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978-1-108-05373-0 - Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsis:  
To Which is also Added a Biographical Memoir of the Late Dr Haug by Professor

E.P. Evans

Martin Haug Translated by Edward William West

Excerpt

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I.

*HISTORY OF THE RESEARCHES INTO THE  
SACRED WRITINGS AND RELIGION  
OF THE PARSIS.*

FROM THE EARLIEST TIMES DOWN TO THE PRESENT.

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## L

# HISTORY OF THE RESEARCHES INTO THE SACRED WRITINGS AND RELIGION OF THE PARSIS.



### I.—THE REPORTS OF THE GREEKS, ROMANS, ARMENIANS, AND MOHAMMEDANS.

IN this Essay it is intended to give a brief outline of the gradual acquaintance of the Western nations with the Zoroastrian religion (now professed only by the small Parsi community in India, and by a very insignificant number which remain in their ancient fatherland in Persia), and to trace the history of the scientific researches of Europeans into the original records of this ancient creed, where the true doctrine of the great Zoroaster and his successors, buried for thousands of years, is to be found.

To the whole ancient world Zoroaster's lore was best known by the name of the doctrine of the Magi, which denomination was commonly applied to the priests of India, Persia, and Babylonia.

The earliest mention of them is made by the Prophet Jeremiah (xxxix. 3), who enumerated among the retinue of King Nebuchadnezzar at his entry into Jerusalem, the

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“Chief of the Magi” (*rab mag* in Hebrew), from which statement we may distinctly gather, that the Magi exercised a great influence at the court of Babylonia 600 years B.C. They were, however, foreigners, and are not to be confounded with the indigenous priests. In the Old Testament no account of their religion is given, and only once (Ezekiel viii. 16, 17) it is hinted at.<sup>1</sup> The Persians, however, whose priests the Magi appear to have been, are never spoken of as adherents to idolatry; and the Persian kings, especially Cyrus (called *Koresh* in Hebrew, *Kurush* in the cuneiform inscriptions), favoured the Jews. In Isaiah this great king is called “the anointed (*mashiakh* in Hebrew) of the Lord” (xlv. 1), “the shepherd who carries out the Lord’s decrees” (xlv. 28); he is the “eagle<sup>2</sup> called from the orient, the man appointed by the Lord’s counsel” (xlv. 11); he is “strengthened by the Lord to subdue the heathens” (xlv. 1).<sup>3</sup> From these high terms, in which King Cyrus, who professed the religion of the Magi, is spoken of, we are entitled to infer that this religion was not so diametrically opposed to the Mosaic as the other ancient religions were; that Cyrus, at all events, was no idol-worshipper; a supposition we shall find confirmed by Herodotus, and by the sacred books of the Parsis themselves. The Zoroastrian religion exhibits even a very close affinity to, or rather identity with, several important doctrines of the Mosaic religion and Christianity, such as the personality and attributes of the devil,

<sup>1</sup> The religious custom alluded to in Ezekiel undoubtedly refers to the religion of the Magi. The prophet complains that some of the Jews worship the sun, holding towards their face certain twigs. Exactly the same custom of holding a bundle of twigs in the hands is reported by Strabo (xv. 3, 14), as being observed by the Magi when engaged in prayer. It is the so-called Barsom (*Beresma* in the Avesta), still used by the Parsi priests when engaged in worship.

<sup>2</sup> In *Æschylus’s* celebrated play “The Persians” the eagle is the symbol of the Persian empire (verses 205-10). The eagle was, as Xenophon reports (*Cyropædia*, vii. 1, 2), the ensign of the ancient Persians.

<sup>3</sup> The Hebrew word *goyim* (literally “people”), used in the plural, as it is here, denotes the heathenish nations, the idol-worshippers, in their strictest opposition to the Israelites.

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and the resurrection of the dead, which are both ascribed to the religion of the Magi, and are really to be found in the present scriptures of the Parsis. It is not ascertained whether these doctrines were borrowed by the Parsis from the Jews, or by the Jews from the Parsis; very likely neither is the case, and in both these religions they seem to have sprung up independently. In the Zend-Avesta we meet with only two words<sup>1</sup> which can be traced to the Semitic languages, neither of them referring to religious subjects. In the later books of the Old Testament we find several Persian words and many names, but they have nothing to do with religion. The most famous of these Persian words in the Old Testament, now spread over the whole civilised world, is the word "paradise," which means originally a park, a beautiful garden fenced in.<sup>2</sup>

The name Magi occurs even in the New Testament. In the Gospel according to St. Matthew (ii. 1), the Magi (Greek *magoi*, translated in the English Bible by "wise men") came from the East to Jerusalem, to worship the new-born child Jesus at Bethlehem. That these Magi were priests of the Zoroastrian religion, we know from Greek writers.

The earliest account of the religion of the Magi among the Greeks is to be found in HERODOTUS, the father of history (B.C. 450). In his first book (chap. cxxxi., cxxxii.) we read the following report on the Persian religion:—

'I know that the Persians observe these customs. It ' is not customary among them to have idols made, temples

<sup>1</sup> These are *tanúra*, "an oven;" *pairi-daéza* (in the Zend-Avesta), and *hara*, "a mountain," found only in the name *Haró berezaiti*, "high mountain," considered to be the chief of all mountains; preserved now-a-days in the name *Alborz*. *Tanúra* is evidently the same with the Hebrew *tanúr* (Gen. xv. 17; Isa. xxxi. 9), "an oven or furnace;" *hara* is identical with *har* in Hebrew, "a mountain."

<sup>2</sup> The original form of the word is "circumvallation or enclosure;" in Hebrew we find it in the form *par-des*; in Greek as *paradeisos*. *Pairi* is *peri* in Greek; *daéza* corresponds to *deha* in Sanskrit—i.e., enclosure, generally applied to the body. Of the same root is the English *thick* (very likely identical with S. *digdha*, past participle of the root *dih*, "to besmear, pollute," in a more comprehensive sense "to surround.")

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‘ built, and altars erected; they *even* upbraid with folly  
 ‘ those who do so. I can account for that, only from their  
 ‘ not believing that the gods are like men, as the Hellenes  
 ‘ do. They are accustomed to offer sacrifices to Zeus on the  
 ‘ summits of mountains; they call the whole *celestial* circle  
 ‘ Zeus. They offer sacrifices to the sun, moon, earth, fire,  
 ‘ water, and winds, these *elements* originally being the only  
 ‘ objects of worship; but they accepted from the Assyrians  
 ‘ and Arabs the worship of Aphrodite, the Queen of  
 ‘ Heaven, whom the Assyrians call Mylitta, the Arabs  
 ‘ Alitta, the Persians Mitra.’<sup>1</sup>

‘ The Persians offer sacrifices to the aforesaid gods in  
 ‘ the following manner. They neither erect altars nor  
 ‘ kindle fires when they are about to offer a sacrifice; they  
 ‘ neither use libations, nor flutes, nor wreaths, nor barley;  
 ‘ but when any one is willing to offer a sacrifice, he then  
 ‘ carries the sacrificial beast to a pure spot, and after  
 ‘ having twined round his turban a great many wreaths of  
 ‘ myrtle, in preference to any other leaf, he invokes the  
 ‘ deity. The sacrificer ought not to pray only for his own  
 ‘ prosperity; he must also pray for the welfare of all the  
 ‘ Persians, and for the king, because he is included among  
 ‘ them. When he has cut the animal into pieces, he then  
 ‘ boils its flesh, spreads the softest grass he can get, espe-  
 ‘ cially preferring clover, and places the pieces of flesh on  
 ‘ it. After having made this arrangement, one of the Magi  
 ‘ who is present sings a theogony,<sup>2</sup> as they call the incan-

<sup>1</sup> Here Herodotus has committed a mistake; not as to the matter, but as to the name. The Persians, in later times, worshipped a great female deity, who might be compared with the Mylitta of the Babylonians (the Ashtaroth or Astarte of the Old Testament), but she was called ANA-HITA (in the Zend-Avesta and cuneiform inscriptions), and was known to the Arab and Greek writers by the name of ANAITIS. She represented the beneficial influence of water.

Mitra is the well-known sun-god of the Persians and a male deity.

<sup>2</sup> Herodotus, who exhibits throughout the whole report an intimate knowledge of the Persian sacrifices, means by theogony here, those sections of the sacred books which are called *Yashts* or invocations, containing the praises of all the feats achieved by the deity in whose honor the sacrifice is to be offered. See the third Essay.

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‘tation (which is used); without one of the Magi no  
‘sacrifice can be offered. After waiting a short time, the  
‘sacrificer takes off the pieces of flesh, and uses them as  
‘he likes.’<sup>1</sup>

In the 138th chapter of the same book, the father of  
history says: ‘Lying is regarded as the most discreditable  
‘thing by them; next to it is the incurring of debt,  
‘chiefly for this reason, that the debtor is often compelled  
‘to tell lies. If any one of the inhabitants of a town be  
‘affected with leprosy, or white spots (another kind of  
‘leprosy), he cannot enter the town, nor have any inter-  
‘course with the other Persians; they believe him to have  
‘that disease in consequence of having sinned in one way  
‘or other against the sun.<sup>2</sup> All foreigners affected with  
‘these *diseases* are driven out of the country; for the same  
‘reason many expel even white pigeons. They neither  
‘make water, nor spit, nor wash their hands, in a river;  
‘nor will they allow any one else to do so; for they pay a  
‘high reverence to rivers.’

In another passage (iii. 16) Herodotus reports that the  
Persians believe Fire to be a god; wherefore Cambyses  
committed a great sin, as he says, in burning the corpse  
of King Amasis.

The chief Greek writers on the manners and religion  
of the Persians were KTESIAS (B.C. 400), the well-known  
physician to King Artaxerxes II., DEINON (B.C. 350), who  
is looked upon as a great authority in Persian matters by  
Cornelius Nepos (in the life of Konon), THEOPOMPOS of  
Chios (B.C. 300), and HERMIPPOS, the philosopher of  
Smyrna (B.C. 250). The books of all these writers being  
lost, save some fragments preserved by later authors, such

<sup>1</sup>This custom is still maintained  
by the Parsis. The flesh (or any  
other sacrifice) to be offered is first  
consecrated by the priest, then for a  
short time left near the fire, and  
finally taken off by the sacrificer, to

be used by him; but it is never  
thrown into the fire.

<sup>2</sup>The name given to sinners against  
the sun is *mīthrō-druksh*, *i.e.*, one  
who has belied Mithra (the sun).  
Such diseases were believed to be the  
consequence of lying.

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as PLUTARCH, DIOGENES of Laerte, and PLINY, we cannot judge how far they were acquainted with the religion of the Magi. The two chief sources whence the Greeks and Romans derived information about the religion of the Magi were THEOPOMPOS'S eighth book of the history of King Philip of Macedonia, which was entitled "On Miraculous Things," and specially treated of the doctrine of the Magi; and HERMIPPOS, who wrote a separate book "On the Magi." We are left without information whether or not Theopompos derived his statements on the lore of the Magi from his intercourse with the Persian priests themselves; but Hermippos, who composed, besides his work on the Zoroastrian doctrine, biographies of lawgivers, the seven sages of Greece, &c., is reported by Pliny (*Historia Naturalis*, xxx. 2) to have made very laborious investigations in all the Zoroastrian books, which were said to comprise two millions of verses, and to have stated the contents of each book separately. He therefore really seems to have had some knowledge of the sacred language and texts of the Magi, for which reason the loss of his work is greatly to be regretted.

It is not intended to produce all the reports on the Zoroastrian religion and customs to be met with in the ancient writers, but only to point out some of the most important.

According to Diogenes of Laerte (*Pro-cæmium*, chap. vi.), EUDOXOS and ARISTOTLE stated that in the doctrine of the Magi there were two powers opposed to each other, one representing the good god, called ZEUS and OROMASDES (Ahuramazda, Hormazd), and the other representing the devil, whose name was HADES and AREIMANIOS (Angrô-mainyush, Ahriman). Of this chief doctrine of the Magi THEOPOMPOS had given a further illustration. According to Plutarch (*De Iside et Osiride*) and Diogenes of Laerte (*Pro-cæmium*, chap. ix.), he reported that Oromasdes ruled for three thousand years alone, and Areimanius for three thousand more. After this period of six thousand years



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had elapsed they began to wage war against each other, one attempting to destroy the other; but finally (he says) Areimanios is to perish, mankind is to enjoy a blessed state of life; men will neither be any more in need of food, nor will they cast shadows; the dead are to rise again, men will be immortal, and everything is to exist in consequence of their prayers.

A brief but full account of Zoroaster's doctrine is to be found in Plutarch's book "On Isis and Osiris (chap. xlvi., xlvii.), which being in detail, seems to have been borrowed from a writer who was actually acquainted with the original texts. The philosopher Hermippos, abovementioned, being the only scholar of antiquity who can be supposed, with sufficient reason, to have had a real knowledge of the sacred language of the Zend-Avesta, we may regard him as the author of Plutarch's statements. These are as follows:—

'Oromasdes sprang out of the purest light; among all things perceived by the senses that element most resembles him; Areimanios sprang out of darkness, and is therefore of the same nature with it. Oromasdes, who resides as far beyond the sun as the sun is far from the earth, created six gods (the six *Ameshaspentas*, now *Amshaspends*, "the archangels"); the god of benevolence (*Vohu-manô*, "good-mind," now called *Bahman*); the god of truth (*Asha vahishta*, or *Ardibahisht*); the god of order (*Khshathra vairya*, or *Shahrivar*); the god of wisdom (*Armaiti*, or *Isfendarmad*); and the god of wealth and delight in beauty (*Haurvatât* and *Ameretât*, or *Khordâd* and *Amerdâd*). But to counterbalance him, Areimanios created an equal number of gods counteracting those of Oromasdes. Then Oromasdes decorated heaven with stars, and placed the star Sirius (*Tishtrya*, or *Tishtar*) at their head as a guardian. Afterwards he created twenty-four other gods,<sup>1</sup> and set them in an egg;

<sup>1</sup> This statement seems at the first glance to be very strange. But one may easily explain it from the Avesta texts. This writer had evidently in

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‘but Areimanios forthwith created an equal number of  
‘gods, who opened the egg; in consequence of this, evil is  
‘always mingled with good. Thus the good god and the  
‘demon are engaged in a constant war. Of plants and  
‘animals, some belong to the good, some to the evil spirit;  
‘to the good one belong dogs, birds, and crabs; to the evil  
‘one, water-rats. At the end, the time is to come when  
‘Areimanios will perish and disappear, in consequence of  
‘disease and famine, caused by himself. Then the earth  
‘will become even and equal, and there will be only one  
‘state and one language, and one and the same manner  
‘of living to the happy men who then speak only one  
‘language.’

STRABO the geographer (B.C. 60) has given in the 15th  
book of his celebrated Geography an account of the religion  
and customs of the Magi, of which some passages may be  
thus translated:—‘To whatever deity the Persians may  
‘offer sacrifice, they first invoke fire, which is fed at their  
‘sacred places with dried barkless pieces of wood, and is  
‘never to be extinguished; they put fat over it, and pour  
‘oil into it; if anybody happens to throw or blow into it  
‘anything dirty or dead, he is to die; the fire is to be  
‘kindled by blowing.’

In another passage (xi. 8, 4) he enumerates as Per-  
sian deities *Anaitis*, *Omanes*, and *Anadates* or *Anandates*.<sup>1</sup>

PAUSANIUS, the celebrated Greek traveller (A.D. 180), has  
the following report on the fire-worship of the Magi (v.  
27, 3). ‘In the temples of the Persians there is a room  
‘where ashes of another colour than those being burnt on  
‘the altar are to be found.’<sup>2</sup> To this room he first repairs,

view the thirty spirits presiding over  
the particular days of the month; he  
was informed, or he gathered it from  
his own reading of the texts, that  
there are two distinct classes of divine  
beings to be worshipped, six forming  
the higher order, twenty-four the  
lower; the Supreme Being, the crea-  
tor Ahuramazda, was not comprised

in these. In the Parsi calendar (Siro-  
zah, thirty days) Hormazd is included  
in the number.

<sup>1</sup> *Anaitis* is *Anāhitā*, a goddess,  
representing the celestial waters.  
*Omanes* is *Vohu-manō* or Bahman;  
*Anandates* is *Ameretāt*, spirit of the  
trees.

<sup>2</sup> The two kinds of ashes men-