
Zoroastrianism: The Iranian Roots of Christianity?

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To readers other than scholars of Iranian religion this material may be new, but the issue of Zoroastrian influence on Biblical religions is itself far from new. Matthew Black, John Bright, Harold Henry Rowley, William David Davies, Walther Eichrodt, Reginald H. Fuller, Theodore Gaster, E. O. James, and Helmer Ringgren all recognized it. Parallels between the Jewish and Christian Messiah and the Zoroastrian Sošyans were noted in 1906 by Lawrence Mills and in 1926 by Hubertus Von Gall. George Carter wrote a monograph on Zoroastrian influence in 1918. It was a common theme of the *Religionsgeschichtliche Schule*, who suggested a thoroughgoing influence on Jewish and Christian apocalypticism, messianism, and eschatology. Finkelstein and Manson in 1929 and 1938 suggested that “Pharisee” derives from a Pahlavi rather than a Hebrew root, and thus means “Persian” or “Persianizer.” That has not been decided and seems to have been forgotten. The whole question has gone into eclipse, despite excellent articles in the *Anchor Bible Dictionary*, in collections on Ancient Religions (e.g., Johnston 2004), and the publications of the Irano-Judaica conferences, despite widespread recognition of Iranian influence on the concept of Satan and on demonology, the question of its wider influence on eschatology is seldom raised in Biblical studies. What are the reasons behind this? Has the issue been settled? Has the inability to establish indubitable Persian influence proven that such influence is negligible or non-existent?

Two basic preconditions must be fulfilled before influence from one religion to another can be assessed properly. First, the priority in time for a particular idea in one of the religions; second, the possibility of religious and cultural contacts between the religions involved (Hultgård 1998, 79). There are many reasons why it is *difficult* to establish such preconditions, but it is not impossible. The most obvious difficulty is that of dating Zoroastrian materials. The tradition remained oral until the development, sometime between the fourth and sixth centuries CE of the Avestan script. The script was created to record the sacred traditions known as the Avesta recited in Zoroastrian liturgies. John Hinnells explains that the oral Avesta “was of enormous proportions, and, to help laymen understand its teachings, the priests made summaries and compiled selections in Pahlavi” (48). Pahlavi succeeded the Avestan language by the third century BCE. The surviving Avesta is a heterogeneous body of texts in which the *Gāthās* (hymns attributed to Zarathuštra) together with the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*, the *Ahuna Vairya*, and the *Airyaman Išya* constitute all that has survived in Old Avestan, the language likely to have been spoken in the days of Zarathuštra. Linguistic evidence suggests a date around 1000 BCE or even earlier for these Old Avestan texts. The other parts form the Younger Avesta, of later origin. The manuscript tradition of these texts

is very late, the oldest manuscript being from the thirteenth century CE.

The reliability of oral tradition in preserving such ancient material as the Hindu *Ṛg Veda* from around 1,200 BCE is seldom seriously questioned but the similar antiquity of the Avestan materials is not widely accepted. It is true, as Mary Boyce says, that absolute dating is impossible for this sort of material (1992, 1168). And Almut Hintze agrees that attempts at dating any Avestan text are uncertain (1999, 77). The Avestan texts are complemented by more extensive materials in Pahlavi, which were composed between the ninth and tenth centuries of the Christian era. The *Dēnkard*, the *Bundahišn*, the *Zādspram*, the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, the *Pahlavi Rivāyat*, the *Bahman Yašt* or *Zand ī Wahuman Yasn*, the *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg* all date from between the seventh and the tenth centuries CE.

The argument of Hultgård’s essay is that most of the cosmogonic and apocalyptic-eschatological material preserved in Pahlavi compilations originated earlier (40). As Mircea Eliade pointed out, if we date traditions from their first appearance in writing we would have to date the German folktales at 1812–22, the date of their publication by the brothers Grimm (1978, 7 n. 4). There is widespread agreement among scholars of Iranian religion on the antiquity of the *content* of the Pahlavi texts. The researches of Mary Boyce, John Hinnells, Norman Cohn, Cyril Williams, Anders Hultgård, Johanna Narten, Albert de Jong, Almut Hintze, Shaul Shaked, and James Russell, published, for the most part, in the last two decades, indicate that the Avestan and Pahlavi materials originated before the Christian era; some of it six centuries before.

This antiquity is suggested both by internal criteria from the Iranian texts and by external corroboration from Greek and Roman sources. There are two significant genres in Pahlavi. The *zand* is an Avestan tradition that has been summarized in Pahlavi, composed during the Sassanian period (third to seventh century CE). The *hampursagīh* is characterized by its setting as an encounter between Ahura Mazdā and Zarathuštra and is considered a genuine Avestan genre perpetuating traditional material (Hultgård 1998, 44). Hultgård considers Avestan evidence (with the exception of parts of the *Zamyād Yašt*) to be scarce and allusive and less convincing without the testimony of Greek authors (70). Hintze, on the other hand, thinks that the most trustworthy evidence for the transmission of Avestan materials from the third century BCE to the third CE lies in the character of the Avestan script and language (1998, 147). She is confident that “the most detailed description of eschatological events” is in the *Zamyād Yašt*, which may be attributed to the seventh or sixth century BCE. Its content may be even older (1999, 77). Still, the testimony of classical authors lends further weight to this thesis.

Albert de Jong considers evidence from longer passages in Plutarch, Herodotus, Strabo, Diogenes and Agathias, and conducts a broad thematic survey of classical texts. Plutarch, in the first century CE, gives a detailed picture of Zoroastrian cosmology and eschatology, which corresponds in detail to the Pahlavi texts. Plutarch attributes his description to the historian Theopompus, from the fourth century BCE, who was well-informed about Zoroastrian beliefs. Thus the cosmogonic myth with its apocalyptic-eschatological implications was in circulation in the fourth century BCE. Other Greek writers cite Theopompus as their source for the Zoroastrian doctrine of resurrection. According to Diogenes Laertius Theopompus "says that according to the Magi humankind will become alive again and be immortal" (*Proemium*; de Jong 1997, 157–63).

It thus appears demonstrable that there is a basic continuity in Persian eschatology from the *Gāthās* (c. 1000 BCE) to the early Islamic period and that apocalyptic eschatology is firmly attested in Zoroastrianism in the sixth century BCE (Hultgård 1998, 76). The principle argument of opponents of Iranian influence such as Edwin Yamauchi, that Zoroastrian concepts cannot be demonstrated to be pre-Christian, is thus very strongly, if not decisively, refuted. Yamauchi is not alone in considering and rejecting this theory. Hinnells lists Zaehner, König, Charles, Eichrodt, Hanson and Barr, but Hinnells also forcefully dismisses such objections. Opponents claim that Zoroastrian/Biblical parallels do not appear until the ninth century and that there are differences between their respective conceptions. However, the first point simply ignores the fact that the date of a text does not establish the date of its content, and that there are differences in the apparently shared beliefs, as Hinnells argues, simply shows that there was not facsimile copying of every detail of these beliefs, which, of course, is not what "influence" implies. The creative and individual nature of the Jewish and Christian traditions is not in question, but it is increasingly difficult to deny the chronological priority of eschatological beliefs among the Iranians. The argument that eschatological concepts were simply pervasive and could have surfaced anywhere is also decisively refuted by Norman Cohn, who reveals the eschatology of Iran to be a radical departure from prevalent conceptions of chaos and cosmos in the ancient Near East.

What of the possibility of religious and cultural contacts between the religions involved? In fact, "Jews and Persians were in close geographical contact from the Achaemenian period down to the fall of the Sassanian Empire. Palestine was under Achaemenian rule for two hundred years, from 538 BCE to the Macedonian conquest. The large Jewish population in Mesopotamia remained under Iranian sovereignty also in the Parthian and Sassanian periods" (Hultgård 1998, 80). Hinnells observes that Zoroastrian influence is all the more likely considering historical events and points out that "many Jewish-Parthian contacts confronted the Jews and Christians with Zoroastrianism" (2000, 41), and that:

the historical circumstances were such that influence was not only possible but likely, for both Jews and Parthians were allies in the fight against the Seleucids and then against the Romans.... Zoroastrianism was a powerful presence in the Jewish world of the two cen-

turies BCE, and the first century CE.... The coincidence in time of the growth of cosmic dualism, particular religious crises for devout Jews and extensive contacts between Jews and Zoroastrians is too great ... to be merely fortuitous. (33, 42)

The Seleucid depredations of the second century BCE followed by the fierce Roman-Parthian competition for the Near East for thirty years after the invasion of 67 BCE would constitute a fertile seedbed for apocalyptic eschatology. Thus both of the preconditions required by Hultgård are indubitably present: Iranian ideas are chronologically prior to the emergence of similar Biblical ideas and religious and cultural contacts are undeniable. This fulfills James Barr's demand for an explanation of both "mechanism and motivation" (1985, 206).

Another criterion has been developed by Shaul Shaked that makes both the antiquity of Iranian material and its influence over Biblical traditions increasingly likely. The organic fit of the essential eschatological-apocalyptic ideas within the Iranian tradition versus their discontinuous and exceptional nature in earlier Hebrew tradition indicates that these ideas were unlikely to develop in the latter independently of the former. Shaked "demonstrated how the central and relevant ideas of resurrection of the dead, the two judgments, the concept of good and evil, angels and demons, all form part of tight and coherent theological logic in Zoroastrianism in a way that they do not in Judaism and Christianity" (Shaked 1995, 1984; Hinnells 2000, 31). These doctrines are, therefore, unlikely to be late developments in Zoroastrianism. In fact, many scholars argue that the foundations of the central eschatological ideas derive directly from Zarathuštra. Zarathuštra is variously dated, but most date him around 1000 BCE. For our purposes it is enough to observe that Zarathuštra and the ideas that can be traced back to his time predate expressions of eschatology in the Hebrew tradition. As Boyce points out "[t]here is no evidence ... that, before they met Zoroastrians, the Jews held any expectation of physical resurrection after death, let alone of a general resurrection at the end of time" (1991, 365 n. 11).

Hintze (2000) convincingly demonstrates that the ideas of the demonic adversary, his final defeat, and the establishment of an eschatological utopia are organically linked. Hinnells agrees:

it is generally held that the form of the later Jewish and Christian concept of the devil or Satan was influenced by Iranian tradition. If this be accepted then it has serious implications for the understanding of the saviour or Messianic figure.... When [the devil] becomes truly demonic ... then the savior is given a new task. Instead of defeating human forces at the end of the world, in the shape of Edom and Egypt, he must now defeat a supernatural being. This new task demands a new imagery, and if the devil imagery be thought to come from Iran, then the most natural source for the developed savior imagery would be, similarly, Iran. (46)

James Russell applies the criterion of organic fit to both Biblical and intertestamental texts and concludes that they satisfy the criterion proposed by Shaked to prove Iranian borrowing.

Russell is appropriately cautious, affirming that it is impossible to be conclusive here, but, for example, "the overwhelming likelihood [is] that the Zoroastrian conception of apocalypse and the resurrection of all humanity was one source that inspired" Ezekiel 37 (2004, 899). There is so little other evidence of the doctrine of bodily resurrection in the Judaism of the period that it is normally assumed that Ezekiel's valley of dry bones cannot be proclaiming what would then be the extremely anomalous position of individual resurrection, but instead the restoration of the nation via an image of the resurrection of the dead. Since the doctrine is anomalous in existing Hebrew tradition, but integral to the Zoroastrian, it can reasonably be taken to be a borrowing.

Arguments like the forgoing promise to resolve difficulties of dating and establishing channels of influence. The matter is certainly not settled, but if the nature and extent of the influence can be established, then some major questions could find answers as yet lacking. For example, the transition of the Hebrew concept of the Messiah from a figure of the past such as David to an anticipated figure of the future would be clearly explained. In the Old Testament the term "Messiah" always denotes the "Anointed One" as a political and national ruler. In its eschatological sense, the term *māšīah* does not occur in the Hebrew scriptures of the Old Testament. "In the course of time the Jewish notion of the Messiah acquires a semantic component characteristic of the Iranian Saošyant, that is to say the eschatological." So the direction of influence is clear: it is from Iran to Israel (Hintze 1999, 74, 72).

In Iran the Sošyans had always been a figure of future expectation. Although "[t]he idea of a single Saošyant as a final World Saviour bringing about utter destruction of Evil is a post-Gathic development ... [which] becomes in the Younger Avesta the work of a single person, of a heroic man, a final World Saviour who is to become the Sošyans of the Pahlavi texts" (Hintze 1995, 96), but even the Younger Avestan texts are pre-third century BCE and Saošyant is mentioned in the ancient (not later than fourth century BCE) Avestan hymn, the *Farvardīn Yašt*, and elements of the myth of his virgin birth are mentioned in the *Zamyād-Yašt*. Hinnells concludes that the basis of the doctrine of the virgin birth is Avestan (51) and so is "the Pahlavi doctrine of the resurrection of the dead at the end of the world by Saošyant" (53).

Furthermore, the widely recognized fact that Jewish thought concerning death and afterlife underwent a major change in the postexilic period, especially in the Hellenistic period after Alexander the Great (see, for example, White 1993, 16) could also be better explained. Instead of attributing this change to "the widespread influence of the Platonic idea of the immortality of the soul" (16) the more reasonable attribution could be made to Iranian ideas of death and the afterlife, which correspond much more closely to the Hebrew developments. That "[t]wo ideas concerning the fate of the soul after death were held in tension during the Hellenistic and Roman periods. The first was that of resurrection ... The second idea was that the immortal soul lived on after the death of the body, and immediately received its reward or punishment" (17) is explained: the Zoroastrian doctrine of a double judgment, first of the spiritual soul at death and second of the restored physical body after the resurrection, resolves this tension.

There is no earlier evidence for the association of the Hebrew Messiah with the resurrection than the New Testament (Hinnells 2000, 63) but the Zoroastrian Saošyant was so associated in Avestan times. The association may have first been made among the communities that produced the New Testament, rather than being inherited by them from Jewish forbears. Research seeking a linear development from Zoroastrianism through Judaism and thence to Christianity may have proved inconclusive because this was not what happened. As Hinnells says, "it is *historically* possible that, contrary to the usual assertion, Zoroastrian influence may have been conveyed directly to early Christian Apocalyptic without the mediation of Jewish thought" (71). The essentially temporal and political interpretation of Hebrew expectations of the Messiah as compared to the more thoroughly supernatural Christian interpretation could be seen as the superficial influence of Zoroastrianism on the former and its thoroughgoing influence on the latter.

In the immediately pre- and early- Christian period, not only was the historical situation conducive to eschatological-apocalyptic beliefs but the relation of those beliefs to the Hebrew texts would be an understandable development. The Zoroastrian tradition remained oral, circulating among the Magi and the practitioners of that faith. However, as both classical and Biblical traditions make clear, these ideas were known outside of the faith. The ideas of the Iranian culture, now an ally in the struggle against Roman domination, could be widely circulated and enthusiastically applied, but lacked any authoritative *textual* support. The texts that would be available throughout this troubled part of the world would be the Hebrew traditions, rendered into Greek from the mid third century BCE. These texts were local religious traditions inimical to the domination of foreign rulers. Seeking textual support for eschatological ideas, the polyglot communities of the Near East could turn to the Hebrew texts—locally and already tinged with Iranian ideas, although not thoroughly transformed by them. Little surprise in this context would be a novel religious tradition that relied largely on Iranian eschatological ideas but with a textual basis in the Septuagint.

There is enough evidence here to suggest that any Biblical commentary and any history of Biblical religion, especially any analysis of early Christianity, is not complete without some consideration of these questions. So why have these questions been increasingly ignored? James Barr and John Collins "have both argued that one factor in the resistance to theories of influence is the reluctance to admit influence from another religion on Christianity. Collins, like other scholars, repeatedly stresses the distinctiveness of Jewish thought" (Hinnells 2000, 34). However, both Jewish and Christian thought can still be distinctive and differ from the Iranian tradition while being nonetheless influenced by it. For example, the Christian savior who is the first to *be* resurrected, rather than the one who will *bring about* the first resurrections, is a singularly creative innovation.

There are many difficulties that explain the failure to embrace this material forthrightly in mainstream religious and Biblical studies. One is the difficulty of relating two distinct linguistic areas, the Semitic of the Hebrew materials and the Indo-European of the Avestan and Pahlavi. Associated with this is the relatively recent discovery of treasure troves such as

the Dead Sea Scrolls, The Nag Hammadi Library, and Ugaritic texts which have focused scholarly effort on their analysis rather than on the more fraught area of Iranian influence. Also, as Boyce points out, the sheer volume of Biblical commentary "and its often confessional character are probably as daunting to most students of Zoroastrianism as are the unfamiliarity of the Zoroastrian materials and the dearth of standard translations to most Biblical scholars" (1991, 366 n. 11). Nonetheless, the failure to address this issue is a failure and the occasional attempt to dismiss the masterful work of Mary Boyce as a misguided enthusiasm amounting to a tacit conversion to the religion, and scholars associated with her as belonging to a "Boycean School," is not an adequate response to the detailed arguments adduced.

There is more at work here than either the historical complexity of the issue or a reluctance to question the creative originality of the Christian tradition. It is unlikely that the Christian West will easily confess any debt to a culture against which it currently directs military aggression and to which it feels itself superior. Also, Donald Wiebe's recent article on the theological determination of presidential addresses to the AAR indicates a religious influence tacit in the academy, which may be once again at work here. In this case its influence would discourage the recognition of the historical origins of Christian doctrine permitting it to remain a product of revelation dependent upon no worldly source. Comparable to biological evolution, when historical mechanisms of development are apparent then the working of supernatural agency is less so. However, this is scarcely adequate academic justification for the neglect of this thesis, especially given its enormous explanatory potential.

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"That Hardy Race of Pioneers:" Constructions of Race and Masculinity in AME Church Histories, 1865–1900

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In his 1867 *Apology for African Methodism*, Bishop Benjamin T. Tanner, characterizing the future of the AME Church, asserted that the key measure of denominational success would be the attainment of true manhood. Those who best epitomized the pentacle of masculinity, he averred, were the early itinerant ministers who spread the gospel and expanded the denomination westward during the first half of the century. Tanner defined the necessary spiritual qualifications for the modern AME preacher as a strong heart and voice, and an uncompromising faith in God. Armed with those traits, the contemporary preacher, like the early missionaries, needed only a "horse, a saddle-bag, a Bible, a hymn-book, and a glorious field for work" to spread the Christian message. However, in addition to spiritual traits, Tanner described the physical attributes that aided the AME preacher on the frontier who "are the very men to do it, of strong muscles, a strength not to be resisted, with a will that recognizes no impossibilities, they are just the men to work at the oar, and work they do!" (130–8). Tanner's dalliance on the size and strength of the early itinerants was one of the first of many accounts by nineteenth-century AME historians who used the bodies and experiences of missionaries in the past as sites to sort through contemporary concerns about masculinity.

When nineteenth-century AME leaders constructed denominational histories they interpreted past experiences through their understanding of the present. As Donald Byrne has demonstrated in his work on the folklore of nineteenth-century American Methodist itinerants, stories of the early heroic efforts of ministers served to increase collective identity among Methodist clergy. Similarly, the exploits of early AME missionaries not only provided a model of frontier piety, but a location to publicly work through the intersection of spirituality and masculinity. AME histories, like their white Methodist counterparts, were "communal representations" that presented "the past in terms of what the present ought to be" and allowed readers to "participate in and recapitulate primitive ideals for present and future purposes" (Byrne 301). In this

way, the bodily constructions of early denominational missionaries were not simply descriptions, but spoke to the present challenges and concerns surrounding African American manhood in the discourse of the AME Church.

In what follows, I examine the ways AME ministers used images of the early denominational itinerants to communicate prescriptive notions of masculinity to the next generation of preachers. These leaders tried, with some difficulty, to reconcile their embrace of popular notions of masculinity with their own growing allegiance to the "politics of respectability." As middle-class Americans increasingly equated social authority and bodily strength as markers of manhood in the second half of the nineteenth century (Leverenz; Bederman), AME historians understood their ecclesiastical positions, educational achievements, and formalized attire as connoting status and influence and looked to the past for exemplars of physical force. From William Paul Quinn's prowess to scale the Alleghany Mountains, the booming voices and tattered clothes worn by early missionaries to Texas, to skin tone, the historians used all aspects of physicality at their disposal to answer the current challenges to their own manhood and frame theological discussions of masculinity.

As the Civil War ended, and the resources of the AME Church increased, leaders prioritized the recording of the denominational history, particularly on the anniversary of key events. Fifty years after the official formation of the AME Church, Daniel Alexander Payne wrote *The Semi-Centenary and the Retrospection of the African Methodist Episcopal Church* (1866), and a year later, Tanner wrote his *Apology for African Methodism* (1867). The centennial celebration of the exodus out of St. George's M. E. Church led by Richard Allen in November of 1787 inspired another series of histories. In 1888, Payne wrote his *Recollections of Seventy Years* and three years later published his *History of the AME Church* (1891). However, these were only a few of the broad histories written in the 1880s and early 1890s. Alexander W. Wayman produced the *Cyclopaedia of African Methodism* (1882); H. T.



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