The Legacy of Persia & Iran:
From Persepolis to the Silk Road

My Library U – Fast Class Series

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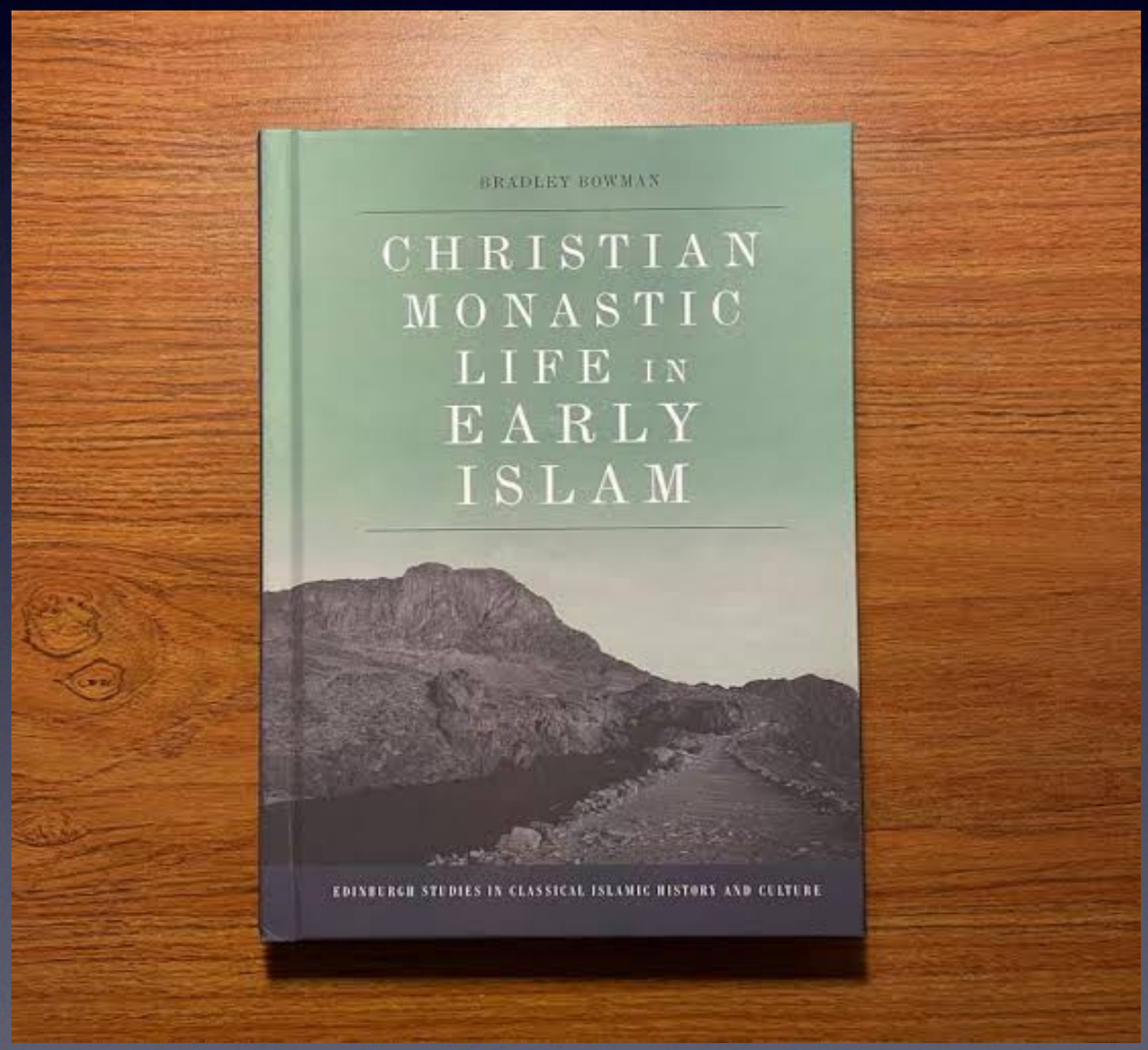

Ancient Persia under Cyrus

- In 550 BCE, Cyrus (King of Persia) – unification of the Iranian peoples
- Achaemenid Dynasty
- Cyrus is considered a rather unique monarch of the ancient world – particularly in the treatment of conquered populations

Sargon II (r. 722-705) and Assyria

- After the death of King Solomon, the ancient Israelite kingdom split into a northern (Israel) and southern half (Judah)
- conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel around the year 722 BCE
- “Lost Tribes” of Israel

The Babylonian Empire
&
Judah

- the city of Jerusalem and the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar II
- the era of the “Babylonian Exile” for the people of Judah - 586 BCE
- Kings II, Chronicles II, and the Book of Jeremiah

- *The king of Babylon then had Zedekiah’s eyes put out, bound him in bronze chains, and carried him off to Babylon. On the seventh day of the fifth month, in the nineteenth year of King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon, Nebuzaradan, the captain of the royal guard, who served the king of Babylon, arrived in Jerusalem. He burned down the Lord’s temple…*
- *But the captain of the guard left some of the poorest of the land to be vinedressers and plowmen…*

Kings II, 25: 7-12

The Edict of Restoration

- Sometimes referred to as “the first charter of human rights”
- Cylinder seal – British Museum
- *The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me [Cyrus of Persia] all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them…* – Book of Ezra 1: 2-4

Ancient Persian Religion

- Zoroastrianism – based on the teachings of Zarathustra (Zoroaster) – possibly 1,000 years before Christianity
- Considered one of the world's oldest organized religions – ancient scriptures known as *The Avesta*
- Dualistic theology: Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman
- Teachings of free-will – human beings are active participants in the cosmic struggle between good and evil

The Achaemenids

- the Persian Empire came to include Asia Minor, Egypt, Mesopotamia, Iran, and parts of India
- The largest empire in history up until that point in time
- Persepolis as the center of empire – systems of roads that united the vast territory together

Ancient Timeline

- The Greco-Persian Wars - Battle of Thermopylae in 480 BCE
- Era of Alexander (d. 323) - control over Persia; his military commanders establish the Seleucid Dynasty
- Parthian Empire replaces Greek rule over Persia around 247 BCE
- Sasanian Empire from the 3rd-7th centuries CE

The Early Islamic Period

- The entry of Islam into Persia occurred through the Muslim conquest of Persia (633–651 CE), a pivotal turning point that ended the Sasanian Empire and fundamentally reshaped Iranian culture, religion, and politics
- Under early Muslim rule (the 7th through 10th centuries), Persia was a highly diverse, multi-religious society. The transition to an Islamic majority was slow
- Muslims lived alongside large, established communities of Zoroastrians, Jews, and Christians (primarily the Church of the East/Nestorians)

Classical Age of Islam

- Often referred to as *The Golden Age*: literature, sciences, medicine, philosophy, engineering, law
- While the early Abbasid Caliphate was politically dominated by Arabs, the intellectual, administrative, and cultural engines of the empire were profoundly Persian
- Major cities along the Silk Road – Bukhara (famous for its carpets and textiles), Samarkand (luxury silks and paper from China), Nishapur (turquoise and ceramics), Tabriz (trading town between the Caspian Sea and the Black Sea), and Isfahan (metalworking)

al-Khwarizmi (d. 850)

- Born in Khwarazm (eastern Persia, modern-day Uzbekistan)
- Spent much of his life working in the great city of Baghdad; a mathematician, geographer, and astronomer
- "The Compendious Book on Calculation by Balancing and Harmonizing"
- It is from the word "*al-jabr*" in this title that the modern English word ***algebra*** originates.

Ibn Sina /Avicenna
d. 1037 CE

- Born near Bukhara (eastern Persia, modern Uzbekistan), he is widely regarded as one of the most significant thinkers of the medieval world
- Wrote in both Persian and Arabic language
- *The Canon of Medicine* - categorized diseases, introduced quarantine to limit the spread of infections, and remained the premier medical textbook in Europe and the Middle East for over 500 years

Omar Khayyam (d. 1131)

- philosopher, mathematician, and poet from Nishapur (Persia)
- He was the son of a tent-maker (*Khayyam*) – "he was stitching the tents of science"
- Arabic language for his academic works, Persian for his poetry
- Poetry becomes the rage in the 19th century across Europe

The Quatrains:

- *Oh, come with old Khayyam and leave the wise to talk; one thing is certain, the rest are lies. The flower that once has blown, forever dies.*
- *Drink wine and look at the moon and think of all the civilizations the moon has seen passing by. Come my moon, drink with me on this moonlit night, for who knows if the moon will ever find us again!*
- *Dead yesterdays and unborn tomorrows, why fret about it, if today be sweet.*

Hafez (d. 1389)

- From Shiraz; recognized as one of the greatest Persian poets
- Shiraz known as the “town of gardens and nightingales” and famous for its wine production throughout the Middle Ages
- Mystical (Sufi) quality to the poetry of Hafez - spiritual awakening transcends all boundaries
- "I have learned so much from God / That I can no longer call myself / A Christian, a Hindu, a Muslim, a Buddhist, or a Jew. / The Truth has shared so much of Itself with me…”

Jalal al-Din Rumi (d. 1273)

- Born in Balkh (eastern Persia) in 1207
- took refuge in Turkish lands (Asia Minor) as a result of Mongol invasions
- conventional study and teaching of Islam in Konya until he was around 37 yrs old… Then, he embraces mysticism
- one of the best-selling poets in the United States for the last several decades, selling millions of copies and frequently surpassing traditional Western literary figures

Legacy of Rumi

- While at Konya – he wrote more than 30,000 verses
- “even if the forests were pens and the ocean ink” – God’s words are endless (Qur’an 18:109)

Tomb of Rumi at Konya

- Epitaph reads:

"When we are dead, seek not our tomb in the earth, but rather in the hearts of men"

The poet Rumi on Jesus and Mary

- "See the value of true art, when the earth or the soul is moved to create true beauty – for the witness might then for a moment know, beyond any doubt, God is really within – Birth from a hand's loving touch, birth from a song, from a dance, breathing life into this world. The body is like Mary, and each of us, each one of us has a Christ within".