

November 2, 2003

The Martyrs of Persia

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

The Scythians were Eurasian nomads, who for centuries roamed the vast grasslands along the Dnepr, the Don, and the Volga. In Assyrian records they are known as the Ashguzai, and in the Bible, which calls them the Ashkenaz, they are descendents of Gomer, in the second generation after Noah (Genesis 10:3; 1 Chronicles 1:6). In ancient Persian their name, as preserved in an inscription of Darius, was corrupted to Skusha, from which was derived the Greek name by which we still call them, Scythians. In Greek mythology, the patriarch of the race was said to be Scythes, the son of Heracles (Herodotus 4.10). Antiquity remembered them as fearsome mounted archers.

In the seventh century before Christ, the Scythians wandered into the notice of history when they passed down through the Caucasian Gates and encroached on the Assyrian Empire. Although this contact was originally hostile, Esarhaddon (681-668) made allies of them, giving his daughter in marriage to the Scythian king, Bartatua. The Assyrians hoped to keep the newcomers around for a while, to help against the rising Babylonians and Medes.

The Scythians, however, could do pretty much what they wanted, because the Assyrian Empire went into full decline after Esarhaddon (and would collapse when Nineveh fell in 612). Moreover, these nomads rarely remained long in one place, and sometime between 630 and 625 they determined to go on a raiding expedition down the western half of the Fertile Crescent. They actually had designs on Egypt, according to Herodotus, who left us a record of what ensued: "When they arrived in that part of Syria called Palestine, Psammetichus, the King of Egypt [Psamtek I, 664-610], met them with gifts and supplications to advance no further" (1.105). Although thus bought off from invading Egypt, the Scythian hordes menaced much of the Holy Land, destroying the Philistine cities of Ashkelon and Ashdod.

Although the Medes, in due course, drove the invaders to the northern frontiers of the Mediterranean, up toward the Black Sea, they remained a threat to the Fertile Crescent for a long

time. In the early years of the sixth century Jeremiah still thought of them as a force to be reckoned with (51:27), and centuries later the apostle Paul used their name as a synonym for barbarians (Colossians 3:11).

The Scythian invasion of the Holy Land probably lasted for a only a few months. Even this brief time, nonetheless, was sufficient to inspire panic among the populace; they had already heard of those terrifying mounted archers whom even the Assyrians preferred not to fight. One of Israel's prophets took this invasion as a sign of God's impending wrath. His name was Zephaniah.

The Scythian attack came early the reign of Josiah of Juda (640-609), before the Deuteronomic Reform that began in 622 (1:1). Thus, Zephaniah was a contemporary of young Jeremiah. This dating would also explain Zephaniah's preoccupation with popular religious syncretism, involving the worship of the Phoenician Baal, the Ammonite Milcom, and the Philistine Dagon (1:4-5,9). It was chiefly against this syncretism that King Josiah's reform of 622 would be directed (2 Chronicles 34:8-33).

The imagery of warfare, of which the Scythians were currently providing a vivid example, prompted Zephaniah to view the judgment of God in terms of a cosmic overthrow, an undoing, as it were, of the work of Creation, especially of days five and six: "'I will utterly consume everything from the face of the land (\*'adamah\*),' says the Lord; 'I will consume man (\*'adam\*') and beast; I will consume the birds of heaven, the fish of the sea . . . I will cut off man (\*'adam\*') from the face of the land (\*'adamah\*),' says the Lord" (1:2-3). This is the worst punishment Zephaniah could imagine, this cutting out of the very ground from under human existence, so that man's life is left "up in the air."

Zephaniah arguably gives us the Bible's most detailed picture of the \*Dies Irae\*, "the day of the Lord" (1:14-16). It will visit all nations, not just local folks like the Philistines (2:4-7) and the small countries east of the Jordan (2:8-11), but also the Ethiopians at the southwestern edge of the Fertile Crescent (2:12) and the Assyrians at its other end (2:13-15). Most of all, warns Zephaniah, it will visit God's holy city, Jerusalem (3:1-4). God will cut off "all nations" (3:6).

For all these dire warnings, nonetheless, Zephaniah must finally be regarded as a prophet of hope, because God is faithful to His promises. After the divine visitation of wrath has passed, God's people are once again summoned to sing the renewal of grace (3:14-20). Even as man waited for the divine judgment, he was told, "Be silent in the presence of the Lord God" (1:7). And this Lord God, when His wrath is spent, promises, "I will gather those who sorrow" (3:18).

©2003 Patrick Henry Reardon

**All Saints Orthodox Church**  
**Antiochian Orthodox Christian Archdiocese of North America**  
4129 W. Newport Avenue / Chicago, IL 60641  
Church Office: (773) 777-0749  
<http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/>

**Father Patrick Henry Reardon, Pastor**  
[phri@touchstonemag.com](mailto:phri@touchstonemag.com)

**Pastor's Daily Biblical Reflections:**  
[www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html](http://www.touchstonemag.com/frpat.html)  
**Pastoral Ponderings:**  
[http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral\\_ponderings.php](http://www.allsaintsorthodox.org/pastor/pastoral_ponderings.php)