



## BIBLE II. PERSIAN ELEMENTS IN THE BIBLE

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#### ii. Persian Elements in the Bible

Identification of Persian elements in the Bible is difficult because: (1) nobody knows just what was “Persian” when the biblical books were being written. (2) many things then “Persian” were also elements of other cultures. These are only the first of the difficulties.

Nevertheless, there are some reliable items—occasional references to Persia/Persians in dates and catalogues of places and peoples, a few stories with events set in Persia (Esther, Tobit, I Esdras, Daniel, II Maccabees), some information about men of Persian times. At least Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi prophesied in these times; Ezra and Nehemiah give us partially historical records of Persian officials and their actions, Ezra even presents several purported royal decrees (1:2-4; 4:17-22; 6:3-5; 6:6-12; 7:11-26) as well as letters of minor functionaries. *Si non è vero, è ben trovato*.

All these passages taken together lead us to believe that from Cyrus to Alexander relations between the two peoples were generally good and occasionally close. Some cultural exchange seems likely, and some evidence supports the likelihood. For example, incense, hitherto of little importance in biblical texts, becomes prominent in the laws and psalms of the Persian



period, as incense altars do in Palestinian archaeology of that time, and as incense was in Persian ritual (Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, p. 4).

Exchange of ideas also occurred. “Second Isaiah” (the author of Is. 40-54) used some Persian material. Is. 41:2-3; 42:1-7; 43:14; 44:28; 45:1-5, 13-14; 48:14-15 parallel the “Cyrus cylinder” (*ANET*<sup>2</sup> 315b ff.) so closely that both must have had a common source, which must have been the Persian propaganda which represented Cyrus to the Babylonians as chosen by Marduk, to the Jews as chosen by Jahweh (Smith, *JAOS* 83, 1963, pp. 415-21).

Second Isaiah also answered many of the questions in *Yasna* 44: “Who created/set in order justice, the sun and stars, earth and sky, waters and plants, right thought, light and darkness?” To these Zoroaster had expected his audience to reply, “Ahura Mazdā.” Second Isaiah makes Yahweh take the credit, either by similar rhetorical questions, or by direct answers (45:8; 40:12, 26; 42:5; 44:24; etc.; 40:12; 41:19; 40:13; 45:7, 19—these are mostly the same chapters in which he used the Cyrus propaganda). Creation had not hitherto been conspicuous among the acts attributed to Yahweh. (Genesis 1 is a late preface, most likely after 530.) Therefore Is. 40-45 probably marked an important extension of Yahweh’s supposed activity. When the author of Gen. 1 worked out the notion he kept the Persian idea of creation in six main categories, but eliminated Angra Mainyu, angels and demons, and insisted that everything created was “good”—evidently deliberate “corrections” of Persian thought (Barr, “The Question,” pp. 206ff., though Barr did not grasp the preceding argument).

Another example of similar “correction,” by Second Isaiah himself, appears in his introduction of monotheism. In praising Yahweh’s creative power, he declared him the creator of both good and evil. This left no place for a separate evil power, so he made Yahweh the only god and declared the rest mere idols. This solution was not satisfactory to later Jews, who were unwilling to blame evil on Yahweh. Similarly, later Persians were unwilling to have Ahura Mazdā’s omnipotence limited by the power of his wicked twin. Therefore both literatures contain series of passages trying to solve the problem of theodicy, independent developments from an original instance of influence.

Second Isaiah’s denial of the existence of other gods was the extreme expression of an earlier Israelite tradition, classically expressed in Dt. 12, which prohibited Israelites to worship them and ordered destruction of their shrines. The Achaemenids, however, had an empire to govern. Whatever they



thought of other peoples' gods, they generally treated them with diplomatic respect. The only Achaemenian text that resembles Dt. 12:2f. is Xerxes' claim in XPh 35-41 (Kent, *Old Persian*, p. 151). Again, these are probably independent. So too are the passages, in both the Old Testament and the Avesta, where the great ethnic gods appear in groups of minor gods (e.g., Ps. 82; *Yasna* 30.9; 31.4; 51.22 (?); Darius, DB 4.61, Kent, pp. 129, 132; Xerxes, XPc 12-13, Kent, p. 149).

Similar parallel development appears in beliefs about life after death. Darius left many inscriptions inculcating good behavior, so many that we can infer from their silence that he did not choose to threaten the disobedient with post-mortals punishment (the lack is particularly conspicuous in DB 4.57-59, Kent, pp. 129, 132). Similarly, the only mention in his inscriptions of what may be post-mortals reward is a single sentence which interrupts the thought in DB 5.18-20 (Kent, pp. 133-34; col. 5 is a later addition to the text, Kent, p. 108a). And this sentence, promising Ahura Mazdā's protection, may refer to protection of the corpse—the Achaemenids buried. Xerxes, by contrast, proclaimed that, "The man who . . . worships Ahura Mazdā and Arta reverently . . . becomes happy while living and becomes blessed when dead" (XPh 46-56, Kent, pp. 151-52). In the generation before Darius, Second Isaiah had nothing to say of post-mortals rewards or punishments. Perhaps by the time of Xerxes, some glossator added a prophecy of the resurrection of the dead—the first reference to it in the Old Testament, II Is. 26:19. Yet, later "The Book of Isaiah" was finished off with a prediction of eternal punishment for (at least) the bodies of the wicked; they would be burned and eaten by (fireproof?) worms 66:24. The Palestinian development shows no debt to the Persian, and the Persian seems to have been non-Zoroastrian. Zoroaster had been liberal with post-mortals punishments "in the house of Evil Thought," mainly by darkness, cold, bad food, and stench, but this notion of a supernatural fourth class hotel run by a fiend was never taken up by a biblical writer. (The notion of post-mortals judgment, reward, and punishment had appeared in Egypt about a thousand years before the earliest defensible date for Zoroaster, but the Old Testament authors deliberately neglected the Egyptian beliefs, too.)

The return of the Judean exiles in the late 500s started a dispute about purity which ran through the following century. The exiles at first refused to allow the local Judeans to participate in rebuilding the temple; overruled on this, they denied the purity of the high priest and declared marriage with non-



Judean women unclean. Their later leader, Nehemiah, was able to overrule the high priest's permission of gentiles in the temple and to cleanse the temple of the permitted impurity, to drive out a son(?) of the high priest who had married a Samaritan girl, and to organize a temple police to enforce his requirements (Smith, *Palestinian Parties*, chaps. 5-7). All this proves that the exiles came back with purity rules different from those of the native Judeans. Did they get them from the Persians for whom they had worked? So Boyce, 1984, pp. 298f. The suggestion is supported by historical likelihood and by many similarities between Persian and Jewish purity laws. Nevertheless, Leviticus and the *Vendidad* show practically no signs of direct literary dependence. Persian influence, here almost certain, seems to have been a matter of concepts and implementations, not of specific sources.

As shown above, this relationship makes it hard to distinguish dependence from parallel developments. In the case of purity, the reports of conflicts between "the people of the land" and the ex-exiles indicated the latter's dependence on alien standards. For angelology and eschatology we have no such guidance. Here some scholars have turned to philology for help. It has been argued that Greek *pneuma* originally meant "blowing," "breath," or "breath-like material," so its extension to mean "a spirit" (whether the "inner man" or a disembodied being or a psychological condition, e.g., "a spirit of anger") reflects the influence of the Iranian *mainyu*. However, Hebrew *rū<sup>h</sup>* already had this entire range of meanings in pre-exilic times (e.g. Gen. 6:17; 8:1; 41:38; Jud. 11:29; I Sam. 16:14; I K. 22:21f.; Is. 11:2). Thus the extension of *pneuma* can be explained by translation of the Hebrew and the translation's influence. Both "the spirit of Yahweh" and "the angel/angels of Yahweh" appear often in the oldest biblical strata and are apt to be at one moment identical with him, at the next distinguished, as Spənta Mainyu and the Aməša Spəntas are vis-à-vis Ahura Mazdā. Here we must have independent resemblance. Moreover, the Aməša Spəntas are conspicuously absent from the Bible, Yahweh's will, justice, kingdom, glory, etc., never seem to be personified. This suffices to disprove any theory of strong general influence by any text like the present Avestan one.

Particular influence would seem most likely in the growth of the power or powers of evil. Nevertheless, there is no trace of "the Lie" as a cosmic power, nor does Satan or the devil ever come near being Yahweh's twin, nor does the concern to ward off evil spirits ever play so large a part as it does in the Avesta. Again, we find parallelism without clear contact. In Daniel 10:11, 20



Persia and Greece have supernatural “princes” who fight against those friendly to the Jews (and are therefore, of course, evil). Jesus and Paul live in a world infested and ruled (for the present) by demons: Jn. 14:30; 16:11; I Cor. 2:6, 8. The author of the Apocalypse envisions wars of angels and demons in heaven and on earth—Michael and his angels fighting against the devil and his demons (12:7f.)—to end only when all powers of evil are thrown into a pool of fire where “they will be tortured day and night for ages of ages” (20:10).

Besides these major phenomena many scattered details have been supposed evidence of Iranian influence, but in no case have any been shown to be dependent on any known Iranian source, and in all cases the suppositions are discredited by the isolation of the details and the lack of any Iranian structure or theory to which they might belong.

Thus, for instance, in Jn. 8:44-5, Jesus is made to say to Jews, “You are (children) of your father the devil and want to carry out your father’s desires. He was a murderer from the beginning and had no part in the truth, nor is there any truth in him. When he speaks falsity, he speaks from his own (stock), because he is a liar and the father of falsity. As for me, because I declare the truth, you do not believe me.” Here the devil and falsity look like Angra Mainyu and the Lie, and the total opposition of their adherents to those of the truth is in the spirit of Zoroaster. But antitheses between truth and falsity, light and darkness, good and bad, etc., are almost universal, as are the equations, Good = truth = light, and the like. Similarities in such matters do not prove dependence, and here there are important differences that argue against it. In Zoroastrianism the Lie was prior to Angra Mainyu, who chose it (*Yasna* 30.3-5); in John, falsity is the “child” of the devil. In Zoroastrianism, as in Christianity, all men are creatures (“children”) of the good god; the anthropological dualism of Jn. 8:44 contradicts both traditions. Most important, although the antitheses found in the quoted passage are often echoed in John, the rest of the Zoroastrian system is utterly lacking; there are no traces of the grotesque mythology and eschatology, let alone of the Zoroastrian social classes, cult of fire, rituals, purity rules, discipline, and so on. To infer Zoroastrian influence when all these are unattested is unlikely.

Consequently we are driven back to the demonology and eschatology already mentioned. These are most fully represented in the Apocalypse, but traces of them appear in most other books of the New Testament and the Pseudepigrapha; evidently they were widespread, though not universal, in early Christianity and Judaism. What most resemble Iranian material are the



Christian references to a wicked ruler of this world. But even here there are differences. In Christian mythology the ruler is always a creature, emanation, corruption, or the like, of the good god or of one of the good god's aspects or descendants. This is true even in most of the systems commonly called "gnostic"; the cliché that declares them "dualistic" is most often false. On the other hand, *Yasna* 30.3-5 says the good and bad spirits were "twins," and orthodox Zoroastrianism took this to mean separate, independent individuals (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 193). Thus the common "gnostic" forms of Christian teaching are somewhat similar to those of the Zurvanite sect in Iran, a few extreme "gnostics" held positions like that of orthodox Zoroastrianism, but no Zoroastrians seem to have held the orthodox Christian position (that the devil was created by the good god as a good being, and later revolted), and none of all the above positions matches the biblical one, because the bible has no explicit teaching about the origin of evil spirits.

Similarly, in eschatology, those authorities who write of the Zoroastrian river of fire can refer to no text earlier than the *Bundahišn* (*Yasna* 32.7, 51.9; etc., often cited, refer to the use of fire in the judicial processes that Zoroaster thought would enliven the end; general references to destruction of the world by fire probably reflect Greek theories—when the river does appear it does not destroy the world, but finally runs down the drain and cleans that out.) On the other hand, destruction of the world by fire was predicted by Zephaniah 1:18, about 620, certainly before Persian influence. Daniel 7:9-10, ca. 160 b.c., combined the conception of Yahweh as fire (from Dt. 4:24) with Ezekiel's visions of his throne (1, etc.) and of the river flowing from the temple (47:1-12), II Peter 3:5-7 elaborated Zephaniah; the Sibyllines took up Daniel (2:196-205; 3:84-87; etc.); and pseudo-Hystaspes, first quoted by Lactantius (*Divinae Institutiones*, ed. S. Brandt, *Corpus Scriptorum Ecclesiasticorum Latinorum* 19, Vienna, 1890, 7.18), imitated them. There is no reason to think this clear Jewish tradition a reflection of invisible Iranian material. Finally, the "pool of fire" in Apoc. 20:10 is neither a river nor a threat to heaven or earth, but merely a place where the devil and his associates can be tortured forever. Most modern scholarly opinion holds that the Persian fire was to destroy the wicked almost at once; medieval Persian opinion made it purify them for a happy hereafter (*Bundahišn*, chap. 34; see Boyce, 1984, p. 52, par. 2.3.7). Neither belief is compatible with the New Testament doctrine of eternal torment, so it seems unlikely that the Persian theory (if any such theory was held in the first century) had any relation to the New Testament teaching.



In sum, the late date and textual uncertainty of the Persian material and the early date and strength of the Christian and Jewish influence in Iran make it hardly worthwhile to discuss the many, brief, isolated parallels between Iranian and biblical material. Nevertheless, discussion will surely continue. This may be explained by *Gāthā* 30.9 in the rendition of Duchesne-Guillemin, “Les pensées se rassemblent là où l’intelligence est défaillante.”

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For earlier studies, primary texts, historical and cultural background, and other relevant matters, see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, vols. I-II.