

# **KHUSHROW II – THE SASANIAN KING WHO WAS CLOSEST TO THE CHRISTIANS**

Dr. Kersey Antia

July 20, 2018

**S**ince Khushrow II fled to the Roman emperor Maurice in 590 to seek refuge from the rebellion of Wahram Chobin whom he was able to defeat with the help of Maurice and since Maurice had adopted him as his son to foster good relations between the two empires, through the rite of ADOPTIO PER ARMA which conventionally assumed the Christian identity of the adoptees, historiographers started circulating the stories of Christianization of Khushrow II. Such stories about Khushrow II (as well as about Khushrow I) were quite baseless as can, among other things, be easily affirmed by the distinctly Zoroastrian symbols on their carnage as well as by the lament of Pope Gregory the Great that Khushrow II was not converted despite the best efforts of Roman bishops. (p. 164). However, such stories persisted for long, faded by the fact that Khushrow had two Christian wives, had built monasteries, churches, etc. and had become an ardent devotee of Sr. Sergius and generously donated to his church. Christian nobles of Armenia (who had converted from Zoroastrianism) remained loyal to Khushrow II during the rebellion of Wahram Chobin. Khushrow II also co-opted the Christian elites of the conquered Roman territories for the smooth running of his empire. (p. 168).

As Payne notes, Khushrow II's reign “was the apex of Christian aristocratic fortunes under the Sasanians and Christian elites were ubiquitous in military and fiscal contexts during the age of the Islamic conquests.” (p. 168). Moreover, as the Holy Cross was now in the possession of Persians, Christian soldiers in the Persian army “drew strength from Christ by means of a relic of his Cross, much a Roman soldiers did.” They secured most consequential victories “with a relic of Christ's cross” in their possession. (p. 169). Payne further notes, “Rather than allow East Syria leaders to retain a monopoly on the powers of Christ and his saints, Khushrow II sought to channel their forces into the service of the Iranian Empire.” (p. 171). When Khushrow II invaded the Roman Empire in 604, he included the patriarch, Sabrisho, in his march to Nisbis, which “attracted the attention of Christian communities for the implicit and explicit approval of imperial warfare that his presence signaled.” The Chronick of Seert even maintains that Khushrow II went on to battle the Romans “only because he believed that the prayers of Salerisho would ensure an Iranian victory.” However, as Payne notes, for Khushrow II, “the presence of a living holy

man in his retinue was a sign that Christian powers could be placed in the service of his empire, designed to persuade both conquerors and conquered of the feasibility of incorporating the Christian Roman Empire into Iran.” (p. 174).

It seems Khushrow II (and most of the Sasanian kings) were guided by his father's views, as quoted by Al-Tabari (*Tarikh al-rusul wa al-muluky* Volume 2, 999/298) to recognize the contributions of non-Zoroastrians to the realization of Zoroastrian empire: “just as royal throne cannot stand on its two front legs without the two back ones, our kingdom cannot stand or endure firmly if we cause the Christians and adherents of other faiths, who differ in belief from ourselves to become hostile to us. So refrain from harming the Christians and become assiduous in good works, so that the Christians and adherents of other faithful may see this, praise you Roman Senate sent three envoys to Khushrow II. “They offered nothing less than the full submission of the Roman emperor Herculius, to the kind of Kings, in terms that James Howard-Johnston has described as “grovelling.” Payne adds: For the first time in their nearly four centuries of interaction – sometimes conflictual, sometimes peaceable – the Roman state recognized Iran's claim to universal dominion and accepted a subject position. The reasons for this humiliating about-face were plain.” (p. 174), the Khushrow had captured at least thirty percent of the Roman territory as well as the True Cross n 614. Persians, notes Payne, “aimed to subordinate rather than to devastate Roman infrastructures,” though they were quite violent with resistors and Roan soldiers. Payne, however, asserts that “the archaeology of the Lievant more generally revealed more continuity than discontinuity during the era of Iranian rule,” and the Persians “immediately repaired any damage that the holy places sustained, leaving no trace of a destructive conquest” and in Transjordan “church construction, rather than destruction, continued apace.” Negative reports about the Persian conquerors was in the words of Payne, due to Persian “appropriation of the symbolic foundations of Christianity in its holiest places.” While Romans transformed Persia into God's enemy, contemporary witnesses, as cited by Payne, “considered Roman defeat a consequence of Christian sin, a collective failure to fulfill the obligations that God demanded of them.” (pp. 176-7). Payne cites the Chronicle of Khuzistan to narrate “the respectful delivery of the cross from Jerusalem to the Iranian court” and the king himself “honored the cross before a courtly audience, according to the chronicle” installed it in a “new treasury” at his capital. “If historians have focused on the damage done to Roman political institutions in advance of the Islamic conquests,” regrets Payne, “the ways in church the Iranians consolidated their rule have received less attention,” which he tries to address. (pp. 179-182). Payne points out that Persians' effort for the renovation of Jerusalem is often ignored even in the

contemporary Christian reports, even though it took place “under the auspices of the Iranian authorities” and Khushrow II, “moreover, ordered and funded Jerusalem's reconstruction.” (p. 183). He also reports that the Persian commander Yazdin “dispatched large sums of silver to Jerusalem at the order of the king of kings and presided over the renewal of its sanctuaries and the construction of new monasteries and churches.” However, as Khushrow II positioned himself as the rebuilder of Jerusalem remarks Payne, Roman authors did not acknowledge this fact. However, as someone who has chronicled the relations of Jews with Persians over their entire history, I find the sudden reversal from cordial collaboration with the Jews in Jerusalem during the first three years of the seize of Jerusalem to their expulsion from the city not only “unprecedented” as Payne described, but also so hard to explain except perhaps as the Persian attempt at desisting the Jews from continuing their age old hostility to the Christians as it interfered continually with the establishment of law. And order and also perhaps to ultimately safeguard Jews against eventual Christian counter-attack, making it further difficult for the Persians to govern a new territory. However, it seems in their zeal to establish their bonafides among the Christians in the city in order to stabilize their rule firmly there, winning over the heart of the Christians seems to have taken precedence over the long history of their pro-Jewish stand unless Khushrow surmised that the Jews were going overboard in settling their scores with the Christians just because of the pro-Jewish disposition of the Persians. All the same, it pales in significance when compared to the long history of Roman persecution of the Jews.

Christological controversies had incited violent contestations of ecclesiastical leadership in the Roman East. Following the systematic Roman repression of all the bishops who opposed Chalcedon, they longed for a world without a Roman empire, a Christianity without a Roman dominance. The bishop John of Ephesus even came to regard the Sasanians as a possible ally of his church in the mid-sixth century. Sasanian patronage led to “ecclesiastical institution building for the non-Chalcedonians, of a kind not seen since Theodora, wife of Justinian, extended her support to them,” which, in turn, led to the articulation of a common Miaphysite doctrine. As Payne notes, “The Iranian regime inaugurated an era of triumph for Miaphysite orthodoxy.” (p. 186). But the East and West Syrians came to stand at opposite sides of the question of Christ's nature. When the Miaphysites disagreed with the Dyophysites on the appointments to the see in 612, Khushrow organized a synod to resolve them to present their competing doctrines, had them translated from Syriac to Pahlavi and then supervised the ensuing presentations. According to an eye witness, Babai, he sought middle ground between the two opposing sects and even advised them to avoid referring to “the highly controversial

theologian Nestorius (386-451).” He “acted in a manner that recalls the effort of a theologically engaged emperor such as Justinian to design a Christological compromise.” However, unlike the Roman emperors, he did not side with either of them as he found their difference insurmountable. However, a few years later both the groups were found partaking of the same communion at court, which is the significant representation of Christian unity. It thus seems Khushrow took “from Roman emperors the authority to validate theological truth.”

Khushrow obviously appeared to be a Christian monarch to many of his Christian subjects for his close association with Christianity as already noted. “But,” concludes Payne, “Zoroastrians did not share this exclusive (Christian) understanding of religious identity” as long as Zoroastrian institutions were not contradicted or the cosmological project of the good religion were not compromised. (p. 204). While Payne does not seem to be aware of it, but what he observes in his concluding remarks as well as throughout the book reminds me, among others, of an Avestan prayer that is recited in the Jashan ceremony alone at least nine times and fully reinforce Payne's thesis and even more.

Good thoughts, good words and good deeds, performed here or elsewhere (in this country or elsewhere) whether they are already performed in the past or they will be performed in future, we imbibe them all in our being and make our guiding light because we all belong to the good.

Moreover, the same Jashan ceremony begins with the invocation of souls of the righteous in seven different verses to ensure their totality and leave out none, each verse ending with invoking the souls of everyone from the time of the first man, Gayomard, to the last Messiah to come, and to further ensure their totality the last verse specifically includes the souls from all the seven regions (*Keshwar*) known to them by naming them all. As linguistically it bears a definite Sasanian imprint it further reinforces Payne's characterization of the (Sasanian) Zoroastrian perception and inclusion of the Zoroastrian “the Other”.

However, this is but one example of it as many more could be easily found. As Zoroastrianism preached, even mandated that and made it incumbent on everyone to bring about the renovation (*Frashokereti* or *Frashegird*) of the world, it cogently reinforces Payne's (patent contention that “the perfection of the *Frashegird* was the common inheritance of humanity and Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians alike would ultimately enter paradise.” (p. 30). Very few theologies assign such space for “the Other” and as an historian Payne has assiduously depicted it to de-mythify the myth of Sasanian persecution of Christians that has gone on unexplored and unexposed for centuries.