

CONCORDANCES BETWEEN JUDAISM AND ZOROASTRIANISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jul 7, 2020

In view of the remarkable similarities between these two ancient faiths it is not surprising that early writers were quite impressed by the commonality between them. For instance, what George William Carter noted in his work, *Zoroastrianism* (AMS Press, Inc. New York, 1918 and 1970) brings it out well: “Each was proclaimed by a prophet. Each worshipped one God. Each believed in an evil power. Each forbade images. Each laid emphasis on a moral act. Each was intolerant toward other systems. Each developed priestly cults, and emphasized ceremonial cleanness. Each had something like a synagogue worship. Belief in the policy of the Persians towards the Jews also would render the Jews favourably disposed toward their rulers. 5. Isaiah XLIV:28, :3-8, “many of the people of the land became Jews.” Esther VIII:17.

Carter notes: “Mordecai the Jew was next unto king Ahasuerus, and great among the Jews, and accepted of the multitude of his brethern; seeking the good of his people”, Esther X:3; also Esther VII:8, VIII:7-17, Daniel, VI:1-3, 14-28, VIII:3.

Carter's conclusion reveals the views of early scholars. I can quote it in his own words, though quite succinctly: “The depth of its philosophy, the spirituality of many of its views, the clearness and purity of its ethics, are scarcely equalled by any creed of ancient times. In the face of these noble conceptions, it is remarkable that what is probably the purest religion of antiquity, except the Jewish, should almost have perished from the earth.

The main elements of the Zoroastrian faith were for the most part fixed before the Persian period of Jewish history, and that there was probably no marked influence made by the Jews upon the Persian faith. The Jews, however, discovering that their rulers had many conceptions and teachings similar to, and others in advance of their own, would, in receiving and adopting them, easily deduce such teachings and conceptions from their own revelation, with no thought that they were borrowing. At any rate, later generations would think of them as purely Jewish beliefs. While the germs of the beliefs that came into prominence in post-exilic times in Judaism may be present in the earlier writings, the germs alone are not enough to explain the later developments. The explanation is found in the fact that the “germs which lay hidden in Judaism were fertilized by contact with the Persian religion.” (C.F. Kent, *The Jewish People*, p. 257.). To this foreign

contact, therefore, we probably are indebted for some of the loftiest and most spiritual conceptions, which came into Judaism and passed from Judaism into Christianity. The Jews were not only influenced by contact with the Persian faith, but by those who became converts to Judaism. As to-day a person changing from one faith to another decidedly different carries into the new faith some of his old influences, so the very fact that many Persians became Jews (Esther VIII:17.) would favour the development or adoption of beliefs already latent in Judaism.

The followers of the Zoroastrian faith probably furnished the stimulus for ideas and beliefs that otherwise might not have come into prominence. These beliefs Judaism preserved and fostered for fuller development under the benign influence of Christianity.” (pp. 104-6). Subsequent views on this subject have developed them further and also at times challenged them but the debate goes on.

Possibility of finding more similarities between Judaism and Zoroastrianism

There are possibly many more parallels or symbiotic exchange of ideas between the past – exilic Jews and Persians that further research can unearth. For instance, Ezra Nehemiah's purity ideology played an important role in the reconstitution of the Israeli community as it had done in Persia for long. Ezra 9.10-12 and Nehemiah 13.13 call for removal of all aliens from the land of Israel. Ezra 9.2 prohibit intermarriages between Judeans and alien women since Israel, the “holy seed” is illicitly desacralized by them. They are even perceived as threatening the purity of the land as well as Israel's existence according to Ezra 9:12, 10-12 and 14. Moreover, Nehemiah 13.28-30 states that marriages with foreign women pollutes the Judean priestly bloodline, which is reminiscent of the Persian Magi's claim and adherence to heredity. Nehemiah 13.4-9 even denounces the male alien as a perpetual polluter in ritual terms, thereby adding the concept of alien pollution to that of moral and ritual impurity.

As Saul Olyan observes, “the Nehemiah memoir knows nothing of the polluting abomination of aliens” but it states that “aliens also pollute 'ritually' through their physical presence,” whereas the only alien pollution that the Ezra memoir knows is that of defiling abominations.” This may remind one of Strabo's observation, among others', of the Magi's exclusive tendencies. He contends that both do not only deal with moral or lineage pollution but also with ritual defilement of a novel sort which is evidently a concern in Nehemiah 13.4-9/ Olyan also traces the complex relationship of the purity-ideology of Ezra-Nehemiah to the Jewish tradition out of which it developed. (*Journal*

for the Study of Judaism, Volume XXXV, No. 1, 2004, pp. 1-16). Although Olyan does not at all see any Persian "influence" on Ezra-Nehemiah, I wonder if they were consciously or unconsciously guided by what they had witnessed at first-hand in the Persian court which was then so consumed by the importance of preserving *Khavareh*, royal glory and also royal seed. As I have stated elsewhere the winged figure usually placed over the heads of Achaemenian kings in their rock inscriptions cannot but be the *Khavareh*, Royal Glory, and not Ahuramazda or Fravashi as is commonly supposed. And as I have quoted Mary Boyce (in my thesis on Conversion in Zoroastrianism) as asserting that one of the reasons Zoroastrianism did not spread beyond the border of Persia was the fact that the Achaemenians regarded it as too significant or distinct a possession to share with others, leading to racial purity and consciousness among them. Moreover, ritual purity has always been the hallmark of Zoroastrianism.

The Elamites who were inhabiting Persia in large numbers were highly, rather overly conscious about preservation of lineage and seeds culminating in the tradition of "incesteral" marriage, for the lack of a better word or as I have detailed elsewhere, definition. All these factors must have influenced the thinking of Ezra-Nehemiah at least in some way and contributed in some way to the doctrines they became so well-known for but which were for long current among the Persians in general and in the Persian court in particular.