

Iran in History

by **Bernard Lewis**

In attempting to attain some perspective on Iran in history, I begin, as I think one must, with the Arab-Islamic conquests in the seventh century—that series of epoch-making events following the advent of Islam, the mission of the Prophet Muhammad and the carrying of his message to vast areas east and west from Arabia, and the incorporation of many lands, from the Atlantic and the Pyrenees to the borders of India and China and beyond, into the new Arab-Islamic empire. These events have been variously seen in Iran: by some as a blessing, the advent of the true faith, the end of the age of ignorance and heathenism; by others as a humiliating national defeat, the conquest and subjugation of the country by foreign invaders. Both perceptions are of course valid, depending on one's angle of vision.

What I would like first to bring to your attention is a significant and indeed remarkable difference between what happened in Iran and what happened in all the other countries of the Middle East and North Africa that were conquered by the Arabs and incorporated in the Islamic caliphate in the seventh and eighth centuries.

These other countries of ancient civilization, Iraq, Syria, Egypt, North Africa, were Islamized and Arabized in a remarkably short time. Their old religions were either abandoned entirely or dwindled into small minorities; their old languages almost disappeared. Some survived in scriptures and liturgies, some were still spoken in a few remote villages, but in most places, among most people, the previous languages were forgotten, the identities expressed in those languages were replaced, and the ancient civilizations of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt gave way to what we nowadays call the Arab world.

Iran was indeed Islamized, but it was not Arabized. Persians remained Persians. And after an interval of silence, Iran reemerged as

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a separate, different and distinctive element within Islam, eventually adding a new element even to Islam itself. Culturally, politically, and most remarkable of all even religiously, the Iranian contribution to this new Islamic civilization is of immense importance. The work of Iranians can be seen in every field of cultural endeavor, including Arabic poetry, to which poets of Iranian origin composing their poems in Arabic made a very significant contribution. In a sense, Iranian Islam is a second advent of Islam itself, a new Islam sometimes referred to as *Islam-i Ajam*. It was this Persian Islam, rather than the original Arab Islam, that was brought to new areas and new peoples: to the Turks, first in Central Asia and then in the Middle East in the country which came to be called Turkey, and of course to India. The Ottoman Turks brought a form of Iranian civilization to the walls of Vienna. A seventeenth-century Turkish visitor who went to Vienna as part of an Ottoman embassy, notes with curiosity that the language which they speak in Vienna is a corrupt form of Persian. He had of course observed the basic Indo-European kinship between Persian and German, and the fact that the Germans say *ist* and the Persians say *ast*, almost the same thing, for the verb "to be," present indicative third-person singular.

By the time of the great Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century, Iranian Islam had become not only an important component; it had become a dominant element in Islam itself, and for several centuries the main centers of Islamic power and civilization were in countries that were, if not Iranian, at least marked by Iranian civilization. For a while this supremacy was challenged by the last center of power in the Arab world, the Mamluk Sultanate based in Egypt. But even that last stronghold disappeared, after the contest between the Persians and the Ottomans to decide which should conquer Egypt and the Ottoman success in what might call the preliminary elimination bout. Arabian Islam under Arab sovereignty survived only in Arabia and in remote outposts like Morocco. The center of the Islamic world was under Turkish and Persian states, both shaped by Iranian culture. The major centers of Islam in the late medieval and early modern periods, the centers of both political and cultural power, such as India, Central Asia, Iran, Turkey, were all part of this Iranian civilization. Although much of it spoke various forms of Turkish, as well as other local languages, their classical and cultural lan-

guage was Persian. Arabic was of course the language of scripture and law, but Persian was the language of poetry and literature.

The Iranian Exception

Why this difference? Why is it that while the ancient civilizations of Iraq, Syria, and Egypt, were submerged and forgotten, that of Iran survived, and reemerged in a different form?

Various answers have been offered to this question. One suggestion is that the difference is language. The peoples of Iraq, Syria, Palestine, spoke various forms of Aramaic. Aramaic is a Semitic language related to Arabic, and the transition from Aramaic to Arabic was much easier than would have been the transition from Persian, an Indo-European language, to Arabic. There is some force in that argument. But then Coptic, the language of Egypt, was not a Semitic language either, yet this did not impede the Arabization of Egypt. Coptic survived for a while among the Christians, but eventually died even among them, except as a liturgical language used in the rituals of the Coptic Church.

Some have seen this difference as due to the possession by the Persians of a superior culture. A higher culture absorbs a lower culture. They quote as a parallel the famous Latin dictum: “conquered Greece conquers its fierce conquerors”—in other words the Romans adopt Greek culture. It is a tempting but not convincing parallel. The Romans conquered and ruled Greece, as the Arabs conquered and ruled Iran, but the Romans learned Greek, they admired Greek civilization, they read, translated, imitated Greek books. The Arabs did not learn Persian, the Persians learned Arabic. And the direct Persian literary influence on Arabic is minimal and came only through Persian converts.

Perhaps a closer parallel would be what happened in England after 1066, the conquest of the Anglo-Saxons by the Normans, and the transformation of the Anglo-Saxon language under the impact of Norman French into what we now call English. There are interesting parallels between the Norman conquest of England and the Arab conquest of Iran—a new language, created by the breakdown and simplification of the old language and the importation of an enormous vocabulary of words from the language of the conquer-

ors; the creation of a new and compound identity, embracing both the conquerors and the conquered. I remember as a small boy at school in England learning about the Norman conquest, and being taught somehow to identify with both sides—with a new legitimacy created by conquest, which in the case of Iran, though not of course of England, was also buttressed by a new religion based on a new revelation.

Most of the other conquered peoples in Iraq, in Syria, in Egypt, also had higher civilizations than that brought by the nomadic invaders from the Arabian desert. Yet they were absorbed, as the Persians were not. So we may have slightly modified or restated the question; we haven't answered it. Another perhaps more plausible explanation is the political difference, the elements of power and memory. These other states conquered by the Arabs—Iraq, Syria, Palestine, Egypt and the rest—were long-subjugated provinces of empires located elsewhere. They had been conquered again and again; they had undergone military, then political, then cultural, and then religious transformations, long before the Arabs arrived there. In these places, the Arab-Islamic conquest meant yet one more change of masters, yet one more change of teachers. This was not the case in Iran. Iran too had been conquered by Alexander, and formed part of the great Hellenistic Empire—but only briefly. Iran was never conquered by Rome, and therefore the cultural impact of Hellenistic civilization in Iran was much less than in the countries of the Levant, Egypt and North Africa, where it was buttressed, sustained and in a sense imposed through the agency of Roman imperial power. The Hellenistic impact on Iran in the time of Alexander and his immediate successors was no doubt considerable, but it was less deep and less enduring than in the Mediterranean lands, and it was ended by a resurgence, at once national, political and religious, and the rebirth of an Iranian polity under the Parthians and then the Sasanids. A new empire arose in Iran which was the peer and the rival of the empires of Rome and later of Byzantium.

This meant that at the time of the Arab conquest and immediately after, the Persians, unlike their neighbors in the West, were sustained by recent memories, one might even say current memories, of power and glory. This sense of ancient glory, of pride in identity, comes out very clearly in Persian writings of the Islamic period, written that is to say in Islamic Persian in the Arabic script,

with a large vocabulary of Arabic words. We see the difference in a number of ways: in the emergence of a kind of national epic poetry, which has no parallel in Iraq or Syria or Egypt or any of these other places; and in the choice of personal names. In the Fertile Crescent and westwards, the names that parents gave their children were mostly names from the Qur'an or from pagan Arabia—Ali, Muhammad, Ahmad, and the like. These names were also used in Iran among Muslim Persians. But in addition, they used distinctively Persian names: Khusraw, Shapur, Mehyar and other names derived from a Persian past—a recent Persian past, that of the Sasanids, but nevertheless Persian. We do not find Iraqis calling their sons Nebuchadnezzar or Sennacherib, nor Egyptians calling their sons Tutankhamen or Amenhotep. These civilizations were indeed dead and forgotten. The Persian sense of pride did not rest on a history retained and remembered, because their history too, except for the most recent chapters, was lost and forgotten, no less than the ancient glories of Egypt and Babylon. All that they had was myth and saga; a sketchy memory of only the most recent chapters of the pre-Islamic history of Iran, none at all of the earlier periods.

The Islamic view of history may serve as an explanation of this—why does one bother to study history, what is the importance of history? History is the record of the working out of God's purpose for humanity, and from a Muslim, particularly a Sunni Muslim point of view, it has a special importance as establishing the precedents of the Prophet, the Companions and the early "rightly-guided" rulers of Islam, who set the pattern of correct law and behavior. That means of course that the only history that matters is Muslim history, and the history of picturesque barbarians in remote places, even of picturesque barbarians who may happen to be one's ancestors, has no moral or religious value, and is therefore not worth retaining. By the time the Persians recovered their voice, after the Islamic conquest, they had lost their memory—though not, as we shall see, permanently.

The history of ancient Iran prior to the Sasanids, the immediate predecessors of Islam, was obliterated by successive changes. The ancient language was replaced by Muslim Persian, the ancient scripts were forgotten and replaced by the Arabic script modified to suit Persian phonetic needs. The old language and script survived among the dwindling minority who remained faithful to the Zoroastrian

religion, but that was of little importance. Even the personal names to which I alluded a moment ago were forgotten, except for the most recent. Thus, for example, the name of Cyrus, in modern times acclaimed as the greatest of the ancient Persian kings, was forgotten. The Persians remembered the name of Alexander in the form Iskandar, but they did not remember the name of Cyrus. Alexander was remembered better among the Persians than were the Persian kings against whom he fought.

Iran, Greeks and Jews

What little information survived about ancient Iran was that which was recorded by two peoples, the Jews and the Greeks, the only peoples active in the ancient Middle East who preserved their memories, their voices and their languages. Both the Greeks and the Jews remembered Cyrus; the Persians did not. The Greeks and the Jews alone provided such information as existed about ancient Iran until comparatively modern times, when the store of information was vastly increased by Orientalists, that is to say European archeologists and philologists who found a way to recover the ancient texts and decipher the ancient scripts.

Let me pause for a moment to look at the image of Iran as preserved in the Bible and the Greek classics, that is to say, as preserved by the Jews and the Greeks. The Greek view, as one would expect, is dominated by the long struggles, beginning with the Persian invasion of Greece and culminating in the great Greek counter-attack by Alexander. This is a major theme in ancient Greek historiography; the contrast between Greek democracy and Persian autocracy also forms an important theme of Greek political writings. But despite the fact that the history was mainly one of conflict, the tone of ancient Greek writing about Persia is mostly respectful, and sometimes even compassionate, notably for example in the play *The Persians* by Aeschylus, himself a veteran of the Persian wars, who shows real compassion for the defeated Persian enemy.

The Bible gives us a uniquely positive picture of ancient Iran, in a literature which does not normally deal indulgently with strangers, nor even with its own people. The earliest occurrences of the name Persia, *Paras*, are in the Book of Ezekiel, where *Paras* is listed

along with other exotic and outlandish names to indicate the outer limits of the known world. *Paras* has something like the significance of *ultima thule* in modern usage. The name makes a more dramatic appearance in the story of the writing on the wall at Belshazzar's feast, where the inscription *Mene mene, tekel upharsin* informed the hapless Babylonian monarch that he was weighed in the balances and found wanting, and that his realms would be shared by the Medes and Persians.

And then of course comes Cyrus, mentioned more particularly in the later chapters of Isaiah, what the Bible critics call Deutero-Isaiah, that part of the Book of Isaiah dating from after the Babylonian captivity. The language used of Cyrus is little short of astonishing. He is spoken of in the Hebrew text as God's anointed, messiah, and he is accorded greater respect, not only than any other non-Jewish ruler, but almost any Jewish ruler.

Inevitably the question arises—why? Why does the Bible speak in such glowing terms of this heathen potentate? There is of course one obvious answer, that Cyrus was, so to speak, the Balfour of his day. He issued a declaration authorizing the Jews to return to their land and restore their political existence. But that doesn't really answer the question; it merely restates the question. Why did he do that? A series of conquests had brought a multitude of ethnic groups, as we say nowadays, under Persian rule, Why should Cyrus take such a step on behalf of one of them? We only know the Jewish side of this, we don't know the Persian side, and one can only venture a guess as to the reason. My suggestion is that there was, shall we say, a perceived affinity, between those who professed two spiritual, ethical religions, surrounded on all sides by ignorant polytheists and idolaters. One can see this sense of affinity in the latest books of the Old Testament, and also in subsequent Jewish writings. One notes for example a number of Persian words, some already in the Bible, many more in the post-Biblical Jewish literature.

This encounter between Iranian religion and Jewish religion was of far-reaching significance in world history. We can discern unmistakable traces of Persian influence, both intellectual and material, on the development of post-exilic Jewry, and therefore also of Christendom, and corresponding influence in the late Greco-Roman and Byzantine world, and therefore ultimately in Europe.

Let me just take a few examples, first on the practical side. The

early Arabic sources tell us that the Persians invented a new device for riding, a device called the stirrup, previously unknown. We can easily see why this device, which revolutionized transport, communications and also warfare, created so great an impression. A mounted soldier in armor, on an armored horse, with a lance, could launch a much more devastating charge with stirrups than without them, when he was in imminent danger of being dismounted. We hear vivid stories, specially from the Byzantine writers, of the advent of this new and devastating instrument of warfare, the mounted, armored horseman, the cataphract.

The stirrup also helped the Persians to develop the postal system. Their system, described with admiration by the Greeks, consisted of a network of couriers and relay stations all over the realm. It was known in Arabic as *barid*, which comes of course from the Persian verb *burdan*, meaning to carry. The post-horse was the *paraveredos*, from which comes the German *Pferd*. Another innovation credited to Iran, though the evidence here is conflicting, is the mill, the use of wind and water to generate power. This was the first and for millennia the only source of energy other than human and animal muscle.

In another area the Persians are accredited with the invention of board games, particularly chess, which still uses a Persian terminology—the Shah—and also the game which is variously known as trik-trak, shich-besh, backgammon and other names.

We are on stronger ground in ascribing to Persians—and here we come back to the theme of cultural history—the book, that is the book in the form of a codex. The Greco-Roman world used scrolls, and so did much of the ancient Middle East. The codex, stitched and bound in the form which we now know as a book, seems to have originated in Iran. The cultural impact of such an innovation was obviously immense.

But let me turn to what is ultimately the more important theme, and that is the influence of ideas. From Iran, from Iranian religion, comes the concept of a cosmic struggle between almost equal forces of good and evil. The Devil, as you know, was Iranian by birth, although he is now given a local habitation and a name in the Western Hemisphere. The idea of a power of evil, opposite and almost equal, is characteristic of ancient Persian religion: Ahriman is the predecessor of Satan, Mephistopheles, or whatever else we may choose

to call him. Linked with that was the idea of judgment and retribution, of heaven and hell; and here I would remind you that paradise is also a Persian word. The *para* is the same as the Greek *peri*; *peridesos* in ancient Persian means walled enclosure.

Messianism too seems to have Persian antecedents, in the doctrine that at the end of time a figure will arise from the sacred seed of Zoroaster, who will establish all that is good on earth. It is not without significance that the Messianic idea does not appear in the Hebrew Bible until after the return from Babylon, that is to say after the time when the Jews came under Persian influence. The importance of messianism in the Judaeo-Christian tradition is obvious. Linked with this is the idea and the practice of a religious establishment—a hierarchy of priests with ranks, under the supreme authority of the chief priest, the *Mobedhan Mobedh*, the Priest of Priests. And by the way, that form of title, the Priest of Priests, the King of Kings, and the like, is characteristically Iranian. It is used in many Iranian titles in antiquity; it was adopted into Arabic: *Amir al-Umara*—the Amir of Amirs, *Qadi al-Qudat*—the Qadi of Qadis. Perhaps even the title of the Pope in Rome: the Servant of the Servants of God—*Servus Servorum Dei*—may be ascribed to indirect Iranian influence. The whole idea of a church, not in the sense of a building, a place of worship, but a hierarchy under a supreme head, may well owe a good deal to Zoroastrian example.

The ancient religion of Iran survives. Zoroastrianism is still the faith of small, dwindling, but not unimportant minorities, in India, in Pakistan, and to some extent in Iran. They preserved the ancient writings, in the ancient script, and a knowledge of the ancient language, and it was these which enabled the first European Orientalists to learn Middle Iranian and to use it to rediscover the still more ancient languages of Iran.

Iran and Shi'ism

For at least a millennium, Iran has been associated with Islam, and in the more recent centuries with Shi'ite Islam, which some have seen as an expression, a reappearance of the Persian national genius in an Islamic disguise. Some have gone even further—nineteenth-century European writers like Gobineau claimed to see the triumph

of Shi'ism as the resurgence of the Aryanism of Iran against the Semitism of Islam. Such ideas are rather discredited nowadays, though they were popular at one time, and still have their adherents.

The difficulty about such theories is that Shi'ism, like Islam itself, was brought to Iran by Arabs. The first Shi'ites in Iran—and for a long time this remained so—were Arabs. The city of Qomm, the stronghold and center of Iranian Shi'ism, was an Arab foundation, and the first settlers in Qomm were Arabs. (I remember being taken round Qomm by a Persian friend who pointed to the deserts that surround it, and remarked: "Who but an Arab would build a town in a place like this?") Shi'ism was reintroduced and imposed by the Safavids many centuries later, and they, I would remind you, were Turks. Until then Iran was a largely Sunni country. But no doubt that with the establishment of the Shi'ite Safavid state a new era began, one of a distinctively Iranian Shi'ite character.

The accession of the Safavids marks a new era in Persian history and the establishment, for the first time in many centuries, of a unified dynastic state. The Safavids brought certain important new features. One I have already alluded to—unity. Under the first Arab conquerors the whole of Iran was under one rule, that of the Caliphs situated in Medina, then in Damascus, then in Baghdad. But with the break-up of the Caliphate, Iran broke up into its various regions, under local rulers of one kind or another. The Safavids for the first time created a united realm of Iran, more or less within its present frontiers—not just diverse regions, Pars and Khurasan and the rest of them, but a single realm with a single ruler. It has remained so ever since, in spite of the immense ethnic diversity which characterizes that country to the present day. If you look, for example, round the periphery, starting in the north-west, you have the Turkish-speaking Azarbaijanis. To the south of them are Kurds, to the south of them are more Turks, the Qashqais, to the south of them, in Khuzistan are Arabs, in the south-east the Baluchis and then the Turkmen. These form a periphery, all around the center, of peoples speaking different non-Persian languages. Nevertheless, the culture of the Persian language and the distinctive Shi'ite version of Islam helped to maintain the unity that was imposed by the Safavids and maintained by their successors.

Shi'ism brought a second important feature, and that is differentiation from all the neighbors: from the Ottomans in the west, from

the central Asian states in the north-east, from the Indian-Muslim states in the south-east. Practically all of these were Sunni states. True, Persian was used as a classical language, a literary language and even at times a diplomatic language by all three neighbors, the Ottomans, the Central Asians, and the Indians. But the crucial difference between the Sunni and Shi'ite realms remained.

Another interesting development of the period, particularly under the late Safavids and their successors, is the emergence of the notion of Iran. I have been using the terms Persia and Persians, to speak of the land and the people, as was customary in Western languages until recently. The name Iran is ancient, but its current use is modern. We first find the word in ancient Persian inscriptions. In the inscription of Darius for example, in the ancient Persian language, he describes himself as King of the Aryans. Iran is the same word as Aryan; it means "noble" in the ancient languages of Iran and of India. The King was the King *Aryanum*, which is a genitive plural, King of the Aryans. It survives in the myths and sagas of the early medieval period, in the Shahnama and related stories of the great struggle between Iran and Turan; it reappears in the nineteenth century as the name of the country in common rather than official usage. It did not become official usage until much later, probably under the influence of the Third Reich. The German government of the time, which needed various facilities and help from Iran, went to some pains to assure the people of that country that they were Iranians, which is the same as Aryans, that they were therefore different from and superior to all their neighbors, and that the Nuremberg Laws did not apply to them. It was at that time that the name of the country, in foreign languages as well as in Persian, was officially changed to Iran.

Let us look at another turning-point in history, the Islamic Revolution, and its creation the Islamic Republic. This was indeed a revolution. The word revolution has been much used in the Middle East in modern times, to designate a whole series of coups d'état, palace revolts, assassinations, civil wars and the like. What happened in Iran, for better or for worse, was a real revolution, in the sense that the French Revolution and the Russian Revolution were real revolutions. And like them, the Iranian revolution had a tremendous impact in all those countries with which it shares a common universe of discourse, in other words in the Islamic world.

As with these earlier revolutions, there are contrasting views of the Islamic revolution in Iran. In one of them, we see actions and statements which have made the name of Iran, even the name of Islam, stand for a regime of bloodthirsty bigots, maintained by tyranny at home and by terror both at home and abroad. In the other, that which they themselves prefer to present, we see an alternative diagnosis and an alternative prescription for the ills and sufferings of the region, an alternative, that is, to the alien and infidel ways that have long prevailed, and a return to authenticity.

At the present time, with the ending of direct outside rule and the rapid diminution even of outside influence, a familiar pattern is beginning to reemerge in the Middle East. Today there are again two major powers in the region, this time the Turkish Republic and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In the sixteenth century, in the same countries, two rival powers, the Ottoman Sultan and the Safavid Shah, representing the Sunni and the Shi'ite versions of Islam, fought for the headship of the Islamic world.

A thousand years earlier, in the sixth century, in the same countries, two rivals, the Byzantine emperors and the Sasanids of Iran, embodied rival civilizations and rival visions of the world. Both Sasanids and Byzantines were conquered and overwhelmed by Islam. Both the Ottoman Sultans and the Safavid Shahs were swept aside by new forces from outside and also from inside their realms.

Today the rivals are two regimes, both established by revolution, both embodying certain basic ideologies, secular democracy in Turkey, Islamic theocracy in Iran. As in earlier times, neither is impervious to the temptations of the other. In Turkey we have seen a religious party win a fifth of the votes in a free election and play an important role in national politics. We do not know how many Iranians would prefer secular democracy, since in an Islamic theocracy they are not permitted to express that preference. But from various indications one may say that their number is not inconsiderable.

The struggle continues, within these two countries and elsewhere, between two different versions of what was originally a common civilization. The outcome remains far from certain.