

The influence of judaism, christianity and zoroastrianism on the areas surroundin...

[Religion](#), [Christianity](#)



ARAB1055: INTRODUCTION TO THE MIDDLE EAST Discuss the influence that Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism had on the areas surrounding

Arabia Word count (excluding headers and footnotes) : 2192 Teacher: Dr.

Hendrik Kraetzschmar Before discussing the issue of religious influence

between Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity, a good starting point

would be to explain what these influences might be. If these influences did

occur, which we cannot be sure of, what arguments do we have to address

the issue, i. e. what evidence either linguistic or written do we have in

helping us determine a point of view? (Barr, 1985) Many scholars believe

that because these Abrahamic religions arose in Arabia they must have

influenced each other; on the other hand other scholars disagree. Questions

like did Zoroastrianism influence Judaism and thus Christianity, or was it

solely Judaism that affected Christianity have been asked. These questions

have recently begun to be discussed more deeply and in this essay we will

address these issues. The only way to way to understand formal religious

influences from a historical perspective is to study religious practices of the

times. And, attempt to prove that different religions have had an influence

on religious practices of the time such as the Judaic faith that absorbed

elements of Zoroastrianism in the Parthian period (Boyce, 1977)

Understanding when each religion emerged and its background is essential

to understanding each religions timespan. Firstly, Zoroastrianism emerged

around 2000BCE (no one is entirely sure) and took on variant forms with

Zoroastrianism remaining as the central core. Zarathustra or Zoroaster could

be compared in many ways to Jesus. According to hagiographic images,

Zoroaster had an auspicious birth, fought off evil spirits and left his

hometown in Iran for about a decade. Afterwards Zoroaster received revelations from a spiritual goddess named Vohu Manah. Her coming, as Gabriel's to Jesus, shows her as a fount of wisdom and many comparisons to Jesus have been drawn here. When followers of Zoroaster, and Zoroaster himself, were opposed by his own tribe in the region they fled to a neighbouring area whose lord was called Vishtaspa. Again comparisons have been made such as Jesus fleeing to Nazareth. Vishtaspa was a great success for Zoroaster gaining him many followers, up and till his at the age of 77 (around 1923BCE) by a priest of another cult. This violent demise is reminiscent of Jesus's crucifixion. (Choksy, 2003) The following religion Judaism, undoubtedly the most influential, emerged around 1500BCE. Israelites share a common ancestry through the 12 sons of Jacob, the grandson of Abraham who built the secret Ka'ba stone which all 3 faiths regard as sacred. Early Jewish peoples worshipped many gods, such as Yahweh (YHWH), Anath (a fertility goddess), Hokhma (a wisdom goddess), El (a sky god) and Baal the storm god. These gods were once venerated by the Jews but were eventually deserted with the focus on YHWH as the supreme god. Prose written in 590BCE, on ostraca, unearthed in Lachish (south Israel), reveal the emergence of YHWH as the single Israelite god. This concluded commencement of the monotheistic Jewish Faith similar to the one we know today. (Choksy, 2003) 590 years later the prophet Jesus was born in Bethlehem, and so the Christian faith emerged. Unlike similar past religions, Christianity commenced as a monotheistic faith which spread rapidly throughout the Eurasian steppe and by the 4th century Constantine 1st had made it the religion of the Roman Empire. By this point, different forms of

Christianity had emerged, especially Monophysitism and Nestorianism which gained footholds in Armenia and Iran. The tribes of the Magi, at some point, would have been living amongst or encountered Christians, either through contact with missionaries or simply through the church. During the Sasanian era (AD 224 to AD 651) Nestorianism was common amongst the higher classes. Thus, with the emergence of this new fascinating Christian faith, Zoroastrians, when making comparisons between the two faiths, would elevate their own faiths importance partly for self-preservation and to prevent conversion. Instances for symbolic comparisons are apparent, such as the 3 Magi kings chosen to indicate Jesus' status as saviour. (Choksy. 2003) If maps were to be used in this essay, one would see the movement of these religious peoples throughout Arabia over time, and would find that these religions must have encountered each other, Christians moving south into Iran or even Jews in Babylon receiving their freedom from the Archaemenians by Cyrus II . For the purposes of clarity, we must now begin to discuss the trends and influences which all 3 faiths share; and how they may have taken place - in order. I will be concentrating on the contacts between the Iranian faith and the Judaic faith before the coming of Christianity. Two well-known scholars, Jacob Neusner a scholar of the Judaic faith and Richard Nelson Frye a scholar of Iran, have both come up with their own theories of when or how this contact occurred. (Neusner. 1976) finds that there is very little evidence to conclude contact, but all the same believed it occurred " The Rabbis do not seem to have known much about Iranian religion and culture" (148). " The Rabbis give evidence of knowing what they should have known: those few aspects of Iranian culture, law and

religion, which impinged upon the practical affairs of the Jewish community" (149) As well as Neusner, Frye believes that if any in-depth intercommunication was to have taken place it would have done in the later period. And he too finds little evidence to conclude interrelations occurred (1952, 1967). (Foot, 1912) In Sasanian society, Zoroastrianism, Judaism, as well as Christianity, had reinforced definite crystalline forms, each in an effort to preserve its own identity in the presence of the others. This intrinsically meant people assumed the interconnections between each faith were apparent for all to see. In much the same way as Mohammedism would talk about people of the book prior to that idea people assumed greater equivalences between their religions than might be the case today between various sects. For example by the second century Judaism was strongly established, much more so than in 350 BCE (Foot, 1912) As mentioned before, in order to correctly analyse the past, written evidence from any one point in time is needed to back up one's thesis. Some texts which we will analyse will be each religion's sacred scriptures; however with each text having been either been translated, re-written or partly lost one must take great care when analysing their origin as well as when they were written. The texts we shall analyse are, the Avesta, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Torah, the book of Tobit and the book of Ecclesiastes. K. G. Kuhn a scholar of Iranian texts and author of " Die Sektenschrift und die Iranische Religion" from the journal " Zeitschrift für Theologie und Kirche" compares the Dead Sea Scrolls with Iranian religious scriptures. In doing so he concluded that ideas held by both Zoroastrians and Jews could not solely have come from Israelite eschatology, by revealing the differences to us, he makes it clear to us that

ideas acquired from Iran, were taken and developed by the Jews. Of course, this is subject to challenge; anybody who could come up with a reasonable explanation for these supposed angelic and diabolic hosts being developed solely by the Jews might prove Kuhn wrong.(Barr. 1985) An interesting point made by Duchesne-Guillemin(1958 p. 93) is that if the Dead Sea Scrolls had been influenced by the Iranian faith, the fact that they depicted the essence of very early Zoroastrianism of the Gathas was peculiar because of the change the religion had been through since that point. At this point, one must form an understanding of how the eschatological views of each religion could have influenced each other, principally Zoroastrian influence on Judaism and thus Christianity in the areas surrounding Arabia. The book of Tobit would be a good starting point; it encapsulates fragments of both the Catholic and Judaic faiths. Manson (1951) states the following: " The clearest evidence of Persian influence on Jewish theology, apart from the general similarity of the two systems, is the use of the name Asmodeus for the chief of the demons. This name is borrowed directly from the Persian ' Aeshma Daeva'. " (Manson 1951 p. 154) With regard to the devils, that are part of the evil spiritual world, Manson makes a case that there are similarities in the evil hierarchy of these devils/jinns echoed throughout the 3 religions, because the names of some these devils are similar Manson states that perhaps it was the Zoroastrian religion that influenced the Jewish religion first. This perfectly plausible conclusion drawn by Manson, has legitimacy, although when analysing the two names " Aeshma Daeva" and " Asmodeus" precautions must be taken, firstly the former consists of two words " Aeshma and Daeva". Secondly when analysing Iranian texts such as the Avesta, "

Aeshma Daeva" is only referred to as " Aeshma". However Manson would surely be quick to argue that in texts such as the Bundahish- " Aeshma Daeva" does appear, but, the Bundahish was a compilation of lost scriptures from the Avesta. (Barr, 1985) The comparisons mentioned above are interesting because they show all the different possibilities offered by scholars, although I believe contact between the two faiths was more than likely and most probable. Because we have definitively concluded that the Zoroastrian faith was actively orating Zoroaster's message at time of Muhammad — Adam J. Silverstein a lecturer of Islamic studies at the University of Oxford concludes " We do not know for certain what the Zoroastrians in Iran made of the rise of Islam, but they must have been unhappy about it, having lost the support and patronage that the Sassanid empire had hitherto offered them. "(J. Silverstein A, 2010, p14) Persian treatise written in the year A. D 1400 named " Sitacr -i Akdlim -i Sab'ah"/"Sketches of seven Countries" contains teachings of the legend Zoroaster, it goes on to speak of Azerbaijan as the native land of Zarathustra and the wanderings which he made to Korasan and Balkh. The very fact that the Zoroastrians faith was still so established as that time was key in its survival as a great Abrahamic faith amongst the many other religions of the time. This is an important factor, because the Zoroastrian faith which had been current for 6 centuries and conserved ancient traditions, and countless statements contained in the Persian texts, have resemblances of parallels in Avestan texts. (Yohannan, Williams 1907) In Conclusion, when discussing the interrelations between the three Abrahamic faiths, evidence suggests if any significant influence occurred, it occurred during the earlier periods of these

faiths. For example, the period after the Jews received their freedom from Cyrus II. Despite the fact that, after the coming of Christianity these religions had taken similar forms to those we know today, it is still possible that the religious leaders of the time would re-emphasize the importance and similarities between the faiths, in efforts to preserve their own religions in the presence of others. This in turn has united the different believers of (people of the book) around the world and has subsequently forged links between hagiography and monotheism among Zoroastrians, Jews, Christians and later even Islam. Not forgetting that members of all 3 religions exist today whether this be the few surviving Zoroastrians living in India or the ever increasing number of Jewish people in Israel, no doubt these people do not deny that influence of formal religious practices between the religions took place and further is to come. Word count (excluding bibliography and footnotes): 2192

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----- [1]. With regard to the Zoroastrian faith it must be asserted from the outset that there is no one single Zoroastrian faith. To begin with Ahuramazda was regarded as the ruling god of Iran. Throughout the ages Zoroastrianism assumed different forms. [2]. An ostraca is a piece of ceramic/ceramic often found by archaeologists. [3]. 3 "Monotheism" is the idea of monarchical forms of polytheism, in which case one god's rank is predominant over all others (e. g YHWH, Auramazda, Allah). It is also applied to the pantheistic thought that encapsulates all the different gods as manifestations of the one god. (Foot . 1912.) [4].

Monophysitism is the belief among Christians that the nature of Christ existed in only one form, whether divine or a synthesis of human and divine forms. [5]. Nestorianism is the belief that the nature of Christ consisted of two loosely united aspects: the human and the divine. A Nestorian Church still stands in Iraq. [7]. The Avesta was the prayer book or so called bible of Zoroaster, the first translation of this text into a European language was done by Anquentil du Perron a French man (Le Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de zoroastre, 1771) . Very little of the original Avesta survives to this day, in comparison to the Bible around one tenth of it survives. These texts often grouped together as a prayer book called the Vendidad could be broken down in to 7 categories. 1. Yasna 2. Visperad 3. Yashts 4. Minor Texts 5.

Vendidad 6. Fragments 7. Gathas (Jackson. V. 1893) [8]. The Dead Sea Scrolls which were discovered in the 1950s on the shore of the Dead Sea are a compilation of hundreds of Judaic texts. They have been dated back to around the year 100bc. [9]. The book of Tobit often referred to as The Book of Tobias is the canonical Apocryphaic work of Jews and Christians. A religious scripture. Many of the ideas found in the book of Tobit have also been found in the Dead Sea Scrolls located in Qumram in the 1950s. (Tobit 2012. EncyclopÃ|dia Britannica Online)