both the man and woman, but can be broken by just one of the parties involved. This can cause bad feelings for the one who is "jilted". In some cases both parties agree to break the engagement. Marriage is the time when the two become husband and wife legally and go and live together. The marriage can be broken only by legal proceedings called a divorce.
3. Usually the three steps in Iranian culture are engagement, aghd, and marriage.
 - a. ENGAGEMENT (namzad) can be arranged by the parents for their children at an early age or later on when they are in their teens or early twenties. Nowadays in modern Iran there are a few who get engaged independently on their own or the girl may be allowed to have "veto" privilege. An engagement can be broken but this is rare, since it is hard on one's "abru" (reputation) especially, for the girl because some would think of her as being "second hand."
 - b. AGHD is the legal ceremony with the Mullah (a religious Muslim leader).

Usually, a government official comes to register this event or the couple might go to the registration office. Since it is both a legal religious and government contract, various conditions are written down such as the dowry amount which is the amount given to the parents, the amount which will be paid if there is a divorce, etc.. Once an “aghd” takes place, it can be broken only by legal proceedings such as a divorce. The couple does not live together until after the next step, the marriage, which may be right away or after several years. Often the couple cannot live together until the man saves enough money to set up the house, finish his military service, or finish his education. This is probably the relationship Joseph had with Mary since Joseph wanted to divorce Mary privately when he heard about her expecting a baby.

- c. MARRIAGE (Arusi) - is the secular celebration with a meal, party, or a series of parties. Customs vary in different parts of Iran, but after this celebration the couple live together for the first time. Usually, it is important on the wedding night for the bride to prove she was a virgin. According to custom, in order to protect marriage the wife must be a virgin at the time of marriage. This principle comes from the Bible in Deuteronomy 22:13-22. Here the scripture states that after a man marries and then slanders his wife saying that she was not a virgin when he married her, the mother and father were to bring proof that she was a virgin to the town elders. If the elders accepted the proof the man would be fined 100 shekels of silver for bringing false charges against his wife. However, if the man's charges that the woman had sexual relations before marriage were true, according to the law, as found in verse 21, she was to be stoned to death. After the angel appeared to Joseph, the Bible says, “Joseph took unto him his wife, and knew her not till she had brought forth her first-born son.” Joseph never had sexual relations with Mary until after Jesus was born.

B. MARY A VIRGIN

Isaiah 7:14 predicted that the Messiah would be born of a virgin. The Gospels tell of the angel Gabriel visiting the virgin Mary. Matthew 1:23 and Luke 1:34 confirm that Mary was a virgin.

“Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel.” Isaiah 7:14

“The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel” – which means, “God with us.” Matthew 1:23

“How will this be,” Mary asked the angel, “since I am a virgin?” Luke 1:34

1. In Persian there are three words which could have the meaning of the English

word “virgin”.

- a. Bakereh which is an Arabic derivation now used in Christian religious terms. This word for virgin is used in the official Persian translation of the Bible.
 - b. Dokhtar which means a daughter or a girl or a virgin. When this word is used in talking about a girl, it is assumed automatically in the Middle East that the girl is a virgin since she isn't married yet, that is, unless some negative word is added. This word is used in the new Persian translation. In the Persian to English Khayam Dictionary in the month of Mehr 1341 “dokhtar” is translated into English as “a girl” and “a virgin.”
 - c. Doosheezeh - is the word used for “Miss” and means a maiden or a virgin. An English teacher in a Persian school related that some of her students didn't want to be called a “Khanom” which means lady, but rather a “doosheezeh.” In the Persian to English Khayam Dictionary “doosheezeh” is translated into English “a maiden” and a “virgin.”
2. As one looks in the Persian to Persian or Persian to English dictionaries these three words are interchangeable in their meaning of virgin. You see, in the Middle East an unmarried girl is assumed to be a virgin and so, words pertaining to Miss and girl can be for a virgin as well. The words for virginity - dohktari, doosheezeege, and bakereh- have basically the same meaning. The Greek culture around the New Testament time was quite different. There was much sexual immorality. Because of this the Greeks had a specific word for virgin, another word for daughter, and another for unmarried woman. Unfortunately, because of the influence of Western morals and the basic sinfulness of man, some of these standards are beginning to break down in Iranian society today.
 3. Therefore, any translator translating the Scriptures into English would have no choice but to use the word virgin in Isaiah 7:14; Mat. 1:23; and Luke 1:27, to convey the proper meaning to the English reader. Using young woman, as some translations have, is at best a translation from one who does not understand the culture of the Bible and Middle East, or at worst from someone who is putting his liberal theological prejudice into his translation. For other aspects of the virgin birth, see standard works such as J. Gresham Machen's, The Virgin Birth of Christ.

C. THE TRIP TO BETHLEHEM (Luke 2:1-6)

1. **Why did Mary go with Joseph to register in Bethlehem for the Roman census when she was so close to delivering her baby?** Perhaps women had to be present personally to register, or she wanted to be away from her home city and

the gossip, or she wanted to be with her husband, Joseph.

2. **Did Mary ride a donkey to Bethlehem?** Almost every picture of this event in the West shows Mary riding on a donkey and Joseph leading the donkey. The scripture is silent on this point. Even if they did have a donkey would Mary have ridden on it or would it have been used to carry basic household furnishings, Joseph's carpenter tools, and bedding? Their journey took at least three days. Maybe they had several donkeys or perhaps they both walked leading the donkey carrying the heavy load.

D. THE MANGER SCENE (Luke 2:7)

1. **Was the lodging in the stable free?** Many years ago I watched a Christmas play put on by Iranian Christians. In this scene Joseph and the innkeeper haggled over the price of using the stable because it was a better place to stay, since it was private.
2. **Was the stable really better than the inn?** Probably there were no private rooms in the inn except for the wealthy. Joseph and Mary were poor common people. Many travelers slept in the same room and most of them were men. If you were a woman would you like a room full of men observe the birth of your first child? How could the shepherds have come in the middle of the night to see the baby if it had been born in a crowded inn room? They would not have been able to. Also, if they had been in the inn with men traveling far from home, there were probably prostitutes, swearing, and much sexual immorality.
3. **Was the stable clean? Have you ever been in a stable?** I'm sure Mary and Joseph did the best they could to provide a healthy environment.
4. **What are swaddling clothes (King James, cloth in NIV)?** If you were born in Iran, were you wrapped in swaddling clothes? Some children who are born in Iran today are wrapped tightly in these special clothes. Sometimes only the feet are wrapped. In the villages often the arms are bound initially too. Two of our daughters who were born in the Persian Maternity Hospital in Tehran in 1965 and 1970 had their feet and legs bound while they were in the hospital.

E. THE SHEPHERDS (Luke 2:8-20)

Shepherds in Iran have one of the lowest paid professions. Often they watch sheep and goats which belong to someone else, and many of them are very poor. However, God saw fit to give the good news of the Savior's birth to shepherds. They probably felt at ease at the stable when they visited the baby Jesus. Jesus was born for all classes of men.

F. THE NAMING OF JESUS ON THE EIGHTH DAY (Luke 2:21 Cf. 1:59-65)

In Iran occasionally the child is named on a later day such as the eighth day. It was on the eighth day that John the Baptist was named. When I asked an Iranian friend why they do this, he replied that many babies die in infancy and so, why waste a good name! Let several days pass and then name the child to make sure he will live. Also, the name Jesus had a meaning – Savior. In Iran almost all personal names have meanings.

G. THE WISE MEN OR MAGI (Matthew 2:1-12)

1. Who were the Magi or wise men? Magi, the Greek word, is derived from a Persian word which meant a caste of wise men specializing in astrology (study of the stars), medicine, and natural science. During this time Zoroastrianism was the national Persian religion and there was much emphasis on the study of the heavens.
2. Where did the Magi come from? The Bible says they came from the east. The present-day countries of Jordan, Iraq, Syria, and Iran are east of Jerusalem. Three Iranian cities called Saveh, Hamadan, and Reziyah each claim that the wise men originated there.
3. How did they know the star was a sign? There could be several reasons. They could have been curious to find out what the star meant, but who would take a long trip just out of curiosity? Perhaps God in His sovereignty revealed this to them so there would be Gentiles (non- Jews) acknowledging the birth of the Savior. Perhaps they learned about the star through the witness of the scattered Jews who remained in Iran after the others returned from the Babylonian captivity. They may have talked about their hope of the Messiah, especially Daniel's prophecies like Daniel 9, which gives the approximate date of the coming and death of the promised Messiah or a prophecy like Num. 24:17. "There shall come a star out of Jacob, and a Scepter shall rise out of Israel."
4. Why was Herod troubled at the coming of the Magi? Of course, he was afraid when he heard they were looking for the king of the Jews. Did you think that he might have thought about a possible future political alliance between the kingdoms of Armenia and the Persian Empire which were on the edges of the Roman Empire?
5. Have you thought about the "humbling" act of the Magi? Just think, these distinguished men after they gave their gifts, worshiped a tiny baby of a different nationality in a poor home! Have you dedicated your time, money and spiritual gifts to serve and worship our Lord Jesus? Matthew 2:11 says they came into the house which Joseph evidently rented in Bethlehem after the initial birth in a stable. Joseph probably worked at his trade as a carpenter to support his family. Some feel that Christ may have been as old as two years since King Herod ordered all babies two years and younger to be killed. How big was the house? During the 1975 census taken in Tehran, 40 percent of the population still lived in one-room houses, 30 percent in two rooms, and 30 percent in three rooms or more.

H. MAKE A PERSONAL APPLICATION

1. Think of the beauty of the Christmas story and its uniqueness - a Roman census, manger, shepherds, virgin birth, poverty, magi. It must be God-given for man never would have been able to invent such a story! Compare this with Mohammad's account of the birth of Christ as recorded in the Muslim's holy book, the Koran. From the Koran Sura 19 (Maryam) 16-34 Mary is told by a messenger from God that she will have a son born of God. Then later during the pain of childbirth, she grabs onto a palm tree and wants to die. Then a voice (interpreted as the infant Jesus or Gabriel) speaks saying to look to the ground and a small stream appears for refreshment. Mary shakes the tree and ripe dates fall down for her to eat. When she returns to her own folks they ask her how this baby was born since she wasn't a bad woman. She points to the cradle and Jesus starts to talk saying, "I am the slave of Allah. He has given me the Scriptures and has appointed me a Prophet." Only one of these two books can be true! Which one will you accept as the true revelation from God?
2. Do you just know the facts of the Christmas story? Have you personally accepted this Jesus Christ as your own Savior? The word "Jesus" means Savior. That name was given because he would save his people from their sins.