
THE DATE OF ZOROASTER: *Some Apologetic Considerations*

Winfried Corduan*

Christian apologetics of necessity functions on many levels. In addition to the conceptual/philosophical issues, the apologist must address the many factual/historical issues surrounding biblical revelation. Most importantly, sometimes these matters go hand in hand: one's treatment of factual concerns will be a reflection of one's philosophical stance; simultaneously, one's philosophical conclusions must comport with the factual evidence as it is available to us.

A case in point is the issue of the influence of ancient Iranian ideas on Jewish and Christian thought. Some hot topics in religious discourse today are the existence and nature of God, the reality of the supernatural realm, the problem of evil and its resolution, the nature of life after death, and the belief in a culmination of history in apocalypse. One thing that all these topics have in common is that there is a belief abroad (almost as a matter of conventional wisdom) that the Christian responses to these issues are to a large degree the result of an influx of Persian ideas into Old Testament religion during the latter years of the first Jewish commonwealth and its subsequent importation into Christian theology.

GENERAL REMARKS ON INFLUENCES IN WORLD RELIGIONS

We need to be careful not to become too defensive on an issue of historical influence. After all, the evangelical doctrine of scripture includes the notion that God revealed himself within human culture. Scripture, the Word of God, is written in human language with human concepts, manifesting human culture at every turn. Thus, the idea that part of the human culture which embodies divine revelation combines some Persian elements with Jewish ones need not be considered to be any more hostile to truth than the fact that parts of the New Testament combine Jewish culture with various Hellenistic (Greek and Roman) elements. Nevertheless, insofar as such belief in Persian influences

*Winfried Corduan holds a Ph.D. from Rice University and has taught since 1977 at Taylor University, where he holds the rank of Professor of Philosophy and Religion and is Associate Dean of General Studies.

may be presented as hostile to Christian truth, the issue needs to be confronted. Examples of hostility would be if the alleged Persian influence is seen as preempting factual reports of the origin of a belief in the Bible or if the matter is presented in terms of the belief being derived from Persian sources *rather than* being revealed by God. In any event, any discussion of such implications must be preceded by the factual question of whether such influencing actually did take place.

The tracing of influences in the history of religions is not as popular as it was at one time. Earlier in this century, it seemed to be a widespread occupation in the world of scholarship of comparative religion. Many scholarly investigations were driven by the axiom that innovations in religion occur only once;¹ then, if two cultures hold a similar belief or practice, either one of them must have derived it from the other, or they must both have derived it from a common source in a third culture (which may be several steps removed). As a self-evident axiom, this principle is surely dubious.

In order for the claim that one religious culture was the source for a belief or practice in another, the following criteria must obtain:

- 1) There should be some reason to think that similar beliefs could not have arisen in two different cultures. Such a reason could assume the form of such a close resemblance between the two beliefs that its arising twice in different cultures becomes too much of a coincidence, or a specific reference in the belief to one of the cultures. Vague similarities in terms or concepts are not sufficient to make the search for influences necessary.
- 2) The culture that is supposed to be the source of the belief for a second culture must show evidence of having possessed the belief in the way in which it is supposed to have influenced the second culture.
- 3) For the influence to have taken place, there needs to be sufficient opportunity in terms of time and location.
- 4) When the hypothesis of influence becomes specific, there must be good reason to believe that the influence did, in fact, go one direction and not the other.
- 5) Finally, there must be reason to believe that the recipient culture could be in some way disposed, no matter how unconsciously, to adopt some beliefs of

¹It would be a mistake to generalize from Wilhelm Schmidt's notion of *Kulturkreise* that all beliefs or cultural innovations that resemble each other in two cultures, no matter how loosely, must have a similar origin. At least for Schmidt, such relationships must be demonstrable by normal historical criteria. There is no question, however, that the wanton tracing of influences, which was carried out long before Schmidt, Gräbner, and the Vienna School, has found the vocabulary of *Kulturkreise* useful for its aims. Wilhelm Schmidt, *The Culture Historical Method of Ethnology*, trans. S. A. Sieber (New York: Fortuny's, 1939).

the originating culture. Conversely, there should not be evidence of intentional resistance to borrow from the originating culture.

When all of these criteria are met, influence becomes a strong inference. A good case in point would be the influence of Judaism and Christianity (for that matter, probably Zoroastrianism) on the Prophet of Islam, Muhammad. There is surely good reason based on Muhammad's life, times, and teachings to accept the proposition that he learned much from these religions (though one should also not minimize the presence of indigenous monotheism in Arabia at the time). In fact, in clear cases such as this one, the establishment of influence is pretty uninteresting and trivial; of much greater concern is the manner in which the prophet adapted the borrowed ideas to his own use.

A highly questionable case of whether the above criteria obtain is the situation of Zoroastrianism and canonical Judaism. Within the limits of this inquiry, I contend that the notion that canonical Judaism received certain key ideas from Zoroastrianism meets none of the above five criteria well enough to make it a reasonably strong inference. There may be good reasons to believe that certain non-canonical expressions of Judaism (e.g., Philo or the Talmud) may have received some Persian and Zoroastrian influence, but for the purposes of this article, these matters are not consequential.

REFERENCES TO THE SUPPOSED INFLUENCE

The notion of Zoroastrian influence on the development of Judaism and Christianity counts pretty much as conventional wisdom. Textbooks in world religions regularly present it as the main reason for occupying ourselves with an otherwise obscure religion. Thus Lewis M. Hopfe, author of the textbook I have used for many years, places his chapter on Zoroastrianism ahead of the one on Judaism and states that "this religion cannot be overlooked in any study of the religions of the world because of its great contributions to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam."² Later on he cautiously lists the Satan figure, resurrection of the body, concern for life after death in heaven or hell, God's plan for bringing the earth to an end, angels, and a day of judgment as the possible contributions of Zoroastrianism to Judaism and Christianity.³ Noss and Noss,⁴ to mention the authors of one other popular textbook, follow suit.

²Lewis M. Hopfe, *Religions of the World*, 6th ed. (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 246.

³*Ibid.*, 259.

⁴John B. Noss and David S. Noss, *A History of the World's Religions*, 9th ed. (Formerly: *Man's Religions*) (New York: Macmillan, 1994), 408.

A few further references must suffice to indicate the way in which the supposed influence is assumed and reported. George Foot Moore states,

The eschatology of Judaism has an unmistakable affinity to that of the Zoroastrian religion in the separation of the souls of righteous and wicked at death, and their happy or miserable lot between death and the resurrection, and in the doctrine of a general resurrection and the last judgment with its issues. The resemblances are so striking that many scholars are convinced that this whole system of ideas was appropriated by the Jews from the Zoroastrians, as well as that Jewish angelology and demonology were developed under Babylonian and Persian influence.⁵

What makes this assertion particularly intriguing is the fact that Moore dismisses the notion that the Jews could have influenced the Persians as "improbable" for "various reasons."⁶ However, he then proceeds to say that the seeds of the Jewish doctrine of the resurrection lay already in Isaiah 26:19, which he considers to be indigenous to Jewish thought⁷—but of which he had earlier said that it may be based on Ezekiel 37:12-14 (an exilic prophet) and Isaiah 66:7-9 (in Moore's view the post-exilic "Trito-Isaiah").⁸

A similar ambivalence surrounds R. C. Zaehner's presentation of the supposed influence. With his usual caution, he resists the facile equation of Zoroastrian and Judeo-Christian apocalyptic, but on the specific issue of whether the Judeo-Christian tradition has absorbed the idea of rewards and punishments in an afterlife from Zoroastrianism, he asserts,

The answer is surely "Yes," for the similarities are so great and the historical text so neatly apposite that it would be carrying scepticism altogether too far to refuse to draw the obvious conclusion.⁹

Further on, in decrying what he considers to be the corruption of Zoroaster's doctrines in the later Sassanid period, Zaehner expostulates,

One is tempted to say that all that was vital in Zoroaster's message passed into Christianity through the Jewish exiles, whereas all that was less than

⁵George Foot Moore, *Judaism in the First Centuries of the Christian Era: The Age of the Tannaim*, vol. 2 (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1958), 394.

⁶*Ibid.*, 394, n. 4.

⁷*Ibid.*, 395.

⁸*Ibid.*, 296. On Moore's acceptance of the three-part Isaiah, see p. 327. Since Is. 26 is commonly held in this scheme to be part of the writings of the first, 8th-century, Isaiah, Moore is apparently making some *ad hoc* modifications.

⁹R. C. Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism* (New York: Putnam, 1961), 57.

essential was codified and pigeon-holed by the Sassanian theologians so that it died of sheer inanity.¹⁰

To close this section with one further example on the more popular level, Charles Francis Potter makes the curious claim that

the significance of this coincidence (of the Jewish captivity in Babylon, and the rise of Zoroastrianism which brought about the return of the Jews to their homeland) has never been sufficiently recognized by either Jewish or Christian historians or theologians, although it radically changed the religions of both.¹¹

This, despite the widespread acceptance of the notion of Zoroastrian influence on Judaism. Potter gives only one concrete instance of this influence:

A careful Bible student with any historical sense is forced to recognize how very plainly the fact stands out that the Hebrews borrowed the devil from the Zoroastrians.¹²

On the whole then, the consensus appears to be the following: During the Babylonian exile as well as during the ensuing period of Persian hegemony which lasted until the coming of Alexander the Great, the Jews absorbed several important ideas from their Zoroastrian neighbors and overlords. To some extent the specific list of these ideas varies, but the devil, angels, and doctrines of the afterlife are commonly asserted to be among the beliefs passed on in this way. One further item not on the traditional list has been proposed recently by possibly the leading scholar of Zoroastrianism today. Mary Boyce has made the case that the Jews may have picked up the very notion of monotheism (i.e., God as the sole Creator) from Zoroastrianism during the exile. Because of her stature in the field, because of the fact that she is advancing a scholarly conclusion rather than a popularized depiction, and—most importantly—because her claim really puts the issues in perspective, we shall look at her proposal in a little more detail.

¹⁰Ibid., 171.

¹¹Charles Francis Potter, *The Great Religious Leaders* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1958), 64-5.

¹²Ibid., 76. Although it is not directly a part of the present story of Judaism and Zoroastrianism, I must mention H. G. Wells' amazing *tour de force* by which he claims that the Babylonian captivity was the single culturally refining influence on the Jewish people. "The plain fact of the Bible narrative is that the Jews went to Babylon barbarians and came back civilized....In the intellectually stimulating atmosphere of that Babylonian world, the Jewish mind...made a great step forward during the Captivity." H. G. Wells, *Outline of History*, quoted in Archie J. Bahm, *The World's Living Religions* (Berkeley: Asian Humanities Press, 1992), 249.

VERY BRIEF SUMMARY OF ZOROASTER'S TEACHINGS

Zoroaster, whose original Persian name was Zarathustra, is the founder of the religion that bears his name in Western circles. His followers survive as the Gabars in Iran and the Parsis in India and places of Indian immigration the world over. Zoroaster was born into the Aryan culture in which—similar to the religion of Vedic Hinduism—many gods, "daevas," were worshipped with fire sacrifices. Zoroaster taught that there was only one God (Ahura Mazda), the Creator, who manifests himself with his six Amesha Spentas and Spenta Mainyu, his Holy Spirit. These Amesha Spentas could be interpreted either as six attributes of Ahura Mazda's or as six angels; however, it may be most suitable to see them as six "persons" of God, analogous to the three persons of the Christian trinity. Thus, together with Spenta Mainyu, Ahura Mazda is a "heptinity." God is opposed by the evil spirit, Angra Mainyu. Angra is not equal to Mazda in either rank or power; the dualism of Zoroaster's own teachings (in contrast to later developments) is more ethical than metaphysical. Human beings need to side with Ahura Mazda and live by truth and light while avoiding the lies and darkness of the evil spirit. Zoroaster abolished animal sacrifices and condemned the ritual of the sacred drink, haoma, but he kept fire as sacred.

MARY BOYCE'S ARGUMENT

Mary Boyce is at the forefront of those scholars who give Zoroaster a quite early date.¹³ In her earlier writings she has argued for 1700-1000 B.C. as the most likely framework, but she has now reduced it to 1500-1200. This early date allows for a thorough dissemination of Zoroaster's teachings and the conversion of the Iranian rulers to this faith. Thus, by the time that Cyrus established the Persian Empire, he was a thoroughly devoted Zoroastrian. What has captured Boyce's attention (following Morton Smith)¹⁴ is the section of Isaiah (40-48) which mentions Cyrus by name and even refers to him as the Lord's "Anointed." Furthermore, Isaiah 45 describes Yahweh as Creator in terms which to Boyce bear a startling resemblance to Yazna 44, a part of the Avesta which is among the Gathas, the section which goes back to Zoroaster himself, and in which Ahura Mazda is displayed as the sole Creator. Finally, to complete the data, Boyce quotes Smith to the effect that other biblical passages that refer to God as Creator (such as Genesis 1) may have been written some time after the exile.

¹³Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*. Vol. 1: *The Early Period* (corr. ed.; New York: E. J. Brill, 1989); Vol. 2: *Under the Achaemenians* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1982).

¹⁴JAOS 83 (1963): 415-21.

Thus Boyce thinks that she finds herself confronted by the poignant situation in which Deutero-Isaiah, the Hebrew prophet among the exiles at the time of Cyrus, for the first time introduces the idea that Yahweh is the sole Creator of all that exists. And he does so in the context of praising Cyrus as divinely anointed. Since Cyrus is known to be a member of the very faith that has held exactly this belief about its high God, Ahura Mazda, for a long time, Boyce concludes that the second Isaiah must have learned this belief from Cyrus or his "agent" and adapted it to his own tradition.¹⁵

Additionally, Boyce claims that there is a piece of evidence for a Zoroastrian derivation of the doctrine of creation in Genesis itself. Each of the six Amesha Spentas is associated with one particular aspect of creation. These are:

Vohu Mana (Good Thought)—Cattle

Asha (Truth)—Fire

Kshatra (Kingdom)—Metals

Armaiti (Devotion, Piety)—Earth

Haurvatat (Wholeness)—Water

Ameretat (Immortality)—Plants¹⁶

What better way to explain the fact that in Genesis creation of these same parts of the world take place on six successive days than that the Genesis account is derived from the idea of the Zoroastrian Amesha Spentas! James Barr, in an article that on the whole is critical of the notion of Zoroastrian influence, seems to endorse this particular hypothesis and argues that the Hebrews would have left out any reference to angelic intermediaries in this context in an effort to distance themselves from pagan associations.¹⁷ (Thus, paradoxically, they would be absorbing a foreign belief while at the same time attempting to ward off foreign influence.) This piece of adaptation would had to have transpired sometime after the encounter between Deutero-Isaiah and Cyrus.

Boyce's thesis hinges on several assumptions. From the Hebrew side, it requires that Isaiah 40-48 was written by Deutero-Isaiah in Babylon, and that all other biblical material on God as Creator (including Genesis) was written subsequently, namely after contact with Zoroastrianism in Persia. I shall forego comment on these questionable

¹⁵Boyce, *History*, 43-47.

¹⁶Boyce, *History*, vol. II, 21-24.

¹⁷James Barr, "The Question of Religious Influence: The Case of Zoroastrianism and Christianity" *JAAR* 53, 2: 201-35. Apparently the fact that this list is seriously inconsistent with the Genesis 1 account in terms of both content and sequence bothers neither Barr nor Boyce.

matters in this paper. From the Persian side, Boyce's argument depends on Cyrus being a devout follower of Zoroaster's, thereby in turn necessitating a time for the ministry of Zoroaster which makes a Zoroastrian Cyrus possible.

Leaving the date of Zoroaster to the side for the moment, let us consider the question of whether Cyrus was Zoroastrian. As a matter of fact, it turns out that we know surprisingly little about the religion of any of the Achaemenid kings. Insofar as we have any data, they tend to be ambivalent. Darius, the third king in line after Cyrus displays his devotion to Ahura Mazda in several inscriptions.¹⁸ However, he also acknowledges "the other gods that are," thus leading one to suspect a more henotheistic practice than Zoroaster would have allowed. For other later kings, the syncretistic re-incorporation of pre-Zoroastrian deities is clear, even with Artaxerxes who instituted the Zoroastrian calendar.¹⁹

For Cyrus, however, the data are not at all ambiguous in one sense: there is no evidence that Cyrus was Zoroastrian. To the contrary, he rebuilt the temple of Marduk in Babylon and stated that he worshipped Marduk himself. He sent the Jews back to Jerusalem to rebuild their own temple. In fact, he encouraged other newly-acquired vassal states to rebuild their temples and worship their own gods. These actions are hardly the work of the zealous devotee of a monotheistic faith who converted Deutero-Isaiah. Further, various other aspects of his life (his burial, the fact that his religious buildings are not Zoroastrian fire temples, and the representations of various spirits which decorated his palace walls) are incompatible with Zoroastrianism.

Boyce interprets these apparent inconsistencies as not inconsistent with Cyrus' great devotion to Ahura Mazda, in the light of which he shows himself as accommodating and tolerant of alien beliefs. He not only does not engage in religious bigotry, but he also implements a pragmatically effective way of dealing with his subservient people.²⁰

Now, we can acknowledge that such accommodation regularly takes place. Boyce states:

¹⁸In addition to the inscriptions in which Darius declares his faith in Ahura Mazda, several of them come with a depiction of the king, over whom appears to hover a figure in a circle with long outstretched wings. The meaning of this symbol, which has become an official sign for Zoroastrianism, is highly disputed. Interpretations include that the figure represents Ahura Mazda (so Zaehner), the king's pre-existent soul (known as his *fravashi*), the king's spirit of fulfillment (known as his *khvarena*—so Boyce), or even as the god Indra/Intara, who had become transformed into the angel, Verethragna.

¹⁹Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight*, 154-72.

²⁰Boyce, *History*, vol. II, 65-66.

Whatever Cyrus' motives were for allowing Assyrian genii to pace his palace-walls, there is no reason why he as a Zoroastrian should not be allowed as much latitude as Christians—or for that matter Jews, Muslims or Buddhists, all of whom have from time to time indulged in startling inconsistencies.²¹

We need only to think of King Solomon who, despite all that he owed to Yahweh, eventually abetted idolatry himself. However, to invoke accommodation or inconsistency as a hypothesis for Cyrus, we need to begin with positive evidence that he was Zoroastrian at all, and that is still lacking.

If Cyrus were indeed such a devout Zoroastrian, why is the Zoroastrian tradition so shockingly silent about it? Mary Boyce replies with yet another speculative hypothesis. The Avestan legend about Zoroaster has him come to the palace of King Vishtaspa (Greek: *Hystaspes*). In Boyce's chronology, this event would have taken place sometime in the middle of the second millennium B.C. At first, Vishtaspa resisted Zoroaster's message, and, in fact, the prophet was incarcerated. However, when Zoroaster managed to heal Vishtaspa's horse supernaturally, the king converted and became the prophet's most loyal supporter. It so happens that King Darius, second in line of the throne after Cyrus also had a father named Vishtaspa. The hypothesis is that the later Zoroastrians came to think erroneously that Cyrus was Darius' father, and thus believed that Vishtaspa, convert of Zoroaster, and Cyrus-Vishtaspa, father of Darius, were one and the same person. Consequently, all of Cyrus' deeds as Zoroastrian have been passed down into history under the name of King Vishtaspa.

Again, that such a subsumption of the deeds of one man under the name of another man is possible, can stand uncontested. History knows of other examples of such confusion. For example the popular legend that, when Holy Roman Emperor, Frederick II, died he actually concealed himself in a cave from whence he will reappear again in the future to restore the empire to its glory, was transferred from the successful, but impious and blasphemous, Frederick II to his father, the pious Frederick Barbarossa, who died on a crusade. However, once again, as ingenious as Boyce's hypothesis about Vishtaspa is (and she is not the first to have advanced it), it not only lacks positive corroboration, but is belied by the inconsistencies between the details of the Vishtaspa legend and, according to Henning, all other known facts concerning Cyrus and Darius.²² Boyce's argumentation boils down to a

²¹Ibid., 61.

²²W. B. Henning, *Zoroaster: Politician or Witch-Doctor?* (London: Cumberlege [Oxford University Press], 1957), 25.

speculative hypothesis supported by a further speculative hypothesis which is plausible only if we do not take the data too seriously.²³

How can one support the idea that Cyrus was Zoroastrian? At one point Boyce begs the question altogether when she states that we know of a Zoroastrian presence in Babylon from the reference in Isaiah,²⁴ clearly a case of arguing in a circle. Alternatively, she also argues that Zoroaster lived early enough and that his teachings were spread widely enough, that we can assume that Cyrus simply must have been Zoroastrian.

THE DATES OF ZOROASTER

At this point in the discussion we get to the heart of this issue: the date of Zoroaster. For if Zoroaster lived too late to make it probable that Cyrus was Zoroastrian by default, then Boyce's argument has nothing left to stand on. In fact, as we already observed, Boyce advances a decidedly early date for Zoroaster.

Currently there are two major schools of thought on Zoroaster's date: around 600 B.C. and 1000 B.C. or earlier.²⁵ It is interesting to note that textbooks tend to claim consensus for the date they favor although there really is no agreement.²⁶

The Iranian tradition itself has preserved only one specific date for us. It appears in both Zoroastrian sources themselves and in credible reports about Zoroastrian beliefs.²⁷ All of them refer to Zoroaster's

²³This is a harsh judgment in light of Mary Boyce's credentials. But in the context of Zoroastrian studies, which have witnessed some truly fantastic speculations, Boyce's conclusions are relatively moderate. We shall return to this point when mentioning W. B. Henning's only partially heeded call for common sense.

²⁴Boyce, *History*, vol. II, 66.

²⁵In addition there are some Greek sources mentioning a time frame that would correspond to roughly 6,000 B.C., e.g. Diogenes Laertes, Pliny the Elder, and Plutarch. However, these dates are not given scholarly credibility.

²⁶Thus, Ninian Smart: "There is a rough consensus that he probably was of the tenth century B.C.E." *The World's Religions* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice Hall, 1989), 215. Hopfe: "Modern investigation into the Gathas seems to indicate a date between 1400 and 1000 B.C.E." *Religions of the World*, 248. Noss and Noss: "[Zoroaster's birth in 660 B.C.E.], with misgivings, is accepted by most modern scholars, but others, with some plausibility, contend that Zoroaster must have lived at an earlier period, perhaps as early as 1000 B.C.E. or as late as the first half of the sixth century B.C.E." *History of the World's Religions*, 390.

²⁷A. V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster: The Prophet of Ancient Iran* (New York: Columbia University, 1926), 150-81, contains a summary of all known sources and Jackson's evaluation thereof. Even though much work has been done in the interpretation of the various sources, the ones we have now are still the same ones that were available to Jackson.

The Iranian sources are: *Bundashin* 34:1-9; *Arta Viraf* 1:2-5; *Zatsparam* 23:12. These are also reported by various Muslim sources, including: Albiruni,

appearance 258 years before the time of Alexander the Great. In some sources this time frame is approximated as 300 years, but from their context we know that this is supposed to be an approximation.

Some of the sources also mention the fact that this number was reckoned by the magi (for whom, as we know, chronology was never a haphazard matter).

All of these references are relatively late. Some come from the very end of the Pahlavi period (the second major phase of Zoroastrianism from approximately A.D. 200 until the coming of the Muslims in the seventh century); others are even later. The Muslim sources are from the tenth century. There is nothing in the Avesta or any other earlier sources to pinpoint a date. Furthermore, it would be overreaching the evidence to think that the documents in question constitute separate, independent witnesses to the same time frame. They are essentially parts of the same flow of tradition concerning the date.

Lending credibility to these sources, their own limitations notwithstanding, is the absence of any other indigenous tradition concerning the time of Zoroaster. The burden of proof rests upon those either finding fault with this traditional date or advocating a different date.

Boyce's argumentation for an earlier date relies more than anything else on the language of the Gathas. She also brings in factors relating to the nature of the society which may have surrounded the Gathas, but without the linguistic evidence those matters are at best assumptions, at worst circularities. However, the language provides information deserving consideration in assigning a date to the Gathas. These are:

1) *The affinity of the language to that of the Indian Vedas.* The Aryan invaders who came to the Indian subcontinent spoke an Indo-European language, commonly referred to as "Vedic" because it is preserved in the sacred writings known as the Vedas. The Vedas stem from ca. 1500 B.C. on; Vedic is a precursor to Sanskrit, which is somewhat less complex. The language of the Zoroastrian Avesta is called "Avestan"; the Avestan of the Gathas resembles Vedic very closely. It is so different from later Persian languages that by the Pahlavi period, the Zoroastrians themselves no longer understood much of its meaning.²⁸

Chronology of Ancient Nations 1:17 and Masudi, *Meadows of Gold* and *Indicatio et Admonitio*.

²⁸Nyberg contends that part of the reason the vestan of the Gathas is so obscure is that it never was intended to mean much of anything. Rather, what we have in those writings issues basically from the ravings of a shaman in a hemp-induced ecstatic trance. H. S. Nyberg, *Die Religionen des alten Iran* (Leipzig, 1938).

2) *The discrepancy between the language of the Gathas and texts from the sixth century.* We have certain Persian writings dating from the sixth century B.C., e.g. inscriptions by some of the Achaemenid kings (Cyrus, Darius, etc.). There is a marked difference between the language used in these texts (which are also closely allied to later forms of Iranian language) and the Avestan, particularly of the Gathas, for which there are no further examples in the sixth century.

Consequently, Boyce and many others argue that the sixth century date must be wrong. On the basis of the language, the Gathas must have been written significantly earlier than that time period. Primarily because of the affinity to Vedic, Boyce dates the Gathas (and thus Zoroaster) in the same time period as the Indian Vedas. This early date allows ample time for the thorough dissemination and acceptance of Zoroaster's teachings. Then a Zoroastrian Cyrus could become a distinct possibility, and Boyce's arguments—at least from the Persian side—would have greater credibility.

Boyce explains the later date of 258 years before Alexander on the aforementioned basis that the later Zoroastrians, seeking to identify Vishtaspa and Cyrus, calculated backwards to a time that would indeed coincide roughly with the time of Cyrus. Thereby, she has found a handy explanation for the persistence of that date in the later traditions. Boyce has no problem conceding that the later magi were chronologically competent to reckon back to the time of Cyrus/Vishtaspa and come out with a very close match. If their records and their ability were good enough to yield that kind of precision, why should we think that they were ignorant of the object of their calculations, namely their prophet himself?

The fact is that the linguistic data are far from conclusive. They are not based on aspects of the languages themselves (in which case one would have to be thoroughly competent in them before risking any judgments), but on external matters, such as geographic factors, and assumptions about the rate of development of the language. W. B. Henning (who, incidentally, taught Boyce at least some of her language skills) states

This argument would hold good only if the language of the Gathas were the same dialect, at an earlier stage, as Old Persian; but that is not the case and has never been claimed. It is notorious that the various dialects of one and the same language group develop at different speeds and in different directions, so that the comparison of two dialects can never lead to a relative date. Moreover, in Iranian the Eastern and Western dialects developed not merely in different but in opposite directions; thus while the word endings disappeared in the West, they were well maintained in the East. From the

point of view of comparative linguistics the Gathas could have been composed at a date far later than 600 B.C.²⁹

It is impossible to say when, and to what extent, a language must remain the same or change. Particularly in a religious context, ancient and dead languages are frequently perpetuated long after massive changes in the vernacular. One has only to think of the use of Latin in Catholic Christianity, Sanskrit and even Vedic in Hinduism, or Quranic Arabic in Islam (even in countries where Arabic is not understood). Thus it is quite possible that Zoroaster might have recorded his prayers and reminiscences in a language he might not ordinarily have used.

However, we do not even have to resort to this latter hypothesis to make sense of the data. The geographic area that we call "Iran" or "Persia" has always been relatively disjointed. Even after the time of Cyrus, who brought the country together under Persian dominance, thereby succeeding earlier Median hegemony, Iran continued to exist as a collection of widely diverse political and geographical subunits. This diversity includes also a wide variety of languages spoken, along with other serious cultural divergences. Zaehner argues that Zoroaster was born and ministered in Ragha and Chorasmia respectively (the latter being King Vishtaspa's turf).³⁰ These were well north and east of where the Achaemenid kings lived, so a comparison of their language with that of the Gathas is thoroughly inconclusive as to the date. The differences are more easily accounted for by geographical distance, for which we have evidence, than by temporal separation—which is precisely the issue in question.

The best conclusion seems to be one based on the sources which date Zoroaster's appearance to 258 years before the time of Alexander. The "time of Alexander" was so cataclysmic in Persian history that it remained a constant reference point. In terms of historical reference, Zaehner states the accepted view that

for the Persian or Iranian the name 'Alexander' can only have meant the sack of Persepolis, the extinction of the Achaemenian Empire, and the death of the last of the kings of kings, Darius III. This occurred in 330 B.C.³¹

258 years before 330 B.C. gives us a date of 588 B.C., only two years before the Jewish Babylonian captivity and thirty years before Cyrus' rise. A matter that is not clear is to what event in Zoroaster's life this date could correspond. Three options are his birth, his call (at age 30), and his conversion of King Vishtaspa (at age 42). That it would refer to Zoroaster's birth is highly unlikely in order to allow for a fairly

²⁹Henning, *Zoroaster: Politician or Witch-Doctor?*, 36.

³⁰Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight*, 33.

³¹Zaehner, *ibid.*, 33.

Zoroastrian Darius (who ascended in 521). Both of the other options remain possibilities, though the consensus among those scholars who accept a sixth-century setting seems to go in the direction of Zoroaster's coming to Vishtaspa. Thus, Zoroaster's lifetime would be from 628 to 551 B.C. If the reference is supposed to be to the time of Zoroaster's call at age 30, the adjustment of twelve years would have to be made.

Finally, one may want to ask whether the sources claiming the date of 258 years before Alexander have intrinsic plausibility. Can one reasonably believe that a date of this accuracy has been preserved correctly for such a long time? As a matter of fact, there is good reason to believe that this date could have and would have been preserved with a good degree of reliability.

W. B. Henning, who almost single-handedly prevented Zoroastrian studies from losing themselves in a spiral of speculations, gives several good reasons for accepting this testimony as credible on its own ground.³²

1. *The date was preserved even when people did not know what it meant.* It has been suggested that the date was concocted by magi in order to make the interval between their own time and the time of Zoroaster come out to a thousand years (600 B.C. to A.D. 400), thereby bringing them into the time period of the next savior/prophet figure who was supposed to appear a thousand years after Zoroaster. The problem with that explanation (and, by the way, with the one alluded to earlier that they wanted to identify Cyrus with Vishtaspa) is that the chronologists of the Sassanian period were ignorant of the length of time of the Seleucid and Parthian periods. Their calculations were off by a few hundred years, so it would not have added up to more than eight hundred years. It appears that they stated the date because it was handed down to them precisely as that date.

2. *There is evidence for awareness of this date in the third century.* Even though the actual sources that we now have which mention this date are quite late, there is good reason to believe that it was known in the third century A.D. As noted above, the first Sassanian kings established a chronology which is misinformed, but which works on the presupposition of this date. They saw their own era beginning in the year 538 of their age, which was counted officially as the year 9,538 in Zoroastrian chronology. Zoroaster was believed to have inaugurated the tenth millennium, thus appearing in the year 9,000 (of a total of 12,000 allotted to all of world history). They also thought that the Seleucid/Parthian reign only took 266 years, and that this particular period began after Alexander had ruled for fourteen years. Subtracting 266 and 14 from 538 yields 258. Thus the appearance of Zoroaster even at that time must have been believed to have been our 258 years before Alexander. Consequently, again for no otherwise

³²Henning, *Zoroaster*, 36-43.

explicable reason, the third-century Sassanian kings used this date in their calculations.

3. *Chronological concerns were of high significance to the magi.* The magi would have had good motivation for maintaining memory of the date. Because Zoroastrian cosmology involved dividing history into four (or sometimes three) periods of three thousand years each, at the beginning of the last of which Zoroaster appeared, it is only natural to assume that a formula for when Zoroaster's time began would have been preserved, even when other matters of chronology had become misunderstood.

4. *The date fits into the other known facts of historical chronology.* As we have already seen, a huge question confronting anyone promoting an earlier date for Zoroaster is why there is no evidence of his specific teachings being adopted anywhere prior to the end of the sixth century. To see any evidence of Zoroaster's unique teachings we have to wait until Darius' inscriptions in the late sixth century in which he proclaims his devotion to Ahura Mazda. Even then, and during the subsequent Achaemenid dynasty, we find that Zoroaster's teachings are not accepted quickly or wholeheartedly (particularly if we believe that Zoroaster taught monotheism). In short, the circumstantial evidence is exactly what we would expect from a sixth-century date for Zoroaster. Finally, and with a certain amount of hesitation lest we put the cart before the horse, I cannot completely forego mentioning how well Zoroaster's ministry does fit into the so-called "axial age," the century of religious upheaval, characterized by a worldwide rebellion against oppressive priesthoods and by the reintroduction of monotheistic or mono-principled religions.

In sum, the existing data support with high plausibility a sixth-century date for Zoroaster. Zoroaster's ministry would have taken place initially in Chorasmia from whence his teaching spread west until it was accepted in all of the newly-founded Persian Empire. The message would have been disseminated pretty quickly, taking only decades to reach Darius by 522, but not fast enough to have converted Cyrus in Babylon, whose religious convictions seemed to have tended towards a polytheistic multiculturalism. By the same token, the Jews, who were sent home from Babylon by Cyrus in his first year, would have missed exposure to Zoroastrian teachings as well.³³

³³Unless, of course, one wants to stipulate a miracle by which in one stroke Zoroaster managed first to convert the Jews across hundreds of miles—resistant as they were becoming at this point to such an occurrence.

THE HISTORICAL IMPROBABILITIES OF INFLUENCE

There is no compelling evidence for either Zoroastrianism in Babylon during the Jewish captivity or for any later Jewish adoption of Zoroastrian beliefs.

1. The three books of the Old Testament which could chronologically establish a link to the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenid period—Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther—simply do not do so. The teachings associated with the supposed influence (angels, resurrection, apocalypse, etc.) make no appearance in those books. In fact, Ezra and Nehemiah specialize in the cultivation of purity in Judaism, and Esther is not occupied with doctrinal matters.

2. When one lines up the Old Testament descriptions of Satan, angels, the resurrection, and apocalypse (and for that matter, even the depictions in most of the intertestamental writings, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Apocrypha, and the New Testament) side by side with their Zoroastrian counterparts, the differences between them are notable. The Hebrew descriptions do not bear much resemblance to the Zoroastrian versions in nomenclature or details. There are no specific likenesses between Ahriman and Satan, Zoroastrian apocalypse and Jewish apocalypse, Zoroastrian angelology and Jewish angelology,³⁴ etc.

3. The scanty information that we have of the Zoroastrianism of the Achaemenid period gives us no reason to assume that the beliefs in question had developed in Persia in the way in which they were supposed to have influenced Judaism. It is an anachronistic *tour-de-force* to take the doctrines of the *Denkart*, the *Bundashin*, and the *Videvdāt*, all of which stem from the Sassanian period, interpret them as the Zoroastrianism of all ages, and conclude that the Jews must have been exposed to them during the time before Alexander. The truth is that we know very little of what the supposed Zoroastrians of the first Persian Empire did in fact believe. If we assume that they did by and large embrace Zoroaster's teachings, as represented in the Gathas, and the teachings of the earlier portions of the Avesta, we have some information to go on. But, as stated before, there is not enough genuine evidence to support a theory of wide acceptance of relatively orthodox Zoroastrianism in Iran during this time period.

4. Of the five criteria to establish influence which we mentioned initially, none support an influence of Zoroastrianism on canonical Judaism.

a) There is insufficient resemblance between the Jewish doctrines and the Zoroastrian doctrines to believe that one culture must have derived

³⁴The Jerusalem Talmud does mention that the Jews came back from Babylon with the names of angels (*H. R. 1. 2*), but they are not Persian names.

teachings from the other. Neither is there sufficient equivalence in terminology to demand influence of one group on the other in these matters.

b) The meager knowledge we have of Achaemenid Zoroastrianism does not allow us to postulate the wide-spread existence of Zoroastrian doctrines in Iran. As we saw, belief in a Zoroastrian Cyrus is without foundation. Thus, to claim Zoroastrian influence on canonical Judaism is to begin with an unknown. The argument commits the fallacy of *a d ignorantium*.

c) The crucial point of this article was to show that Zoroaster's initial ministry was far away from Babylon and roughly simultaneous with the exile. By the time Zoroastrianism reached Babylon, the Jewish remnant had returned to Palestine. Even though a few Jews remained in Babylon and all Jews lived under Persian hegemony for another two hundred years, there is no evidence of direct influence on canonical Judaism.

d) Since the point of this paper was to show that there was little physical opportunity to facilitate the passing of religious influence between Palestinian Judaism and Zoroastrianism, it would make little sense to speak of Jewish influence on Persian religion. However, if, as sound biblical theology demonstrates, the Jews had belief in monotheism, angels, judgment, apocalypse, and possibly even Satan (depending on one's dating of the Book of Job) prior to the exile, then, if one should be forced to conclude influence of one group on the other, the arrow of influence seems more reasonable to go from Judaism to Persian religion, rather than the other way around. I do not want to argue for that point, partially because I maintain belief in an original monotheism which reasserts itself from time to time in very divergent cultures. However, since the deportation of Israel in 722 B.C. brought many monotheists to the East (and many never returned), there would at least be a possibility that a person with such a belief may have wound up in Ragha, Media, to stimulate Zoroaster's religious imagination.

e) Finally, the information we have about the Jews after the exile shows that by then they no longer succumbed to the temptations of paganism. Whatever sins they may have been guilty of during the time from the restoration until the time of Malachi, it was no longer that of borrowing the religious beliefs and practices of their neighbors. The issues concerned intermarriage, lack of faith, and perfunctory religion; however, all these things occurred in the context of establishing and maintaining their distinctive faith. Not until later, under the Seleucids, do we find clear evidence of adaptation to pagan culture, and even then it led to the Hasmonean revolt. To find a time when the Jews were disposed to pick up foreign religious ideas, one has to look prior to the exile.

We conclude that, faint accidental resemblances notwithstanding, there is no foundation for the notion that significant doctrinal ideas in canonical Judaism were derived from Zoroastrian influence. James Barr begins his article on this topic by examining the question to what extent ideological commitments have colored the discussion of Zoroastrian influence. He concludes that there is very little evidence of this ideological tainting.³⁵ However, he only looks on one side of this matter, namely to what extent people have rejected the notion of Zoroastrian influence on the basis of ideology. I believe that, had he also considered the other side of the coin, namely to what extent the theory of influence is advanced on the basis of prior ideological commitments, he might have reached a different conclusion.

³⁵"On the whole, the question of Iranian influence upon Judaism appears less affected by ideology than do some other questions of the same kind." Barr, "Religious Influence," 202.

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