

Zarathushtra – source of the Judeo-Christian heritage

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The religion of Zarathushtra is so little known in our times, though many Judeo-Christian traditions and beliefs have their origin in this ancient religion, which was so dominant and wide-spread in Persia before the birth of Christ.

We use words such as ‘satan,’ ‘paradise,’ ‘amen’ almost daily without knowing, however, their Zarathushti origin. We all know of the three magi that predicted the birth of Christ. So sad, however, is the state of our ignorance about this religion, that few are today aware that these magi from the East were none other than Zarathushti priests. Zarathushtis can thus proudly claim that they heralded Christianity to the world. Zarathushtis had a belief in the coming of a Savior, bom of a virgin mother, centuries ago.¹

Mithraism and Christmas. Most scholars agree that Christ was not born on December 25th, which was reckoned as the winter solstice in the Julian calendar. The Romans celebrated it very fervently as the Nativity of Mithra, the Sun-God that they adopted from Iran.

Mithraism was very popular among the Romans and many relics of Mithra temples, unearthed all over Europe, bear testimony to it. It was a corrupted and distorted form of the Zarathushti religion, but even in its corrupted form, it stood for certain basic Zarathushti values such as truth, justice, brotherhood, kindness and loyalty, which inspired allegiance among millions of Romans and Europeans. Franz Cumont, a noted authority on Mithraism, writes in his book, *The Mysteries of Mithra*:²

Never perhaps, not even in the epoch of the Mussolman invasion, was Europe in greater danger of being Asianicized than in the third century of our era ... a sudden inundation of Iranian ... conceptions swept over the Occident, ... and when the

1 Vendidad 19.5 and Zamyad Yasht 19.92

2 Tr. by J. MacCormack. Chicago: Open Court, 1903.

flood subsided, it left behind in the consciousness of the people a deep sediment of Oriental beliefs, which have never been obliterated.

It seems the early Christians absorbed many Mithraic traditions and festivals, but gave them a Christian significance, such as to Christmas on December 25th.

Major contributions. Among Zarathushtra's major contributions to our present-day religious heritage, was a belief in an all-wise, all-powerful and eternal God, free will, heaven and hell, individual judgment, resurrection, last judgment, life everlasting for the reunited soul and body, the coming of a savior, strong ethics based on good thoughts, words and deeds, and equal rights and respect for women.

One of the chief attributes of the Lord is feminine – the name 'Mazda' itself having a feminine base and, of the six *amesha spentas*, three are masculine and three feminine.

Words such as 'paradise' among others, are ancient Iranian.

Zarathushtra discovered that the whole universe was governed by a cosmic Law of Asha (righteousness) and enjoined upon his disciples to follow this law and make this earth a better place to live for all mankind. His scriptures revere the souls of all good men (as well as women) of all times and nations, even those at war with Iran, who follow this law and further the kingdom of God on this earth.

These teachings later became so familiar to the nations west of Iran. Nevertheless, it is only in the religion of Zarathushtra that these doctrines have retained their fullest logical relevance and purity, as Zarathushtra time and again emphasized the goodness of the physical world and human body, and the utter impartiality of divine justice.

Individual salvation he made repeatedly clear, depends on the sum of his or her thoughts, words and deeds, and how well one follows the Law of Asha. There could be no intervention whatsoever, whether compassionate or capricious, by any divine being or priests to alter this. The Day of Judgment, therefore, has an overwhelming and pointed significance to a Zarathushti.

Cyrus and the Jews. How well Zarathushtra's doctrines shaped the conduct of his followers and how they in turn shaped the course of history is, however, most evident in the conduct of the most powerful emperors Iran has ever produced, namely Cyrus and Darius, who are also the greatest empire-builders known to recorded history. It was King Cyrus who freed the Jews from Babylonian captivity.

Cyrus (and his successors) made no attempt to impose the Zarathushti

religion on his subjects but his inscriptions bear live witness to the fact that he encouraged each of his subjects to live a good life according to their own tenets. He allowed the Jews to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Dr. Mary Boyce observes in this regard:³

This was only one of many liberal acts recorded of Cyrus, but it was of particular moment for the religious history of mankind; for the Jews entertained warm feelings thereafter for the Persians, and this made them the more receptive to Zoroastrian influence.

The Jews regarded Cyrus as a Messiah, and therefore one who acted in Yahweh's name and authority. In the Old Testament reads:⁴

In the first year of Cyrus, King of Persia, in order to fulfill the word of the Lord, spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus, King of Persia, to make a proclamation throughout his realm and to put it in writing. This is what Cyrus, King of Persia, says: 'The Lord, the God of Heaven, ... has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem.'

Again in the Old Testament, the first verse of Ezra repeats this theme and adds that King Cyrus returned to the Jews 5,400 articles of gold and silver which the Babylonians had taken away from their temple in Jerusalem.

Yahweh himself is, represented as saying:⁵

Behold my servant whom I uphold, ... Cyrus will bring forth justice to the nations ... he will not fail ... till he has established justice in the earth.

Pre- and post exilic beliefs. Zarathushti doctrines became disseminated throughout the Persian empire which extended from India to the Mediterranean. The Jews who were one of these peoples found many congenial elements and similar ideas in their faith. Both had many common beliefs such as belief in one God, coming of a Messiah and a strict code of behavior and ethics. The Jews had progressed much in their ethical and spiritual conceptions during the Babylonian captivity. This progress happened to be for the most part in just those doctrines which were commonly held by millions of Zarathushtis among whom they lived.

3 *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1979, p. 51.

4 Second Chronicles 36:22 and 23.

5 Isaiah 42:1,4.

Perhaps the foremost among these is the belief in a *future life*. Those portions of the Old Testament that were written before the Exile scarcely mention it. They knew no reward for their deeds other than what they found on this earth. Their hopes were centered around this world and prosperity in this life.

The Exile, however, made a great difference in the Jewish thinking in this regard, for it is during this period and thereafter that we find for the first time in their recorded history, the expression of a hope in the other world. There is an entirely new note struck in the words such as these in the later Isaiah:

Let thy dead live, let thy dead body rise. Awake and sing, ye shall dwell in the dust; for thy dew is the dew of heroes, and the earth shall cast forth the shades.

Also in Daniel:

And many of them that sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

Even after the Exile this lesson about the immortality of the soul was not assimilated by all Jews, notably by the Sadducees. But the people who professed this new doctrine were called the Pharisees, meaning 'Persians' (according to some scholars). Zarathushti influence on the Dead Sea Scrolls has been unanimously accepted by historians.

As Dr. Boyce notes:⁶

So it was out of a Judaism enriched by five centuries of contact with Zoroastrianism that Christianity arose - a new religion with roots thus in two ancient faiths, one Semitic, the other Iranian. Doctrines taught perhaps a millennium and a half earlier by Zoroaster began in this way to reach fresh hearers: but again as in Judaism, they lost some of logic and coherence by their adoption into another creed; for the teachings of the Iranian prophet about creation, heaven and hell and the days of judgment, were less intellectually coherent when part of a religion proclaimed the existence of one omnipotent God, whose unrestricted rule was based not on justice but on love. They continued nevertheless, even in this new setting, to exert their powerful influence on men's strivings to be good.

The authority of Zarathushtra. The influence of Zarathushtra's teachings was so profound on western thought that the intellectuals in Europe referred to

6 *Op. cit.*, p. 99.

him time and time again through the centuries. In one of Faust's stories Zarathushtra is depicted as the author of a book which Faust studies so well that he earns the title of a second Zoroaster. Later the book receives the same attention from his famous student, Christopher Wagner.

The Greeks made a practice of sheltering a philosophic or 'scientific' theory under the guise of Zarathushtra's authority. This practice was continued during the Renaissance with a book on Zarathushtra written by Jessenius, a physician to Franciscus Patricius, editor of the *Chaldean Oracles*:

Zoroaster, first of all men, came near to laying the foundations, however rudimentary, of the Catholic faith.

In "Thus Spake Zarathushtra" in 1887, Nietzsche deliberately depicted Zarathushtra as exactly the opposite of what he was. His purpose in deliberately distorting the truth was lost on the readers, which frustrated him greatly. "I have not been asked," he exclaimed in *Ecce Homo*, "I should have been asked what the name Zarathushtra means in my mouth, in the mouth of the first immoralist: for what makes this Persian a fantastically unique figure in history, is just the opposite of it.

Zarathushtra was the first to see in the battle of good and evil, the prime mover of all things: the translation of morals into metaphysics, as a power, cause and end in itself, was his work.⁷

European travelers. When European travelers of India began writing about the existence and religion of Parsis in India, the West sent many scholars to study their religion to find an Iranian origin for Christianity. As Dr. Hinnells, Professor of Comparative Religion at the University of Manchester, observes:

The British respected the Parsis (greatly) because in them they saw, in a strange and foreign land, people who shared similar morals, principles and even physical similarity.

The favorable reports of various European travellers had created such an interest in the religion that as early as in 1700 an Oxford professor, Thomas Hyde, wrote a book to prove that "Zoroastrianism was the Persianized form of an idealized Judaism." His great respect for Zarathushtra led him, rightly or wrongly, to seek in it resemblances to his own faith.

The Portuguese generally referred to the Parsis as Jews from the 16th century, which, as Prof. Hinnells maintains, was the best compliment the devout Europeans of the 16th century could give to any distant people by identifying them with their own religious traditions.

7 Insel edition, p. 117.

As Schaeder commented in his book on Goethe in 1938: “With the knowledge of the Avesta there arose a temptation to search the Iranian religion for the hidden sources of primitive Christianity.” The French sent Anquetil Duperron to India to study the Avesta. He lived among the Parsis in Surat, India for many years and published his book, *Avesta*, in 1771.

How much the European philosophers were excited by Anquetil’s trip to India and how much it raised their hopes, especially those of Voltaire and Diderot, to see anything in the Avesta that could be used against Christianity is depicted superbly by Raymond Schwab in his book, *Vie de Anquetil-Duperron* (Paris, 1934). The rivalry between the English and the French prompted the English scholars to reject Anquetil’s findings summarily, but ultimately the truth prevailed, opening up the gilded door of Avestan studies in Europe.

Voltaire praised Anquetil for his courage to tell the truth; his famous comment will ring through the corridors of history: “People speak a lot about Zoroaster and will go on speaking about him forever.” ■

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