

A Brief Review of Yezidi Beliefs and Customs, and of Any Possible Relations between them and Zoroastrian Beliefs and Customs

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My first encounter with Yezidism and the Yezidis came as a graduate student at the N.C. State University during 1965, when I ran into the Yezidi and Kurdish students who were glad to relate with me after finding out that I was Zoroastrian. We had long discussions about the Yezidis. My wife even remembers me sending some donations even as a college student to their cause, to their American Associations. I remember one of them giving me a book on Yezidism with a Parsi-style picture of Zoroaster with a caption “Zoroaster our prophet.” Ever since then I began to read a lot about Yezidism, most of it too complex and confusing to clearly attest to their being Zoroastrian, though Zoroastrian elements in it are often very apparent and distinct. Moreover, being a devoted student of Iranian history and culture, my study led me to believe that the Kurds in general and the Yezidis in particular are perhaps racially closest to the Parsis and Irani Zoroastrians than any other race in the world, as they, especially the Yezidis, have not married outside their race and mingled with the Arabs. Many scholars I consulted in this regard readily reinforced this view.

Among the many books I have read regarding the Yezidis, one of the first ones was: *The Yezidis: Their life and Beliefs*, by Sami Said Ahmed, (University of California, Los Angeles, edited by Henry Field, Field Research Projects, Miami, Florida 1975). He addresses the Yezidis as Yazidis and therefore the term Yazidi is used here for Ahmed’s narration. Ahmed, however, in turn relies on the texts and evidence given by his Yazidi friend, but regrets that “his actual name cannot be given as he is bound by his faith to preserve its secrets. Should his fellow Yazidis identify him, his life would most likely be in utmost danger.”¹ Ahmed finds that Yazidi practices “reflect clear Mithraic-Zoroastrian influence,” such as not contaminating the earth, but he also finds “Hindu-Buddhist, Christian, and even Babylonian aspects expressed in Yazidi doctrine.”

It was Sheikh Adi who formulated their code, and started their main center at Lalish. Islam has “the strongest influence upon the life and creed of the

1 p. 10.

Yazidis, but they are not ascetic Muslims.”² The first mention of Yazidis so far is found in the writings of al-Baghdadi (circa 1038) who observed: “The Yazidis are not regarded Muslims for they permitted the abolition of Islamic law in contrast to all Muslims.” The name Yazidi is likely derived from the word Yazad, angel/God, but they are also called by various other names, and “the Yazidis of Syria still call themselves Desanis.” Ahmed’s Yazidi guide believed that the Yazidis are named after King Cyrus who “was saturated with the - - - teachings of Zoroaster.”³ “However,” proclaims Ahmed, “all the information given by him about Cyrus is erroneous,”⁴ which is very apparently true, and hence not worth detailing here. “They called themselves Christians, perhaps of fear from the Muslims,” notes a Christian writer, and another one notes: “They transmit from father to son orally whatever their ancestors have learned from Zoroaster, and they prostrate to the sun wherever it goes.”⁵

An eighteenth century traveler, Niebuhr, reported that the Yazidis kept practicing their old religion, and never capitulated (to Islam), except when threatened by death.”⁶ Some ancient writers refer to the Yazidis as Chalabi, which is “but another name for Satan.” However, Chalabi was a title conferred on wealthy notables in Ottoman times.” And Ahmed finds no reason to believe Chalabi meant Satan.⁷ Yazidis now live in Iraq, Syria, Turkey, Lebanon, and Russia. They numbered about one million in the eighteenth century or so, but they were no more than 50,000 in Iraq in Ahmed’s time.

The Yazidi religious texts, *Jalwa* and *Resh*, were put to writing a hundred years ago or so “as some Yazidi Sheikhs no doubt realized that their sacred books could otherwise be forgotten amid persecution and conflict.” They refrain from “mentioning the very word Satan or any of his attributes, have kept themselves aloof for centuries, their books remain a mystery.” The word Ankar they use for Satan may have some affinity with the word Angra as in Angra-Mainyu, which stands for Ahreman or Satan in Zoroastrianism.⁸

The Book of *Resh* mentions the names of Shapur I and II as Yazidi Kings who succeeded each other and ruled for 150 years, the present Yazidi princes being their descendants. As Ahmed points out, none of it is true, along with many other mythical tales. As per Ahmed’s Yazidi guide “Taus Melek (Satan) is the head of the Angelic host – he was an emanation from the very beginning

2 p. 14.

3 pp. 27-28.

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5 p. 29.

6 p. 30.

7 pp. 32-33.

8 p. 153.

of God to preserve and keep the worlds and creatures. He loves mankind, had absolute divine power over angels, jinni, and humans, he is an eternal God with no alpha, no omega.” The Yazidis compare God’s anger at Satan as temporary, because it is the anger of a father for his son. “Seemingly the Yazidis are convinced that Taus Melek directs the world’s affairs, and mankind is directly responsible to him. He is God of the Earth, although they may pray to one God, namely Yazdan, from whom all other six deities emanated.”⁹ Ahmed discards many notions he was told about Taus Melek, such as, Taus Melek slew a peacock, cut it into pieces, and after reviving him, he “himself entered the body of this beautiful bird and flew away.” However, Satan for them is a facet of Yazdan (God), and a member of the celestial Trinity. The accounts given Yazidi “religious services” and performances may not be reliable. The Yazidis occasionally assemble at the Shrine of Sheikh Adi, but it is difficult to believe they got through any such performances. The Yazidi Taus may remind one of the Golden Calf of the Druzes, who assign the peacock the role of a spiritual and deceiving minister in the legend of the temptation and fall of Adam & Eve.

Ahmed quotes a Kurdish statesman as observing that, in view of the Yazidi belief that the Principle of Goodness will vanish after a rule of 1,000 years, leading to an intense struggle between the Gods of Light and Darkness, without anyone knowing the ultimate result; the Yazidis believe in playing safe by worshipping both. Ahmed adds: “It seems very likely that the Kurdish author presumed a Zoroastrian stratum behind the Yazidi veneration of Satan, but it is strongly doubted if the Yazidis have such convictions.”¹⁰ However, Ahmed often does not seem to be well acquainted with the Zoroastrian dualism (for which see my forthcoming treatise). As he does not seem to be familiar at all with Zoroastrianism, he tends to miss seeing apparent similarities with it in such Yazidi beliefs.

Ahmed observes: “No doubt the Yazidis believe in God (Yazdan), Creator of Heaven and Earth. But they believe that from him two trinities emanated: celestial and terrestrial. The six deities came from one God, each having the same aspects of the great God,” which is reminiscent of the six Amesha Spentas. But “Satan is God because he is made of God’s substance, and by his own free will,” which is so characteristically Zurvanite, at least in its basic conception. The Yazidi belief in reincarnation may have “caused them to have (Sheikh) Adi as a member of the terrestrial trinity,” but Ahmed does not explain how. But relying on the admission of some Yazidis he maintains that the Yazidis “in fact believe in the godhead of Sheikh Adi.”¹¹

9 p. 220.

10 p. 229.

11 p. 238.

The Yazidis believe that the Resurrection Day and Day of Judgement will be at the valley of Batit in Sinjar, and “Sheikh Adi will sit there next to the Scribes. During that time Sheikh Adi will carry his people in a tray to save them from the fires of Hell, and place them in paradise. A Yazidi tale assigns this duty on the Day of Judgement to Taus Melek, a fact again testifying that for the Yazidis both are of the same rank,”¹² again a starkly Zurvanite notion.

Ahmed finds “similarities between some Hindu prayers to the sun, and those of the Yazidis as striking,”¹³ and he regards sun worship as “a Mithraic remnant,” but the sun worship has a place of its own in Zoroastrianism. His knowledge of Mithraism however seems to be limited, and seems to assume a closer connection between Mithraism and Zoroastrianism than the latest research suggests.

“The Yazidis regard King Cyrus as a principle Yazidi figure.” However, Ahmed rightly comments: “most of the information regarding Cyrus is taken from the Old Testament, and presented in a confused manner, and cannot be taken at face value.” Ahmed adds: “The Yazidis still commemorate the entry of Cyrus (Yazid the Shamsoni) into Babylon by observing the fast of Yazid, and they break this fast on raisin wine three minutes before sunset. At midnight during these three fasting days, a meal is served called “Bash Shivi,” similar to “Sihur” the midnight meal of the Muslims during the month of Ramadan.”¹⁴

Ahmed does not find all the evidence about Zoroaster provided by his Yazidi informant very reliable, but then Yazidis were only following an age-old oral tradition, which tended to gather many tales over time and clime. But he was able to provide the name of Zoroaster’s mother as Doghdo, and his father as Purushaspa. He narrated that “Zoroaster uttered the word” Khuda” (God) when he was born. He ascribed many of the Yazidi beliefs and taboos to Zoroaster.¹⁵ As Ahmed notes: The Yazidis “picture Zoroaster as a strong believer in Taus Melek, and to have translated (their scripture) *Jalwa* into Persian.” There is nothing in the sources to indicate this, nor ascribe to Zoroaster the books attributed to him by our Yazidi friend. The stories of Zoroaster’s miracles - - - might be known among the Yazidis although they have no historical value. However the Yazidis have great respect for Zoroaster and may believe him to be one of their apostles,¹⁶ which appear to be very many, Abraham being “the father of all prophets who is the father of the Yazidis.”¹⁷ Moreover, the Yazidi tradition asserts that “Jesus and Sheikh Adi

12 pp. 239-240.

13 p. 240.

14 p. 258.

15 pp. 259-260.

16 p. 261.

17 p. 260.

represent one person,” and Ahmed details their adoption of Christian, Muslim, and even Manichaean beliefs.¹⁸

Ahmed narrates the account offered by Yazidi writers about certain Yazidi practices, e.g. prohibition against entering a toilet, and tends to “view this taboo rather as a remnant of Zoroastrianism,”¹⁹ but does not explain it further, which may again reflect his rather limited understanding of Zoroastrianism. The Yazidi princes can resort to excommunication “as a weapon” to isolate and officially exclude any member of the community, Yazidi or non-Yazidi. “The intention ostensibly is to preserve the faith from heresy and free thought.” Their wife and family must join in the ostracism. “On whim or discretion the Prince may at any time lift excommunication and bring the outcast back to the fold.” Thus, “the Prince can compel this community to have no exchange with non-Yazidis.”²⁰ Moreover, “Yazidis are forbidden attendance in public baths, mosques, schools, or any place where they might hear something contrary to their faith. They cannot enter any public place of entertainment. Foremost in the series of taboos is the prevention of learning, a privilege reserved for the family of Sheikh Hasan al-Basri. Undoubtedly, the ban was designed to maintain the underprivileged castes ever in ignorance.” There are many bans based on superstition. But “Among the most abhorrent sins in Yazidism is eating lettuce, for it is absolutely forbidden,” because their prophetess is named after it,²¹ which as we will see later is not true.

The Yazidis are not allowed to use water in the lavatory. Ahmed, again notes that “Zoroastrian influence is undeniable” here, which may be questionable as he does not adumbrate the purity laws of the Yazidis, and even maintains that the Yazidi sees the cleanliness of body as irrelevant.²² His Yazidi friend regards fasting as commemorating the entry of King Cyrus into Babylon, which, if true “is a revival of a Zoroastrian tradition, although it is not known that the Sasanians ever commemorated this incident.”²³ Indeed, fasting is prohibited in Zoroastrianism, as it saps our energy to gird up and work unceasingly for God in every way we can. However, the Yazidis observe a forty-day fast during summer, which “represents the fasting of Noah, his family and companions on the Ark during the Flood.” The fasting Sheikh or Kochak must break his fast immediately if anyone offers him food “in the name of Sanjaq or any Saint.”²⁴ A feast of five days from July 11-16 follows

18 pp. 261-288.

19 p. 291.

20 p. 289.

21 p. 292.

22 p. 311.

23 p. 304.

24 p. 358.

this fast. Ahmed describes many other feasts “which continue for seven days” and for which attendance is obligatory, which is reminiscent of Gahambars along with their emphasis on community participation. “The Feast” which “takes place between Eastern September 23-30 (October 6-13)” “coincides completely with a Zoroastrian feast, and thus it might be a remnant of Zoroastrianism.”²⁵ Although Ahmed does not name this feast, he is here obviously referring to the Celebration of Mihragan. No outsiders are allowed to attend certain feasts such as the Barshbaki feast celebrating the Bench of Sheikh Adi.

The foregoing account of the Yazidis is as comprehensive as I could find with my limited resources, but I have left out much information that does not pertain to Zoroastrianism. I presented it at first for familiarizing the reader with the subject, before I could proceed to discuss a much more comprehensive, systematic, and scholarly book on the Yazidi religion, with an emphasis on its relations with Zoroastrianism. I received it as a prize in the 1940’s from The M.F. Cama Athornan Institute in Bombay, but it may hardly be available now and thence it is reviewed here: *The Religion of the Yazidis: Religious Texts of the Yazidis, Translation, Introduction, and notes, by Giuseppe Furlani, translated from Italian with additional notes by (my Avesta Pahlavi Professor) J.M. Unvala, Ph.D., Heidelberg, Navsari: J.M. Unvala, 1940, 97 pages.*

Concluding Remarks

This account of the Yezidis is by no means a comprehensive one, especially in view of my limited access to the sources, and it relates only to the similarities, rather common elements, between Yezidism and Zoroastrianism. Indeed, as reviewed here in brief, there are several common elements between them. However, there is no clue as to how and when they happen to develop these common features. And, one still wonders whether they are a result of being exposed to Zoroastrian influence in its hay day, or they are of a common ancestry, as claimed by some scholars who trace their origin in the town of Yazd in Iran. If the latter is the case, then the Yezidis would have retained many more Zoroastrian elements in their belief system, including some Avestan prayers and rituals, rather than a few disconnected and disparate ones. One could even expect them to preserve the whole system intact as the Zoroastrians who migrated to India have done even to this day, and even those who went to China after the fall of the Sasanians did the same, at least until they ran into hostility from its rulers by revolting against them, and as a result were driven out. As already pointed out, Yezidism have some beliefs in common with Zoroastrianism, at least in the sense that Zurvan was the Father of both Ohrmazd and Ahriman, which is not properly investigated so far. Yezidism is also very syncretistic and abounding in myths like Manichaeism.

25 p. 360.

One does not, however, have to look to Buddhism or Hinduism as the source of the Yezidi belief in reincarnation, as such notions were not unknown to the region, and of course the Silk Road traffic provided enough opportunity for the exchange of ideas, besides trade. Also, veneration for fire is prevalent among many nations – for instance, even among the present-day Lithuanians. And strict rules governing purity are common to many cultures. So at present we are far from fathoming or unravelling the reasons lurking behind the common elements in both systems. But this paper presents what we so far know on this little known subject.