

# INFLUENCE ON JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITIONS

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What James Russell, an eminent Jewish scholar observes in this regard makes Zoroaster's influence quite evident even to a layperson:

“While the Zarathushti religion was not practiced in the West, with the exception of the heresy Mithraism, Zarathushtra was nevertheless revered as a great teacher. It is said that in the library at Alexandria, over a million lines were attributed to Zarathushtra. Actually his only known authentic composition is a Hymn to God and is about as long as the Gospel of Matthew.

It is important to realize that at the time of Jesus, the borders of the Roman Empire were located just outside Palestine in the Jordanian desert, where the Parthian Empire began. It is likely that the magi were “in the neighborhood” at the time of Jesus' birth.

The world of Jesus is a world of Zarathushti ideas embedded in Judaism: the good mind vs. the evil mind; angels of light vs. angels of darkness; the idea that heaven is the reward if your good deeds outweigh your evil deeds; and that the angels are recording good and evil deeds.

The idea of evil as separate from God was real to Jesus. He was tempted by Satan, cast out demons, and he stated that Satan's house could not stand if it were not by God that he performed miracles. Most importantly, Jesus talked about God being a good and loving God. The God of Jesus in a very real way was no longer the God of Abraham.

In the psychological terms of Kohlberg's moral development theory, the God of the ancient Hebrews in Genesis was a God of pre-conventional morality: humanity was not to ask why, but simply to obey God or be punished. The God of Moses was a God of conventional morality and conformity: these are the rules, obey them for your own good.

On the other hand, the God of Jesus, like Zarathushtra, is post-conventional in its morality: God is universal goodness; one should speak and act from the heart. The God of Jesus is wholly good and is on our side for all time. We are to strive “to be perfect as our heavenly father is perfect.” (Compare Yasna 34.1).

“In a very real way, the religion of Zarathushtra is the foundation of all Western religion. The worship of one God and the high moral level of the religion of the magi set them apart in the ancient world and made

theirs a religion most similar to Judaism. Additionally, Zarathushtra had predicted the coming of a savior. This places the Zarathushti priests at the birth of Jesus. It also explains why priests from the Temple of Jupiter or from the Temple of Isis and Osiris, who were certainly in the region, are not included in the story of those who came to honor Jesus, even though these other religions practiced astrology and might have also “followed a star.”

We in the West forget that until the rise of Islam, Christianity was the second largest religion in the Middle East, behind the religion of the Zarathushti world. The second century Arabic Gospel of the Infancy was very direct: “The wise men came from the East according to the prophecy of Zarathushtra.”

The development of the magi in the art of the West is a story in itself. For the first thousand years, the magi were pictured correctly in all-white Persian attire. It is said that a Persian army once spared a Byzantine Church because of the fresco of the magi on it. During the Middle Ages, the magi were portrayed – like all ancient people – in the dress of the period. Today artists take all manner of liberties with the magi, but usually picture them as wealthy Arabs.

How did the magi come to be the Three Kings? Early Christian art and stories sometimes have two, four or even twelve magi. The third century theologian Origen states that there were three wise men, probably because of the three gifts identified in the New Testament story. Another early church father, Tertullian, refers to the magi as “almost kings”. By the sixth century, the Armenian Gospel of the Infancy provides names for the three magi, i.e. Melchior, who reigned over the Persians; Balthazar, who reigned over the Indians; and Gaspar, who reigned over the Arabians.” (Ken R. Vincent, “How the Magi Got to Be Kings”, *Fezana Journal*, Winter 2001, p. 26).

## ZOROASTRIAN INFLUENCE ON JUDAEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION

Since Jews and Zoroastrians lived adjacent to each other in many areas, many Iranian religious ideas became common currency among them such as in the Qumran scrolls. Michael Axworthy confirms most of what is already noted here, but his remarks explain why the Zoroastrian influence has received little attention: “It is a controversial subject, and the relative obscurity of Mazdaism and Zoroastrianism in western scholarship until recent times has helped to conceal the influence of Mazdaism on Judaism, but as further work is done, the more significant it is likely to be found. Perhaps the strongest indicator is the positive attitude of the Jewish texts toward the Persians.”

Even as he admits differences in belief between the early and the later Zoroastrians, he affirms that “the concepts of heaven and hell, of free human choice between good and evil, of divine judgement, of angels, of a single creator-god, all appear to have been genuine early features of the religion, and were all hugely influential for religions that originated later. Mazdaism was the first religion, in this part of the world at least, to move beyond cult and totemism to address moral and philosophical problems with its theology, from an individualistic standpoint that laid emphasis on personal choice and responsibility. In that limited sense, if in few others in this context, Nietzsche was right – Zoroaster was the first creator of the moral world we live in. Also sprach Zarathustra.” (*Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, Hurst & Company, London, 2007, p. 11). More and more of such assertions of Zoroastrian influences are appearing now even as the number of Zoroastrians is dwindling away fast.

As noted in the Introduction to the *Cambridge History of Iran*, (Volume 3, (2), Cambridge University Press, New York, New York, 1983, pp. 1XV 1-10.), when the Babylonian Exile was over, the Jewish population came under the protection of the Persian kings and Iranian influence found a new base of support among the Jews in Parthia. “The doctrines considered to have been inspired by or borrowed from Iran are diverse and range from theological, such as the dualism between good and evil or between light and darkness, the belief in angels and archangels (corresponding to Zoroastrian *yazatas* and *amaesha-spentas*) and in Satan as the epitome of evil and the adversary of God (corresponding to Ahriman), the notion of paradise and hell, and the doctrine of future life and the existence of the soul; to ethical, such as reward and punishment by divine justice; to eschatological, such as resurrection of the dead and the last judgment. Of particular interest in this respect are Iranian apocalyptic beliefs, prominent in Zoroastrian writing, namely, millennial periods and events, the doctrine of the Savior (Soshyant), and the destruction of the wicked and the renovation of the world at the end of time.” The discovery of the Dead Sea Scrolls add to further interest in tracing Iranian influence in post-Exilic rabbinical and apocryphal writings and the emergence of Christian doctrines.

To quote Mary Boyce again on the subject: “Gradually many of Zoroaster's fundamental doctrines became disseminated throughout the region, from Egypt to the Black Sea; namely that there is a supreme God who is the Creator; that an evil power exists which is opposed to him, and not under his control; that he has created this world for a purpose, and that in its present state it will have an end; that this end will be heralded by the coming of a cosmic Savior, who will help to bring it

about; that meantime heaven and hell exist, with an individual judgment to decide the fate of each soul at death; that at the end of time there will be a resurrection of the dead and a Last Judgment, with annihilation of the wicked; and that thereafter the kingdom of God will come upon earth, and the righteous will enter into it as into a garden (a Persian word for which is 'paradise'), and be happy there in the presence of God for ever, immortal themselves in body as well as soul.

These doctrines all came to be adopted by various Jewish schools in the post-Exilic period, for the Jews were one of the peoples, it seems, most open to Zoroastrian influences – a tiny minority, holding staunchly to their own beliefs, but evidently admiring their Persian benefactors, and finding congenial elements in their faith. Worship of the one Supreme God, and belief in the coming of a Messiah or Savior, together with adherence to a way of life which combined moral and spiritual aspirations with a strict code of behavior (including purity laws) were all matters in which Judaism and Zoroastrianism were in harmony; and it was this harmony, it seems, reinforced by the respect of a subject people for a great protective power, which allowed Zoroastrian doctrines to exert their influence. The extent of this influence is best attested, however, by Jewish writings of the Parthian period, when Christianity and the Gnostic faiths, as well as northern Buddhism, all likewise bore witness to the profound effect which Zoroaster's teachings had had throughout the lands of the Achaemenian empire. (*Zoroastrians*, pp. 76-77).

Historians see the close relationship of gnostic doctrines with Zurvanism and postulate the Parthian period as the cradle of the gnostic movement.

Manichaeism and Mazdakism, both gnostic religions, were strongly affected by Zoroastrian doctrines. "They in turn became vehicles for the spread of Iranian concepts outside Iran; Manichaeism, in particular, traveled far and wide, from North Africa to China and was attacked in Christian lands as a Persian heresy." (p. 1xviii). Mithraism, was the "most important cult of paganism in Rome," though it has no basis in the Avesta. But with the identification of other figures with Iranian deities or demons, for instance, Arimanus (Ahriman), "the Iranian origin of Roman Mithraism becomes abundantly evident." As the Iranians in Commagene, Cappadocia and Pontus, continued to practice of their religion long after Alexander's conquest, Shapur I was surprised to find them there and even returned all their belongings his army had pillaged. They may have adapted it to their hellenized milieu because it is believed that it was from these regions that the cult of Mithra spread to Rome in the 1<sup>st</sup> century. According to E. Renan, "If Christianity had been checked in its growth by some deadly disease, the world would have become Mithraic".

Cumont, the foremost historian of Mithraism, wrote, “Never ... had Europe a narrower escape from becoming Asiatic than when Diocletian officially recognized Mithras as the protector of the reconstructed empire.” (Ibid, p. 141). Mithraism provided an important vehicle for the spread of Iranian ideas and moral values in the Roman empire. “Of all the Oriental cults”, wrote Cumont, “none was so severe as Mithraism, none attained an equal moral elevation, none could have so strong a hold on mind and heart.” (Ibid, p. 159). My thesis on Mithraism, written in 1956 is available on Avesta.org, but I have revised it in view of the latest findings.

The influence of Mithraism on the development of Christian doctrines have been often discussed and “many Christian beliefs and rituals including the concept of a God incarnate as divine Savior, have been held to have derived from the Mithraic religion,” according to G. Widénagren.

A more direct and clear-cut Zoroastrian influence is quite evident in the spread of Iranian religion in the Caucasus and eastern Anatolia. Ancient Armenia influenced by Mazdaism, is held by James Russell to have been Zoroastrian indeed until the 4<sup>th</sup> century when it became Christian. The Zoroastrian presence in Georgia has been confirmed by archaeological and linguistic evidence. Zoroastrian influence in Armenia and Georgia is quite evident in such common deities as Anahita, patron goddess of Armenia, Aramazd (Ahura Mazda), Mithra (Meher), Vahagan (Verethraghna) in Armenia; and Armazi (Ahura Mazda) in Georgia. The cult of fire there is also simply revealed by archaeological and literary evidence, as are the Armenian and Georgian names of Iranian origin for malevolent creatures. (pp. lxxviii-lxix). Please see my publication *Argument for Acceptance in Zoroastrianism*, (pp. 88-101), CreateSpace.com or Amazon for more evidence in this regard.

## **ZOROASTRIAN INFLUENCE ON JUDEO-CHRISTIAN TRADITION – CONCLUDING REMARKS**

One needs to be very careful and objective in claiming Zoroastrian influence on Judaism as such claims fall in the range of two opposite poles. For example, M. Gaster (“Parsism in Judaism,” *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, 9, Edinburgh 1908-26, pp. (637-40) vehemently denies any possibility whatsoever of any such influence but rather claims exclusive Jewish influence on Zoroastrianism. On the other hand, Rev. Lawrence H. Mills (*Zarathushtra, the Achaemenids and Israel*, Chicago, 1906, etc.) envisions all post-biblical developments in Judaism as a result of Zoroastrian influence. As a teenager in the 1950's

I still remember quoting him in my sermons in the school, for instance.

Even though the debates are still going on among the scholars on this subject, as I have often emphasized, the word “influence” does not represent the real phenomenon here as it is too simplistic to conceive that such an intelligent race in antiquity as the Jews would simply pick up alien ideas unless they had their roots of such alien ideas also deep down in their own tenets, especially as the Achaemenids are well known for not imposing their beliefs on their subjects. Moreover, non-Iranists interpreting Iranian materials as they deem fit and at times selecting only those facts that fit into their mould has not enhanced confidence in their findings. Even though I have mostly relied on well-recognized authors writing in English, even their works are not exempt from not being completely objective or historic. Such a situation is exasperated by the fact that even later Zoroastrian savants interpreted texts in terms of their own *Zeitgeist* as they had lost the knowledge of their original meaning thereby often leading to speculation by Zoroastrian scholars themselves.

In light of the facts brought out by this work, it should be now quite apparent that despite almost all scholars seeing it differently, there is not so wide a chasm and difference between the monotheism of the Old Testament and the Gathic monotheism as the later dualism of the Pahlavi texts almost cited universally by the scholars as the Zoroastrian dualism is more than two millennia later than the Gathic one. The Gathic and the Old Testament monotheism are not quite as different as they are often made out to be, in view of the facts reviewed here. And yet, some similarity in their ideology, however apparent, is not sufficient to establish influence beyond a doubt and calls for caution and more research. It is hoped various evidence cited in this work will go at least a little way to relieve the situation.