



Introduction to “The Second Temple: Reformation Period”

Review of Previous Article

With the conclusion of the Peace of Callius (ca. 449 BCE) between Persia and Athens, the Achaemenid Empire became the major crossroad for Greek and Jewish scholars, awed by the majesty and richness of the kingdom and the implications of its Zoroastrian religion. The Achaemenids preserved the contributions of Zarathustra (Greek, “Zoroaster”), who introduced the world’s first morally and ethically based religion at the very time of the Israelite King David (ca. 1000 BCE). Zarathustra was educated as a priest of the ancient Indo-Iranian nature religion. However, beginning at the age of thirty, he had visions in which he was introduced to the Supreme Good God, Ahura Mazda (Lord Wisdom), who, with his Holy Spirit (Spenta Mainyu), had brought forth six Amesha Spentas (archangels) and numerous yazatas (angels). Together, Ahura Mazda and the Spentas created single entities of celestial (*menog* = soul) sky, water, earth, fire, plant, animal and man. Soon thereafter the evil god, Angra Mainyu, brought forth his own *daevas* (demons) to challenge Ahura Mazda and his angels. Fortunately, the initial *menog* Creation was secure from all assault by evil.

Ahura Mazda and the Spentas next transformed the *menog* Creation into a single, terrestrial (*getik*) state that was vulnerable to evil. Angra Mainyu and his minions then attacked and shattered the unique *getik* Creation. Ahura Mazda and his Spentas responded by taking the shattered pieces, grinding them into tiny particles, and scattering them abroad. Soon these particles creatively emerged as innumerable skies, waters, earths, fires, plants, animals and men. Angra Mainyu retaliated with a corresponding counter-creation of evil – storms, tidal waves, volcanic eruptions, smoke, dust, blood, diseases, poisonous plants, ugly and predatory animals, and evil men.

In his communications with Zarathustra, Ahura Mazda revealed that good thoughts, good words and good deeds would help withstand the attacks of evil.

To these must also be added appropriate sacrifices, rituals, liturgies and purification ceremonies. At death the soul of every person would hover over the body for three days and nights. The soul would then leave for the Chinvat Bridge, which crossed the chasm between earth and heaven. At the entrance to the bridge, the individual judgment of every soul would take place, and the soul's intermediate state until the final judgment would be determined. Meanwhile, the dead body was to be exposed to wild birds and animals and then the bones buried.

At the end of time, a World Savior (Saoyshant) would appear and lead all Creation to victory over evil and to the final judgment. A general resurrection would take place, uniting each body with its soul. A river of molten metal would then flow forth. The good would walk serenely through the river as though it were just warm milk. The evil would be incinerated within three days, and finally Angra Mainyu and his demons would be taken to oblivion in hell.

Zarathustra's visions and subsequent ministry introduced the world to the concept of linear time – past, present and future – to the idea of a cosmic, ethical battle between good and evil, to the supposed intermediate, ethereal state of the soul (*menog*), to a world savior, to death and resurrection, and to judgment and either eternal life in Paradise or oblivion in death. Thus, the Iranian priest and prophet, Zarathustra, was the very first to articulate the concept of human destiny.

Overview of This Article

Cyrus II the Great, the first emperor of the Achaemenid dynasty of Persia (559-530 BCE), not only was the monarch of a vast empire; he also was a devout follower of the Zoroastrian religion and of its prophet, Zarathustra, who had lived 500 years earlier. Cyrus generously granted conquered peoples restoration to their homelands, worship of their traditional gods, and local governance under their ancestral laws. These initiatives led to successive returns of the exiled Hebrews to Judah and to Jerusalem. However, the two principal priesthoods of the Hebrews – Zadokites and Levites – had a long national history of religious separation and geographical division. Thus, the initial returns of the exiles were troubled by a lack of unity and of cohesive support for their leadership and their ancestral laws.

Finally, Artaxerxes I (465-424 BCE) probably was the Persian emperor who appointed two Jewish court officials – Nehemiah, the cupbearer, and Ezra, the scribe – to lead subsequent returns of the Hebrews. The success of Ezra and Nehemiah's efforts depended upon profound changes in the traditional governance, culture and religion of the Hebrews:

1. There was an unexplained termination of the Davidic kingship during the time of Zerubbabel and of his son, Meshullam.
2. There was a prolonged disruption of the prophetic office that had been largely held by Zadokite and Levitical literary prophets.

3. There was a reunion of the Zadokite and Levitical priesthoods, with defined roles for each priesthood in the newly established theocracy. The Zadokites focused on the Temple and its services, while the Levites devoted themselves to Scripture and its teachings.

4. The status of Jerusalem was elevated by the restoration of a wall, signifying its repopulation and its theocratic independence.

5. The people were placed under a rigid covenantal structure requiring obedience to 613 commandments. These not only included numerous rituals, liturgies and purification rites, but they also excluded marriage to foreign wives as well as intercultural involvement with other ethnic and religious groups.

As prominent officials in the Persian government, both Ezra and Nehemiah were very familiar with Zoroastrianism – the official religion of the Achaemenid (Persian) Empire. In instituting their Hebraic reforms, Ezra and Nehemiah deferred to the authority of the Persian emperors. Thus, they borrowed a number of Hebraic “ancestral laws” from Zoroastrianism and its founding prophet, Zarathustra. These “borrowed” beliefs included the concepts of an ethereal soul (*menog*), an earthly, embodied (*getik*) state, intermediate and final judgments, an embodied afterlife, and a final bliss or oblivion. The borrowings also involved the adoption of attending archangels and angels. These religious “loans” provided substantial foundations for later world Judaism, Christianity and Islam. Even more importantly, they provided much of the framework for the future appearance and fulfillment of the Christ event.

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