

IRAN SCENES

Zoroastrian “Towers of Silence”, Yazd

Picture: Jeremy Thomas



Although Iran is overwhelmingly a Muslim country, minority faiths survive here, Judaism and Christianity among them. But allegedly the most ancient Iranian religion is Zoroastrianism, which has been practised at least since the time of the Medo-Persian Empire. The Biblical kings whose tombs we have seen were buried according to Zoroastrian rites, and their burial places and other monuments make frequent reference to the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, in both written and pictorial form.

Although Zoroastrianism involves the worship of one god, it is a far cry from Biblical monotheism. It takes its name from the ‘prophet’ Zoroaster (Zarathustra), a rather shadowy figure whose very dates are uncertain; estimates vary widely, from the 18th to the 6th centuries B.C. According to some sources his teachings may have influenced King Cyrus to allow the captive Jews to return home, although the Medo-Persian kings seem to have tolerated a variety of religions within the empire and so would have had no difficulty accommodating another God, the LORD, amongst the deities of their subject nations.

The city of Yazd, in the centre of Iran, has a particularly high concentration of Zoroastrians, who make up between five and ten per cent of the population. There is a Zoroastrian fire temple here, which houses a flame said to have been kept burning continuously since 470 B.C. (during the reign of King Ahasuerus). The four ‘elements’, earth, air, fire and water, hold spiritual significance for Zoroastrians, as reflected in their traditional burial practices. On top of two fortified mountains (the “Towers of Silence”) on the edge of the city, the corpses of the dead were stripped naked and left in the open air. Only when birds of prey had consumed the flesh were the bones gathered and placed in deep pits. In this way, it was thought, the earth would be kept uncontaminated. This method of disposing of the dead was practised until as recently as the 1960s, since when the dead have been buried in the usual way, albeit in graves lined with concrete to achieve the same end.—*Jeremy Thomas*