ZOROASTRIANISM, JUDAISM, AND CHRISTIANITY

Zoroastrianism, Judaism, and Christianity share so many features that it seems that there must be a connection between them. Does this connection really exist? If so, how did it happen? And how much of the similarity between these faiths is due simply to parallel evolution, rather than direct contact and influence?

The simplest answer to the first question is, yes, there is a great deal of Zoroastrian influence on Judaism and Christianity, but the problem is that it is hard to document this exactly, at least in the early stages of Judaism. The evidence is there, but it is all "circumstantial" evidence and often does not stand up to the rigorous judgment of scholarship. Nevertheless, I will dare to present these ideas assertively, with the qualification that there will likely be no definite way to prove them either true or untrue.

In 586 BCE, the forces of the Babylonian Empire conquered the Jews, destroying their Temple and carrying off a proportion of the Jewish population into exile. The captives consisted especially of educated and upper-class people as well as the royal family. This "Babylonian captivity" lasted almost fifty years. In 539 BCE the Persians, under the leadership of the Achaemenid King Cyrus, conquered Babylon, and in 538 Cyrus issued a decree stating that the Jews would be allowed to return to their homeland. Not only were the Exiles released, but Cyrus, and to some extent his Achaemenid successors, also supported the rebuilding of the Jewish Temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus' policy was motivated not only by his religious tolerance (he also encouraged other, pagan peoples to maintain their own religions) but by statesmanlike wisdom; people treated generously are less likely to rebel.

But not all the Jews wanted to go home. In the years of Exile, the adaptable Jewish people had established themselves in Mesopotamia, settling there and engaging in business and even politics. Many Jews, while remaining devout Jews, did not go back to their homeland. They carried on their lives in their new home, and as the Persian Empire consolidated its rule, some Jews even rose to high positions of service in the imperial court.

It was during the end of the Exile, among the Jews now living in the Persian Empire, that the first significant contact was made between the Jewish and Iranian cultures. And it is evident in the Bible that Jewish thinking changed after the Exile. The question is then: are these changes the result of the cultural meeting of Jewish and Iranian thinkers, or are these changes due to the shock of Exile? During the Exile, Jews had to change not only how they worshipped, since they no longer had their temple or the animal sacrifices which had been at the center of their faith, but also how they thought about God. The Jewish concept of God as their tribal protector, who would save them from being conquered or exiled, had to undergo revision.

I believe that both factors are present, inspiring the changes in post-exilic Judaism: not only the Jews thinking new thoughts about God and humanity, but also contact with the Zoroastrian religion of the Persian Empire. But then another question arises: how did the ancient Jews learn about Zoroastrianism? It is highly unlikely that Jewish scholars and thinkers ever directly encountered Zoroastrian scriptures such as the Gathas (the founding text of the Zoroastrian faith, attributed to the Prophet Zarathushtra himself) or the Yashts (hymns of praise to various intermediate deities and guardian spirits, adapted from pre- Zarathushtrian mythology). The priestly usage and archaic language of the Avesta scriptures would be a barrier to Jews. But most of Zoroastrianism, known and practiced among the people, existed in oral tradition: through word of mouth, not by the study of written scriptures. This oral tradition included stories about God, the Creation, the ethical and cosmic conflict of Good and Evil, the divine Judgment and the end of the world. The tradition would also include the well-known Zoroastrian symbolism of fire, light and darkness, as well as stories and prayers about the yazatas or intermediate spiritual beings and the Prophet Zarathushtra. These are all elements of what might be called "classic" Zoroastrianism (as it developed from the "primal" Zoroastrianism of the Gathas).

This is how the Jews encountered Zoroastrianism - in private dialogues and political and civic experience, rather than in formal religious studies. And as the Jewish religion was re-made after the catastrophe of the Exile, these Zoroastrian teachings began to filter into the Jewish religious culture.

There are some venturesome scholars who say that the Jewish idea of monotheism was inspired by contact with Zoroastrian monotheism. While it is true that Jewish monotheistic ideas did change after the Exile, I do not believe that it was Zoroastrian contact which inspired this change. Rather, it was the fact of the Exile itself. Jewish thinkers and prophets even before the Exile were hinting at a concept of One God who was greater than just an ethnic divinity. When the Captivity threw these thinkers into a foreign culture, away from their divinely appointed homeland, it was necessary to broaden their idea of God to a more universal and abstract deity, who could be worshipped with praise and moral actions rather than animal sacrifices and liturgies. The concept of a single God whom all nations would eventually worship evolved among a conquered and exiled people no longer assured of their divinely protected status.

The Gathas of Zarathushtra, which may pre-date Cyrus by almost a thousand years, do describe God in universalist and abstract terms, but by the time of the Jewish contact, it is unclear just what type of monotheism was believed in the Zoroastrian community. Was it a true monotheism which worships only One God, to whom all other gods are either evil demons or simply non- existent? This seems to be the monotheism of Zarathushtra, but not of the Achaemenid kings of the Persian Empire, who were able to incorporate the veneration of subordinate divinities into their worship, as long as these subordinates were recognized as creations of the One God and not gods in their own right. The Jews, as we will see, would recognize angels as semi-divine intermediaries,

but would not go so far as the Zoroastrians in honoring those intermediaries with hymns of praise such as the Yashts.

One of the most important differences beween Jewish monotheism and Zoroastrian monotheism is that Jews recognize the one God as the source of both good and evil, light and darkness, while Zoroastrians, during all the phases of their long theological history, think of God only as the source of Good, with Evil as a separate principle. There is a famous passage in Second Isaiah, composed during or after the Exile, which is sometimes cited as a Jewish rebuke to the Zoroastrian idea of a dualistic God: "I am YHVH, unrivalled: I form the light and create the dark. I make good fortune and create calamity, it is I, YHVH, who do all this." (Isaiah 45:7) This passage, which is a major source for Jewish speculation on the source of good and evil in the world, denies the Zoroastrian idea of a God who is the source only of "good" and favorable things.

Therefore I would not say that contact with Zoroastrian monotheism influenced Jewish monotheism. The philosophical minds of the two cultures may indeed have recognized each other as fellow monotheists, but this central Jewish doctrine is one which was not learned from the Zoroastrians. It grew from the original monotheistic revelation attributed to Moses, just as Zoroastrian monotheism grew from the revelation of Zarathushtra (who may indeed have been roughly contemporary, though completely unconnected, with Moses). These were two parallel journeys towards understanding of one God.

There are other developments, however, in the Jewish faith which are much more easily connected with Zoroastrian ideas. One of the most visible changes after the Exile is the emergence of a Jewish idea of Heaven, Hell, and the afterlife. Before the Exile and Persian contact, Jews believed that the souls of the dead went to a dull, Hades-like place called "Sheol." After the Exile, the idea of a moralized afterlife, with heavenly rewards for the good and hellish punishment for the evil, appear in Judaism. One of the words for "heaven" in the Bible is Paradise - and this word, from the ancient Iranian words pairi-daeza, "enclosed garden," is one of the very few definite Persian loan-words in the Bible. This moral view of the afterlife is characteristic of Zarathushtrian teaching from its very beginning in the Gathas.

It is also thought that the Jewish idea of a coming Savior, or Messiah, was influenced by Zoroastrian messianism. Already in the book of Second Isaiah, possibly written during the Exile, the prophet speaks of a Savior who would come to rescue the Jewish people: a benefactor, "anointed" by God to fulfill his role (the word "messiah" means "anointed one"). In many verses, he identifies Cyrus the liberator as that Messiah. The growth of messianic ideas is parallel in both Jewish and Iranian thought. Zarathushtra, in his Gathas, describes a saoshyant (savior) as anyone who is a benefactor of the people. Similarly in Jewish prophecy, the Messiah is not a single special Savior but anyone who does great things for the Jewish people - even if that person is a Persian King. But as both Persian and Jewish savior-mythology evolve, the Saoshyant - and the Messiah - take on a special, individual, almost divine quality which will be very important in the birth of Christianity.

The conquests of Alexander of Macedon in the fourth century BCE created the first "global" culture (at least for the Western world) in which people, goods, and ideas could circulate from southern Europe, through the Middle East, all the way to Iran and India, and vice versa. It was in this cosmopolitan, Hellenistic world that Jews and Persians had further contact, and the Zoroastrian influence on Judaism became much stronger. This influence is clearly visible in the later Jewish writings such as the Book of Daniel and the books of the Maccabees, which were written in the second century BCE.

An interesting Biblical account of Zoroastrian-Jewish contact, as well as an early attestation of Middle Eastern petroleum, appears in the Second Book of the Maccabees (which is not found in Jewish Bibles, only in Catholic Christian ones). This document dates from about 124 BCE, which places it among the latest books of the Old Testament - so late that the Jewish canon does not recognize it. In the first chapter of this book, there is a story of how the Jewish altar fire was restored to the Temple after the Captivity. Jewish Temple practice required a continuously burning flame at the altar (Exodus 27:20) though this flame did not have the special "iconic" quality of the Zoroastrian sacred fire. Nevertheless, during the restoration of the Jewish temple, this story arose and is repeated in the Book of the Maccabees, four hundred years later: "When the matter (restoring the fire) became known and the king of the Persians heard that in the place where the exiled priests had hidden the fire a liquid had appeared, with which Nehemiah and his people had purified the materials of the sacrifice, the king, after verifying the facts, had the place enclosed and pronounced sacred." (2 Maccabees 1:33-34) This shows that at least at the time of the composition of 2 Maccabees, the Jewish writers were aware of the Zoroastrian reverence for fire - and also that, if the story is true, the Zoroastrians saw and respected similarities in practice between their own religion and that of the Jews. The fiery liquid cited here is petroleum, called "naphtha," a word which arises from a combination of Persian and Hebrew words.

The Iranian influence continues to be evident in Jewish writings from what is known as the "inter-testamental" period, that is, after the last canonical book of the Old Testament and before Christianity and the composition of the New Testament. This covers an era between about 150 BCE to 100 CE. These Jewish inter-testamental writings describe a complicated hierarchy of angelic beings, in an echo of the Zoroastrian concept of the holy court of the Yazatas. The Jewish idea of seven chief archangels probably has its inspiration in the seven Amesha Spentas, the highest guardian spirits of Zoroastrian belief. Jews had their own ideas of angels long before they encountered Zoroastrianism; angels were nameless, impersonal representatives of God's message and action. But after the Exile, Jewish angels gain names and personalities, and also are spoken of as guardians of various natural phenomena, just like the Zoroastrian yazatas. The Jewish and Christian idea of a personal "guardian angel" may also have been inspired by the Zoroastrian figure of the fravashi, the divine guardian-spirit of each individual human being.

Zoroastrian influence on Judaism is also evident in the evolution of Jewish ideas about good, evil, and the End of Time. The original statement of the famous Zoroastrian dualism of good and evil is found in the Gathas, where Zarathushtra describes the two conflicting principles of good and evil in what might be called psychological, or ethical terms. Human beings are faced with the existence of good and evil within themselves - he describes these principles as the "beneficent" and the "hostile" spirits - and everyone must make the choice for Good in order to follow God's will.

But by the Hellenistic era, Zoroastrianism had already developed its doctrine of "cosmic dualism" - the idea that the entire Universe is a battlefield between the One Good God, Ahura Mazda, and the separate Spirit of Evil, Ahriman. This view of dualism is a symbolic transformation, and an expansion, of the more psychologically based teaching of Zarathushtra that good and evil are ethical choices and states of mind.

Both "cosmic" and "ethical" dualism coexist in Zoroastrian thought throughout the long history of the faith; their history is not one of a "pristine" idea of ethical dualism which is supplanted or "corrupted" by the idea of cosmic dualism. And reflections of both types of dualism are found in Jewish thinking. The Biblical book of Deuteronomy, like the other early books of the Old Testament, was re-edited and possibly even re-written during and after the Exile. An important passage in Deuteronomy 30:15 shows a Jewish version of ethical dualism:

"See, today I set before you life and prosperity, death and disaster. If you obey the commandments of YHVH your God that I enjoin on you today, if you love YHVH your God and follow His ways, if you keep His commandments, His laws, His customs, you will live and increase, and YHVH your God will bless you in the land which you are entering to make your own. But if your heart strays, if you refuse to listen, if you let yourself be drawn into worshipping other gods and serving them, I tell you today, you will most certainly perish....I set before you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live...." (Deut. 31:15-19, Jerusalem Bible translation)

Even though the original text of the Gathas was most probably inaccessible to the Jews, the teachings of Zarathushtra were part of the religious culture of the Persian people among whom many Jews lived. An interesting notion in Jewish moral thought which may have been somewhat inspired by Zoroastrian ethical dualism is the idea of the "evil impulse" and the "good impulse" (Hebrew, "yetzer tov, " good impulse, and "yetzer hara," evil impulse.). This idea seems to arise in the rabbinic thought of that "inter-testamental" period in which Jews encountered both Greek and Zoroastrian ideas. In this Jewish moral meditation, God gives human beings both a "good impulse" and an "evil impulse," and they must learn to choose between the promptings of these two mentalities.

What gives this idea a Jewish "twist" quite different from the original Zoroastrian teaching is that the evil impulse, in Jewish thought, is not entirely evil. It is not, like the Zarathushtrian "hostile spirit," completely inimical to goodness. The Jewish "evil impulse" is only evil when it is obeyed and yielded to without restraint. The evil impulse is sinful lust in excess, but in moderation it is necessary in order to prompt people to procreate; it is sinful greed in excess, but in right order, it is the drive behind trade and the pursuit of lawful profit. The Jewish "evil impulse" thus resembles Freud's concept of the "id," the amoral motive power behind human actions either for good or evil - and indeed, Freud was inspired by Jewish moral philosophy in his own thinking.

But despite these Jewish reflections of ethical dualism, it is the doctrine of "cosmic dualism," with its mythological and symbolic content, that most influenced the later Jewish thinkers. Even before the Exile, under the threat of destruction by foreign empires, Jewish prophets were moving toward a vision of not only political, but cosmic war and catastrophe. This type of prophecy, after the Exile, evolved into apocalyptic (from the Greek word apokalypsis which means "revelation"). This is a form of religious storytelling, poetry, and preaching which uses a high level of mythological symbolism to describe not only a cosmic battle between the forces of Good and Evil, but also a schedule for the coming End of Time.

Zoroastrianism, from the beginning, has taught that time and God's creation has a beginning, a middle, and an end-time in which all souls will be judged. The Zarathushtrian teachings were later elaborated and illustrated with mythological motifs, many of them borrowed from the pre-Zoroastrian Indo-Iranian gods and goddesses, as well as myths of cosmic conflict from ancient Mesopotamia. Later Zoroastrianism also teaches of a specific sacred time-line, a historical structure for the created world. The Zoroastrians are often credited with introducing eschatology, or the knowledge of the End of Time and its events, into the religious world of both West and East.

All religions borrow from their predecessors and adapt old material for their new dispensation, and Judaism is no exception. The Iranian world of angels and demons, light and darkness, God and an Adversary, and a sacred time-line, enters into the Jewish universe of apocalypse. Many of these apocalyptic writings survive from the "inter-testamental" period, such as the Book of Enoch, a compilation of spectacular visions about angels, demons, and the Last Judgment. The Jewish apocalyptic idea of the End of Time, as well as a final Judgment by God when that End arrives, owes a great deal to Zoroastrian thinking.

This Zoroastrian connection becomes even more evident in the writings of Jewish sects, such as the Essenes. Due to archeological finds such as the "Dead Sea Scrolls" and the "Nag Hammadi Library," the modern world can know what these ancient devotees believed - and some of these beliefs show direct Zoroastrian influence. This is especially true in the text known as the "Essene

Manual of Discipline," which, like the apocalyptic texts, describes a war between the Spirit of Light and the Spirit of Darkness, as well as the Spirit of Truth and the Spirit of Error, and an ultimate End-Time when the battle will be won. This Essene text sometimes sounds almost exactly like the Gathas, which are more than a millennium older: "For God has established the two spirits in equal measure until the last period, and has put eternal enmity between their divisions. An abomination to truth are deeds of error, and an abomination to error are all ways of truth..." (Essene Manual of Discipline, from THE DEAD SEA SCROLLS ed. Millar Burrows) It could be a free translation of the dualistic verses of the Gathas.

It is from these Jewish sects, as well as the Jewish mainstream, that Christianity emerged. The claiming of Jesus as the awaited Messiah was meant to answer Jewish hopes, and possibly usher in the End of Time, much as the Zoroastrians expected of their Saoshyant. It is in the context of the coming Saoshyant that the story in the second chapter of Matthew's Gospel (it is a story, not a historical event!) of the Three Magi should be read; these astrologers, who are thought to be Zoroastrians, were following the Savior-signs of their own religion when they sought out the infant Jesus. The famous Prologue of the Gospel of John ("In the beginning was the Word....") has many elements suggestive of Zoroastrian influence, including philosophical and ethical dualism, and the light/darkness metaphor so characteristic of Zoroastrianism. "And that life was the light of men, a light that shines in the dark, a light that darkness could not overpower." (John 1: 4-5)

It is often said that the figure of Satan, prince of Evil, was inspired by Zoroastrian teachings about Ahriman, the adversary of Ahura Mazda. But the Jewish idea of the "Adversary" (which is what "satan" means) is not quite like the Zoroastrian Ahriman. In the post-exilic Book of Job, Satan is an adversary, but he is also God's loyal servant, doing God's work by testing a righteous man. Some of the early Talmudic rabbis identified the "evil impulse" with Satan, but that idea was not completely accepted. Indeed, the features of Judaism that are most indebted to Zoroastrianism, such as angels, devils, Heaven and Hell, and eschatology, tended to fade among believers in later centuries, and they are no longer emphasized in the Jewish mainstream, though they continue to hold sway among Jewish sects such as the Hasidim.

It is in Christianity that the doctrine of the Devil is almost identical to the Zoroastrian concept. The Devil, or Satan, is a being who CHOSE to be evil, through pride, just as Zarathushtra's evil spirit chose to do evil; and this devil, as Christians believe, not only roams about attempting to corrupt people, but has corrupted the physical world as well, just as Ahriman does in the later Zoroastrian teachings.

Christianity also adopted Jewish - and Zoroastrian - apocalyptic myths about cosmic battles and the upcoming end of the world into its own doctrine. The Christian book of Revelation, the last book in the New Testament canon, is a later example of a form that goes back all the way through its Jewish sources to the distant, ancient worlds of Iran and Mesopotamia.

There are many devoted Jewish and Christian believers who deny that Zoroastrianism had any influence on their religions. In their view, this would compromise the unique revelations from God which characterize these religions. But there are other believers who follow a more universalist path. To these believers, the "seeds of wisdom" are found in every religion, including paganism and Zoroastrianism. Every religion has its grains of Truth, seeds which can be sown and grown in the garden of a new revelation, whether that is Jewish or Christian. In this view, it is not only not wrong to adapt what went before into the new faith, but it is essential. Thus nothing that is true will be lost.

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