

Views of Scholars Refuting Zoroastrian Influence

Dr. Kersey Antia, January 2012

There are many historians who not only challenge any Zoroastrian “influence,” even when framed on the Hinnells model, but also there are some who insist on the Ugaritic origin of Jewish monotheism, for example, Mark S Smith, *The Origins of Biblical Monotheism: Israel’s Polytheistic Background & the Ugaritic Texts*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2001., pp. 265-6. See also references provided for it by Jonathan Goldstein in *Peoples of an almighty god: Competing Religions in the Ancient World*. New York: Doubleday, 2002, p. 288.

Even though Mesopotamian religion is known for rank polytheistic beliefs, Smith posits that the emergence of supra-national empires suggested the model of super-national God. Consequently, the Assur and Marduk became super-gods whose patronage of empires “matches their manifestation as the sum-total of all the other deities. Mesopotamian authors are exploring the nature of all divinity in relation to a single major god.” The response from Israel followed suit in one respect. The events leading to the Judean exile of 587 extended Israel’s understanding of its deity’s mastery of the world even as the nation was being reduced”. Smith thesis seem to raise more questions than answers, if any; it provides and he makes an important claim on rather ill-fitting evidence. How can the concept of a monotheistic god of a defeated nation be affected by as-yet polytheistic gods in different lands, despite the time-lag involved in such a process? His thesis reminds me of the claim of another Assyriologist, Simo Parpola, who claims Zoroaster adopted monotheistic ideas from learning about Assur in Assyria. My response to Smith would be the same as my response to Parpola as regards any deity emerging at any time as the Supreme Being from the Mesopotamian polytheism.

Smith adds that “some scholars locate this shift to monotheism” (in Israel) “in the Persian period. The date of ‘Second Isaiah’ at the beginning of the Persian period might lend support in this direction.” However, he doubts that Zoroastrianism provided a model for the monotheism expressed in the Old Testament because “Zoroaster ... preached a dualism pitting Ahura Mazda, the spirit of good, along with his six Amesha Spentas (‘Bounteous Immortals’), against a spirit of evil named Angra Mainyu, later spelled Ahriman.” (This is incorrect as Angra Mainyu is not pitted against Ahura Mazda but against Spenta Mainyu.)

“This dualism,” he observes, “does not truly resemble biblical monotheism.” (See Shakeed’s refutation of it, as quoted by me.) Moreover, he holds that “a principle of evil, for example in the form of Belial, Satan, or the devil, began to appear only in the latest biblical works and in the other Second Temple literature.” (But the latter was written during the Persian Period.)

“Furthermore, the language of biblical monotheism appears to represent, at least in its formulations, developments of older language exalting the national god.” (There is now general agreement that monotheistic tendencies can be seen in the Old Testament itself.) But, “on the other hand, this is not to say that Persian religious tradition did not reinforce monotheistic rhetoric in this period, or influence some biblical presentations of divinity. Some years ago A.L. Oppenheim claimed that the ‘eyes and ears’ of the

Persian king served as the model for ‘the satan’ in the book of Job 1-2. One might concede that the Zoroastrian notion of the good god reinforced the Judean notion of monotheism, as later developments would. Yet it was not Judean monotheism’s main progenitory”, he rightly asserts.

Although most historians, as already noted, declare the Talmud as a product of the Persian rule, Richard Kalmin maintains that it was shaped by Persia as well as Roman Palestine – *Jewish Babylonia between Persia and Roman Palestine*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006. However, the Persian rabbis were influenced by the strict hierarchical divisions within Persian society and tended to interact among themselves as a rule in the privacy of their study houses. Consequently, what they wrote in the Talmud was for their own consumption, to be read only by them. It is “primarily literature by rabbis and for rabbis. Neither the Persian government nor nonrabbinic Jews would have access to it, and the Talmud contains numerous unambiguous criticisms of Persian and Persian kings, as well as of nonrabbinic Jews”. (p. 144). However, he concedes, “my claim, regarding the depiction of Babylonian rabbis as Palestinians in the mid-fourth century is not meant to exclude Persian influence.” (p. 174).

After surveying Zoroastrian eschatology at length, what R.C. Zaehner (*The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, Phoenix Press, New York, 2003, pp. 56-60) calls for our attention: “Zoroaster’s doctrine of rewards and punishments, of an eternity of bliss and an eternity of woe allotted to good and evil men in another life beyond the grave is so strikingly similar to Christian teaching that we cannot fail to ask whether here at least there is not a direct influence at work. The answer is surely ‘Yes’, for the similarities are so great and the historical context so neatly apposite that it would be carrying skepticism altogether too far to refuse to draw the obvious conclusion.” “The case for a Judaeo-Christian dependence on Zoroastrianism in its purely eschatological thinking is quite different and not at all convincing, for apart for a few hints in the *Gathas* ... and a short passage in *Yasht 19.89-90* in which a deathless existence in body and soul at the end of time is affirmed, we have no evidence as to what eschatological ideas the Zoroastrians had in the last four centuries before Christ.” (Here the evidence provided by Theopompus, Plutarch and Dr. De Jong may negate Zaehner’s objection). “The eschatologies of the Pahlavi books, though agreeing in their broad outlines, differ very considerably in the detail and emphasis which may be due to the antiquity of the tradition. They do not correspond at all closely to the eschatological writings of the inter-testamentary period nor to those of St Paul and the Apocalypse of St John. They do, however, agree that there will be a general resurrection of body as well as soul, but this idea would be the natural corollary to the survival of the soul as a moral entity, once that had been accepted, since both Jews and Zoroastrian regarded the soul and body as being two aspects, ultimately inseparable, of the one human personality. We cannot say with any certainty whether the Jews borrowed from the Zoroastrians or the Zoroastrians from the Jews or whether either in fact borrowed from the other”. However, there is historically meager possibility for the third alternative and an overwhelming majority of scholars suggests the Jews learning from the Zoroastrians.

“Thus from the moment that the Jews first made contact with the Iranians they took over the typical Zoroastrian doctrine of an individual afterlife in which rewards are to be enjoyed and punishments endured. This Zoroastrian hope gained even surer ground during the inter-testamentary period, and by the time of Christ it was upheld by the

Pharisees, whose very name some scholars have interpreted as meaning ‘Persian’, that is, the sect most open to Persian influence. So, too, the idea of a bodily resurrection at the end of time was probably original to Zoroastrianism, however it arose among the Jews, for the seeds of the later eschatology are already present in the *Gathas*.”

“In the *Gathas* ... there appears an individual judgment at death when souls are judged at the Bridge of the Requiter and a final universal ordeal by fire when the two parties are allotted their eternal destinies of weal and woe. This is in marked contrast to the later doctrine in which there is one individual judgment only: The final eschatological ordeal is not in any sense a judgment but a purgation by molten metal in which the sins of the damned are burned away. By this final purification they are made fit for eternal life and eternal joy”, which may well overcome confusion often felt about the need for having two “judgments”, the last being a purgation and not a judgment. However, it seems quite improbable that individual judgment at the Chinvat Bridge after death was not believed in at any time in view of the prayers for the same being impeccably and religiously observed to this day. Perhaps the later texts saw no reason to mention the belief in individual judgment as it had its roots so firmly in the early antiquity and was followed so faithfully ever since – even diasporas in England and North America to this day.

“Violence” as Jan Assmann remarks, “is inherent not in the idea of One God but in the exclusion of other Gods”. What Assmann says about Judaism is quite true about the Achaemenian Zoroastrianism: “Judaism is the only one that has never turned the implications of violence and intolerance into historical reality precisely because it has relegated the final universalizing of truth to eschatology and not to history”. (*Of God and Gods*, The University of Wisconsin Press, Madison, Wisconsin, 2008, pp. 110-111). If there were some instances of violence against minorities in the Sassanian times, it arose mainly from political reasons and not from religious grounds, as I have explained elsewhere in this essay.

However, Assmann is not entirely consistent when stating that the Maccabean revolt “was not only a movement of resistance against the Seleucid tyrant but also a civil war directed against the “Hellenists”, or reformers, among the Maccabees’ own people”, who “fought with equal zeal, one for and other against the (Jewish) Law”. “The Maccabees, did not just defend themselves against the troops of Antiochus IV. They are recorded as having extinguished the life of entire Jewish towns and cities that had adopted the Hellenistic way of life”, following the treatment prescribed in the Deuteronomy for pagans: “You shall surely strike down the inhabitants of that town by the edge of the sword---.” (p. 119). Such inconsistencies, however, are not uncommon in other religious systems.

There is some evidence of the idea of the Menog and the Getig worlds both being conceived in the Menog world manifesting itself at least in tangentially in the Rabbinic Judaism of the Iranian Jews. For example, Rabbinic Judaism, according to Neusner (*Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3.2, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2008, p. 922), “constituted a religious-mythical system in which earth and heaven corresponded to one another.”

After Joseph G.R. Joshua “fell into a trance”, his father said to him, “What vision did you see?” He replied “I saw a world upside down, the upper below, the lower

above,--- As we are esteemed (for our Torah) here, so it is there.” (b. Bava Batra 10b). However, Neusner does not see in it similarity with the Zoroastrian cosmological belief (or at least it does not strike him as such) as inspired by the Jews living under the shadow of Persia on the Persian soil for centuries but it will be hard to explain it otherwise.