

## The House of Lie and the House of Song -- Zoroastrian Influence in the West

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*A mural in the Chihil Sutun, Isfahan, Iran, depicts the good life from a Persian viewpoint*

The first person to represent the wisdom of the East in Europe was a Persian prophet and priest, Zarathushtra, better known under the Greek form of his name, Zoroaster, who lived in the western part of the great plateau which stretches from the Indus valley to the valley of the Tigris in Mesopotamia. About the middle of the second millennium the Aryans first entered it and proceeded in two sections, one into northwest India, the other into western Asia, with a third group subsequently settling permanently in Iran, and giving their name of Airyana (Iran) to the country. It was among them that the great reforming movement initiated by Zarathushtra was destined to arise, probably about 650-600 B.C.

In India, where an elaborate polytheism of nature gods was established among the Aryan-speaking peoples, the good gods were called devas ("shining ones") and the demons asuras (lords). In Iran this was reversed. The daevas became evil spirits, while the asuras (written as Ahuras) were the real Iranian deities, together with Mithra, the god of light and of war. Haoma, and Ahura Mazda, the all-knowing and all-encompassing sky, who personified the moral order, became a principal object of worship closely associated with the intoxicating beverage haoma, sacrificially crushed and sacramentally drunk to gain inspiration, health and power, though today it is consumed by the priest alone.

### **Zarathushtra**

Such were the divine beings and their cults when Zarathushtra began his reform, convinced that he was the messenger of Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord and only God. He repudiated all the Vedic Iranian gods and their mythologies, the sacrificial offerings and the drinking of the sacred haoma, and subordinated to

Ahura Mazda the ahuras and the daevas in the universal struggle between good and evil.

Our information about his teaching, life and work comes chiefly from the collection of hymns known as the Gathas, contained in the first and oldest part of the Avesta, the Zoroastrian scriptures, which were compiled, if not by Zarathushtra himself, at least probably by some of his contemporaries. From these metrical chants, written in an older dialect and different meter than the rest of the Avesta, it would seem that the seer's mission was to rally mankind to engage in a relentless conflict against the forces of evil, personified as daevas, and to abandon the worship of all the older deities in favor of that of the one and only Supreme Wise Lord, Ahura Mazda, known later as Ormuzd.

In many respects Ahura Mazda is akin to the Indian Varuna, the All-knowing One, with whom in origin probably he is identical. It was Zarathushtra, however, who represented him as the universal creator and sustainer of the good and the right, with subordinate divine beings created by him, or personified attributes to him, such as Good Thought, righteousness (the best order), dominion, prosperity, right thinking and piety, and immortality, together with Spenta Mainyu, the holy and beneficent Spirit who is in perpetual conflict with Angra Mainyu, the Lie or evil primeval Spirit, also called the Druj. These twin Spirits, the one good and the other evil, are not actually said to have been created by Ahura Mazda, though they meet in him.

They existed before the world was called into being, but they have exercised their respective functions in relation to each other only since the earth became the battleground of the two opposed forces. "Never shall our minds harmonize, nor our doctrines" declared Spenta Mainyu at the first beginning of life, according to the Gathas, "neither our aspirations, nor yet our beliefs; neither our words, nor yet our deeds; neither our heart, nor yet our souls" (Yasna, 45, 22).

### **Good and evil**

This interpretation of the age-long struggle between good and evil represents the first attempt in the history of religion to grapple with the problem in terms of ethical monotheism. Although the solution offered by Zarathushtra rapidly developed into a definite dualism, as it is stated in the Gathas, Ahura Mazda alone exists as the all-wise, good and beneficent Creator—the King of Righteousness. How the two primeval principles of good and evil came into existence is not explained, any more than it is in the Christian gospels. That they are in perpetual conflict cannot be denied.

The universe, however, being the creation of the one and only good God, the physical and moral orders derive from his righteous will. Therefore, the dualism is not ultimate. The twin spirits were not thought to exist independently of Ahura, and in the end the good must prevail over evil. As the daevas were the offspring of Angra Mainyu and endeavored to mislead man through evil thought, evil word and evil deed, so it is man's highest duty and mission to resist these lures and destroy the powers of evil by choosing aright, since in creating man Ahura Mazda gave him freedom of action as a moral being.

Through Good Thought and the power of the Good Spirit he commends the right and gives divine assistance in its fulfillment, but it is left to each individual to shape his own course. The situation is summed up in the Gathas in these words:

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The two primeval spirits who revealed themselves in vision as twins, are the Better and the Bad in thought and word and action. And between these two the wise ones chose aright, the foolish not so" (Yasna, 30).

END INDENT

By their right choice those who obey the law of Ahura help in the final victory of the Good Spirit of the Wise Lord over the Lie (Druj, or Angra Mainyu). They must always speak the truth, repudiate the nomadic life, till the soil, cultivate grain, grow fruits, treat kindly domestic animals and irrigate barren ground, for "he that is no husbandman has no part in the good message" (Yasna, 31, 10).

This identification of agriculture with the good life arose from the fact that the worshippers of Ahura Mazda were settled cattle-farmers keeping at bay the marauding nomads of the north, the furanians, who were regarded as followers of the forces of evil intent on capturing cattle for their sacrifices to the daevas. It was against them that Zarathushtra fought in his holy wars, and it was a result of his victory over them that the new faith was established on a firm foundation. He is, indeed, said to have lost his life when the Turanians stormed Balkh and destroyed the Zoroastrian temple Nush Azar in which he was officiating at the fire-altar. Whether or not this holy war was the occasion and manner of his death, the movement initiated by him survived him, but it soon lost its fundamental monotheism and strictly ethical character.

### **Eschatology**

Zarathushtra steadfastly maintained that in the end evil will be destroyed and good will prevail. Thus, in his doctrine of "the last things," which constitutes the first systematized eschatology in the history of religion and which was destined to have a far-reaching influence on the apocalyptic speculations of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, he taught that at the end of the world there would be a general resurrection. Then the forces of good and evil would undergo a fiery test in molten metal, and although whether or not Angra Mainyu and all his followers would be destroyed by this ordeal is not very clearly stated, a golden age of order will be proclaimed as a result of the Judgment and the setting up of the kingdom of Ahura Mazda. In this renovated world, either on earth or in the spiritual order, only the good will have a place, and their final reward will be conditioned by the choices they have made in this life.

In addition to this "Great Consummation" when the present cycle of the world would be completed and a new cycle free from all evil would begin, an individual judgment immediately after death was also predicted. Every man being responsible for the deeds done in the flesh, he would be required to give an account of his actions at the last and his fate determined accordingly. By persevering in well-doing and following the good thoughts, the good deeds and the good words revealed by Zarathushtra, he acquired merit which was transferred to his heavenly account and would render him solvent at the Day of Judgment.

If he could show a credit balance of merits, and thereby atone for his evil deeds, on the fourth day after he would have a safe passage across the chinvat bridge which separates this world from the next life. Below it lies a molten lake into which those were destined to fall to their doom whose evil works predominated and so upset their balance on this perilous bridge as narrow as the edge of a razor. Righteous souls, on the other hand, who had followed the precepts of the prophet, easily went over and entered heaven, while, according to later eschatology, those whose good and evil deeds were more or less equal passed to an intermediate state or limbo, located between earth and the stars, till the final Judgment.

This doctrine of the last things is based on the principle that man works out his own salvation. Whatsoever is sown in this life is reaped hereafter, "evil for evil, good reward for the good, affliction to the wicked, happiness to the righteous. Woe to the wicked, salvation to him who upholds righteousness." No mediator or intercessor could determine the issue any more than prayers or sacrifices could avail to alter the strict justice of the procedure.

The fate of all human beings was decided by their own deeds once and for all in a clear-cut manner at the Judgment of Ahura Mazda by an ordeal by fire, and the crossing of the bridge called that of "the separator" (chin vat) because it divided those destined for the "House of the Lie" from those to be admitted to paradise, the "House of the Song," the best existence.

In the later Avesta the eschatology of the founder was elaborated as rite primeval twin spirits came to be regarded as two opposed gods. Ahura Mazda, who was now called Ormuzd, was represented as having created the good, and Angra Mainyu, or Ahriman as he was designated, all that was evil, set over against each other in dualistic fashion. Unlike the devil of Jewish, Christian and Muslim tradition, Ahriman was represented as the actual creator of the daevas under his control, together with noxious creatures and serpents, wolves, ants, locusts and men of diabolical character, witchcraft, black magic and disease. This conception of a dual creation governed by two deities, each independent of the other, with their respective hostile armies of supernatural beings and equipment, made the devil (Ahriman) co-equal and co-eternal with God (Ahura Mazda).

Indeed, in one of the later Avestan writings, Ahura is represented as explaining to Zarathushtra how Angra Mainyu (Ahriman) upset all his plans for making Persia a terrestrial paradise by introducing the bitter frost in winter, the excessive heat in summer, and all the ills which the Iranians had to endure, including, in addition to death, the 99,999 diseases he had maliciously created!

In one of the later writings, the Bundahish, or "original creation," belonging probably to the ninth century AD., a theory of world ages was set forth which in idea went back to the fifth century B.C. The whole of time, which was represented as having a duration of twelve thousand years, was divided into four periods each of three thousand years. In the first of these the ancestral spirits, who became the guardian genii of men and spirits, held sway. During the next three thousand years Primeval Man and a primeval ox arose. In the third period the forces of evil became predominant and the progenitors of mankind were created, from whom the founders of the Iranian dynasty were descended.

The fourth and last age, inaugurated by the founding of Zoroastrianism, has yet to reach its consummation.

Zarathushtra was to be succeeded by three "saviors," each appearing at intervals of a thousand years, the last of whom, the Saoshyant or Messiah, supernaturally born of a pure virgin of the seed of Zarathushtra preserved for the purpose in a lake, would usher in the glorious new world order. The dead would then be raised and at the final Judgment the righteous would be separated from the wicked as a prelude to the

pouring forth of molten metal on the earth and in hell. To the righteous it would be soothing like "warm milk," but to the wicked it would be agonizing torment burning away all the evil they had contracted. Ahriman and his demons would be cast into the flames to be consumed, or else they would be driven into outer darkness to be hidden away or destroyed at the last. A new heaven and a new earth would be created in which righteousness, joy and peace would prevail for ever, and Ahura Mazda become all in all.

### **The Parsis**

Although the influence which Zoroastrianism, and its later dualistic development called Mazdaeism, exercised on Judaism, Islam and indirectly on Christianity, was considerable, only a remnant of the great movement inaugurated by Zarathushtra survived in Iran after the Muslim conquest in the seventh century AD. In Persia the faithful few became known as the Gabars, or "infidels," because they refused to accept the claims of the Prophet Muhammad, and long persecution has reduced them to less than ten thousand today. But small though they are numerically, they have tenaciously practiced their ancient faith throughout the ages in their fire-temples, purified of many of its later dualistic and magical accretions.

The rest made their way into India in the seventh and eighth centuries where they became known as Parsis (i.e. "people of Pass," or ancient Persia). There they settled under less strenuous conditions, mainly in Bombay, and soon became a prosperous and wealthy community, numbering today about 50,000, with about the same number scattered throughout India, together with a few isolated groups in London and other commercial centers all over the world.

### **Zoroastrianism and Judaism**

That Zoroastrianism deeply influenced post-exilic Judaism is not surprising, when it is remembered that it was after the conquest of Babylon by Cyrus the Great in 538 B.C. that permission was given to the captive Israelites to return to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple. The returned exiles, however, remained under Persian rule just as did the vast majority of the Jews who stayed on in Mesopotamia. It was about this time that Zoroastrianism was beginning to make its influence felt in the Iranian Empire, though it was not until some two hundred years later that it was very apparent in Judaism, after Alexander the Great had conquered Persia in 331 B.C., and subsequently established his rule over Palestine. Syria then became part of the western section of the Macedonian Empire governed by Ptolemy, who had been one of Alexander's generals.

It was at this time that a new type of Jewish literature, known as apocalyptic, began to emerge showing unmistakable traces of the principal doctrines of Zoroastrianism concerning heaven and hell, judgment after death and at the end of the world, an angelic hierarchy, a dualism of good and evil under two opposed forces with their respective leaders, Michael and Satan, together with a Messianic kingdom in which righteousness would prevail. Alexander, it is true, showed scant regard for the Zoroastrian movement, which he associated with the Achaemenid dynasty he had defeated.

Nevertheless, its eschatological doctrines had made sufficient impression on current thought in the Persian world (which included Jewry) that by the second century B.C. it had become an established feature in the new Jewish apocalyptic writings, such as the book of Daniel in the canonical scriptures of the Old Testament, and the extracanonical book of Enoch and the Testaments of the Twelve Patriarchs.