*Published:* July 20, 2005
*Last Updated:* July 26, 2013

# ZOROASTER VI. AS PERCEIVED IN WESTERN EUROPE

**ZOROASTER**

vi. AS PERCEIVED IN WESTERN EUROPE AFTER ANTIQUITY

There is a continuous tradition of reports about Zoroaster among early and later medieval Christian historians, chroniclers, and annalists. The most prominent authors include Eusebius of Caesarea (ca. 260-265 to 339/340), St. Jerome (ca. 347-419/420), St. Augustine (354-430), Gregory of Tours (538/539 594/495), Isidore of Seville (560-636), Rabanus Maurus (ca. 780-856), Hugo [Hugh] of Saint-Victor (1094-1141), Petrus Comestor (ca. 1100-ca. 1179), Roger Bacon (ca. 1220-92) and Vincent of Beauvais (ca. 1190-1264) (On these and other authors see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 439-63). In slightly modified form, this tradition continues through the early modern periods stretching from Humanism to Enlightenment. Prominent authors from these periods include Sir Walter Raleigh (ca. 1554-1618), Samuel Bochart (1599-1667), Athanasius Kircher (1601-80), Olaus Rudbeck (1630-1702), and Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) (On these and other authors see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 463-501). All these authors in one way or another made use of a selection of a maximum of eleven motifs that can be combined and recombined for different purposes.

According to the set of information that was inherited from antiquity (see Bidez and Cumont), Zoroaster was identified with a descendent of Noah—the

usual candidates are Ham, Mizraim, Kush, and Nimrod—and he was regarded as a Bactrian king who had fought a war against Ninus and had lost his life during this war. Zoroaster was held to have composed two million verses and to have written down the seven liberal arts (*artes liberales*) on two columns. It was assumed that Zoroaster had wanted to present himself as a god. In order to achieve that aim it was reported that he had excessively consulted a demon, who would eventually cause Zoroaster's death. The presumed fact that he had laughed when he was born—a motif that can also be found in the Pahlavi legends—would foreshadow his demonic nature. Moreover, he was held to have invented the cult of fire and, worst of all, magic.

Magic, indeed, is one of the main topics connected to Zoroaster in European intellectual history. Again we are dealing with a motif that is first attested in antiquity and goes all the way to modern esotericism and the contemporary scene of middle-class magic and witchcraft. Most prominent European scholars of magic of the early modern period devoted at least one brief passage to the supposed inventor of that discipline. Here, it may suffice to mention the names of authors such as Heinrich Cornelius Agrippa of Nettesheim (1486-1535), Giordano Bruno (1548-1600), Giambattista Della Porta (ca. 1535-1615), Jean Bodin (1530-96), Gabriel Naudé (1600-53), and Eliphas Lévi (1810-75). Contrary to the authors mentioned in the previous section, most of these authors (on whom and others see Stausberg 1998a, pp. 503-69) were in favor of a 'pure', or 'natural', version of magic that was carefully distinguished from its 'demonic' branch. Correspondingly, Zoroaster came to be regarded as a wise man, who would know about the secrets of nature and heaven.

The distinction between two sorts of magic gained prominence during the Renaissance, and that period witnessed a powerful revival of the figure of Zoroaster. The most important author in this respect is the Florentine Neo-Platonist Marsilio Ficino (1433-99), who is also famous as the translator of some writings attributed to Hermes Trismegistos (on Ficino and Zoroaster, see Stausberg 1998a, pp. 93-228). Zoroaster appears in many of Ficino's writings, where he is consistently referred to as a figure of authority. Starting with his commentary to the Platonic dialogue *Philebos*, Ficino mentions Zoroaster as the first of a series of six "ancient theologians" also comprising Hermes Trismegistos, Orpheus, Aglaophamos, Pythagoras, and Plato. The last is held by Ficino to have incorporated the wisdom of his predecessors in his writings, which in turn were revived and commented upon by Ficino. In this way,

Zoroaster came to be regarded as the fountainhead of the entire Platonic tradition. Ficino, and many after him, argued in favor of a substantial congruency between, on the one hand, the ancient tradition which culminated in Platonism and, on the other, Christian revelation. For Ficino, and for some other Christian Platonists such as Agostino Steuco (1497/1498-1548), Francesco Patrizi da Cherso (1529-97), and Philippe de Mornay (1549-1623), this congruency was considered as an apologetic 'proof' of the truth-claims of Christianity. However, such Zoroastrian-Platonic Christianity to a considerable extent transformed the idea of what Christianity was all about. Platonic notions of the cosmos, ontology, interpretation of the object of understanding, language, and epistemology competed with Aristotelian notions, and the latter would triumph in the age of the Counter-reformation. In the course of that process, a major work of Patrizi, in which he strongly drew on the evidence of Zoroaster, was placed on the index of prohibited books (On Patrizi and Zoroaster, see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 291-393.) One stimulus emerging from Ficino's Neo-Platonism that was turned into a Christian dogma, however, was the idea of the immortality of the soul. Significantly, Ficino had argued in favor of that idea by referring to the authority of, among others, Zoroaster.

Prior to Ficino, within the confines of the Byzantine empire, the Platonist revival was inaugurated by the philosopher Georgios Gemistos Plethon (ca. 1355-1360 to 1454). At least according to his adversaries, Plethon's Platonism was part of his anti-Christian campaign culminating in his attempt to create a new law and compose a new confession of faith. In this project, Plethon referred to Zoroaster, the foremost of the ancient lawgivers and sages (Alexandre, p. 30), as his prime authority. In that way, Plato's supposed teacher Zoroaster substitutes for Moses as the prime lawgiver, and the creed that Plethon has written is entitled *Summary of the Teachings of Zoroaster and Plato* (text in Alexandre, pp. 262-69). Zoroaster is the champion of Plethon's program of religious revival and nativism (On Plethon and Zoroaster, see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 35-44, 57-82; 2001a; Tardieu suggests that Plethon's (presumed) mentor, the Jew Elisha, was an adherent of Sohrawardi's [d. 1191] illuminationism. While these ideas were soon forgotten, Plethon made a lasting impact on Zoroaster's place in later Western history in that he attributed a collection of obscure fragments, possibly of Middle Platonist origin, the so-called *Chaldean Oracles* (see Majercik) to Zoroaster. Thus, like Hermes Trismegistos, with whom Zoroaster finds himself on common ground throughout much of the early modern period (witness Ficino and Patrizi, but also later alchemical writings, on which see Stausberg, 1998, pp. 947-48),

Zoroaster acquired a 'scripture' and could from then on be 'quoted' and commented upon. Throughout the 17th century, in connection with the rise of antiquarianism and philological scholarship, the Zoroastrian origin of these texts was doubted and eventually replaced by 'authentic' Zoroastrian sources such as the *Sad dar* (tr. by Hyde in 1700) and later the Avestan texts (tr. by Anquetil in 1771). This development, however, was not irrevocable, for within the later Platonic and some esoteric traditions both Zoroaster and the *Chaldean Oracles* retained much of their charm.

While Zoroaster appeared as a figure of highest repute in the Neo-Platonist discourse and its corresponding hermeneutics, mostly in Italy, for many learned scholars from the northern Protestant countries such as Gerhard Johann Voss (1577-1649), Johann Heinrich Ursin (1608-67), and Theophile Gale (1628-78), Zoroaster was, rather, connected to negative ideas such as idolatry and the teaching of two principles (see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 604-51; 2001b). If anything of worth was to be found in Zoroaster, then it was only insofar as he originally was identical with Moses as claimed by Pierre-Daniel Huet (1630-1721; see Stausberg 1998a, pp. 654-70). In nascent Orientalism, the image of Zoroaster was not positive either, for Islamic stereotypes came to be mixed with European traditions. The results of that process can be seen in the writings of Barthélmi d'Herbelot (1625-95; see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 671-79).

In his *Historia religionis veterum persarum* (History of the religion of the ancient Persians, 1700; 2nd ed., 1760), the Oxford orientalist Thomas Hyde (1636-1703) presents an ingenious combination of all the relevant source materials available at the end of the 17th century. According to Hyde, originally the religion of ancient Persia was "orthodox." However, it had fallen into decay and was subsequently reformed by Abraham. Afterwards, it degenerated again, and Zoroaster took upon himself the task of again reforming it. Zoroaster was just the right person to achieve that aim, because in his youth he had been the servant of a Jewish prophet, and he was responsible for transferring the knowledge that he had gained in this way to Persia and the Persians. According to Hyde, Zoroaster had acquired so deep an insight into the mysteries of revelation that he was able to make a valid prediction of the birth of the Messiah. (On Hyde, see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 680-712; 2001b.)

In his *Natural History of Religion* (1757), sec. 7, David Hume refers to Hyde's ideas about the 'monotheism' of the Persians (see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 718-23). In turn, Hyde's thesis of the basic 'orthodoxy' (in Protestant Christian

terms) of the ancient Persians and their main 'sect' was in part a response to the challenge resulting from an intellectual experiment made by Pierre Bayle (1647-1706). In his famous *Dictionary,* Bayle had sketched a debate between the philosopher Melissos (the spokesman of the monistic position) and Zoroaster. whom Bayle casts in the role of spokesman for a dualistic position and as a forerunner of Mani (see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 724-35; 2000). The stage was set for a debate which would continue throughout the 18th century, and the question if Zoroastrianism is a 'monotheistic' or a 'dualistic' religion has still been a hot topic in 20th-century scholarly debate.

The idea that Zoroaster's biography had a Jewish side was not unknown; in an alchemical treatise published in 1738 (on which see Stausberg, 1998, pp. 948-52), Zoroaster was even referred to as a "famous Jew and Rabbi." This gave Hyde the opportunity to assign an important role to him in the history of humanity, but a number of later authors used this information to drag Zoroaster through the mud. Most influential in this regard was Humphrey Prideaux (1648-1724), who considered Zoroaster to be the greatest impostor who had ever lived on earth (Stausberg. 1998a, pp. 740-56). In part, this polemic against Zoroaster was actually directed against deism and the idea of 'natural religion'.

As a matter of fact, Zoraster was a key figure in Enlightenment discourse focusing on these issues. In 1751, Zoroaster, as the perfect enlightened king appeared as the hero of a philosophical novel; its author, Guillaume Alexandre de Méhégan (1725-66) soon found himself in the Bastille (see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 884-94). References to Zoroaster can be found in the works of almost all major French Enlightenment thinkers (for references, see Stausberg, 1998a, index), most prominently perhaps in the several writings of Voltaire (1694-1778) in which Zoroaster played different and often contrasting or even contradictory roles, ranging from the champion of reason to the incarnation of nonsense (on Voltaire and Zoroaster, see Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 901-46). Voltaire refers to Zoroaster in novels, letters, dictionaries, historical texts, etc.; and this may be regarded as typical for the 18th century, where we find Zoroaster in a broad range or discursive practices and contexts (for references see Stausberg, 1998a), such as letters, novels, prophecies, tragedies, astrological drama (idem, 1998a, pp. 966-67), fictive reviews (pp. 963-65), Kabala (pp. 965-66), political propaganda (idem, 1998c), and on the stage of the opera (idem, 1998a, pp. 869-84; Handel's [1685-1759] *Orlando* is to be added; on Mozart's [1756-91] *The Magic Flute*,see Rose, pp. 120-47; there are later

adaptations!).

Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron (1731-1805) published his *Zend-Avesta* some years after his return from India, where he had entertained an intense, albeit problematic, working relation with two Zoroastrian priests (Stausberg 1998b). Among the many materials contained in this set of three volumes, there is a biography of Zoroaster *(Vie de Zoroastre)*, which was partly based on New Persian (Zoroastrian) materials. Contrary to Hyde, Prideaux, and others, Anquetil no longer places Zoroaster in the parameters provided by Biblical history, but he tries to elucidate Zoroaster's contribution to the history of human civilization. According to Anquetil, Zoroaster lived in the 6th century BCE (589-512), which he considers to be a revolutionary period in the history of human thought, for it was in this century that Pherecydes founded Greek philosophy and taught the immortality of the soul, that Confucius reestablished moral purity and simplified the cult of the first Being, and that Zoroaster propagated the idea of time without limits, i.e., eternity. (Some years later, de Pastoret published a comparison of Zoroaster, Confucius, and Moḥammad.) Despite his lasting achievements, however, according to Anquetil Zoroaster ultimately failed because of his weak character: his "enthusiasm" and his arrogance led to imposture and the eruption of war (Stausberg, 1998a, pp. 790-809). Reactions to Anquetil's work were mixed (and his character doubted). While scholars (such as William Jones) severely criticized Anquetil, others (such as Johann Gottfried Herder in Germany) were electrified. Several English Romantics received part of their inspiration from Anquetil's *Zend-Avesta*. While references to ancient Persia or Zoroastrianism abound in English Romanticism (Rose, pp. 155-67), with the exception of Percy Bysshe Shelley (1792-1822) Zoroaster is rarely directly mentioned. In Shelley's *Prometheus Unbound* (1819) the Earth states (Act I): "Ere Babylon was dust, / The Magus Zoroaster, my dead child, / Met his own image walking in the garden. / That apparition, sole of men, he saw."

Later in the 19th century, (Francis) Marion Crawford (1854-1909), an American novelist living in Italy, published *Zoroaster* (1894),a historical novel set at the court of Darius. The novel recounts Zoroaster's unhappy love story with a Jewish princess and his prophetic mission that, in Crawford's report, in part was inspired by his teacher Daniel.

In the history of the Western perceptions of Zoroaster nothing remained the same after Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900) published the four parts of his *Also sprach Zarathustra* (Thus spoke Zarathustra)from 1883 to 1885 (a compiled

edition was first edited and published in 1892). As Jenny Rose has pointed out, within those years "more than thirty books relating to Zoroastrian texts were published in German" (Rose, p. 178), and Nietzsche did in fact, in a transformational mode, draw back on a number of Zoroastrian traits in these books. However, it seems that Heraclitus (see HERACLEITUS OF EPHESUS) had first been the candidate for the hero of the book (Wohlfart). In a later poem ("Sils-Maria"), one of the 14 *Lieder des Prinzen Vogelfrei* (Nietzsche, III, p. 648),Nietzsche recounts his first encounter with Zarathustra (Zoroaster), and in *Ecce homo* (1889) he complains that nobody had ever asked him what the name Zarathustra did actually mean to him, "the first immoralist." According to the explanation given here, the unique significance of the historical Zarathustra in the history of humanity consisted in his metaphysical interpretation of morality, in his idea that the fight between good and evil was the real force in the order of things (Nietzsche, VI, p. 367). As "that Persian" was responsible for this "fatal error," Nietzsche argues that Zarathustra, who, he feels, was "more veracious than any other thinker," was also the first who had realized his error; and hence he was the right choice to become the spokesman of the opposite position that overcomes his initial error (ibid.). Just as Nietzsche's Zarathustra was not intended to be a faithful copy of the historical Zarathushtra, so Nietzsche did not simply identify with his hero who announces that "God is dead."

Nietzsches enigmatic, yet powerful prose stimulated the composer Richard Strauss to a famous tone poem (used by Stanley Kubrick as film music for *2001: A Space Odyssey*), and it attracted many readers, few of whom, however, will ever have read the entire volume. (It is reported that many soldiers during World War I carried a copy of the book in their luggage.) Nietzsche's unique style also stimulated others to follow suit and continue Nietzsche's *Zarathustra* (for five examples, see Stausberg, 2002, p. 1 [with n. 2]). This process continued all the way down to Osho, formerly known as Bhagwan Shree Rajneesh (1931-90; see bibliography).

Apart from Osho, some other new religious movements refer to Zoroaster. For instance, this is the case with OHASPE, theosophy (which, in turn, made quite an impact on the Parsis [see Stausberg, 2002b, pp. 112-18]), anthroposophy, the Grail Movement of Abd-ru-shin (Oskar Ernst Bernhardt, 1875-1941), and, most significantly, Mazdaznan (on this movement see Stausberg, 2002b, pp. 378-400). Otoman Zar Adusht Hanish (1844[?]-1936), the 'master' of the movement, was by his adherents regarded as a reincarnation of Zoroaster

(Stausberg, 2002b, pp. 392-94). Throughout the 20th century, as in the 18th century, one finds references to Zoroaster in a wide range of source materials and textual genres, stretching from astrology (see idem 1998a, p. 968) to novels (Gore Vidal, *Creation,* 1981), and fantasy (Herbert W. Franke, *Zarathustra kehrt zurück* [Zarathustra returns],1977).

Apart from literary sources, since the 15th century (but possibly already the 11th) the Western perception of Zoroaster has also materialized in the form of paintings. In a rather bizarre manner, he is represented in a Florentine picture-chronicle (Stausberg, 1998d, pp. 342-45 with illus. 42). Possibly, he is presented in Raphael's "School of Athens" (idem, 1998d, pp. 345-50 with illus. 44-46). Moreover, we find him in illustrated chronicles (idem, 1998d, pp. 345-46 with illus. 43), in an illuminated MS from the southern Netherlands (idem, 1998d, pp. 350-51 with ill. 47), and in emblematical books (idem 1998d, pp. 350-52 with illus. 48). A painting by Eduard J. F. Bendemann (1811-89) that was part of the composition of the throne room at the royal palace at Dresden, Saxony (idem, 1998d, pp. 351-54 with illus. 49) was very influential in that it in some way was disseminated in India, where it is still popular among the Parsis.

Last but not least, it should not be forgotten that modern scholarly discourse is equally involved in the history sketched above. Iranologists and historians of religion have certainly had an impact on the public perception of Zoroaster, if only by providing new 'biographical' materials. On the other hand, the perception of Zoroaster by students of Zoroastrianism needs to be critically reflected upon. Zoroaster the shaman, the politician, the pious prophet, or the sacrificial priest: All these images at the same time continue older traditions of perception and stimulate scholarly imagination—and do so to an extent that goes clearly beyond the scanty evidence provided by the primary sources. Moreover, the history of Western perceptions of Zoroaster has evidently influenced modern Iranian and Zoroastrian discourses. In this way, 'Zoroaster' is an important node in the tight web of several intercultural relations.

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August 29, 2005