

Zoroaster

The Prophet of Ancient Iran and His Book, ZEnd'Avesta

To present the subject of this ancient faith in a brief form is most difficult. There are too many controversial opinions concerning the time when this Prophet appeared in Iran. European scholars place him all the way from six thousand three hundred and fifty (6350 B.C.) to two thousand (2000) B.C. and as late as 1300-1000 B.C. (see Bunsen, Spiegel, Max Muller, Rapp (1865) and others). Aristotle and Eudoxus, according to Pliny place him 6000 years prior to the death of Plato. Other ancient and later writers speak of his place of origin which as Bactria, at that time an independent monarchy. They speak of him as a contemporary of King Vistacpa. Plato says that he belonged to the Country of the Medes in West Iran, while Duncker gives proofs that the Prophet and his Book have originated in Bactria. The period of King Vistacpa, supposed to be the Persian King Gushtasp, however, contradicts the other dates mentioned above. Those who place him several thousand years B.C. assert that he belonged to the Aryan race supposed to have had its origin in Central Asia, and which due to diversity of opinions migrated to lands further West (Iran) and to the South (India). The Aryans remaining in India became the Ancient Brahmans the founders of the Vaidic Age. Their Prophets revealed the Rîg-Veda followed by commentaries by the priest-hood who introduced the worship of many Gods and beliefs in the Reincarnation and the Works containing such interpretations are the three Vedas which followed the original teachings of true Brahman Prophets as revealed in the Rig-Veda.

The other branch of the Aryans who are supposed to have migrated to Iran in the West were the ancestors of Zoroaster.

Other writers on the subject place the origin of the Aryans in Iran and assert that they were nature worshipers and believers in many Gods, with the exception of a large section who believed in one God as taught by Zoroaster. They add that the schism they created caused the migration of the former to India while the latter who followed the pure religion of Zoroaster remained in Iran. These went under the name Mazdayasnians (monotheists). The origin and birth of Zoroaster is related by one writer as follows; about 3,500 years ago at Rayy (near the present capital, Teheran) there lived a holy man by name Pourushaspa whose wife was Dogdho. The ninth chapter of the Yacna (part of Zoroasterian sacred writings) relates that he prepared a religious ceremony as a thanks offering to God and prayed for the gift of a child. His prayer was answered and the male child named Zarathustra was born with the mission to destroy evil and establish the good in the land. Then the father prayed, "O Maker of the material world, to what greatness can this evil destroying teaching of Zoroaster be compared?" The answer came, "As high as Heaven is above the Earth, so high above all other utterance the law of Mazdeism".

Zoroaster preached the Eternal or absolute Being which he called Zerana-Akerova, the invisible Essence whose manifestation was Ahura-Mazda, King of Lights. The enemy of Ahura was Ahriman or Angra Mainus, King of Darkness. Ormazd, the Manifestation, was to destroy Ahriman by creating the visible world.

He first created the Frevashi, the divine intelligences or souls. These were the basis and reason for existence. On the earth he created the Lofty Albordj (Albordj, the mountain chain in the north of Iran), From its summit (the damavand over 19,000 feet high), the chinvat bridge extends to heaven and beneath is Buzahk (the monstrous gulf, the home of Ahriman), beneath the earth. To defeat Ahriman, he created the sun, moon and stars and the Gallaxies. The space between heaven and earth, he divided into three giving each to one of the three. The sun, the moon, and the stars led the hosts of the starry Heavens against Ahriman.

Ahriman prepared for battle against them, and Ormazd, knowing of the final defeat of the hosts of darkness, offered Ahriman peace for the time being.

Ormazd and the Fravashis (holy men and divine souls) terrified Ahriman. the letter was at last defeated by Ormazd's "strong word"- and laid him in chains.

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The record continues the story which leads to completing the creation by Ormazd. The waters were the cause of mists which formed the clouds, which caused the rain to water the seas, and each element and plane was placed in charge of the Divine Souls. These highly revered Mithra (the sun, who was the god of fruitification and reproduction and led the Holy Souls to their stations. The latter of whom the leader was Ormazd were, with him, seven beings. Each was a King or Queen of the various parts and planes of creation, as the metals, vegetables, waters, etc, etc.

Meanwhile, Ahriman was busy preparing his Hosts to oppose the above Souls. He reached Heaven, but his followers remained behind. Thus he fell down upon the earth in the form of a serpent and entered everything he found, but men of good deeds who served Ormazd defeated him after ninety days and ninety nights, and drove him back into the abyss of Dozehk (Hell). But he returned and entered the Bull to test men and misled them, but the Bull died and Kiaumarth (the first man) according to Zoroastrian story of Genesis, came from his right shoulder, and Goshirin, the guardian spirit of the animal race,

came from his left shoulder. Kayumarth was both man and woman, who produced children after they came from the fallen Bull; and these were to remain in Hell until the Day of Resurrection. However, men stand between the two worlds of light and darkness, left to their own free will. As creatures of Ormazd, men are protected but are tempted night and day by Ahriman. Ormazd took pity on men and sent a revelation of his Will to men in the Law of Zoroaster. If man obeys, he is saved. That Law is - "think purely, speak purely, act purely". And bodily purity has a like worth with moral purity.

The Fravishis (Holy Great Souls) are kept in Heaven in Ormazd's realm of light, but those spirits must descend to be united with human bodies and be led to the "way of two destinies". One, by obeying, they cross the chinvad bridge, and by disobeying, they fall in the abyss. But some are redeemed by prayer and intercession, and some remain there until the Day of Resurrection.

In the end, God will send his Prophet, Sociosh who saves all, and his advent will be followed by the General Resurrection.

Ahriman's comet will then fall, and conflagration will change the earth into a river of melted iron which will pour into the realm of Ahriman. To the righteous, it will feel like warm milk and they will pass through it to the dwelling of the just. But all sinners are borne away to Hell. There, they will burn three days and three nights, and then being purified, Ormazd will receive into Heaven. All others, too, will be purified by this fire, all evil will be consumed and all darkness will be banished. There will at last emerge from that fire a more beautiful earth, pure and perfect, and destined to be eternal.

In comparing Zoroaster and his Faith with Brahmanism and the Vedas, there are many points in contrast. For example, all the gods of Brahmanism are the demons and evil spirits of Zoroastrianism. This reform movement in Iran replaced the ancient Magian worship of stars and phenomena of nature, in the same way that Buddhism in India reformed the worship of many gods amongst the followers of the Brahmans.

In the Zoroastrian records, the Zend-Avesta is the oldest part. Then in later times come the sacred records called the Vendidad, the Bundshish and other traditional words. The Zend-Avesta means the Avesta and its footnotes, or commentaries, written in the Zend language, which was a later development of the Aryan language.

When in the second century A. D. Ardashir conquered Parthia (one of the petty kingdoms to which Alexander had reduced the Persian Empire 500 years before) and founded the Sasanian Empire, he and his successors organized a body of Priests and Scholars to search and study all the religious writings which were found in the hand of the nation. For Alexander who conquered Persia in the fourth century B. C., had set fire to all the libraries and consumed the sacred writings of the Persians, while preserving and sending into Greece all the scientific and philosophical works of the Persians.

After many years of research, the Persian Savants found only one and one-half of the original twenty-one chapters of the Avesta, the Book of Zoroaster. All other records consisted of prayers to stars, rivers, fire, the sun, etc., composed by the priesthood during the previous five hundred years. Thus, the new religious culture was based upon the one and one-half chapters remaining of the Avesta mentioned above.

That fragment, however, contained essential rules for human conduct, besides a record of Creation and Genesis, not unlike such records in other Religions. Most important of all, was the prophecies by Zoroaster regarding future Prophets, especially the final Universal Resurrection. One prophecy speaks of the coming of Islam or the Arab Faith, whose prophet would speak with eloquence in words so involved that they would be interpreted differently so that they would lead to the appearance of many sects and divisions in his Faith. Then Zoroaster adds, that about 1260 years (1844 A. D.) after the Arab Prophet, Ushidar-Mah (the great Door of Knowledge, etc.) will appear, followed by Shah Behren (an Ancient Persian King) or Sosioch, who is to come at the end of all things to bring about the Resurrection and establish the Kingdom and untroubled happiness (See Spiegel, Vendidad, Chpt. "I", note.)

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Many people have misjudged the faith of Zoroaster, as teaching two gods, one, the good, and one, the evil. This is as untrue as it would be if applied to Christianity, Islam or any other Faith, which has taught the oneness of God, but also spoken of the Tempter, be it the devil, Lucifer or Satan. The eternal battle between truth and falsehood and Light and Darkness is a record of Man's search after truth and goodness and of the tests and temptations which have at times retarded his progress towards the knowledge of the True God.

Similarly, many have made the mistake of calling the Faith of Zoroaster as one which teaches the worship of fire, the sun, moon, the elements and the phenomena of nature. Reverence for these is common to all the ancient pagan creeds which we Baha'is believe to be branches of the most ancient religion called Sabeanism. For those branches, be they the Druids, the worship by the Norsemen of Thor, the ancient Greeks, Egyptians, Romans, Indians, Chinese, and the early Magians of Iran all belong to a once Universal Faith called Sabeanism.

These features which those peoples worshipped as gods, were symbols of the numerous names and attributes of the One God and it was in that sense that they were revered by Zoroaster.

As for the different ancient and modern writers' disagreement as to the time that Zoroaster lived and taught, this is explained by the fact that the title Zoroaster, or Light Bringer, was borne by every Prophet who appeared in Iran in various ages.

But the author of the Avesta, the Zoroaster with whom we are dealing, appeared 3000 years ago, or 3000 years before the rise of the Bab. We Baha'is base this conclusion on a prophecy by Zoroaster concerning four equal sections of 12,000 years. He takes the last two sections, namely the last 6000 years, and states that the pure God (Ormazd) sent him as the middle of the road Prophet, that is, he rose 3000 years before the coming of the Universal Manifestation whose fore-runner, the Bab, appeared in 1844. Dr. Adolf Rapp, (1865) in his book, figures the date of Zoroaster to have been about 1200 B. C. But the late Dr. James Breasted, head of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, who for many years conducted excavations in the Near East and especially Persepolis, in southern Persia, confirms the date of Zoroaster to have been 1000 B. C.

Another point which needs explaining is the assumption by ancient and modern writers, that Zoroaster and Abraham were the same person. This is because the name of our Zoroaster was Apram which is similar to Abraham. But Apram is an Aryan name, while Abraham is Semitic or Chaldo-Assyrian. As for their additional proof that the story of fire is recorded in case of them both, -This is quite far-fetched. For Nimrod's fire which Abraham turned into a garden, was the fire of opposition to his mission and belief in one God. He overcame this fire, and the flowers of the garden were his many followers. The fire of Zoroaster, however, was the symbol of the love of God, which consumes all infidelity, and united men in fellowship and brotherhood.

Furthermore, the Koran speaking of Heavenly Books refers to Abraham's "Epistles" we conclude that the Abraham in the Koran was the Arabicized form of Apram, the author of the Avesta.

Another point:-Ancient and later historians, place Zoroaster in Balkh, in the province of Khorasan of ancient Bactria. He may have traveled to those parts, but the Parsi records place him in Atrapatan, the ancient name of the present northwestern province of Iran, i.e., Azerbaijani (Azer, i.e., fire Bayjan, i.e., the place of). There existed one of the great fire temples of which there many, including the one in Baku in the Caucasus, where the fire, as a symbol of the love of God, was kept perpetually. It now appears that the seepage of petroleum which was then unknown was feeding those flames.

The Mohammedans do not consider Zoroaster a Prophet; and they assert that no mention of his name is found in the Koran. We Baha'is, however, believe the contrary. In addition to reference, in the Koran, to "Epistles" of Zoroaster, there is mentioned of the "people or followers of Ras". This refers to river Aras in Persian Azerbaijan which forms the present frontier between Iran and Armenia and the Caucasus, wrested from Iran by Russia over one hundred years ago.

When in the seventh century, Islam conquered Iran the followers of Zoroaster, or Parsis (as they are now called) who did not accept Islam sailed for India, and formed the present flourishing community of Parsis, both in India and Iran, who although small in numbers are renowned for uprightness and purity as citizens, and men. Many amongst them have accepted the Baha'i faith which to them, as to all seekers in other religions, is the fulfillment of the prophecy of their ancient Prophet.

We conclude this sketch by quoting a few teachings of Zoroaster:-

Ahura-Mazda, the all-knowing lord teaches:

1. of the life on the earth
2. of the life hereafter
3. of immortality of the Soul and the Resurrection

"I am the Keeper: I am the Creator, and the Sustainer: I am the most beneficent spirit."

"The Creator, Ahura-Mazda, the brilliant, the majestic, the greatest, the best, the most beautiful."

"Who created us, who formed us, who keeps us, the holiest among the heavenly."

The true spirit of Zoroaster's ideal of God is well depicted by the English poet, Milton, who says:-

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"Unspeaking, who sitst above these heavens,
To us invisible or dimly seen
In these Thy lowest works, yet these declare
Thy goodness beyond thought, and power divine."

By Ali-Kuli-Khan, N.D.

Beverly, Mass.

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Written by request of a beloved Bahá'í Friend and delivered at the Bahá'í Center in Hamilton, Mass., on the evening of Aug. 30/45. Set aside for the study of different religions.