

Book Review: *Religion, Empire, & Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a postscript on Abu Ghraib*, Bruce Lincoln, Univ. of Chicago Press, 2007.

Dr. Kersey Antia, Apr 30, 2019; updated May 19, 2019

As Bruce Lincoln rightly observes, whereas the religious politics and political religions of almost all major empires have been studied in recent years, such a study of the Achaemenian Persia has not yet been attempted, though it “was by far the largest, wealthiest, most powerful empire of the ancient world prior to the emergence of Rome.” Even though our knowledge about this empire has improved dramatically, Lincoln regrets: “our work on Achaemenian religion has neither kept pace with nor benefitted from these other studies”. Thus, of the 14,295 items listed in the comprehensive bibliography of the Achaemenian Empire by Ursula Weber and Josef Wiesehofer in 1996, only 33 are devoted to the religion of the dynasty and 28 to its religious policies. Nor has the situation changed much since that bibliography was completed”. But he contends that the energy that the issue of Achaemenians being Zoroastrian or not has consumed” is quite disproportionate to its importance”. To him it is relatively inconsequential whether the Achaemenians were Zoroastrian, consciously adhering to the religious reforms effected by Zarathustra or more broadly as Mazdean (i.e. marked by worship of “the Wise Lord” Ahura Mazda, who is understood as a pan-Iranian, and not a strictly Zoroastrian deity), which however invites more questions than answers. He tries to identify the core principles of the Achaemenian cosmology, ethics, and soteriology – their sense of space, time, history and its purpose and understanding and how this interacted with the will to empire. Insofar as he tries to accomplish his mission, however, by extensively if not entire citing Zoroastrian textual evidence and little or none for Ahura Mazda as a “Mazdean” or pan-Iranian” deity his efforts could as well sustain my thesis (detailed at a conference in Italy in 20__ and expanded in a forthcoming book) that the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians. Lincoln quotes works by three authors as the basis of his book: Clarisse Herrenschildt's identification of “a Cosmogonic Consciousness as a central Part of Persian Imperial Religion”, in 1977, Marijan Mole's 1963 views that the Achaemenians were guided by their soteriology and eschatology as indicated by their references to the word *Frasha*, better known in Avesta as *Frasho Kereti*, “making the world wonderful” meaning Renovation and later as *Frashegird* in Pahlavi. “As Mole skillfully showed, every performance of certain Zoroastrian rituals – above all, the daily sacrifice – anticipates the Renovation and helps

lead the world toward its fulfillment. The third work Lincoln cites is Gregor Ahn's on their exercise of power by Achaemenian kings by representing themselves as God's chosen agents and as defenders of the cardinal virtues - "truth (*Arta*; *Asha* in Avesta) above all and as suppressors of "the Lie" (*Drauga*: *Druj* in Avesta) that inspired people to rebel against the king. Lincoln seems to concede that the overall Zoroastrian orientation of the Achaemenians can be traced in their inscriptions: "Since the language of the inscriptions is brief and allusive, assuming familiarity with religious and cultural constructs of considerable complexity," Lincoln posits: "Of greatest value in this regard is the evidence from Zoroastrian texts, written in other Iranian languages that are separated from Old Persian by space (as in the case of Avesta, an east Iranian dialect) or time (as in the case of Pahlavi, a middle Iranian dialect of western Iran)", (p. VII-15). Note Lincoln's reliance here (as also elsewhere) on the Zoroastrian texts for his very unique Mazdian (versus Zoroastrian) Thesis, hitherto unknown to the best of my knowledge. Lincoln presents his own views on this subject in the texts immediately following these remarks: "Comparisons of this sort have frequently been entangled with the question of whether the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians, a question that has been much debated, with very inconclusive results. Those who wish to make the case tend to stress the similarities, including the fact that the supreme deity named in the inscriptions, like that of the Zoroastrian scriptures, was called "the Wise Lord" (Avestan and Old Persian Ahura Mazda, Pahlavi Ohrmazd). Conversely, those on the other side of the question stress those places where the two corpora differ, for example, the Wise Lord's great adversary, whom Zoroastrians call "the Evil Spirit" (Avestan *Angra Mainyu*, Pahlavi *Ahriman*), "the Adversary," and "the Lie" (Old Persian *Dauga*, cognate to Avestan *druj* and Pahlavi *druz*). Complicating things further are a host of terms that are cognate concepts that are similar in their broad outlines but show significant differences in their particulars. As an example, one might note the Old Persian *paridaida*, a pan-Iranian term that denotes a walled enclosure but that the Achaemenians (as we have seen) used to describe their pleasure gardens and the Avesta used to denote a space in which those most tainted by death could receive purification (Avestan *pairidaez*)."

These relations can be understood in one of two ways, maintains Lincoln. Conceivably, the Achaemenians (from Darius, at least) were Zoroastrians whose views were inflected by political – and, perhaps, also other – considerations such that they differed from the ones priestly authors spelled out in more strictly religious texts. Alternatively, the Zoroastrian texts and the Achaemenian inscriptions can be understood as two variants within a broad, pan-Iranian tradition that one might label "Mazdean." Both thus inherited common linguistic, cultural, and religious features that they developed in their own

fashions and for their own reasons. These two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, and affirming the second does not necessarily falsify the first." (p. 15).

Since the Greeks testify often about the Achaemenian belief in Aeriamaos (Angra Mainyu) Darius may have his own political reasons to emphasize the concept of Lie to justify conquering those that Spread the Lie against him but his resorting to the concept of Angra Mainyu may not foot the bill here. And it may not be impossible to find Achaemenian references to Angra Mainyu if a determined effort is made to do so. Indeed Aristotle has described Achaemenian dualism in *Persi Philosophias*. Plutarch has also described it and attributed the source of his information to Theopompus – See Gharaardo Gnoli, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naples, 1980, pp. 206-209. Moreover, the use of the word *Pairidaida* by the Achaemenians may very likely have been prompted by the concept of heaven denoted by the Avestan word, *Pairidaeza* to symbolize heaven on earth, as is often found among Persians if not among other people. Moreover, the concept of *Pairidaeza* is more ancient than that of *Pairidaida*. Lincoln's innovative view that the Zoroastrian texts and Achaemenian inscriptions may reflect "two variants within a broad pan-Iranian tradition that one might label "Mazdean" is quite thought provoking and perhaps true for Cyrus and Cambyses but not for later Achaemenians as far as my study goes but such a hypothesis needs more empirical data than provided here by Lincoln and there are few studies so far that throw light on this subject. This is especially true as Lincoln relies heavily, if not almost exclusively, on Zoroastrian texts and not on any data that can represent what he call Mazdean. His thesis is further complicated by the fact that even the contemporary Greeks such as Zanthos refer to Zoroaster and they would have hardly known of Zoroaster without his affiliation with the Achaemenians who were the prime, if not the sole, concern of the Greek writers writing about Persia at the time.

I have delineated here many examples of Lincoln relying on Zoroastrian texts, for example, for interpreting the Achaemenians' justification for attacking Scythians, Greeks, and other enemies (Poraters) because they all lied, just as "the Wise Lord did not consider it right just to launch a first attack against the Lie when that other had not yet attacked these lights (Ohrimezda's creation), to attack him when he had not yet attacked those lights", as per *Dadestan-e Dinig* 36.13 (p. 32). However, this Pahlavi text, even though composed so much later, at least over a millennium later, reflects Achaemenian belief, how much can it possibly coexist or coincide with his Mazdean thesis especially as it is not spelled out there, and the scriptural evidence he so heavily relies on is so typically Zoroastrian.

Referring to the Bisitun inscription where Darius pictorially relates

his feat of defeating nine rebels that rose against him, Lincoln explains the scene, once again, on the basis of the Zoroastrian text of *Greater Bundahishn* 1.1-5 (p. 18). He also cites this text for correlating the cosmogonic accounts contained in the inscriptions with the six creations of the Wise Lord mentioned in this text in section 3.7, both being typically Zoroastrian texts of the ninth century A.D. Lincoln also points out the correlation of Zoroastrian cosmogony and royal titles in seventeen inscriptions (p. 54). He again relies on the ninth century Zoroastrian text, *Dadestan-I Dinig* (36.4-8) to make similar observations. (p. 32).

Lincoln states that “Zoroastrians understood happiness as something people can sometimes win in the present but that righteous souls usually receive postmortem,” but I cannot disagree more with him here as the righteous are promised or entitled to happiness (*shati*) all the time and not just “sometimes” if they proclaim and follow *Arta* (*Asha*) except for some special circumstances. In contrast, the Achaemenians understood happiness as the original and proper state of mankind, as per the Wise Lord's intentions. The appearance of enemy armies, famine, and the Lie – presumably (note his unsupported presumption here) during the interval between the original creation and Darius' accession – caused the loss of happiness as humanity's natural, God-given condition. (Such a belief came into being much later due to alien influences as pointed out by me elsewhere.) Thereafter, people have to exert themselves if they are to gain happiness in this life, and their effort also helps secure them a blessed state in the hereafter. Restoring happiness as the general condition of all mankind, however, is something else: an extremely arduous undertaking.” While I find it hard to agree with him here fully, I like to once again illustrate Lincoln's reliance on Zoroastrian texts and not on any Mazdean text on which a Mazdean thesis can be upheld. “Both Avestan and Achaemenian texts entertain happiness as a possibility and a desire that the righteous can realize in both the present and the heavenly future. Beyond this, however, the Achaemenian inscriptions also make it a feature of the primordial past. In similar fashion, both the Avesta and the inscriptions identify two means to win happiness, truth and ritual speech, to which the inscriptions add a third, obedience to the Law.” The latter however, is not unknown in the Avestan texts. What immediately follows also illustrates Lincoln's reliance on Zoroastrian texts to prove his thesis despite upholding that the Achaemenians were Mazdean, whatever it means.

“Some of the later Zoroastrian texts written in Pahlavi also help nuance our understanding, particularly the cosmogonic accounts from which excerpts have already been cited (see chapters 2 and 4). [Using much the same terminology as the Achaemenian inscriptions, these

texts tell how, in the endless time before history, the Wise Lord established six – not four – perfect creations]:

The Wise Lord created six creations of the material world. First was sky, second water, third land, fourth plants, fifth Animals, sixth man. (*Greater Bundahishn* 3.7 [TD'MS 33.2-5])

As table 7 shows, this list is quite close to that of the inscriptions. Three items are identical (sky, earth, mankind), and a fourth match is implicit, the Achaemenian inscriptions grouping water and land together under the heading “earth” (*bumi*), the Pahlavi texts treating them separately (using the word *zamig*, not *bumi*, for “land”).

“Just as the Achaemenian account listed inanimate creations (earth, sky) before animate ones (mankind and happiness); the same pattern is evident in the Pahlavi texts which add a further wrinkle. Thus, after the inanimate entities (sky, earth, and water), and before the animate ones (animal and mankind), a mediating entity appears: plants, which are living but have no soul. The Pahlavi sequence is also governed by a second organizing principle, the order of creation mirroring the food chain”. It should also be understood that food is, not just antithesis of famine, but the basis of life and health as well as – alongside sex – a prime source of sensuous pleasure. (This raises the possibility that the Achaemenian and Zoroastrian lists of final creations may be even closer than we originally imagined.) For each in the first encompasses land and water in the second, so happiness of mankind may similarly, encompass plants and animals as shown which contains reference to the *Great Bundahishn* (3.7, etc.).

Zoroastrian doctrine constituted the Wise Lord and his original creation as entirely good. Accordingly, “the world’s imperfections were understood to have appeared at a later moment, as the result of what is usually called Assault” (Pahlavi *ebgat*) of the Evil Spirit”.

“Focusing on each of the original creations in sequence,” adds Lincoln, “texts like *Selections of Zad Sparam* and the *Greater Bundahishn* delight in describing how the initially pure and simple nature of things was complicated and corrupted by the Evil Spirit”, (p. 58), which is however another instance of interpreting a “Mazdean” phenomenon by relying on quintessentially Zoroastrian texts which does not support his “Mazdean” thesis but rather contradicts it later. Lincoln notes: “All in all, we are here very close to the temporal scheme of the Pahlavi texts,” which as already noted are a millennium or more later and replete with alien influences. Lincoln presents them in a table, entitled Periodization of Cosmic History in three Different Eras, as suggested in Darius’ Inscriptions and Zoroastrian Scriptures.

While explaining the reference to the word *Frasha* in the

Achaemenian inscriptions, Lincoln once again notes that it “also figures prominently in Zoroastrian discourse” and the Achaemenian kings used the word *Frasha* “to convey how magnificent, how amazingly beautiful, how complete and perfect was the world that the Wise Lord created”. (p. 62). Indeed, it runs like a section from the *Bundahishn*.

In his closing remarks Lincoln once again is relying on the typically Zoroastrian concept of *Frasha* to establish his “Mazdean” thesis on the basis of solely Zoroastrian evidence: A few Avestan passages, he contends, give this word a cosmogonic sense similar to that of the Achaemenian inscriptions. Overwhelmingly, however, both Avestan and Pahlavi texts deploy *frasha* in eschatological contexts. Thus, as we have been, *frasegird* (Avestan *frasho-kereti*), or “Wonder making,” is the technical term that denotes the Renovation, that is, the purification and perfection of the world after evil has been conclusively defeated at the end of historical struggle.

He further adds: “That the same word should be used to describe the original and the final perfection of the material cosmos is not particularly surprising. In this fashion, the Zoroastrian texts make the point that the world's salvation from evil and the Lie is not a new phenomenon as it returns the world to the ideal condition in which the Wise Lord had created it. The end and the beginning thus come together such that a wondrous cosmos, happiness of mankind, and the supremely benevolent deity Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, fill the eternity of the future, just as they fill the eternity of the past”. (pp. 64-65).

My object in pointing out this eminent scholar's “Mazdean” thesis about the Achaemenians based mostly, if not entirely, on the Zoroastrian evidence is not to challenge his work on the whole but to indicate that his work could be useful in demonstrating the Zoroastrian rather than hitherto unproven Mazdean framework and ideology under which the Achaemenian mindset was working. Such an inference many become more plausible when all other evidence offered in a paper I delivered in Italy on this subject as in a forthcoming book, including Skjaervo's views therein, which show even more striking Zoroastrian parallels with the Achaemenian inscriptions, is taken into consideration. However, it is unfortunate, if not unfair, from the perspective of Zoroastrians that he chose to link torture with the religion and empire of the Achaemenians who have been universally acclaimed as by far the most tolerant rulers the world had witnessed up to their time and that too on the testimony of their rivals, although the 9/11 tragedy that moved him to write the book would have better fitted the torture policies of the rulers that almost obliterated the Zoroastrian race and dynasties and are still posing a threat to the world peace, but that may not be politically correct or safe as misrepresenting an almost

dead race. Moreover, any reference to Abu Ghraib here is similar to comparing apples with peaches and is not at all in order, to say the least.