

Zoroastrianism Lecture II

The records of early Zoroastrianism are tantalizingly incomplete. We know nothing for certain of the growth and spread of this religion through the Zagros Mountains and the plateau of Iran. When the faith emerges into the light of history, it is the official religion of the Persian Empire under the Achaemenian dynasty. (To give you some idea of the time span of Zoroastrianism, this dynasty was destroyed during the invasion of Persia by Alexander the Great ca. 335-333 B.C. All the development discussed on the following pages took place before this date.) In the fate of this dynasty and its religion we can see the influence of politics upon the fate of religions. If the Persians had been successful in their attempts to conquer Greece it is possible that the religion of Zoroaster would have established itself as the major religion of the Western world.

But the religion of the Achaemenian monarchs differed in important aspects from that promulgated by Zoroaster himself.

1. Zoroaster became an object of worship, his life punctuated by supernatural occasions. For instance: the glory of Ahura Mazda united itself to the prophet's mother, thereby making her fit to bear the prophet; a divinely protected stem of a haoma plant was infused with the ideal self of the prophet, at the proper time the parents of Zoroaster drank the juice of this stem mixed with milk which contained the material substance of the coming prophet. And so forth. His adult life was covered with legends of the same sort: his initial entrance into the palace of King Vishtapa was through the roof, which opened of itself to admit him and during this somewhat unusual entrance, he played with a cube of fire without hurting himself.

2. The initial uncompromising monotheism of Zoroaster was modified by an adoption into his religion of elements of the old Aryan nature worship. While Ahura Mazda was always held to be too great for images of wood or stone to be made of him, he was given a multitude of helpers difficult to distinguish from subordinate gods. Various angels and named attributes of Ahura Mazda were separated from him and given personality and function as independent, although subordinate, gods. Thus Vohu Manu (Good thought) became the guardian god of cattle, Asha (Right) became the fire god, and Kshathra (Dominion) the god of metals. Other attributes of the one god with feminine names became goddesses or feminine archangels: Armaiti (Piety) was goddess of the soil, Haurvatat (Prosperity) goddess of water and Ameretat (Immortality) goddess of vegetation.

Some of the older Aryan gods also reasserted themselves, technically as subordinates of Ahura Mazda. In the religion of

the common people they assumed rank equal to or greater than his. In particular, Mithra the sun god, became the provider of light and the rewarder of those who spoke truth and kept faith and one who guarded his followers from harm in this world and the next. Worship was also offered to Vayu, the wind god and to the Ushas, dawn goddesses. There are references in the later Avesta to Ahura Mazda himself offering sacrifice to Mithra. Thus technical monotheism was strained to the limit, and perhaps beyond, by a syncretistic mix of the old and new religions.

One important goddess, Anahita, was borrowed from the Babylonian, non-Aryan peoples conquered by the Persians. She is another name for the persistent goddess Ishtar. She is the goddess of the waters of heaven let down to enable the fruitfulness of earth. She also is responsible for the increase of vegetation, flocks and herds.

Also brought back into religious use, although in modified form, was the important intoxicant and hallucinogenic Haoma. Animal sacrifices were offered to Zoroaster himself.

3. The development of the idea of the "fravashis." Originally ancestral spirits, the word came to signify the immortal and spiritual part of all living beings, including angels and gods. As the fravashis exist before birth and after death they also function as ideal selves whose role is to pull people heavenward and away from physical and spiritual danger on this earth. In other words, they are embodiments of the unique perfection possible to different individuals. In return for their work in salvation they were offered prayers and sacrifices and so took their places in the increasingly complex spiritual world of Zoroastrianism.

I do not know what sparked this return to practical polytheism from the strong monotheism represented by Zoroaster himself. I can only observe that Zoroastrianism was an originally prophetic religion which was fostered by priests and kings. While the Hebrews had a series of great prophets during the Old Testament period and of great scholars in more modern times and Christianity is constantly being reworked by saints and scholars, Zoroastrianism had only one significant prophet. It may be that religions which do not experience periodic renewal of their original insights are bound to suffer this sort of relapse.

4. The temporal ethical dualism of Zoroaster was sharpened almost to a complete and eternal ethical dualism. Alongside the elaboration of gods mentioned above came the elaboration and individuation of evil forces. Angra Mainyu was pictured as co-creator of the world with Ahura Mazda so that for every good the latter created there was a matching evil created by the former.

Thus for winter Angra Mainyu made the killing frosts, for human wealth the unfeeling and wicked rich, for religious piety disbelief and so forth. Thus the whole world was perceived as a field of warfare between good and evil, with evil so powerful that a late Zoroastrian source declares, " Had not the awful Fravashis of the faithful given help unto me (Ahura Mazda) ... dominion would belong to the Druj, the material world would belong to the Druj." Here Druj is a female demon, technically her name means "the lie", and her purpose is to destroy righteousness among human beings. This emphasis on the numerousness of evil demons and upon their power tended to present them as co-eternal with the good.

5. Emphasis shifted from quality of moral life to ceremonial impurity. The intent of the demons was to fasten ceremonial impurity upon people to break their ability to communicate with Ahura Mazda and his attendants. Thus later Zoroastrian works, particularly one called the Vendidad, do not provide ethical instruction but directions for aversive magic, the use of passages of the Gathas as powerful spells to ward off the pollution of evil.

The current attitude of Parsees to dead bodies is a remnant and example of this focus on ritual impurity.

6. Finally, the doctrine of after life and judgement beyond death is elaborated in greater and greater detail. With this was developed a highly elaborate mythology concerning the end of the world, including the concept of three messianic saviors, born of virgins through the magical intervention of Zoroaster .