

The Wisdom-Religion of Zoroaster



The Wisdom-Religion of Zoroaster by Alexander Wilder

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Frontispiece: Mithra in red by Develv.

Says Sir William Jones:

The primeval religion of Iran, if we may rely on the authorities adduced by Mohsan Fani¹ was that which Newton calls the oldest (and it may justly be called the noblest) of all religions; a firm belief that

. . . one Supreme God made the world by his power and continually governed it by his providence; a pious fear, love and adoration of him; a due reverence for parents and aged persons; a fraternal affection for the whole human species, and a compassionate tenderness even for the brute creation.

The believers in a Golden Age preceding the ruder and unhappier periods of human history readily trace in this a confirmation of their cherished sentiment. Those who contemplate religions as substantially the same in their essential principles, can subscribe heartily to the statement. Even they who ignore and repudiate the past as solely bestial and barbarous, and place everything in the future as a goal of effort and expectation, will not hesitate to accept the proposition as an ultimate attainment.

Yet that which is to be, must be to a large degree something that has been, and a rehabilitation of the old. It must have existed in idea, or it would not be evolved in manifested existence. Religions may have their Apostles, but Apostles are not the first creators of religions. For religion has its inception not from the logical reason, but in the human heart, in the passionate desire for the better and more true, for that which is superior to the present selfhood. It comes into existence as an infant child, and grows gradually, taking form and shape according to the genius of those by whom it is adopted and cherished.

When the first Zarathustra was born, Mazdeism was already divergent not only from Turanian Shamanism but likewise from the Aryan Deva-worship of archaic India. The pioneers of Eran were tillers of the soil and dwellers in ceiled houses and walled villages, while the followers of Indra and Saurva were still nomadic shepherds and fed their flocks wherever pasture was afforded, little regardful even of any respect for

¹ Mohsan who is here cited was a native of Kashmir, and a Sufi. He insisted that there was an Iranian monarchy the oldest in the world, and that the religion of Hushang, which is here described, was its prevailing faith.

the enclosed and cultivated fields of their brethren. Yet at that period the two had not become distinct communities. "Hard by the believers in Ahura live the worshippers of the devas," says Zoroaster.

Much curious speculation has been bestowed in regard to the identity of the Great Sage and Prophet of archaic Eran. Some modern writers have even suggested that he was simply a mythic or ideal personage described in ancient hyperbole as a Son or Avatar of Divinity, because of representing the religious system of which he was the recognized expositor. Plato more rationally styles him "the Oro-Mazdean," who promulgated the learning of the Magi, by which was meant the worship of the Gods, and being true and truthful in words and deeds through the whole of one's life. "By means of the splendour and glory of the Frohars or guardian spirits," says the *Fravardin-Yasht*,

. . . that man obtained revelations who spoke good words, who was the Source of Wisdom, who was born before Gautama had such intercourse with God.

We find him accordingly set forth in the *Gathas*, the most ancient literature of his people, as an historic person of the lineage of Spitama,¹ with a father, remoter ancestors, kinsmen, a wife, and sons and daughters.² The *Yasna*, or Book of Worship, declares the following:

Then answered me Homa the righteous:

Pourushaspa has prepared me as the fourth man in the corporeal world; this blessing was bestowed upon him that thou wast born to him — thou, the righteous Zarathustra, of the house of Pourushaspa, who opposeth the devas, who art devoted to the Ahura religion and famous in Airyana-Yaejo, the Aryan Fatherland.

He seems to have begun his career as an humble student and reciter of the chants and prayers in the presence of the Sacred Fire, but to have been developed in maturer years into an apostle and speaker of oracles which should impart the true wisdom to all who heard. He gave a rational form to the religious thought of his countrymen, elaborated it into a philosophy, and began lot it the preparation of a literature by which it should be perpetuated.

Nevertheless we may not accept for him much that has been published under the name or title by which he is commonly known. Whether he actually wrote much we do not know. Generally, the disciples, and not the Masters, are the ones most prolific in literary productions. Besides, there have been many Zoroasters, or spiritual superiors, who succeeded to the rank and honours of Zarathustra Spitama. All these who made contributions to the Sacred Oracles, appear to have received acceptance like that awarded to the Mazdean Apostle. Nor does the distinction seem to have been confined to the Iranian country, nor even to the collections of the *Avesta*. When conquest extended the Persian authority to other regions, it was followed by religious

¹ [Ashu Zarathushtra]

² The father of the first Zoroaster was named Pourushaspa, his great grandfather, Ha-katashaspa, his wife Hvovi, his daughters, Freni, Thrithi, Pourushista. The daughters were married according to archaic Aryan custom to near kindred.

propagandism. In this way the Zoroastrian faith burst through the limitations of a single people and country, and for a period of centuries appeared likely to become the principal religion of the world. It was supreme in the Parthian dominion clear to Kabul¹ or further, and it extended over the Roman Empire as far as Germany and Scotland. As conquest removed the lines of partition between peoples, religion and philosophy met fewer obstacles. The “pure thought” and doctrine may have been greatly changed by the commingling with the notions of the newer receivers, as we observe in the Mithra-worship and the various forms of Gnosticism. We also find men in different countries of the East who, for their apperception and superior intelligence bore the same honorary designation as the Sage of the *Avesta*, which has created some uncertainty in later times in distinguishing the individual who was actually first to bear the title.

The Mazdean faith has left a vivid impress upon the doctrine and literature of other religions. The Hebrew Sacred Writings of later periods treat of the “God of Heaven,” and the “God of Truth,”² and contain other references significant of acquaintance with the Persian theosophy.

The New Testament is by no means free from this influence; the Gnosis or superior wisdom is repeatedly mentioned; also guardian angels, and various spiritual essences. The reference in the *Apocalypse* to the tree of life, the second death, the white pebble inscribed with an occult name, the procession in white robes, and the enthronement, are taken from the Mithraic worship.

The pioneers of the later Platonic School distinctly named Mithras as the central divinity. He had to a great degree displaced Apollo and Bacchus in the West, and ranked with Serapis in Egypt. Porphyry treats of the worship of the Cave, the constructing of a Cave by Zoroaster with figures of the planets and constellations overhead, and declares that Mithras was born in a *petra* or grotto-shrine.³ He describes the Mithras-worship as being in touch with the Esoteric philosophy, and his famous Letter to Anebo,⁴ the Egyptian prophet, appears to have been called forth by the ap-

¹ The Afghan language appears to have been derived from that of the *Avesta*. Perhaps the book was written there.

² The name Mithras signifies truth. Falsehood was regarded as obnoxious to this divinity, and as punished with leprosy. (2 *Kings* v, 27)

³ That ingenious writer “Mark Twain” [Samuel Langhorne Clemens] calls attention to the fact that all the sacred places connected with the Holy Family in Palestine are grottoes. “It is exceedingly strange,” says he, “that these tremendous events all happened in grottoes,” and he does not hesitate to pronounce “this grotto-stuff as important.”

We may look further, however. The ancient mystic rites were celebrated in *petras*, or grotto-shrines, and the temples of Mithras bore that designation. The Semitic term PTR or *peter* signifies to lay open, to interpret, and hence an interpreter, a hierophant. It was probably applied to the officiating priests at the initiations, in the “barbarous” or “sacred” language used on such occasions. There was such an official at the Cave or Shrine of Mithras at Rome, till the worship was interdicted. In the Eleusinian Rites, the hierophant read to the candidates from the *Petroma* or two tablets of stone. The servants of the Pharaoh in the book of *Genesis* were sad at having dreamed when there was no *peter* to give a *petrun* or explanation. Petra in Idumea probably was named from the profusion of its *petra*; or shrines, and the country was famed for “wisdom” (*Jeremiah* xlix, 7). Apollo, the god of oracles, was called *Patereus*, and his priests *paterae*. Places having oracles or prophets were sometimes so named, as Pethor, the abode of Balaam, Patara, Patras, etc.

⁴ [Iamblichus, *Theurgia or the Egyptian Mysteries: Reply of Abammon, the Teacher to the Letter of Porphyry to Anebo Together with Solutions of the Questions Therein Contained*. Translated by M.D., F.A.S. Alexander Wilder. London: William Rider & Son Ltd., 1911]

prehension of an endeavour to qualify or supersede it by a theurgy which was chiefly deduced from the occult Rites of Serapis and the Assyrian theology.

In connection with their expositions of the Later Platonism, the various philosophic writers, as for example Synesios, Proklos, and Damaskios, quoted selections from the Oriental literature. These have come to us under the general name of “Chaldean Oracles,” but later redactors have styled them “*Ta tou Zoroastrou logia*,” the Memorable Sayings of the Zoroaster.¹ They exhibit a remarkable similarity to the Neo-Platonic teachings, and we have the assurance of a distinguished Parsee gentleman famous alike for his profound attainments and his extensive liberality,² that they are genuine. He declares that there is no reason to doubt that the Persian doctrine was based upon that of the Chaldeans and was in close affinity with it, and he adds that the Chaldean doctrine and philosophy may be taken as a true exposition of the Persian.

We may remark that much of the religious symbolism employed by the Persians was identical with that of the Assyrians, and the explanations given by M. Lajard in his work, *La Culte de Mithra*, plainly accepts rites and divinities from the Chaldean worship.

Many of the Maxims attributed to the Iranian Zarathustra, as well as the Memorable Sayings of the Chaldean Zoroaster are replete with suggestions in regard to the true life of fraternity and neighbourly charity, as well as information upon recondite and philosophic subjects. They are inspired by a profound veneration as well as intuition. Every family was part of a Brotherhood, and the districts were constituted of these fraternities.

The Zoroastrian designation of the Supreme Being was Ahura and Mazda, the Lord, the All-Wise, Mazdeism or the Mazdayasna is therefore the Wisdom-Religion. The Divinity is also honoured as the Divine Fire or inmost energy of life — in his body resembling light; in his essence, truth.

Mithras was the God of Truth. The Zoroastrian religion was an apotheosis of Truth. Evil was hateful as being the lie. Trade was discouraged as tending to make men untruthful. “The wretch who belies Mithras,” who falsifies his word, neglecting to pay his debts, it is said,

. . . is destructive to the whole country. Never break a promise — neither that which was contracted with a fellow-religionist, nor with an unbeliever.

As Ahura Mazda is first of the seven Amshāspends, or archangels, so Mithras is chief of the Yazatas or subordinate angels. “I created him,” says Ahura Mazda, “to be of the same rank and honour as myself.” Mithras precedes the Sun in the morning, he protects the Earth with unsleeping vigilance, he drives away lying and wicked spirits, and rewards those who follow the truth.

Those who speak lies, who fail to keep their word, who love evil better than good, he leaves to their own courses; and so they are certain to perish. His dominion is geographically described in the *Mihir-Yasht* as extending from Eastern India and the

¹ An edition published at Paris in 1563 had the title of “*The Magical Oracles of the Magi descended from the Zoroaster*.” By *magical* is only meant gnostic or wise.

² Sir Dhunjeebhoy Jamsetjee Medhora, of the Presidency of Bombay who has written ably on Zoroastrianism.

Seven Rivers to Western India, and from the Steppes of the North to the Indian Ocean.

Although much is said about “dualism” and the corporeal resurrection, it is apparent that it is principally “read into” the Zoroastrian writings rather than properly deduced from them. Opportunity for this is afforded by the fact that the vocabulary of the different languages was very limited, and single words were necessarily used to do duty for a multitude of ideas. We notice this fact, by comparing them, that no two translators of passages in the *Avesta* give the same sense or even general tenor. We are often obliged to form a judgment from what is apparent.

This text from Dr. Haug’s translation seems explicit:

Ahura Mazda by his holy spirit, through good thought, good word and good deed, gives health and immortality to the world.

Two ideas are distinct:

- 1 That all real good is of and from Divinity;
- 2 That intrinsic goodness on the part of the individual, makes him recipient of its benefits.

It seems plain, also, that in the mind of Zoroaster, as of other great thinkers, life is semi-persistent. The *Yasna* and *Hadokht-Yasht*, both “older Scriptures,” declare this plainly. They recite the particulars of the journey of the soul, the real self, from the forsaken body to the future home. It waits three days by the body, as if not ready to depart forever. The righteous soul, then setting out, presently meets a divine maiden, its higher law and interior selfhood, who gives the joyful assurance:

Thou art like me even as I appear to thee. I was beloved, beautiful, desirable and exalted; and thou, by the good thought, good speech, and good action, hast made me more beloved, more beautiful, more desirable, and exalted still higher.

So the righteous soul having taken these three steps, now takes the fourth, which brings it to the Everlasting Lights.

Here is no talk about the resuscitating of anything that had really died. There is recognized a continuing to live, and for the worthy one, this life is eternal, or what is the same thing, divine.

For the others, there is the counterpart, a meeting with an impure maiden figure, a falling under the sway of the Evil Mind with the probations which this entails. Nevertheless we may not consider this Evil Mind as sempiternal, or all-powerful; else there would be two Intelligences in conflict for dominion over the universe, and so the shifting scenes of human life could be only an absurd, pitiful farce. In the nature of things, evil must exist as the correlative of good; but it is never an essence or a principle. It is always self-destroying and never permanent in any form. In most old copies of the *Hadokht-Yasht*, we notice that no fourth step is mentioned, in the case of the wicked soul; though far from righteousness, it is not consigned to perpetual hell.

The primitive Mazdean doctrine was philosophic on these subjects as well as moral, “All good has sprung from Ahura-Mazda’s holy spirit,” the *Yasna* declares:

And he who in his wisdom created both the Good and the Negative Mind,¹ rewards those who are obedient. In him the last cause of both minds lies hidden.

Further we are told of the real origin of devas or devils, that those who do not perform good works actually themselves “produce the devas by means of their pernicious thoughts.”

In the end, however, the Saviour is to make the whole world immortal. Then the Truth will smite and destroy the lie, and Anhra Manyas, the Evil Mind, will part with his rule.

By this we are not to understand any coming crisis of the external world, but a palingenesis or restitution and regeneration in each person individually. It was a true saying in the Gospel:

This is the crisis or judging: that the Light comes into the world, and men love the darkness rather than the light; for their deeds were evil.²

Both the *Memorable Sayings*, and the recorded utterances of the *Avesta* which are still preserved, abound with philosophic and theurgic utterances. Many of them are very recondite, others excel in sublimity. The following selections are examples:

The Paternal Monad (or Divine Fire) is: It is extended and generates the Twin. For the Dual sitteth close beside the One, and flashes forth mental promptings which are both for the direction of all things and the arranging of everything that is not in order.

The Paternal Mind commanded that all things should be divided into Threes, all of them to be directed by Intelligence.

In all the cosmic universe the Triad shines, which the Monad rules.

Understand that all things are subservient to the Three Beginnings. The first of these is the Sacred Course; then in the midst is the region of Air; the third, the other, is that which cherishes the Earth with fire — the fountain of fountains and Source of all fountains, the womb containing all; from hence at once proceeds the genesis of matter in its many shapes.

The Father takes himself away from sight; not shutting his own Fire in his own spiritual power. For from the Paternal Beginning nothing that is imperfect gyrates forth. For the Father made all things complete and delivered them to the Second Intelligence which the race of men call the First.

He holds fast in the Mind the matters of mind, but sensibility he supplies to the worlds. He holds fast in the Mind the things of mind, but supplies soul to the worlds.

¹ [The Iranians have a reference to the later Atlanteans in *Yasna* (ix, 15). Tradition maintains that the “Sons of God,” or the great Initiates of the Sacred Island, took advantage of the Deluge, to rid the earth of all the Sorcerers among the Atlanteans. The said verse addresses Zoroaster as one of the “Sons of God.” It says: “Thou, O Zarathustra, didst make all daemons [*i.e.*, Sorcerers], who before roamed the world in human forms, conceal themselves in the earth,” (*i.e.*, helped them to get submerged) — *Secret Doctrine*, II p. 772]

² [John iii, 19]

The Soul being a radiant fire by the power of the Father, not only remains immortal and is absolute ruler of the life, but also holds in possession the many perfections of the bosoms of the world; for it becomes a copy of the Mind, but that which is born is somewhat corporeal.

Let the immortal depth of the soul lead and all the views expand on high. Do not incline to the dark-gleaming world. Beneath is always spread out a faithless deep and Hades dark all around, perturbed, delighting in senseless phantasms, abounding with precipices, craggy, always whirling round a miserable deep, perpetually wedded to an ignoble, idle, spiritless body.

Extend the fiery mind to work of piety and you will preserve ever changing body.

The mortal approaching the Fire will be illuminated from God.

Let alone the hastening of the Moon in her monthly course, and the goings forward of stars; the moon is always moved on by the work of necessity, and the progress of the stars was not produced for thy sake. Neither the bold flight of birds through the ether, nor the dissection of the entrails of sacrificed animals is a source to learn the truth; they are all playthings, supports for gainful deceptions; fly them all, if thou art going to open the sacred paradise of piety, where virtue, wisdom, and justice are assembled.

Despite all these mentions of the Father and the Paternal Monad, no reference is made in the *Avesta* to God as a father. Nevertheless he exhibits all the qualities of a parent and protector; he gives happiness, rewards goodness, creates beneficent light and darkness, and loves all his creation.

Many of the Avestan utterances are sublime. Says Ahura Mazda:

My light is hidden under all that shines.

My name is: He who may be questioned; the Gatherer of the People; the Most Pure; He who takes account of the actions of men. My name is Ahura, the Living One; my name is Mazda, the All-Wise. I am the All-Beholding, the Desirer of good for my creatures, the Protector, the Creator of all.

The *Yasna* abounds with expressive sayings, somewhat of the character of proverbs.

He first created, by means of his own fire, the multitude of celestial bodies, and through his Intelligence, the good creatures governed by the inborn good mind.

When my eyes behold thee, the Essence of truth, the Creator of life who manifests his life in his works, then I know thee to be the Primeval Spirit, thee the All-Wise, so high in mind as to create the world, and the Father of the Good Mind.

I praise the Mazdayasnian religion, and the righteous brotherhood which it establishes and defends.

In the Zoroastrian religion a man might not live for himself or even die for himself. Individual virtue is not the gain of only the soul that practices it, but an actual addition to the whole power of good in the universe. The good of one is the good of all; the

sin of one is a fountain of evil to all. The aim of the Mazdean discipline is to keep pure the thought, speech, action, memory, reason and understanding. Zoroaster asks of Ahura Mazda, what prayer excels everything else? “That prayer,” is the reply, “when a man renounces all evil thoughts, words and works.”

Fasting and ascetic practices are disapproved as a culpable weakening of the powers entrusted to a person for the service of Ahura Mazda. The sins of the Zoroastrian category include everything that burdens the conscience, seeing evil and not warning him who is doing it, lying, doubting the good, withholding alms, afflicting a good man, denying that there is a God — also pride, coveting of goods, the coveting of the wife of another, speaking ill of the dead, anger, envy, discontent with the arrangements of God, sloth, scorn, false witness.

The soul of man is a ray from the Great Soul, by the Father of Light.

It is matter of regret that so much of the Zoroastrian literature has been lost. It is more to be regretted that it has not been better translated. Yet books do not create a faith, but are only aids. Men are infinitely more precious than books. The essence of the Wisdom-Religion was not lost when the Nasks perished.

The Zoroastrian ideal of Brotherhood is founded on a recognition of the Divine Unity, and does not represent an association of men united by a common belief or common interests.

There is no distinction of class or race. In the Zoroastrian writings the Frohars or protecting geniuses of all good men and women are invoked and praised, as well as those of Zoroastrians. Anyone whose aspirations are spiritual and his life beneficent, is accepted, though not professedly of the Mazdean fellowship.

So much of the literature has an esoteric meaning that superficial students lose sight of, that the genuine Wisdom-Religion is not discerned. There are eyes needed that can see and apperceive. Then the symbols which materialists blunder over will be unveiled in their true meaning and there will be witnessed a revival of a religion devoid of elaborate ceremony, but replete with justice, serene peacefulness and goodwill to men.



“Chaldeans, Hierophants of the Aryan Root-Race” and “The Zend Avesta is to Zoroastrianism what the Veda is to Brahmanism,” in our Atlantean Realities Series.

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