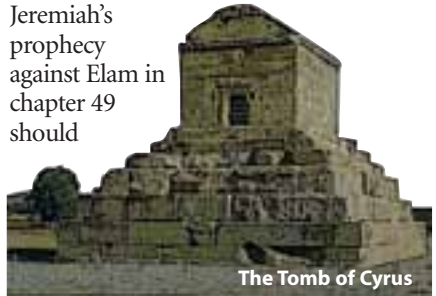


## INTRODUCTION

**U**nder its ancient name of Persia,<sup>1</sup> Iran has a powerful claim upon the interest and prayers of the Lord's people. Think of Cyrus, of Darius, and the involvement of these Persian rulers with the Jews' return from Babylon; think of Daniel, Nehemiah and Esther in the Persian palace city of Shushan (Susa); think of Artaxerxes and his support of Ezra and Nehemiah in the restoration of Jerusalem. By a more ancient name, Elam, the region appears in the book of Genesis, both in the table of nations (ch. 10), and as the king-

dom of Chedorlaomer (ch. 14). Indeed Shushan was a capital city of Elam, and it was from there that Cyrus, in the service of Divine providence, began the expansion that led to the establishment of the 'Medo-Persian' Empire,<sup>2</sup> his capture of Babylon in 538BC and the end of the Babylonish Captivity. 'Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah' (2 Chronicles 36.23; see also Isaiah 44-45).

Jeremiah's prophecy against Elam in chapter 49 should



The Tomb of Cyrus



Relief of Darius

probably be understood as relating to Persia as Greater Elam.

When Messiah was born we read that ‘there came wise men from the east to Jerusalem.’ These ‘wise men’—Greek ‘magoi’, Hebrew ‘magim’—were probably Persian adepts of the teachings of Zarathustra, Zoroastrianism, an ancient monotheistic religion of the northeastern parts of Persia and beyond. Amongst the amazed witnesses on the day of Pentecost were ‘Parthians, and Medes, and Elamites’, in other words each major ethnic group of the contemporary Persia.<sup>3</sup> Old Testament, New Testament, these Last Days, Iran touches and is touched by the Word and work of the Lord, and, I repeat, has a powerful claim upon the interest and prayers of the Lord’s people.

## GENERAL DESCRIPTION

The name Iran comes from the Avesta, the book of Zoroaster, and is a form of Ariyana, Arya in Sanskrit. It means simply Aryan—the land and the people of the Central Asian Steppes. Persia was the generally known and used name until 1935. Modern Iran is the largest of the Gulf States, and lies between latitude 26°–36° in southwest Asia. This is the same latitude as North Africa and the Mediterranean Sea, and a similar position to northern Mexico and the southern States of the USA. Tehran, the capital of Iran, lies on the same latitude as

Memphis, Tennessee. A high semi-arid plateau ringed by mountains, Iran has a short coastline in the north on the Caspian Sea, and, moving clockwise, borders with Turkmenistan, Afghanistan, Pakistan, the longer southern coastline on the Persian Gulf, then Iraq, Turkey (almost reaching Lake Van and Mount Ararat), Azerbaijan, Armenia, and Azerbaijan again. This 636,000 square mile plateau, cradle of the ancient Persian civilizations with a cultural heritage over 4,000 years old, is now home to some 69 million people. As much as 99% of the population is Muslim; some figures quote 95% Shi’a, 4% Sunni. All other religions, including Christianity, are lost in the remaining 1%.

One of the twenty-eight provinces of Iran is Fars, in the south of the country, with its capital Shiraz. Fars was the original homeland of the Persian people. The vernacular name of the Persian language is Farsi or Parsi, giving us ‘Persia’ and ‘Persian’. Fars is the Arabic version of Pars; the Old Persian word was Pārsā.



## CLASSICAL PERSIA

### ■ Achaemenid Dynasty, 550–350 BC

The Achaemenian king, Cyrus the Great, ruled here from the middle of the 6th century BC. From that time Persian history is documented, and the Achaemenid Dynasty is recognised as the founder of the Persian Empire, ancient forerunner of Iran. Cyrus' son extended Persian rule into Egypt, ending the Pharaoh dynasties. Soon afterward, Darius (522–486 BC) became the powerful ruler of a heavily

the earth beneath:  
*there is none else'*  
(Deuteronomy 4.39).

Xerxes, son of Darius, also ventured into Greece, and defeated the Spartans at Thermopylae.

However, at Salamis the Persian fleet was destroyed, and Persian power began to wane. Xerxes returned into Asia, and was killed by one of his own guards in 465 BC.

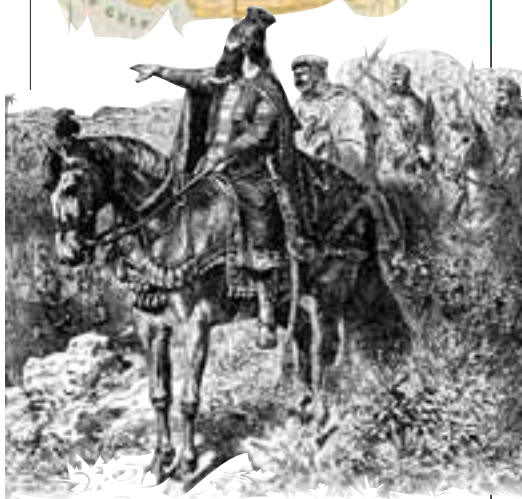


Gate of Nations, Persepolis



Map showing the extent of the Persian Empire

centralised Persia. He followed the Persian ambition of subduing Greece, but his defeat at Marathon in 490 BC robbed him of that prize. You will need a good Bible encyclopaedia to guide you through the Darius/Xerxes/Ahasuerus/ Artaxerxes I, II, III, connection with the times of Ezra, Nehemiah, Haggai, Zechariah, and the Second Temple, but be assured that in all of this we see the coming together under the Lord of all things toward the times of the Messiah and the Gospel—‘consider *it* in thine heart, that the LORD he *is* God in heaven above, and upon



Cyrus rides out with his armies

The later Achaemenid kings of Persia faded<sup>4</sup> through years of bloodshed, intrigue and rebellion, the last one fleeing to Bactria for refuge only to be killed by a cousin. Daniel's 'second Beast' is eclipsed. The Achaemenids, from 550 to 330 BC, ruled an empire stretching from the Aegean coast of Asia Minor to Afghanistan, as well as south to Egypt. They erected the magnificent structures at Persepolis, and put in place a vast network of roads, a legal code, a coinage system and a comprehensive administrative system, and engaged in wide-ranging commerce.

■ **Alexander the Great, the Seleucids, and the Parthians, 350 BC–220 AD**

In the 4th century BC Alexander the Great invaded Persia, having conquered most of Greece,<sup>5</sup> Egypt, Turkey and Iraq. He entered Shushan and eventually came to Persepolis. With uncharacteristic, and never wholly explained, violence, Alexander reduced this magnificent city to ruins, and yet, equally inexplicably, he embraced and enforced many Persian customs through the Greek-speaking empire. The 'third Beast' is rampant. After Alexander's death



Alexander the Great

in 323 BC the empire was divided into three squabbling Greek/Macedonian dynasties, Persia being controlled from Syria by the Selucids.<sup>6</sup> Palestine too was part of Selucid, Greek-speaking, Syria. The Selucids had problems controlling the

A Parthian head



numerous ethnic minorities across their dominions, especially the nomadic Parthians, whose homeland lay along the south of the Caspian Sea. These warlike horsemen<sup>7</sup> came to control most of Persia from about 250 BC to 220 AD. Parthian Persia, with a capital at Ecbatana, stretched from the Euphrates to the Indus, in a fusion of Greek and Persian culture.

■ **The Sassanids, 224–642 AD**

The last Parthian king was overthrown by the Sassanid ruler Ardashir I, also known as Artaxerxes (but not to be confused with at least three ancient Persian rulers of that name). Ardashir took Mesopotamia and also the eastern border kingdom of Kushan into his domain. The Sassanids ruled Iran for four centuries, and revived the Achaemenid term *shahanshah* (king of kings) for their ruler, who was sovereign over numerous lesser rulers. Sassanid rule and their system of social stratification were reinforced by Zoroastrianism, which became the state religion. Rome, with its capital by now at Byzantium, had replaced Greece as Iran's principal western enemy, and armed hostilities between the two empires were frequent.

Coin from Khosro I's reign



Khosro I, 531–79, is the most celebrated of the Sassanid rulers. He was a great builder, embellishing his capital, founding new towns and constructing new buildings, rebuilding the canals and restocking farms which had been destroyed in the wars. In the spring of

633 a grandson of Khosro called Yezdegerd came to the throne, and in that same year the first Arab squadrons made their probing raids into Persian territory: the beginning of the end. Yezdegerd was a mere boy, and years of warfare had exhausted both the Byzantines and the Persians. The small, disciplined armies of Khalid ibn Walid, Muhammad's chosen companion-in-arms and now leader of the Arab army, had opened, irrevocably, a door of conquest.

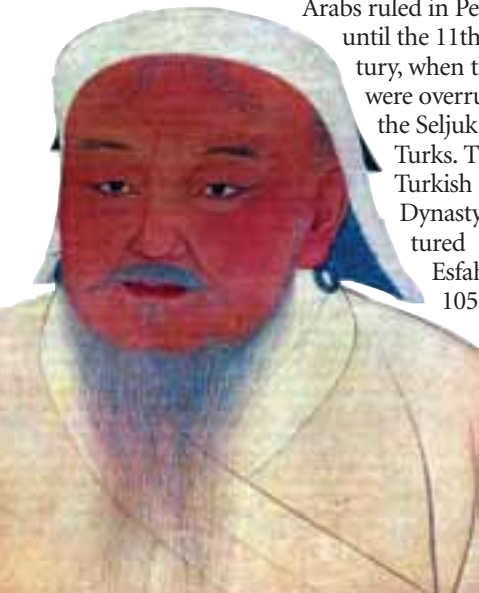
## ISLAMIC PERSIA

### ■ Arab, Turk and Mongol, 650–1500 AD

The impact of the Arabic conquest was profound, bringing a new religion and a new social and legal system. Persia became part of a world empire whose centre was not in Persia! Nevertheless, there are striking continuities in the culture. Persians contributed significantly to all aspects of Islamic civilization. By the ninth century there was a revival of the Persian (Farsi) language and literature that was distinctly Persian

but showing Arabic and Islamic influences. The Arabs ruled in Persia until the 11th century, when they were overrun by the Seljuk Turks. This Turkish Dynasty captured Esfahan in 1051.

Ghenghis Khan



Through numerous rebellions, the Turks hung onto power until they, too, were swept away by Genghis Khan's all-conquering Mongols in the early 13th century. Most memorable of the Mongol rulers in Persia was Tamerlane, Timur the Lame. He began the Timurid dynasty, and from his capital Samarkand ruled, brutally and ruthlessly, an empire extending from the Euphrates to the Indus/Ganges, including the regions that we know today as Armenia, Georgia, Turkmenistan and Afghanistan. Through tributary Khanates his power reached through Southern Russia, and as far as Lithuania and Poland. Timur was Muslim, and his 'excuse' for attacking the Muslim Sultan of Delhi was that the Sultan was soft on Hinduism!

### ■ The Safavids and Qajars, 1501–1925 AD

The Safavid name is from Sheikh Safi-od-Din, spiritual leader of the Safavid Sufi order, founded in 1301. This order became a revolutionary Shi'a movement, seizing power in Persia. Although the Safavid family was of Persian origin, most supporters were Shi'a Turkoman tribesmen from Anatolia, Syria, Upper Mesopotamia, and the Armenian highlands. The Safavid dynasty achieved supremacy in 1502, and settled the Shi'a form of Islam as the national religion. The strong political role exercised by Shi'a clergy, including expectation of total acceptance by all the population, is a recurring aspect of Persian life from this time on.<sup>8</sup> It was an outstanding period of Persian history, associated strongly with Shah Abbas, 1571–1629. He took back Azerbaijan and Armenia from the Ottoman Empire and caused Esfahan to be rebuilt as the cen-

tral city. In his reign Persian became unquestionably the language of administration and high culture, and Persian artistic forms achieved a Golden Age. These levels were not sustained and the dynasty declined, hastened by Afghan invasions in the early 18th century.

Afghan sway did not last very long, and there were several rulers up to 1779. Nader Khan set himself on the throne as Nader Shah in 1736. He expelled Afghan, Turkish and Russian forces from the land, and proceeded to conquer Afghanistan and capture New Delhi. From there he returned with the bejewelled Peacock Throne, to be the proud symbol of Persian monarchy. Viewed as a usurper and dictator, Nader was assassinated in 1747, and the empire quickly fragmented again. In 1794 Aga Muhammad Khan, a leader of the Turkmen Qajars, defeated all rivals and established a new capital in Tehran. The Qajar kings ruled a surprisingly peaceful Persia, in almost the same territory as modern Iran, until 1925. During the Qajar dynasty Persia was threatened by Russia to the north, the Ottoman Turks to the west and British India to the east.

In a pattern that was noted in connection with Afghanistan (QR 560) and in Turkey (QR 561), attempts at reform and modernisation were inadequate, or self-serving on the part of the rulers, or viewed with implacable hostility by merchants and clerics as well as by the general population because of the 'Western' associations. This led in 1905 to protests and then to the Constitutional Revolution (1905–07), which, technically, limited royal absolutism, and created in Persia a constitutional monarchy, with a nod towards democracy. In 1906 Persia's

first constitution ended the absolute rule of the Qajars. The country became a semi-colonial state dominated by Britain and Russia; the discovery of oil in 1908 by a British consortium intensified Western interest.

## THE TWENTIETH CENTURY AND MODERN IRAN

### ■ The Pahlavi era

Reza Khan, 1877–1944, was an Iranian army officer who led a successful coup in 1921. Persia had managed to remain neutral in World War I, but only at the expense of a heavy British presence securing the oil supplies. In the war years it was obvious that the paper provisions of the



Stamps from 1911, 1935 and 1949 illustrate the move from Persia to Iran

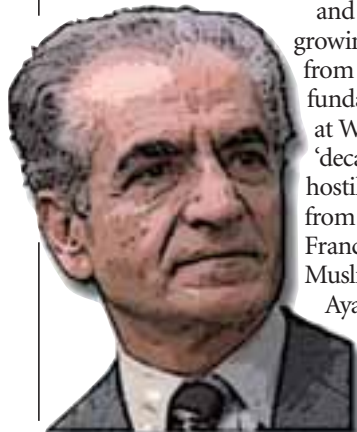
Constitutional Reform were not working, hence the coup. After serving as premier from 1923–25, Reza Khan, who adopted the surname Pahlavi, deposed the last Qajar ruler and declared himself Shah. He sought to modernise Persia, improving transportation and communications and emancipating women. In 1935 the name of the country was changed from Persia to Iran. Reza Shah's early aspirations did reflect the hopes of many educated Iranians for a modern, Westward-looking state that was nevertheless free of foreign interference,

strong, centralised, and economically sound. In the course of World War II British and Russian troops occupied the country, in the face of Iranian reluctance to declare against the Axis powers (was it the Aryan connection?). Reza Shah was obliged to abdicate in 1941 in favour of his son, Muhammad Reza Pahlavi.

Muhammad Reza Shah, 1919–1980, continued the work of modernisation and industrialisation, expansion of education and economic development. He made progress in expanding employment and economic and educational opportunities, in building up strong central government and a strong military, in limiting foreign influence, and in seeking to give Iran an influential role in regional affairs.

Ambitious five-year plans (1963–72) improved agricultural and industrial development and increased literacy. When the Western oil consortium was nationalised in 1973 and oil prices increased, export revenue was boosted. In the later 1970s the situation deteriorated,

**Muhammad Reza Shah, 1919–1980**



social inequalities worsened, and there was growing protest from the Shi'a fundamentalists at Western-style 'decadence'. This hostility was led from exile in France by the Muslim cleric Ayatollah Khomeini. Several attempts at parlia-

mentary reform only showed the extent to which the Shah had lost control of the situation. He left the country in January of 1979, amidst much rejoicing.

### ■ The Revolution

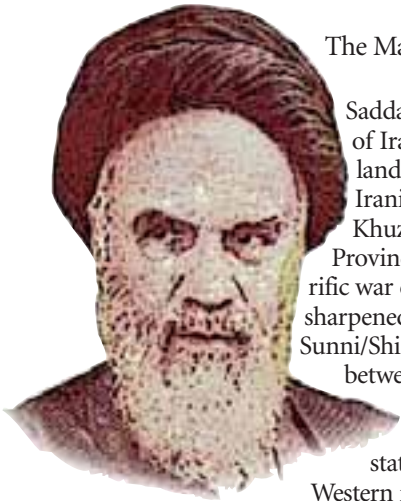
Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran in February 1979 and a revolutionary government was formed; in March the Islamic Republic of Iran was declared. Shah Reza had been admitted to the USA for medical treatment, and in reaction the US Embassy in Tehran was



**Anti-US slogans outside the former US embassy in Tehran**

seized on 4 November 1979. Seventy hostages were held, and demands were made for the Shah's return to Iran. He finally went to Egypt at the invitation of President Sadat and died there in 1980.<sup>9</sup> The hostages were not released until January 1981.

Under the 1979 constitution, supreme authority in all matters rests with the Islamic spiritual leader, the *valayat-e faqih*.<sup>10</sup> The president appoints a cabinet, subject to the approval of the *valayat-e faqih* and the Majles, an elected lower house. Legislation is vetted by the twelve-member Council of Guardians to ensure that it conforms to the Islamic constitution. Islamic fundamentalism continues to be a powerful force in Iran. Soon after Khomeini became Leader,



**Ayatollah Khomeini**

Saddam Hussein of Iraq made a land grab in the Iranian Khuzestan Province. An horrific war ensued, sharpened by the Sunni/Shi'a tension between these two Muslim states. The

Western nations and the USSR helped

arm, train and sustain Iraq throughout this eight-year war!

After Khomeini's death in 1989, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei moved from being President to being the all-powerful Clerical Leader. A moderate president, Muhammad Khatami, was elected in 1997, but reform is a very uncertain thing. Polarisation between moderates and hardliners, international pressure along the 'Axis of evil' line, suspicion from the Atomic Energy Agency about the reality of the nuclear energy programme, all conspire to keep the wheels spinning without much forward motion.

## ■ Language & Literature

Persian is the official language of Iran; the Persian term is Farsi. This is the language of government and education and is the mother tongue of half of the population. A large proportion of the rest has Persian as a second language. Old Persian dates back to the 6th century BC. Written in cuneiform, it was used exclusively for royal proclamations and announcements and was in use until about AD 250. Middle Persian, known as

Pahlavi, or Parsi, was in use from about AD 250 to 900. This was the official language of the Sassanid Empire and of the Zoroastrian priesthood, written in an ideographic script. Modern Persian began to develop about AD 900, and the works of that time are still plain to read and understand. Following the Arab conquest of the Sassanid Empire, Arabic became the official, written language, but Persian remained the language of court records. Persian has borrowed heavily from Arabic vocabulary and eventually adopted the Arabic script.



**Stamp with example of Islamic calligraphy**

Conscious of an heroic past and a rich literary heritage, Persian speakers view themselves as leaders of the country in the arts generally. Before and after the Revolution they have filled the majority of government positions. The second largest language group is Azerbaijani, about 25%, and then the Kurds, less than 10%. Arabic, Armenian, Assyrian, Turkish, and even English, French, German, Georgian, and Russian, are spoken by some in Iran. Bear in mind that Persian (Farsi) is an Indo-European language, in keeping with the Aryan name. It became a prestige language in India in the time of the Mughal Empire, and as it became mixed up with Hindi around the campfires it gave rise to another language, Urdu.

A quick way to grasp the range of the literature of Persia is to look at just one man—Ibn Sina, known to the West as Avicenna, 980–1037 AD. Drawing upon Greek and Arabic learning he wrote

mostly in Arabic, with just two known works in Persian. Philosophy, mathematics, astronomy, theology, music, poetry, and, above all, medicine, were his themes. His famous book *al-Qanun* 'the Canon'—is a million word encyclopaedia of medicine, which was unchallenged in the field for six hundred years. He developed means of verifying squares and cubes, constructed a vernier device, advanced the field of musical harmony in discussing the intervals and the capacity of the ear to distinguish them or not; he dismissed the quest for transmutation of elements as empirically unsound. And lots more!

The Western Renaissance drew heavily on the repository of such writers as Avicenna, and with this history it is easy to see why many modern Muslims resent the Western perception of them as non-contributors to modern thought. Just why they turned aside from modern technology a little later is a different matter. Persian poetry, Persian miniatures, Persian blue ceramics, the splendours of Esfahan architecture, Xerxes' gate at Persepolis, and not forgetting Persian carpets: these are all part of the legacy of Persian culture.

## RELIGION

### ■ Zoroastrianism

Zoroastrianism was the state religion of Persia in the times of the Sassanids, and most written texts date from that time. However, the teachings of Zarathustra, and service of Ahura



Zoroastrian Priests

Mazda as a god, are much older. Dates ranging from 3000 BC to 600 BC are offered as start points. The Persia of Cyrus and Darius probably was Zoroastrian in religion, if not explicitly so by name. From there the influence on the religions of Greece and Rome, especially in aspects of Mithraism, seems easy to follow. The Qajar regime was not sympathetic towards Zoroastrians, and many moved away into North India. The Pahlavi regime's strong appeal to a pre-Islamic Persian history helped the Zoroastrians recover some ground, and there were around 35,000 in Iran at the end of the last century. They tend to be in the major cities, Persian speakers, and moving into the professional classes. In prayer and contemplation they follow their basic tenets of Humata (good thoughts), Hukta (good words) and Huvarashta (good deeds). It is in practice, if not in theology, a light/dark dualism, wherein the followers are, supposedly, morally free to choose to do good without divine aid, intervention or involvement.

### ■ Islam

This article is not the place for the doctrines and history of Islam, but it might help if some aspects of Iranian Islam were made clear. Most Muslims throughout the world are Sunni Islam; the overwhelmingly dominant form of Islam in Iran is Shi'a.

All Shi'a accept seven pillars of faith, five of which are shared with Sunni Muslims. These are *shahada*, or confession of the faith;<sup>11</sup> *namaz*, the prescribed order of prayer; *zakat*, or almsgiving; *sawm*, fasting in Ramadan; and *hajj*, pilgrimage to Mecca and Medina. The extra two pillars for Shi'a are *jihad*, that

is, the obligation to protect Islamic lands, beliefs and institutions; and a requirement of good deeds and demeanour along the same lines as the Zoroastrian tenets mentioned above.

There are several distinct streams of Shi'a Islam, all originating in the years between the Prophet's death in 632 and 1000. In Iran the prevalent sect is the



**A Muslim cleric**

Twelver. Their distinctive tenet, differing not only from Sunni, but also from all other Shi'a, is that the train of leadership and authority passed from Muhammad to Ali, and then in direct sequence to eleven male heirs of Ali, giving the twelve Imam of the 'Twelver' name.

The elevation of the part of the Imam is reflected in the role of their modern successors. If these clerics have superior knowledge of the laws of their god and the undisputed right to interpret and even elaborate them, they alone are qualified to rule society. This is the theological basis of Islamic theocratic government, although many Muslims, including non-Twelver Shi'a, had never thought to see it carried to the level of Khomeini's Iranian Revolution.

Even from this most cursory look at Iranian Islam, it is plain that the followers



**The post-revolution Iranian flag, with its symbol representing the sword and the Koran and the stylized horizontal inscriptions of 'Allahu Akbar' (Allah is great)**

of Muhammad are by no means a unity. Islam is not that uncompromisingly clear cut, monolithic institution of popular presentation. In the hagiographic reverence for, and power and merit ascribed to, the mosques and remains of past Imams

there are uncanny similarities to the mind-set of unreformed Christianity, even to the extent of intercession for the dead.

Sufi is an ascetic and mystical order of Islam. The word means 'wool', and the connotation is almost that of 'hair shirt' in medieval Christianity. Sufis have been accepted, tolerated, rejected, persecuted at different times by other forms of Islam. A 19th century interaction of Sufi and Shi'a in Iran began a reformist work which became the Baha'i faith.

## ■ Christianity

We know that there were those from east of the Tigris present on the day of Pentecost. Perhaps less well known is the fact that there was a more or less continuous 'Christian' presence, ministry and mission in Persia (and beyond) until the 14th century. Yes, that's right, for almost 700 years after the arrival of Islam, Christianity was tolerated, without persecution. In the 2nd century the Syrian Church, with an influential base in the trader town of Edessa, and through the medium of the Syriac/Aramaic language, carried the preaching of the Gospel into Persia. The *Diatessaron*, Tatian's 'Harmony of the Gospels' ( $\Delta\iota\alpha\tau\epsilon\sigma\sigma\alpha\rho\omega\nu$ , from the Greek word for

# IRAN TIMELINE

## BC

- 6th century:** Persian Achaemenids win the whole of the Middle East. Cyrus, etc.
- 5th century:** Wars against the Greeks. Land is gained all the way to the Aegean Sea.
- 4th century:** The structure of the state dissolves.
- 330:** Alexander the Great subjugates most of Persia.
- 3rd century:** Parthians are the new rulers, one of the big powers in the Middle East.

## AD

- 224:** Kingdom of the Sassanids. Zoroastrianism the state religion.
- 637:** Arabs take Sassanid capital. The people begin to turn to Islam.
- 1000-1500:** Turks (Seljuks) and Mongols.
- 1501-24:** Safavid dynasty. Shi'a Islam is the state religion.
- 1588-1629:** Abbas I.
- 1722:** Afghan occupation of central parts of Persia.
- 1724:** Russian and Turkish interference. The two countries divide Persia. Nader Shah.
- 1739:** Afghanistan conquered and Delhi sacked. An enormous loot is brought back to Persia.
- 1747:** Nader Shah is assassinated, the kingdom fragmented.
- 1795:** Qajar dynasty established, lasts until 1925.
- 1840:** Aga Khan flees to India after a failed rebellion against the Shah.
- 1857:** Persia recognises Afghanistan.
- 1891:** Tobacco boycott opposes British monopoly of Persian tobacco trade.
- 1906:** Constitutional revolution.
- 1907:** Russia and Britain divide Persia into protection zones.
- 1914-18:** Persia neutral in World War I, but is a

- battleground because of oil resources.
- 1919-21:** To resist Bolshevik Russia, Persia is made a British protectorate.
- 1921:** Reza Khan establishes a new government.
- 1925:** Reza Khan elected Shah, attempts Westernisation after Turkish model (Atatürk).
- 1935:** Persia changes its name to Iran.
- 1939:** Shah Reza friendly towards German Axis interests.
- 1941:** Allied occupation of Iran. Reza Shah abdicates, son Muhammad Reza Pahlavi is Shah.
- 1943:** Iran joins the Allies.
- 1949:** Iran a constitutional monarchy.
- 1951:** Oil industry nationalised.
- 1959:** Defence agreement with USA.
- 1970s:** Opposition to the Shah and his use of the secret police, the Savak.
- 1978:** Strong Shi'a opposition towards the Shah, led by Ayatollah Khomeini.
- 1979:** *January* ■ The Shah leaves Iran.  
*February* ■ Khomeini returns to Iran.  
*March* ■ Referendum on constitution. Islamic Republic of Iran.  
*November* ■ Iranian students storm US embassy: 70 hostages.
- 1980:** Iraq invades Iran.
- 1981:** January 20: US embassy hostages released.
- 1982:** The Iraqi forces driven out of Iran.
- 1988:** A ceasefire between Iran and Iraq.
- 1989:** June: A fatwa is issued by Khomeini against the author Salman Rushdie.
- 1990:** Earthquake in Caucasian regions kills about 35,000 Iranians.
- 1990-91:** Iran condemns Iraq's invasion in Kuwait and the allied forces' actions towards Iraq.
- 1995:** Total ban on trade with Iran is imposed by the USA.
- 2003:** December 26: Earthquake kills about 30,000 in the southeastern town of Bam.

### Zagros Mountains



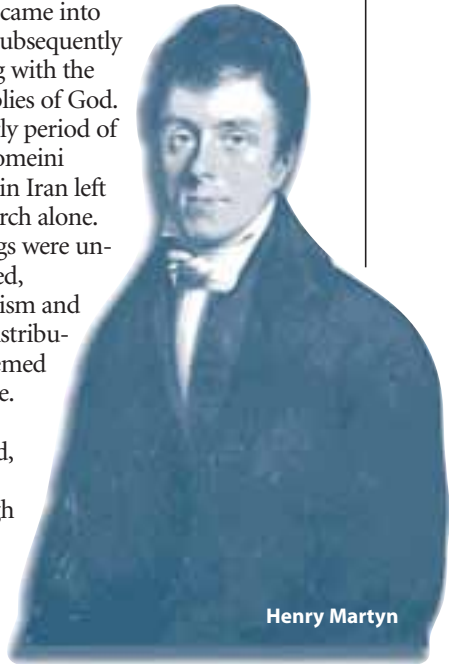
‘four’), in its Syriac (and later, Arabic) form was another 2nd-century instrument of the eastward spread of Christianity. Tatian’s connection suggests an association with Gnosticism and an extravagant asceticism, traits which accompanied the Christian work in Persia. Nevertheless the Persian Church was specifically represented at the Council of Nicea in 325.

After the Council of Chalcedon in 451, the Persian Church followed Nestorian views, an over-exact distinction and separation of the divine and the human Person of Christ. The Church in Persia, sometimes called the Assyrian Church, became specifically Nestorian. This ascetic, monastic, Nestorian Church was not rooted out when the Arabs conquered Persia. Restrictions and tolls were imposed, a kind of third-rate citizenship, but for some centuries the ‘Assyrian Church’ endured under Islam and engaged in mission in Mongolia, China, India, Ceylon—Asia in general. When the Mongols became the ruling people in Persia in the 12th century, the ‘Assyrian Church’ was still regarded with some favour, but the ignominious end of the Crusades in the Holy Land and Egypt seemed to polarise matters in the whole Islamic world. In Persia, the destruction of Christian property and the persecution of Christians began in earnest. With the arrival of Tamerlane in 1369 the church was scattered in a scourge of terror.

Strangely, a Christian enclave was imported from Armenia by Shah Abbas in 1604. He wanted a labour force for his grand building work in the new capital, Esfahan. A separate city, New Jolfa, was constructed to house the more than

30,000 families of Armenian Orthodox ‘Christians’, but in religious matters it seems that the Armenians and the Persians, Orthodox and Muslim, had no dealings with each other. Isolated Roman Catholic and Moravian workers penetrated into Persia in the 18th century, but the outstanding evangelist to the country was, of course, Henry Martyn in the early 19th century. Others followed, at least one of whom has left a telling account of his labours. Dr. William McElwee Miller’s *My Persian Pilgrimage*<sup>13</sup> is a striking record of forty-three years of Gospel labour in Persia, from 1919–62.

In 1937, two years after Persia became Iran, a twenty-six-year-old Armenian living in Tehran became a Christian and began meetings for prayer and ministry in his home. From this work of ‘Papa’ Seth Yeghnazar an indigenous Iranian church came into being, subsequently aligning with the Assemblies of God. The early period of the Khomeini regime in Iran left the church alone. Meetings were unrestricted, evangelism and Bible distribution seemed to thrive. This changed, and although there is no official hostility to



Henry Martyn

Christianity, the churches have suffered—anger towards converted Muslims and the association of Christianity with Western imperialism have sparked attacks on church property and people.

There is undoubtedly a mighty Gospel work being accomplished amongst young Iranians inside and outside Iran at this time. Our TBS speakers in the UK find Iranian believers in their meetings and are much aware of Iranian churches and mission organisations based here. Whether from Parsee (Zoroastrian) or Muslim beginnings, these Christians carry a burden of anxiety, not only for themselves but for their families, in the possibility of retribution. Whilst we bless the Lord for these gracious works, let us also pray for the keeping of these believers and for the deliverance, in every way, of their friends and relatives.

## THE BIBLE

Time and space do not permit a thorough examination of the work of Scripture translation and distribution in the languages of Iran. However, the Society is pleased to be a continuing part of that great task. We currently have the privilege of circulating the VanDyck Bible and New Testament in Arabic not only for Iran but for the millions for whom this is their mother tongue.

An exciting project is our recent work in Farsi. Along with the Words of Life Calendar, the translator has finished the Gospel of John and several tracts and is now concentrating his efforts on the Gospel of Matthew. He reports that the

translation process itself is a form of evangelism, as he has asked refugees from Iran who have sought asylum in the UK to help with the proofreading. It gives the translator opportunity to explain what the verses mean, and he reports that he is finding interest in both the work and in the Lord. The Word of God will indeed not return to Him void!

## Endnotes

1 Please see also our articles on Afghanistan (QR 560), Turkey (QR 561) and Henry Martyn (QR 563) for related background material.

2 Along the way he had defeated the Medes, captured Ecbatana (modern Hamadan), and added the fabulously wealthy Kingdom of Lydia (King Croesus) to his domains.

3 Acts 2.9.

4 Anyone who struggled with Classical Studies or Classical Greek will locate Xenophon's *Anabasis*, the weary return of Greek mercenaries from Persia, along the way later travelled by Henry Martyn, in this period.

5 He, of course, was Macedonian.

6 But Egypt by the Greek Ptolemies. It always confused me as a schoolboy that Syrians and Egyptians were all Greek! A heavy insult in Rome was to be called an Egyptian—one who not only spoke Greek but did so with the accent of North Africa!

7 The 'Parthian Shot' is a telling remark delivered on parting: the Parthian cavalry used to feign flight, then fire arrows at the relaxing enemy.

8 One might say that Ayatollah Khomeini simply revived this era in a much more militant fashion in 1979.

9 Mention of his name in Iran today attracts unwelcome attention from the authorities.

10 This older term was used by Khomeini to justify political rule by the clerics.

11 But of that faith only three points are common between Shi'a and Sunni.

12 Once more I ask readers' indulgence of a very broad use of the term; it is impossible to qualify every appearance of such words.

13 Still available from the William Carey Library Publishers, ISBN 0878082433.