# Antioch

David Pierce

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On Monday, February 4, 2008, at 10 a.m., we left Ankara by bus. We were my visiting mother, my spouse, and I. As we travelled south, we saw less of the Anatolian steppe, and more snow covering it, until everywhere was white. But the sky was blue, and in the afternoon, passengers on the right drew their curtains against the sun.

We passed the great volcanic cone of Mount Hasan. On the horizon ahead of us loomed the Taurus Mountains. The bus rolled on across the plain, slowly climbing. We passed within a few miles of the ancient Tyana, which Xenophon called Dana; we continued on through the defile known as the Cilician Gates.

Xenophon had passed through the Cilician Gates in 401 B.C.E., with the Greek troops who were marching east from Sardis with Cyrus. Cyrus aimed to unseat his brother Artaxerxes from the Persian throne, though the troops did not know this yet. Xenophon described the passage of the Gates in the *Anabasis* (I.2.21–22; the Loeb translation):

> From [Dana] they made ready to try to enter Cilicia. Now the entrance was by a wagon-road, exceedingly steep and impracticable for an army to pass if there was anybody to oppose it; and in fact, the report ran, Syennesis [king of Cilicia] was upon the heights, guarding the entrance; therefore Cyrus remained for a day in the plain. On the following day, however, a messenger came with word that Syennesus had abandoned the heights...At any rate, Cyrus climbed the mountains without meeting any opposition, and saw the camp where the Cilicians had been keeping guard. Thence he descended to a large and beautiful plain, well-watered and full of trees of all sorts and vines; it produces an abundance of sesame, millet, panic, wheat, and barley, and it is surrounded on every side, from sea to sea, by a lofty and formidable range of mountains.

We too descended into the green fields of the Cilician plain, now called Çukurova and filled also with orange groves. Before reaching the sea, our bus turned east, and we were at the Adana bus station around 4:30 p.m. From there it was another three hours to Antioch, this time through the Syrian Gates.

Antioch is today Antakya or Hatay. It is the capital of Turkey's Hatay province, which was the Ottoman *sanjak* of Alexandretta. The name Hatay, or "Land of the Hittites", was given by Turkish nationalists; the Hittites were held to be "proto-Turks". But the province was ethnically mixed, and instead of being included in the Turkish Republic in 1923, it fell under French control. However, fifteen years later, as war with Germany approached, France was looking for Turkish support. Elections in the province, held under French and Turkish military control in 1938, produced a parliament that declared an independent Republic of Hatay. Union with Turkey was announced a year later.

My source here is two paragraphs in *Turkey: A Modern History*, by Erik J. Zürcher (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005). Zürcher does not go into claims, which can be found on the Web, that Turkey sent busloads of its citizens into Hatay to influence the elections that led to its annexation.

As an Antiochene tour guide in Cappadocia told me in 1998: "We used to be Arabs, but now it seems we are Turks." Antiochenes I met later told me they grew up speaking Arabic. In Antakya itself, we heard Arabic spoken on the street. Indeed, some passengers that joined our bus in Adana were speaking it.

From the Antakya bus station, a taxi took us to our hotel. There was a taximeter, but the driver didn't turn it on. He said the meter might read twelve or 13 lira, but he would ask only 10. However, on the return trip three days later, our driver tried to charge 15 lira. We never did understand why meters were not used.

According to its leaflet, the Antik Beyazıt Hotel was built as a residence in 1903. In the room given to Ayşe and me was an oil portrait of Mehmet Akif Ersoy, lyricist of the Turkish National Anthem. Apparently he had lived in the house.

After a beer and pistachios from the mini-bar in the room, we followed the directions of the hotel receptionist to the nearby Anadolu ("Anatolia") Restaurant. The place seemed to do good business. I am not somebody who recalls in detail what he eats; but Ayşe reminds me that we enjoyed cold dishes of broccoli, hummus, eggplant salad, and "Russian" (potato) salad, washed down with more beer; my mother also had *lahmacun* (a small thin pizza topped with minced meat). The *lahmacun* and hummus seemed to show the Arab influence: in my experience, they are not so common in western Turkey. At the start of our meal, a plate of herbs and sliced radishes had been placed on our table: this would happen at our every meal in Hatay.

After dinner, we had a glance at the Protestant church near the hotel. It was a stone box of a building, age indeterminate. A brass plaque gave service times in Turkish, English, and Korean.

We were in the old part of the city, east of the Orontes River—today the Asi Nehri. On Tuesday morning, we crossed the river on foot to visit the archeological museum. There were rooms whose floors and walls were covered with mosaics, all dug up from the ruins of Roman villas in the area.

We were carrying the Lonely Planet guide to Turkey (7th ed., 2001). This described some of the mosaics, as had the older Rough Guide (3rd ed., 1997) that we had left at home. First I wondered what the point of the descriptions was. One should take the writers' word that the museum is worth visiting; one can see for oneself what is in the mosaics.

Then I understood that seeing is difficult. I could be impressed by the spectacle of the mosaics, without grasping what I was seeing. After looking at the mosaics, I did consult the book. Had I really seen the Narcissus and Echo described there? I went back to check. It turned out that I had seen the pair in the second room; but I hadn't noticed that the sitting figure might well be gazing down at his own reflexion. Mosaic tiles had spelled out his name, and Echo's, in Greek letters; but I had not paid attention to these either.

In another room, I had wondered at the unusually bright colors in a figure, without catching on that it was Orpheus, playing to the animals.

One can be amazed by the lifelike faces of a man and woman, without knowing that they are supposed to be Oceanus and Tethys.

Elsewhere in the museum was a sarcophagus that had supposedly been manufactured in Iconium, today's Konya. Could this monstrosity really have been transported by cart through the Cilician Gates? A couple of figures reclined on the lid, but they were unfinished: they were still waiting to be given the features of the people whose bones would lie underneath.

When leaving the hotel that morning, having been warmed by the sun on our balcony, I had optimistically worn only a light pullover. This wasn't enough in the unheated museum, so I was glad to get out in the sunshine of the museum's garden, overlooking the river.

A museum worker explained that the government had forbade the sale of books in the museum. (Why? Perhaps such sales had been used to augment the salaries of the workers, rather than to enrich the state.) The worker directed us to Kültür Miras (the "Antioch Heritage Centre"), a bookshop and cafe. There we found a surprising selection of Christian-oriented literature, in Turkish and English. We bought two copies of a book on the museum mosaics, along with two Turkish volumes: a memoir called *Hatay, My Endless Love* (Sonsuz Aşkım Hatay), and an expanded translation of a master's thesis called "The Dynamics of Living Together and Abstaining From Conflict: A Case Study of Nusayri Alawite, Arab Christian and Armenian Communities in Hatay" written at our university in Ankara. But there were books on the journeys of Saint Paul, and on the Seven Churches of Asia; and there were Christian Bibles in Turkish. Behind the counter was a calendar from the Syrian Orthodox Church.

The proprietor said that tourist visits had dropped in the last couple of years. Perhaps the books that we bought had been on his shelves for quite a while. We sat on the cushions in the cafe and had coffee and orange juice. But our host would not take money for these refreshments. Instead he took our picture.

On a shelf of books in the cafe was a volume on Habib-i Neccar (Habib an-Najjar, or Habib the Carpenter). What I gathered was that Habib was an Antiochene of the first century C.E. who had heeded the words of followers of the Prophet Jesus. It appears that, according to some people, the story is told in the following verses of the 36th Surah of the Quran (Mohammad Asad's translation).

13. AND SET FORTH unto them a parable—[the story of how] the people of a township [behaved] when [Our] message-bearers came unto them.
14. Lo! We sent unto them two [apostles], and they gave the lie to both; and so We strengthened [the two] with a third; and thereupon they said: "Behold, we have been sent unto you [by God]!"
15. [The others] answered: "You are nothing but mortal men like ourselves; moreover, the Most Gracious has never bestowed aught [of revelation] from on high. You do nothing but lie!"
16. Said [the apostles]: "Our Sustainer knows that we have indeed been sent unto you;
17. but we are not bound to do more than clearly deliver the message [entrusted to us]."
18. Said [the others]: "Truly, we augur evil from you! Indeed, if you desist not, we will surely stone you, and grievous suffering is bound to befall you at our hands!"

19. [The apostles] replied: "Your destiny, good or evil, is [bound up] with yourselves! [Does it seem evil to you] if you are told to take [the truth] to heart? Nay, but you are people who have wasted their own selves!"

20. At that, a man came running from the farthest end of the city, [and] exclaimed: "O my people! Follow these message-bearers!

21. "Follow those who ask no reward of you, and themselves are rightly guided!

22. "[As for me,] why should I not worship Him who has brought me into being, and to whom you all will be brought back?

23. "Should I take to worshipping [other] deities beside Him? [But then,] if the Most Gracious should will that harm befall me, their intercession could not in the least avail me, nor could they save me:

24. "and so, behold, I would have indeed, most obviously, lost myself in error!

25. "Verily, [O my people,] in the Sustainer of you all have I come to believe: listen, then, to me!"

26. [And] he was told, "[Thou shalt] enter paradise!"—[whereupon] he exclaimed: "Would that my people knew

27. "how my Sustainer has forgiven me [the sins of my past], and has placed me among the honoured ones!"

The township mentioned in verse 13 is supposed to be Antioch; the first two apostles of verse 14 are John and Jude; the third is Simon Peter; and the man who came running in verse 20 is Habib the Carpenter. Mohammad Asad, however, suggests that the parable is an allegory, and the three apostles are Moses, Jesus, and Mohammad.

Nonetheless, the Habib-i Neccar Mosque exists in Antakya: it was on the little map that we had been given at the hotel. One might get there by walking through the market district. I tried to lead the way. I was unsuccessful; but meanwhile we saw for sale all of the products that working-class Antiochenes might like to buy.

In several shops on one market street, batter was drizzled through a row of holes onto a large rotating griddle. The threads baked for a few seconds, then were scooped up and offered for sale. A purchaser might use these to wrap a slab of cheese: the combination would then be cooked in syrup to produce *künefe*. Not far away there were *künefe salonları* specializing in this dessert. Unfortunately we ate so much at our regular meals that we could never visit one of these salons. For our last dinner in Antakya, we would eat nothing but lentil soup and *künefe*: but the restaurant (called Han) had to bring the *künefe* from somewhere else.

After lunch on Tuesday (at Sultan Sofrası—the Sultan's Table), we made our tour of the houses of worship that were on the hotel map. In town, none of these houses opened directly onto a street; rather, you passed through a gateway into a courtyard, and from there into the temple itself. So they might be hard to find.

We found the courtyard of the Syrian Orthodox Church first. The church itself was closed, and the man sitting there did not move to open it. He did however point out another exit to the courtyard.

This exit led us into a maze of narrow alleys, but with the help of signs, we eventually found the Catholic church. In its courtyard, a man was cultivating orange trees. A woman invited us into the church proper, but she had us remove our shoes first. Three local boys came up behind us, and they too were invited inside. We all poked around a bit, but there wasn't much to see—to our eyes—in the small dark room. When Ayşe, my mother, and I left, so did the three boys.

We found the main road that led out of town to the so-called St Peter's Church. The road first passed the Habib-i Neccar mosque. We popped into the courtyard. But we did not try to enter the mosque itself. There were worshippers kneeling and bowing on the carpeted portico.

It is held by some believers that the grotto called St Peter's Church is where Peter and Paul preached in Antioch. This may be merely a fantasy introduced by Bohemond and the other Crusaders who captured the city in 1098. The grotto is found among the Roman tombs carved into the hills outside of town. One pays five lira to enter. In the dim light that comes through the openings of the Crusader-built facade, one sees little but a simple cave. There is a stone block for an altar, with an alpha and an omega in relief. Behind the altar is a stone chair. To one side is a depression that collects water: a tin cup is available for those who think the water has magical properties. On the other side is a blocked passage, sized and angled like the Jefferies Tubes on the original Starship Enterprise.

Back near the entrance are two stone columns. On one is displayed a text in English; on the other, Turkish. The texts have some differences, inconsequential but curious. Only the English says that one of the twentieth-century popes (I don't remember which) granted plenary indulgences to all pilgrims who came to the grotto. Only the Turkish says that masses can be held there with the permission of the local governor.

I mentioned the differences to a couple of visitors who were reading the English. Thus began a conversation in which I learned that he was German and she was American; they were living across the border in Latakia, Syria, for the sake of their doctoral studies on the Middle East; they had come over to Turkey to renew their visas.

Helen and Christian seemed impressed that we had walked out to the Grotto. But with them we caught a bus back into town. We invited them to join us for dinner; but apparently we didn't wait long enough for them in our hotel lobby. When we came back from dinner, we found a note from them.

We had eaten at Antakya Evi, an old house with high ceilings where Greek music was playing. For no obvious reason, there was little custom. To go with our *rakı*, we ordered too many dishes, which we could not finish; still the waiter brought us several plates of fruit by way of dessert.

Antakya was a pleasant place; at least the older part of town where we were was pleasant. Drivers actually stopped for pedestrians; there were restaurants like Antakya Evi; there were a number of bookstores; there was a juice bar with a sign apologizing to the doctors and pharmacists for reducing sickness by 20%. Little was to be seen of the *türban,* the scarf covering all of a woman's hair that is so controversial in Turkey today. There were also few Turkish flags. I don't know what might be going on behind the scenes in Antakya. But the continued presence of Christianity in the city is used as a selling point, even in tourist brochures printed in Turkish.

On Wednesday, for a hundred lira, we hired Fevzi *Bey*, father of one of the hotel workers, to drive us around the countryside. There were two possible destinations: one, inland, was Harbiye, the ancient Daphne, where many of the mosaics in the museum had been found; the other was Samandağ, a resort on the coast. The route to the latter was said to be more interesting, so we went there.

For most of the journey to Samandağ, we did not take the main road, but wound our way among the villages of the mountains. In Hıdırbey village, we saw a great plane tree, in whose hollow trunk several people could stand. It was the Moses Tree (Musa Ağacı). A plaque said the tree had sprouted from the staff of Moses himself when he visited the spot with Khidr (Hıdır), the "Green Man". It is apparently held by some that this Green Man is referred to in the 65th verse of the 18th surah of the Quran. The following is from the Marmaduke Pickthall translation.

60. And when Moses said unto his servant: I will not give up until I reach the point where the two rivers meet, though I march on for ages.
61. And when they reached the point where the two met, they forgot their fish, and it took its way into the waters, being free.
62. And when they had gone further, he said unto his servant: Bring us our breakfast. Verily we have found fatigue in this our journey.
63. He said: Didst thou see, when we took refuge on the rock, and I forgot the fish—and none but Satan caused me to forget to mention it—it took its way into the waters by a marvel.
64. He said: This is that which we have been seeking. So they retraced their steps again.
65. Then found they one of Our slaves, unto whom We had given mercy from Us, and had taught him knowledge from Our presence.
66. Moses said unto him: May I follow thee, to the end that thou mayst teach me right conduct of that which thou hast been taught?
67. He said: Lo! thou canst not bear with me.
68. How canst thou bear with that whereof thou canst not compass any knowledge?
69. He said: Allah willing, thou shalt find me patient and I shall not in aught gainsay thee.
70. He said: Well, if thou go with me, ask me not concerning aught till I myself make mention of it unto thee.
71. So they twain set out till, when they were in the ship, he made a hole therein. (Moses) said: Hast thou made a hole therein to drown the folk thereof? Thou verily hast done a dreadful thing.
72. He said: Did I not tell thee that thou couldst not bear with me?
73. (Moses) said: Be not wroth with me that I forgot, and be not hard upon me for my fault.
74. So they twain journeyed on till, when they met a lad, he slew him. (Moses) said: What! Hast thou slain an innocent soul who hath slain no man? Verily thou hast done a horrid thing.
75. He said: Did I not tell thee that thou couldst not bear with me?
76. (Moses) said: If I ask thee after this concerning aught, keep not company with me. Thou hast received an excuse from me.
77. So they twain journeyed on till, when they came unto the folk of a certain township, they asked its folk for food, but they refused to make them guests. And they found therein a wall upon the point of falling into ruin, and he repaired it. (Moses) said: If thou hadst wished, thou couldst have taken payment for it.
78. He said: This is the parting between thee and me! I will announce unto thee the interpretation of that thou couldst not bear with patience.
79. As for the ship, it belonged to poor people working on the river, and I wished to mar it, for there was a king behind them who is taking every ship by force.
80. And as for the lad, his parents were believers and we feared lest he should oppress them by rebellion and disbelief.

81. And we intended that their Lord should change him for them for one better in purity and nearer to mercy.

82. And as for the wall, it belonged to two orphan boys in the city, and there was beneath it a treasure belonging to them, and their father had been righteous, and thy Lord intended that they should come to their full strength and should bring forth their treasure as a mercy from their Lord; and I did it not upon my own command. Such is the interpretation of that wherewith thou couldst not bear.

So much for Hıdır *Bey*. We continued our journey. Around one bend of the road, we found several soldiers with firearms and bandoliers. They studied the identification cards of the two Turks among us, and the passports of the two foreigners; they asked a lot of questions about what we had been doing and were going to do; they gave our driver a lot of advice about where he should take us. They named all of the places that Fevzi *Bey* was going to take us anyway; he was annoyed at their presumption.

The soldiers mentioned Turkey's last Armenian village. This was indeed where we were headed next. There did not seem to be much to see. There was a fairly new church, locked; there was a cemetery with headstones graven in Armenian and Latin letters. Fevzi *Bey* suggested we walk around amongst the houses. We did this, though there did not seem to be much point in poking around somebody's stone cowshed, just because that somebody was supposed to be Armenian. We could hear children inside one house, but we saw nobody.

When we came back to the road, we did meet one man, who was supervising two youths as they tinkered with a piece of farm equipment. He cheerfully explained that there used to be seven Armenian villages in the area, but the residents of the other six had fled; the residents of *his* village, Vakıflı Köyü, had stayed, and nothing happened to them. Ayşe thought he gave the year of flight as 1918; but perhaps he said 1938, when it appeared that Turkey was going to take over Hatay. Wikipedia gives the year of flight as 1939; but according to that source also, in 1915, the local Armenians resisted deportation or worse by Ottoman soldiers, until they were rescued by French forces; they *returned* to their villages in 1918.

Ayşe expressed her concern that tourists might be annoying to the villagers. The man said they had got used to the tourists. He regretted not being able to accompany us to the village coffeehouse further down the road. We went there anyway, at his suggestion, and we were welcomed by several elderly men; but there was no coffee. The men were dressed as warmly as one might do in Ankara. There was a wood stove in the middle of the room. The end of the stovepipe was next to the door, which was left open, and wind blew the smoke back into the room.

Returning to the car, we continued down the road towards the sea. Reaching the shore at Samandağ, we turned right for Çevlik. Besides the sea, the attraction there was the Tunnel of Titus and Vespasian, apparently dug to divert the water of mountain streams from the port of Seleucia Pieria. One walked along a deep channel carved in the rock. Eventually, as the surrounding hill became higher, the channel did become an enormous tunnel. Not having the torch recommended by the Lonely Planet, Ayşe and I decided it was too risky to scramble in the dark over the rocks to reach the far end.

Still, our entering the tunnel seemed to give a group of young people the nerve to do the same. We had heard them speculate in Turkish on whether we were German. We first encountered these kids after a side trip to a nearby hillside, which had been carved into several storeys of tombs. The human obsession for saving dead bodies struck me as quite strange.

Fevzi *Bey* took us for lunch at a seaside restaurant that he knew. My mother selected a fish from the three that were offered; Ayşe and I had *menemen*, along with hummus and one or two other dishes; we all drank beer in the open air under the February sun by the Mediterranean Sea.

The guidebooks had warned about the filthy beach. It was indeed strewn with plastic bags. Our *restaurateur* claimed that they all blew over from Syria.

He also suggested a local attraction that Fevzi *Bey* did not know about: a church, synagogue, and mosque, all next to each other. So we drove out along the unpaved Church Street (Kilise Sokağı). Eventually we did find some sort of church complex, looking fairly new (or at least not medieval), with a locked gate. Above the gate was a Merry Christmas (*Mutlu Noeller*) sign, and no other identification; but the church building itself appeared to have Arabic lettering over the door. Across the street, there was not a mosque exactly, but a domed Alawite shrine (*ziyaret*), dedicated to one Şıh ("Sheikh") Rih. We didn't see a synagogue.

From the main road to Antakya, we turned off at the sign for the St Simeon Monastery. After a surprisingly long drive across treeless slopes, we reached a mountaintop ruin of massive stone blocks, all surrounding the stub of what could have been the pillar that accommodated a saint. The painted steel plaque at the entrance (graven with many graffiti) claimed that the saint had lived on the pillar for forty years, till he died in 592.

I remembered seeing Luis Buñuel's film *Simon del Desierto* when younger. Now I was where the saint had really lived. But we were not in a desert, and there was no obvious path down which a woman might stroll, exposing her breasts to tempt the saint as in Buñuel's movie. In any case, the monks living around could have kept her away.

I learned later that Buñuel's movie featured Simeon Stylites the Elder, who had lived over in Syria. The monastery we were visiting was dedicated to Simeon Stylites the Younger. I could only wonder at who would go to the expense of building and maintaining such a place.

The wind was high and the sun was low on that lonely peak. We drove back down the access road. On the way, I noted the white dome of what must have been another Alawite *ziyaret*; but our guide did not take us there.

On Thursday morning we caught a bus to Adana. Along the way, I looked at a Turkish magazine that Ayşe had picked up. Called *Multikulti*, it featured Gypsy (*Çingene*, Tzigane) musicians on the cover. On pages two and three were the photos and words of four bearded gentlemen: the Greek Orthodox Patriarch of Istanbul, the Bosnian Muslim leader (*Reis-ul uleması*), the world leader of the Bektashi Sufi order, and the Armenian Patriarch of Istanbul. I translate the words of the Bektashi leader, Hacı Dede Reşat Bardi:

> Bektashis teach tolerance for all humanity; they defend the unity, the brotherhood of all religions. They do not discriminate among people, be they Catholic or Orthodox. For us, all people are equal before God (*Tanrı*). Every kind of good comes from God (*Allah*); evil is from humans. Religions are for protecting people from this evil. The blessed Ali said, 'If you are going to do something bad, wait till tomorrow; if you are going to do something good, do it right away.' When you go to the next world, God (*Tanrı*) will not ask what religion you were, but will ask an account of what good and what bad you did.

In the heart of Adana, cars jammed the streets, and people crowded the sidewalks. We were in Turkey's fifth-largest city. But people were hospitable, volunteering their aid several times when we seemed lost. In the ethnographic museum, housed in a former church, two girls latched onto Ayşe and chatted about their dream to become medical doctors. They couldn't believe my mother was old enough to be that.

We saw also the archeological museum—not so impressive as Antakya's, but containing a sarcophagus illustrated with scenes from the Iliad, as of Achilles dragging the body of Hector. Nearby was an enormous mosque, with six minarets, built by one of the country's richest industrialists. We strolled along the Seyhan River to the restored Roman bridge, which could have served as the model for Washington's Memorial Bridge.

After picking up supplies of beer and *börek*, we caught the overnight Çukurova Express train back through the Cilician Gates to Ankara.