



Higgins' Herald

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WHO ARE THE P'UREPECHA? (PART ONE)

WBM has been working with the P'Urepecha people of Central Mexico for more than 30 years, since Max Lathrop joined WBM. Bill Higgins has been working with the P'Urepecha since he joined WBM in 1998. So who exactly are the P'Urepecha people?

Called the Tarascans by the Spanish, the P'Urepecha people have a long history. While they were well-established in Mexico by AD 1100, in the area that is now the state of Michoacán, their exact origin is unknown. Some remote similarities to the Quechua language of South America, as well as some similarities in pottery and metalworking styles, might indicate that they migrated from South America, but we do not know for certain. They established their capital in the city of Tzintzuntzan, on the Northeastern shore of Lake Pátzcuaro, where you can still see the famous Yácatas, or stepped pyramids. Like all other Mesoamerican cultures, the P'Urepecha were polytheistic, worshipping a variety of gods related to nature, astronomy, agriculture, warfare, etc.



Max Lathrop

The P'Urepecha were the only major Mesoamerican people to successfully repel the Aztecs in open battle. In 1478, the Aztec leader Axayacatl led a force of 24,000 warriors to attack the P'Urepecha. He was met by a force of 40,000 P'Urepecha warriors, including elite units with bronze weapons. The P'Urepecha were the only Mesoamerican culture with a true permanent, professional army. At the end of the day, the Aztecs lost more than half of their fighting force and had to retreat. This was the first and last time the Aztecs tried to subdue the P'Urepecha.

Everything changed with the arrival of the Spanish in 1519. The Aztec and P'Urepecha empires were the two most formidable

obstacles to the Spanish advance. When Hernán Cortés and his men began moving inland from the east coast, the Aztecs sent a delegation to the P'Urepecha to seek assistance in repelling the invaders. The P'Urepecha responded by sacrificing the Aztec emissaries. Cortés captured the Aztec capital of Tenochtitlán in 1520, after a bloody siege. When the Spanish advanced toward the P'Urepecha capital in 1522, king Tangaxoan II offered little resistance, and the P'Urepecha empire was no more.

After the Spanish consolidated their power-base in Mexico, the P'Urepecha (as well as the other Mesoamerican cultures) entered a long period of colonial restructuring. The Spanish bishop Vasco de Quiroga oversaw the introduction of new socioeconomic structures. One of those innovations was the encouragement of town-specific crafts and economic independence. Some towns would specialize in copperwork, some in pottery, some in carved furniture, some in textiles,

some in musical instruments, others in basketry, lacquerware, leatherwork, and so on. And each town also produced its own agriculture. This system helped preserve local independence and traditions, and made for a stable economy.

Throughout the colonial period, the P'Urepecha maintained a strong village-based identity, with cabildos (local councils), communal agriculture, and ritual life centered on saints' festivals blended with older traditions. While the Catholic church became the prominent religious force in the region, it was a syncretistic Catholicism that incorporated older cultural pagan elements.

The Spanish colonial period came to an end with Mexican independence. The independence movement began on September 16, 1810, led by Miguel Hidalgo. After eleven years of war, Spain recognized Mexican independence with the Treaty of Córdoba on August 24, 1821. Mexico celebrates September 16 as Independence Day because it marks the beginning of the uprising.

Through the 19th Century, the P'Urepecha area experienced political instability, land privatization,

and pressures from national modernization. But many communities maintained traditional governance and largely preserved their cultural identity. By the early 20th Century, anthropologists recognized the P'Urepecha as one of Mexico's most culturally resilient indigenous groups.

After independence, Mexico experienced prolonged instability. Political order and economic growth increased under Porfirio Díaz's authoritarian regime from 1876 to 1911, but the benefits of modernization were distributed unevenly. Land concentration, labor exploitation, foreign economic influence, and political repression, together with demands for democracy and regional autonomy, contributed to the Mexican Revolution, which began in 1910 and is generally dated through 1920.

The Revolution brought both disruption and new opportunities. Land reforms restored some communal

lands, and Indigenous identity movements began to emerge. Still, poverty, limited access to education, and isolation shaped everyday life. Our next newsletter will cover part two of "Who Are The P'Urepecha?"

We will greatly appreciate your prayers for the Lord's work among the P'Urepecha, and particularly the success of this Autumn visit. Pray for the safety of Bill and the team, as Michoacán is now listed as the most dangerous state in Mexico. Also pray for Bill's health and stamina, as he is undergoing continuing treatment for cancer. And pray for the Lord's blessings on the conferences, ministry sessions, worship services, and planning sessions. Pray also for our two ministers now studying at Juan Calvino (now the School of Theology of Juan Calvino University): David Naranjo and Andrés Céja. Pray that the Lord will bless their studies and provide the necessary funds for their continued training.

Thank you for your continued prayer and support for our work among the P'Urepecha people of central Mexico.



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