

In Search of Prester John – Part 1

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As I was researching the wives of the Mongolian khans, I ran across a reference to a tribe called the Kerait¹ – a Christian tribe of Turko-Eurasian ethnicity who had been absorbed by the Mongolian Federation of Tribes under Chinghis Khan during the 12th century. The women of this tribe, with their auburn hair, fair skin and gray or green eyes, were so renowned for their beauty, that they are credited with saving their tribe from obliteration by serving as wives and concubines to the great Mongolian khans.

These women introduced two little known characteristics into the Mongolian ruling families — auburn hair and pale eyes into an occasional offspring, and an obscure form of Christianity.

Missionaries from a Christian sect known as Nestorianism converted the Keraites, along with the Naiman and Merkit tribes, early in the 11th century. These Asian Christians became very different theologically from their counterparts in the West, and were perceived by Westerners as a strange and mythical cult. From this perception grew the fantastical legend of Prester John.

The Development of Nestorian Christianity

Nestorius (385-451 CE) was a monk from the European monastery near Antioch, who was famous for his eloquent preaching and austere life. He was appointed Patriarch of Constantinople in 428 CE by Emperor Theodosius II. Nestorius maintained that Christ was both divine and human, and that these two entities acted as one, but that they did not join in that union in a single individual. He supported the preaching of Anastasius, a presbyter from Antioch, that the Virgin Mary, having given birth to a human son, could be called the Mother of Christ, but could not be referred to as the Mother of God, as Christ received His divine spirit from His father. These teachings opposed Church doctrine, which taught that Christ's divine and human natures, although distinct, were joined together in His singular person. Nestorius was condemned for his views, and was declared a heretic in 430 CE at the synods in both Rome and Alexandria. In the Third Ecumenical Council of Ephesus in 431 CE, nineteen bishops recommended the removal of his title of bishop. Nestorius was excommunicated and banished to a monastery in Egypt².

Nestorius and his followers retired to a monastery in Antioch. There, they confined themselves to the study of external faces to emphasize Christ's real humanity. They studied the Scriptures for grammatical rather than allegorical meaning; and from a purely historical viewpoint rather than a mystical one. Two men, Diodorus, Bishop

of Tarsus, and his pupil, Theodore of Mopsuestia, became important leaders of this school of thought. Theodorus (called by Nestorians "The Interpreter") came to be considered the real father of Nestorianism. He affirmed the true humanity of Christ, and of His perfect sinlessness, due to His union with the Divine. Theodore taught that God and man formed a union within the body of Christ, and that Mary was both mother of man and Mother of God, which dwelled inside Christ as a separate entity. This doctrine was formally condemned at the 5th general council at Constantinople in 553 CE³.

After Theodore's death, Nestorius popularized his teachings, which led the movement to be named after him. He was further exiled to Arabia, and his followers fled further to Persia, where they founded the Nestorian Church. Nestorian schools were established in Edessa and Nisibis, Turkey. From there, missionaries went to Malabar, India and Turkistan. In 625 CE, missionaries from Syria and Armenia reached China. By the end of the 10th century, the Church had been divided into provinces, which stretched from the Moslem world to China, India and Central Asia.

The St. Thomas Theory

One such missionary was thought to be Thomas the Doubter. According to the Acta Thomae, "when the apostles divided the countries of the world for their labors, India fell to Judas" or Thomas, as he was referred to in Syriac legend. The Acta Thomae was written at Edessa, and is treasured by Syrian Christians of Malabar as their authority for the story that St. Thomas had been in India. According to this work, Thomas arrived in India in the year 52 CE. He spent his time preaching, converting and performing miracles, and established seven churches in Malabar. He was eventually martyred on top of a mountain near Madras that now bears his name, and was buried in Mylapore. There is a story about Thomas building a palace for King Gundaphorus of India that reads as though it were borrowed from a Buddhist fable. And in the Gospel of Thomas, from the Acta Thomae, traces of Buddhist sources have been found. The Christians of St. Thomas on the coast of Malabar use Syriac language and formed a liturgy that has been traced back to Persia.

The existence of St. Thomas in India seemed to be backed by several medieval references to the tomb of St. Thomas in India, some that name Mylapore as its location. The Anglo-Saxon chronicle says that in 883 CE, King Alfred sent Sighelm, Bishop of Sherborne, with offerings to Rome and to St. Bartholomew, and Thomas of India, in order to fulfill a vow. The legend of the Three Holy Kings by Johannes of Hildesheim, written in 1378, tells that St. Thomas brought the word of Jesus to the people of India and their rulers, Melchior, Balthazar and Gaspar, and that they became converted and became his archbishops. After St. Thomas was martyred, the three kings had their subjects elect a patriarch Thomas to be their spiritual leader, and the temporal leader who would carry the title of Prester John, in honor of St. John the Evangelist. When the Kings died, Patriarch Thomas and Prester John ruled over India. In 1522, Portuguese explorers discovered a tomb with relics in India, some of which remain in the Cathedral of St. Thomas at Mylapore.

The first written record of Prester John is found in 1158 CE in the Chronicles of Otto, Bishop of Freising. It tells of a meeting between Hugh, Bishop of Jabala, and Pope Eugenius II on November 1. On that year Hugh had been sent by Prince Ramond of Antioch to enlist the Pope's aid for the Christian state that the Crusaders had established in the Near East. Otto related Hugh's story that Nestorian Christians had built a large monarchy beyond Persia and Armenia that was ruled over by a priest king named John. This king had made war on the kings of Media and Persia and had captured Ecbatana, that sat near their kingdom. Prester John was believed to be a direct descendant of the Magi. Inspired by the example of his forefathers, who had come to adore the newborn Christ he had planned to go to Jerusalem, but was prevented from doing so when his forces were unable to cross the Tigris River. Prester John's victory over the Persians is thought to be a distortion of this defeat of Seljuk, the Turkish ruler of Persia, by Jamugha (Gur Khan) of the Khitai in 1194 near Samarkand. Traders traveling from China to Syria on the Silk Road transformed the oral reports of this battle into the Prester John saga.

At that same time of that writing was the Otto Chronicles, a fictional letter that was sent to Rome, signed by Prester John, which said he was going to invade and liberate the Holy Land. Pope Alexander III returned a letter to him in 1177, hoping to open communications. The letter contained a statement of the Pope's authority over all Christians, that he had heard that John was a good and pious Christian, that the Pope would send his own physician and confidant, Master Phillipus, to teach Prester John Roman Catholicism. When Phillipus, who was sent with the letter, vanished without a trace, the existence of Prester John became universally accepted.

Another letter, which scholars have dated to 1165 CE, was presented to Pope Alexander by his supposed ambassador to Emperor Manuel Comnenus of Byzantium. It read:

"John the Presbyter, by the grace of God and the strength of our Lord Jesus Christ, king of kings and lord of lord, to his friend Manuel, Governor of the Byzantines, greetings, wishing good health and the continued enjoyment of that divine blessing.

"Our Majesty has been informed that you hold our Excellency in esteem, and that knowledge of our greatness has reached you. Furthermore, we have heard from our secretary that it was your wish to send us some objects of interest, for our pleasure. Since we are but human we take this in good part, and through our secretary we forward to you some of our articles....

"...We have made a vow to visit the sepulcher of our Lord with a very great army, as befits the lory of our Majesty, to wage war against and chastise the enemies of the cross of Christ, and to exalt his sacred name.

"Our magnificence dominates the Three Indias, and extends to Farthest India, where the body of St. Thomas the Apostle rests. It reaches through the desert

toward the place on the rising of the sun, and continues through the valley of deserted Babylon close by the Tower of Babel. Seventy-two provinces obey us, a few of which are Christian provinces, and each has its own king. And all their kings are our tributaries.

"In our territories are found elephants, dromedaries, and camels, and almost every kind of beast that is under heaven. Honey flows in our land, and milk everywhere abounds. In one of our territories no poison can do harm and no noisy frog croaks, no scorpions are there, and no serpents creep through the grass. No venomous reptiles can exist there or use their deadly power.

"In one of the heathen provinces flows a river called the Phison, which emerges from Paradise, winds and wanders through the entire province, and in it are found emeralds, sapphires, carbuncles, topazes, chrysolites, onyxes, beryls, sardonyxes and many other precious stones.

"There is also a sandy sea without water. For the sand moves and swells into waves like the sea and is never still....And though it lacks water, yet there are found close to the shore on our side, many kinds of fish which are most pleasant and delicious for eating, the like of which is not seen in other lands.

"Three days journey from the sea there are mountains from which descend a waterless river of stones, which flows through the south country to the sandy sea. Three days of the week it flows and casts up stones both great and small, and carries with it also wood to the sandy sea. When the river reaches the sea the stones and wood disappear and are not seen again. While the sea is in motion it is impossible to cross it.

"Between the sandy sea and the mountains we have mentioned is a desert. Underground there flows a rivulet, to which there appears to be no access, and this rivulet falls into a river of greater size...and takes therefore a great abundance of precious stones. Beyond this river are the tribes of Jews, who although they pretend to have their own kings, are nevertheless our servants and tributaries. In another of our provinces, near the torrid zone, are worms, which in our tongue are called salamanders. These worms can only live in fire, and make a skin around them as the silkworm does. This skin is carefully spun by the ladies of our palace, and from it we have cloth for our common use. When we wish to wash the garments made of this cloth, we put them into fire, and they come forth fresh and clean...

"For gold, silver, precious stones, beasts of every kind, and the numbers of our people, we believe that we are unequalled under heaven. There are no poor among us, we receive all strangers and pilgrims, thieves and robbers are not found in our land, nor do we have adultery or avarice.

"When we ride forth to war, our troops are preceded by thirteen huge and lofty crosses made of gold and ornamented with precious stones, instead of banners, and each of these is followed by ten thousand mounted soldiers and one

hundred thousand infantrymen, not counting those who have charge of the baggage and provisions...

"The palace in which our sublimity dwells is built after the pattern of that which the apostle Thomas erected for King Gundafor...The ceilings, pillars, and architecture are of shittimwood. The roof is of ebony, which cannot be inured by fire. At the extremities, above the gables, are two golden apples, set in each one with are two carbuncles, so that the gold shines by day and the carbuncles shine by night. The greatest gates of the palace are of sardony, inlaid with the horns of the serpent called cerastes, so that none may enter with poison. The lesser gates are of ebony, the windows are of crystal. The tables at which our court dines are some of gold and some of amethyst, the columns supporting them are of ivory. In front of the palace is the square where we watch the judicial contests of the trial by combat. The square is paved with onyx, in order that the courage of the fighters may be increased by the virtue of the stone. In our palace there is no light burning, except what is fed by balsam. The chamber in which our sublimity reposes is marvelously bedecked with gold and all manner of precious stones...our bed is sapphire, because of its virtue of chastity. We possess the most beautiful women, but they approach us only for times in the year and then solely for the procreation of sons...

"We feed daily at our table, 30,000 men, besides casual guests, and all of these receive daily sums from our treasury to nourish their horses and for other expenses. This table is made of precious emerald, with four columns of amethyst supporting it, the virtue of this stone is that no one sitting at the table can fall into drunkenness.

"...In our hall there dines daily, at our right hand, twelve archbishops, and at our left, twenty bishops, and also the Patriarch of St. Thomas, the Protopapao of Samarkand, and the Archprotopapao of Susa, in which city the throne of our glory and our imperial palace are situated...

"...that the Creator over all things, having made us the most supreme and the most glorious over all immortals, does not give us a higher title than that of presbyter, 'priest', let not your wisdom be surprised on this account, for here is the reason. At our court we have many ministers who are of higher dignity than ourselves in the Church, and our greatest standing is in divine office. For our household steward is a patriarch and a king, our butler is an archbishop and a king, our chamberlain is a bishop and a king, our marshal is a king and an archbishop, our chief cook is a king and an abbot. And therefore it does not seem proper to our Majesty to assume those names, or to be distinguished by those titles with which our palace overflows. Therefore, to show our great humility, we choose to be called by a lesser name and to assume an inferior rank..."(7)

The literary source of this letter can be traced to books like the biography of Alexander the Great by the German historian Ekkehard of Aura, the 10th century 'History of the Battles by Lei the Arch Priest', and tales of Sinbad from 'The

Thousand and One Nights'. Materials may have also been taken from various travelers' reports of the Far East. This letter was to become one of the most widely read documents of medieval Europe. It was translated from Latin into French, German, English, Russian, Serbian and Hebrew. The letter was reprinted until the 14th century, and became a compendium of medieval geography and folklore. By this time, much of the St. Thomas mythology had been included in the Prester John letter. References to miracles of St. Thomas were added, that St. Thomas delivered sermons in person, and that the income of Prester John's empire came from the pilgrims who went to see St. Thomas. It also became one of the greatest catalysts of exploration in the 15th century.

In the early 13th century, Jacques de Vitry, Bishop of Acre, wrote a letter to Pope Honorius III, who was trying to gain support for the 5th Crusade. This letter was meant to inspire confidence in the crusade, and said that many Christian princes in the East were massing under the banner of Prester John against the Saracens. The author of this letter realized that Prester John would have to be over 100 years old, so he reported that this must be the grandson of Prester John, King David of India, who was gathering forces(8). During the Mongol raid of Khwarizm in 1221, Jacques reported to the Pope that there was truth to his previous letter, that there really was an army marching through Persia, under King David of India, who, being either the son or grandson of Prester John, was commonly called Prester John. He went on to relate how the Caliph of Baghdad had been threatened with war by the Shah of Khwarizm, and had asked King David for aid, that King David had defeated the Shah, seized Persia, and was marching on Baghdad. He planned to go to the Holy Land, where he would vanquish the Saracens, and rebuild the wall of Jerusalem. Jacques did not realize that the soldiers would face Nestorian Christians, the Kerait that rode with Chinghis Khan, and that the battle was actually an internal dispute among the Mongolian tribes resulting from a failed khiraltai, the election which was to have determined the next Great Khan (Khakhan) of the tribal federation. The only factual portion of Jacques' report was the defeat of the Prince of Khwarizm by an Asian warrior-king.

Queen Rusudan also identified the Kerait as Christian. In her letter to Pope Honorius III, she wrote: "they must be Christian, as they ride under a banner with an oblique white cross"(9). The standard of the Mongolian army was a pair of shoulder blades of a sheep, crossed, with nine yak tails hung nine from the cross piece. In that same year as her letter, Andreas I reported the Battle of Kalka (a Mongolian invasion into Russia) to the Pope, in which he stated that the army of King David carried the body of St. Thomas and had killed 200,000 Russians and Cumans...

Continued on Part 2, including End Notes