Medo-Persia and The Islamic Republic of Iran

"Thus saith the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have holden, to subdue nations before him; and I will loose the loins of kings, to open before him the two leaved gates; and the gates shall not be shut; I will go before thee, and make the crooked places straight: I will break in pieces the gates of brass, and cut in sunder the bars of iron." —Isaiah 45:1,2

THE PROPHET ISAIAH points forward more than one hundred and fifty years to the time when Cyrus would be commissioned by God to overthrow Babylon—the first world empire—and to establish the Medo-Persian Empire in its place. Having been raised up for this purpose, Cyrus would thus fulfill the promised release of the nation of Israel from their seventy years of captivity and desolation in Babylon.

ISRAEL'S RELEASE FROM EXILE

The Spirit of God was wonderfully manifested in the

outworking of events as they transpired during this historic period in the lives of the exiled Jewish people. "In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD spoken by the mouth of Jeremiah (Jer. 29:10) might be accomplished, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia, that he made a proclamation throughout all his kingdom, and put it also in writing, saying, Thus saith Cyrus king of Persia, All the kingdoms of the earth hath the LORD God of heaven given me; and he hath charged me to build him an house in Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Who is there among you of all his people? The LORD his God be with him, and let him go up."—II Chron. 36:22,23

JEREMIAH'S PROPHECY

Jeremiah also wrote about the reason for Israel's punishment and the purpose regarding their exile in Babylon. "Thus saith the LORD of hosts; Because ye have not heard my words, Behold, I will send and take all the families of the north, saith the LORD, and Nebuchadrezzar the king of Babylon, my servant, and will bring them against this land, and against the inhabitants thereof, and against all these nations round about, and will utterly destroy them, and make them an astonishment, and an hissing, and perpetual desolations." (Jer. 25:8,9) The prophet identifies Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon, as the one God raised up to accomplish his punishments upon Israel.

The extent of the punishment inflicted upon the Israelites is also recorded. "Moreover I will take from them the voice of mirth, and the voice of gladness, the voice of the bridegroom, and the voice of the

bride, the sound of the millstones, and the light of the candle. And this whole land shall be a desolation, and an astonishment; and these nations shall serve the king of Babylon seventy years." (vss. 10,11) The prophet reveals the complete and extensive desolation that came upon the nation of Israel as a result of all their iniquities.

THE FALL OF BABYLON

Jeremiah also records God's purpose as it relates to the ending of the seventy years of captivity, the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire, and the subsequent establishment of the second of four universal empires that would be raised up to accomplish the long period of subjugation over the Israelite nation. "It shall come to pass, when seventy years are accomplished, that I will punish the king of Babylon, and that nation, saith the LORD, for their iniquity, and the land of the Chaldeans, and will make it perpetual desolations." (vs. 12) Nehemiah wrote, "These are the children of the province, that went up out of the captivity, of those that had been carried away, whom Nebuchadnezzar the king of Babylon had carried away, and came again to Jerusalem and to Judah, every one unto his city."—Neh. 7:6

RESTORATION OF ISRAEL

Isaiah foretold God's promise to restore Jerusalem and to rebuild Israel's Temple after their years of exile in Babylon. He said that it was God "That confirmeth the word of his servant, and performeth the counsel of his messengers; that saith to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be inhabited; and to the cities of Judah, Ye shall be built, and I will raise up the decayed places [wastes, *Marginal Translation*] thereof: That

saith to the deep, Be dry, and I will dry up thy rivers: That saith of Cyrus, He is my shepherd, and shall perform all my pleasure: even saying to Jerusalem, Thou shalt be built; and to the temple, Thy foundation shall be laid."—Isa. 44:26-28

Although Jerusalem would be rebuilt and its Temple restored, after the Babylonian exile ended, Israel was destined to be a subjugated people under Gentile rule for many more centuries to come. It was the Divine intention that this punishment of servitude would be carried out, not only under the Babylonian reign but also by the Medo-Persians, until they were in turn overthrown by Greece. Greece, in turn, would be conquered by Rome.

CYRUS THE GREAT

Cyrus [Koresh] was the founder of the Persian Empire and the conqueror of Babylon by Divine purpose and design. He continues to be known as Cyrus the Great, which distinguishes him from his grandfather, Cyrus I. He had purposely been selected to carry out the second phase of universal dominion, its place in world history, and its relationship to the sons of Israel.

In our featured text (Isa. 45:1,2), Isaiah referred to Cyrus as God's 'anointed.' The word anointed is a form of the Hebrew word, Messiah [*Strong's Bible Concordance*, Old Testament word #4899. anointed, Messiah]. In this scripture, we understand the word to convey the thought that Cyrus would be raised up to act as God's shepherd on behalf of the Jewish people at the time of their release from Babylonian exile. The prophet explains, "For Jacob my servant's sake, and Israel mine elect, I have even called thee

by thy name [Cyrus]: I have surnamed thee, though thou hast not known me."—Isa. 45:4

Thus Cyrus the Great, who was most likely a worshipper of pagan gods, would be raised up by God and prepared to accomplish the Divine purpose as it related to the conquest of the Babylonian Empire. He would also set in motion the release of the Jewish people from seventy years of exile and desolation under the Babylonians. By this victory, Cyrus was thus instrumental in bringing to an end the domination of Mesopotamia and the Near East under Semitic rulership, and the establishment of the first dominant universal empire of Aryan origin.

In response to these great historic events concerning Cyrus, Isaiah also recalls, "Remember the former things of old: for I am God, and there is none else; I am God, and there is none like me, Declaring the end from the beginning, and from ancient times the things that are not yet done, saying, My counsel shall stand, and I will do all my pleasure: Calling a ravenous bird from the east, the man [Cyrus] that executeth my counsel from a far country: yea, I have spoken it, I will also bring it to pass; I have purposed it, I will also do it."—Isa. 46:9-11

THE ARYANS

The word 'arya' from which Aryans has been taken is a Persian word meaning 'noble' and, in a broad sense, is generally used to identify the culture of the ancient eastern semi-nomadic people who inhabited the Iranian plateau and the steppes of Central Asia. When these nomads began to migrate and expand into Eastern Europe, they took their culture with them. The term 'Indo-European' is thus used

in a collective sense to describe the ethnic background, religion, and way of life relating to the Aryan people.

During the period 2,000-1,500 B.C., the Aryans split into two major groups known as the Medes and the Persians. Cyrus the Great had united these two groups into what became the second world power, known as the Medo-Persian Empire. The Sassanid era from A.D. 224-640 was one of the most important and historically influential periods of Iran's history. It was during this time that the highest achievement of Persian civilization occurred, although the Medo-Persian Empire had lost its significance as the second universal power. This was a most important time in their culture, and it was the last great period before the Muslim conquest in the 7th century A.D.

THE ISLAMIC CONQUEST

With the overthrow of the Sassanid regime, A.D. 637-651, the Iranian people were gradually converted to Islam. Previous Persian influences were gradually absorbed into the new Islamic polity. After Prophet Muhammad's death in A.D. 632, most of what was considered Arab territory became united under the new religion and culture of Islam.

In pre-Islamic Arabia, Muhammad's homeland, the responsibility for maintaining order fell upon the sheik [chief], an office that was not inherited. The sheik was elected through the conferring of an oath of allegiance. Arabs held enormous contempt for the hereditary kingdoms of their Persian neighbors. This oath was pledged by every member of the tribe, and could be withdrawn if the sheik failed in his duties. Muhammad adopted the oath of allegiance

for converts to his movement, and the Muslim confession of faith became a new and distinct version of the Arab oath. It also became an important political tool after his death.

Muhammad had not chosen a successor, so there was uncertainty as to who should lead the people after his death. It was decided that a consultative assembly of Muslim elders should choose a new leader. A consensus was reached and Abu Bakr, became known as Khalifat Rasul Allah. After much discussion, the Party of Ali [Shiites] who had earlier opposed the motion, took the oath that allowed Abu Bakr to assume the role of leadership.

THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

The name Persia, which had identified the ancient Aryan people for many centuries, was changed during the years between the two World Wars. In 1935, Persia officially became "The Islamic Republic of Iran."

In November 1979, Iran's new leader Ayatollah Khomeini urged his people to demonstrate against the interests of the United States and Israel. He denounced the American government as "The Great Satan" and the enemies of Islam. The Iran Hostage Crisis was the result. From November 4, 1979 until January 20, 1981, a period of 444 days, student proxies, of the new Iranian regime, held 52 diplomats and other American citizens hostage. The crisis was a direct cause for the loss of Jimmy Carter's re-election for a second term as President of the United States. The hostages were released twenty minutes after Reagan's inaugural address that confirmed his presidency. The Hostage Crisis punctuated the 1st

Islamic Revolution in modern times. In April 1981, the Algiers Treaty was signed in which the United States agreed to not interfere politically or militarily in Iran's affairs, nor to allow the hostages to take any legal action against the Iranian government.

THE GROWING THREAT

When the United States and its allies encouraged the Shah of Iran to start up a nuclear energy program in the 1970's, they did not realize the present consequences of their actions.

Iran's nuclear program began to accelerate in the late 1990's to coincide with a developing independent press, and just before a reformist parliament was elected in 2000.

The reformists supported the program but intended to comply with Iran's international obligations. The United States, however, did not support the reformists and labeled Iran as a member of the "axis of evil," along with Iraq and North Korea. By 2003, it became clear that the reform movement had stalled, and that the international community began to take notice of Iran and its nuclear program.

During these past three decades, other nations, including some of Iran's neighbors—Israel, India and Pakistan—also engaged in nuclear programs. The situation has become increasingly dangerous and there is growing hostility between Iran and the United States. Recently, representatives from the United States, Britain, Germany, France, China, and Russia met to discuss the threat of Iran's program to develop nuclear weapons. All of these nations except China and Russia requested immediate action from the United Nations Security Council, and the

International Atomic Energy Agency, to force Iran to end its program.

A VOICE AGAINST ISRAEL

With the recent election of Iran's new president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the eight-year reform government that preceded him came to an end, and he aroused international anger in a series of blunt statements that were directed against his neighbor Israel. In one of his reckless speeches, he said that Israel should be wiped off the map, or perhaps that it should be transferred from their present location in the Middle East, to a new location in either Europe or North America. He suggested that some European countries, or the United States, Canada or Alaska could give a portion of their land for a Jewish state. Furthermore, he said that the Holocaust, during World War II, was a myth that served as Europe's pretext for the very existence of the state of Israel.

Ahmadinejad's extremist and inflammatory comments reflect his intention to become the leader of the anti-Israeli campaign in the Middle East. It also underscores the reason it is so important that the international community work together to prevent Iran from any further development with their nuclear weapons program. Israel's Foreign Ministry spokesman reacted to his statements by accusing him of acting outside of international law. United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan, and many world leaders, condemned his remarks.

DEFIANCE

Iran has insisted that its nuclear research complies with the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty of

which they were a signatory, and that its program is designed solely as a means to produce electricity. The EU-3 nations—Britain, France and Germany—however, have joined the United States in calling for Tehran to be referred to the United Nations Security Council because of its outright defiance. The two other nations, Russia and China, have historically opposed the other members of the Council because of their close connections with Iran.

Russian and Chinese officials have endeavored to persuade Iran to give up their nuclear ambitions. Recently, however, Russian officials became angry that Iran had broken a voluntary moratorium and had announced their intention to resume uranium enrichment efforts which they believe could produce enough material to build a nuclear bomb in a few years time. Russia was unable to persuade Iran to accept a compromise proposal that would satisfy the United States and the EU-3, in which a joint Russian-Iranian project would enrich uranium in Russia. Iranian officials threatened to end all voluntary cooperation with the United Nations, including their allowing spot checks of atomic sites, if it was referred to the Security Council.

DANGEROUS TIMES

There has been much talk in recent months about Iran's underground nuclear facilities at Esfahan, and United States intentions to destroy them with deep, earth-penetrating weapons. Chris Ford, in an article "Time's Arrow: The Coming Nuclear Epiphany in Persia," *Washington Post* (April 20, 2006), refers to Semour Hersh's report in *The New Yorker*, (April 8, 2006). The report concerns United States plans

for a possible pre-emptive strike against Iranian nuclear facilities, and Ford says, "This strike includes a very viable nuclear option which was approved months ago, and is now in operation. The planes are already on continuous alert, making nuclear delivery practice runs along the Iranian border . . . waiting only for the signal from President Bush to drop their payloads of conventional and nuclear weapons on some 400 targets. And when this attack comes—either as a stand-alone 'knock-out blow,' or else as the precursor to a full scale, regime-changing invasion, like Iraq—there will be no warning, no declaration of war, no hearings, no public debate. The already issued orders governing the operation put the decision solely in the hands of the president."

No one can predict the final outcome of world events as they are unfolding during the closing years of this age, and the completion of the church. The present crisis in Iran, however, brings our attention to a very dangerous situation at the present time. Apostle Paul, in his second epistle to Timothy, spoke of perilous times that would come about during the final days of this present Gospel Age. He wrote, "This know also, that in the last days perilous times shall come." (II Tim. 3:1) We are witnesses of the increasing violence that is taking place throughout the world as evidence of the closing scenes of this age.

PREPARE FOR WAR

The Prophet Joel was moved by God's Spirit to provide a glimpse of this present time. "Proclaim ye this among the Gentiles; Prepare [sanctify, *MT*] war, wake up the mighty men, let all the men of war draw near; let them come up: Beat your plowshares into

swords, and your pruninghooks into spears: let the weak say, I am strong." (Joel 3:9,10) The prophet points to the spirit and willingness in which men are ready to die as martyrs for a misguided cause, and the degree in which suicide bombers sanctify war and violence. 'Let the weak say, I am strong.' This attitude, and the defiance with which it is stated, describes the present crisis and the near inevitable collapse of all worldly institutions. We watch the events of our time with increased interest, and realization that Christ's kingdom will soon assume control of the human family's destiny.

THE GREATER CYRUS

Cyrus, king of Persia, who conquered Babylon and set free from bondage the typical people of Israel, represents our Lord, as the "KING OF KINGS, AND LORD OF LORDS." (Rev. 19:16) Babylon felt secure behind its massive impregnable walls, enormous gates, and ample provisions stored against any threat or siege. Cyrus and his army from the east diverted the waters of the Euphrates River and overthrew the mighty capital city of Babylon. The city was not only overthrown, but also the entire empire, together with all of its great power, influence, and idols of silver and gold.

Mystic Babylon is also described by the Revelator, "Upon her forehead was a name written, MYSTERY, BABYLON THE GREAT, THE MOTHER OF HARLOTS AND ABOMINATIONS OF THE EARTH." (Rev. 17:5) The apostate church system, including its many divisions, is also destined to fall together with all of its riches, influence, and false teachings. Of her, it is also said, "The water [Euphrates] thereof was dried

up, that the way of the kings of the east might be prepared." (Rev. 16:12) "All nations have drunk of the wine of the wrath of her fornication, and the kings of the earth have committed fornication with her, and the merchants of the earth are waxed rich through the abundance of her delicacies." (Rev. 18:3) "She saith in her heart, I sit a queen, and am no widow, and shall see no sorrow." (vs. 7) The greater Cyrus will bring an end to all of earth's corruption and deception represented in Babylon, and will set free the entire family of man who have been held bondage under the Divine sentence of sin and death.■