

Heritage: A Huguenot Tercentenary

Three hundred years ago the Huguenot-Israelites left a war-torn France to settle in other countries among which was South Africa. Their contribution to South Africa's history by these valiant people was gratefully celebrated earlier this year in that country.

In the 17th century the church of France fell under the control of the state and any divergent faith was regarded as heretical and treasonable. The revocation in 1685 of the Edict of Nantes deprived the Protestants of their religious freedom. Rather than forego their faith and be forced to accept the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church, about 250,000 Huguenots fled from France to settle in countries like Germany, England, Switzerland and Denmark. Also, because of its proximity, more than 50,000 fled to the Calvinistic Netherlands where they were received with compassion.

These events took place at a time when the young settlement in the Cape of Good Hope in Southern Africa needed more colonists and the Council of Seventeen, directors of the large Dutch East Indian Company (DEIC), a large trading company in the Netherlands, encouraged the Huguenots to settle at the Cape. 1988 marks the tercentenary of the arrival of our Huguenot-Israel kinsmen in South Africa.

It was in 1688 that seven DEIC ships with about 200 Huguenot men, women and children, reached the small Dutch settlement in the Cape which had been established by Jan van Riebeeck just 36 years earlier. They were settled in what is now the Stellenbosch district of Cape Province and within one generation they had become completely assimilated, discarding their French language and even pronouncing their names in the Dutch manner.

The Huguenots who arrived in the Cape had plied 31 different trades in France such as baking, carpentry, wagon-building, surgery and farming. The DEIC had, however, brought

them to the Cape primarily as farmers. Although they had to develop virgin land and in the first few years often experienced crop failures, the newcomers were hard-working people most of whom eventually succeeded in their new way of life.

Although they numbered only one sixth of the inhabitants of the Cape, they made a contribution to the population out of all proportion to size, and left a rich legacy to the country. While ceasing to speak French, they also exercised a great influence on the development of the Afrikaans language. Today, nine Huguenot surnames are found among the country's 36 most numerous families. Examples are Nel (50,000), Du Plessis (49,000), Fourie (47,500), Du Toit (40,000), Le Roux (32,000), Viljoen (30,000), Marais and Joubert (28,000) and Du Preez (26,000).

The original émigrés who came to the Cape and the other Huguenots who followed them, are commemorated by our Israel kinsmen in the South Africa of today because it is recognised that these staunchly Calvinistic Israelite Protestants have played a very important part in shaping the sturdy character of the Afrikaaner community.

Huguenot descendants are encountered among the leaders and achievers in every walk of life in South Africa - religion, politics, the economy, sport, farming, the legal profession, as well as writers and artists.

The Memorial to the Huguenots in the picturesque town of Franschoek, was officially inaugurated in 1948. The design of J. C. Jongens, an immigrant-architect from the Netherlands, was accepted for the memorial and is rich in symbolism.

The three arches embody the Holy Trinity. The cross at the top is symbolic of the Christian faith while the sun is the sign of justness. The female pivotal figure in front of the arch construction is the work of Coert Steynberg, a well-known South African sculptor. The Bible in her right hand and the broken chain in her left hand symbolise the spirit of freedom and faith. The French lily on her robe is a testimonial of mental nobility and strength of character. The southern tip of Africa is depicted on the globe on which she stands. The Bible on the globe is a symbol of true religion, the harp symbolises art and culture, the corn-sheaf and grape-vine represent agriculture and viticulture and the spinning-wheel of industry. The pool in front of the monument represents undisturbed tranquillity of mind and spiritual peace after great strife and turbulence.

The female figure set in this context is surely a fitting representation of the Israel woman in

the twelfth chapter of the *Revelation*, who would be brought safely through the wilderness (Europe) to her appointed place in the (British) Isles and beyond; the dragon of paganism being frustrated in his efforts to destroy her and thus thwart God's plan. Small groups of Israel people, unable to reach the sanctuary with the main bodies, were left in various parts of Europe and it is this remnant of the woman's seed (Rev 12:17) that the dragon has persecuted from the 16th century onwards.

The indigenous people of the United Kingdom can join their kinsmen in South Africa in honouring the Huguenots for we, who received by far the greater number, have also been enriched by their faith and character. Great Britain, indeed, would have been very much poorer, spiritually and industrially, if she had not been allowed to provide a refuge for these victims of satan's wrath.

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