

How Iran Conquered the World

Dylan Evans

Preface

Few people today know anything about the Mazdan religion. Less than 150,000 people still practice it, and its sacred texts are rarely translated. Yet it has had such a powerful influence on Jewish thought, and thereby on Christianity and Islam, that we might justifiably see the three great Abrahamic faiths as little more than Mazdan sects. By this account, over half the world's population are, in fact, adherents of Mazdaism.

Mazdaism is the great contribution of Iran to global civilization. Its roots stretch back over three thousand years, to a time when it emerged from the same Indo-Iranian current of ideas that would also give birth to Hinduism. Indeed, its oldest scriptures remind one of nothing so much as the Rig Veda.

At some point in the first millennium BC, the Mazdans came to attribute their religion to an ancient prophet called Zarathustra – just as the Jews came to attribute theirs to an ancient prophet called Moses. Whether either of these figures really existed is moot; the stories told about them are largely the product of later invention. And just as the Jews would eventually ascribe the Torah to the authorship of Moses, so the Mazdans would ascribe their ancient hymns or Gathas to Zarathustra.

These hymns sing of the majesty of Ahura Mazda – an Avestan phrase that means “the Mindful Lord” and from which the word Mazdan is derived. Yet while this name may be largely forgotten today, the basic character of Ahura Mazda has survived intact. For while the one true God proclaimed by Jews, Christians and Muslims is still addressed by Semitic names such as Yahweh and Allah, his Semitic characteristics have been almost completely replaced by Iranian ones. The God who is now called Yahweh by Jews and Allah by Muslims owes far more to Iran than to Israel or Arabia.

Judaism, Christianity and Islam still bear faint traces of their Middle Eastern origins, but their most prominent features – the concepts of heaven and hell, the last judgment, free will, and a belief in a future messiah who will restore justice – were all imported from Iran. The Middle Eastern aspects of the Abrahamic faiths – their anthropomorphism, their idea of predestination, their emphasis on divine wrath and their detailed dietary rules – are but ancient relics which many believers prefer to downplay in favour of the later Iranian additions. Even the influence of Greek philosophy on Christianity and Islam owes more to Indo-Iranian ancestry than to Mesopotamian currents. In the battle for man's soul, it is the Iranian god who proved victorious, not the Semitic one.

Synopsis

When Cyrus was crowned King of Ashan in 559 BC, the land he ruled over was an insignificant vassal state of the Median empire. Yet within twenty years Cyrus had overthrown the old emperor and established himself as the ruler of a new, even larger

domain that stretched from the Mediterranean Sea to the Hindu Kush. The Greeks would call the new empire Persia, but those who live there have always preferred the name Iran – the land of the Aryans.

As Cyrus grew in power, so did the influence of his religion. For by the sixth century BC the Iranians had developed a distinctive set of religious ideas and practices centred around the worship of Ahura Mazda, the Mindful Lord. These ideas shared many features with ancient Hinduism, for both the Iranian and Indian spiritual traditions were descended from a common ancestor, a proto-Indo-Iranian religion that may have flourished in and around Afghanistan around 1200 BC. Like the early Hindus, the worshippers of Ahura Mazda made much use of sacred fires in their ceremonies, and used a stimulant drug (called *soma* in the Indian scriptures and *haoma* in the Iranian ones). They chanted similar hymns and revered similar animals, especially cows and horses. Above all, they celebrated the same universal force of truth and order, which the Indians called *ṛta* and the Iranians *asha*.

There were differences, too. Unlike the early Hindus, who conceived time in cyclical terms, the worshippers of Ahura Mazda developed a completely original view, according to which history would one day come to an end. Suffering and injustice would be abolished when Ahura Mazda would triumph in a final cataclysmic battle between good and evil. The dead would then be resurrected, and the good would live forever in the House of Song, while those who had lived bad lives would be condemned to spend all eternity in darkness. All these ideas were born in Iran; no previous culture had ever conceived of such things before.

Not even the Jews had contemplated such ideas before they found themselves ruled by an Iranian king. For hundreds of years they had developed their own idiosyncratic religion in the tiny kingdoms of Israel and Judah, until the Babylonian King Nebuchadnezzar had conquered Jerusalem in 597 BC and carted them off to exile in Iraq. When the Babylonian empire fell to Cyrus some sixty years later, a few Jews returned to their ancient home, but many chose to remain in Iraq. Here, the Jews drank deeply from the ideological wellspring of their Iranian new rulers, and transformed their religion to such an extent that within a few centuries its Semitic origins had been almost entirely eclipsed. By the time Alexander the Great conquered Iraq, ancient Judaism had been transformed into a thoroughly different religion.

Gone were the old anthropomorphic descriptions of Yahweh that predominated in the earlier Jewish writings. Gone was the old view of the afterlife as a shadowy underworld to which all the dead went, irrespective of whether they had lived good or bad lives. Gone was the idea that history would last forever.

Replacing these Semitic notions were Iranian ideas: a much more abstract creator God, and a clear distinction between heaven and hell. The Jews also adopted the Mazdan idea of a future messiah – the Saoshyant, who would be born miraculously at the end of time from a virgin mother, and restore justice to the world. The Jews even borrowed the poetry of the Iranians to describe this future king – as a good shepherd.

The Tanakh actually shows this process itself, since some of the books it contains were written prior to contact with Iran while others were written during Iranian rule, in

Iranian-controlled territory (Iraq). The difference between the two sets of books is striking. The pre-Iranian books are thoroughly Semitic, and resonate with previous Semitic literature such as the Babylonian Enuma Elish and the Sumerian Gilgamesh. The Iranian books (especially Esther and Daniel) are a world apart, and seem thoroughly permeated by Mazdan ideas and Persian culture.

Iran and India: how Cyrus transformed the ancient Vedic religion into Hinduism and Buddhism...

Iran and the Greeks...

When the followers of Jesus broke away from mainstream Judaism in the first century AD, it would be the Iranian aspects of their parent religion that they preserved, and the Semitic aspects that they ditched...

But Iranian Mazdaism continued to evolve in tandem with its Jewish and Christian offshoots. For a long time the Mazdan priests regarded writing with great suspicion, and were only goaded into putting their oral tradition down on papyrus by the Sasanian dynasty in the third century AD...

The compilation of the Avestas...

This was the golden age of Mazdaism...

The prolonged contact with Jewish communities was a two-way street, with each influencing the other. From Judaism, Mazdaism took a stricter monotheistic approach. Before the Iranians and the Jews came into close contact with each other in 539 BC, Mazdaism was probably much more ambiguous about the status of Ahura Mazda vis a vis other supernatural beings such as Angra Mainyu, Mithra and Anahita. The dialogue between Mazdans and Jews that ensued over the next few centuries seems to have sharpened the distinction between Ahura Mazda as the one supreme being and lesser entities (who became the prototype for the evolving Jewish concept of “angels”).

The Talmud (300 – 600)

Samaritan texts

Syriac liturgical texts (ca. 600)

The standard Muslim account of the life of Muhammad and the birth of the Quran goes roughly as follows....

Almost nothing in this account is true. We do not even know the name of the prophet who allegedly founded Islam. The name Muhammad originated as an honorific meaning “....”

How Islam preserved the Mazdan elements of Judaism and Christianity

The compilation of the Quran under Abd al-Malik

The Islamic destruction of Mazdaism

The Mazdan influence on Islam (eg. pray 5 times/day)

It has been said that in the wake of the Arab conquests, Iran was Islamized but not Arabicized. I think it was not even Islamized; rather, Islam was more influenced by Iranian culture than the other way round. Even secular Arab culture was reshaped according to Persian imagery. Take the so-called *Arabian Nights*, for example, in which the court of Caliph XXX resembles nothing so much as a **Persian harem**...

We are all Iranians now...

But the image of Iran in the west today conveys nothing of this rich heritage...

The West still sees Iran through Greek eyes. In its portrait of the conflict between Greece and Persia, the movie *300* followed the script written by Herodotus. The Iranian king Cyrus is depicted as ...

There is, by contrast, no Iranian equivalent of Herodotus. For one thing, the Iranians at that time despised writing, and preserved a largely oral tradition instead. But they were not particularly exercised by the Greeks, who were merely a distant enemy, and the battle at Thermopylae would only have merited a footnote if they had ever deigned to write anything at all. The *other* for Ancient Iran was not Greece, but the Hephtalites and other barbarian hordes to the north.

Chapter Outlines

Chapter One: The origins of Mazdaism (559 – 330 BC)

- Proto-Indo-Iranian religion (2nd millennium BC)
- Proto-Hinduism and the Rig Veda (900 BC)
- Early Mazdaism (Iran 559 – 330 BC)

NB: The Indo-Iranian *Asura/Āditya deities are an *innovative group* not found in the parent Proto Indo-European religion.

Chapter Two: The transformation of Yahweh (538 – 333 BC)

- The cult of Yahweh prior to the Babylonian exile (900 – 597 BC)
- The Babylonian exile (597 – 538 BC)
- Early Iranian influence on Jewish scriptures (538 – 333 BC)
- Torah (630 – 450 BC)
- Deutero-Isaiah [*Is. 40-55*] (ca. 538 BC)
- Trito-Isaiah [*Is. 56-66*] (ca. 510 – 490 BC)

How Yahweh became Iranian.

Chapter Three: How Iran conquered India (520 – 325 BC)

There has been a military presence in the Hindu Kush since the time of Darius the Great, when the Persian empire extended as far east as the Indus valley. There, the ancient Vedic culture was transformed by its contact with Iran...

Chapter Four: How Ahura Mazda conquered Greece (333 – 133 BC)

Chapter Five: How Christianity spread Iranian culture (156 BC – 200 AD)

- Book of Daniel and the origins of messianism (156 BC)
- Dead Sea Scrolls (100 BC – 70 AD)
- Josephus (80 AD)
- New Testament (55 – 90 AD)
- Nag Hammadi codices (100 – 200 AD)

How Ahura Mazda went global

How Christianity cherry-picked the Mazdan elements of Judaism

Chapter Six: The golden age of Mazdaism (224 – 651 AD)

- The Avestas
- The Talmud (300 – 600)
- Samaritan texts
- Syriac liturgical texts (ca. 600)

The compilation of the Avestas under Ardashir I.

The development of Mazdan theology.

Chapter Seven: How Iran conquered the Arabs (651 – 950 AD)

- The Quran (691 – 700)
- The early Hadith (800 – 950)

How Islam preserved the Mazdan elements of Judaism and Christianity

The compilation of the Quran under Abd al-Malik

The Islamic destruction of Mazdaism

The Mazdan influence on Islam (eg. pray 5 times/day)

Chapter Eight: The Mazdan conquest of the world

We are all Iranians now (well, at least half the world is).