

Zoroastrian Elements in the Syncretism that Prevailed in Asia Minor Following the Achaemenian Conquests

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Introduction

Since the total population of Zoroastrians in the entire world today is a meager 130,000 at best, it is hard to conceive that Zoroastrianism not only prospered in Iran but also acted as a very prominent factor in the syncretism that prevailed in Asia Minor from the time it became an integral part of the Achaemenian empire to the downfall of the Sasanian empire. It is generally acknowledged that Semitic Armenia was Persianised in the Achaemenian times, a process which lasted up to the Sasanian times. Strabo. (XI.532) reports that Mithra and Anahita were especially worshiped by the Armenians. It was also in the Achaemenian times that the Jews first came into contact with the Persians. The Zoroastrian concepts heretofore unknown to the Jews such as satan, “the angel of wisdom”, and “the holy spirit” became common features of Jewish beliefs, along with many others. Moreover, the Achaemenian kings welcomed Greek scientists, physicians and Phoenician explorers and artisans at their courts. The conquest of Iran by Alexander the Great further exposed the Greeks to Iranian influence just as it exposed Iran to Greek Influence. Alexander married an Iranian princess, Roxane and he arranged for a mass marriage of 50,000 of his Greek soldiers with Iranian women at Susa after his return from India. Such a mass phenomenon must have left its mark on the fusion of the two races.

With the Greeks came their gods represented in human forms, a concept so sacrilegious to the Iranians. According to R. Ghirshman, Anahita “enjoyed MOST¹ popularity beyond the western frontiers of Iran and her cult spread to Lydia, where she was called “the lady of Bactria”, to Pontus, Cappadocia and Armenia. It was probably even more popular than that of Mithra. --- Artaxerxes introduced to the cult of this religion the worship of Anahita in the form of an image, an imitation of the Babylonian and Greek religions, in both of which worship of images was found. HIS INTENTION WAS APPARENTLY TO INTRODUCE A RELIGION THAT WOULD BE COMMON TO ALL THE PEOPLES OF HIS EMPIRE.² According to the *Cambridge History of Iran*, (Vol.3, p. 101), Artaxerxes II’s aim in erecting the

1 All italics in this article are mostly author’s own.

2 *Iran*, Penguin Books, 1978, pp. 270 & 314.

statues of Anahita was “simply to direct the attention of Iranians and non-Iranians throughout the Achaemenian dominions to the Persian gods. But in a sense the strengthening and unfolding of Iranianism, almost of Iranian consciousness — for that is what Persian gods meant — brought with it, at least in western Asia Minor, a strengthening of Hellenism as well as Iranianism, since the visual language in which the goddess Anahita was portrayed was Greek.” The Parthian kings who overthrew the Seleucid (Greek) rule in Iran tried to assimilate much of the Greek influences in the beginning simply for avoiding administrative difficulties. Later on when their rule was firmly established in Iran, they did try to attend to religious matters. However it was not until the Sasanian times that some uniformity in various Zoroastrian practices and beliefs was obtained. Until then it seems there were many differences in religious beliefs and practices among the Iranians themselves. As Richard Frye comments in this regard: “One might distinguish between the religions of the Indo-Parthians, the Kushans, the Sakas, the Sogdians, the Parthians, the Armenians, the Persians, and the Iranicised population of Pontus, Cappadocia and Commagene, not to mention syncretic cults of Mesopotamia and elsewhere.”³ Viewed against this background it is easy to realize why syncretism became the order of the day in Asia Minor where the East and the West met and where both the Greeks and the Persians had their own colonies. However, this is not to suggest that syncretism did not prevail elsewhere. As observed by Prof. W. M. McGovern, “Many of the Zoroastrian doctrines were destined to have a wide influence upon the peoples of many different times and places. This was especially true of the various groups inhabiting Central Asia; and when we find travelers among the modern Mongol groups speaking of the Mongol tendency to expose their dead, of the special consideration shown to the dog, and of the great reverence for the fire, we know that these customs and these tendencies are merely the results of Iranian influences spreading through the centuries to all the parts of Central Asia.”⁴ Colledge’s research also confirms this view: “In Central Asia, however, the tenets of Zoroastrianism were seemingly influential.”⁵

Factors in Asia Minor Particularly Conducive to Syncretism:

Asia Minor, however, was most conducive to such a syncretism due to various factors. During the Achaemenian times as well as during the Parthian and Sasanian times, the Iranians tried to subjugate the Greeks or Romans by

3 *The Heritage of Persia*, The World Publishing Company, Cleveland, 1963, p. 191.

4 *The Early Empires of Central Asia*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1939, p. 84

5 *Parthian Art*, Cornell University Press, Ithaca, New York, 1977, p. 110.

first conquering Asia Minor which lay as a buffer state between them, and vice versa. Some of the provinces in Asia Minor had such a nice soil and climate, so reminiscent of the fertile regions of Iran, that many Iranians settled there permanently in large groups along with their Mobeds, especially in Cappadocia. I find yet another factor contributing syncretism which is generally overlooked. Different Iranian sub-groups that were living in the adjoining regions moved into Cappadocia. Thus, according to Frye, the Cimmerians, originally an Iranian people living in south Russia, “moved westward against Phrygia and into Cappadocia, from whence probably the name Gomer came into the Bible and Gamirk in Armenian. After the Cimmerians, however, came the Scythians. Herodotus (I, 103-04) says that the Scythians had driven the Cimmerians out of Europe and then followed them.”⁶ Thus, in addition to the Achaemenian settlements, there were large groups of Iranian people living in Asia Minor during this period. Strabo considered Cappadocia “almost a living part of Persia.” Even though Strabo lived when the Persian influence had waned and there was no need for Persian settlements in Asia Minor, “he speaks of Cappadocia as having many temples of Persian gods and many fire-temples and many fire priests.”⁷ Pausanias reported Iranian fire ceremonies as late as the second century A.D.⁸ The Arebsur inscription provides yet another evidence for the spread of Zoroastrianism in this area.

In view of this unprecedented exposure to various cultures, gods, beliefs, races, etc., Asia Minor in the later Achaemenian period became a breeding ground for syncretism. In the words of Frye, “The Zeitgeist of the fourth century B.C., one would imagine, favored syncretism, or at least mutual influences between religions, and we may postulate a greater reciprocity of influences in the near East at that time than earlier.”⁹

Zoroastrian Elements in this Syncretism

Colledge describes this syncretism as “an immense new religious movement.”¹⁰ He states that during the early Parthian period “Semitic (including Babylonian), Iranian and Greek deities began to be considered identical. Thus Ahura Mazda became the Iranian equivalent of Bel, Mithra of Shamash, and Anahita of Ishtar or Nanai. — Heracles was usually the Hellenic aspect of the Semitic Nergal or the Iranian Verethraghna.— But the most striking example of all lies in the syncretism of gods present in the dedication of the statues which still guard the colossal tomb of King Antiochus I of

6 *History of Ancient Iran*, p. 70.

7 *CHI* Vol.3, p. 107.

8 *Op. cit.*, p. 102.

9 *History of Ancient Iran*, p.133.

10 *Ancient Peoples and Places: The Parthians*, Praeger, N.Y., 1967, p. 107.

Commagene (69-34 B.C.).”¹¹ King Antiochus “spoke of combining the Persian, Macedonian gods, and local gods, and the Persian and Greek and local traditions. ... instead of alternating between the Greek and Iranian world, he tried to treat them as if they could be translated into each other.... He worshipped Ahuramazda but called him also Zeus and Mithra.”¹² It seems “one cannot speak about Iranians in Asia Minor without speaking about the Greeks, that is without understanding what Greeks and Persians had in common with them as well as their differences. ... The Greeks were fascinated and astonished by the outlandish grandeur of the Persians.”¹³ The frequent assumption by the western writers that the Persians were greatly concerned with the Greeks, asserts Margaret Root, “is a misapprehension which stems from our western view of the world and from the unfortunate fact that Greece has given us our main literary sources of information on the Achaemenids. It was the Greeks who were fascinated by the Persians, by Persian mores, and yes, by Persian courts, art and luxury goods—not the reverse. The Persians were themselves a product of the East. They were seasoned actors in the international affairs and the cultural experience of the Near East long before their empire was formed. It should not be surprising that, historically, culturally, and strategically, the Achaemenid kings were mainly concerned with this sphere—with Egypt and with Asia.”¹⁴

This being the real state of affairs, alien gods and beliefs seem to have contributed far less than the Persian gods & beliefs to the religious syncretism that prevailed in Asia Minor. The Persian gods and beliefs apparently attracted easy allegiance from the masses as seen above. This hypothesis is supported by Spiedel’s references to the existence of the old Greek and Roman beliefs that the wisdom of Persia was far superior to their own and to Tacitus’ observation that foreign beliefs were on the rise, which may have led to the spread of Mithraism in the western world.¹⁵ “Religious syncretism,” reports CHI,¹⁶ affected what M. Louis Robert has called “the Iranian diaspora in Asia Minor” to such an extent that a Satrap of Sardis in the fourth century (B.C.) was so worried that it might amount to infidelity to the religion of Iran.” The Satrap was worried, it seems, not because non-Zoroastrians began following the religion of Iran but that they did not do so the right way. However, when the religion moved either eastward or westward, it could not apparently retain its pristine purity. “What is striking and marking a departure from popular

11 *Op. cit.*, pp. 107-108.

12 *Op. cit.* p. 113.

13 *Cambridge History of Iran*, Vol. 3, pp. 101-102.

14 Root, Margaret Cool. *The King and Kingship in Achaemenid Art: Essays on the Creation of an Iconography of Empire*. Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1979.

15 *Mithras-Orion*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1980; last chapter.

16 Vol. 2 pp. 340-341.

Mazdaism as described by Herodotus, is that ‘Zeus the Lawgiver,’ who must be Ahura Mazda, now has a temple, and even a statue, dedicated by the (Persian) Governor (of Lydia) himself. One is reminded of the ‘backslidings’ of the Children of Israel under the influence of their neighbors in conquered Canaan. The new statue is perhaps the Governor's own innovation. ... But while the satrap (of Sardis), evidently a man of some religious convictions (for a cult-statue was costly), may go thus far, perhaps shocking his more conservative fellow Iranians, he is, for that very reason, all the more determined to show himself orthodox in what he thought really mattered.” “In a Greek inscription ... discovered by the American excavators of Sardis in 1974, ‘he orders the priests ... to take no part in the mysteries of Sabazios, [that is] of those who carry the burnt offerings, nor of Aggdistis, nor of Ma. And they ordered Dorates the (Zoroastrian) priest to abstain from these mysteries’ ... the gods whose esoteric worship is banned for priests of Ahura Mazda are all native to Asia Minor.”¹⁷ Why were the priests banned from worshiping these three alien gods and who but the local non-Zoroastrian devotees would as a rule pray to them? Was not the Persian satrap then encouraging them to pray to Ahura Mazda instead? Or did he think building a temple and statue of Ahura Mazda in order to spread His worship was a lesserevil than letting aliens worship other gods? This fascination with Zoroastrianism was so strong that it continued unabated long after the fall of the Achaemenians.

As Duchesne-Guillemin observes: “The infatuation for the East reached such proportions that there was no better way of lending weight to a work on magic, alchemy, astrology or any other pseudo-science – not to speak of the Apocalypses – than to ascribe it to Zoroaster or some other supposed Magian, Ostanes or Hystaspes for instance. The real authors of these treatises or at least some of them, could have been Iranian “emigrants” in regions which had formerly formed part of the Persian empire but who spoke Greek. ... The Neo-Platonists took an interest in Iranian doctrines for a loftier reason, and in a more honest manner so to speak. ... Iran had cause to interest the Jews also, and later the Christians. ... Later on the Jews, in order to retain their intellectual superiority in face of Persian domination, created spiritual genealogies which went to the extent of identifying Zoroaster with Baruch, Jeremiah's scribe. In this way all the wisdom of the Iranians was (very cleverly!) made to spring from Palestine. ... Christian tradition welcomes the Magi as the three kings who came from the East to prostrate themselves at Bethlehem. ... The Christians borrowed the teachings of the Jews and tried to incorporate Zoroaster into their own tradition, by identifying Zoroaster with Ezekiel, Nimrod, Seth, Balaam and Baruch and finally, through the last, with Christ himself.”¹⁸ “In general,” concludes Boyce “Zoroastrianism appears to have

17 *Cambridge History of Iran*. II , 340-341.

18 *Religion of Ancient Iran*, English Translation, Bombay, 1973, pp. 16-19.

exerted rather than received influences since Zoroaster's doctrines, with their originality and coherence, acted as a new stimulus on established beliefs and thoughts. ... Zoroastrian influence, especially in the spheres of cosmogony and salvation-beliefs, appear to have been exerted on a variety of philosophies and religious movements in Ionia ... Although many sets of ideas – Egyptian, Babylonian, Phoenician, Greek Anatolian and Indian – seem to have circulated widely then (during “the Achaemenian epoch”) in the Near East, there is much to be said for the view that Zoroastrianism, endowed as it was with doctrinal strength and profound originality, and backed by the prestige of Imperial power, ‘came in like a spring tide’ (per L. H. Mills) and helped to change the world-outlook of many peoples.”¹⁹

Despite the dominant role played by Zoroastrian elements in this syncretism, their contribution has not yet been fully examined by scholars, as a result of which we are not able to trace with authenticity the Zoroastrian ideas that may have found their way directly into Christian beliefs, especially those regarding eschatology . The Zoroastrian beliefs regarding salvation, cosmogony and eschatology that prevailed in this syncretism before the advent of Christianity and immediately thereafter may have contributed to the development of these belief in Christianity, especially those pertaining to the three time-periods – the beginning, the present and the end of time, – so well detailed in the Pahlavi texts. When historians began to examine the primary evidence of the Biblical texts by rigorously reconstructing what the New Testament chapters meant to their author and original readers, thereby constructing a scientific basis of empirical evidence for Christian theology, they found that the earliest Christian community comprising of Aramaic-speaking Jews believed that while Jesus was the prophet of God, he was someone who would come into his full power only at the end of time. As Thomas Sheehan points out, Zoroastrian ideas “can be seen in late Judaism’s adoption of notions like the fall of Adam from paradisaal grace *at the beginning of time*, the working of Satan and other demons *in the present age*, and the Last Judgment and the resurrection *at the end of history* – all of which Christianity was to take over and turn into dogmas. But the clearest sign of this absorption of Persian ideas can be found in the eschatological visions of history that surfaced in apocalyptic literature during the two centuries before Jesus began to preach.”²⁰ The Book of Daniel was such an apocalyptic work of note written around 165 B.C. and most scholars generally agree that it shows the influence of Zoroastrian concepts. However, there were other such works written in the syncretic climate of the Near East by Greek-speaking Persians (or Jews according to a recently propounded theory) such as Hystaspes or Ostanes, which Christian scholars do not always seem to be fully conversant with. The

19 *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. II, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982, pp. 153 and 162-3.

20 *The First Coming: How The Kingdom of God Became Christianity*, Random House, New York, 1986, page 40.

latter may have directly contributed to the preference for as well as prevalence of eschatological ideas in Christianity.

Incidentally, what Jesus taught is surprisingly similar to what Zoroaster had taught long ago. As Sheehan observes: “The heart of Jesus’ message is summarized in the strikingly simple name with which he addresses the divine: “Abba”, the Aramaic word for “papa” (Mark 14:36). This familial usage --- was a shock to the then current idea of God. Late Judaism tended to see Yahweh as a distant and almost impersonal Sovereign whose presence to mankind required the mediation of angels, the Law, and the complexities of religious ritual. (Note the similarity with the pre-Zoroastrian beliefs.) But with the simple and intimate word ‘Abba’, Jesus signaled that God was immediately and intimately present, not as a harsh judge but as a loving and generous father. -- This immediate presence of God as a loving Father is what Jesus meant by the ‘kingdom’. ----- It was a new order of things in which God threw in his lot irrevocably with human beings and chose relatedness to them as the only definition of himself.”²¹ This is so similar to what Zoroaster preaches in the Gathas. He addresses God so often as Father in the Gathas- Yasna 31.8, 44.3,, 45.4, 45.11, 47.2, 47.3. He declares that any person in this world who acts under the motivation of his own virtuous spirit is himself of the very nature of God – “Such a person, indeed, by reason of his virtuous conception, is an ally, a brother, or a father (of Thee), Wise Lord.” (Yasna 45.11). As Insler observes, the Gathas represent “a pact between God and man in the profound realization that only by the mutual support of God and man can either one survive.... (Yasna 45 represents) the prophet’s penetrating view of the interdependency of the power of God and the actions of those who believe in him.... I see the extraordinary contribution of Zarathushtra in the profound realization that man can both serve and honor God more meaningfully in the enactment of lordly principles of truth and good thinking among his fellow men than in the awesome reverence founded upon fear and dread.”²² Thus, the teachings of Zarathushtra and Christ have so much in common besides other things.

As per Sheehan,²³ the very first members of the Jesus movement, the Aramaic-speaking Jews “first projected Jesus’ reputation into the *future*” (Italics are Sheehan’s) “by declaring that he would be the Coming Son of Man. The second group of converts was “the Hellenistic Jews of the Mediterranean Diaspora, who had absorbed Greek language and culture.” Unlike the former, they were so active in spreading the Jesus-movement that they were the first to suffer persecution by the Romans. Since most of the Persian eschatological ideas had already been known to the Greek-speaking populace at the time in the Near East, these converts must have been quite familiar with them. Indeed,

21 *Op. cit.*, pp. 59-60.

22 *The Gathas Of Zarathushtra*, Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975, pages 115, 254 and 22.

23 *Op. cit.*, pp. 180-182.

as Sheehan maintains, it was they who “within a few years of crucifixion, effected a momentous shift in the interpretation of Jesus. --- The Hellenistic Jews declared that Jesus was already reigning as the messiah in the interim before his glorious return.” The third group of converts, “the Gentile converts came to believe that Jesus was God's divine Son who had preexisted even before creation”. All this has a very familiar ring to the students of Zoroastrianism. Sheehan seems to attribute this projection by the Gentiles to their being “rooted as they were in both Judaism and the Graeco-Roman world.” While Sheehan concedes that Judaism was significantly influenced by the Zoroastrian eschatological ideas after the Babylonian Captivity, it is often not recognized that the Graeco-Roman world itself during this epoch was highly influenced at least in the religious sphere by the Zoroastrian elements in the religious syncretism that prevailed in the Near East at the time. It is the need to increase the awareness of this subject and demonstrate the potential it offers for finding direct relations if any, between Zoroastrianism and Christianity that has prompted this author to explore this topic. What is attempted here is a delineation of the similarities between Zoroastrian and Christian beliefs and the possibilities that a serious study of syncretism in the Near East offers in explaining how these similarities came about.