CHAPTER TEN: ZOROASTRIANISM

Chapter Outline and Unit Summaries

I. Introduction
   A. Zoroastrianism: One of the World’s Oldest Living Religions
   B. Possesses Only 250,000 Adherents, Most Living in India
   C. Zoroastrianism Important because of Influence of Zoroastrianism on Christianity, Islam, Middle Eastern History, and Western Philosophy

II. Pre-Zoroastrian Persian Religion
   A. The Gathas: Hymns of Early Zoroastrianism Provide Clues to Pre-Zoroastrian Persian Religion
      1. The Gathas Considered the words of Zoroaster, and are Foundation for all Later Zoroastrian Scriptures
      2. The Gathas Disparage Earlier Persian Religions
   B. The Aryans (Noble Ones): Nomadic Inhabitants of Ancient Persia
      1. The Gathas Indicate Aryans Nature Worshippers Venerating Series of Deities (also mentioned in Hindu Vedic literature)
         a. The Daevas: Gods of Sun, Moon, Earth, Fire, Water
         b. Higher Gods, Intar the God of War, Asha the God of Truth and Justice, Uruwana a Sky God
         c. Most Popular God: Mithra, Giver and Benefactor of Cattle, God of Light, Loyalty, Obedience
         d. Mithra Survives in Zoroastrianism as Judge on Judgment Day
      2. Aryans Worship a Supreme High God: Ahura Mazda (The Wise Lord)
      3. Aryan Prophets / Reformers: Saoshyants
III. The Life of Zoroaster

A. Scant Sources of Information about Zoroaster
   1. The Gathas Provide Some Clues
   2. Greek and Roman Writers (Plato, Pliny, Plutarch) Comment

B. Zoroaster (born between 1400 and 1000 B.C.E.)
   1. Original Name (Zarathustra Spitama) Indicates Birth into Warrior Clan Connected to Royal Family of Ancient Persia
   2. Zoroaster Becomes Priest in His Religion; the Only Founder of a World Religion to be Trained as a Priest
   3. While Wandering and Meditating on Religious Questions, Zoroaster has Vision of Angel Vohu Mana
   4. Message of Vohu Mana: There is Only One God, Ahura Mazda (The Wise Lord) and Zoroaster Will be His Prophet
   5. Archangels of Ahura Mazda Appear to Zoroaster for Ten Years
   6. Efforts to Convert People Fail for Ten Years, Zoroaster Considered a Heretic and Sorcerer
   7. Turning Point: Zoroaster and Cousin Maidhyomah Journey to Bactria to Convert the Monarch Vishtaspa
      a. Eventually Zoroaster Succeeds in Converting Vishtaspa and All His Court and Kingdom
      b. Zoroastrianism Spreads from Vishtaspa’s Kingdom to Lands of the Aryan People
   8. Zoroaster Killed by Soldier at Age Seventy-Seven While Tending the Holy Flame in the Fire Temple

IV. The Teachings of Zoroaster

A. The Nature of God
   1. Central Teaching: Only One God Exists, the Creator of all, Ahura Mazda (Lord of all Wisdom)
a. Ahura Mazda: Aryan Supreme High God
b. Zoroaster Declares Ahura Mazda the Sole God, All the Gods of Nature *(Daevas)* Declared False Gods
c. Extreme Radical Monotheism: Not Even Zoroaster’s Contemporary Moses Denied the Existence of other Gods
d. Ahura Mazda: Invisible and Intangible

2. Ahura Mazda Reveals Self Through Agency of Six Modes *(the Amesha-Spenta, Holy Immortals)*

a. The *Amesha-Spenta* Less Like Angelic Beings, More Like Divine Attributes of Ahura Mazda
b. Because Ahura Mazda’s Nature Incomprehensible, He Comes to Humans as Just One of the Aspects of His Nature
c. Ahura Mazda’s Six Immortal Attributes Balance Male and Female
d. Ahura Mazda’s Three Masculine Immortal Modes
   (1) Asha (knowing law of God and law itself)
   (2) Vohu-Mana (love)
   (3) Kshathra (loving service)
e. Ahura Mazda’s Three Feminine Immortal Modes
   (1) Armaiti (piety)
   (2) Haurvatat (wholeness or perfection)
   (3) Ameretat (immortality)

3. The Yazata (Adorable Ones): Hosts of Angels

a. Limitless in Number, but Only Forty Named in Zoroastrian Texts
b. Three Most Frequently Mentioned
   (1) Sraosha, Guardian of Humanity
   (2) Ashi Vanguhi, Sister of Sraosha, Rewarder of Good Deeds
   (3) Mithra: Strongest Angel, Ideal of Soldiers

B. The God of Evil

1. Zoroaster’s Greatest Contribution to World Religion
2. Zoroastrianism is Monotheistic, Not Truly a Dualism
a. Two Spirits Emanate from One God, Ahura Mazda
   (1) Spenta Mainyu: Good Beneficial Spirit
   (2) Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, Shaitin, Satan: Evil Spirit Commanding Host of Demons
   (3) Mutually Dependent, Like Yin and Yang
   (4) Zoroaster Identifies all Pre-Zoroastrian Aryan Daevas as Demons of Angra Mainyu
   (5) Aeshma Second to Angra Mainyu: The Demon of Wrath, Disease, Death
b. The Two Spirits Not Independent of Each Other or Ahura Mazda; Co-Exist from Beginning of Time

C. The Nature of Humankind

1. Humans Cooperate with Either Forces of Good or Evil
   a. Humans Born Innocent and Sinless
   b. Humans Have Pure Freedom to Decide Which Side to Take in Cosmic Struggle, Good or Evil
   c. All Will be Held Accountable for Choices

2. Humans Can Achieve Perfection in this Life

3. Ethical Conduct Determines One’s Eternal Destiny

D. The Destiny of Humankind

1. Humans Repaid That Which they Commit: Evil to Evil, Good to Good

2. Zoroastrianism’s Unique Contribution: Eschatology
   a. Complete System about the End of the World, not Just Individual’s Death
   b. Soul Stays with Body for Three Days After Death to Meditate on the Deeds of Life
   c. If Balance of Life’s Deeds is Evil, Soul Condemned to Hell
      (1) On Way to Hell Soul Crosses Chinvat Bridge, a Narrow, Razor-like Path, Tormented by Old Hag, and Eventually Falls into Hell
      (2) Hell Described in Vision of Arda Viraf (written between 226-641 C.E.) as Place Where People Punished for Breaking Purity, Cleanliness, and Sexual Taboos
d. If Balance of Life’s Deeds is Good, Soul Goes to Paradise
   (1) On Way to Paradise Soul Crosses Chinvat Bridge, a Wide Easy Path, Guided by Beautiful Maidens
   (2) Paradise Place of Beauty, Light, Pleasant Scents, and Noble Souls

e. Time Comes to End, Ahura Mazda Destroys all Evil, the Souls in Hell Freed, the Saoshyant Restore World, and New Cycle of History Begins without Presence of Angra Mainyu and His Demons

E. Zoroastrian Ethics

1. Highly Developed Ethical Code

2. Ethics Based on Sacredness of Earth, Fire, Water, Air

3. Anything that Pollutes Basic Elements Considered Evil, all that Maintains Purity is Good

4. Value Truthfulness, Chastity, Justice, Compassion, Care of the Soil, Cattle, Charity, Education, Service

F. Zoroastrian Worship

1. Zoroaster Ends Blood Sacrifice System, Emphasizes Petitionary Prayers to Ahura Mazda for Living a Righteous Life

2. Remaining Sacrifice: Burning Sandalwood in Fires that Burn Perpetually in Zoroastrian Temples

   a. Priests Wear Surgical Masks So As Not to Contaminate Sacred Flame with Breath
   b. Pious Bring Sandalwood to Temples on Special Occasions, Receive Sacred Ashes

3. Rituals for Rites of Passage

   a. Initiation Ritual: Investiture of Sacred Shirt (sadre) and Sacred Thread (kusti), Which Must be Worn for Rest of Their Lives
(1) The kusti Tied and Untied Five Times a Day as a Form of Prayer
(2) Sacred Belt Contains Seventy-two Threads to Represent the Chapters Yasna

b. Death Ritual Most Distinctively Zoroastrian
   (1) Body Cannot be Buried Lest Contaminate Soil
   (2) Body Cannot be Burned Lest it Contaminate Sacred Fire
   (3) Body Cannot be Buried at Sea Lest it Contaminate the Water
   (4) Corpses Washed, Given Clean Clothes and Wrapped in kusti, Taken to Enclosure Called a Tower of Silence, dakhma
   (5) Corpse Placed in Open Compartment for Vultures to Eat
   (6) Bones Later Washed Down Central Well
   (7) In Rare Cases Burial in Stone Caskets Lined with Lead Allowed
   (8) Urban Zoroastrians Allow Cremation by Electrical Heat—No Flame Contaminated

V. Historical Development of Zoroastrianism

A. Well Established Religion of Persian People by Sixth Century B.C.E.
   
   1. Possible Religion of Cyrus the Great (rules 558-530 B.C.E.)
   
   2. Earliest Evidence: Inscriptions from Period of Darius the Great (521-486 B.C.E.) Mention People Worship Ahura Mazda (but do not mention Zoroaster)

B. Persian Military Exploits / Conquests Spread Zoroastrianism’s Influence

   1. Known to Plato and Other Greek and Roman Intellectuals
   
   2. Jews in Babylonian Captivity Come Under Persian Influence in 538 B.C.E. When Liberated by Cyrus the Persian
   
   3. Changes in Jewish Theology After Babylonian Exile Suggest Zoroastrian Influence
      a. Emergence of a Satan Figure in Judaism Post-Exile
      b. Jewish Literature in Inter-Testament Period Contains References to Satan and His Demons
      c. New Testament Assumes Existence of Satan

e. Jewish-Christian Themes Most Influential on Muhammad Seem to Have Zoroastrian Precedent

C. Persian Empire Conquered by Alexander the Great (Fourth Century B.C.E.)

1. Zoroastrianism Declines Under Influence of Hellenism, Quiescent During Period of Roman Empire

2. Only Surviving Influential Remnant is Cult of Mithra, Carried throughout Mediterranean by Roman Soldiers

D. Revival of Zoroastrianism in Third Century C.E.

1. Sassanid Rulers of Persia Give Zoroastrianism Official Support, Translate its Sacred Texts into Contemporary Language

2. Rise of Islam in Seventh Century Challenges Zoroastrianism

E. Zoroastrianism in Persia Under Islamic Rule from 642 C.E.

1. Early Muslim Tolerance Turns to Intolerance by Ninth Century C.E.

2. Zoroastrians Either Convert or Flee Persia to India

   a. Hindus Tolerate Zoroastrians (Parsis, Persians)
   b. Flourish in India in Nineteenth Century After British Arrival due to Fact Parsis Value Education and Not Encumbered by Caste or Dietary Rules

VI. Zoroastrian Holy Days

A. The Jasans (Feasts)

1. Feast Day Each Month for a Amesha-Spenta or Yazad

2. Most Popular: Farvardin Jason on 19th Day of First Month
B. New Year’s Day (N_R_z)
   1. Celebrated on First Day of First Month, Farvardin
   2. Marked by Feasts Celebrating Coming Spring

C. Seasonal Feasts (Gahambars)
   1. Six Seasonal Feasts (Gahambars)
   2. Each Lasts Five Days and Connected to Some Aspect of Creation: Heaven, Earth, Trees, Animals, Humans

D. All Souls Day (Muktad)
   1. Similar to Farvardin: Honors Departed Ancestors, Welcomes Them into the Home
   2. Special Offerings Made, Placed on Platform for the Spirits

VII. Zoroastrianism Today

A. Most Live in India
   1. Number 100,000, Mostly in Bombay
   2. Prosperous Minority

B. Zoroastrians in Iran
   1. Number Around 11,000
   2. Under Suspicion by Shi’ite Rulers, Considered Infidels (Gabars)
   3. Persecuted Since 1979 Iranian Revolution

C. Survival Threatened
   1. Do Not Encourage Conversion, Low Birthrate, and Forbid Intermarriage, Persecution in Iran all Combine to Make Demographic Trends Dire for Zoroastrians
   2. Bombay Parsis Might Soon be Only Remaining Viable Zoroastrian Community
### Key Names, Concepts, and Terms

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