

IRAN SCENES

The tomb of Esther and Mordecai, Hamadan



Picture: Jeremy Thomas

This little shrine, large enough to hold no more than about a dozen people comfortably, is perhaps the most unexpected of all Biblical sites in Iran.

We are still at Achmetha (mentioned, as we saw last month, in Ezra 6:2), but in a strict Muslim state one is not prepared for the discovery of a fully functioning synagogue, which is what this building is, there still being a tiny community of Jews in this city. Inside can be seen all we would expect in a synagogue, including the `ark' in which the scrolls are kept, and a copy of the Ten Commandments on the wall. But what surprises the visitor most of all is the presence of two tombs, allegedly those of Esther and Mordecai, in a small anteroom. As Achmetha (Ecbatana) was one of the capitals of the Medo-Persian Empire, King Ahasuerus and Queen Esther presumably visited regularly, and it may be that Mordecai accompanied them as a member of the king's court.

It is impossible to be certain, of course, that Esther and Mordecai are actually buried here, but within the local Jewish community (now numbering only around fifteen, and reducing further over time) there is a long tradition of pilgrimage associated with this spot which can be traced back reliably for at least 1,500 years. Perhaps there is something in the tradition, therefore, and this may be the place where these two Old Testament characters sleep in the dust of the ground. The Iranian government's contempt for the State of Israel is well known, having received widespread publicity in recent years. But such hatred is supposedly not directed against Jews per se. Along with the Christian minority in Iran, Jews are regarded as 'people of the book' and respected. On an official level, they enjoy representation in the Majlis or Iranian parliament. As one Iranian told me, "We have a problem with Israel, not with Jews". But it is impossible to post a letter from Iran to Israel, because the latter is considered not to exist.—*Jeremy Thomas*