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Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg Part 2

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The Princessa Sofia Hedwiga carrying the young missionaries Bartholomäus Ziegenbalg and Heinrich Plütschau to India happily reached Cape Town on 16th April, 1706 where the crew and passengers stayed for some weeks. There were many damages to be repaired and food and water needed to be stocked up. The weather was pleasant and the missionaries immediately contacted the native Africans whom they found most friendly. They were not impressed by the witness of the Germans in the city but found fellow believers among the Dutch. Ziegenbalg wrote in his first letter home to say that the Germans had given up their faith on leaving Germany and there was no German pastor in the city. They had an opposite experience on becoming familiar with the Dutch colonists. They were busy catechizing native children in the gospel and carried their Bibles with them openly in their hands to testify to their faith. Ziegenbalg writes that they love to talk to him about their joint faith. They had also many good theological books and accepted a copy of Freylinghausen's Fundamental Principles of Divinity, a work recommended by Louis Berkhof in his Systematic Theology for bringing piety into dogmatic theology.

Ziegenbalg was delighted to meet African children who were being catechised by the Dutch but was sad to see that the Dutch enslaved the Africans and did not allow them to be baptised even if they were taught and showed a true delight in the gospel. Ziegenbalg was appalled by this racist tyranny and misuse of the Great Commission. It was as if the Dutch were keen on introducing the natives to Christian doctrines to keep them docile but not keen on introducing them to Christ.

From South Africa to India

Ziegenbalg and Plütschau continued their journey on 8th May but the Sofia Hedwiga was driven helplessly by fierce winds eastwards, westwards and southwards in bitterly cold weather, thunder, lightning and hail. The ship's main mast was broken into three pieces and the foremast was shredded a few days later. Now the ship floundered to one side and water poured over the decks and everything in the ship was thrown in disorder.

After May 21st passage became calmer and as the coasts of Madagascar and Mauritius were passed. Ziegenbalg had leisure to write letters home and start on a book concerning true wisdom, inspired by the boat's name 'Sofia'. Writing from Tranquebar on 25th September, 1706, he states that he had only time to write 26 chapters so could not post the book off during

the journey as it was only half finished! On 13th June the party passed the Tropic of Capricorn for the second time on their zigzag course and the climate became warmer and on June 22nd they passed the Equator. Then the ship lost trace of its exact position and drifted on until 5th July when panic almost overcame the crew and passengers as there was still no land in sight and the ship found itself amongst treacherous rocks looming out of the sea. A strong wind now drove them mercifully out of the danger area towards the coast of Ceylon but storms prevented them from going on land. However, on 9th July, they finally reached the Malabar Coast and Tranquebar.

An Unwelcome Start in India

On arriving at Tranquebar on 9th July, 1706, Ziegenbalg and Plütschau found unexpected difficulties awaiting them. The captain had been angered by the Christian testimony of the two missionaries on board, especially at their protests when he made immodest advances to lady passengers both single and married. He refused to allow them to leave the ship even after all the other passengers had disembarked and the cargo had been stored on land. The Captain told Ziegenbalg and Plütschau that missionaries should learn to have patience. After three days prevention from going ashore, a German Captain named Mincke visited the Danish ship and persuaded its captain to place the two men in his care. The captain of Ziegenbalg's vessel seemed to think that the two arrested passengers would fare even worse under Mincke's 'care'. However, Captain Mincke turned out to be a most friendly man and quickly put Ziegenbalg and Plütschau on a boat set for the shore. The waves were most troublesome and soon the native vessel was about to capsize in the stormy waters but many brave native Indians sprang into the raging waves from the shore and steadied the boat, bringing it safe to harbour. Sadly, the enraged Danish Captain, now himself on land, seeing he had been tricked, flew at the native youngsters who had helped the missionaries, beating them wildly with a long, thick stick. He then turned on Ziegenbalg but Captain Mincke took hold of the aggressor's arm with a powerful grip, removed his stick and led the Captain away. Though the bully cursed and threatened he was no match for the big German.

Now, hoping all was well, Ziegenbalg and Plütschau looked forward to settling down with the natives who had proved so helpful and kind. Their first communications with the natives were in Danish as they had not yet learnt Tamil and Portuguese. One of native Indians, a fine young man of noble blood, offered himself as a helper and servant. He was to be the missionaries' first teacher in the Portuguese language and Tamil, their first interpreter and their first convert. The friendly Indians now gathered around the two missionaries and asked them who they were and for what purpose they had come to Tranquebar, and showed clear signs that the missionaries were welcome. Ziegenbalg and Plütschau had been called to the Indians who were now welcoming them so they realised they had found a new home from home.

Puzzling statements found in Ziegenbalg's correspondence

It is at this point in Ziegenbalg's written testimonies since his departure from Copenhagen until his establishing himself as a missionary that Ziegenbalg's accounts become puzzling to me and apparently self-contradictory. When writing to the King and the authorities at large, Ziegenbalg describes events as if everything went according to plan with no opposition. Plütschau's reports were much blunter and explicit. However, we know that Ziegenbalg's correspondence was, at least in this initial period, heavily edited by his, at times, 'over pietistic' friends and some correspondence was even suppressed. So, too, Ziegenbalg's letters were immediately translated by his supporters into English. After studying German in several universities and teaching in that language for over fifty years, I still find Ziegenbalg's German extremely difficult so I understand the difficulties of those who have rendered his works into English. On reading English translations of Calvin's works, I found the translators had put words and thoughts into Calvin's head which he had never uttered. We also know, however, that Ziegenbalg was most cautious in writing anything which might hinder the work in India and support from abroad. Another feature of Ziegenbalg's character is hinted at with great respect by Plütschau. Ziegenbalg during the first years of his work in India was quite immune to the negative attitude of the East India Company. He could ignore it and forget it. He was so intent on reaching the Tamils and mixed races with the gospel and so stable in his faith that the Lord would conquer any opposition, that he just did not think about opposition at all. This 'stickability' was not Plütschau's who after five years worrying about such matters resigned from the Mission field. Then even Ziegenbalg became more critical of the behaviour of the Norwegian governor and his henchmen.

Protests from the Danish and Norwegian authorities

Scarcely, however, were the troubles with their sea captain on land over when further opposition arose on the part of the Tranquebar Danish and Norwegian authorities. Whilst still on the dockside, the Vice-Commandant of Tranquebar, Krahe, approached Ziegenbalg and Plütschau with anger on his face and had the missionaries thrown into a tiny, dark cell which was so hot and stuffy that one could hardly breathe. There they were left from morning until late evening without food or drink though their thirst was great. At last Commandant Hassius, a Norwegian of German stock and a graduate of Wittenberg University, appeared with four officials and two chaplains and, though he knew all about Ziegenbalg's mission, asked for documentary proof that the missionaries had a right to land at Tranquebar, telling them that as they were not merchants, there was no place for them in the town. Ziegenbalg showed Hassius his credentials from King Frederick and the Danish-Halle Mission but Hassius ignored them protesting that he saw no use in their missionary efforts and they were not welcome in Tranquebar. He then had the two missionaries led to the market place where he left them to take care of themselves though the King had

commanded Hassius to welcome and look after the missionaries. Ziegenbalg and Plütschau comforted each other with the knowledge that the Lord who had brought them thus far would help them in their plight.

Ziegenbalg and Plütschau find friends amongst the Europeans

Soon a friendly Dane approached them and asked if they were looking for lodgings. On hearing this was the case, he said that his father-in-law would be glad to receive them. The Dane gave his name as Attrug and his profession as secretary to the East India Company, so he was a very useful first connection. However, Attrug told them they would never receive help from the Tranquebar authorities who were convinced that they had been sent as spies by King Frederick to report on the officials' behaviour. Attrug's father-in-law told the missionaries that he had a tiny house in the poorer part of the town which they could use. 'It is to the poor people that we are called', confessed Ziegenbalg. The neighbours in the dockside area were the down and outs of the town and mostly the offspring of Portuguese and low caste Indians who were looked down upon by most sections of the public.

Life as missionaries begins in earnest

Now happy to be with the poor, casteless people of Tranquebar, Ziegenbalg and Plütschau within a few days, and with the help of their new Tamil friend, composed a statement as to the intentions of the missionaries. This included thirty-six Christian objectives and prayers for the conversion of the Tamils and also the Lord's Prayer. This was first composed in Portuguese and then translated into Tamil to be distributed amongst the Indians and Euro-Indians in the locality so all would know that the missionary enterprise had begun. At the same time Ziegenbalg started on a Tamil dictionary with transcriptions in Latin characters and explanations in German adding words and phrases daily for their own use.

Through the help of a school-master interpreter who understood some German, Dutch, Danish and Portuguese, the latter language being the lingua franca of the area, the two friends realized that most of the natives could speak both Portuguese and Tamil so they struggled to become fluent in both languages.

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