Zorastrianism and Its Earthly Tenure

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Available at: https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/ccr/vol37/iss37/5

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INTRODUCTION

"Repent, for the End is Near." The pacing street person with this admonition on a sandwich board is an increasing phenomenon as we approach the end of this millennium. This used to be a standing cartoon in the New Yorker Magazine, but is no joke today. As Harold Bloom sourly reminds us in his Omens of Millennium: The Gnosis of Angels, Dreams, and Resurrection (1996), TV angels, near-death experiences of tunnels and light, and an increase in hell-fire and brimstone religions — not to mention the increasing clamor of personal interviews with extraterrestrials — are dogging our heels for the next few years.

Where does all this come from? How can a society connected by the Internet, breaking the genetic code, and contemplating a journey to Mars, still manage to have its feet mired in this ancient apocalyptic tarpit?

The answer, of course, is that man does not live by reason alone. We are also creatures of wondering, visions, and archetypal imagery that surfaces in our art and in our dreams. But we are also people who change — but for whom ancient patterns of thought and feeling break through in times when the old seems to be dying and the new is not yet in sight.

The concepts of the Millennium, Armageddon, the struggle between good and evil, the one God of the Universe, Satan, devils, angels, paradise and hell, ecological reverence, and human responsibility all derive from the most shadowy of the world’s great Bronze Age prophets: Zoroaster. Music lovers will know him in a very politicized form as Zarathustra in Richard Strauss’ tone poem, based on the work of Nietzsche.

*Presented at the International Society for the Comparative Study of Civilizations, May 9, 1997, Provo, Utah
THE CONTROVERSY OVER ZOROASTER’S DATES

Tradition and linguistics tell us that Zoroaster was born in what later became the eastern province of the Persian Empire. We know him through traditions still treasured by the 100,000 or so adherents who live in India, England, and elsewhere, scattered like stars across the world’s firmament. We also know that these Zoroastrians are all that remain of a religion that had imperial status in successive Persian dynasties for over 1,100 years and counted its adherents in millions. No minor cult, this!

We also know that Zoroaster, the state religion that flourished after he was gone, and the cults that spun off as populist heresies from the state religion, transformed the world views of Judaism, Christianity, Islam, Buddhism, and Hinduism. We also know that nearly every heresy that dogged the Western great religions had Zoroastrian cults at the root of the orthodox rejection. In addition, today’s “millennial madness” can be traced back in a straight line to him.

Zoroaster’s dates have become a source of dissension among scholars. Orthodox Zoroastrians place his birth at 7,000 years ago — which, of course, runs counter to archaeology. Mainstream historians have long placed him at the beginning of the Axial Age, between 628 and 551 BCE, but linguists such as the doyenne of Zoroastrian studies, Mary Boyce, studying what has come down to us as Zoroaster’s actual language in his dialogues with his god, place him in the Bronze Age, somewhere between 1500 and 1000 BCE.

Ordinarily an idea too far ahead of its time dies. We have an example of this when Egyptian pharaoh Amenophis IV (Akhnaton) in the 15th century BCE attempted to replace polytheism with worship of the universal god, Aton, the solar disk. His reform barely survived his lifetime. We see this again in the difficulties that Moses faced with his people backsliding into Baal worship. It took Moses forty years of isolating the Hebrew tribes in the desert for him to wean them away from their golden calf and fertility goddesses — and even then, forty years were not enough.
Zoroaster, too, living, say, in 1200 BCE, should have been lost to history forever in a time that was not ready for him. But somehow his message was not lost. His preliterate followers memorized and cherished his words for almost a millennium before these accounts were remanded to writing. This very antiquity, however, has played a role in making some of the texts that have come down to us unreadable, and we are forced to wonder how much of what he said and did was added to or misunderstood by his later priests and followers.

Despite this, the penetrating vision of Zoroaster and the simplicity of its message managed to survive and gather adherents over the 800 to 1000 years between his ministry and a time that would give it wings, the Axial Age.

We now have a cleared picture of how intellectual and spiritual movements flow across trade routes, and that a certain accumulation of wealth is necessary before individuals can question and explore radical departures from received truths. With trade in goods and ideas comes enough money to support men independent enough to fly in the faced of tradition. It is no wonder, then, that across the Old World, the 6th century BCE produced an international trading community and the leisure to support a Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Lao Tse, and the Hebrew compilers of the Bible. The time had come for a new power in the world, the Persian Achaemenian Empire, to sponsor a religion out of their own ethnic roots, and Zoroaster’s followers offered a distinguished message. Zoroastrianism thus entered the world’s religious stream.

THE SHADOWY ZOROASTER

Although the linguists tell us that Zoroaster’s name meant “Camel-tender,” he was obviously not a camel-tender any more than the great Persian mathematician Omar Khayyam (12th century CE) was the tentmaker that his name implies. These names obviously piously derived from their ancestors.

Everything that historians can speculate about Zoroaster is unfortunately that — speculation. He lived at a time and in a part
of the world where writing systems had not yet been introduced. By the time writing was available to the Persians, it was either the unwieldy cuneiform, used only by specialists, or was in a borrowed language, Aramaic. Unlike the Greek or Hebrew alphabets at the same time, which anyone educated could read, Old Persian was not accessible to an otherwise educated Persian. This difficult writing system may account for our lack of immediate written doctrine from and about Zoroaster himself, as well as the religion’s later fate as a faith with holy scripture that nobody but priests could read.

By educated guessing, however, we can say that Zoroaster was a priest of the old Aryan polytheistic religion who began to chafe under the stupidity and obvious fleecing of the gullible that he saw around him. He passionately began attacking what he called “the mumblers,” the cult priests and their mumbo-jumbo, and in so doing, he gathered followers — and enemies — along the way.

Considering the exalted rank of some of his followers, and considering how class-conscious that society was (and still is), we might also safely conclude that Zoroaster was an aristocrat.

We may also believe, from what he himself testified, that one day he had a life-changing epiphany — much like that experienced by Mohammad nearly two millennia later — in which he was overcome by a divine light and a vision of the eternal. His vision dominated the rest of his life forever and changed the psyche of most of mankind to this day.

By battling for light, goodness, and decency, he said, one could depend upon an afterlife of eternal bliss. By opting for the lie, deception, and self-deception, one was guaranteed an afterlife of eternal burning.

What I find particularly remarkable about Zoroaster’s vision is his attitude toward the lie. During the Bronze Age (and ever since), few men had the independence to speak truth in the face of power. One could not tell a king a truth he did not want to hear, nor could a worker tell his master, nor a woman her husband. Everyone lied — as they still do — out of fear, prudence,
or overweening ambition. Zoroaster’s righteous man or woman would have had to have dignity and incredible courage to follow his example.

Paradise and Hell, as described by Zoroaster, are quite different from the afterlife pictured by Greek religion, in which the dead live in a sad, gray world of nothingness. Germanic mythology had battlefield heroes being taken directly up to the abode of the gods where they lived in eternal bliss, but this reads like military propaganda, much like the Ayatollah Khomeini issuing plastic keys to Paradise to the children clearing mine fields during the Iran-Iraq war.

Zoroaster’s vision was better than those: an absolutely moral vision in which the good, no matter what their class, are rewarded, and the evil, no matter how important, are punished. This was definitely a first, as was Zoroaster’s affirmation that there was only one god of the universe, not a private tribal god as the Hebrew Yahweh, but one who was universal. He saw that god as light, goodness, and illumination — an amazingly abstract concept at a time that most people needed very concrete idols in their worship.

He also believed that when that god (Ahura Mazda) created our universe, he set in motion a physical world of light and shadow, a world in which all things were shaped by their opposite. Joy can only be perceived when we know sorrow; the sweetness of life by the finality of death; and we cannot know good without knowing evil. Evil, which Zoroaster personified as “Ahriman,” was one of his creations who chose evil by his own will; he could be said to be a shadow cast by Ahura Mazda’s light, but by no means a rival godhead, as the term “dualism” would lead us to believe.

For the first time in antiquity, someone was deeming man capable of playing a role other than victim of irrational gods and dark forces. While obedience to God’s will was the issue posed in the Hebrew Bible and while the first Romans were analyzing the entrails of sacrificed animals (or people) for indications of the gods’ intentions, Zoroaster was asking for free and intelligent
participation in life’s struggle against the forces of evil, internal and external.

ZOROAスター’S VISION GOES IMPERIAL

Over an immensely long period, his ideas survived and found favor among the founders of the word’s first international empire, the Persian Achaemenids.

A millennium after Zoroaster’s death, his world of small kingdoms related by blood and the Indo-European language was united by a military genius, Cyrus the Great. By 550 BCE, Cyrus, King of Persia, had absorbed his neighbors, the Medes, and this joint Persian and Median kingdom proceeded to unite all of the other peoples who called themselves Ariana (Iranian), geographically running from the Persian Gulf to Central Asia. This new empire then conquered Babylon, Egypt, and Asia Minor, and loomed large both then and now, as an institution of intelligent governance and great wealth.

Zoroaster’s faith was adopted by the nobility, among whom the admonition “good thoughts, good words, and good deeds” was transformed into “ride well, shoot straight, and tell the truth,” something the Greeks noted with admiration. The lower social orders still practiced their older polytheism, and many of the nobility were no better — yet the religion was favored enough by the monarchy to make it the state religion of three successive dynasties, the Achaemenids, the Parthians, and the Sassanians, a period spanning from 550 BCE to 631 CE. All of these dynasties demonstrated prudent tolerance for the religions of their non-Iranian subject peoples, but the Sassanians, perhaps taking a leaf from the Byzantines, created a state religion as intolerant of internal heresies as Byzantine Christianity. The Sassanians also attempted to codify and put an official stamp on this state religion. Nonconformists were severely persecuted.

During that time too, the Magi (priests) asserted great power and did what professional priesthoods always do: they rendered the religious texts inscrutable and monopolized power of a state church. Zoroaster would have grieved. Christ’s message met
with the same fate in Medieval Christianity.

The problem with Zoroastrianism was that this religion, in the form that we think Zoroaster devised, has always appealed to the principled and rational, but not the superstitious and lovers of emotional ritual. It could not enlist the loyalty of the merchant class because it did not have texts in a writing system accessible to them, nor was it passionate enough to move the needy lower classes.

Where there is a vacuum, something fills it. Mithraism, an Iranian sun cult older than Zoroastrianism but adopting some Zoroastrian terminology, enjoyed great popularity among soldiers and was the first Zoroastrian spin-off to take root beyond Persia. Roman soldiers carried it into western Europe where for a time it rivaled Christianity in competition for state support. Even Roman Christianity yielded to Mithraism in the selection of December 25 as the date of Christ’s birth; it had been the date celebrating the birth of Mithra.

Zurvanism, a messianic cult that was more interested in Armageddon than ethical monotheism, enjoyed such popularity among the lower classes that it became contagious and began to pour into neighboring pools — from whence came the Jewish messianic fervor that swept the holy land and culminated in the cult of Christianity. It is once more alive and well among the present ultra-orthodox Jews in Israel who claim they can hear the footsteps of the Messiah at this moment, preparing to come back and bring peace on earth.

The most interesting of Zoroastrian spin-off religions appeared in the third century CE in the hands of a preacher by the name of Mani, who gave his name — and his life — to the Manichean cult. Mani believed — with considerable evidence to back him up — that all prophetic religions begin with inspiration and end with stultifying “business as usual.” He preached a passionate religion calling upon the common ethical theses in Zoroastrianism, Christianity, Judaism, and Buddhism. And he emphasized, perhaps more than any of his predecessors, the opposition of spirit and flesh.
Zoroaster was the source of the idea of the cosmic conflict of good and evil, light and darkness, truth and the lie; however, flesh and spirit were not, in his great vision, enemies. When one lived as Zoroaster did, in a terrain sharply defined by watered and fertile versus dry and barren, the desert is divided from the cultivated by a single furrow. For cultivators, the laboriously watered land means civilization and the evil comes riding out of the grasslands to destroy it. Farmer and barbarian were opposites and natural enemies, which Zoroaster used to illustrate the cosmic struggle.

Mani and other Zoroastrian cults such as the Zurvanites and Mithra Cult, carried this concept to its ultimate and abstract extreme: that flesh and spirit were unalterably opposed. Zoroaster’s concrete observation now became an excuse for elevating spirit, which was seen as male, and denigrating the flesh, which was seen as female. The solution to this dilemma lay in celibacy; sexuality became forever suspect. In addition, the exaggerated concern with spirit paved the way for all the mystical and monastic movements that followed: the Kabbalists, Sufis, and Christian Charismatics.

These cults enjoyed enormous popularity and influence among the monotheistic religions that followed. Mani was crucified by the Sassanians, the last Persian dynasty before Islam, and some of his adherents went underground or fled to Central Asia where they enjoyed long success. Some also fled to the west, many of them becoming Roman soldiers and some of them converting whole communities in southern France and Switzerland, which became known as the Albigensians and the Cathars, names that still reverberate in the history of Genocide. The Catholic Church launched a grisly persecution with the aim of forcibly reconverting these people or wiping them out.

In a strange footnote to history that may be entirely coincidental, the mission of Mani with his synchronistic religion that was intended to reform and restore Zoroaster’s religion and add to it all valuable later prophetic insights, was replicated in the 19th century Baha’i faith in Iran. This religion too was persecut-
ed and it too spread out from its Persian homeland to the rest of the world where it enjoys increasing success.

In its state form, however, Zoroastrianism never really extended its reach beyond an elite cadre of native Iranians.

**THE STATE RELIGION COLLAPSES**

Zoroastrianism came to a grinding halt in its homeland when the Arabs, then a barbarian people out of the desert, emboldened by a new religion, Islam, overran the mighty Sassanid Persian empire. For centuries, Persian military resources had been stretched to a breaking point in holding back the barbarians from Central Asia, a 1500-mile frontier, constantly turbulent, constantly threatened. In addition, the Sassanids had been engaged in an expensive alternately cold and hot war with the Roman Byzantines, which in its day looked like our own 50-year Cold War with the USSR. Apparently military planners never expected a barbarian attack from the south. To the haughty Persians, as the Arabs overran them, it seemed the world had been turned upside down.

Arab Muslims claim that Islam did very little conversion by the sword. After their first successful conquests, they were perfectly happy to grant tolerance to Jews, Christians, and Zoroastrians in exchange for a tax assessment. To the surprise of the Arabs, the Persian peasantry, oppressed under their ancient feudalism and the endless taxation required by the imperial Persian military machine, converted in numbers. What had they to lose? The state Zoroastrian church had little meaning for them, and they were persecuted when they followed Mani. Islam, with its vital egalitarianism, looked like the better option.

As for the merchant class, although the Sassanians grew rich on Silk Road trade, aristocrats and court cultures have always been scornful of “money grubbers,” which is how they saw merchants. Warfare, romance, and heroic deeds obsessed the aristocracy, not frugality and business dealings. Because Mohammad was a merchant and Mecca was a trade route nexus, Islam became the only major religion in the world that honors
merchants. Persian merchants converted to Islam and have been among Islam's most unshakable adherents.

The aristocrats were faced with a dilemma. They had lost power and had become second-class citizens under Arab overlords. They had two choices: convert and get ahead in this new world order, or persist as Zoroastrians and flee Iran. Most enlisted in the new world order, and to this day, Persian aristocratic attitudes toward Islam seem ambivalent. However, a very special few stayed loyal to their faith and fled to the remote corners of Iran. When even there Muslim persecution made life miserable, many fled Iran, taking up new homes in Bombay, India, where they live to this day, still identified as Persians (Parsees). These decent, intelligent people carefully avoid persecution in their new home by never engaging in any missionary activities. One can only be Zoroastrian by virtue of two Zoroastrian parents. As a result, this community is dwindling in number as its educated children marry out of the faith, and the next century could see them vanish for good.

ZOROASTER'S MARK ON THE WORLD

If this is a failed religion, why should we remember Zoroaster? I would suggest that as historians, it is awe inspiring to contemplate the effect of one individual on religious history for all time. And as practitioners of the modern religion, democracy, we might well contemplate what happens to an institution that does not speak to the heart of the non-contemplative non-intellectual. There is a world-wide obsession with emotional religion that we cannot afford to overlook.

The historian needs to reexamine how Zoroaster affected the development of Judaism, Hinduism, Buddhism, Christianity, and Islam.

- Judaism. When the Jews encountered Zoroastrianism during their 50-year exile in Babylon, their concept of God was transformed from a personal ethnic god to God of the Universe. Contact with the Zurvanite cult also
planted the seeds of the messiah fever that raged in Judea during Roman times. Concern with the afterlife, heaven and hell, and final judgment also began at this time, along with an extraordinary interest in angels. This transformed Judaism became the nursery for Christianity and Islam.

- **Christianity.** This religion had its roots in Zurvanistic messianic frenzy, has been obsessed with life after death, heaven and hell, Armageddon, and angels and devils. It also picked up the Sunday Sabbath from the Mithra cult, along with the notion of being “washed in the blood of the bull” (lamb, in Christianity). December 25th is also Mithra’s birthdate, now assumed by Western Christians for Christ’s birth. One perverse Christian interpretation of Zoroaster’s struggle between good and evil has taken the form of quite savage religious bigotry — an assumption that only Christians have virtue and all others are devils.

- **Islam.** Beginning with Mohammad’s trance contact with the Angel Gabriel, Islam has had serious concern with an afterlife, with heaven and hell, and with angels and devils. The Shiite Sect and their later offspring, the Sufis, have the mark of Zoroastrian cults stamped on them, not to mention their very Persian flavor. Although Persians converted to Islam, somewhere in their hearts lies the ancient religion and memory of empire.

- **Hinduism.** Early Zoroastrianism provided an elite infusion of the notion of a god of creation beyond the many gods and goddesses of Hindu mythology. Sophisticated Hindus have thus gone beyond Hindu pantheism and have, in
effect, interpreted their religion as a symbolic projection of concepts, not actual gods to be worshipped.

- **Buddhism.** This religion, which began as non-theistic, later adopted Zoroaster’s great drama of conflicting good and evil forces, which made it more palatable to Tibetans and Southeast Asians, who responded to more drama in their religion than pure Buddhism offered.

Those of us interested in the political aspects of civilization in which issues of power and control loom large might look at the offspring of Zoroaster’s cerebral religion, the emotional cults. Are we not in a cultic rebellion phase of history now?

- **Puritanism.** The puritanism and misogyny that dogs all of the world’s religions and many of the world’s governments are the fruit of Zoroastrianism’s spin-off, Manicheeism. Misogyny is as old as human culture, but it was justified by the philosophy preached in this cult.

The battle of opposites was taken to its ultimate extreme — the opposition of body and spirit. Flesh became an evil — a concept that Zoroaster never considered. Women and nature became things to be controlled, to be avoided. The battle of good over evil, God over the Devil, spirit over flesh, led to extremely ascetic communities who were ready to abdicate sexual reproduction entirely and thus end the entire human drama. Governments did not like this and persecuted such groups with relentless zeal.

Although Manicheeism died out as a cult, its ideas infiltrated every other religion where it
would break out periodically as a fit of asceticism or hysteria over hellfire and damnation. The hermits in the Egyptian desert, monasticism in both Catholicism and Buddhism, Calvin’s dour sermons in Geneva, and the Ayatollah Khomeini’s diatribes on The Great Satan are all perverted interpretations of Manicheeism come to life again.

• **Demonization.** The other direction that this Manicheeism took was to replace the ancient world’s tolerance with the demonization of others who don’t conform to us. This is still with us. What started out as Zoroaster’s civilized observations on the nature of good and evil has taken over the whole world in the practice of demonizing. One side is all good and the other all evil. The lower intellects among us make such differentiations on the basis of gender, race, ethnicity, religion, and politics. In sports, we look for winner versus loser — enemies rather than joint players of the same game.

• **Genocide.** Rather than engage in battle against the dark night of the soul, or against the real barbarian galloping out of the hills to slit our throats and take our goods, we are engaged in a frenzy of killing those we think are our opposites but who are really mirror images of ourselves. In our century, we have seen the Turks demonize the Armenians, the Nazis demonize Jews, Slavs, and Gypsies; the Cambodian government target intellectuals and city people; two of the three former Yugoslavian religious groups attempting genocide on the others; the Tutsis victimized by the Hutus in Rwanda; and Algerian and Afghani
religious fascists attempting to exterminate women who don’t know their place. The US and USSR came close to global destruction in their mutual demonization, a nightmare from which we have both, fortunately, awakened.

Zoroaster would have been appalled. Little did he consider that a religion needs to have something to say to the unenlightened as well as to the contemplative, lest the unenlightened go off on their own in hysterical and dangerous directions. Democracy shares this problem.

But for the enlightened, if Zoroaster were to come back today, he would tell us to look to our own shadow and let in the light. If his religion’s gatekeepers relent and permit conversion, this religion could well have a second — and better — incarnation in the next century.

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