

Christianity in Persia and the Status of Non-Muslims in Iran

A. Christian van Gorder



LEXINGTON BOOKS

A division of
ROWMAN & LITTLEFIELD PUBLISHERS, INC.
Lanham • Boulder • New York • Plymouth, UK

Contents

Preface: Reza Safa	ix
Foreword: George Braswell	xiii
Acknowledgments	xvii
Abbreviations of Organizations	xxi
1 Introducing the Land of Persia and Early Persian History	1
2 Early Persian Religions, Judaism, and Christianity Before Islam	21
3 The Rise of Islam and the Role of Non-Muslims in Persian Islam	47
4 Types of Islam in Persia and Iran	99
5 Modern Protestant Missionary Efforts in Persia	121
6 Non-Muslims and the Islamic Revolution of 1979	169
7 Contemporary Christianity in Iran	199
8 The Persecution of Protestants in Modern Iran	219

9 Conclusion—The Future of Christian and Muslim Relations in Iran	237
Appendix I: International Organizations Confronting Religious Persecution (2009)	261
Appendix II: Statements from the Universal Islamic Declaration of Human Rights	267
Appendix III: Timeline of Persian History	271
Appendix IV: Chronological List of Rulers in Iran	275
Appendix V: Ethnic and Religious Groups in Iran (1999)	277
Appendix VI: Non-Muslim Religious Minorities	279
Glossary of Arabic and Persian Terms and Names	281
Selected Bibliography	305
Index	321



Introducing the Land of Persia and Early Persian History

The start of a journey into Persia resembles an algebraic equation—it may or may not come out.

Robert Byron, *The Road to Oxiana* (1937)

Anyone who knows, and knows that he knows, makes the steed of intelligence leap over the vault of heaven.

Anyone who does not know but knows that he does not know, can bring his lame little donkey to the destination nonetheless.

Anyone who does not know, and does not know that he does not know, is stuck forever in double ignorance.

Nasr al-din Tusi, Persian poet (1201–1274)

INTRODUCING IRAN

How should one consider Iran? Who are the Iranians? How does Persian history affect present realities? How does religion today affect the way that Iranians view the world?¹ Does history show Iranians generally to be a tolerant or a militant nation? What is the experience of Christians and other non-Muslims in Iran today and throughout Persian history? Many Europeans and North Americans approach these questions with a host of preconceptions. Richard Frye states that “Persia in the mind of the West today is conceived as the center of arch-villains who support and finance terrorism against the West.”² Many of these stereotypes are driven by orientalist scholars, recent political experiences, or media pasquinades rooted in military and economic

considerations. Iran is a complicated nation with a dramatic history that defies easy generalizations. Its paradoxes and contradictions are often overlooked. Few non-Iranians genuinely struggle to understand Iran in all of its complexity. Since the revolution of 1979, only a small number of European and North American scholars and political and social commentators have visited Iran, and even fewer have spent significant amounts of time living in Iran.

What lenses should a non-Persian or a non-Shi'ite Muslim use to better appreciate modern Iran? How different people view another culture or another religion relates to a wide range of factors, perceived and implicit. This effort, intended for a general readership that may, or may not, have any prior knowledge about Iran, focuses on only one small area of intercultural interaction: Muslim and Christian relations in Iran past and present. It is hoped that this research will positively contribute to a more nuanced and comprehensive understanding of the complicated world that is Iran.

As a Christian, my intention is that this study will enable Christians and Muslims worldwide to appreciate the fascinating story and the extensive contributions that Christians have made to Persian culture throughout the last two thousand years. As a North American, I hope that this book will contribute to improved communication and a deeper sense of mutual respect between people of these different cultures and countries. Perhaps this book might also encourage other students and scholars to probe more deeply into the specific episodes that this work briefly introduces.

Understanding Iran is a daunting task. Those foreigners, and there were many, who lived in Iran during the era when the last shah of Iran was in power were there for a host of reasons.³ Foreigners came to Iran as missionaries, business opportunists, military consultants, students and teachers, or, most commonly, employees of the oil industry. These Westerners perceived Iran through their own limited lenses and rarely worked to bridge the vast gulf that existed between their own interests and the day-to-day concerns of millions of average Iranians simply struggling to survive. On the other hand, Iranian perceptions of North Americans and Europeans are also clearly defined along political constructs rooted in the assumption that foreigners are a largely unsympathetic threat. Latent distrust for both proselytizing Christianity and the aggressive West has combined to create a toxic mix of alarm and rising disenchantment.⁴ Such gaps, Muslim and Christian, East and West, rich and poor, will not vanish with the wave of a hopeful wand. Patient scholarship and a wide range of varying interactions over time are the only ways to bridge these gaps in our mutual mis-

understandings. Our perceptions of each other are often unfair, and our expectations of each other are often unrealistic. There is plenty of room for intercultural progress.

Iran is an ancient land that, for millennia, was known as Persia.⁵ The country sits atop a lofty elevated plateau with an average height of about three thousand feet above sea level. Iran is set between the Caspian Sea to the north and the Persian Gulf to the south. The Islamic Republic of Iran is the sixteenth largest nation in the world and shares borders with seven different neighbors. The center of the country is made up of a desert plateau surrounded by a lofty mountain chain. Massoume Price describes the nation as a “complex of mountain chains encircling a series of interior basins.”⁶ These mountains begin in the Caucuses and in Turkey and spread as far as the plains of the Punjab in India. Agrarian civilizations have flourished alongside the rivers that come from these mountains. Despite these small rivers, however, there is only one navigable waterway in the entire country, the Karun, which is 520 miles long from the lofty Zagros Mountains in the northwest until it flows into the Persian Gulf.

Primarily, autocratic governments have ruled Persia for the past five thousand years. Throughout this period, the boundaries of the country have frequently shifted. The centrality of Iran to a number of other thriving civilizations has long made the region important for her neighbors. This has been an asset in times of economic prosperity but also a serious liability when wars with neighboring nation-states transformed Persian territory into a vast battleground. Abbas Maleki notes that “Iran’s geographical position made it the bridge for communication by land between far eastern Asia, China and India, and the African and European lands.”⁷ The fabled Silk Road passed through Persia as it wound its way toward the bazaars of Central Asia and Western China. Today, Iran enjoys a central geopolitical position of influence between the potential economic powers of Central and East Asia and the ancient civilizations of the Middle East.

Iranian culture is changing rapidly from a rural to an urban base. Today, over half of Iran’s seventy million people live in her cities. Since most of Iranian land is arid, the population faces frequent challenges and has often been forced to resort to manmade water supplies. For centuries, an ingeniously creative water supply system of *qanats* (or underground canals) was built which was able to capture water from underground water tables and carry water to nearby fields needing irrigation. Deep wells are also ubiquitous. M. M. Salehi claims that Iran’s arid climatic conditions have forged the “core of Persian culture

and personality" which includes a willingness to embrace political and religious centralized despotism in exchange for essential agrarian aid.⁸

Iran, today, is a nation of young people, and almost 45 percent of its seventy million citizens are under fourteen years of age while 60 percent are under nineteen years of age.⁹ The country is well-educated with compulsory instruction for all citizens from age seven until the end of secondary school. The republic enjoys a literacy rate of close to 87–94 percent and almost all Iranians have at least finished the fifth grade in their public education.¹⁰ Many Iranians study English and pay for private tutors in a wide range of academic disciplines. Learning has always been highly valued among Persian cultures.

Modern Iranian politicians frequently assert that there are now no ethnic problems within Iran. Indeed, ethnic rivalries are much less pronounced than in past centuries, but significant cultural divisions and distinctions remain. Massoume Price states that 51 percent of all Iranians are non-Persians.¹¹ A majority of Iranians are of Aryan descent—originally from India—and are not Arabs or Arabic speakers. Some Arabs remain in Khuzistan, but they constitute only about 3 percent of the national mosaic. The independent Turkmen people of the north make up another 2 percent of the population. There are almost three million Kurds in Iran, but the largest minority is the Azeris in the north who comprise almost 20 percent of the national population. One can also find Baluchis, Jews, Armenians, Chaldeans, and other minorities in Iran. Edward Said reports that many minority groups, such as "Azerbaijanis, Baluchis, Kurds, Arabs, and others" are "stifled" by the state structures of dominance.¹² There may well remain some undercurrents of division, but, in modern Iran, most public expressions of ethnic tensions are kept locked under tight control.

Each of Iran's minority groups cherishes its own distinct language. The largest (and official) language of Iran, Persian (Farsi), is an ancient language with roots in the Indian subcontinent. Persian also shares many linguistic and grammatical links with modern European languages.¹³ A number of other languages, such as Armenian, Kurdish, or ancient Chaldean, are also widely spoken throughout Iran. The fact that Persians have been able to maintain their cultures and languages is amazing given the countless numbers of strong invaders who have ravaged their nation throughout the millennia.

Political stability and frequent interactions with the larger world do not describe modern Iran. Newspapers in North America and Europe are often filled with portentous fears about the possibility of Iran's developing nuclear weapons and about its willingness to start wars, either directly or indirectly, against Israel or the United States.¹⁴ Iran, at

the time of this writing, is under the political leadership of President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, who, according to Yossi Melman and Meir Javedanfar, is a “strong believer in conspiracy theories,” including ideas that the Danish cartoons which mocked the Prophet Muhammad were a “Zionist inspired plot against Islam.”¹⁵ These views, along with his disdain for the Zionists of Israel, led Ahmadinejad to convene a conference in December 2006 with the world’s leading advocates of denial that the Nazi Holocaust ever occurred.

The Iranian economy is gradually recovering from the devastating aftereffects of the Iran-Iraq War which slowed to an inconclusive stalemate in 1988. The government controls most economic sectors, including the major airline and shipping agents, the largest oil company, and all significant media outlets within the country. The Iranian economy has also had to survive a series of stringent trade embargoes because of its strident political positions. In spite of these embargoes, the oil economy continues to bring floods of revenue into the country. Petroleum, which was first drilled in Iran in 1908, remains the country’s primary source of revenue.¹⁶ Other natural resources are exported, including copper and natural gas. Huge pipelines are now being constructed to export natural gas to the countries of the former Soviet Union. For many Iranians, little has changed for decades on a stagnating economic front. Much of the Iranian populace remains reliant upon subsistence agricultural production for its tenuous livelihood.

THE FOUNDATIONS OF EARLY PERSIAN HISTORY

The country of Iran is one of the oldest in the world and has some of the richest cultural traditions of any nation in human history. Many of the grandiose events, written across the pages of Persian history, are retold in the beloved epic *Shahmeneh* or *Book of the Kings*, written in Persian by Firdausi (or Ferdowsi).¹⁷ For over thirty years (ca. 935–1020) this elegist sought to retell over a thousand years of colorful Persian history with special attention to Rostam (and his son Sohrab), the great defender of Persian culture against the first Arab invaders.¹⁸ These dramatic epics written in skillful poetic verse read like compelling narratives from the ancient Persian *Book of a Thousand Tales* which might have first been told at the makeshift stages of *caravanse-rai* along the ancient Silk Road.¹⁹

The architecture, literature, poetry, paintings, calligraphy, music, ceramic, and folk arts of Persia are some of the most splendid in the

world. The boundaries of the ancient Persian kingdoms reached far beyond the demarcations that define modern-day Iran to stretch into the Caucasus and Iraq in the west, Afghanistan in the east, and Central Asia in the northeast. The history of the region, in the words of Mohssen Massarrat, is marked by “tribal campaigns of conquest and the establishment of new relationships of rule and loyalty over other tribes of varying ethnic origins, languages, religions, and cultures.”²⁰ Iran throughout its long, colorful history has been controlled by Persians, Arabs, Mongols, Turkmen, Afghans, and many other lesser-known ethnic and tribal groups.

People have lived in Iran since the time of the Old Stone Age, about one hundred thousand years ago. Archaeological evidence indicates that human life existed in the Paleolithic Era, and Neolithic Era findings are continuous beginning around 9000 B.C.E. In one Sumerian settlement, archaeologists unearthed the “remains of the world’s oldest wine-jar complete with grape residue and traces of resin that were used as a flavoring and preservative, indicating that the wine would have tasted something like Greek retsina.”²¹

Semi-nomadic peoples and cattle breeders began arriving from the Indian subcontinent into Persia (shortly before 6000 B.C.E.) and developed a unique dialect and culture. The cities of Susa and Elam were constructed on the Susanian plain near Iraq (Mesopotamia) around 3900 B.C.E. Tribal groups came from modern-day India to the west of Iran and invaded a languishing Babylonian empire. The independent state of Elam was able to defeat Assyrian and Babylonian powers and capture fabulous treasures from these realms as plunder around 2000 B.C.E. At the same time, massive migrations began to take place throughout the entire region. People had been coming in successive waves from the Indian subcontinent and from Central Asia to the rich Iranian plateau.²² Extensive agricultural and trading communities were established in Fars, to the south, which resulted in the development of a distinct linguistic and religious culture. By 1000 B.C.E., Iranian people groups had formed states in oasis communities wherever water was available. One of these tribes, the Medes, progressively gained political ascendancy.

Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis notes that “the first definite mention of an Iranian tribe, the Medes, occurs in ninth century B.C.E. Assyrian texts.”²³ The Medes were unrelenting warriors who settled first in the Hamadan valley before spreading across Khurasan in northern Persia. At first, they were a loose confederation of states and posed no real military threat to the Assyrians. Gradually that began to change, and, in about 670 B.C.E., when the Babylonians overran the Assyrians in

612 B.C.E., the Medes were already established as a powerful, organized empire. The other main ethnic group, the Persians, settled in the province of Fars.

A Mede and Persian political-military coalition coalesced to form the Achaemenian Kingdom. This dynasty ruled over an immense empire for half a millennia and spread from modern-day Afghanistan to Turkey. The Achaemenians were the first truly Persian empire, and they ruled from about 559 or 558 until 330 B.C.E. Their dream was to build a powerful dominion from northern India to Greece with colossal armies, inexhaustible wealth, and passionately practiced religious conviction.

The Achaemenid Kingdom is primarily known for the rule of Cyrus the Great who became the king of Fars and anointed himself the “king of kings.” Within a few years, Cyrus (modern Persian, *Kurosh*) conquered a sweeping empire that ranged from Pakistan all the way to the Mediterranean coast. In 549 B.C.E., Cyrus seized the Median capital of Ecbatana (modern day Hamadan) and ten years later came to the high walls of Babylon and entered the city as a liberator, sparing the population (a rare show of mercy in that era). Cyrus unified the lands under his control and had a policy of tolerance for the religious and cultural differences among his citizenry that became a trademark of his reign. He ruled with deftness over at least thirty different ethnic groups and established an elaborate administrative structure that included *satrapies* (provinces) where each governor that he appointed was obligated to collect tribute.

In 529 B.C.E., Cyrus died in battle at the hands of Queen Tomyris of the Massagetae, east of the Caspian Sea.²⁴ Cyrus was succeeded to the throne by his son Cambyses (*Kambojiya*) who continued his father’s military prowess by conquering Egypt. While in Egypt, Cambyses heard of a rebellion against his authority in Persia. He died suddenly and unexpectedly in 522 B.C.E.—perhaps by suicide or through intrigue. The confederates against Cambyses were led by Darius the First (*Daryavaush*). When Darius became king he organized an excellent administrative structure to preside over twenty-three different provinces under the direction of the twin governmental and religious cities of Susa and Persepolis. Darius subjugated the Indus valley in 512 B.C.E. but died in 486 B.C.E. He was succeeded by his son Xerxes (*Khashayarsha*). Greek historian Herodotus claims that Xerxes took two million soldiers with him to attack Athens in 480 B.C.E. While Xerxes was able to overthrow Athens and kill the Spartan King Leonidas in Thermopylae, his fleet was trounced at Salamis, and Xerxes had to withdraw back to Persian soil. Xerxes died in 465 B.C.E. and was

followed by his son Artaxerxes (*Artakhshatra*) who governed for over forty years. The biblical stories of Ezra and Nehemiah took place during this era.

The annals of the Jewish people record stories of their relations with these exalted Persian kings. This is because, since about 727 B.C.E., Jews had been residing in Mesopotamia after they had been brought to the area as slaves by Assyrian (and, later, Babylonian) kings (2 Kings 18:11). There is one Jewish legend, however, which claims that the first Jew to enter Persia was actually Sarah bat Asher, a granddaughter of the Patriarch Joseph.²⁵ What is certain is that a series of expulsions from Israel and Judah occurred in 586 B.C.E. with the cataclysmic destruction of Jerusalem. The Persian King Cyrus is known in Jewish history as a messiah and liberator of the Jewish people (Isaiah 44:25–28; 45:1–4) because he freed them from the grinding weight of Babylonian domination.²⁶

In spite of a visit to the Lion's Den and the oppressive actions of Prince Haman, the biblical stories of the prophet Daniel and Queen Esther show the Jewish people living in relative peace in the lands of the Medes and the Persians.²⁷ Under the Achaemenid rule the Jews of Persia were usually free to practice their religion in exchange for their loyalty to the throne.²⁸ Jews had authority to establish their own courts and legal codes in conjunction with Achaemenid civil law. Ezra and Nehemiah, biblical writers and statesmen, served in the Achaemenid court. The Jewish community flourished under such acceptance. Judaism's encounter with Persia also may have dramatically changed their own religion in a number of theological and doctrinal ways, including introducing new ideas about the afterlife, about Satan, and about a promised political Messiah.²⁹ James Barr claims that such views are not surprising given the fact that "the Jews lived for about two centuries under the Pax Persia and some of their most important books were written at that time."³⁰

The Achaemenian Empire was a time of cultural transition. It was during Achaemenian rule, around 400 B.C.E., that the Kurds, a warring mountainous tribal people, are mentioned for the first time in written history.³¹ It is also when the people who live in what is now called Azerbaijan and Armenia begin their long relationships with Persia.³² After many wars with Romans and Greeks, the Armenians fought the Persians but were unable to win their independence and became a Persian province. In an effort to win over the will of the Armenians, the Persians initiated a number of royal marriage alliances and shared their religious and cultural legacies with the Armenian people. The Achaemenians were skillful politicians, warriors, and master builders,

and they raised the vaunted cities of Persepolis and Pasargadae. The stately tombs that were carved for their kings into the rocks and cliffs of these cities still remain to this day.³³

The Achaemenian Empire eventually fell to Alexander the Great who captured Babylon, Susa, and Persepolis between 330–325 B.C.E.³⁴ Alexander was the son of Philip II of Macedonia who had trained his child in the school of the great philosopher Aristotle. According to the Greek historian Eratosthenes (276–194 B.C.E.), Alexander “believed that he had a mission from God to harmonize men generally and to be the reconciler of the world.”³⁵ His brief rule certainly brought an extensive interchange of cultures and religions which forever changed their characters. Alexander called himself an Achaemenian king and married several Persian princesses, including the legendary Roxana of Bactria. He prompted his soldiers to intermarry and settle in Persia. Persians, however, do not always remember his conquering prowess in a charitable light. The Greek king ravaged many of the treasures of the Achaemenian Empire and countless holy artifacts of the Mazdaen state religion. Zoroastrian historical records claim that Alexander slaughtered scores of magi and extinguished the holy flames at thousands of temples. In fact, Alexander the Great is the only human being in Zoroastrian writings who merits a title which is usually reserved only for devils and demons—*guzastag*—“the accursed.”³⁶

Alexander’s untimely death marked the dawn of new empires. His vast realms were divided into smaller kingdoms led by various military leaders. The region of Persia was gradually conquered by one of Alexander’s generals, Seleucos Nicator of Phrygia (312–281 B.C.E.), based in Babylonia. Seleucos also consolidated his control over much of Asia Minor. His reign, and those of his followers, the Hellenistic Seleucid Dynasty, flourished in the region until about 250 B.C.E. The Seleucids were progressively weakened and finally overthrown by the repeated pillaging efforts of the invading Parthians.

The Parthians, a northern Iranian nomadic tribe of warrior horsemen, came to power in 250 B.C.E. and ruled Persia for almost five centuries until 240 C.E.³⁷ They were uproarious soldiers and dexterous archers. The Parthian Empire extended from the Euphrates River in Babylonia to Herat in Afghanistan. Parthian armies marched as far as Syria and Israel exacting tribute. Their primary rivals were the Romans whom the Parthians challenged in a series of inconclusive wars.³⁸ The fall of the Parthians, however, came not from external forces but from internal political squabbling.

The Parthians were mostly Zoroastrians but were usually ambivalent about other religious traditions. Jewish writers chronicle an era of

peace and prosperity under Parthian rule. It was during Parthian rule that Christianity first arose in the Middle East. The Zoroastrian magi mentioned in the New Testament probably came from Persia, and the book of Acts mentions that Parthians were present on the day of Pentecost at the foundation of the Christian Church (Acts 2:9).

METHODOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS

This research primarily focuses on Muslim and Christian relations in Iran. I have tried to frame this story within the broader context of Persia's enchanting history and multivalent cultures. Appreciating this historical context will better facilitate analysis. It is instructive, for example, to appreciate the various ways in which nationalistic governments in Persia have often equated the Christian religion with the foreign military and political ambitions of the Roman and Byzantine Empires. This explains why, in certain periods, religious persecution has been unleashed against the nation's Christians.

How many non-Muslims reside in Iran today? Because the nation's population is overwhelmingly Islamic, it is not easy to get an accurate answer to this question from unbiased sources. What is certain is that there were between 276,000 and 310,000 Christians in Iran at the time of the 1979 revolution and that at least half of that number has since fled the country.³⁹ This means that Christians in Iran now only constitute somewhere between 2 and 4 percent of Iran's entire population.⁴⁰

Iran is often described as the easternmost region of the Middle East. The term, however, is not particularly useful because it is too generalized, so the terms Persian and Iranian will be used interchangeably, although this is sometimes meant to include Armenian, Chaldean, Kurdish, and Arab Christians or Muslims living within Iran. Terms pose a unique problem in this study because of the wide variance of spelling. There are many examples: The term Sasanian, for example, is often spelled "Sassanian" in English-language sources. The capital of Iran is usually referred to as Tehran but in this text will be cited as Teheran. Even though this spelling is less frequent in English, some argue that it may actually more closely approximate the Farsi pronunciation.⁴¹ My intent in this process has been simply to be consistent in hopes of avoiding unnecessary confusion.

The breathtaking extent of Persian cultural and religious expression is profound, and this book is designed to be an introduction to the region and to the interfaith interactions of Muslims and Christians to readers who may not be well-versed in either the Persian context or

the unique experiences of these two faiths and their intriguing interactions. Iran is an intensely religious country which has given the world a host of unique religions and even a host of basic concepts, such as "paradise," which have shifted into other world religious traditions.⁴² I have tried, either in the text or in notations, to provide some salient context, which means that I will briefly mention other religions, mainly Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and the Baha'i Faith, to show how their experiences with Shi'a Islam have paralleled or contradicted the experiences of Christians in Persia.

Perspective is another factor which should be considered in any thematic survey of this nature. I write as a North American Baptist with the Pentecostal sensibilities of the African American church. It is often the case that studies on Muslim and Christian interactions written by Christians are seen as "attacks from the outside" and are "received by Muslims with suspicion and sometimes hostility."⁴³ It has been my intent, however, to introduce Islamic ideals and themes in as positive and sympathetic a light as possible. In any event, I hope Muslim readers will forgive any lack of nuance and contact the author to assist my deeper appreciation of the themes and concepts in which I have not represented Shi'ite Islam as they feel it should be presented.

Another consideration that research for this book has had to address is the ways in which orientalist assumptions drive European and North American scholarship about Persia. I am deeply indebted to all of those non-Persian scholars in this area who have gone before me, and yet, in this process, I have been repeatedly obligated to step back from what I have been reading and consider again the mental outlook of the writer and how that perspective positively or negatively contributes to helping people gain as accurate a picture as possible of Persian Christianity and its relation with Shi'ite Islam in Iran. When possible, I have sought to rely on recent texts which, one hopes, may be more sensitive to such concerns, and also to rely on Persian or Muslim authors.

Iran poses unique questions for contemporary Western scholarship. The nation is often presented in the worst possible light imaginable. While it is true that Iran generates 75 percent of the world's executions even though it makes up only 1 percent of the world's population, such facts should not cause us to assume that the present religiously zealous government provides a mirror representation of the attitudes of its citizens. Iran is much more than a captive nation of veiled women, brusque ayatollahs, menacing plans for nuclear weapons, or incendiary remarks from an unbalanced president. It also is a country with environmental activists, groups like Students Seeking Freedom and

Equality, moderates, and dedicated campaigners in a women's movement for social change.⁴⁴ How can non-Iranian scholars responsibly present data in a context where there is little access and frequent hostility toward international media sources?⁴⁵ Accounts speaking for religious minorities in Iran, for example, cannot always be relied upon to be objective. Both Western and Iranian sources are often motivated by political polarization. How can these accounts be trusted? In spite of these concerns, the stories of those who are suffering need to be told in the hopes that their presentation will encourage further scrutiny and consideration. I have tried to include as many Iranian perspectives as possible in this research. What is most needed, at the initial phase of consideration, is background information which should help to provide a fuller picture of the situation.

Establishing a historical foundation for appreciating the Christian experience in Persia is not only prescient for the present, but also these stories contain consequential lessons in and of themselves for the study of Muslim and Christian interactions. Griffiths writes, "Now is the time for Westerners to consider the lessons to be learned from the experience of Christians who have lived in the world of Islam for centuries."⁴⁶ At the same time, the sobering recitations of the past offer sparse and meager ground for any deliriously optimistic expectations about future Muslim and Christian interactions within Iran.

We are wise to proceed realistically, while also holding forth a measure of hope that these interactions can stabilize and improve in a very uncertain future. What is undeniable is that the presence of Christians in Iran has created within the life of Persia an ongoing conversation that continues into the present and provides a unique, rich expression of global Christianity. When Islam, another foreign religion from the children of Abraham, enters Persia, there are even further fascinating cultural transformations. It is the task of historical interfaith analysis to find the ways in which the intellectual and philosophical cultures of both Persian Christianity and Persian Islam are dynamically inter-related. This book introduces some of those unique contributions to both Persian Islam and Persian Christianity.

One further reminder needs emphasis: There are as many variant experiences of being Shi'ite or Muslim as there are of being Christian, Protestant, Catholic, or Orthodox. There are as many divergent ways of being an Iranian as there are of being a Canadian, a Bengali, or an Irishman. Societies often structure themselves with distinct patterns, and this is certainly the case within Iran. In some ways, outsiders lack even the capacity to appreciate certain deeply cherished worldview assumptions, but, at other times, our perceptual divides can be eased by

the reminder that all of us share experiences and concerns as mothers and fathers, sons and daughters, which can provide an ample shared space in which our conversations can be mutually beneficial and instructive.

The focus of this book is on the interactions that Christians have had with Muslims in Persia historically and in modern Iran. The contextualization of present problems are best discussed in light of the historical record of the ways in which Persian Christians have related to people of other faith traditions in their homeland. In addition, in the words of Aidan Nicholls, "church history can be a privileged means of access to the inner truth of a Christian confession."⁴⁷ Christians in Persia are far more than a historical footnote; they are a living entity and present-day witness for the Christ of God. Learning about their testimony through the ages has certainly been a humbling inspiration to this author.

Many of the same problems that Muslims and Christians face in their global interactions with each other are also present in the Persian context. John Esposito remarks that the similarities between these two faiths have invariably "put the two on a collision course."⁴⁸ Fear and ignorance have marked much of the Muslim and Christian interaction worldwide. Both transnational religions often claim to preach the ultimate, universal truth, and both are often dedicated missionary religions which promise paradise and warn of a fiery hell. Historically, both traditions have often chosen to remain relationally apart from each other, although there have been a few bright exceptions through the centuries. It is a puzzling, engaging relationship, and I have immensely enjoyed both the research on this topic, and interactions with Persian Christians in Iran, Europe, and North America.

NOTES

1. One of the few empirical and comparative studies on this question was published in 2002. See Ghorbani, Nima, P. J. Watson, Framarz Ahad, Ronald J. Morris, and Ralph W. Hood. "Muslim-Christian Religious Orientation Scales: Distinctions, Correlations, and Cross-Cultural Analysis in Iran and the United States." *International Journal for the Psychology of Religion*, volume 12, number 2, 2002, pages 69–91.

2. Frye, Richard N. "Persia in the Mind of the West." *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations*. Volume 14, number 4, October 2003, page 406. Frye also notes that in the pre-1979 era the people of Persia were often compared with the French, "in both positive and negative features, so it is not surprising that this generality has emerged in writings of Westerners about Persia," (403).

3. Michael Axworthy writes: "There were Americans everywhere in Teheran in the 1970s. Author and professor James A. Bill has estimated that between 800,000 and 950,000 Americans lived in or visited Iran between 1944 and 1979 and that the number resident there increased from fewer than 8,000 in 1970 to nearly fifty thousand in 1979. Ten thousand were employed in defense industries around Isfahan alone. There were of course some Americans living in Teheran who made an effort to understand the country but many did not" (Axworthy, Michael, *Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*. New York: Basic Books, 2008, page 248). Axworthy notes that only American citizens could attend Teheran's American school or be treated at the American hospital. Iranian hospital staff could not speak Persian and had to eat in the janitor's room.

4. Religion has always played a large role in the political misconceptions that devout Muslim Iranians have had about the focus of American foreign policy. This can be proven through the various statements that the Ayatollah Khomeini has made about the role of religion in the United States. Iranians, for example, were aware that presidents such as Nixon and Ford placed their hands on the Bible and made an oath to God to serve justice. They saw the shah of Iran make the same public expressions of religion. When Jimmy Carter, an openly evangelical Christian and devout Sunday school teacher, arrived on the scene, he claimed that his faith led him to work for human rights. This led to hope among some Iranians who hoped for a change from the Nixon-Ford policy of ignoring human rights abuses inside Iran. When it came to the human rights of the people of Iran, however, Carter was not interested in challenging the shah's totalitarianism and indeed supported it by increasing arms sales and welcoming the shah to the White House as a distinguished guest. Carter also traveled to Iran where he warmly praised the relationship between the shah and his citizens. The mixture of religion and politics, in this context, encouraged some Iranians to see America as being both anti-Iranian and anti-Islamic. When speaking of Israel, the ayatollah would often point out the religious implications of the fact that little American assistance, at the time, was forthcoming to tens of millions of Arab Muslims in the region, while so much attention went to supporting the three million citizens of Israel.

5. The term "Persia" comes from the word "Pars," which is the name of the southwestern province of Iran along the Persian Gulf. The Arabs, with no "p" in their phonetics, referred to the country as Fars. The term "Farsi," which is the name for the ancient language of Persia, comes from this Arabic term. Local people called their country Iran meaning the "land of the Aryans" for millennia before it became the official name for the country in 1935.

6. Price, Massoume. *Iran's Diverse People: A Reference Sourcebook*. Santa Barbara, California: ABC Clío, 2005, page 1.

7. Maleki, Abbas, "Iran's Northeastern Borders: From Sarakhs to Khazar (the Caspian Sea)," in *The Boundaries of Modern Iran*. McLachlan, Keith, editor. New York: St. Martin's Press, 1994, page 11.

8. Salehi, M.M. *Insurgency through Culture and Religion: The Islamic Revolution of Iran*. New York: Praeger, 1988, page 13. Salehi's argument notes

that many of the sources of water in feudal times were under the control of those who had the wealth to maintain them. Land without water was not of much value, but irrigation networks forced people to work together and rely on the kindness of others. Further, skilled and trained workers were needed to maintain and annually repair these irrigation networks, and these requirements further made local populations beholden to those wealthy political elite who were able to maintain these effectively. Lastly, the wide open plains of Iran made them vulnerable to military raids and attacks which necessitated that farmers gain the protection of an external lord. All of these factors gave these lords almost total control over the people who were dependent upon him and strengthened the power of a feudal lord. No disobedience or disloyalty was to be tolerated, and any opposition was usually met with brutal force. Salehi's point is that the social systems of premodern Iran, based on water availability, create deeply rooted communitarian assumptions about the benefits of despotism.

9. Bailey, Betty Jane, and J. Martin, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publications, 2003, page 159.

10. Price, 321.

11. Price, 321. Price goes on to state, "The government is well aware of the hostility and problems imposed by such (repressive) trends among the younger generation. It has taken a few steps to reduce tensions and ease living conditions but with little success" (Price, 322).

12. Said, Edward. *Covering Islam: How the Media and the Experts Determine How We See the Rest of the World*. New York: Vintage Books, 1997 (1981), page 63.

13. Axworthy (1) observes:

Any speaker of a European language who is learning Persian soon encounters a series of familiar words: *pedar* (father—Latin, *pater*); *dokhtar* (daughter—German, *tochter*); *mordan* (to die—Latin, *mortuus*; French, *mourir, le mort*); *nam* (name); *dar* (door); and, perhaps the most familiar of all, the first-person present and singular of the verb "to be," the suffix *-am* (I am—as in the sentence "I am an Iranian: *Irani-am*). An English speaker who has attempted to learn German will find Persian grammar both familiar and blessedly simple by comparison. There are no genders or grammatical cases for nouns. Persian, like English, has evolved since ancient times into a simplified form, dropping the heavily inflected grammar of Old Persian.

14. The East-West Institute released a study on May 20, 2009, reporting that "a group of U.S. and Russian scientists say Iran could produce a simple nuclear device in one to three years and develop a nuclear warhead in another five years." *Waco-Tribune Herald*, May 20, 2009, 6A.

15. Melman, Yossi and Meir Javedanfar. *The Nuclear Sphinx of Teheran: Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the State of Iran*. New York: Carroll and Graf Publishers, 2007, page 53.

16. The Australian oil prospector William Knox D'Arcy began explorations for oil in 1901 after his agent bought rights to look for oil throughout the country except for the five northernmost provinces. The agreement was to pay the Qajar rulers twenty thousand British pounds up front and 16 percent of

the profits for the next sixty years. Oil was discovered in 1908, and the Anglo-Persian Oil Company (APOC) was formed in 1909. APOC built its first oil refinery in Abadan before World War I but the war curtailed its efforts. When drilling resumed after World War I the results were quite profitable but, since little of the profits went to Iranians, foreigners became the focus of particular resentment. The APOC was renamed the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company (AIOC) in 1933. In a 1954 agreement, the United States entered the oil industry in Iran in a joint partnership with the dissolved AIOC and reformulated NIOC (National Iranian Oil Company).

17. Axworthy (87) writes: "The great themes of the *Shahmeneh* are the exploits of proud heroes on horseback with lance and bow, their conflicts of loyalty between their conscience and their kings, their affairs with feisty women who are as slim as cypresses and radiant as the moon, and royal courts full of fighting and feasting—*razm o bazm*." Axworthy goes on to say, "The *Shahmeneh* has had a significance in Persian culture comparable to that of Shakespeare in English or the Lutheran Bible in German only perhaps more so—it has been a central text in education and in many homes, second only to the Qur'an and the great fourteenth-century poet Hafez" (87).

18. During one battle Rostam wounds an opponent that he discovers, too late, to be his son Sohrab whom he had with a Turan girl. In this way, Sohrab is sacrificed for the Persian nation. Firdausi writes of this event:

This was the fate allotted to me.
The heavens gave my key into your hand
it's not your fault. It was this hunchback fate
such is decreed by the stars
that I am slain by my father.

From the *Tragedy of Sohrab and Rostam*, translated by Jerome W. Clinton. Seattle: University of Washington Press, 1996, page 151.

19. The Persian book *Hazar Afsaneh (Book of a Thousand Tales)* is the precursor to the classic book of stories called *One Thousand and One Nights* (in Arabic, *alf-Layla wa Layla*), which is from Arabia and includes beloved stories from Arabia, Persia, Turkey, Egypt, and Mesopotamia such as "The Adventures of Sinbad," "Ali Baba and the 40 Thieves," and "Aladdin and the Magic Lamp." The Arabic version came to Europe during the Middle Ages but was not completely translated until Antoine Galland made a French translation in the eighteenth century and Edward Lane and Sir Richard Burton wrote English translations in the nineteenth century. The same story that frames the Arabian version also provides the outline for the earlier Persian book, *Book of a Thousand Tales*. It is a story of Sasanian kings Shahzaman and Shahriyar who are both brothers who rule from Samarkand and India and China. Both kings discover that their wives have been unfaithful and decide to take a new wife every night and have her beheaded in the morning. Finally, one woman, the vizier's daughter named Dinazad, tells a story to King Shahriyar every evening and thus is allowed to live and become queen. Most of the stories in the Arabic version first appear in the Persian narrative.

20. Mohssen Massarrat, "The Ideological Context of the Iran-Iraq War: Pan-Islamism versus Pan-Arabism" in Amirhamdi, Hooshang, and Nader Entessar, editors. *Iran and the Arab World*. London: St. Martin's Press, 1993, page 36.

21. Axworthy, 2. The archaeological site is called Hajji Firoz Tepe, near the Zargos Mountains.

22. Currents of migration moved in both directions in terms of Central Asia. Peimani reports that "the domination of Iranian peoples over Central Asia began in the second millennium B.C. However, the region was incorporated into the Iranian empire of the Achaemenids only around the sixth century B.C." Peimani, Hooman. *Regional Security and the Future of Central Asia: The Competition of Iran, Turkey, and Russia*. Westport, Connecticut: Praeger Books, 1998, page 23.

23. Curtis, Vesta Sarkhosh. *Persian Myths: The Legendary Past*. Austin, Texas: University of Texas Press, 1993, page 8. The Assyrian Empire collapsed in 612 B.C.E.

24. Herodotus (Book 1:216) states that the Massagetae, a warring Iranian tribe, may have established a polyandrous society based on matrilineal rule. Herodotus suggests that the women of this tribe could have all of the husbands or sexual partners that they wanted, but the men could have only one. Many scholars dismiss Herodotus's claim as being sensational and reflective more of his own views of the role of women.

25. This legend is cited in Deshen, Shlomo, and Walter Zenner, editors, *Jewish Societies in the Middle East: Community, Culture, and Authority*. Washington, D.C.: University Press of America, 1982, pages 99–114.

26. Cyrus liberated everyone from Babylonian rule with no particular interest given to the Jews or to any other ethnic group. The Bible, however, portrays his coming as "God's anointed," and all biblical accounts of his reign are positive. Cyrus gave all Jews citizenship, and many chose to remain in his kingdom instead of return to Israel. The book of Esther in the Hebrew Bible is entirely set in Iran. The Jewish festival of Purim also very closely parallels the Iranian springtime celebration of Fravardigan. The tomb of the prophet Daniel is said to be in the southwestern city of Shush (Susa). The temple in Jerusalem was not rebuilt until the following century and with Persian assistance. Israelites played a leading role in developing the commercial Silk Trade route with China. When the temple was destroyed a second time by the Romans in 70 C.E., a new form of Judaism, Rabbinic Judaism, emerged which relied on a text called the Mishnah, a commentary on the Mishnah called the Gemara, and a series of Talmudic books including one known as the Babylonian Talmud. Babylon was part of the Iranian world, under the control of the Sassanian Empire, at that time. The Sassanian ruler Yazdigerd I (399–421) had close relations with many rabbis. Unfortunately, the rule of Yazdigerd II (439–457) saw a time when Sabbath schools were closed, Jewish leaders were executed, and the observance of the Sabbath became forbidden.

27. The city of Hamadan, the summer capital of the Achaemenid Empire, in the foothills of the Zargos Mountains is home to a large Jewish community

that claims even today that it was in Hamadan that the story of Esther took place.

28. There were occasional troubles in ancient Persia as in the theme of the story of Queen Esther and the evil vizier Haman. At times, certain Zoroastrian priests attacked Judaism.

29. Before coming to Iran, the Jews wrote or spoke little of the afterlife. In contrast, Iran had a developed world of angels and demons. Jews had a cyclical view of time before coming to Iran and hearing of the apocalypse promised by Zoroastrians. They also taught about an evil deity named Ahriman which also came into Judaism, Christianity, and Islam as the person of Satan (who is only vaguely mentioned in Job). Iranians had a belief that, at the end of time, Saoshyant, a righteous king, would emerge to save people.

30. Barr, James. "The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity" in the *Journal of the American Academy of Religion*. Volume 53, number 2, June 1985 (201–235), page 201.

31. Price, 12: "Kurds are mentioned as mountain tribes of Zagros and were engaged in destroying part of the army of the rebellious Persian prince, Cyrus the Younger, around 400 B.C.E. They were called Carduchi by Xenophon and were described as 'rough mountain dwellers resisting all intrusion, fighting with sling shots and shooting arrows.'"

32. During the Achaemenid Era, Azerbaijan was known as Atropatene after the name of Governor Atropates who was a Mede who had declared his state independent from the rest of the country. He called his territory Atropatene which means "the place of tending the sacred fire." It is possible that the name was used before that time. After Alexander the Great captured Atropatene, he established fortifications to control the area.

33. One has to ask how the Achaemenid kings could be loyal Zoroastrians if they were burying their kings in tombs instead of following the religious practice of exposing their dead to the sun and to vultures. Perhaps the royal family or the upper class of citizens was exempted from the requirement of this ritual.

34. In the fifth century C.E. poems were written about Alexander who claims that he was directed by angels in his conquest of Persia. See G. J. Renwick, *Syrian Christianity under Later Sasanian and Early Islamic Rule*. Burlington, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 2005, chapter 6 entitled "Alexander the Great in Seventh Century Syriac Apocalyptic Texts" (150–78).

35. Waterfield, Robin. *Christians in Persia: Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics, and Protestants*. London: Allen and Unwin, 1973, page 12.

36. Dockerty, Paddy. *The Khyber Pass: A History of Empire and Invasion*. New York: University Square Press, 2008, page 34. While Alexander is the only person given this title, it is also used to describe Anga Mainyu, the hostile spirit who is the personification of evil and the eternal opposite of Ahura Mazda. For Zoroastrian writings see *The Book of Arda Wiraz*, 1:9, *The Great Bundahishn* 33:14, and *Denkard* 4:16, and 7.7.3. The historian Livius also writes about the ways that Alexander was scorned by Zoroastrians.

37. Vesta Sarkhosh Curtis gives the date for the founding of the Parthian Empire as 238 B.C.E. and marks the end date as 225 C.E. (Curtis, 8).

38. Parthian kings fought Crassus, Mark Antony, and many other Roman leaders. Augustus wisely followed a course of diplomacy with the Parthians. What invariably happened based on the nature of the two armies, their weapons, and their tactics was that the Parthians could never defeat the Romans on Roman soil where they lacked siege equipment and the hills provided aid for the Roman infantry. On the other side, the Romans were vulnerable to the Parthians on the wide expansive fields of Mesopotamia, and they were not able to provide their forces with the needed supply lines.

39. As recently as 1999, Victor Assal claimed that there were still 310,000 Christians living in Iran which would be about 4.5 percent of the entire population of almost sixty-nine million. See www.bsos.umd.edu/cidcm/mar/irnchst.htm, August 13, 2001, page 1.

40. Robert B. Reppa reports that, in 1974, there were 276,000 Christians, 67,000 Jews, and 35,000 Zoroastrians in Iran. Reppa, Robert B. *Israel and Iran: Bilateral Relationships and Effect on the Indian Ocean Basin*. New York: Praeger Publishers, 1974, page 107.

41. I am referring to the “h” sound which is not the hard “h” implied by the more widely used spelling Tehran. Both spellings are sometimes used in the same source. The governmental website for the Netherlands, for example, uses the spelling “Tehran” in their English version and “Teheran” in their Dutch version. Reuters and the *New York Times*, for example, also use both spellings interchangeably.

42. In modern Persian the term *ferdows* means both “heaven” and “garden.” The English word “paradise” is borrowed from the Greek transliteration of the Persian term which was *paradisos*. The Arabic term for Paradise is *jannat* but the Persian concept of paradise predates the advent of Islam in Arabia.

43. Marshall, David. *God, Muhammad, and the Unbelievers: A Qur’anic Study*. London: Curzon Press, 1999, page 2.

44. Students Seeking Freedom and Equality claims to have campus organizations on a number of campuses with over forty students involved. Recently, four students from SSFE—Berooz Kerimzadie, Peyman Piran, ‘Ali Kantori, and Majid Pourmajid—were arrested and their case is being closely watched by Human Rights Watch who issued a statement on their behalf on April 10, 2008, that they should either be charged or released. Students were also arrested at Shiraz University after a protest there in March of 2008. They were arrested after a rally on Student Day on December 7, 2007. This observes the day when three students were shot and killed at the University of Teheran in 1953. More information can be found about recent student protestor arrests at the website of the organization International Campaign for Human Rights in Iran.

45. Iranian-American reporter Roxana Saberi was given an eight-year prison sentence for spying for the United States, but was released in June 2009. Saberi is a freelance journalist for the BBC and National Public Radio and had lived

in Iran for six years before her arrest. *The New York Times*. "Iranian Court Will Review Prison Term for Journalist," by Nazila Fathi, May 7, 2009, A10.

46. Griffiths, Sidney H. *The Church in the Shadow of the Mosque: Christians and Muslims in the World of Islam*. Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2008, page 179.

47. Nicholls, Aidan, *Light from the East: Authors and Themes in Orthodox Theology*. London: Sheed and Ward, 1995, page 2.

48. Esposito, John L., *The Islamic Threat: Myth or Reality?* New York: Oxford University Press, 1999 (1992), page 35.

2

Early Persian Religions, Judaism, and Christianity before Islam

The Elephant dreams of one thing—the Elephant driver dreams of another.

Iranian proverb

One day the Prophet Abraham invited a person to dinner but when he learned that he was an infidel he cancelled the invitation and turned him out. Immediately the Divine Voice reprimanded him saying, “You did not give him food for even a day because he belonged to a different religion, yet for the last seventy years I am feeding him day and night in spite of his heresy. Had you fed him for one night, you would not have become poor on that account.”

al-Ghazali

EARLY PERSIAN RELIGION AND ZOROASTRIANISM

The first settlers of Persia had religious beliefs which seem to parallel the faith convictions of early Indian civilization. Foltz explains: “Ancient Iranians believed the universe was created in seven stages—the number seven having a lasting mystical significance.”¹ Humans forged links with supernatural beings that they called *mainyus* and also with the forces of the natural world such as the sun, moon, stars, and elements. Those favored by the gods received a heavenly blessing—a *khavarna*—which would provide them with financial prosperity, long life, and health. One of the loftiest gods was Ahura Mazda, the Sun God, who was also associated with wisdom.² Ancestors and heroes

who died would also join this pantheon of powerful spiritual forces. Libation rituals, animal sacrifices, chants, and formulas were passed down from generation to generation as a way to effectively unleash divine blessings upon the community.³

It was from rituals and prayers developed in early Persia that the religion of Zoroastrianism sprung into existence. The major ideas of the religion are ancient, but the rituals and holy books, called the *Avesta*, were written between 1000 and 600 B.C.E.⁴ It was shortly after this time that Cyrus the Great came to power. Major religious works are called the *gathas*, or “hymns.” Many of these are dedicated to relating accounts about the life of Zoroaster (Persian, *Zardosht*) who is not to be considered the founder of the religion but only its apt promoter. Followers of his teachings find the term “Zoroastrian” offensive and sometimes call themselves modestly followers of “a good religion” (*veh-din*) or, more frequently, “worshippers of God” (*Yazdan Parast*).⁵ Those who poured out libations were called *magi* (“guardians of the sacred flame”) or *zaotars*, and this is likely where Zoroaster, a priest in this rank, received his name.⁶

Little can be known about Zoroaster, the most preeminent advocate of “the good religion.” In fact, Foltz writes that “among the *founders* of the world’s major religious faiths, none is more shrouded in mystery than Zoroaster.”⁷ It is not certain where or when he was born, but one legend tells that at the moment of his birth he laughed instead of cried out because he came to the earth with a hopeful message of joy and affirmation.

The Prophet was more of a reformer who restored ancient ideas than he was a teacher of new doctrines.⁸ He taught that Ahura Mazda was the one, supreme God, probably making Zoroastrianism the most ancient form of monotheism. Zoroaster taught that there was a dualism expressed throughout the world: the power of good, represented by light and Ahura Mazda, was in perpetual spiritual combat with evil, represented by darkness and Ahriman, the king of lies.⁹ The world was brimming over with demons who unleashed chaos and disorder and also angelic spirits who imparted prosperity, health, good weather, and kept the faithful from natural disasters. Zoroastrianism has a strong ethical core and commends its followers to work tirelessly for social justice against life’s pressing social evils.

Above all else, Zoroastrianism affirmed the wonder and beauty of life. Adrian Fortescue claims that “it is perhaps the only religion which considers fasting actually wicked.”¹⁰ The religion promoted “truth as opposed to lies” and told followers to “always strive for good words, good thoughts, and good deeds.”¹¹ It is a pragmatic faith which seeks

to touch every dimension of life with holiness in hopes of making this life become a preface to an eternal celebration of heavenly reward.

Sexual ethics were strict in terms of fidelity, and celibacy was seen to be an unconscionable evil. In one odd expression of sexual mores, however, Zoroastrians felt that it was morally acceptable—some might say even advisable—to marry one's own brother or sister.¹² Zoroaster taught that one's moral decisions in this life would directly affect one's level of blessing in the world to come. After death, a person's good deeds would be weighed on a scale balanced against one's evil deeds. Good people would ascend to a realm of bliss while evildoers would face a period of punishment in hell.¹³

Zoroastrianism has played a sizeable role in the evolution of Persian civic and religious culture. Even today, the names of the months of the Persian calendar represent Zoroastrian archangels.¹⁴ Universalist Zoroastrianism also has had an impact on the world's religions, and, as Michael Axworthy asserted, "Nietzsche was right—Zoroaster was the first creator of the moral world we live in: *Also sprach Zarathustra*."¹⁵

Zoroastrians believed that the way that one curried God's favor was to perform acts of virtue but also to pray at least five times a day. Priests recited scriptures with special readings being added for certain holy days and festivals. Many of these festivals were already celebrated in Persia and focused on the changing seasons of the year. Worshippers would always pray in the presence of a sacred fire which has led some to describe Zoroastrianism as fire worship. This common term of disapprobation was given to them by both ancient Greeks and Muslims who first arrived in Persia during the middle of the seventh century.

Zoroastrianism teaches that the natural way of things was not to be disturbed either in life or death. The faith is well known for its practice of exposing dead bodies in lofty "Towers of Silence" so that remains can be picked clean by vultures and the sun can fully bleach the bones of the beloved departed. This was also done so as not to pollute life-giving soil with dead bodies. Zoroastrians also felt that life-giving water, as well as fire, was sacred and pure. The ceremonialization of the natural order made it a religious anathema for anyone to kill a snake, spider, or scorpion because these minions have been released into our world in order to serve the inscrutable designs of the evil Angra Mainya.¹⁶

From its inception, Zoroastrianism was a universalist religion of missionaries who went throughout Persia promoting their message and warning all to avoid the fires of hell and embrace the liberating truths of their holy books. Missionaries carried these books throughout Central Asia and even traveled as far as China with their gospel.

Sometimes their declarations were seen as threatening to those whom they traveled among, and they were persecuted and even killed for their preaching. Part of their difficulties may also have sprung from the fact that the very concept of missionary proselytization was unknown to most cultures before that time: Zoroastrians were probably the world's first missionaries. The main way the religion spread, however, was both through the exemplary lives of saintly followers and through the distribution of Zoroastrian holy books, which were continually being revised, adapted, and translated in order to better reach their intended audiences among the various cultures that they encountered.

BUDDHIST MISSIONARIES IN PERSIA

The Buddhist king Asoka (Ashoka) governed India and dispatched missionaries to the *Kambojas* (Persians) in the middle of the third century B.C.E. Early Theravadan evangelists tried to adapt their message to Zoroastrians by downplaying alien concepts and accentuating points of theological and ethical agreement.¹⁷ Because the distances were so vast and the dangers of travel were so extensive, these Buddhist preachers tended to travel in groups and along the well-guarded caravan routes. Sometimes, Buddhist monasteries were established alongside caravan centers which would serve as hotels and restaurants for grateful travelers.¹⁸ Buddhism spread modestly throughout the eastern Iranian world, and archaeologists and historians have affirmed the presence of the Buddhist message from Persian missionaries along with some traces of their work in Afghanistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and Tajikistan, as well as throughout Persia.¹⁹ Buddhist influence can be seen in Persian art, literature, and certain phrases in the Persian language while Persian influences might be traceable to certain Buddhist rituals and festivals which closely parallel Persian festivals.²⁰

CHRISTIANITY IN THE PARTHIAN ERA

Christianity first arrived in Persia during the Parthian Era and possibly as early as the first century.²¹ Persian Christians sometimes claim that the wise men (the magi) of the Epiphany were the first Christians. The book of Acts cites that "Parthians, Medes, and Elamites," three Persian tribal groups, were present at the founding of the Christian Church on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2:9). St. John Chrysostom affirmed this view when he taught, "The Incarnate Word on coming into

the world gave to Persia, in the person of the *magi*, the first manifestations of His mercy and light so that the Jews themselves learn from the mouths of Persians of the birth of their Messiah."²²

Some Persian Christians believe that the Apostle Thomas visited Persia en route to India. Adrian Fortescue regrets that "instead of these legends we can advance only timid conjectures about the origin of Persian Christianity."²³ What is certain is that Christianity came to Persia early in the life of the Christian church. Some Christians probably moved into the tolerant realm of the Parthian kings, settling just across the Roman frontier, as refugees fleeing persecution in the Roman Empire (beginning around 68 C.E.). Others may have come as missionaries seeking to preach to Jewish communities in the Parthian Empire. All of these Christians, whatever their motive in coming to Persia, looked to Edessa (modern-day Urfa in Turkey) as their spiritual home.²⁴ Edessa had a flourishing Christian community by the end of the second century. It was under the ecclesiastical control of the Patriarch of Antioch. The eastern Aramaic dialect of Edessa, perhaps the Aramaic spoken by Jesus, was to become the primary liturgical language of the Orthodox churches of Persia.

Missionary bases were set up in northern Mesopotamia and a Christian bishop was appointed for the largely Jewish city of Arbela (near the Tigris River in modern-day Iraq) in 104.²⁵ According to the disputed *Chronicles of Arbela*, one of the first martyrs of Persian Christianity was Samson (*Semsoun*), the bishop of Arbela, who was killed somewhere between 118 and 123 by Zoroastrian priests who felt threatened by the rapid growth of the church. Christians had been allowed by the government to practice their faith freely but were arrested quickly whenever they began to preach their faith to settled Zoroastrian communities. This was because Zoroastrianism was seen as the only faith of a true-born Persian and arrests began as early as 170 in the province of Bactria. A number of early Christian writings, including reflections by Chrysostom and Clement of Alexandria, reveal an early and vigorous discussion between Christianity and Zoroastrianism. Local officials, however, did not allow such debates to express themselves in Zoroastrians choosing to convert to Christianity.²⁶

One of the first verifiable histories of Christianity in the region was written by Tatian the Assyrian (110–180), a zealous ascetic who wrote a synoptic gospel in hopes of stamping out heretical ideas among the Christians who lived "between the two rivers."²⁷ One Armenian document written by a cleric named Bardaisan, from 196, shows that a Christian community was in existence "among the Gilanians and

Bactrians," and the apocryphal Acts of Thomas (from the same era) mentions Christians in the "land of the Kushans."²⁸

By the year 225, over twenty bishoprics were established throughout the Parthian Empire. Christians in Persia even established monasteries although they used different titles for monks and nuns than were used among Greek and Coptic Christians.²⁹ These Christian parishes were spread out over a wide range of the Parthian Empire. Dutch archaeologists have uncovered a Christian cemetery on the Persian island of Kharg (16 miles from the mainland) which dates to 250 along with about sixty tombs that speak of the remnants of an active Christian church. By the end of the Parthian Era, Christian churches spread from Edessa in modern-day Turkey to Herat in western Afghanistan.

RELIGION IN PERSIA DURING THE SASANIAN EMPIRE

The Parthians governed through a loose alliance of tribes and clans which were constantly fighting each other. One of these groups from Fars in the south, the Sasanians, was able to take control of this confederation and created a much stronger central authority which used religion and language, as well as the threat of force, to cement loyalties. King Ardrashir I established a new kingdom, the Sasanian Kingdom (240–642 C.E.), from his hometown of Istakhr (near Persepolis).³⁰ The Sasanians named their new nation Eranshahr (where the term "Iran" originates from) and claimed that they were ruling with the direct mandate of the gods. Under the absolutist monarchical Sasanian Empire, Zoroastrianism became the state religion, and other faiths were relegated to a second-class status.³¹ Zoroastrian religious texts were redacted and revised during the Sasanian period in order to remain relevant in addressing quickly changing political circumstances.

GNOSTICS, MANACHAEANS, MAZDAKITES, AND JEWS BATTLE WITH ZOROASTRIANS

One legacy of Greek military presence in Persia may have been the presence of certain gnostic ideas. The term "Gnostic" (from the Greek "those who know") means a belief in mystical, esoteric teachings which will bring spiritual enlightenment about the true, hidden nature of the world. A group of gnostics, called the Mandaens, emerged (and still exist) in the southern marshes of modern Iraq and Iran.³² The

Mandaens trusted in a sacred text called the *Ginza* which related the need to follow certain Jewish rituals, the water-baptismal rite given by John the Baptist, and the secret teachings of Jesus. Humans are born in a fallen state and need to return to the pure light of truth. If they fail morally, they will be consigned temporarily for purging, to a cold world of darkness ruled over by evil spirits associated with the zodiac, who are children of an evil female spirit named Ruha. Each human has a heavenly twin who is able to assist them in this evil life and who serves to guide people toward spiritual light and pure truth. Baptism (*masbuta*) in flowing water is the central ritual for the moral inward purity that the Mandaens seek to attain.

During the Sasanian period, another new religion emerged through the teachings of a dark and brooding prophet named Mani who was born in Persia in April 215 C.E. Mani received a number of revelations that he should not eat meat, drink wine, or sleep with women (because they were impure).³³ Sexuality was the way in which evil imprisoned light and held humanity in darkness. Mani, who mixed gnostic ideas with Jewish and Christian teachings, claimed he was God's final prophet. His message was that Jesus Christ came to the earth to teach the truth of spiritual dualities and ascetic practices.³⁴

Today known as Manichaeism, this religion fought for influence among the priests of the Zoroastrian (then known as Mazdaen) elite who were close to the central imperial powers. One modern critic stated that Mani promoted a "monstrosity of existence," while Axworthy states that the thinking of Mani "was a kind of Pandora's box of malignity, the particles of which went fluttering off in all directions on their misshapen wings."³⁵ The Prophet Muhammad was supposed to have explained, "All will be saved except one: the Manichaeans."³⁶ Manichaeism is easily one of the most maligned—and thus one of the most misunderstood—faith traditions in all of religious history.³⁷ It has been argued that one of its greatest critics—the Christian monk St. Augustine (a former Manichean)—was also probably responsible for carrying the remnants of a number of Manichaean ideas into the heart of medieval Christian theology.³⁸

The message of Manichaeism survived, however, due to the aggressive work of faithful missionaries who took the message across Central Asia and into China.³⁹ These zealots worked hard to master local languages and translate their writings into vernacular dialects. They also incorporated local rituals and worldview assumptions into their teachings as they continued to adapt to their target audiences.

Zoroastrian influences eventually won out, and Mani was imprisoned by royal edict and thrown into jail where he died shortly there-

after. A Zoroastrian magi named Kerdir succeeded in encouraging the Sasanian king to acknowledge that Zoroastrianism was the official state religion. But this status, and the triumph over Manichaeism, was a pyrrhic victory. At the same time that "Zoroastrianism sought to become the official religion of Iran," it also continued to foster an "open and syncretistic relationship with neighboring religious cultures" in an attempt to "harmonize Iranian traditions" into a unifying fusion with those of their ethnic and religious neighbors.⁴⁰

There were many other religions that emerged over the three and a half centuries of Sasanian rule, and this fact troubled the Zoroastrian elite. In the fifth century, another religious visionary named Mazdak began preaching a message of social justice before he was arrested and executed.⁴¹ His followers, the Mazdakites, shared a vision of shared goods and lands (and perhaps also shared wives). This faith, sometimes described as a form of proto-Communism, later reemerged to some degree among certain Isma'ili sects. This is probably where the greatest legacy of this movement was to be found.

Zoroastrians felt that religionists such as Mazdakites, Jews, Christians, Buddhists, and relocated Indian Brahmins should be curtailed by the rulers, but government officials were concerned with more pressing political and economic concerns and allowed other religions to flourish.⁴² In fact, a number of faiths increased their influence and extent dramatically under a Sasanian rule indifferent to their presence.

Under Sasanian rule, Jews lost any political autonomy that they had gained in the Parthian Era. Zoroastrian priests sometimes incited followers to destroy Jewish places of worship and sought to have local politicians forbid the practice of Jewish rituals. In spite of these attacks, the Jewish community was able to thrive during the Sasanian Period, because their economic networks were extensive and instrumental in the operation of the Silk Road trade. When Jews actively rose up to support Sasanian military efforts against their Roman enemies, it was soon realized at the governmental level that they were no threat to the Sasanian rule and that their business acumen was an invaluable asset to the wealth of the royal court. Jewish scholarship was eventually able to flourish in Persia under later Sasanian rulers. The first Persian translation (in Hebrew characters) of the Pentateuch was published in 1546 (in Istanbul), and Walter Fischel claims that "the Bible became an inseparable part of Persian literature."⁴³ In contrast to improved Muslim-Jewish relations, tensions began to increase between Jews and Christians in this era, characterized by a number of heated Jewish-Christian arguments.

CHRISTIANITY IN THE SASANIAN ERA

Christianity, which had first come to Persia during the Parthian Era, continued to flourish under early Sasanian rule. Whenever Sasanian warriors captured Roman territories in battle, they deported Christians from conquered lands and resettled them in Persia. The first such mass deportation took place between 256 and 260 at the outset of the reign of King Shapur I. These thousands of Christian prisoners of war originally came from Antioch. Some of these Christians who arrived in their new country served with distinction at high levels of the Sasanian military and in the government.⁴⁴

Church historian Eusebius noted that a certain John of Persia attended the Council of Nicea in the fourth century.⁴⁵ One of the first Persian church leaders was the fourth-century monk Aphrahat whom Jacob Neusner called one of the "first great fathers [along with Ephrem] of the Iranian Church."⁴⁶ Aphrahat wrote long polemics against Judaism and encouraged Persian Christians to pay little attention to their Jewish neighbors.⁴⁷ Another important person in early Persian Christianity was Abraham of Kashgar (born about 491) who was responsible for reviving monastic Christian orders in the country.⁴⁸

Nestorian Christians began to arrive in Edessa (and other cities in Persia) in large numbers at the end of the fifth century. Other Persian Christians gladly converted to Nestorian Christianity as a way to sever all religious ties with Rome. The fact that the church experienced no persecution from the government almost certainly had something to do with the fact that it had no political connection with Rome (Persia's greatest political rival). Another positive factor for many Persians was that the Nestorians quickly adapted to the local Zoroastrian context and forbade all forms of celibacy. Bishop Bar Sauma, the first Nestorian bishop in Persia, set the example by marrying a former nun.

The Nestorians are one of the most misunderstood communities in all of Christian history. This is because, according to Stephen Neill, "almost all of Church history has been presented exclusively from the Western point of view."⁴⁹ Nestorius was a monk in Antioch who had been promoted to the rank of Archbishop in Constantinople (Istanbul), but he faced political opposition which soon became framed in the guise of charges of religious heresy. Nestorius was forced to flee to the Libyan Desert where he spent his last years writing his *Apologia* (which one writer described "as one of the dullest books that ever came from the hand of man"⁵⁰). The actual theological points of disagreement that Nestorius had with Cyril were minor and semantical, although, at the time, they were considered of earth-shattering consequentiality.⁵¹

As Nestorian Christians were persecuted, they fled to the East. Even in Edessa, however, there were schisms between those who supported Nestorius—such as the theologian Theodore of Mopsuestia and the translator Hiba—and those who warned that he was a heretic—such as the Syriac bishop of Edessa Rabbula who forced Theodore and Hiba into exile. When Rabbula died in 437, Hiba returned from exile and became the archbishop of Edessa and cemented its role as the center of Nestorian Christianity. This position of honor was held until 489 when the Monophysite bishop of Edessa closed down the Nestorian seminary in the city. This led Nestorians to retreat even further eastward to the city of Nisibis where they established a training center (with as many as one thousand students studying the Bible and evangelistic missionary methods⁵²). It was at this point that the decision was made that Nestorian priests would be allowed to marry. This break with tradition further outraged their foes. Most of the sacraments developed in the West remained in the East except the confession of sins to a priest. The first Nestorian patriarchate was organized by Persian bishops at the Synod of Marktaba in 424.⁵³

Christians and Zoroastrians often had an uneven relationship from the outset. Christians were so numerous in Persia during the Sasanian period that one Zoroastrian leader suggested that Christians should be eliminated altogether.⁵⁴ Laws were passed which were stricter than previous Parthian laws about Christians in Persia, and Christians were no longer able to operate with their own legal civil codes.⁵⁵ Zoroastrians attacked Christians for believing that God could be a human being and that He could mysteriously allow Himself to be killed. Some Christians responded by engaging Zoroastrians in challenging debates about the nuances of their own religion.⁵⁶ Other Zoroastrians called for calm: “Cease, therefore to harass the Christians, but exert yourselves diligently in doing good works, so that the Christians and adherents of other religions, seeing that, may praise you for it and feel themselves drawn to your religion.”⁵⁷

Some of the first Christians to arrive in Persia were of Armenian descent although little historiographic evidence remains of their communities except “theological and liturgical” documents.⁵⁸ Another source to learn about these first Christians comes through literature written against them by their opponents.⁵⁹ Propagandists warned, “Christians destroy our holy teaching and teach me to serve one God and not to honor the Sun, or Fire. . . . They attribute the origin of snakes and creeping things to a good God. They despise many servants of the King and teach witchcraft.”⁶⁰ Conversions to Christianity, however, seem to have continued unabated throughout the Sasanian Empire.

The most difficult time for Christians under Sasanian rule was during the era of King Shapur II (or Shahpur, 310–379). During the last forty years of Shapur II's rule, Christians were seen in a negative political light as a "potential fifth-column for the Romans."⁶¹ Since Shapur was fighting the Romans who were Christians, he equated Christianity with treason—a sad misconception which has often affected Christians worldwide throughout church history. It was also around this time that Constantine mandated that Christianity should become the favored religion of the empire and provocatively ordered that the symbol of the Christian cross become emblazoned on the battle standards of the Roman armies.

When Shapur lost a humiliating defeat at the hands of the Roman army at Nisibis, vulnerable Christian communities came under a scalding attack in an empire that was eagerly looking for scapegoats. Taxes on Christians were doubled by the Persian ruler (called the "king of kings") with the thought that they should bear the brunt of the costs of war. The bishop of Seleucia-Ctesiphon, Catholicos Simon Bar Sabbae, refused to oblige the shah, saying, "I am no tax-collector but a shepherd of the Lord's flock."⁶² The bishop, along with five other bishops and over one hundred other church leaders were arrested and then publicly beheaded in front of Bishop Simon on Good Friday, April 17, 341, before the bishop was the last to be killed. For the next forty years, assaults against Christians were carried out in vehement force. The emperor concluded that Christians had sympathies and extensive communication networks with Christian Rome and were probably acting as spies. In Shapur II's proclamation against "these Nazarenes," he explained: "They dwell in our land and share the ideas of Caesar, our enemy."⁶³

Shapur II became convinced by his Zoroastrian advisors that fealty to the emperor should be expressed by Persian subjects as loyalty to the emperor's religion. This is how Zoroastrianism assumed the role of the state religion of the Sasanians. J. Duchesne-Guillemin cites the fact that Christian martyrs had their severed heads offered to the god Anahita as an act of devotion as proof of this opinion. Other scholars, such as Jacob Neusner, feel that the Zoroastrian religion of the time was too eclectic and unorthodox for Shapur II to inaugurate a uniform state religion.⁶⁴

In any event, Christians suffered in countless horrific ways. Of this era, Fortescue writes:

It is strange that anyone can forget the Persian martyrs. Not in the worst times of Roman persecution was there so cruel a time for

Christians as under Shapur II of Persia. In proportion to the extent and the time the persecution lasted, Persia has more martyrs than any other part of the Christian world.⁶⁵

Persecutions were sadistically carried out if any Christian refused to “deny the son of the carpenter.”⁶⁶ Persian Christians, also called “Sons of the Carpenter,” were often flayed alive, dismembered, and even thrown into deep pits filled with rats and left to starve and be eaten.⁶⁷ At least thirty-five thousand Christians “joined the white-robed heavenly army of martyrs” after being tortured to death for refusing to become Zoroastrians.⁶⁸ Samuel Moffat claims that as many as 190,000 Persian Christians were slaughtered during this ghoulish pogrom of terror.⁶⁹

It is amazing that any Christians at all survived these four decades of state-organized genocide, but Christians had managed to continue to both worship and evangelize. The situation improved dramatically for them after Shapur II's death in 379. King Yazdigerd I (399–421) issued an Edict of Toleration in 409 which paralleled the Edict of Constantine a century earlier. Grateful Christians immediately adopted the Nicene Creed and sought to bind themselves more closely with Christians in the West.⁷⁰ Yazdigerd I was “hailed in Christian documents as the victorious and glorious king and some even claimed that he was a Christian.”⁷¹ Yazdigerd I mandated that those churches which had been destroyed should be rebuilt and that those Christians who had been imprisoned should be released. It is even reported that the shah considered making Christianity the state religion after being impressed by “various miracles of healing wrought by Christian authorities.”⁷²

He also offered the same policy of toleration toward his Jewish subjects. While grateful Jews hailed King Yazdigerd I as a new Cyrus, his royal edict enraged the religious elite, and he was widely branded as an apostate and a traitor to the Zoroastrian faith. This public opposition by the religious elite meant that the period of official toleration toward Judaism and Christianity was to be short-lived. After only a decade, the aging king began to heed the shrill, persistent laments of powerful Zoroastrian priests who expressed outrage at the conversion of some of their members to these alien faiths. The plight of Jews and Christians changed dramatically once again shortly after the death of Yazdigerd I. The shah was succeeded by a hedonistic son, Bahram V, who had no interest in opposing Zoroastrian priests who called for restrictions against religious minorities. Bahram V, also known as Bahram Gur (The Wild Ass) because of his love for hunting, women, and wine, ruled briefly because, one day, he disappeared suddenly into a

concealed bog of quicksand while hunting for wild boar in the marshes surrounding Medea (in 439 C. E).

Persecution resumed in force again under Yazdigerd II (439–457) who seemed determined to return the Zoroastrian elite to power and to reignite a national passion for the true faith. This led to large-scale oppressive torments for non-Zoroastrians. Over one hundred fifty thousand Christians were murdered in the two decades that Yazdigerd II was in power.⁷³ Christians were publicly tortured and held in public cages until they starved to death. Some had their bodies torn apart with broken reeds or were thrown into “pits to be eaten by starving rats.”⁷⁴ Other Christians who refused to deny their faith were beheaded or crucified by Zoroastrian priests.

In one particularly brutal ceremony, on August 24 and 25, 446, the shah gathered church leaders and their families from throughout the empire in Karka (modern Kirkuk in Iraq) where he proceeded to butcher them slowly one by one. One of the executioners was reportedly so touched by the stalwart faithfulness of those he was killing that he too confessed faith in Christ, which meant that he himself was condemned to be crucified (on September 25 of that same year). Another leading evangelist, Pethion, continued to preach boldly and had a harvest of results until he was beheaded in 447 near the city of Kholwan. The only positive factor from this era was that the intense persecution forced the Persian Church to break from the ecclesiastical rule of the Patriarch of Antioch and independently establish their own Catholicos Dadishu as Patriarch in the Council of Marktaba held in 424.

During the Sasanian era, the Nestorian Apostolic Churches arrived in Persia through intense missionary activity which continued on into Central Asia and even as far west as China. Persia soon became the jumping-off point for the expansion of Christianity into Asia.⁷⁵ Christian minorities found sanctuary in Persia in the face of the intense sufferings which they were experiencing in the Roman Empire (usually by their fellow Christians). Unlike other Christian groups, apostolic churches did not grow because of the decline of Zoroastrian influence. It is possible, according to Neusner, that many early Persian converts to Christianity might have been converted Jews. This is proven by a number of Jewish-Christian *Arguments* which were transcribed in Persia from the fourth century. Neusner writes that, in the fourth century, the “everyday relationship between the two communities was vigorous, intimate, and competitive.”⁷⁶

Nestorians fled to Persia for safety after the bitter Chalcedonian Council of 451. When they moved to Persia, they tended to settle

in isolated communities and not to mix much with local populations. They were free to practice their religion and broke entirely from Byzantine religious authorities. Celibacy and monasticism were renounced and diophysitism (the two natures of Christ) became the official doctrine of a large portion of the Persian church in 486. The present-day Armenian Church maintains that the two natures of Christ, the divine and the human, have united to become one nature. This doctrine is derisively called monophysitism by its non-Armenian and Nestorian critics.⁷⁷

The city of Gondeshapur in the southwestern Iranian province of Khuzestan became the center of their activities and home for a Nestorian-sponsored medical college.⁷⁸ Nestorians were able to convert most of the Assyrians living in the region to accept their doctrines. Many Nestorian Assyrians were forced to flee from their homeland in Iraq to the relative safety of the mountainous regions of Kurdistan near the city of Urmiah. The Assyrian Church of the East gradually joined with Nestorian churches and became one of the most widespread missionary movements in the history of Christendom. Nestorian Christians extended from Cyprus in the west to Tibet and central China in the Far East.⁷⁹ Vibrant Nestorian bishoprics were established in the Persian cities of Nishapur (in Khusiristan), Merv (in modern-day Turkmenistan), and Herat (in modern-day Afghanistan). Nestorian Christians were present in some of the larger cities of India and even in remote Mongolia. Persian Christian crosses with Pahlavi inscriptions have been unearthed near Madras (in India) dating from the eighth century.⁸⁰

The presence of Nestorian missionaries is chronicled in Marco Polo's book of legends from the fourteenth century. The Church of the East was known for its commitment, not only to evangelism and missions, but also to careful scholarship, and that is how it often first gained a foothold in certain localities. Some missionaries, including one beloved Armenian missionary, not only preached the gospel of eternal life but also pragmatically taught the Turkic tribes of Central Asia the everyday concerns of how to grow hardy vegetables and plant corn.

Nestorian parishes continued to expand because church members were not afraid to share their faith with their neighbors and because they conducted services and published portions of the Bible in various local languages. The Nestorians were also noted for their discipline and zeal, and they conducted their church communities with strict rules about how to raise their children and how they should dress. One historian from the period said that during their Christian meet-

ings, “no one whispers, no one fell asleep, laughs, or makes signs.”⁸¹ However, their rapid evangelistic growth among formerly Zoroastrian villages resulted in further difficulties during the Sasanian era under the reign of Shah Chosroes I (Khosrow Anushirvan, 531–579).

While the shah was away fighting a war with the Roman Empire (from 540–545), his officials detained the Orthodox Patriarch Mar Aba I (bishop from 540–552) and warned him that he would be released from prison only if he promised to stop making converts.⁸² When Mar Aba refused, he was shackled in prison for a number of years.⁸³ Zoroastrians accused Mar Aba of being an apostate and an enemy of the true religion and claimed that Christians disgustingly married their close relatives.⁸⁴ When Chosroes learned that Mar Aba was imprisoned he released him and sent the patriarch into exile in (what is now called) Azerbaijan. Mar Aba, however, returned illegally from exile which led some Zoroastrian leaders to attempt to assassinate this prominent church leader. Again, the shah intervened and, again, the patriarch was briefly imprisoned. When Mar Aba finally died of old age, Zoroastrian opponents sought to have his body thrown to the dogs to be ripped apart, but the bishop was instead buried at the monastery outside Seleucia-Ctesiphon in a widely celebrated public ceremony.

Sasanaian antipathy towards Christianity also carried over to Persian actions on distant battlefields. In one odd narrative, the Sasanian ruler Chosroes II (Khosrow) ordered the Orthodox Patriarch Sabaryeshu I (596–604) to accompany the army in order to pray for its success against their Byzantine Christian foes.⁸⁵ This, however, was not a difficult task for Sabaryeshu, since he believed that the Byzantines were misled heretics. In another expression of interest in Christian leaders, Chosroes (one of his wives was a Christian) forbade the church to replace Gregory (who died in 608) as patriarch until 628.⁸⁶ He also forced Christians to wear a distinctive mark on their clothing and doubled their taxes to pay for his wars.⁸⁷ When Sasanian warriors advanced into the Middle East (from 614 to 628), they demolished a number of Christian churches, including the storied Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem.

There were also examples of Christians who were slain near the end of the Sasanian Empire, such as the martyrdom of the Armenian Christian Magundat-Anastasius who was murdered by order of Shah Chosroes II on January 22, 628.⁸⁸ Yazdin, the royal silversmith appointed to the shah, was also beheaded for his Christian faith, and his goods were confiscated by the state. Yazdin’s wife was also tortured to see if she would reveal any other valuable treasures that the silversmith might have hidden. Vine explains that this wave of persecution

“was partly motivated by the urgent need for money to carry on the forlorn defense of the empire, for the Christians had many men of substance among them. Many innocent Christians thus suffered to appease Persian fear and to help refill the war-depleted royal treasury.”⁸⁹

NOTES

1. Foltz, Richard C. *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*. Oxford: One-World Publications, 2004, page 12.

2. While Ahura Mazda is later singled out by Zoroastrians as the one, supreme God, in these early stages there are many gods. This has led some scholars to refer to pre-Sasanian Zoroastrianism as Mazdaism.

3. Foltz (2004) notes that ritual vessels were purified through the use of cow urine, rich in ammonia, page 14.

4. The *Avesta* was first translated into a European language in 1771 by the Frenchman Anquetil du Perron. This version was much criticized for its inaccuracies. The first English translation of the *Avesta* was not published until 1887 and was translated by James Darmesteter. The *Avesta* is composed of a number of sections including ancient myths called the *Yasht*. Some of the same myths from this book are also repeated in the *Shahnameh* (*The Ancient Book of the Kings*) which is an epic poem in rhyme by the Persian poet Ferdowsi which was completed about 1010 C.E.

5. The term “Zoroastrian” is offensive to them in the same way that the term “Mohammedan” is offensive to Muslims. Neither religion worships their founder. The term they use to describe themselves is “Yazdan Parsat.” The term “Parsee,” which is how they are referred to in India, comes from the Sanskrit word for Persians. Because the term Zoroastrianism is offensive, some have called them Mazdakites given the fact that their god is Ahura Mazda. Detractors also have called them fire worshippers, which is a term that they detest. Muslim critics call them Gebers, although the origin of this epithet is uncertain. I have chosen to use the word Zoroastrian in this book simply to avoid confusion and not out of disrespect.

6. Zoroaster is also known as Zarathustra and by other names and titles. Foltz (2004) suggests that the name Zarathustra means something like “camel manager” (21).

7. Foltz, 2004, 19. Some have suggested that Zoroaster lived as early as the time of Abraham (the eighteenth century B.C.E.) while others say he appeared at about the same time as Buddha (sixth to fifth centuries B.C.E.).

8. The holy books tell of a period where ancient truths had been discarded and set aside for hedonistic and materialistic impulses. It was in this context of chaos that the message of Zoroaster emerged.

9. Hasenfratz, Hans-Peter. “Iran und der Dualismus,” in *Numen*, volume 30, number 1, July 1983 (35–52), is an excellent article focusing on the dualism which was promoted by Zoroastrian teachings.

10. Fortescue, Adrian. *The Lesser Eastern Churches*. New York: AMS Press, 1972 (1913), page 25.

11. Kriwaczek, Paul. *In Search of Zarathustra: Across Iran and Central Asia to Find the World's First Prophet*. New York: Vintage Books, 2002, page 229.

12. This supposed accusation would put them in clear disagreement with Oscar Wilde's suggestion that "everything should be tried once except incest and Morris dancing."

13. Heaven is a place for good people (*ashavan*), and it is ruled over by Ahura Mazda, while hell is reserved for those who are evildoers (*drugvant*) who will spend eternity in a kingdom ruled by Angra Mainyu. These decisions were to be made on a Day of Judgment, which would occur on Mount Hara on the fourth day after a person died when they would have to cross a bridge. For the righteous, as one walks along the bridge it becomes wider and easier to traverse while, for the wicked, the bridge becomes progressively narrower and then becomes as narrow as a sharp blade. The good would be joined in their journey by a beautiful young goddess named Daena, and she would lead them into heaven. In contrast, the wicked would find themselves being escorted into hell by a tired, old, and ugly hag who was smelly and who would eventually hug them and throw them into the gaping mouth of hell.

14. The month of Bahman is named after the archangel Vohu Manu. Other months named after archangels are Ordibehesht and Khordad. It is interesting that the Islamic Republic did not change these names.

15. Axworthy, 10.

16. These creatures were deemed demonic (*khrafstra*) and impure, and should not be touched.

17. The concept of *devas*, who are minor deities according to Indians, was ignored because these were seen to be devils by the Zoroastrians. Buddhist missionaries in Persia referred to Zoroastrianism as "The Good Religion."

18. The Taliban in Afghanistan made famous one of these shrines that was carved out of solid rock in Bod Ghaya in the Bamiyan valley. One statue measured over one hundred feet and the other measured over one hundred fifty feet in height. They dated from the sixth century B.C.E., and they had survived until they were dynamited in 2001.

19. The presence of Buddhist missionaries is also to be seen in the place names of Persia. A number of villages in western Khorosan and as far west as Rayy near modern-day Teheran bear the name No Bahar, which means "Buddha House." Towns in southern Iran and along the coast have similar names.

20. The yearly festival of the hungry ghosts has been practiced in China since the advent of the T'ang Dynasty. This festival very closely parallels the All Souls festival held every year called Fravardigan.

21. Price, 19.

22. Waterfield, 16.

23. Fortescue, 39.

24. Edessa originally was a center for Jewish learning before many Jews in that community converted to Christianity. Edessa was considered the beginning of the Metropolis of East Syria and the center of Syriac-speaking Christianity in

the early church. Antioch was the center of the more Hellenized western Syrian churches. Edessa, however, remained in the Patriarchate of Antioch and was never joined with the Patriarchate of Rome or Alexandria. Edessa was in the prefecture that spread all the way to Asia. The actual authority of the church in Antioch, or for that matter Edessa, the further one traveled from those cities, was more theoretical than practical. Language becomes a key factor: Greek was not spoken at Edessa.

25. Price states that the Jewish historian Josephus noted that "a king of Adiabene accepted Judaism around A.D. 36" (Price, 19). This might explain why Christians would feel comfortable coming to that city. Adiabene is a small border kingdom east of the Tigris River and in modern-day Iraq. Another center for Jewish learning was the city of Nisibis where an academy had been established. A large number of Christians were also said to reside in Nisibis at the end of the Parthian Era.

26. Masani, Rustom. *Zoroastrianism: The Religion of the Good Life*. New York: MacMillan and Company, 1968 (1938), page 18.

27. Bradley, 138. Bradley also notes that Jerome accused Tatian of being the heretical "father of the Encartites who practiced extreme forms of self-denial such as chaining themselves to rocks, walling themselves up in caves, and only eating uncooked grass" (138).

28. Foltz, Richard C. *Religions of the Silk Road: Overland Trade and Cultural Exchanges from Antiquity to the Fifteenth Century*. London: Macmillan, 1999, page 65.

29. Monks in Persian Christianity were called "Sons of the Covenant." There was also another designation for ascetics who chose not to take a lifetime vow. These were called the "Sons of the Church." The covenant that was referred to in the first title was the lifetime vows that were being made by monks.

30. The term Sasanian comes from a legendary ancestor of Ardrashir I named Sasan. Ardrashir came to power after defeating the Parthian King Artabanus V. Ardrashir's hometown of Istakhr was where the Zoroastrian holy book known as the *Avesta* was kept on ox-hide parchments written in gold. Most of these ancient treasures were destroyed by Alexander the Great when he conquered Persia. Present copies of the *Avesta* only date back to the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries and are far from complete.

31. There were two chief languages of high culture in the Sasanian Empire. As was true of the Achaemenid Empire one of these languages was Semitic and one was Indo-Iranian. The Iranian language Parsik (or also called Pahlavi or Farsi) was spoken in the highlands of Fars in the southwest and was the official language of the Court and the Zoroastrian priests. A form of Syriac or Aramaic was spoken among the Nestorian Christians and the Jews of the region. Other literary and social languages were also used.

32. "Iraq's Ancient Mandaen Community Close to Extinction Says Report" in the *Hindustan Times*, October 9, 2007, page 1: "The United States did not set out to eradicate the Mandaens, one of the oldest and misunderstood of the many minorities of Iraq." This article states that the Mandaens, with their

own language, Mandic, a derivative of Aramaic, were about sixty thousand in number before the war against Saddam Hussein. Today, there are fewer than five thousand Mandaens in Iraq and about a thousand in Iran. Many of the exiles have fled to Syria and Jordan with smaller numbers going to Australia, Indonesia, Sweden, Yemen, and three families have come to the United States. In an interesting attempt to make this group more relatable to his American audience, Todd Robberson's article in the *Dallas Morning News* on February 25, 2004, is entitled "Iraq's Baptist Mandaens are survivors, but ranks are thinning." Robberson's first line in his article states, "They call themselves the original Baptists, but any similarities to Americans of that description pretty much end with the waterborne ritual they share" (www.dallasnews.com/).

33. Mani based this on the teaching of the gospel (Matthew 22:30; Mark 12:25) that human beings would be transformed into asexual beings in the purity of heaven and would be "like the angels" and not marry or be given in marriage. Further proof came in the idea that the fatal moral virus of original sin was seemingly passed on to future generations through the sinful and impure act of human procreation.

34. The Jesus presented in Manichaean writings is one that would be unfamiliar to Christians. Jesus has three aspects. He is the "Splendor," the one who gives knowledge. He is also a docetic, historical Jesus—who only appears to be human. Manichaeans promote asceticism that teaches that the body is evil and designed to promote harmful sexual lusts and Jesus was able to overcome these base instincts and urges and, in so doing, overcome this physical world. Lastly, Jesus is the judge who will come again at the end of time. The forces of evil in the world are led by an evil spirit who entraps light and brings darkness.

35. Axworthy, 51.

36. Axworthy, 51.

37. Many of the writings of St. Augustine of Hippo, himself a former member of a Manichaean sect for ten years before converting to Christianity, focus on discrediting the religion. Other Christian and some Muslim writers have similarly attacked their views.

38. St. Augustine of Hippo was a Manichean before he was a Christian. He attacked his previous religion as a heresy, but some of the ideas that he promoted, and which became central to medieval theology, have their precedent in Manichaeism. St. Augustine promoted the doctrine of original sin and related its inception with the act of sexual union. He preached the predestination of the elect and the damnation of all who were unbaptized, including infants. Pelagius, in the fifth century, challenged these ideas with his message of free will but he lost this debate in the halls of ecclesiastical authority, and was branded as a heretic. Axworthy (52) comments: "As pursued later by the Western Christian church in medieval Europe, the full grim panoply of Manichaean/Augustinian formulae emerged to blight millions of lives, and they are still exerting their sad effect today—the distaste for the human body, the disgust for and guilt about sexuality, the misogyny, the determinism (and the tendency toward irresponsibility that emerges from it), the obsessive idealization of the

spirit, the disdain for the material—all distant indeed from the original teachings of Jesus.”

39. There was even a brief period of time, from around 763 to 840 C.E., that Manichaeism was the state religion of the Uighur Turks in Central Asia.

40. Shaked, Shaul. *From Zoroastrianism Iran to Islam: Studies in Religious History and Intercultural Contacts*. Brookfield, Vermont: Ashgate Publishing, 1995, page 253.

41. The teachings of Mazdak began to spread around 530 C.E., and they emphasized social justice and the just distribution of property and resources. His was a proto-Communitistic movement that sought to empower the impoverished masses. This group, according to its enemies, even shared their wives as well as their possessions. The Sasanian ruler Khosrow Anushirvan had Mazdak executed, but their teachings went underground and reappeared again in later riots (such as the uprising at Babak in the eighth century).

42. The currents between indifference and concern often shifted. Perhaps the most intolerant Sasanian ruler was Shapur II (309–377 C.E.) who had little, if any, toleration for other religions within his realm. He strongly supported the role of the Mazdaen magi in the civil and political life of the country.

43. Fischel, Walter J. “The Bible in Persian Translation: A Contribution to the History of Bible Translations in Persia and India,” *Harvard Theological Review*. Volume 45, number 1, January 1952 (3–45), page 5. The translation was done by Jacob ben Tavus, a Jewish scholar from Persia, and was published as part of a Jewish polyglot Bible by the publisher Eliezar ben Gerson Soncino. This book was hardly known until it was used as part of the London Polyglot Bible published in 1657 by Thomas Hyde of England. There may have been earlier Persian-Hebrew translations of the Bible before the 1547 version was published. Giambattista Vecchietti (1552–1619) collected portions of texts of Hebrew translations when he visited Hamadan and Shiraz in 1606, but his books may have been lost during a pirate raid off the Barbary coast. Vecchietti claimed that he had received in the city of Lars, Persia a copy of the book of Psalms dating to 1316. He also claimed to have a number of ancient copies of translations of the Prophetic writings. Vecchietti himself worked on a Persian translation of the Psalms and other Wisdom literature while living in Agra (1604) with the active patronage of Akbar the Great (1542–1605). Akbar at this time tried but failed to launch a new eclectic religion called Tauhid Ilahi focusing on monotheism and designed to welcome Hindus and all others to a place of shared worship near Agra called the Ibadat Khana.

44. A treaty with the Roman Empire, signed in 561, was to guarantee that Christians would be left alone and be able to build churches and live freely in society. It was shortly thereafter that Christians began to enter the military and government. The plight of Christians improved dramatically under the rule of one Sasanian ruler, Khusrau Parviz, who was able to “regain his throne as a result of Byzantine intervention and who was married with two Christian wives.” Berkey, Jonathan. *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East, 600–1800*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2003, page 25.

45. Christopher Buck, "The Universality of the Church of the East," in the *Journal of the Assyrian Academic Society*, volume 10, number 1, 1996, page 61.

46. Neusner, Jacob. *Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism in Talmudic Babylonia*. Atlanta, Georgia: Scholars Press, 1990, page 199.

47. Aphrahat, known as the Persian Sage, lived in the first half of the fourth century. He was a monk and then a bishop at the Mar Matai monastery north of Mosul. Between 337 and 345, Aphrahat wrote a number of sermons or *Demonstrations* which were organized acrostically with each sermon bearing a letter of the Syriac alphabet. Since there are twenty-three letters in the Syriac alphabet there are twenty-three sermons. Nine of these twenty-three are concerned with attacks against Judaism, and none of them attack Zoroastrian ideas. These tracts give historians a clear picture into the theology and church structure of early Parthian Christianity.

48. Vine states that there had been monastic orders in Persia in the third century. The church in later years began to loosen its emphasis on celibacy. Abraham of Kashgar established the Christian monastery on Mount Izala near Nisibis. Monks at Mount Izala followed many of the same rules for order that had been used in Egypt. Abraham had traveled to Egypt and instituted the same tunic, belt, cloak, hood, sandals, cross, and stick used by Nestorian monks in Egypt. The monks of Mount Izala "met for common prayer seven times a day but later this was reduced to four times a day. They were vegetarians and ate only once a day at noon" (Vine, 74). After three years of training, and with the abbot's approval, a monk could begin the life of a hermit in complete solitude. Abraham died at age ninety-five in the year 586 and was succeeded as abbot by Father Dadyeshu. The most famous monk of Mount Izala was Mar Babai the Great (529–628), not to be confused with the Patriarch Mar Babai. Monk Mar Babai was abbot during the long vacancy without a patriarch that occurred in Nestorian Persian Christianity between 608 and 628.

49. Quoted in Waterfield, 25.

50. Fortescue, 70. This critique comes from M. Jugie. The title of the treatise was *The Book of Heraklides*, which was the pseudonym that Nestorius used in order to get a better hearing from his audience.

51. Nestorius was promoted to being the Archbishop of Constantinople in April of 428 and was attacked aggressively by Cyril by the end of 428 and in his Easter letter of 429. The argument was over the term for Mary, to be called "the Mother of God," which was a term that Nestorius did not use. Cyril claimed that this was because Nestorius did not believe that Jesus was God. Eusebius wrote a letter that also confirmed this notion that Nestorius was a heretic who did not believe that Jesus was God. The actual semantical question was on the relationship between the divine and human nature of Jesus and how they were related. For a more extensive discussion on the issue, I would recommend chapter 14, "The Problem and the Person of Christ," in the book *The Early Church: The Story of Emergent Christianity from the Apostolic Age to the Foundation of the Church in Rome* by Henry Chadwick. New York: Penguin Books, 1990 (1967), pages 192–212.

52. Bradley, 140: "With the Bible, radical discipleship and mission at the heart of the curriculum this school grew to have about one thousand students by the mid-sixth century."

53. There had been a catholicate at Selucia-Ctesiphon before that time which was linked to the church in Antioch. The decision to establish a patriarchate meant that the church formally broke this link with Antioch. There are various lists of exactly how many bishoprics were established by the Nestorian church in the Persian Empire. Aubrey Vine states that there were seven different bishoprics in the sixth century. Six of these seven were in Persia proper while the seventh was in the Persian vassal-city of Merv (Mary), which is in modern-day Turkmenistan.

54. Foltz, 2004, 81.

55. Shaki, Mansour, "Citizenship in the Sasanian Period," in *Encyclopedia Iranica*, volume 5, edited by Ehsan Yarshater, Costa Mesa, California: Mazda Press, 1991, 633.

56. There was an interesting interaction between Mihram Gushnasp and a Zoroastrian priest that is recorded in a book called *The Acts of the Persian Martyrs* and is recorded in Foltz (2004):

Priest: We in no way hold fire to be God, but only pray to God through fire, as you do through the cross.

Mihram: But we do not say, as you do to the fire, "We pray to you, Cross, God."

Priest: That is not so.

Mihram: So you have it in your Avesta that it is a god.

Priest: We revere fire because it is of the same nature as Ormazd.

Mihram: Does Ormazd have everything which fire has?

Priest: Yes.

Mihram: Fire consumes dung and horse-droppings, and in brief, whatever comes to it. Since Ormazd is of the same nature, does he also consume everything like it? As the source in question is a Christian text, the priest's reply to this challenge, if he offered one is not recorded. (Foltz, 2004, 88).

57. Foltz, 2004, 83.

58. Garsoian, Nina G., "The Locus of the Death of Kings: Iranian Armenia—The Inverted Image" in the book *The Armenian Image in History and Literature* edited by Richard G. Hovannisian, Malibu, California: Undena Publications, 1981, page 27. Many of the documents that have survived by Sasanian Zoroastrian high priests make clear that they are speaking of Christians who originated from *Aneran*, which was their term for modern-day Armenia.

59. Most of the negative polemical material of the time written by Christians was directed toward Jews and not toward Zoroastrians.

60. Foltz, 2004, 81.

61. Foltz, 2004, 81.

62. Waterfield, 19.

63. Fortescue, 46.

64. Various views, including Duchesne-Guillemin, are presented in Neuser, Jacob. *Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism in Talmudic Babylonia*. Lanham, Maryland: University Press of America, 1986, pages 114–15.

65. Fortescue, 45. One notable martyr in this era was Simon Bar Sabba'e who was commanded in his trial to worship the Sun. The bishop's answer was, "The Sun put on mourning when his creator died, as a slave does for its master." Five of his closest friends were slowly tortured and killed in front of him before the bishop himself was executed on Good Friday, 339. The annals of Roman martyrs list his feast day, and that of his companions who also were killed, as April 21, and the Byzantine Church remembers his death every April 17. His successor, Shahdost, was also martyred in 342.

66. Stewart, John. *Nestorian Missionary Enterprise: The Story of a Church on Fire*. Edinburgh, Scotland: T. & T. Clark, 1928, page 28.

67. Stewart writes:

It is not easy to describe the new kinds of punishment that the Persians invented to torment Christians. They flayed the hands of some and the backs of others. In the case of others again, they stripped the skin of the face from the forehead down to the chin. They tore their bodies with broken reeds causing them excruciating pain. Having dug great pits, they filled them with rats and mice and then cast the Christians into the pits first tying their hands and feet so that they could neither chase the animals away nor place themselves beyond their reach. The animals themselves having been kept without food devoured these Christian confessors in the cruelest way. (26–27)

Another torture, according to Stewart, called for the Christians to have molten silver poured into their eyes and ears (262).

68. Fortescue, 50.

69. Moffet, Samuel H. *A History of Christianity in Asia, Volume One*. Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1998, page 140.

70. They also acknowledged the hierarchical patterns of the Western Church under a designated bishop and agreed to conform their liturgical calendar to those being used in the West.

71. Foltz, 2004, 83. In contrast, Zoroastrian documents call King Yazdigerd I the "sinner" (*winahgar*). Other Sasanian kings had members of their court, including wives, who were Christians. The last Sasanian emperor, Yazdigerd III, was said to have a Christian burial when he died in Merv in 651.

72. Neuser, 138.

73. Foltz, 2004, 82. Foltz says, "In many cases Iranian Christians seem to have sought out their martyrdom, deliberately provoking Zoroastrians by putting out (or defiling) their sacred flames and committing other acts of sacrilege. But even at the worst of times, Christianity was never actually a banned religion in Iran, as it had been in the Roman Empire for three centuries" (82–83).

74. Bradley, 139. Bradley continues: "At Kirkuk one chronicler reported that ten bishops and 153,000 Christians were slaughtered, till the chief official, sickened by the blood, and overwhelmed by the faith of his victims, believed in Christ himself and was murdered. In the midst of this horror, the

bishops gathered for the Synod of Dadyeshe in 424, where, probably for political reasons, they loudly asserted that they were not subject to any other bishop in Christendom" (139).

75. Nestorian missionaries, traveling in pairs, were trained in Persia and went on their missionary journeys into Central Asia and China. The renowned Xi'an Stele of 781 was erected under the direction of an Iranian named Yazdbozed (Foltz, 2004, 84), and their influence was also felt in Tibet and Mongolia.

76. Neusner, Jacob. *Aphrahat and Judaism: The Christian-Jewish Argument in Fourth-Century Iran*. Leiden, the Netherlands: E.J. Brill, 1971, page 4.

77. The two chief protagonists in this early debate were Cyril, the Bishop of Alexandria, and Nestorius, the Bishop of Constantinople. The two theologians of the Antiochene School that supported the views of Nestorius were Diodre of Tarsus and Theodore of Mopsuestia. Cyril taught that both the divine and the human were fully present in Jesus but that there were two distinct natures. The union of the divine and the human natures of Jesus were not unified until the final ascension of Christ. Armenian Christians tended to develop theological formulations which more closely approximate the views of St. Cyril.

78. The school survived into the Islamic era, and Christian teachers trained Muslims in their medical arts. The medical academy at Gondeshapur was under the control of the Nestorian Bokhtishu family for many generations, and it was this academy that provided medical doctors to the Sasanian royal court for many years.

79. The first contact that Nestorians had with Turkic-speaking peoples of Central Asia was in the sixth century. The principle advocate of these missionary efforts was the Nestorian Patriarch Timothy I (who was Patriarch from 780–823). The Nestorians used many methods to win converts. Some even claim that Nestorians resorted to magic, and there is one account where a Nestorian missionary was able to stop a thunderstorm after a local shaman had tried to do the same but had been ineffective (Foltz, 84).

80. Two famous identical crosses still remain in Milapore on the Coromandel Coast near Madras, and there is also archaeological proof of an ancient church with Pahlavi inscriptions in Kottayam. Documents from between 700 and 824 have been found which mention the Christian missionaries in this region. One of the documents, written in 824, is written in Tamil, Arabic, and Pahlavi. This group lived in Cranganore. The famous Western Chinese stone at Xian Fu is dated to the year 781 and was found in a monastery that was founded in 638. The stele consists of 1,900 Chinese characters, about fifty Syriac words, and about seventy Syriac names with Chinese transliterations. There may even be one Persian word on the stele, denoting Sunday (*yaksambun*—from the Persian for Sunday, *yekshambeh*). The Persian missionary Alopen came to the emperor's palace in 635. According to Waterfield (45), Japanese archaeologists working in China unearthed a stone in Western China with a Pahlavi language translation of Psalm 24:6. To show the extent of Persian missionaries Waterfield also cites (46) the legend of a priest from Persia who came to the village of St. Ives (Huntingdonshire) in the sixth or seventh century. A poem entitled Poly-Olibion, written in 1666 by Michael

Drayton states, "From Persia led by zeal, St. Ives this island sought and near our eastern fens a fit place finding taught. The Faith, which place from him alone the name derives and of that sainted man has since been called St. Ives" (Waterfield, 46).

81. Bradley, 142.

82. Chosroes, or Khosrow Parvez (the Victorious), was said to be deeply in love with a Christian girl whom he made one of his wives and added to his harem. He was a great supporter of dancers and magicians and loved to spend his time hunting. When he went hunting he did so in a huge game-park that was stocked full of all kinds of animals for him to kill. His throne was resplendent with jewels, and the dome of his palace was also a planetarium which had mechanical arms that moved representations of planets and stars.

83. Patriarch Mar Aba I was not released until seven years after he would have been able to leave prison had he agreed to cease his evangelistic efforts. Although he did not die until 552, another seven years after he had finished his prison sentence, it is probable that his harsh imprisonment hastened his death.

84. This charge probably came from the false assumption that Manicheans, who did not always forbid incest, were one with the Nestorians.

85. Vine, Aubrey R. *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia from the Persian Schism to the Modern Assyrians*. London: The Independent Press, 1937, page 66.

86. Gregory served the Nestorian Church as patriarch from 605 when Sabaryeshu died until 608. Even though the church was forbidden to have a leader at this time by the edict of the king, the community was led by Mar Babai, the abbot of the monastery on Mount Izala.

87. Vine, 89.

88. It is possible, however, that Magundat-Anastasius was killed not because he was a Christian but because he had previously been a Zoroastrian. As such, his conversion made him an apostate subject to death. A hagiographic biography was written about the martyr in Greek shortly after his death. It has been revised many times. The manuscript is one of the best pictures historians have of the early Eastern Syrian Church.

89. Vine, 67. Vine also claims that the wife of Chosroes was herself a Nestorian (68). Chosroes was deposed and killed in 628 by his own son, Kavadh II. The boy reigned for only a few months before he was also deposed and the Sasanian Empire fell into even greater political chaos. Four kings ruled the country in the four years between 628 and 632. It was at this time of weakness, in 633, that the Arab conquest began to enter Persia. Resistance was feeble, and the decisive battle occurred in 637.