

THE MISSION OF THE IRANIAN CHURCH

by Mert Hershberger

The church in Iran is suffering intense persecution these days. Leaders are being harassed and killed, but the church is growing. Could there be a message for the Church here from the Bible?

1 Ancient Iran

Ancient Iran was the home of Zoroastrianism. This system of belief holds Ahura Mazda as the High God and ascribes to a dualism between good and evil. Characteristics of the religion include the use of fire in worship - many would even say the worship of the fragrant sandalwood fire itself - and the placing of the dead in open towers so that carrion birds can eat the flesh.

In Iran, the ruler came to be seen as having divine qualities as the king of kings during the Persian Empire when the Medes and Persians spread out from their homeland in South-Central Asian. Their empire and influence extended from present day Iraq to present-day Tajikistan. The Kurds of Turkey and Iraq, the Azeri of Azerbaijan, the Dari of Afghanistan, and the Tajik of Tajikistan all have languages related to Persian.

The spread of Persian influence led to the spread of Zoroastrian religion, which is largely practiced today only among the Parsees.¹ Most Persians have turned to Islam. Iranian Islam has become mostly Shi'ite and exhibits a dualism similar to Zoroastrianism along with the concept of suffering as a means to atone for personal sin and demonstrate personal devotion.

2 Persia in the Hebrew Scriptures

Persia came late in the Old Testament period. Major portions of Daniel, as well as the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Zechariah

¹ Parsees is the generally accepted term for the descendants of the ancient Persians who still practice the teachings and traditions of Zoroaster.

and Habakkuk were all written under the Medo-Persian Empire. Below is a summary of what the Old Testament teaches regarding Iran. For a more detailed study, see the link for Allyn Huntzinger's book *Persians in the Bible* in the list of resources.²



Ancient “Greater Iran” during the Achaemenid stretched from the modern boundaries of eastern Turkey to western China and from the Steppes of Russia to the Indian Ocean.³

In Genesis and the prophets, we can read about Iran via references to such places and peoples as Elam/Susa, the Medes, and the Persians. Cyrus was prophesied in Isaiah as the one who would send Israelites out from captivity.⁴ Jeremiah prophesied that 70 years would pass from the time of the Babylonian captivity to the

² The name Iran is related to “Aryan” and means “the Land of the Aryans.” <http://ancienthistory.about.com/od/persianempiremaps/qt/Iran.htm> . All internet articles current as of April 18, 2010.

³ http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Greater_Iran.gif

⁴ Isaiah 45:13.

time when Judah would be released. Sure enough, 70 years passed, Daniel read those words and prayed, and then Cyrus conquered Babylon and released the Jews to go back to their promised land with great favor and blessing.

Persian bureaucracy kept records of details about the rebuilding of the Temple and the walls of Jerusalem that are recorded in Ezra, Nehemiah, and Haggai. This demonstrates how the Lord uses the nations to extend His glory in the earth. Israel was restored because she was in a place to inherit the promises and to be blessed as she blessed the nations. God made promises and kept them. The Iranian peoples had a key part in God's purposes for His people.

The Book of Esther never records the name of God. In fact, the main Jewish characters, Esther (Hadassah) and Mordecai, are named after pagan gods. But the faithfulness of God is greater.

Mordecai saved the king's life from a plot, but would not bow down to wicked Haman. Haman hated the Jews and was in high command in the king's court, so Haman connived to have all the Jews killed by royal edict when entrusted with the royal seal. Providentially, the king had his queen Vashti degraded in honor, and Esther had won the imperial beauty contest to become the next queen. Once Mordecai had seen these things come to pass, he urged Esther to advocate for her people, saying that she had been appointed "for such a time as this".⁵

She and her maids fasted along with the Jews of the capital city of the empire. Then on the appointed days, Esther held a feast for the king where Haman's plot and wickedness were exposed. Not long afterward, the enemies of the Jews were slaughtered rather than the Jews, and God again demonstrated His faithfulness to His people. God used a few Jews in positions that influenced the Persian government to protect the entire Jewish people.

3 Iran and persecution in the early church

In the book of Acts, there is a record in the account of Pentecost of Parthians, Medes, and Elamites, all from the area of Greater Iran,

⁵ Esther 4:14.

hearing the Good News in Jerusalem.⁶ Along with this, there is strong evidence that at least some Iranians heard and responded to the Good News in their homelands in the first couple of centuries after Pentecost. A church existed and was growing. In Jerusalem, the church was born though and we will look there first for a quick case study of what happened.

Before the Ascension of Jesus, he commanded his disciples to proclaim the Good News throughout the earth, making disciples of all nations⁷ in the power of the Holy Spirit. After Pentecost, this began to happen in rapid fashion. In Jerusalem the church grew and developed rapidly, even making disciples of Levites as the Word of the Lord spread to thousands of Hebrew and Greek speaking Jews. Following persecutions, the Good News finally spread to Samaria and the rest of the Roman Empire. The "followers of the Way" from Jerusalem became known as "Christians" first in Antioch, as the Good News bridged the cultural gap to Gentile peoples. However, it took persecution to spread the Gospel and eventually the church in Jerusalem declined rapidly after the fall of Jerusalem in 70 AD and was greatly weakened after the exit of many of her members.

There is a tradition that Andrew and Matthew both served as apostles to areas of Greater Iran. An early center for Christianity under King Shahpur I (240-272 A.D.) was the city of Shush, where Daniel saw his visions and Nehemiah served the king's cup.⁸ The church there spread, and the message was announced throughout the trade routes of the Persian Empire, even into Central Asia and China through missionary efforts of the Church of the East.⁹ Though the Christology was biblical, it was not as sophisticated as in the Greek and Latin speaking portions of the Roman Empire. Thus later churches would call these brave Christians 'Nestorians', assuming they followed the heresy that the bishops of the East and

⁶ Acts 2:9. Also, Allyn Huntzinger. *Persia and the Bible*. Self-published: 2004, 50-51.

⁷ Mat 28:17-20.

⁸ Huntzinger, 51.

⁹ Huntzinger, 51.

the West had condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431. Eventually, persecutions by the Persian Empire and then the expanding Muslim-Arabic empires and finally the Mongol invasions, virtually killed the Church ... waiting for a renewal in modern times. In spite of all these difficulties, scattered congregations of Assyrian and Armenian Christians managed to somehow survive. But these churches could barely cope with surviving. The ability and energy to reach out to non-Christians (mostly Muslims) would have to wait for centuries until the Modern Missionary Movement.

The re-evangelization of Persia began when two Moravians, Hoecker and Rueffer, went to Iran and began to suffer for the Lord there. Beginning with Henry Martyn, an Anglican mathematician and linguist, outreach was made to Persians via a translation of the Bible and verbal witness. Later, American Presbyterian missionaries entered Persia in the north. These churches grew a little, but largely drew from a few Muslim converts as well as non-Persians. In the twentieth century, a prayer group began in Tehran which grew into a vigorous church later associated with the Assemblies of God.¹⁰

4 The contemporary Persian Church

Since the establishment of a clerical state in Iran during the Islamic revolution a generation ago (1979), many churches in Iran have been forced to come to life or to die. As of 2004, there were an estimated 20,000-25,000 Jews in Iran, and that number was declining rapidly due to emigration.¹¹ Now Muslims are beginning to come to Christ in large numbers. Iranian Christians International estimated in 2004 that there were 70,000 house church members and that they were praying for 500,000 Iranian Christians by the year 2015.¹² A more recent article by Open Doors estimated the number

¹⁰ <http://www.elam.com/articles/Church-in-Iran/>

¹¹ <http://www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/reIran09.html>

¹² <http://www.farsinet.com/ICI/>

of Believers from Muslim backgrounds to be over 100,000, all of whom live in Iran.¹³

There are also believers among the international diaspora of Iranians, some of whom are from Armenian and Assyrian backgrounds, while an increasing number are of Muslim backgrounds.¹⁴

Joshua Project Peoples Data on Medo-Iranian Peoples

<i>People Cluster</i>	<i>Primary Religion</i>	<i>Total Population</i>	<i># of People Groups</i>	<i>Percent of unreached peoples</i>
Aimaq	Islam	1,620,470	9	100
Baloch	Islam	10,235,030	22	100
Kurd	Islam	29,417,760	53	100
Luri-				
Bakhtiari	Islam	4,969,660	7	100
Nuristan	Islam	69,510	9	100
Parsee	Zoroast	676,880	11	100
Pashtun	Islam	47,990,940	26	100
Persian*	Islam	47,511,970	65	97.4917
Tajik	Islam	6,432,450	30	100
Talysh	Islam	657,730	19	100

*Of the Persian peoples, only the Ossetes who live primarily in the Caucas Mountain range, the Persians of Iran & their diaspora, and the Tats have a significant Christian population.

Web: www.joshuaproject.net

<http://www.joshuaproject.net/affinity-blocs.php?peo1=14>

The Good News of the Kingdom is being announced to Iranians via satellite and radio and the church is growing. At the end of this article, you will find links to a number of different ministries I found

¹³ <http://www.opendoorsusa.org>.

¹⁴ Huntzinger, 69-73, 78-80.

on the internet ministering to Iranians in the diaspora and in their homeland by various means. As the momentum builds, it must go somewhere. Here is a list of all those peoples derived who have some affinity with the Greater Iranian heritage and may thus have an opening to the Gospel which relates to such a heritage apart from Islam.

At the same time, the church in Iran has been suffering terribly at the hand of the Iranian government as leaders have been imprisoned and people have been killed for their faith. The government is clamping down on freedoms and seeking to wield increasing military muscle through the likely development of nuclear weapons and hard-nosed opposition to the state of Israel. What is next? How will the church respond? What is God saying to the church?

5 Conclusion: a vision for the Iranian Church

I believe that Iran is currently going through the refining fires of persecution so that the message of Christ will be clearly and purely proclaimed and so that the message will spill over into neighboring countries. In nation after nation, in recent days, where persecution has hindered a growing church which was receiving the love of faithful intercession from the global body of Christ, that church has been purified and grown and gained a vision of wider mission. This has been true in China and Indonesia, to cite just two examples. So the churches in Iran have the opportunity to be purified and to grow within the boundaries of Iran. But *God has something beyond church growth in store for the Church in Iran: a mission to the nations.*

First, God has entrusted every church with the Great Commission: Go, make disciples of all nations ... for I am with you even to the end of the age. This mission is still valid.

Second, the ancient Jewish people in Persia and the ancient Christian churches in Persia experienced this mission and with it the divine blessing of His presence and provision. With the revival in the present day, it makes it abundantly clear that this is even more possible.

Third, the Persian language and culture retain many similarities to languages and cultures like those of the Kurds and the Tajik. I

think that this would make it possible for the Good News of the Kingdom to extend to them more readily from an Iranian than from a Westerner.

Fourth, the heritage of Persia is more ancient than the presence of Islam in those cultures, so the people have an identity of dignity that is not rooted in Islam. This has provided part of the impetus for the growth of the church in Persia and could readily provide impetus for the advance of the Kingdom among related peoples in the heirs of Greater Iran as well.

Fifth, already Iranian-Persian leaders are catching the vision. Whether satellite evangelists or internet catechists or traveling missionaries, some have already ventured out to reach neighbors. If the nations are discipled by the Persian saints, it will be a blessing to both, as surrounding nations believe. The Persian churches will be encouraged by the renewed vision and protected by the changed lives of leaders, and the surrounding nations will experience the wonderful power of the Good News of the Kingdom. God has provided the power and the purpose and the promises. He is waiting for the Church to respond. But let the Persian Church also be cautioned: if they do not respond, they may find that the persecution will choke out their life as happened to the early church in Jerusalem. The flame which has begun to burn bright again may fade into oblivion rather than spread across borders. Yet I remain confident that the Lord has better things in store for the Persian Church.

Like the attacks of the Anglo-Saxons, Goths, and Vikings who attacked centers of Christianity in Europe before the Good News was earnestly preached to them by their victims and their captives, persecuted Iranians have the opportunity to witness to their persecutors and are doing so. However, they also are increasingly in a position to reach their cultural cousins from the Kurdish to the Tajik peoples.

This will require training in cross-cultural witness from some now simply training pastors. The increased witness will require increased prayer support and out-of-country connections. Let us pray and plan and labor accordingly. The revival is happening for such a time as this.

Bibliography

History of Christianity in Asia, Volume I: Beginnings to 1500, and Volume II: 1500 to 1900, both by Samuel Hugh Moffett (Orbis Books: 1998 and 2005) gives the detailed historical background of the Singanfu Stone, which is a testimony of the birth of Christ and evidence of the witness to the Gospel in China along with some sources on the spread of Christianity via the Church of the East. In Volume I, Moffett looks at Iran and her peoples pp. 10-12, the church in Iran and her mission in pp. 91-256. Volume II, pp. 193-196 details the story of Nestorians under the Persians and Turks; pp. 386-381 details modern Protestant efforts in Persia.

Christian Mission to Muslims: The Record: Anglican and Reformed Approaches in India and the Near East, 1800-1938, Lyle L. Vander Werf, (William Carey Library: 1977).

Internet Resources

222 Ministries:

www.worldchristianministries.org/default6.asp?active_page_id=330

Elam: A mission begun in 1988 by an Iranian to reach Iran.

www.elam.com This includes an excellent short article on Church history in Iran: www.elam.com/articles/Church-in-Iran

InterVarsity Christian Fellowship – International Student Ministry
<http://www.intervarsity.org/ism/article/397>

Iran Alive Ministries: www.iranaliveministries.org

Iranian Christians International: www.farsinet.com/ICI

Iran for Christ Ministries: www.iranforchrist.com

Jews of Iran:

www.jewishvirtuallibrary.org/jsource/anti-semitism/iranjews.html

Persian Ministries International: www.persianministries.org

Persia in the Bible. Allyn Huntzinger (English edition, 2004)

<http://www.farsinet.com/persiansinbible/images/pib04alle.pdf>

Persian World Outreach:

<http://www.persianwo.org>

Pray for Iran:

<http://www.prayforiran.org>

Worldwide Directory of Iranian/Persian Christian Churches

<http://www.iranianchurch.org>
