

Zoroastrianism Under the Achamenians

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Introduction: The religion of Zoroaster

Man in his spiritual quest has always longed for a higher being. Zoroaster was one of the first religious genius with an original mind who merged powerful logic with spiritual thinking. The great prophet of Zoroastrianism is considered to be the first theologian to have sought new answers to the problems that were developing on earth.

The Iranian society in which Zoroaster was born was semi-nomadic. The Asian steppes on which they lived has been compared to a sea of grass and the inhabitants considered themselves not as dominant over creation but as no more than a part (albeit a responsible one) of the chain of being. They developed a kinship with the cattle on which their lives depended and in tending them they evolved an orderly and mostly peaceful society.

Their chief form of worship was offered to a group of divinities called the Ahuras or Lords who were the ethical guardians of Asha. This concept embraced all the three spheres of life, the physical, moral and spiritual. Their late stone age culture was materially simple but had a religious tradition full of depth. This they shared with their Indo Aryan cousins, an offshoot of which developed slowly into Hinduism. But the great difference was that Zoroastrianism was essentially revealed by one man, Zoroaster.

Zoroaster was born into a time when life was getting hard. The old order was breaking down through the development of a disruptive militarism. An important element in the changes was the coming of the bronze age to the steppes, which led to the invention of the war-chariot and new weapons. Bands of chariot riders terrorized the people, killing herdsmen and stealing the cattle. The rule of Asha became imperiled by these godless greedy men who worshipped mainly the daevas rather than the ethical Ahuras. The victims were suffering and in distress, creating the classical situation for a prophet to arise to offer salvation through consolation and hope to the people. The revealed faith of Zoroaster was to become the oldest recorded faith of salvation.

Zoroaster developed his beliefs from the old polytheism of Iran. The greatest innovation he made in religious thought was to acknowledge Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom, the Wise Lord, as God, the divine creator, the only eternal being. Ahura Mazda is self-existing, wholly wise and wholly good. The expression Ahura Mazda also stresses the mental, and not the naturalistic, concept of God, and was therefore a complete innovation in the meaning of the idea of God. Fundamentally, Zoroaster's religion was the result of a conscious rebellion against the pre-existing polytheistic religion.

Under the Zoroastrian concept Ahura Mazda created the world and all that is in it, including man, who is good, but the world becomes a battleground where the good meets evil, the source of all corruption, misery and vice. The world has thus to strive towards victory, i.e. salvation from evil. This dualism was expressed in the Gathas as the opposition of the two principles of Asha and Druj, between which man has to choose.

Zoroaster also evoked a number of lesser divinities, who strive with Ahura Mazda, with different functions, to fulfil the single aim of salvation. These are the Amesha Spentas, the "beneficent immortals" who are described as a "spiritualization of the abstract notions of good thoughts and deeds, truth, desirable power, wholeness and immortality."

Zoroaster also believed in the justice of God. To address the injustices in society, he taught that man and woman can attain heaven by accepting his revelation and acting justly in accordance with the revelation.

These actions are judged on the third day of the death of a person when his or her good thoughts, words and deeds are weighed in balance against the bad. If the good actions are in the majority, the soul passes on to heaven. If the deeds weigh more heavily on the evil side, the soul plunges into the underworld, a place of punishment and retribution. Later, when the struggle against evil on earth is finally over, there will be a resurrection and a last judgment will take place when molten metal will form a burning river and the reincarnated souls, along with those then living, will pass in the flesh through the metal. The good will be saved by divine intervention and the wicked will perish together with all evil.

These are some of the fundamental doctrines included in the Gathas. Subsequently, another belief evolved that in the last battle the good will be led by a world savior, the Saoshyant, who will be born miraculously of a virgin mother.

The doctrines propounded in the Gathas gave mankind with a satisfying theology, providing a noble goal for living, along with specific rules for achieving that goal. This inherent religious strength enabled Zoroastrianism to survive without any secular or worldly support, and its adherents lived by the religion and showed themselves ready to endure persecution and death. After Zoroaster's death, his followers underwent a dark period.

When Zoroastrianism encountered writing, sometime around 8th century BC, its priests rejected the use of this foreign invention for their holy texts. These were a profoundly conservative class of hereditary priests who believed in the efficacy of the oral word as a union of sound and sense. All the forms of writing that they came across, from the cuneiform to the alphabet of the Aramaic, were not thought to be adequate to represent the sounds of the Indo-Iranian language. These languages were found to be unfitted for sacred purposes and the priests continued to rely on their trained and vast memories. Several centuries were to pass before an unknown genius invented, the language of Avesta, based on Aramaic, with an alphabet of 44 characters, carefully designed to render the sounds of the ancient holy tongue. It was still later that the whole Avesta, i.e. the scripture, was committed into writing, along with its Zand, i.e. its translation into the then colloquial, Middle Persian or Pahlavi.

Achemenian period

The main topic to be discussed in this paper is an examination of the ways in which the doctrines of Zoroaster were impacted during the Achemenian dynasty. An introductory word about them. Historical accounts tell us that Zoroastrianism evolved in northeastern Iran and moved west nearly 700 years after Zoroaster. There it influenced the Median tribes which had moved eastwards from the Zagros mountains. Of the five Median tribes, one was Magoi (Magi), who are believed to have been literate and provided the priesthood for the Medes and western Persians. They moved into the plains of Kermanshah and established contact with Zoroastrians.

In that same time period, Persians from southern Iran moved eastwards and overpowered a tribe known as the Elamites and became the rulers of the kingdom of Anshan near Fars (north of Shiraz). They ruled as the vassals of the Medians for a century, while Zoroastrianism progressed among the Medians and the Persians moving eastwards. The Achamenian era truly began with the successful rebellion in 558 BC by Cyrus the Great against his father in law Astyages, the ruler of the Medians. Under the Achamenians, the religion of Zoroaster joined forces with the secular world of the Persian empire. The inscriptions left by the Achamenians show a religion that through diffusion, adaptation and priestly elaborations developed syncretistically i.e. through the combination or reconciliation of differing religious beliefs or practices. The old traditions were creeping back into the religion and due to contact with other religious worlds that were alien to the Iranian traditions (the civilizations of Elam and Mesopotamia), new features were being incorporated. Although the religion of Zoroaster was a rebellion against the pre-existent polytheistic religion, some of the old deities from the mythological and naturistic era were readmitted into the practice of the religion. These were brought in in the form of the Yazatas and recognized as Amesha Spentas. While Ahura Mazda still remained the supreme God, the religion lost its concept of a true monotheism in the real sense. The cult of Anahita and Tiri were reintroduced, the latter becoming associated with the Indo-Iranian Tishtrya, a divinity associated with the bringing of rain.

We can trace the evidence of these later incorporations in the inscriptions left by the Achamenians. The ancestor of Cyrus, Aryaramnes, referred to Ahura Mazda as God on a tabernacle discovered in Hamadan in 1920. Aryaramnes inscribed thus: "The country which I possess was bestowed upon me by Ahura Mazda. By the grace of Ahura Mazda I am the monarch of this country. I pray that Ahura Mazda may help me." Similar inscriptions by Cyrus the Great and Darius I the Great, refer to their allegiance with Ahura Mazda. Darius I has said "I worshipped Ahura Mazda. I am the King by Grace of Ahura Mazda."

Even Xerxes, Darius' son, following his father's beliefs, praises Ahura Mazda and says "where previously Daivas were worshipped .. I destroyed Daivas and proclaimed that Daivas shall not be worshipped." During his military exploits Xerxes incorporated part of Egypt into his kingdom and on the western side marched into Greece. This brought in several foreign influences and Zoroastrian theologians had to make compromises to assimilate several non-Zoroastrian divinities. Thus, Artaxerxes II broke the tradition of exceptional praise to Ahura Mazda. At Persepolis he inscribed that "by the will of Ahura Mazda, Anahita and Mithra, I built this palace. May Ahura Mazda, Mithra and Anahita protect me from the evil." The cult of Mithra goes back before Zoroaster's time in Iran, but it is disputed whether Zoroaster accepted or denied Mithra. Yet, in contrast to his predecessors Cyrus and Darius, Artaxerxes II incorporated Mithra in the pantheon of deities, a long time after the birth of Zoroaster.

The dualism expressed in the Gathas is the opposition of two PRINCIPLES, Asa and Drug. This was simplistically transformed by the Achamenians into a straightforward opposition between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, or, Ormisd versus Ahriman. The God of Zoroaster is thus demoted to the same rank as the destroying spirit, and made his symmetrical opposite. This symmetry is found only in the historical sources from Achamenian times onwards.

A dualistic approach is also found in the religions of Babylonia and Assyria and this approach influenced Zurvanism, a sort of cult of Zoroastrianism or one based on Indo-Iranian religious thought. The theme is very characteristic in philosophical and religious thought in the Mediterranean in the last few centuries before the birth of Christ. This dualism became a characteristic feature of the Zurvanites. It has also been expressed in the first chapter of the Bundahisn which translates the Gathic passage in Yasna, XXX, para. 3-5, concerning the two opposing principles, as being the twin spirits of Ohrmazd and Ahriman. The same is done by the Pahlavi commentary to the passage in the Gathas.

It was later under Mani that Zurvanite dualism was greatly condemned. In fact Manicheans violently attacked those who claimed that Ormazd and Ahriman were two brothers or that God created both Good and Evil. Manichaeism also believed in a dualism of its own, but it at least placed man again at the center of salvation, redeeming Ormazd from the Zurvanite disgrace and made him the true redeeming God.

This new form of dualism must be considered to be a very important phenomenon because it did not leave untouched Zoroaster's teachings with regard to moral value and the dignity and freedom of man, and caused a great reversal. Thus, whereas, Gathic tradition gave the central place to Ahura Mazda, and therefore to man as the bodily symbol of Ahura Mazda on earth, the new approach gave the most important place to Time and Destiny. Destiny displaces the central concept of choice that requires man to choose between good and evil and be individually responsible. Destiny is a concept which provides the human soul with no escape.

Another change introduced during the Achamenian period concerned sacred buildings as places of worship. Gathic tradition does not recognize sacred buildings as Zoroastrians considered it wrong to keep God shut up in the walls the dwelling place of whom was the whole world. Regardless, the Achamenians erected temples for Anahita and other temples were constructed in which man made images were replaced by a sacred fire.²

It was also during Artaxerxes's time that the cult of the Yazatas became deeply rooted as a second pantheon of Zoroastrian divinities as part of an evolved religion. All these deities were honored and venerated with a special day of dedication in the Zoroastrian calendar.

There were several other difference that were also introduced during the Achamenian period. Take the case of the symbol that we recognize as the Fravashi- the divine essence of the creator. This is also a concept that is alien to the Gathas. Later in the younger Avesta we come across the concept of Khvarenah - Divine Grace or Divine Fortune. This comes from a Median term Farnah which means "having the radiance of." When Darius conquered Egypt, the Egyptian symbol of Sun God, their divine grace, became accepted in Iranian culture. The Achamenian monarchs were considered to possess the divine grace. The male figure in the Fravashi has been interpreted as being the farvsashi of the monarchs holding the ring as a symbol of power and prosperity through divinity.

Reference has also been made to the fact that the name of Zoroaster is nowhere mentioned on Achamenian inscriptions. This indicates that Gathic teaching, while supported in principle, was becoming diluted by pre-Zoroastrian Indo-Iranian thoughts as well as the influence of Babylonia and Egypt. But it has also been argued that the inscriptions are secular writings as evidenced by the fact that even in Sassanian times when Zoroastrianism became a state religion their inscriptions do not refer to Zoroaster.

The foundation and consolidation of the Persian Empire brought the control of religious policy into the hands of the Achamenian Kings. In order to justify the authority of the Great King in the various lands that had been conquered, he was made into a King with divine authority. Just as Ahura Mazda is the greatest of the Gods, the Great King became the King of Kings.

The King claimed to have a special relationship with the supreme God. He was King by virtue of God's will. Having conquered foreign lands, Iranian interpretations of the gods of other peoples were introduced, thus allowing for the syncretistic influence on Zoroastrianism. It is a paradox that while these Zoroastrian rulers would not impose their religious beliefs on the peoples they had captured, those very peoples were to change Zoroastrianism drastically.

The sovereignty of the King became protected by the divine triad of Ahuramazda, Anahita and Mithra in reflection of Babylonian and Assyrian beliefs and concepts. At Persepolis, these dieties were celebrated at the great New Year feast. Complicated court ceremonies made the Great King an inaccessible figure and the public had to pay divine homage by way of prostration before the King.

The reasons for the changes introduced by the Achamenians are more complex than just the religious and political that I have described. This was a period of great transition and adaption to new developments. The tribal organization gave way to a unitarian state that was soon to become a worldwide monarchy. This was the greatest empire known to man then, founded by a military aristocracy which ended up governing from the Nile to the Indus to the Aegean, a vast number of people of various cultures and beliefs, cultures which like them were also hundreds and thousands of years old.

Trade and commerce was increasing, new administrative structures created. Long journeys were undertaken by the Persians which involved lengthy stays in various satrapies. All these factors provided the basis for the very profound religious and cultural changes that were introduced into Zoroastrianism by the Achamenians.

Foot Notes:

1 The paper was presented in September 1996 during the series of adult discussion classes held by the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Washington (ZAMWI) at the Mobed's Residence in Vienna, Virginia. The topics were developed by Mr. Adi Davar, the Director of adult religious programs for ZAMWI. The views expressed are those of the author alone and were developed from publications included in the reading list for the classes.

2 During a recent visit to Iran, the author visited the ruins of a temple dedicated to Anahita located in Kangavar.