

# Why is western religion a version of Zoroastrianism?

Philip Bitar

Version 2014-08-10

Western religion is a version of Zoroastrianism because the four main themes of western religion all originated in Zoroastrianism:

- ◆ **Monotheism**
- ◆ **Satan** — cosmic antagonist to God
- ◆ **Afterlife dichotomy** — heaven vs. hell
- ◆ **Apocalypticism** — ultimate victory of God over Satan, of good over evil

I cover these topics in *Human Life*, Edition 1, p. 71-81; Edition 2, p. 77-87; and in *In Pursuit*, p. 243-248.

## A brief history

The roots of western religion and eastern religion can be traced back to Indo-European-speaking nomads living north of the Caspian Sea. About 1500-1000 BCE, some of these people migrated south in two branches, one into Iran to the west and the other into India to the east. The western branch gave rise to western religion, whose themes were established by Zoroaster, while the eastern branch gave rise to eastern religion, whose themes were established by Indian religious thinkers in Indian scriptures, especially the Upanishads about 800-400 BCE.

Zoroaster is to Zoroastrianism as Moses is to Judaism — a religious leader who was said to be contacted directly by God and to be commissioned by God to bring God's word to the people. Zoroastrianism flourished in the Near East under the first great empire of the region, the Persian Empire established by Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE and continuing till it was conquered by Alexander the Great in 330 BCE.

The four themes shown above are absent from the Judaic Bible — the Christian Old Testament — except for the following. Monotheism appears in Second Isaiah, Isaiah 40-55, which is dated to about the mid 500s BCE. And the book of Daniel, which is dated to the 100s BCE, ends with an apocalyptic passage containing a reference to afterlife. Based on the content and dating of the parts of the Judaic Bible, along with the political history of the Near East, we can deduce that Judaism assimilated the four themes shown above in the centuries 500s-000s BCE, with the following qualification.

The official leaders of Judaism — the priests — did not assimilate the idea of afterlife, but a lay movement of religious leaders did assimilate the idea of afterlife. The former were known as Sadducees, while the latter were known as Pharisees. After the destruction of the Judaic temple in Jerusalem by the Romans in 70 CE, the role of the priests vanished, leaving the lay movement of Pharisees, and this movement evolved into Rabbinic Judaism, which is modern mainstream Judaism.

Zoroastrianism is not well known in the west today for the following reason. When Islam emerged in Arabia in the 600s, Islam claimed to be the fulfillment of the local monotheist religions — Christianity and Judaism — just as Christianity had claimed to be the fulfillment of Judaism. But this respect for older monotheist religions did not extend to Zoroastrianism because the leaders of Judaism had not acknowledged their debt to Zoroastrianism since doing so would have compromised their claim of originality. As a result, when the Islamic warriors from Arabia conquered Iran in the 600s, they were intolerant of Zoroastrianism, considering it to be a false religion. Accordingly, over time, most Zoroastrians either converted to Islam or fled from Iran. Since the Muslims came from the west, the Zoroastrians fled east, where they found refuge in India.

"Zoroastrianism" in Wikipedia

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism>

“Zoroastrianism in India” in Wikipedia  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism\\_in\\_India](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism_in_India)

“Zoroastrianism in Iran” in Wikipedia  
[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrians\\_in\\_Iran](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrians_in_Iran)

### **Zoroastrianism — Monotheism, cosmic antagonist, apocalypticism, afterlife dichotomy**

#### **Quote from “Zoroastrianism” in Wikipedia:**

<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Zoroastrianism>

Zoroastrianism arose in the eastern region of the ancient Persian Empire, when the religious philosopher Zoroaster simplified the pantheon of early Iranian gods into two opposing forces: Spenta Mainyu (Progressive mentality) and Angra Mainyu (Destructive Mentality) under the one God, Ahura Mazda (Illuminating Wisdom)....

Zoroastrians believe that there is one universal, transcendent, supreme god, Ahura Mazda, or the “Wise Lord”....

The religion states that active participation in life through good deeds is necessary to ensure happiness and to keep chaos at bay. This active participation is a central element in Zoroaster's concept of free will, and Zoroastrianism rejects all forms of monasticism.

Ahura Mazda will ultimately prevail over the evil Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, at which point the universe will undergo a cosmic renovation and time will end.... At the end of time, a savior-figure (a Saoshyant) will bring about a final renovation of the world, in which the dead will be revived....

Zoroastrianism includes beliefs about the renovation of the world and individual judgment, including the resurrection of the dead.

Individual judgment at death is by the Bridge of Judgment, which each human must cross, facing a spiritual judgment. Humans' actions under their free will determine the outcome. One is either greeted at the bridge by a beautiful, sweet-smelling maiden or by an ugly, foul-smelling old woman. The maiden leads the dead safely across the bridge to the Amesha Spenta Good Mind, who carries the dead to Paradise. The old woman leads the dead down a bridge that narrows until the departed falls off into the abyss of hell. [Lake of fire]

Zoroastrian hell is reformative; punishments fit the crimes, and souls do not rest in eternal damnation. Hell contains foul smells and evil food, and souls are packed tightly together although they believe they are in total isolation. [There are differing versions of afterlife depiction.]

### **Judaism — Monotheism**

#### **Quote from “Book of Isaiah” in Wikipedia:**

[http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book\\_of\\_Isaiah#Monotheism](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Book_of_Isaiah#Monotheism)

Isaiah 44.6 contains the first clear statement of monotheism: "I am the first and I am the last; besides me there is no god".

In Isaiah 44.9-20 this is developed into a satire on the making and worship of idols, mocking the foolishness of the carpenter who worships the idol that he himself has carved.

While Yahweh had shown his superiority to other gods before, in Second Isaiah he becomes the sole God of the world.

This model of monotheism became the defining characteristic of post-Exilic Judaism [starting in the late 500s BCE], and became the basis for Christianity and Islam.

## Judaism — Afterlife

Quote from Book of Daniel 12.2, NRSV:

Many of those who sleep in the dust of the earth shall awake, some to everlasting life, and some to shame and everlasting contempt.

## George William Carter

In *Zoroastrianism and Judaism* (1918), George William Carter addresses the possible influences between Zoroastrianism and Judaism prior to the time of Christ. The book has about a hundred small pages divided into ten chapters. Chapter 1 is on Zoroaster; chapter 2 is on the history of Judaism; and chapter 10 presents conclusions. Chapters 3-9 consider the possible influences between Zoroastrianism and Judaism with regard to the following respective topics: God, the spiritual realm, the physical realm, the expectation of a savior, regulations, ethics, and afterlife.

Carter concludes that the direction of influence was from Zoroastrianism to Judaism.

...The main elements of the Zoroastrian faith were for the most part fixed before the Persian period of Jewish history, and...there was probably no marked influence made by the Jews upon the Persian faith. The Jews, however, discovering that their rulers [the Persians] had many conceptions and teachings similar to, and others in advance of, their own, would, in receiving and adopting them, easily deduce such teachings and conceptions from their own revelation, with no thought that they were borrowing. At any rate, later generations would think of them as purely Jewish beliefs. While the germs of the beliefs that came into prominence in post-exilic times in Judaism may be present in the earlier writings, the germs alone are not enough to explain the later developments. The explanation is found in the fact that the “germs which lay hidden in Judaism were fertilized by contact with the Persian religion.”

[George William Carter, *Zoroastrianism and Judaism*, 1918, p. 105-106, also p. 36, 40. The embedded quote is from C. F. Kent, *A History of the Jewish People*, p. 257, publication year not indicated]

I think that the most interesting insight from Carter is that the Christian theme of an exalted, heavenly savior follows the Zoroastrian theme of savior, which contrasts with the Judaic idea of an earthly savior. The former theme is found in the writings of Paul and the gospel of John, while the latter is found in Mark, Matthew, and Luke. The Zoroastrian savior was also to be born of a virgin.

[On virgin birth: Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 1979, 2001, p. 42, 74]

## Mary Boyce

Noted scholar of Zoroastrianism, Mary Boyce (1920-2006), concurs with Carter's perspective on Zoroastrian influence, as explained in her work *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (1979, 2001). Boyce portrays the spread of Zoroastrian ideas under the Persian empire, as follows.

Presumably both priests and the laity were prepared to discuss matters of religion with inquirers; and gradually many of Zoroaster's fundamental doctrines became disseminated throughout the region, from Egypt to the Black Sea....

These doctrines all came to be adopted by various Jewish schools in the post-Exilic period, for the Jews were one of the peoples, it seems, most open to Zoroastrian influences — a tiny minority, holding staunchly to their own beliefs, but evidently admiring their Persian benefactors, and finding congenial elements in their faith.

[Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, 1979, 2001, p. 76-77. Also p. 81]