"That We Share the World's Pain"
Mission to Iran

Maurice McCrackin experienced his ordination service in June of 1930 as oddly perfunctory. Even the questions asked him by the examining committee seemed trivial compared with his own serious hopes for the ministry. He had been asked if he considered the Bible to be divinely inspired, the "whole and complete word of God." He answered yes, making a mental note that a person had to look at the Bible in its totality because certain parts of it were inconsistent not only with each other but with the spirit of love that suffuses the New Testament. He was also asked whether he approved of "the government and discipline" of the United Presbyterian Church and whether he agreed to be subject to his brethren in interpreting divine will.¹

In response to these questions and others, McCrackin was able to affirm that he was in agreement with church doctrine. The real question for him was whether or not he could live in such a way as to make God's love for humanity palpable, and this he was never asked.

Inspired by the slogan "Evangelization of the World in This Century," young McCrackin had planned on becoming a missionary ever since his Student Volunteer Movement days. His idealism had not waned, although the American enthusiasm for mission work was not what it once had been. In 1920, 2,700 young people volunteered to be sent to foreign missions, whereas in 1928 only 252 volunteered.² After World War I, dramatic cultural and political changes had shifted values away from idealistic callings. The "Roaring Twenties" witnessed a relaxation of moral codes and traditions, undermining the ethic of self-discipline, service, and self-sacrifice. Following the war, the United States adopted an isolationism that was also inimical to mission work. On top of all this came the stock market crash of 1929, disrupting the financial base that had supported the missions. Becoming a missionary was not exactly a popular calling. In fact, the Board of Foreign Missions of the Presbyterian Church had only two openings in 1930 that interested McCrackin: ministerial work in China and educational work in Persia. He chose the latter.

The Foreign Mission Board sponsored a training program to help its young ministers make the transition from idealism to reality, from the classroom to the field. For this purpose the 1930

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group of outgoing missionaries gathered in early June at Hartford Seminary in Connecticut. There McCrackin met Mary Shedd and Bernice Cochran, both wives of Presbyterian missionaries home on furlough from Persia; they explained to him the unsettled situation there and the growing governmental opposition to Christian evangelism. He was undiscouraged; in fact, his interest in Persia was piqued by the honesty and warm personalities of these women.

After the Hartford orientation, McCrackin enjoyed a final flurry of visits to friends and relatives, returning to his birthplace in Storms Station, Ohio, as well as to his father's grave in neighboring Bourneville. He visited friends and saw the sights in New York City, Philadelphia, Washington, and Pittsburgh, aware that he would not see these people and places again for many years. Finally, with some fears but also with certainty about the ultimate rightness of his mission, Maurice McCrackin boarded the S.S. George Washington at Hoboken, New Jersey, on August 19, 1930, to begin the long trip abroad.

It was his first real separation from family and familiar surroundings. Even at McCormick Seminary in Chicago he had lived near his brother and his Uncle Sam Findley and had been close enough to Monmouth to spend holidays and vacations with his mother and aunt. His seminary buddies--Roy Linberg, John Paul Vincent, Grant Mason, and John Wilson--were close in the joking, spirited way of brothers. Now all emotional support would have to be sustained through letters. The young minister would be doing the work he had diligently prepared for, but he would be doing it without the reflected identity provided by close loved ones.

This was also going to be a difficult time for Bessie McCrackin. To have all three of her children and all of her grandchildren overseas carrying on this good work at the same time was both heartening and worrisome for her, especially as world tensions made crossing the Atlantic increasingly dangerous.

The George Washington, however, sailed a fairly placid course on its trip across the North Atlantic. Despite relatively calm weather, McCrackin suffered almost continually from seasickness. On the eighth day out, the ship landed passengers at Cobh, Ireland; other passengers disembarked at Plymouth, England, and Cherbourg, France. Finally, on the tenth day out, the George Washington sailed up the Elbe River and arrived at the port of Hamburg. After a quick tour of Hamburg, McCrackin's party moved directly by train to Berlin, the most beautiful and exciting city he had yet encountered. With him in his steamer trunk he carried his typewriter along with reams of paper, many favorite books, including the Bible, several suits, some casual clothing, an overcoat, thirteen pairs of silk socks, five pairs of shoes, a pair of spats and puttees, nineteen handkerchiefs, five bottles of hair tonic, and a can of flea powder.

At each stop Maurice sent postcards home, reassuring his mother and aunt that his physical and mental health were fine (they had asked him to write often to assuage their worries about his nervous stomach). From Berlin he made the long train journey east, through northern Germany and Poland to Moscow, traveling in the company of a medical missionary, Dr. Ralph Hutchinson, and his sister Marian. The three developed a close friendship on this trip, and for a time afterward McCrackin wrote to family and friends of his dreams of courting and marrying Marian Hutchinson.

The missionary group spent two difficult, frustrating days in Moscow, and McCrackin left with no illusions about the Soviet system, 1930 edition. The city was terribly expensive, overcrowded, inefficient; the weather was correspondingly dismal. Everywhere disgruntled people seemed to be waiting in lines for their small rations of food and goods. From Moscow he made the
arduous thousand-mile journey south through the farms and steppe country of Russia to the Caspian Sea, traveling third class, cold and uncomfortable. "None of us undressed for three nights," McCrackin wrote to his mother, and there was no bedding available. After many disheartening travel experiences, including a cold winter's night spent in Baku, a Soviet Azerbaijan city on the Caspian Sea, where they could not find lodging, the three Americans took a ferry to the Caspian port of Resht in Persia. From there, bidding the Hutchinsons farewell, McCrackin quickly moved on to Teheran, then Tabriz, and finally to Urumia, officially renamed "Rezaieh" in honor of Reza Shah Pahlavi, the new leader of the country. Rezaieh was located in the northwestern Persian province of Azerbaijan, only forty miles from the Soviet frontier, and just across mountain ranges from Iraq and Turkey.³ Rezaieh was then, and would remain for many years, a crossroads of conflict. The place was practically in ruins, a "pillaged and tumble-down town," the result of years of civil war and a devastating earthquake.⁴ The Presbyterian mission comprised most of the habitable, intact edifices in the area. Local people lived in huts of mud and straw.

The trip from the United States to Rezaieh had consumed almost a month, and the young missionary was eager to settle down to work. The original plan was that he would study Turkish in Rezaieh in preparation for his teaching duties. The local population consisted of many ethnic groups—Assyrians, Armenians, Kurds, Russians, with a majority of Turkish-speaking Muslims. The Kurds in particular were perceived by many Iranians as enemies bent on establishing their own state. The Reverend Maurice McCrackin was to teach English in the elementary grades at the mission school while becoming acclimated. There were political complications, however. The central government had just mandated that school instruction be conducted in Farsi, even in private mission schools. Since most residents of Rezaieh spoke a Turkish dialect, it was going to be difficult for a new recruit to pick up Farsi. It was soon determined that McCrackin should leave Rezaieh temporarily in order to immerse himself in Farsi, the Persian language. He was therefore sent to Daulatabad, Malayir, an isolated substation of the Presbyterian mission at Hamadan. The town was on a high plateau, surrounded by snow-covered mountains, and seemed a long way from anywhere.

In Daulatabad everyone except one missionary family spoke Farsi. McCrackin was assigned a native-born tutor, Manuscher Khan Farabashi, who introduced him not only to the language, but also to the culture. McCrackin struggled for hours each day with Farsi, sorely missing his new friends in Rezaieh and his old friends back home. He doubted that anyone he knew could picture him in his present circumstances. In the spring of 1931 he and the resident missionary celebrated the Persian New Year by visiting various households, drinking cup after cup of hot black tea served with sbirini (sweets). In a humorous letter home, McCrackin described the elaborate politeness of the people he was being introduced to:

These calls are interesting. Persians fall over backwards in being courteous and polite. Upon entering a home the greeting "Salaman Alekumi" (Peace be with you) is exchanged, then both parties see how many different ways they can say "Thank you" for the other's kindness in wishing them peace. Here are a few of them and they all mean Thank you: "By your favor," "Your kindness is great," "May your hand never hurt you," "By your mercy,"

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"By your condescension," "Your favor is great," "Your benevolence is great," "By your kindness," "Your glory is great," "Your friendship is great," "May your shadow never grow less." Your choice of these is sort of said under the breath, so for a while, before I knew any of them, I just grunted or breathed heavily and the effect was practically the same. After this is gotten out of the system, your host tells you to "Bifarmayid" (a common term used on numberless occasions when you want someone to go to it, sort of an "After you Dear Alphonso" stuff, if you get the drift).\(^5\)

McCrackin also watched appalled as a wrinkled old man smoked opium at a wedding reception, drawing in the pungent drafts from his beautiful pipe. How different these people were from the swashbuckling, sword-swinging Muslims he had pretended to conquer when he played as a youngster, how alien from anything he had ever experienced before. He wondered what his mother and aunt would have thought of such a place. He also wondered how in the world he could make God's word relevant in this setting, with its wrenching poverty, shocking infant mortality, and widespread illiteracy.

Before returning to teach at the mission school in Rezaieh in September 1931, McCrackin had an opportunity to explore the interior of the country. In a Ford Model A, he and Joseph Cook, a missionary doctor, traveled without benefit of paved roads over a 250-mile trail through the bandit-infested countryside of Persia to the Zagros Mountains and the region known as Luristan. Dr. Cook had given up a lucrative medical practice in California to serve in this dangerous and disorganized mission field.

McCrackin had already helped Cook with some of the Lur patients at the Presbyterian mission in Hamadan, and had assisted at a dramatic operation during which Cook reconstructed a nose bridge for a man whose face had been mauled by a bear. When it was clear that the operation had succeeded, the waiting crowd had cheered their approval, chanting in Lurish what sounded to McCrackin like "Bah, bah, bah." It was fortunate for all that the operation was a success; a patient's death could mean trouble for a missionary doctor.

The trip to Luristan was an initiation rite, exposing McCrackin to conditions of deprivation unlike anything he had ever witnessed. The terrain was rugged; their car had frequent breakdowns and blowouts. Often they got stuck in the mud, and once the car had to be pulled out by a group of nearby laborers chanting, "Ay Ali" as they pulled in unison on the thick rope. Wild dogs roamed the area, and outlaws were common. Along the way Cook treated several robbers for bullet wounds. Neither missionary knew the Lurs' language, but the inhabitants seemed to realize that the missionaries meant well and so helped them reach their destination.

At the village of Alische, they were greeted by the local governor, Amannullah Khan. By way of welcome, according to an ancient custom, he displayed fifteen of his prisoners, each bound to the others by a heavy, linked chain. McCrackin and Cook kept their horror to themselves and dutifully took pictures.\(^6\) After this ceremonial welcome the governor showed them to their lodging at the rear of his mansion: a small room with cooking facilities, a roof to sleep on (as was the local custom), and a pavilion overhung with jungle oak for their temporary clinic.

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The Lurs were an ingenious and rugged people whose culture was shaped by the harsh, isolated mountains in which they lived. Most of the time they did without medical care, many people suffering and dying from curable illnesses and wounds. In the six days of this visit, Cook saw an astonishing number of patients. Meticulous records show that 1,846 patients received treatment. A few of them were in advanced stages of syphilis, others were ill with tuberculosis, and some had been injured by wild animals. McCrackin wrote about this trip in a letter home:

The two most pitiful cases were a woman of about 35 and a boy of around 10, both with very bad cases of syphilis which had broken out on their faces. The nose of the boy was almost completely gone, as well as his upper lip, and unless stopped will very gradually eat into his head. The woman was not quite so bad off, but her nose was practically eaten away.  

As soon as the Lurs realized that medical care would be available, they converged en masse on the missionaries’ makeshift shelter. They could not understand English, Turkish, or Persian, and did not seem to have the concept of lining up; they had to be taught to wait their turn for treatment. Cook soon ran out of medicine and sometimes had to prescribe local remedies like tea made from willow bark.

Cook had brought along some old medical journals to wrap medicine in, and the two missionaries were struck by the contrast between their own circumstances and those depicted in the journals. Amused and offended by advertisements promoting luxurious accommodations for upcoming meetings of the American Medical Association, they were reminded of the great discrepancies in wealth and awareness that underlay much of the world’s suffering. Dr. Cook’s journal reflects the dissatisfaction about American values that serving in foreign countries often breeds:

I smiled as I thought how far removed America and Europe with their fine buildings are from Looristan and the black tents. But after all the Loors are like ourselves—they love their children, they love their wonderful valleys and mountains, they love their freedom, even want to be free to rob and pillage their neighbors, again as we do in civilized countries in banks and stock and bond houses, but with laws to sanction our actions.

The trip to Luristan was traumatic for McCrackin. Unlike his traveling companion, he was not used to such conditions. "The only difference between the Lurs and the animals," he wrote to his mother in September 1931, "is that the Lurs can talk." The shock of seeing their harsh existence would stay with him, but his appreciation of their endurance and dignity would increase with the passage of time until he no longer thought of them, or of any others who suffered, as less than human for it.

Mccrackin had begun to look at Cook as the father he never had, a man who truly lived according to the example of Jesus. The Cooks welcomed McCrackin into their household, and he became tutor to their twelve-year-old daughter Josephine. It therefore took the breath out of him a
year later to learn of Dr. Cook's sudden death of typhus in January 1932. Such a waste, and such a loss for Mrs. Cook and the four children! How could anyone be comforted by the thought that this premature death was God's will? In a letter to his Aunt Mary, McCrackin wrote, "He was one of the most friendly, helpful and loving men I've ever known. It's my first great sorrow and I have to talk it over with someone."  

In addition to medical professionals, the Christian missions in Persia supported teachers. Four of the six Presbyterian mission stations there ran schools, which were valued locally not only because they taught English, but because they offered well-supervised extracurricular activities and sports. The schools served both commuting and resident students, the faculties consisting of Protestant missionaries as well as native teachers. Many of the faculty members, like young McCrackin, were not trained teachers, but they adapted to the role of teacher as a form of Christian ministry. In the process of developing an academic program without good facilities or equipment, they created lifetime bonds of friendship and community among themselves. Although the Persian schools McCrackin served were small, accommodating several hundred students at most, the missionaries believed that their influence on individual students' lives was incalculable. In a letter home, McCrackin justified the mission schools:

A number of students were talking of the years they had spent in Memorial School. They admitted that there were certain government diplomas which they might have obtained had they enrolled in the government schools, but added that as graduates of our school they had something far more important: preparation for life, ability to think for themselves, initiative, a clearer idea of right and wrong, and a finer knowledge of duties to society and to themselves. I listened to these remarks and thought to myself, 'Well, our work may be hampered, we wonder sometimes if the outpouring of effort and money is worth the candle, but when the effect is seen in the lives of the young men and women in our schools, here at least is one proof it is all well worthwhile.'

At that time Persia had a convoluted educational bureaucracy that dictated the curriculum, passing students on the basis of rigorous examinations at the end of their sixth and twelfth years of school. Fifty of Persia's 1,072 schools were private, but they were allowed neither to teach religion openly nor to distribute Christian literature. Converts to the Christian faith were in fact ostracized by their families. The missionaries' proselytizing was necessarily limited to telling stories about Jesus in class, teaching of courses on ethics and morality, and making the most of the exchanges afforded by extracurricular activities.

The first two years of McCrackin's internship as a missionary abroad passed quickly as he became acclimated and then began teaching English at the mission school in Rezaieh. He made friends first with the children of the missionary families. These children liked his kidding and the way he told stories, and they called him "Uncle Mac." He also formed abiding friendships with his fellow missionaries, volunteering for extra duty on the playing field or behind the typewriter, adding humor and songs to the informal gatherings characteristic of life at mission stations. McCrackin
was at his best delivering birthday tributes and composing poems for special occasions. He also played tricks whenever he could, to keep things lively. Once he staged a fake Kurdish raid on some friends who were walking the two miles to his dormitory lodgings outside Rezaieh. He hid behind a grove of trees in order to stage an ambush. As his friends drew close, McCrackin and his collaborators sprang their surprise, admitting their ruse only at the last moment.

McCrackin was also busy listening and learning. He wrote long letters weekly to his mother and aunt, detailing the customs, landscape, and personality of Persia. He also wrote regularly to his brother and sister and to his seminary friends. His letters were generous, full of humor and fun as well as sober reflections on the missionary life and the state of the world.

McCrackin's seminary friends still referred to each other as the "Co-operative" and corresponded in florid prose, referring to each other by their old nicknames. In letters these friends sometimes kidded "Mercy McCrackin" about the lack of matrimonial prospects in the mission field. They also liked to make fun of their own high-spirited idealism by mimicking the phrases of earlier idyllic times: "May we its members not be guilty of forgetting the ideals for which it [the Co-operation] stands and may there not be erased from the tablets of our memories its noble ideals and exalted purposes." They often signed their letters "Yours in the Work"--the work of building the City of God, the "beloved community," on earth.

His old buddies missed him. "Horseface" McEwen wrote in 1931 thanking McCrackin for writing enthusiastically about mission work: "Your spirit haunts many of us, and we feel, even across the seas that lie between us, the force of your personality." John Wilson, his former roommate, was having a difficult time in McCrackin's absence. After Wilson was denied mission work for theological reasons, he wrote a plaintive letter admitting that he felt lost without McCrackin's presence in his life. Wilson wrote of his great love for "Mac" and told how, when asked to pray for Mac in chapel, he went back afterward to cry. Wilson was smoking and drinking in McCrackin's absence, and he was having problems in his relationships with women. Finally, a concerned professor advised him to form a new group of his own, rather than bemoan the dispersing of the Co-operative. Wilson soon straightened himself out and began his own extraordinary ministry. He would eventually become executive secretary of the Ohio Council of Churches.

During his third year in Persia, McCrackin was transferred again, this time to the city of Tabriz to teach high school English, ethics, and geology. He did not feel entirely qualified for this assignment, but he made up for what he did not know by the intensity of his concern for individual students. Although he had taken a college course in geology, it was all he could do to stay one lesson ahead of his students in the textbook. There was no way he could have led them on a field trip, he later mused. He felt much better prepared for the English and ethics classes and, indeed, enjoyed the class discussions very much.

In the ethics class his five Muslim students raised some challenging questions about Christianity. The class was organized around the lives and values of five well-known but quite different people: Jesus, Mohammed, Napoleon, Louis Pasteur, and Florence Nightingale. When they studied Jesus, McCrackin described him as kind and loving, the Prince of Peace.

"If he's so peaceful, why have Christians been involved in wars over the centuries? Why have they been so bloodthirsty and merciless?" his Muslim students asked him. They claimed that

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their own hero, Saladin, who had retaken Jerusalem during the Crusades, had been more merciful to his enemies than the Christians had been. Their honest question took the young missionary by surprise. He had to admit that many Christians were indeed not very Christlike. He frequently recalled this exchange as a challenge to his own growing concern about how Christianity was lived by its adherents.

Before he went to the Mideast, he entertained many reservations about Islam, especially as practiced in Persia. As a child he thought of Muslims as people with curved swords who would cut your head off at the least provocation. And he noted in letters home to his family the thread of fanaticism and the yearning for martyrdom in the Shiite sect of Islam. But he was gradually beginning to feel that he had much to learn from the people he was meeting in Persia. Serving as a missionary turned out to be more of a learning experience for him than a carrying of sacred truth to the infidels, as he had years earlier imagined it would be. And now he was to learn some additional valuable lessons.

During the summer of 1933, before school started, a troubling thing occurred. One of the senior boys was accused of fathering a child, and with no hearing, the school refused to grant the boy a diploma. McCrackin wrote about this incident to his aunt:

The alumni committee of the school had a meeting. This is made up of, for the most part, older members in the church. Without letting him say a word to them, they passed judgment on him and have refused him a diploma. In the eyes of the law he is innocent, and on hearsay they blacken him this way. Well, what if he is guilty? When you think of the background and environment of these poor fellows it is little wonder that they slip at times in spite of themselves. And we, who are supposedly a Christian organization, refuse the boy a hearing, refuse to forgive him, ruin his reputation and don't give him the help that he needs now more than he has ever needed it before.

The accused boy, one of McCrackin's students, had been going through a religious struggle and was much interested in Christianity. McCrackin feared that the lack of charity shown him by the school and church officials would likely destroy his interest. No one seemed to be concerned about the pregnant girl, perhaps because she was not a student in the school, perhaps because her culpability was not a disputed fact, but McCrackin felt that his colleagues had mishandled the case:

They go over the old argument that if we let him graduate we put our stamp of approval on such an action, that we stand for purity and all that. Well, it is my opinion that before we stand for a cold, cruel justice, we should have a good portion of love. And if we had enough love, we wouldn't turn this boy out this way.

McCrackin, still new to the ministry, did not stand up for the boy before the institutional powers. But the case struck a chord in him, and there would come a time when he would stand firm rather than let something like this happen.
During the years McCrackin was in Persia, the country was undergoing dramatic changes. Civil authorities, under the leadership of Reza Shah Pahlavi were attempting to wrest power from the Muslim leaders or mullahs, many of whom were unschooled and inimical to the government. One government tactic was to insist that all males wear "Pahlavi hats," fezzes with small bills that made it difficult to bow down to the east and touch one's face to the ground, as Muslims did five times a day. (McCrackin compared these fezzes to railroad engineer hats.) A general Westernizing influence moderated the traditional subjugation of women, which had kept them veiled and voiceless in polygamous marriages. Reza Shah was attempting to eliminate the veil and undermine other Shiite traditions. In short, civil authorities were trying to replace the traditional Muslim culture with a secularized one. McCrackin was happy to see some of these changes. He abhorred the treatment of Persian women, and in a letter home to his family he penned a poignant verse that bemoaned the Muslim woman's "bitter inheritance ... by Prophet's voice" doomed to a life of subjugation. The poem ended by asking whether a God of love and goodness would want that. Some missionaries felt that the changes presaged an opportunity to Christianize the nation. If Muslim influence waned, as expected, it was hoped that Christianity might replace it. But the history of the area and the rising tide of nationalism made that possibility less and less likely. Nor was there interest back home in supporting an ambitious missionary enterprise. In 1930 a "Layman's Inquiry" had been launched by the National Board of Missions to research and evaluate the effectiveness of mission work and to make recommendations for financial allocations in the future. Sponsored by funds from the Rockefeller family, researchers led by Harvard's William E. Hocking went abroad to gather information for their report. One goal was to measure results gained in proportion to dollars spent. The report was to have far-reaching effects on McCrackin's work, and, indeed, on the church's entire understanding of mission work.

In an August 1933 letter to his friends, McCrackin declared that the inquiry had the same dramatic impact on him that the election of Roosevelt had on secular America. He also voiced agreement with some of its findings. On the one hand, he defended the need for missions:

Far be it for me to think that I can add anything of originality to the volumes which have been written in defense or condemnation of the same. Suffice it to say that I believe Jesus is unique among the religious leaders of the world, that while there is much in other religious cultures which should be preserved, that Christianity in its purest form has far more to contribute than it can obtain from other great faiths.

On the other hand, McCrackin saw the limitations of missionary work as organized and conducted at that time:

Fully justified, it seems to me, are criticisms that missionary economic standards of living act as a barrier, that many of us are inadequately prepared, especially preachers sent out to be teachers, that we do not spend enough time in studying the religious, cultural and mental background of the people in order to find their fundamental need, and all too true is the paragraph under missionary personnel which reads, "We feel that the Christian view of life..."
has a magnificence and glory of which its interpreters, for the most part, give little hint: they seem prepared to correct but seldom to inspire; they are better able to transmit the letter of doctrine than to understand and fulfill the religious life.

These comments reveal the core of McCrackin's faith as well as two recurring themes of his ministry: that to be of service required identifying with those served, and that what a person does is more important than what he or she preaches.

Before the major cutbacks in foreign missions, McCrackin had participated in an attempt to encourage direct support from congregations in the United States. He had been assigned to solicit funds from a large church in Madison, New Jersey. McCrackin's job was to write to the church about affairs at the mission, requesting funds for specific needs and promising to visit this congregation during his furloughs. Such an approach had worked well during the high tide of evangelistic fervor, but by the mid 1930s financial and emotional support for the missions was undermined not only by the economic depression, but also by the political situation abroad, as the world crept closer and closer to global war.

Another restraint on missionary zeal was the new Iranian government's growing harassment of foreign missionaries. The head of Christian missions there, Dr. William Shedd, was accused of having subverted the national cause during World War I when, as American consul, he offered protection to the Assyrian minority, who were predominantly Nestorian Christians. It was rumored, too, that Shedd had abetted the Kurdish enemy. This last accusation was unfounded, but it put the missionaries on the defensive, and the cumulative effect was demoralizing.

For a time McCrackin feared that he would be sent home early as a result of the combined pressures of the Layman's Inquiry and the directives of the Department of Education in the emerging state of Iran. Instead, he was sent back to Rezaieh for his fourth year abroad, the 1933-34 school year.

By this time the unsettled situation was becoming debilitating to McCrackin's physical and mental health. It seemed as if the missionaries were engaged in a guerrilla war of attrition with government officials. McCrackin had been suffering chronic stomach and intestinal problems and had several acute bouts of illness, some of them quite serious, including a liver disorder that left him jaundiced and a peculiar rheumatoid illness that caused a chronic aching in his joints. The physical illnesses seemed always accompanied by mental depression. He dutifully wrote about these problems to his mother, who normally received letters about a month after he sent them. He told her of his loneliness, his desire for a wife and children. And she wrote back urging him to marry, giving him the news of marriages, births, and deaths in Monmouth and in the family. The unintended effect of these letters was sometimes to put increasing pressure on him and exacerbate his sense of isolation.

Not only was McCrackin lonely, but the missionaries as a whole began to feel increasingly isolated from the people they were serving. In spite of close personal relationships with several government officials, McCrackin and his colleagues at Rezaieh were unable to negotiate with the governmental agencies that were trying to close down their schools. Having tried without success to get to the heart of the problem and to speak about it logically, the missionaries finally took to the sort of meticulous record-keeping that was to become McCrackin's trademark in dealing with recalcitrant institutions.
In a report on negotiations with an Iranian educational bureaucrat, McCrackin made note of the smallest details, down to the size of the room in which he met the official, Dr. Hekmat, a graduate of the American College in Teheran and director of the Education Department. McCrackin wrote about Hekmat's plush leather-bound chairs and his affability, his continual affirmations of good will, his insistence that the closing of the school was part of a national policy to assimilate Turkish-speaking people, and his refusal to give definite answers about what was to become of the school property. In phrases that foreshadowed future dealings with administrators, McCrackin wrote:

Then Mr. Allen [one of the other missionaries] asked him what the source of the difficulty was. Meaning, of course, the origin. This question was either misunderstood or deliberately avoided. The answer given would be the answer to the question, "What is the cause?" He made the statement that it was the determined policy of the Persian government to assimilate all minority groups, and that it was the opinion of the Persian government that the mission stood in the way of assimilation of the Assyrians. This circular situation led the Persian government to ask us in a friendly way to evacuate the Urmia [sic] area, and we were given to understand that if we did not take it up in a friendly way that such action would be taken for us!

It seemed to the missionaries that they were being forced out for no clear reason and that there was nothing they could do about it. McCrackin and his colleagues reeled under the impact of the closing of their school, but tried to make the most of the cutbacks by rationalizing that the commitment and independence of the native converted Christians would at least be assured as they accepted the challenge of maintaining their own institutions without foreign help.

When the school at Rezaieh closed, McCrackin and a missionary colleague, Marie Gillespie, were reassigned to the Mission Station at Resht, where he again taught English and ethics. But threats from the Iranian bureaucracy persisted, and within a year the station at Resht was told that it too would have to close its school—after one hundred years of service.

The missionaries at Resht may have thought of themselves as part of a heroic tradition of religious exodus, for they worked hard on a play to be performed at Thanksgiving in 1933 about the exodus of God's people from Egypt. It was called "Deliverance from Bondage," and it starred Maurice McCrackin as Pharaoh. Wearing a beautiful white and yellow robe, McCrackin portrayed Pharaoh weeping over the loss of his son. At a dramatic moment, little Jean Cochran, daughter of one of the missionaries, recognized him in spite of his silken headdress and whispered audibly: "It's Uncle Mac, it's Uncle Mac!" This light touch may have been appreciated, given the heaviness of the text, which was written in a strained imitation of Elizabethan English:

Albeit thou shouldst hold thy peace, for if this thing become known unto Pharaoh, thy life be in danger. Only patience and obedience will bring us out of bondage, for God seemeth to have forgotten us.
Indeed, the missionaries, like the Hebrews in Egypt, must have felt that God had forgotten them. McCrackin, internalizing these pressures, experienced an almost overwhelming emotional depression. He was able to perform his duties, but without his customary panache. This darkness of spirit was reflected in a sermon he wrote at the time, in which he bemoaned the greed and blindness that kept people unaware of the suffering around them and their own potential for alleviating it. He berated the rich, whose possessions were the result of human misery and who were lauded for contributing large sums of money to ease the suffering they were themselves perpetuating. He even chided himself for sloughing off his studies and for not taking more seriously his own previous exposures to human misery. He seemed to see the great mass of humanity as too burdened even to acknowledge their spirituality. His sermon concluded with a litany of hope, but the words and rhythm reflect more bitterness than optimism. It was as though his faith were holding on by a thread, the knowledge that God was suffering too, and there was hope of redemption only in joining the struggle:

To accept in its fullness the thought of God as a suffering father, who conserves all that is good and who works with us for the attainment of justice and truth, gives us a positive optimism in the face of world conditions disheartening to the extreme. Who but Christ could have uttered the words and under such conditions, "In the world you will have tribulation, but be of good cheer, I have overcome the world." Be of good cheer with war clouds hanging in the horizon, be of good cheer when Wall Street ruins the hopes and lives of millions, be of good cheer when Hitler rules in Germany, be of good cheer when capitalistic society crushes the life of the masses. Yes, be of good cheer, but only on the condition that we share the world's pain, that we too have tribulation, that we struggle with God to establish a society whose members do justly, love mercy, and walk humbly with their God.¹⁹

Sharing in the pain was exactly what the Reverend McCrackin felt he was doing in that last year in Persia. The belief that God suffers when humans suffer was then and remained McCrackin's answer to a commonly held notion that it is God's will when bad things happen. To him bad things happen in spite of God's will, not because of it. Evil is not something initiated by God; rather, injustice is caused by individuals, governments, or corporations and is due to indifference, laziness, and carelessness.²⁰

Such preoccupations fed McCrackin's depression, so that by the summer of 1934 he felt no better. He hoped the depression would pass, and he dared not write of it to his family and friends for fear of worrying them. Although he began teaching again at Resht that fall, he was suffering from a chronic stomach disorder. As he continued his work, he was fighting both physical ills and a deepening sense of gloom. Finally he realized that he could not complete the term. He only hoped that a change in scenery would lift the gloom and help him see a way to renew his ministry. By December he was prepared to leave his mission work and make the trek back to America. He said
good-bye to his beloved Persian students, his fellow missionaries, and, most poignantly, the mission children who loved him as their "Uncle Mac."

In such a state he left Resht for the Holy Land, traveling on a lonely pilgrimage through Baghdad, to Damascus, and then on to the Jordan River, the Sea of Galilee, and Nazareth, where he spent Christmas. On the morning of December 26, 1934, he awoke before sunrise and walked down the road from Nazareth to Jerusalem. He recorded this incident in a journal:

I came up over the brow of the hill just as the morning sun was touching Nazareth, its light increased until the whole village and hillside was flooded and I thought that in the same way the light which Jesus brought to the world has not risen on some places, but where it has, its power is increasing and at one time all the world will feel its warmth and live in the spirit of Jesus and give themselves as he did in service to mankind and in revealing God's will to those around them, just as we must shed his light in the group where we are. "So let your light shine before men that they may see your good works and glorify your father who is in heaven."

Visiting the very land where Jesus was celebrated and persecuted reinforced McCrackin's hope for a resurrection of his own spirit. After leaving the Holy Land, he toured the great pyramids of Egypt. He also visited the sites that marked the tribulations of the early Christians, the Colosseum and catacombs of Rome, before sailing back to the United States from England. In later renditions of his life story, however, this pilgrimage took second place to the lesson of the Muslim boys who inquired about the inadequacies of Christians. He preferred to stress the living challenge rather than the historical or spiritual past.

Early in 1935 an uncharacteristically sad and discouraged man returned from the mission field a half-year early to open himself up to the healing care of those who loved him. McCrackin had gone abroad a youth and returned a man. His faith in the possibility of redeeming the world had been tested and found wanting. He had a vague, uneasy sense that Christianity as it is known should not be imposed on a culture with its own traditions. He would not have articulated this at the time, because he was not quite conscious of what was wrong. But all the careful observations he had recorded in his letters and all the questions he had entertained in class were the beginning of a new interpretation of what "redeeming the world" involves. What he did know was that deep friendships were at the heart of good missionary work--and that idea he would take forward with him into all of his future ministries. Amid the alien culture of Persia the young missionary had experienced genuine community. He had grown to love the other missionaries--Marie Gillespie, his partner in organizing skit nights; the Cochran's and the Giffords and their children, with whom he had lived; Dr. Cook, who had died of typhus at an early age. Their community extended to the nationals, especially to those like Yonatan Merzeki, a Kurd who had been adopted by missionaries and grown up at the mission station.

Yet the work the missionaries were able to do in the context of such need was discouragingly constrained. Toward the end, Persia had been a kind of death for McCrackin, the letting go that often precedes spiritual maturity or a particularly creative and productive path in life. He still felt

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that Jesus’ way was the only answer, but he did not yet know how to express the longing in his heart to relieve the pain of those who suffered, to communicate the joy that was possible when compassion, service, and hearty fellowship were at the center of a human community. He had taken himself as far from Monmouth, Illinois, as it was possible to go in order to share the love and acceptance he had experienced and knew to be true, and he had come home utterly drained. It lay before him to learn how to sustain the Christian vision in a different context, how to love the needy in a culture he already understood.

Notes for Chapter 3

1. Ordination vows are listed in The Constitution of the United Presbyterian Church in the United States of America, published periodically in Philadelphia by the Office of the General Assembly of the United Presbyterian Church. Subjugation to the will of his brethren would become a major issue later in McCrackin's life when there was an effort to defrock him for civil rights and peace activities that, according to McCrackin, were based on demands of his informed personal conscience.
3. There is no uniform way to transliterate the names of Persian (i.e., Iranian) cities. The country was called "Persia" in the West until the mid-1930s, but was long called "Iran" by natives. McCrackin always refers to the country as "Persia."
4. Letter to Bessie McCrackin, September 28, 1930. All the letters from Persia are in the McCrackin Collection, Cincinnati Historical Society.
5. Letter to Mary Findley, January 9, 1931.
7. Ibid.
8. Joseph Cook, journals, 1931. McCrackin was given a carbon of Dr. Cook's journal by Cook's widow.
15. Letter to Mary Findley, summer 1933.
16. There are different versions of this poem. One is contained in a letter to his sister Julia and her husband, January 30, 1931.
18. Maurice McCrackin, "Deliver Us From Bondage," manuscript, Cincinnati Historical Society.
19. Italics added. McCrackin saved hundreds of his sermons, and these are among the papers donated to the Cincinnati Historical Society.
20. Corroboration for this belief is found in Leslie Weatherhead, Christian Agnostic (New York: Abingdon Press, 1965), later one of McCrackin's favorite books.
at many of us are inadequately prepared, especially...