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THE ACHAEMENID KINGS AND THE WORSHIP OF AHURA MAZDA: PROTO-ZOROASTRIANISM IN THE PERSIAN EMPIRE

AVRAM R. SHANNON

IN the two centuries prior to the Common Era, before Alexander the Great came on the world stage and left his indelible mark of Hellenism, the Near East was ruled by Indo-Aryans out of Persia, or modern-day Iran. These rulers, called the Achaemenids (from their family name), were different than any of the previous rulers over the Near East. For one thing, they were Indo-Europeans and spoke an Indo-European language, while the previous rulers had been Semites like the Assyrians or the Neo-Babylonians. These Achaemenid kings conquered the great cities of the Near East, such as Babylon, but did not assimilate in the same ways that previous conquerors had. They ruled their new empire not from the traditional sites along the Euphrates but from their ancient palaces on the Iranian plateau, from Susa, Ecbatana, and Persepolis.¹

Another way they differed was in their religion. The Indo-Aryans east of the Zagros mountain always differed somewhat in their worship from the Semites of Mesopotamia and the Levant. Their gods were similar to those found in the Vedic scriptures of India. However, around this time, the Persian rulers began to worship in a new manner. They began to follow the teachings of Zarathustra, the prophet who founded Zoroastrianism, the religion named after him. While the first major king of the Achaemenids, Cyrus the Great, does not seem to be too devoted to what would be termed Zoroastrianism, one of his successors, Darius I, certainly was. It is possible to map a development of royal treatment of Zoroastrian worship by the Achaemenid kings, from Cyrus to Xerxes, through the use of the sources available to us, and to view the effect that this had on the development of the religion.

The prophet Zarathustra is a somewhat difficult figure to pin down in history, since there are many theories on when he actually lived. The standard

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1. W. J. Vogelsang, "The Rise and Organisation of the Achaemenid Empire: The Eastern Iranian Evidence," in *Studies in the History of the Ancient Near East*, vol. 3, ed. M. H. E. Weippert (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1992).

theory is that he lived, taught, and wrote his hymns (which are the basic scripture of the Zoroastrian religious practice) in about the sixth century B.C.E. The primary reason for this is that it is in this period that the name of Ahura Mazda, the god of Zarathustra's Hymns, begins to show up in the inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings. Another theory, put forth by Mary Boyce, is that he lived around the 12th century B.C.E. The *Gathas* (the name for the hymns in Avestite, the language in which they are written) are therefore written down later, and represent a later version of his original teachings. There is much discussion on the matter, and the arguments made by the various sides are largely inconclusive. This paper, however, supposes a later Zarathustra rather than an earlier one, as the evidence in question seems, in this case, to point in that direction.²

There are a number of divine beings worshiped in Zoroastrianism, both anciently and modernly. Chief of these is Ahura Mazda, the ruler god. His name means "wise lord," and according to Herodotus he was worshiped as the wide sky above the earth.³ His symbol appears to have been a winged disk, similar to that found in Egyptian usage, but uniquely Persian. Ahura Mazda is the primary god mentioned in the *Gathas*, and seems to have been the god that Zarathustra himself worshipped. He is the only god mentioned by name in any inscription belonging to Darius I, and he is presented by Darius as being the divine source behind the power of the king, which is very much in line with standard Near Eastern kingship ideology.⁴

Another important god is Mithra, who was associated in later Persian works with the sun. This same god is mentioned in the Vedic literature as Mitra, and then later worshiped by the Romans in his own mystery cult under the name of Mithras. Mithra is not mentioned in the *Gathas*, nor is he mentioned in any of the Achaemenid royal inscriptions before the reign of Artaxerxes II in 404–359 B.C.E.,⁵ some eighty or so years after Darius I and his proposed establishment of Zoroastrianism as the state religion in the Persian Empire. Even Mary Boyce, who believes that the Achaemenid kings were Zoroastrian from the beginning and that Zarathustra's great religious innovation happened very early in Iranian history, recognizes that there is no

2. The interested reader however is directed to the various discussions in Jarl Charpentier, "The Date of Zoroaster," *Bulletin of Oriental Studies* 3.4 (1925): 747–55; Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 1 (Leiden: Brill, 1982); and William Malandra, *An Introduction to Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1982).

3. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.131.

4. G. W. Ahlstrom, "Solomon, The Chosen One," *History of Religions* 8.2 (November 1968): 94.

5. Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, trans. Peter T. Daniels (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2002), 251.

mention of the god Mithra in the hymns written by Zarathustra.⁶ M. J. Edwards, discussing a difficult passage in Herodotus, argues that the early Persians associated Mithra with the morning star (i.e., the planet Venus), although not with the Greek goddess or her various Near Eastern counterparts.⁷ He is later identified with the sun, and it is by this association that he is best known in the later Roman mystery cult that bears his name.

Fire plays an important role in the Zoroastrian religion, as it did in the old Iranian religion before it, and many of the depictions of the Achaemenid kings show them worshipping before an altar of fire. This seems to be more than merely a holocaust altar for the sacrificing of burnt offerings but a central part of the Zoroastrianism religion. Although a little out of the period under discussion, during the reign of Darius III (335–331 B.C.E.), in the waning days of the Persian Empire, according to the history of Quintus Curtius, Darius inspires his troops by “the Sun and Mithras, and the sacred and eternal fire.”⁸ This passage illustrates both the centrality of fire in the religious views of the last of the Achaemenid kings, as well showing the close association between the sun and Mithra during his reign, almost to the point of equation.

Cyrus the Great does not make mention of Ahura Mazda in any of his inscriptions. In fact many of his inscriptions betray a sense of plurality that is not found in the texts of later kings of the Achaemenid dynasty. A very famous inscription of his illustrates this. This is the Cyrus Cylinder, found in Babylon, which contains a decree justifying his rule in the city of Babylon. In it he relates how Marduk, the local god of Babylon and chief god of Babylonia, appointed him to be king over Babylon. Later in the text he commands that temples be rebuilt and the various local cults be started up again. He then asks that these gods bless him. This text has a parallel in Ezra 1:1–4 in the Hebrew Bible. The portion of the text reads: “May all the gods whom I settled in their sacred centers ask daily of Bel that my days may be long, and may they intercede for my welfare. May they say to Marduk, my lord, ‘As for Cyrus, the king who reveres you, . . .’”⁹

This inscription betrays in Cyrus a plurality which the later Achaemenid kings rejected. In this inscription he invokes Marduk and Bel, a title for Marduk, to bless him, and mentions a number of other gods. Mary Boyce, once again trying to fit this text into her interpretation of the Achaemenid king's religion has observed, “Doctrinally, it is impossible to reconcile his

6. Mary Boyce, “On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 32.1 (1968): 14, note 27.

7. M. J. Edwards, “Herodotus and Mithras: *Histories* 1.131,” *The American Journal of Philology* 111.1 (1990): 4.

8. Quintus Curtius, 4.13.12, in Briant, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 106.

9. *Cyrus Cylinder* (COS 2.124, 314–16), trans. Mordechai Cogan.

acknowledgment of alien great gods with his own acceptance of Ahura Mazda as the one true God.”¹⁰ Impossible, indeed. This is actually part of the reason for supposing for a later Zarathustra, because there is no textual evidence for his existence or his religion until after the reign of Cyrus the Great, in the mid sixth century B.C.E. Cyrus does not seem to be a worshipper of Ahura Mazda, at least not exclusively, nor does he seem to be an adherent of the teachings of Zarathustra.

Egypt is an interesting case for the discussion of the religion of the Achaemenid kings, as both Cambyses and Darius were installed as Pharaoh with, at least initially, all the related religious associations. Cambyses, the Persian king between Cyrus and Darius, only ruled for seven years, and appears to have been very involved in the Egyptian religion. Pierre Briant observes that Cambyses had a particularly strong sense of devotion towards Neith, an Egyptian goddess, including making donations to build her a temple.¹¹ Darius I, interestingly enough, also seems to have had some connection to the Egyptian religion, in that his cartouche has been found in Egyptian temples.¹² However, in general, the rule of Persians was not positive for the Egyptian gods and the priesthoods that maintained their cults. Quite the contrary, in fact. Lisbeth Fried has argued that all foreign religions and religious observances were tools of the Persian state, observing that “Persian rule had a strongly negative impact on the growth, development and autonomy of Egyptian temples.”¹³

However, this discussion gets more complicated with Darius I, one of the most powerful kings of his line, and a strong devotee of Ahura Mazda. The first mention of Ahura Mazda in a royal inscription dates to the reign of Darius I, and the primary god he mentions is Ahura Mazda.¹⁴ Other gods are mentioned, but only in secondary usage. That Darius viewed Ahura Mazda as the premiere and the greatest god is clear from his inscriptions. One of the most famous of these is the Behistun Inscription, in which he describes the strength of his empire and of his reign. There is throughout his inscriptions a great ideological element including his divine kingship and “insisting especially on the privileged protection of Ahura Mazda.”¹⁵ For example he claims that “By the grace of Ahuramazda¹⁶ I am king; Ahuramazda brought the

10. Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 65.

11. Briant, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 473.

12. Lisbeth S. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple-Palace Relationships in the Persian Empire in Biblical and Judaic Studies*, vol. 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 106.

13. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King*, 106.

14. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 2.103.

15. Briant, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 211.

16. In Old Persian the divine name of Ahura Mazda is written as a single word, as here.

kingdom to me.”¹⁷ Here we can clearly see that Darius I portrays his kingship as a divine gift from the god Ahura Mazda.

There are evidences from classical sources for Darius’s adherence to a religious system similar to Zoroastrianism, if not necessarily Zoroastrianism itself. One of these includes a recognition of ritual purity, and the impurity found from dead bodies. Herodotus records a story, and although he gives his standard anti-Persian spin on it, it is easy to see contained within it the idea of ritual purity. A certain Babylonian queen insisted, upon her death, on being entombed over a gate into the city of Babylon. It is recorded that Darius I was squeamish about passing under the gate for reasons not given by Herodotus.¹⁸ We can assume that it was part of his religious devotions that made him squeamish, as it is unlikely a warrior king was overly upset over the mere presence of a corpse.

For Darius I, Ahura Mazda was the supreme god, the highest and holiest of beings, a god worshiped in his inscriptions with a singular fervor, similar to that found by the Hebrew prophets in the Hebrew Bible. He praises Ahura Mazda saying, “A great god is Ahuramazda who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created man, who created peace for man, who made Darius king.”¹⁹ There seems to be a logical progression from one thought to the next. Thus first, Ahura Mazda creates heaven and earth, then he creates man, and then he creates peace for man. How is it that he creates peace for man? He makes Darius I king. Here we have both a compelling piece of propaganda as well as an interesting statement of Darius’s fervent belief in his appointment by Ahura Mazda and his willingness to serve him.

It has been argued that one of the purposes of the Achaemenid kings in the spreading of their Persian Empire was to establish Zoroastrianism as the state religion and to spread it abroad throughout the Near East.²⁰ Even with the strength of Darius’s conviction in Ahura Mazda as discussed above, this seems to be unlikely, especially since the kings subsequent to Cyrus followed his policy of official religious tolerance, as observed in the above discussion of the Cyrus Cylinder. According to the book of Ezra, in the Hebrew Bible, Darius I renewed Cyrus’s proclamation and continued his policy toward the Jews living in the Persian province of Yehud (Ezra 6:1–12). Once again quoting Boyce, “it is impossible to reconcile his acknowledgment of alien great gods with his own acceptance of Ahura Mazda as the one true God.”²¹

17. Darius I, DfB 1.11–12, as quoted in A.V. Williams Jackson and Louis H. Gray, “The Religion of the Achaemenid Kings. First Series. The Religion According to the Inscriptions,” *Journal of the Oriental Society*, vol. 2, *Index to the Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vols. 1–20 (1900): 162.

18. Herodotus, *Histories* 1.187.

19. Darius I DNa, in Jackson, “Religion of Achaemenid Kings,” 162.

20. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 2.49.

21. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 2.65.

We should not try to reconcile these things. While it becomes obvious from the reading of the inscriptions that all the kings subsequent to Darius I worshipped Ahura Mazda, and many of the later elements of Zoroastrian religion, it is by no means as evident that the religion they practiced was Zoroastrianism as it is currently understood, and indeed, it would be unfair of us to do so. There does, however, seem to be a general movement toward this later stage, especially in the introduction of other deities into the pantheon, such as Mithra and Ahura Mazda's *spensa*, or angelic beings who attend to him and serve him in various spheres. Indeed, there is a general movement away from the tolerance found in the early kings, either in Cyrus's and Cambyses's seeming syncretism, as well as in Darius's following of the previous policies of the empire, and perhaps a recognition of the polytheistic roots of his new religion.

Xerxes, the son of Darius I, while following his father's faith in Ahura Mazda as the great god, did not do likewise with the tolerant policy put forth by Cyrus the Great. His policy seems to have been one of putting in place the worship of Ahura Mazda, where previously other gods had been worshiped, referred to as *daevas*, the word in the Avesta for false god. He talks about how Ahura Mazda created the earth and created peace, in a passage that parallels his father's nicely, but then goes on to report, "By the favor of Ahura Mazda I smote that land and put it into its place . . . within these lands where formerly the *daevas* were worshipped. Afterward, by the favor of Ahura Mazda, I destroyed the community of the *daevas* and proclaimed: The *daevas* you shall not worship. Where formerly the *daevas* were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahura Mazda and the holy Arta."²²

There are a number of very important facts to be learned from this inscription. First, it clearly illustrates the less tolerant attitude of Xerxes, as compared to his forebears. Second, it shows how the religion of the Achaemenid kings was moving progressively toward something closer to modern Zoroastrian religious dogma, with the inclusion of a mention of the worship of Arta (a name that can be roughly translated as "righteousness"), who is one of the angelic demigods associated with Ahura Mazda. As previously mentioned, the only god named by Darius I in any of his inscriptions is Ahura Mazda, his premiere and primary god.

Another example of the evolving nature of the belief of the Achaemenid kings, and their relationship to the cult that they had adopted comes from later in the previously quoted inscription, where Xerxes says, "The man who has respect for that law which Ahuramazda has established, and worships Ahuramazda and Arta reverently, he becomes both happy while living, and becomes blessed when dead."²³ This is again very different from the

22. Xerxes XPh, quoted in Robert J. Littman, "The Religious Policy of Xerxes and the 'Book of Esther,'" *Jewish Quarterly Review*, New Series, 65.3 (January 1975): 153.

23. Xerxes XPh, quoted in Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 550.

inscriptions of his father, which, while singularly devoted to Ahura Mazda and ascribing to him creation and the right of divine kingship, which he gave to his supporter Darius, are free from anything as theological as we have here. This is more than just the standard Near Eastern statement of “I am king because my god is best.” This is a real positive statement of a religious doctrine in an official royal inscription. By now, Zoroastrianism, in whatever form, was definitely the state religion.

Where previously in the Near East gods were held to be more powerful than others, never before was a god put forward as the sole true god, with everyone submitting to the worship of the “true god” in the true manner. Previously “god” had been used to justify conquest only in the sense of “My god is more powerful than your god.” Here we have, “My god will be your god too, whether you like or not.” This is the kind of ideology that would be used again and again during the Middle Ages, by both Christians and Muslims, and it finds its strongest historical antecedent here in the Persian Empire. It has often been argued that Zoroastrianism had a great influence on Judaism and subsequently Christianity, usually in a positive sense.²⁴ Here, however, we have illustrated something a little less positive, the tendency towards religious bigotry so often found in state religions.

Thus we can see in the process of moving from the standard Near Eastern treatment of religion in the reigns of Cyrus the Great and Cambyses to Xerxes’s enforcement of the worship of Ahura Mazda and the proto-Zoroastrianism that went with it a movement toward increasing dogmatism and standardization of the religion. Darius’s conversion to the worship of Ahura Mazda was to have interesting effects on the Persian Empire. As discussed above, it led to some religious intolerance. It also led to the formalization of one of history’s most interesting religions, a religion that continues on to this very day. The effect of the Persian prophet Zarathustra on Darius I and then again on Darius’s son had a far reaching influence that has lasted long after the empire that Cyrus created had fallen. Something very important happened sometime between the reigns of Cambyses and Xerxes, something into which the royal inscriptions give us much insight.

24. For an overview of the various arguments see James Barr’s excellent article, “The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity,” *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 53.2 (June 1985), 201–35.