

IRAN'S ETHNIC CHRISTIANS: THE ASSYRIANS AND THE ARMENIANS

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Abstract: *The idea that Christianity is foreign to Iran is a misconception. Christians have lived and often thrived in Iran. People from most every major Christian sect have made, or have tried to make, Iran their home. To a degree, these sects have cross-pollinated, but they have maintained their own identities. After mentioning Iran in the OT and early church history to provide an overview of the country's connection with all of Christianity, this paper focuses on the Christianity of the Assyrians¹ and Armenians of greater Iran, two ethnic Christian groups that left a marked impact on the country and the area in general. The account of Assyrian and Armenian Christianity² in greater Iran centers on their beginnings to the modern period when the Protestant Modern Missions Movement began.*

Key words: *Christianity in Iran, Armenian Christians, Assyrian Christians, Iran and the Bible, Nestorianism, Monophysitism, Church of the East, Eastern Christianity, persecution, growth*

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¹ The Iranian Assyrians are not the same Assyrians mentioned in the Bible. Adam H. Becker, *Revival and Awakening: American Evangelical Missionaries in Iran and the Rise of Assyrian Nationalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 231, 337, argues that the term “Assyrian” is used accurately for Assyrian Iranians soteriologically, dealing with “death, salvation, community, and tradition,” but not racially or ethnically. Becker notes “Assyrianizing” “imaginatively” connects racially and historically the ancient Assyrians with the modern Assyrians.

² There are other names given to Assyrian Christianity such as the Nestorian Church, the Church of the East, the Antiochene Church, and the Eastern Syriac Church, but they all are associated largely with the same branch of the faith. In this paper, the names are used interchangeably, although the term “Nestorian” is avoided because as Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winker, *The Church in the East: A Concise History* (New York: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003), 21–24, state, some Assyrians today do not like being called Nestorians and feel the term is derogatory and inaccurate. Similarly, Armenian Christianity at times has been confused with Orthodoxy. Armenian Christianity differs with the Orthodox Church in theology (Council of Chalcedon) and practice (Armenian Christianity does not submit to the same church leadership). Also, note the difference between *Armenian* Christianity and *Arminian* Christianity, the former being focused on an ethnic people (the Armenians) while the latter is related to soteriological issues.

Greater Iran³

I. IRAN IN THE BIBLE AND IN EARLY CHURCH HISTORY

Eleven books in the OT directly reference the lands or peoples of greater Iran.⁴ Iran’s current Islamic government displays Bibles in museums that date back hundreds of years and promotes the idea that the tombs of well-known OT figures such as Daniel, Esther, and Mordecai are located within its borders as are the tombs of Cyrus the Great, Darius the Great, Xerxes, and Artaxerxes. In many OT books, the peoples of Iran play a prominent and positive role in God’s plan for the nations, particularly Israel. Cyrus, for example, is used as a type of Christ and is called a “servant,” a term used for Davidic kings. Even more significant is the designation of Cyrus as the Lord’s “messiah” or “anointed one” in Isa 45:1. In certain ways, the policies of the Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC) molded post-exilic Judaism; the Achaemenids allowed the Jews to return to their homeland and enabled them to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem and to construct the second temple. Contrasted with other non-Jewish nations, the OT characterization of Persians is affirming. Theologian Walter Brueggemann notes:

Compared to the complicated and vexed story of Yahweh with the Egyptians, the Assyrians, and the Babylonians, the story of Yahweh with the Persians lacks drama. On the horizon of this testimony, the Persians are not recalcitrant vassals

³ Greater Iran consists of an area that not only includes present-day Iran but also some of the surrounding areas, including parts of Afghanistan, Iraq, southeastern Turkey, the southern Caucasus, and Turkmenistan.

⁴ Some specific references include Gen 10:22; Ezek 34:24; 2 Chr 36:22–23; Isa 44:38; Jer 51:11; Dan 5:31; Esther 1; Ezra 4:7–24; Nehemiah 2; Hag 1:1; and Zech 1:1.

of Yahweh, need not be broken by Yahweh, and so need no Yahwistic recovery. In this modeling of nations as partners, Persia is the exemplar of a positive, responsive partner.⁵

Iran as a “responsive partner” with the Judeo-Christian God continues as the history of Christianity begins deep in the heart of the Parthian Empire (227 BC–AD 224). Some believe the Magi, the famed “Three Wise Men,” who followed the celebrated star to Christ’s home told about in Matt 2:1–11 were from Iran and possibly Zoroastrian priests,⁶ though Edwin M. Yamauchi disputes this claim.⁷ Church Father John Chrysostom mentions Persia as the origin of the wise men: “They [the Jews] learn from a Persian tongue first of all, what they would not submit to learn from the prophets . . . when they saw that wise men [*σὺν*], at the sight of a single star, had received this same, and had worshipped Him who was made manifest.”⁸ Another account by the fourth-century historian Eusebius states that the king of Edessa, Abgar, and Jesus Christ corresponded with one another,⁹ though this report is probably more fable than fact.¹⁰ During Pentecost, the first grand spiritual awakening for Christians, the author of the biblical book of Acts of the Apostles mentions Jews from the Parthians, Medes, and Elamites—all tribes in Iran—as those who were converted to Christianity when they heard Peter the Apostle’s sermon (Acts 2:9). Church tradition indicates that a number of Christ’s first twelve apostles had contact with this area, including Matthew, Jude, Simon the Zealot, Bartholomew, and Thomas. While some of these accounts may be considered legend, generally historians agree that there has been a constant, albeit complicated, Christian existence in Iran since the early days of the faith. These explanations, even if not completely accurate, probably were based on actual historical details as they were accepted by the people of the day.¹¹

Primary sources of the earliest forms of Christianity in Persia are scant, but there is a shared consensus on the basic history of the period. Christians were in the area by the AD 100s.¹² Tatian, an Assyrian Gnostic (AD 100–180), is one of the first to give a definitive historical account of the church in Iran.¹³ It is also known that the metropolitan areas of Edessa (150 miles northeast of Antioch in Syria) and

⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament: Testimony, Dispute, Advocacy* (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2012), 518.

⁶ Peter Clark, *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction to an Ancient Faith* (Sussex Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices; Portland: Sussex Academic, 2001), 155.

⁷ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Persia and the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1990), 481.

⁸ John Chrysostom, *Hom. Matt.* 6.4 (NPNF¹ 10:80).

⁹ Eusebius, *Ecl. Hist.*, 1.12.

¹⁰ Edwin M. Yamauchi, *Pre-Christian Gnosticism* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973), 84–85.

¹¹ J. P. Asmussen, “Christians in Iran,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods* (ed. Ehsan Yarshater; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 2:927.

¹² Richard C. Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World’s Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2004), 80; Mark Bradley, *Iran and Christianity: Historical Identity and Present Relevance* (London: Continuum, 2008), 138; and Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500* (Richmond, UK: Curzon, 1999), 109.

¹³ Aziz S. Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen, 1968), 247.

Arbela (N. Iraq) are where Christianity in Iran began, and Christianity eventually progressed to Nisibis (140 miles east of Edessa in northern Mesopotamia), a place where Iranian Christianity deepened when it was ceded to Iran in 363.¹⁴ Historians Wilhelm Baum and Dietmar W. Winker speculate that the Jews of the area, many of whom were merchants, brought Christianity to the East.¹⁵

With the Parthian Empire being one of relative tolerance, Christians practiced their faith with little persecution. Christians fled the Roman Empire to Parthian-controlled areas during times of oppression. By the early 200s, Christians became numerous enough for the state to be concerned with security.¹⁶ It is reported by some historians that on the island of Kharg in the Persian Gulf that sixty Christian tombs were found where there are also the remains of a Christian church. At Bishapur, on the border of the empire, there are remains of a church with a baptistery.¹⁷ According to a Syrian Gnostic, Bardaisan, who died in AD 222, there were Christians in the provinces of Pars, Medea, Kashan, and Parthia.¹⁸ By the end of the empire, there were twenty bishoprics in Parthian areas.¹⁹ The expansion of the church in Iran was considerable.

II. THE ASSYRIANS AND THE RISE OF CHRISTIANITY IN IRAN

1. *Sassanid empire (AD 224–651).*

a. *Theological considerations.* As Christianity grew, certain forms of the faith began to arise. Aside from Christians fleeing from Roman to Parthian-ruled regions, Christians from the Roman Empire were brought into the area as captives during Sassanian times. A Greek church and an Aramaic and Syriac church emerged, each with its own religious allegiances, though eventually, they developed some unity. As time progressed, two competing schools of thought arose in Iran (and Christendom in general), Alexandrian and Antiochean. The Alexandrian school was not as accepted in Iran and eventually became associated with Western Christianity, while the Antiochean school became known as Eastern Christianity and developed its own divisions. Two noted sects of the Antiochean school related to Iran were Assyrian and Armenian, theologically related to Nestorianism and Monophysitism, respectively.

Both Western and Eastern Christians ascribed to the Council of Nicaea of 325 and the Council of Constantinople of 381. In 410, Christians in Iran began to

¹⁴ John Healey, "The Church Across the Border: The Church of the East and Its Chaldean Branch," in *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East* (ed. Anthony O'Mahony and Emma Loosley; London: Routledge, 2010), 43.

¹⁵ Baum and Winker, *Church in the East*, 8–9.

¹⁶ Asmussen, "Christians in Iran," 928.

¹⁷ W. Stewart McCullough, *A Short History of Syriac Christianity to the Rise of Islam* (Chico, CA: Scholars Press, 1982), 112.

¹⁸ H. W. J. Drijvers, *Bardaisan* (Assen: van Gorcum, 1966), 188.

¹⁹ *The Chronicle of Arbela* (trans. Peter Kawerau and Timothy Kröll; CSCO 468; Leuven: Peeters, 1985), 16; online: www.archive.org/details/ChronicleOfArbela1985.

become more independent from their Roman counterparts. It was in 410 when the Church of the East in Persia formed its own seat of authority at Seleucia-Ctesiphon (located in Iraq)²⁰ and in 424 Iranian Christianity began to create a national church. Several years later, as the church was following more closely to the teachings of Theodore of Mopsuestia, the mentor of Nestorius, division sharpened. Nestorianism was condemned at the Council of Ephesus in 431, and both Nestorianism and Monophysitism were deemed heretical at the Council of Chalcedon in 451. The main difference between those who ascribe to the Council of Chalcedon and those who do not centers on the nature of Christ. The Council of Chalcedon stated that Christ was both fully divine and fully human: “in two natures [God and man], without confusion, without change, without division, without separation.”²¹ This is known as the “hypostatic union.” By 486 the Eastern Church separated itself completely from the Western Church.²² Eventually, the Assyrian church became the one of note in Iran.

b. *Expansion and Persecution.* The exact number of Christians in greater Iran is debatable, but according to the ninth century “Chronicle of Seert,” an Iranian king placed Christians in many cities he established and promoted tolerance among faiths, though Samuel H. Moffett argues persecution of Christians in Iran during the Sassanid Empire was severe with close to 200,000 Persian Christians dying—more than in Rome. However, there were fewer retractions of the faith from those in the West, “a remarkable tribute to the steady courage of Asia’s early Christians.”²³ While Armenian Christians kept their faith largely to themselves, Assyrian Christians did not. Assyrian Christianity in Iran expanded, and its mission and evangelism focus among the peoples of Persia eventually became the leading form of Christianity in the kingdom.²⁴ Not much is known about the everyday Christian in Iran,²⁵ but higher Christian academic and theological centers were established, indigenous leaders developed, bishoprics created, and churches multiplied. One writer estimates there were over 100 bishoprics in the empire. Eighteen of the twenty-five provinces of the empire were evangelized or had some type of Christian witness.²⁶ It is reported that one Persian king supposedly had two Christian wives and another king allegedly had a Christian burial.²⁷ Historian Richard C. Foltz maintains that by the end of the seventh century the Western part of Iran was

²⁰ “Chronological Order of the Catholicos/Maphriyono’s of the East”; online: <http://www.catholicose.org/PauloseII/Catholicate.htm>.

²¹ F. Schaefer, “Chalcedon, Council of,” *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (ed. C. G. Herbermann; New York: Encyclopedia Press, 1913), 3:557; online: www.newadvent.org/cathen/03555a.htm.

²² Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 23.

²³ Samuel H. Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 1: *Beginnings to 1500* (San Francisco: Harper, 1992), 145.

²⁴ R. N. Frye, “The Political History of Iran under the Sasanians,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 3: *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods*, 1:149.

²⁵ Robin E. Waterfield, *Christians in Persia: Assyrians, Armenians, Roman Catholics and Protestants* (London: George Allen, 1973), 30.

²⁶ Bradley, *Iran and Christianity*, 139–41.

²⁷ Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*, 83.

largely Christian, and many of the Christians in this period were well educated and known as “transmitters of culture.”²⁸ Ian Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit are emphatic on the progression of Christianity in the empire when they write, “[There was] exceptional success of Christianity in the western frontier of the Sassanian Empire from the estuary of the Euphrates and Tigris up to Armenia and the Caucasus. . . . By the time of the Muslim conquest, these districts, with the exception of a few Jewish colonies, became purely Christian.”²⁹

The adherents of Zoroastrianism, the majority religion of the time, opposed Christianity in Iran with good reason. Some prominent Iranian Christian leaders arose during this period that at least potentially threatened (or were perceived to threaten) the livelihood and faith of Zoroastrians, many from the Zoroastrian priestly class. Narsai (c. 399–c. 501), who was not from Zoroastrian heritage, is the first known ethnically Persian Christian leader of the church in Iran. Known as the “Harp of the Holy Spirit” for his poetic abilities, he taught at the school in Edessa (eventually becoming its head), restored the school of Nisibis, which had been in a state of disrepair (he was the school’s head for 50 years),³⁰ and incorporated theology into his sonnets.³¹ Mar Aba, a former Zoroastrian, and influential Iranian Christian leader, was the Patriarch of the Church of the East in Seleucia-Ctesiphon (c. 540–552) and a teacher at the school of Nisibis. He published many academic works, including commentaries on OT and NT books,³² and was an evangelist, governmental official, and friend of the king of Persia. He helped mediate arguments within the local Assyrian churches, promoted Christian (opposed to Zoroastrian) marriage, and encouraged the ordinary believer to study the Bible.³³ Mar Aba was exiled and imprisoned for his faith, which led to his death.³⁴

Religious and political reasons led to the intermittent persecution of Iranian Christians during Sassanid rule. By the time of Mar Aba, many Zoroastrians were converting to Christianity and Christianity was becoming indigenous.³⁵ Even when Christians were at peace with the government, the Zoroastrian priests, the Magi, treated them disdainfully, particularly influential former Zoroastrians. Aside from martyrdom, other forms of hardship were placed on Christians. Sometimes Chris-

²⁸ Ibid., 83, 89.

²⁹ Gillman and Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 115.

³⁰ “Our Patron Saint: Mar Narsai”; online: www.mnac.nsw.edu.au/Marnarsai.html. See also Sebastian P. Brock, “A Guide to Narsai’s Homilies,” *Journal of Syriac Studies* 12.1 (2009): 21–40; online: <http://www.bethmardutho.org/index.php/hugoye/volume-index/426.html>.

³¹ Narsai, *Homilies of Mar Narsai* (San Francisco: Patriarchal, 1970), 1:128; in Khoshaba Gewargis, “Dialogue Poem”; online: <http://www.karozota.com/2009/sidor/marnarsaipoem090718.html>. Narsai, *Homily 62*, in Frederick G McLeod, “Man as the Image of God: Its Meaning and Theological Significance in Narsai,” *TS* 42.3 (1981): 461.

³² Author Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis* (Louvain: Secrétariat du Corpus, 1965), 161–70.

³³ Jacob Neusner, *A History of the Jews in Babylonia*, vol. 5: *Later Sasanian Times* (StPB 15; Leiden: Brill, 1970), 92.

³⁴ Vööbus, *History of the School of Nisibis*, 170.

³⁵ A. V. Williams, “Zoroastrians and Christians in Sasanian Iran,” *BJRL* 78 (1996): 39–40.

tians were double taxed, some of their churches were destroyed, and their overall livelihood was affronted.

The Sassanids were not supportive of Zoroastrianism completely; some Christians attained high rank in government. When the Sassanid Empire was strong, there was less need for Zoroastrian support. Persecution tended to increase when the empire was weak. The Sassanid rulers appeared to seek the Zoroastrians' approval by harassing Christians.³⁶ After Constantine legalized Christianity, Christianity was seen as the religion of Rome, and during times of war wholesale discrimination occurred with greater frequency. Fighting against Rome and oppressing Christians became part of the same battle. Thousands of Christians died in the first major persecution in Iran. A few years later, Christians again were persecuted with many more martyred. There were also attempts by Zoroastrians to convert Armenian Christians.

At times Christians gave the Sassanids reasons to persecute them. Christians burned a Zoroastrian fire temple³⁷ and developed inaccurate and untruthful polemics against Zoroastrians. Sometimes the perception that Iranian Christians were allied with the Roman Empire was true. The desire for a Christian leader occasionally influenced the actions of Christians in Iran toward the opposing regime. At least one author argues that Constantine, with tacit approval of the Persian bishop,³⁸ was thinking about invading Persia, seeing himself as a "liberator" of Christians in Persia.³⁹ Ironically perhaps, Christians were in service for the Sassanid government as diplomats to the Roman Empire during times of peace.⁴⁰

2. *The Muslim conquest (AD 651–1256)*. By the time Islam arrived in Iran, Christianity in Iran was not considered orthodox by Rome. Appealing to Western Christians for help was not the wisest of options, for Roman persecution was just as severe, if not more intense. Prior to the Islamic conquest, it is reported the Persian patriarch asked Islam's prophet and founder, Mohammed, for protection against the Sassanids. Toleration, to varying degrees, marked the beginnings of Islam towards Christianity. Toleration meant compromise for Christians, usually in the form of acceptance and allegiance to the Islamic government. While in some ways challenging, many were relieved that Muslims were now their rulers. The threats of persecution and corruption gave Christians reasons to accommodate their new sovereigns with greater ease. One Assyrian patriarch reportedly noted the affinity with Muslims and commented on the similarities between the faiths: "The Arabs, to whom God has given the authority of the world at this time, are with us, as you know, and are not only not opposed to Christianity, but they praise our faith and honor the priests and saints of Our Lord and aid the churches and monaster-

³⁶ Ibid., 39, 45.

³⁷ Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 22.

³⁸ Stephanie K. Skoyles Jarkins, "Aphrahat the Persian Sage and the Temple of God: A Study of Early Syriac Theological Anthropology" (Ph.D. diss., Marquette University, 2005), 1–10.

³⁹ T. D. Barnes, "Constantine and the Christians of Persia," *JRS* 75 (1985): 126–36.

⁴⁰ Baum and Winker, *Church in the East*, 14.

ies.”⁴¹ Foltz cites Persian monk John of Phenek of the late seventh century. Phenek remarked positively about the Islamic conquest when he stated, “We should not think of their [the Muslims’] advent as something ordinary, but as due to divine working. Before calling them, God had prepared them beforehand to hold Christians in honor; thus they had a special commandment from God concerning our monastic station, that they should hold it in honor.”⁴²

For the first couple centuries of Islamic rule, Muslims were the minority in Iran. As Islamic dominance increased, a policy known as the *Shurūt ‘Umar* became the *modus operandi*, a regulation that imposed limitations on non-Muslims. Many of these restrictions, historian Milka Levy-Rubin argues, were influenced by the Byzantine and Sassanian cultures that predated Islam. The Sassanian influence on the *Shurūt ‘Umar* lay largely with the *ghīyār*, the main part of the *Shurūt ‘Umar*. Levy-Rubin argues that the formation of the *ghīyār* arose from a Zoroastrian hierarchal, class-based philosophy that advanced a clear differentiation between believer and nonbeliever. Muslims adapted this principle and placed non-Muslims in the lowest class and regulated aspects of life directly tied to religion (non-Muslims could not speak unfavorably about Islam or Mohammed, could not marry Muslim women, evangelize Muslims, display religious symbols [in case of Christianity, the cross], etc.),⁴³ similar to the Zoroastrians before them.⁴⁴ It is also clear that non-religious aspects of life were controlled. Non-Muslims paid twice as much in taxes, had fewer legal rights, and could hold no public office. While there was much incentive for Christians to convert to Islam there was no systematic or widespread violence against them, though at times monasteries were sacked, graves were razed, and special clothes were required to be worn.⁴⁵ Effectively, the treatment of Iranian Christians was similar under Muslims as it was under the Sassanids: some prohibition and persecution, but no widespread or sustained effort to exterminate.⁴⁶

Under the Muslims as opposed to the Sassanids, Christianity in Iran declined in number. Nonetheless, depending on one’s interpretation, Christianity also thrived. There was kindheartedness toward Christianity in Iranian poetry. Sonnets

⁴¹ William Ambrose Shedd, *Islam and the Oriental Churches: Their Historical Relations* (New York: Young People’s Missionary Movement, 1908), 99.

⁴² Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble*, 90.

⁴³ O’Mahony and Loosley, *Eastern Christianity in the Modern Middle East*, 269.

⁴⁴ Milka Levy-Rubin, *Non-Muslims in the Early Islamic Empire: From Surrender to Coexistence* (Cambridge Studies in Islamic Civilization; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 163.

⁴⁵ Bradley, *Iran and Christianity*, 143.

⁴⁶ Aubrey R. Vine, *The Nestorian Churches: A Concise History of Nestorian Christianity in Asia from the Persia Schism to the Modern Assyrians* (London: The Independent Press, 1937), 99–100, notes that a Muslim lawyer, Mawardi, provided a summary of prohibitions against Christians in the poll tax contract, which non-Muslims were required to obey. It has two sections with six points, the former being mandatory, the latter being suggested. Mandatory: (1) honor the Qur’an; (2) honor Mohammed; (3) honor Islam; (4) do not marry Muslim women; (5) do not convert Muslims; and (6) do not help the enemies of Islam. Suggested: (1) wear different clothing than Muslims; (2) buildings cannot be higher than Muslim buildings; (3) no church bells; (4) no alcohol consumption in public; (5) be discrete in burying the dead; and (6) no riding of horses.

of the major Iranian poets of this period and the next, including Ferdowsi, Khayyam, Rumi, Hafez, and Saadi, extend beyond the Islamic context to connect positively with the Christian faith.⁴⁷ Educational and cultural centers of Iranian Christianity grew. The graduates of some of the educational and medical schools taught Muslim leaders. Influential Christians were prominent in government. They were sought-after administrators, translators, and physicians. Most every Iranian shah up until the thirteenth century had a Christian for a doctor; until the eleventh century, the majority of translators were Christian; and until the tenth century the bulk of philosophers were Christian.⁴⁸

Assyrian Christians in Iran also were able to commission their missionaries.⁴⁹ The Assyrian church expanded into parts of Asia, including India, China, Tibet, and Sri Lanka. They were in China as early as the 600s.⁵⁰ They were in India by the 800s.⁵¹ Among other things, the patriarch Timothy increased missionary efforts. He sent missionaries to the Daylamites, the peoples of Gilan in Iran, and encouraged Christian leaders to occupy places of leadership in churches of Iran as well as sending missionaries to other parts of Asia. Timothy was able to appoint a bishop in Yemen as well as in Tibet. Persian inscriptions, Christian manuscripts, and Nestorian crosses dating to these periods were found in these areas. Some of the inscriptions discuss missionary work and the influence of Christians. In one group of manuscripts, translations of Christian material (including parts of the Bible) into Chinese were done with the help of a Persian monk.⁵²

3. *The Mongol conquest (AD 1256–1500)*. Muslims did not extinguish Christianity in Iran; the Mongols did. By the time of Genghis Khan's death in 1227, the Mongols had moved into Iran. By 1258, all of Iran was under Mongol control. The Mongol conquest was severe for all the peoples of Iran. CIA intelligence analyst Steven R. Ward notes that in the Iranian Plateau, Mongols could have killed 10–15 million people, the vast majority Muslim. The devastation to the population in Iran was thorough; it did not reach pre-Mongol levels until the 1900s.⁵³

The beginnings of Mongol rule seemed encouraging for Iranian Christians as they promoted a policy of religious non-interference. Because of the Church of the East's mission efforts, Mongols were familiar with Christians in other parts of Asia.

⁴⁷ Bradley, *Iran and Christianity*, 32.

⁴⁸ Aptin Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star and the Cross: Minority Religions in Medieval and Early Modern Iran* (International Library of Iranian Studies 5; London: I. B. Tauris, 2006), 45, 48, 49.

⁴⁹ Atiya, *A History of Eastern Christianity* (London: Methuen, 1968), 253–71.

⁵⁰ Huaiyu Chen, "The Encounters of Nestorian Christianity with Tantric Buddhism," in *Hidden Treasures and Intercultural Encounters: Studies on East Syriac Christianity in China and Central Asia* (ed. Dietmar W. Winkler and Tang Li; *Orientalia—Patristica—Oecumenica* 1; Münster: LIT, 2009), 200.

⁵¹ David Thomas, "Arab Christianity," in *The Blackwell Companion to Eastern Christianity* (ed. Ken Parry; Chichester, UK: Blackwell-Wiley, 2010), 13.

⁵² Baum and Winker, *Church in the East*, 47–57.

⁵³ Steven R. Ward, *Immortal: A Military History of Iran and Its Armed Forces* (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2009), 39.

In fact, certain Mongol tribes professed Christianity,⁵⁴ one of the early khan's mothers and primary wife confessed Christianity, and five of the first six Mongol kings were connected with Christianity. Mongols lifted many of the restrictions placed on Iranian Christians by their Muslim predecessors and, as with Iran's former sovereigns, Christians were able to attain influential positions within the government as physicians and other occupations of prominence. An Armenian king in particular helped with the initial success of the Christians in Mongol rule. During this period, Christians abused their freedom and maltreated Muslims, including drinking alcohol openly during Ramazan⁵⁵ and spilling it on mosques and Muslim clothes.⁵⁶ Early on, it is reported that even the poet Saadi noted the influence of Christians against Muslims: "O beautiful One, who from thy invisible treasury, You provide subsistence from the Gabr [pagan] and the Christian, How could'st thou deprive your friends, Whilst having regard for enemies?"⁵⁷

The Mongols' attitude changed against Christianity during the Crusades. Muslims were making gains, and with the majority of Iran's population adhering to Islam, the Mongols began to reconsider their policy of religious tolerance. With the rise of the Mongol king Ghazan, and his profession of faith to Islam, many Mongols converted to Islam in 1295. Ghazan became discriminatory toward other faiths, which eventually led to concentrated and wholesale persecution of Christianity. With the reign of Tamerlane less than one hundred years later, the situation worsened. Tamerlane murdered thousands of Christians (and other non-Muslims), destroyed churches, monasteries, and schools. Outside of a few conclaves in the western part of the country in the Kurdistan areas, Assyrian Christianity ceased in Iran. Gillman and Klimkeit argue that the downfall of the Nestorian church was more of a "coup de grace" than a "destruction of the church at its prime." The Assyrian church depended too much on secular powers, which left it susceptible to regime change. The church became negligent in its own spirituality resulting in its ruin.⁵⁸

4. *The Safavid empire-Pahlavi dynasty (AD 1501–1979)*. By the fifteenth century, what was left of the Assyrian community was divided between the Persians and the Ottomans. In the Urmiyah area where there was the largest concentration of Assyrians in Iran, there were five bishops' seats in 1562. Within these there was disagreement on authority, and three converted to Roman Catholicism.⁵⁹ The "Chaldean Catholic Church" eventually developed with a distinct liturgy under Roman

⁵⁴ Edward Browne, *A Literary History of Persia: From Firdawsi to Sa'di* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1906), 440–41.

⁵⁵ Ramazan is the English transliteration of the Persian term most know as Ramadan.

⁵⁶ Vine, *Nestorian Churches*, 45–46.

⁵⁷ This English translation is from Khanbaghi, *The Fire, the Star and the Cross*, 180 n. 351. In the original language, this is (transliterated), "Eye kerme key ahz khazahneh'yeh a'yeb; doostan ro kojah kani mehroom; gabr va tarsa vazeeefeyh khor dahri; tow key bah dashmanahn nazr dahri." Sa'di, *Gulestani Sa'di* (ed. Iranparast; Tehran: Fanous, 1977), 3.

⁵⁸ Gillman and Hans-Joachim Klimkeit, *Christians in Asia before 1500*, 151.

⁵⁹ Baum and Winker, *Church in the East*, 112.

Catholic jurisdiction and numbered more than the Assyrian Christians in Mesopotamia.⁶⁰ In later years, other powers such as the Russians arrived. Missionaries from the Western church tried to convert the Assyrians to their understanding of Christianity. Assyrians eventually experienced a small revitalization. By the 1960s, 40,000 Assyrians lived in Iran, most of them (25,000) located in Urmiah.⁶¹ However, the Assyrian community thus far has not regained its standing as a significant Christian sect in Iran.

III. ARMENIAN CHRISTIANITY IN IRAN

1. *Before the Safavids.* While Armenia has its own celebrated history distinct from other nations or peoples, its boundaries have varied across the centuries with it being much larger than its current borders; various sovereigns in Europe and Asia have fought over Armenia's territory. Within a milieu of multicultural influence, Armenian Christianity arose, a Christianity that allowed Armenia to gain a unique identity. In short, Armenians believe that the apostles Thaddeus and Bartholomew brought Christianity to them. Arriving possibly through Edessa,⁶² the community where Assyrian Christianity thrived, and/or through Cappadocia, where a Greco-Roman form of the faith was dominant,⁶³ Armenians adopted Christianity in 301, the first nation to make Christianity a state religion. Armenians call their church the "Armenian Apostolic Church" because they believe it descends directly from the apostles' teachings. Sometimes confused with Orthodoxy, the Armenian Apostolic Church forms a separate and independent branch within Eastern Christianity.⁶⁴ In 432, an Armenian synod endorsed the Council of Ephesus of 431 where Nestorianism was condemned, and in 435, the Armenian Church criticized the writings of Theodore of Mopsuestia. About a hundred years later, Armenian Christians officially adopted monophysite theology, formally breaking fellowship with the Roman church.

Within Iran, Armenians have a shared history—Armenian connections date to Darius the Great⁶⁵ and Armenians are identified with the third delegation on the

⁶⁰ For more information see: Anthony O'Mahony, "The Chaldean Catholic Church: The Politics of Church-State Relations in Modern Iraq," *Heyf* 45.4 (2004): 435–50; and Suha Rassam, *Christianity in Iraq: Its Origins and Development to the Present Day* (Leominster, UK: Gracewing, 2010).

⁶¹ Baum and Winker, *Church in the East*, 112.

⁶² Cyril Toumanoff, "Christian Caucasia between Byzantium and Iran: New Light from Old Sources," *Traditio* 10 (1954): 126.

⁶³ Simon Payaslian, *The History of Armenia: From the Origins to the Present* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), 35.

⁶⁴ George A. Bournoutian, *A Concise History of the Armenian People: From Ancient Times to the Present* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda: 1980), 49 and Robert W. Thomson, "Mission, Conversion, and Christianization: The Armenian Example," *Harvard Ukrainian Studies* 12/13 (1988–89): 32, argue for a later date, sometime after 311 and the Edict of Milan.

⁶⁵ Allyn Huntzinger, *Persians and the Bible* (Woodstock, GA: Global Commission, 2004), 26, and Nina G. Garosian, "Iran and Caucasia," in *Transcaucasia, Nationalism, and Social Change: Essays in the History of Armenia, Azerbaijan, and Georgia* (ed. Ronald Grigor Suny; rev. ed.; Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1996), 10.

eastern stairway of Darius's Apadana at *Takeht-e-Jamshid* (Persepolis)—and Armenian Christianity has held a distinct place in Iran, though much of it is after 1500. Throughout the time before the Safavids, Armenian Christians, similar to Assyrians, impacted Christian centers such as Edessa, translated scientific and philosophical works,⁶⁶ and were advisors in the court of Iranian rulers. In certain cases, the Armenian Church supported non-Iranian, non-Christian kings.⁶⁷ In other cases, Armenian officials helped the Iranian government militarily.⁶⁸ One writer calls the Iranian empire the “midwife which helped it [the Armenian Church] at [her] birth.”⁶⁹

2. *The Safavids (AD 1501–1796)*. For a thousand years, the Assyrian church was the most influential Christian sect in Iran, but its demise left a void. While these years have been named the “years of darkness” of the Armenian church,⁷⁰ Armenians unwittingly filled the vacuum left by Assyrians. Doctrinally and ethnically distinct from Assyrians, the Armenian population in Iran was small, less than that of the Jews and Zoroastrians;⁷¹ however, with a new government, changes occurred in Iran's territory. Parts of Mesopotamia and Iraq, areas where Christianity historically had a presence, were not under Safavid rule, and conflicts in the northwest with the Ottomans led to some drastic changes.

Beginning in 1530, the Safavids started to transport Armenians in Armenia proper and Nakhchevan to Iran. Not much is known about this deportation—source material is scant—but it began a period of transferences of Armenians to Iran that lasted about 100 years. There is more evidence regarding the second major deportation that started in 1603 and lasted until 1629. This one was motivated by military and economics. Shah Abbas I was warring against the Ottomans and did not want to lose the Caucasus to them, so he attacked Armenia. The shah used a scorched earth policy in the Araxes Valley (in Nakhchevan) and destroyed the area. He killed the Muslims in the area, but spared the Armenians, known for their skilled artisanship, negotiating skills, and dislike for Ottomans.⁷² Instead of killing them, he deported them to Iran. Many died during the transfer and the climate killed others. Armenians were placed in many areas all over the country. In total, the number of Armenians taken with deportations starting in 1603 was around

⁶⁶ Nigel Allan, “Christian Mesopotamia and Greek Medicine,” *Herm* 145 (1988): 52.

⁶⁷ Payaslian, *History of Armenia*, 134.

⁶⁸ Angus Stewart, “The Assassination of King Het'um: The Conversion of the Ilkhans and the Armenians,” *JRAS* 15 (2005): 45–61.

⁶⁹ Toumanoff, “Christian Caucasia between Byzantium and Iran,” 147, 185.

⁷⁰ Samuel Hugh Moffett, *A History of Christianity in Asia*, vol. 2: 1500–1900 (Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2005), 200.

⁷¹ Khanbaghi, *Fire, the Star and the Cross*, 111.

⁷² The Armenians went to Cilicia in southwest Turkey in the High Middle Ages when Armenian refugees fled the Seljuk invasion. See Robert Lee Wolff and Harry W. Hazard, eds., *A History of the Crusades*, vol. 2: *The Later Crusades, 1189–1311* (2nd ed.; Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 630–59.

60,000 families or 300,000 people.⁷³ From the 1603 deportation on, Armenians became the largest Christian sect in Iran.⁷⁴

One group of Armenians fared better than the rest, the Armenians in Julfa, Nakhchevan. They were an influential group of economically secure Armenians that Shah Abbas I moved to Esfahan, the capital of Safavid Iran. They were defended by the shah's guards, had their own courts, their own mayor, and schools that taught in the Armenian language. The shah even visited homes of some of the most important Armenians. While Armenians in other areas had similar privileges, New Julfa was almost a state within a state. By 1630, there were around 80,000 Armenians in this area. New Julfa became the religious and cultural center of the Armenians in Persia. Religious freedoms were provided such as the consumption of alcohol, ringing of church bells, and building of churches. Armenians could hold their own processions and restrictions on clothing were removed. They established the first printing press in Iran,⁷⁵ the first book printed being the OT book of Psalms. They produced other religious literature. Missions historian Kenneth Scott Latourette called New Julfa the "center of religious devotion and learning" for the Armenian people in Iran.⁷⁶

The shah's interest in protecting Armenians lay not in that he was a benevolent leader or that he had interest in converting to Christianity—the coming of the Safavid Empire established Twelver Shi'ism as Iran's state religion,⁷⁷ a period not the kindest to other faiths; the shah was interested in economic and political gain. Iran overtook China as Europe's silk provider, and the shah needed trusted, competent partners. The Armenians became this community. The shah considered Muslim Iranians from the Turkmen aristocracy, the ones that had the majority of silk trade, a threat to his rule and incompetent traders; Europeans preferred to trade with Christians; and Ottomans refused trade with Muslim Iranians. Armenians were exceptional business people, and had trade connections with the Europeans and the Ottomans. The Shah gave the Armenians a monopoly on silk because of their business acumen and their relationships, which provided a land bridge from Iran to Europe, rendering maritime routes controlled by competing European nations superfluous. The Armenians in return gave the Shah a percentage of the

⁷³ Vartan Gregorian, "Minorities of Isfahan: The Armenian Community of Isfahan 1587–1722," *Iranian Studies* 7.3/4 (1974): 664.

⁷⁴ Khanbaghi, *Fire, the Star and the Cross*, 94–96, 111–13.

⁷⁵ Gregorian, "Minorities of Isfahan," 665–69.

⁷⁶ Kenneth Scott Latourette, *A History of Christianity*, vol. 2: *Reformation to the Present, 1500–1975* (New York: Harper & Row, 1975), 235–36.

⁷⁷ Similar to Protestant Christianity, there are different "denominations" in Shi'ism: Twelver, Seven-er, and Fiver (and divisions within these denominations). The distinctions centered on the succession of imams. For a simple yet helpful explanation of the differences see "Shia Diversity: Twelver, Fivers, and Sevens"; online: www.faroutliers.wordpress.com/2006/10/12/shia-diversity-twelvers-fivers-sevens, which is taken from Vali Nasr, *The Shia Revival: How Conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future* (New York: Norton, 2007), 75. For a more detailed explanation see Allamah Sayyid Muhammad Husayn Tabatabai, *Shi'ite Islam* (trans. Seyyed Hossein Nasr; Albany: State University of New York Press, 1975), 75–84.

revenue, which provided him an additional source of income and ruined the Turkmen's business.⁷⁸

Armenians' skills were multifaceted. Aside from trading silk, Armenians collected precious stones and introduced novelties into Iran such as tennis, bowling, cards, and watches. They also had connections with Russia, strengthened ties with Europe, and were attached to the Safavid court. However, in the late 1600s, the government's position on Armenians changed. Many of their privileges were revoked and by the end of the century, there was little difference between the Armenians and other religious minorities.⁷⁹ Nevertheless, their significance remained. Few converted to Islam; the Armenians became another reminder of the compatibility of Christianity in Iran. Robin Waterfield notes their influence, "The incorporation of a large body of Christians into the very heartland of Persia and their continuing presence in the country was to have a very considerable effect on the future of Persia. From now on they [Iranians] were always confronted with a body of devoted Christians, who in spite of many attempts to induce them to abandon their faith and adopt Islam very rarely did so."⁸⁰

3. *Qajar-Pahlavi dynasties (AD 1796–1979)*. Missionaries from Western organizations dominated Christianity in Iran during much of this time, but a few words concerning Armenians are warranted. Armenians were still involved in international trade and attained influential positions in government.⁸¹ During the Constitutional period, they were involved in its defense.⁸² Armenians were given representation in Parliament and the tax on non-Muslims was also abolished during Qajar times.⁸³ Armenians were respected and admired in Iranian culture.

Here, a word needs to be said about the Armenian genocide that occurred in and around World War I. While the Turkish government denies there was a systematic and intentional killing of Armenians and that the Armenians that died were part of wartime activities, around 1.5 million Armenians were killed through a variety of means by the Ottomans.⁸⁴ The Armenians of Iran were affected by this, so

⁷⁸ Gregorian, "Minorities of Isfahan," 669–70.

⁷⁹ Khanbaghi, *Fire, the Star and the Cross*, 117–20, 128–29.

⁸⁰ Waterfield, *Christians in Persia*, 63.

⁸¹ Hamid Algar, "Religious Forces in Eighteenth- and Nineteenth-Century Iran," in *The Cambridge History of Iran*, vol. 7: *From the Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic* (ed. Peter Avery, Gavin Hambly, and Charles Melville; Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), 730.

⁸² H. E. Chehabi and Vanessa Martin, *Iran's Constitutional Revolution: Popular Politics, Cultural Transformations and Transnational Connections* (International Library of Iranian Studies 28; London: I. B. Tauris, 2010), 21, 39.

⁸³ Daniel Tsadik, "The Legal Status of Religious Minorities: Imāmi Shī' ī Law and Iran's Constitutional Revolution," *ILS* 10.3 (2003): 406–7.

⁸⁴ For a helpful summary, see "Q&A: Armenian Genocide Dispute," 2 June 2016, www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-europe-16352745. Assyrians were also killed during the same war by the Ottomans. Ronald G. Roberson, *The Eastern Christian Churches* (4th rev. ed.; Rome: Pontificio Istituto Orientale, 1993), 8, states: "During World War I, the Assyrians suffered massive deportations and massacres at the hands of the Turks. ... About one third of the Assyrian population perished."

much so that there is an Armenian genocide memorial structure located in Esfahan, Iran. Shireen Hunter explains:

The Armenian encounter with the Ottoman Turks has left an especially deep imprint on their collective psyche. By contrast, Iranian-Armenian relations have historically been mostly, although not always, cordial. Certainly, the Armenians have no harsh memories of Iran, and consequently most Armenians have positive feelings toward Iran. These experiences still affect the region's peoples related to their immediate surroundings and the rest of the world.⁸⁵

Indeed, former Iranian president Mohammad Khatami even laid a wreath at the Armenian Genocide Memorial in Yerevan during a 2004 commemoration.⁸⁶

Armenians also played a role in modern Protestant missions with some Armenians becoming evangelistic during the time of Mohammed Reza Shah. By the 1970s, there were evangelical Armenians pastoring churches in Iran. According to some Assemblies of God missionaries, one Armenian pastor, Haik Hovsepian-Mehr, was able to preach to several million Muslims as at least one sermon was televised.⁸⁷ Presently, Armenians have respected positions in the current Islamic Republic's government, although several Armenians have died for proselytizing their faith.⁸⁸

IV. CONCLUSION

Christianity and Iran have a shared history. From the OT to the present day there has been some type of Christian witness in greater Iran. Two prominent sects, the ethnic Assyrians and Armenians, played a role in this record. Overall, both Assyrian and Armenian Christianity largely fell under the same conditions (intermittent persecution and increased taxation interspersed with toleration and autonomy), except that Assyrians became the leading form of Christianity through the Mongol period and Armenians became the leading form of the faith from Safavid times to the Islamic Republic numbering around 500,000 in 1980.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Shireen T. Hunter, "Conflict in the Caucasus and the Black Sea Region: Causes and Prospects for Resolution," *Hellenic Foundation for European and Foreign Policy* (1997): 5–6, in Julien Zarifian, "Christian Armenia, Islamic Iran: Two (Not So) Strange Companions; Geopolitical Stakes and Significance of a Special Relationship," *Iran and the Caucasus* 12.1 (2008): 130.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 131.

⁸⁷ Mark and Gladys Bliss to Friends in Christ, March 1973, transcript of typewritten letter, Special Collections, Assemblies of God Archives, Springfield, MO.

⁸⁸ Faith J. H. McDonnell, "Iran's Decades of Christian Persecution," *Assyrian International News Agency* (2 February 2011); online: www.aina.org/news/20110204114914.htm.

⁸⁹ "The Status of Iran's Non-Muslim Minorities" (30 July 1980); online: www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/document/cia-rdp85t00287r000101800001-3. Richard Foltz, *Religions of Iran: From Prehistory to Present* (London: Oneworld, 2013), 122, suggests the number of Armenian and Assyrian Christians in Iran currently could be less than 55,000. However, the Joshua Project estimates the total number of Armenian and Assyrian Christians to be around 200,000 (www.joshuaproject.net/countries/IR).

Assyrians often were evangelistic in their faith spreading eastward to Central Asia and China. In modern times, during the formation of Iraq, Christian minorities were protected through the time of Saddam Hussein, though now many have fled because of persecution suffered under the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS). The Assyrian counterparts, the Armenians, usually did not try to evangelize the peoples of Iran or the surrounding cultures;⁹⁰ instead, Armenians integrated into Persian society.⁹¹ Armenians eventually lived in every major city in Iran, left a positive impression on Iranians, showed that Iran had Christian roots, reminded Iranians of global Christianity, demonstrated to Iranians that one can be simultaneously Christian and Iranian, and showed that the Christian faith can be integrated into Iranian culture.⁹² Whatever results that Western missionaries had in Iran were in large part due to the Assyrians and Armenians who by the early 1970s accounted for almost three-quarters of the evangelical church in Iran.⁹³

⁹⁰ Hagop A. Chakmakjian, *Armenian Christology and Evangelization of Islam: A Survey of the Relevance of the Christology of the Armenian Apostolic Church to Armenian Relations with Its Muslim Environment* (Leiden: Brill, 1965), 62, argues that nationalism along with ceremonialism of the Armenian church and sacerdotalism of the Armenian hierarchy were the main reasons for lack of evangelism.

⁹¹ S. H. Taqizadeh, "The Iranian Festivals Adopted by the Christians and Condemned by the Jews," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 10 (1940): 653.

⁹² Bradley, *Iran and Christianity*, 147.

⁹³ Betty Jane Bailey and J. Martin Bailey, *Who Are the Christians in the Middle East?* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003), 117–18.