

WERE THE ACHAEMENIANS ZOROASTRIAN?

Dr. Kersey Antia, Nov 17, 2018; updated Jan 16, 2020

Insler's Views

Relying on his understanding and interpretation of the Gathas, Stanley Insler maintains that the Achaemenian kings were Zoroastrian, as reported in the *Jam-e-Jamshed Weekly* (May 28, 2000, p. 14). Insler maintains “The *Vanguhi Daena*, the Good Religion, became not a Mystical Vision but a Body Of Laws relating the world of Man and the Cosmos: as there is a Right Order in Heaven, so shall it be here on earth. The follower of Truth—its possessor, is an Ashavan opposed to Deceit.

From there on it was a natural step for the Zoroastrian Achaemenian Emperors Darius I and Xerxes I to follow exclusively the worship of Ahura Mazda. In their inscriptions was the impress of Gathic teaching, Darius was the upholder of Truth, the enemy of deceit; he was not hostile, nor deceitful nor did he wrong the weak. Xerxes prays that he may be happy when alive and blessed when dead for he had observed Ahura Mazda's laws (= the Good Religion) and worshipped with Truth and reverence. In response to a subsequent question concerning Darius I's moral pronouncements, Professor Insler considered these to stem not from the Babylonian Hammurabi's Code but from Zarathushtra's Gathic Teaching. It became very evident that Insler did not side with those who believed the early Achaemenian Emperors not to be Zoroastrians!

“The Good Rule of Ahura Mazda can be realized here on earth through the exercise of Truth and Good Thinking. The inter-relationship of Truth and Good thinking is made clear when it is known that one cannot comprehend Truth without understanding it. They are the products of Ahura Mazda's wisdom. With Aramati/Armaiti, often qualified as Spenta – Beneficial or Salutary, Khshathra is interlocking where Armaiti is loyalty. Once more Darius I's inscription was invoked: through the exercise of his authority, this emperor rewarded the loyal man. This, in view of such a conspicuous correspondence and similarity of the Achaemenian governing principles and ideology with the Gathic precepts leave little doubt that the Achaemenians were essentially Zoroastrian, even closer to the spirit of the Gathic teachings of Zarathustra than the later adherents of Zarathustra, especially as no one other than Zarathustra is known to have taught the kind of ideology reflected in the Achaemenian inscriptions and governing principles.

Shaul Shaked's Opinion:

Shaul Shaked also maintains that “the Achaemenian religion seems to belong to the same broad religious tradition as Zoroastrianism, and the same could possibly be said of the little we know of the religion of the Parthians or of Sogdians.” (*Dualism in Transformation*, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994, P. 7-footnote 5).

Joseph Wiesehoffer's Opinion:

Before considering the question of the Achaemenids being Zoroastrian, Joseph Wiesehoffer, (*Ancient Persia*, I.B. Tauris, London, 1996, pp. 96-101) rightly examines the route by which Zoroastrianism reached Persia and Media from its origin in the eastern Iran:

“There are even different theories about the route followed by the message within Iran. Some scholars believe that there may have been a kind of schism between two 'schools', one in the west (under the leadership of Magian 'clergy' in Media), the other in the east (with an important centre in Arachosia), and that a major part of the Younger Avesta originated in Arachosia/Sistan and made its way into Persis (under Darius I). Here the Arachosian and Median traditions had mixed, but the eastern language had become the authoritative 'church language'. Others assume that the Zoroastrian creed was brought to the west by the Medes and Persians at the beginning of the first millennium BC, in a form that already differed from Zarathustra's idea; and that it was further modified there by the Magi under the influence of the highly developed Mesopotamian cultures, and subsequently, in order to meet the requirements of the Achaemenid empire in its process of consolidation. Yet others suppose that in the last decades of Median supremacy, which embraced eastern Iran, the Zoroastrianism of the east established itself in the west as well (with the help of 'missionaries' and through the sons and daughters of eastern Iranian princes at the court of Media). According to this theory, the Achaemenids were ardent Zoroastrians from the very beginning. Both the supporters of a late dating of Zarathustra to the seventh-sixth centuries BC --- following a Sasanian tradition which held that Zarathustra pre-dated Alexander by 258 years --- and those who ascribe an early date to the founder of the religion and to his Gathas, share a crucial problem, that of judging how closely the kings adhered to the message of Zarathustra (or his 'successors'). The answers to this problem vary extensively. While some scholars are of the opinion that all the kings were genuine followers of his doctrine, and yet others that it applied to the usurper Gaumata who was overthrown by Darius. At the same time, the promotion of Zoroastrianism by the kings is usually put down to political and

practical, rather than to religious motives.

While discussing the ethics and eschatology of Zoroastrianism Wiesehoffer notes that in the *Videvdad* the foundation of which may go back to the Achaemenid period, Zoroastrianism clearly shows dualistic features. He also quotes Plutarch at length to prove Plutarch was “also aware of this dualism.” I have elsewhere relied on Plutarch and other Greek writers in order to prove the same. As this kind of dualism is a later but a sure evidence for the practice of Zoroastrianism, and since there is apparently a clear evidence of its prevalence during the Achaemenid times it can leave little doubt about the Achaemenids being Zoroastrian, though Wiesehoffer does not dwell on such an inference.

Wiesehoffer wonders whether Xerxes' Daeva inscription suggests the Zoroastrian rejection of the Daevas, but most scholars think so. He also asks if the Achaemenid Kings followed the usual Magian practices prescribed in the *Vendidad*, but Mary Boyce has shown that they really did by trying to avoid pollution in their burial as required by the Zoroastrian principals of purity.

“We have perhaps managed to show on what difficult terrain we stand when asking the question about the religious confession of the Achaemenid kings. What can be confirmed, however, is that in choosing Ahura Mazda, Darius was on the one hand dealing with something familiar, and on the other hand, hoping to gain legitimacy and support (and justification) for his claim to power by declaring his faith in this god. Whether he associated himself with this god (or the Zoroastrian creed in whatever form) 'merely' for political and opportunistic reasons, or whether he also felt spiritually close to him is a question that can hardly be answered. However, as he shows how closely he follows Gathic precepts at Bashitun, as detailed by me, he must have had sincere interest in following them. Darius considered anything as *drauga* that went against his own sovereignty leading to any form of rebellion or usurpation, which may be due to his being religiously overzealous, or due to fear of losing his newly gained empire, or egoism or perhaps due to a self-righteous belief that being guided by Ahura Mazda he had founded an ideal kingdom leading to Frasho-kereti, final renovation. Whatever the truth may be, Wiesehoffer does not question Darius being Zoroastrian, but whether for political or religious reasons he finds it hard to fathom it out. But I for one see here the possibility for both these reasons guiding him in his undertakings.

Wiesehoffer further notes that “the (Achaemenian) kings allowed their subjects to worship a multitude of gods (and even supported them in doing so),” and “in Elymais the gods who were worshipped were almost exclusively Elamite divinities. For Ahura Mazda there are (so far) only ten evidences, but the sacrifice called *lan* is believed to be the official sacrifice made to this god. This sacrifice was not only supplied

by the rations of the king, it was also the only offering that was widespread and received regular allowances". In my papers on the Elamites I have tried to expand further on this subject. But my own findings suggest that the Elamite elements were too powerful for the great king to neglect, as Persia had not yet become totally Zoroastrian, a fact which Darius I brings it out himself in his Behistun inscription and even laments that the Elamites do not worship Ahura Mazda, which too indicates that he was following the Zoroastrianism of his time, or at least was claiming to do so. "What religious orientation they (the Magis) represented at what particular periods remains debatable. Were they responsible for introducing Zoroastrianism in Persis? Or were only part of them converted to Zoroastrianism? Or was it Darius who first appointed the Magi as Zoroastrian 'officials'? These questions will have to be left unanswered." While such questions may remain unresolved until more evidence is forthcoming, they actually presuppose the prevalence of Zoroastrianism in the Achaemenid period though exact data about its origination, spread and propagation in Persia (or Media) may not yet be available. Nevertheless, the groundwork was already laid down for the Achaemenid Persia to emerge as Zoroastrian as it became more and more evident even with what little we know of the belief system of the succeeding Achaemenian rulers.

Kellens' views on the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenians

In what he describes as "a complete turn-about", Jean Kellens now seems to believe in "the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenids", (*Die Religion der Achaemeniden*, 1983, pp. 107-123), albeit with some reservations. His thought provoking and ground breaking views on this subject have been translated and edited by Prods Oktor Skjærvø. (Jean Kellens, *Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism*, Mazda Publishers, Inc. 2000, pp. 25-30). Kellens posits that Mazdaism "had impregnated the entire Iranian religion" by 1000 B.C. because of "the simple fact that its liturgical texts (Gathas and Yasna Haptanghaiti) have been preserved and "as there is no substantial religious crisis throughout Achaemenian history, a fact that was noticed long ago". He regards Achaemenian Zoroastrianism as "necessarily a post-Zoroastrian Mazdaism, like that of the Young Avesta even though it may not be the same". From Benveniste onward the discussion on this subject centered around a list of "omissions and divergences" from what each scholar conceived Zoroastrianism to be, for instance, omission of the Young Avestan Yazata and titles of the Gathas Amesha Spentas in the Achaemenian inscriptions. However, this practice was observed after Narten's work showed that Yazata is used in the Yasna Haptanghaiti

which is now proven to be an Old Avestan text and the word Amesha Spenta is not mentioned in the Gathas, which is a rather later development. He contends that at least some of the Achaemenian documents are “definitely earlier” than the Young Avesta and therefore he believes “the funerary practices, for instance, are irrelevant” for searching any conclusion on this subject.

Kellens finds it hard to resolve this problem because so little is known about Mazdaism of the Old Avesta and there is no consensus at least in his opinion ever recorded about the criteria for defining it. What he observes here demands our attention so vehemently that it is quoted, here at length: “Is it dualism? Gnoli has showed—conclusively, I think—that this is not the case. Is it monotheism? I recently gave my reasons for doubting it, and Mary Boyce, who probably does not believe in mine, has given other reasons, which do not believe in. Is it Ahura Mazda’s preeminence? It cannot be confirmed. Is it the invention of the Amesha Spentas? It can no longer be assumed, after Johanna Narten’s work. Is it the ethics? Let us be serious. Is it anti-ritualism? The Gathas, as interpreted by Humbach — the best interpretation available — bear witness to a rigorously ritualistic doctrine. Is it rejection of certain practices, such as the bloody sacrifice and the consumption of haoma? Scholars have been skeptical on this point for years, which is reasonable, since there are only a couple of incomprehensible allusions to these points in the Gathas. We must resign ourselves to the fact that we have not been able to identify any distinctive feature of OAv. (Old Avestan) Mazdaism, which is the only one that one might, if one insists, call “Zoroastrianism.” There are the daeuuas, and since we also do not know who the Gathic daeuuas are, one cannot use the presence of Mithra or other gods beside Ahuramazda in the Achaemenid domain as an argument.”

To determine the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenians is in his opinion pitting a poorly known entity, the Achaemenian religion, and a less poorly known entity, Zoroastrianism. However, he unlike Bruce Lincoln, believes that we know the Achaemenian religion better than Zoroastrianism. Indeed he contends that “our knowledge of OAv. Mazdaism is so incomplete that the validity of the question about the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenians is uncertain, at best. For this question has validity only if Zoroastrianism really exists”, as a religious doctrine that is known to be so different that it would have conflicted with the prevailing admission carried out by a charismatic person known in history, and conducted by a deliberate and persevering missionary activity. Kellens argues these requirements have not been considered more frequently and more cogently. A case can be made in my opinion that Zoroastrianism meets these criteria despite it being prehistoric if we examine the issue from an eastern angle in which say,

missionary zeal may not be an inherently dominant characteristic for spreading a faith as indeed evidenced by the fact that it did eventually spread among millions. However, the issues he raises are so important for Zoroastrians, leave aside students of history, that they need to respond to them as best as they can: “Is the Gathic text so transparent that the role played by Zarathustra in it appears with all the precision we could wish for? Gathas is a text in the process of being deciphered and which we still hardly understand less than half of. A favorite statement of Gathic scholars is the following one of Kaj Barr: “the more I read the Gathas, the less I understand them”. “But then how is it that other scholars such as Stanley Insler view it in quite an opposite way?

Kellens argues: “The study of the Mazdean religion has everything to gain by ridding itself of the image of a founder or a prophet. This person who keeps getting in the way, has nothing but drawbacks. Not only is it, more probably, only a red herring but it also causes scholarship to be satisfied with what is only a rudimentary explanatory principle. The only three relevant questions appear to be: Is this inherited from Indo-Iranian, an invention by the prophet, or a later adaptation? This is how one discussed the Amesha Spentas, the Frauuashi and eschatology.

If we agree to think of the evolution of Mazdaism as continuous, whatever shocks it may have undergone, and not as distributed throughout three irreducible stages, each in itself motionless, this religion will have all the dignity and complexity of its historical development”. This is very relevant for the contemporary Zoroastrianism with its many western diaspora that are undergoing many changes in its make-up as in the past in the Achaemenian and Sasanian times. It is interesting to compare, rather contrast, Kellens’ views with those of Lincoln on this subject.

“As for the Achaemenid documentation,” claims Kellens, “rather than being a riddle, it gives us an unexpected chance, being the first direct testimony of Mazdaism and probably, the one that contains the oldest texts after the Old Avesta. Rather than needing the Avesta to illuminate it, it helps us better understand that text. How was the pantheon of the Yashts constituted? What was the place of fire in the ritual? How were the funerary rituals imposed by the *Videvdad* actually practiced? Achaemenid Mazdaism can teach us a lot about these questions and many others if only we agree to look at it from another angle than its hypothetical conversion. The procedure that consists in starting with the Achaemenid facts going toward the Avesta cannot be more sterile than the opposite”.

Kellens’ conclusion about the Achaemenian Zoroastrianism is so true of contemporary Zoroastrianism also as it goes through similar changes: “The Achaemenid religion had its specific features, common and inevitable, which are the result of a special situation in geography

and history and the creative evolution of thought, which belongs to all men.”