



NORTH AMERICAN MOBED COUNCIL **NEWSLETTER** **ATHRAVAN**

October 2013

Vol. # 13

Presidents Message:

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Ervad Kobad Zarolia

Was Cyrus the Great a Zoroastrian? ***Ervad Cawas Desai***

Several weeks ago, ever since a Special Edition of the FEZANA Journal, Summer 2013, devoted to the Cyrus Cylinder was published, two e-mails have been making the rounds claiming that Cyrus the Great was a “Devayasni” and a worshiper of Marduk, the Babylonian God, citing several authorities. Since no one, to my knowledge, has refuted these claims, I humbly believe that it is necessary to do so and hence this paper.

One of the main authorities cited in the e-mails is Abraham Valentine Williams Jackson, the preceptor of Dastur Dhalla. It should be noted that A.V.W. Jackson and C. de Harlez (another authority cited in

the e-mails) were late 19th century scholars. At that time, the late 1890's, the prevalent belief was that Zarathushtra was born around 600 BC about the same time as Cyrus the Great. Let us examine this premise.

The date when Zarathushtra lived and preached is one of great speculation. The ancient Greek historians, particularly Xanthus of Lydiaⁱ, Plato, Pliny and Plutarch place Zarathushtra in eras varying from 7,000 BC (6,000 years before the Trojan War) to 2,000 BC. The Vedic Sanskrit scholars place Him before 3,500 BCⁱⁱ. Others claim a date of 1,000 BC would be more acceptable^{iv}. Some 19th century scholars contending that a date of 7,000 BC would place Zarathushtra in the Stone Age, and relying on the "so-called Parsi tradition" of 258 years before Alexanderv, assigned a date of about 600 BC. Some western scholars, notably A.V.W. Jackson, confusing the Kayanian King Gushtasp, the royal patron of Zarathushtra, with the Achaemenian Hystaspes, the father of Darius I, also accepted a date of 600 BC^{vi}. Most modern scholars now believe that Zarathushtra could not have lived any later than 1,800 BC.

The "so called Parsi traditional date" of 588 BC as the birth date of Zarathushtra, (258 years before the defeat of Darius III in 330 BC), would make Zarathushtra a contemporary of Cyrus the Great, and place the establishment of Zoroastrianism in the Achaemenian Dynasty rather than the Kayanian Dynasty. A date of 588 BC would also make Zarathushtra contemporaneous with the establishment of Buddhism. As Chatterjee puts it, "To seek to make Dharmaraj Zarathushtra more or less a contemporary of Gautama Budha is the height of frivolity"^{vii}.

The Achaemenian Dynasty takes its name from Achaemenes (Avestan Hakhamanish) the patriarch of the Median tribe into which Cyrus was born in c. 576 BC, the exact date being uncertain. In 558 BC, Cyrus II (The Younger, also known to history as The Great), overthrew his maternal grandfather, Astyages, and established the Achaemenian Dynasty. Cyrus the Great was the sixth king after Achaemenes.

None of the Achaemenian inscriptions include the name of Zarathushtra. This is the prime reason why scholars debate whether the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians or not. However, the name of Ahura Mazda constantly appears in the inscriptions and it must be remembered that this was the name given by Zarathushtra to His God.

The oldest Achaemenian object yet discovered is a gold tablet engraved in cuneiform and in Old Persian, giving the titles of Ariaramnes (Old Persian, Aryaramna, meaning Peace of the Aryans c. 640 to 590 BC), probably the son of Ctespes (the second ruler after Achamenes) and a brother of Cyrus I (the Elder, the fourth ruler)^{viii}, "This land of the Persians which I possess, provided with fine horses and good men, it is the Great God Ahuramazda who has given it to me. I am the King of this land"^{ix}. Although the inscriptions of Cyrus discovered up to this date do not mention Ahura Mazda, it should be noted that this name was used by Aryaramna, long before Cyrus' reign and by Darius the Great and his successors long after Cyrus' reign. It is, therefore, a stretch of the imagination to assume that Cyrus, the monarch whose known inscriptions do not mention the name of Ahura Mazda, was not a follower of Ahura Mazda, but was a Devayasni!

It is accepted that Cyrus and Darius acknowledged other gods out of political expediency and that Xerxes and the later monarchs were influenced by the interaction of Greek religious ideas in having anthropomorphic gods. In any event, the practice of Zoroastrianism began to change during the Achaemenian Dynasty under the influence of the Magi, who became the hereditary guardians of the religion and were entrusted with the performance of all religious rituals and the safeguarding of all religious practices. They became the advisors to the Achaemenian Emperors^x.

The last reported words of Cyrus were "God is the protector of this lasting and unchanging organization of the universe. His majesty and grandeur are beyond description"^{xi}. Except for the

inscriptions on his tomb, “Adam Kurush Kshayathiya Hakhamanishya” (“I am Cyrus the King, the Achaemenian”)xii , Cyrus the Great left no other inscriptions behind. According to Plutarch, the tomb was desecrated by Polymachus after the invasion of Alexander. Pliny the Elder is quoted by Professor A.V.W. Jackson that “The Magi hold the fortress of Pasargadae in which is the tomb of Cyrus and that the Magians were hereditary guardians of the tomb, dwelling near it, and offering a sheep a day, and a horse each month, as sacrifice”xiii.

It should be remembered that in the Avesta, Zarathushtra is referred to as a “Maghavan” from the Avestan word 'magâunô', i.e. the religious caste of the Medes into which Zarathushtra was bornxiv. The Zoroastrian religion, at the time of its establishment first flourished in Bactria. Several millennia later, a tribe of Zoroastrians, misnamed “Medes” by Berosus, conquered Chaldea in 2,458 BC. History makes no further mention of Zoroastrians till we come to the 9th century BC, when we find Zoroastrianism flourishing in the Medean Kingdom xv.

About the end of the second millennium and the beginning of the first millennium BC, the Persians from Southern Iran moved eastwards and conquered a tribe known as the Elamites, becoming the rulers of the Kingdom of Anshan (near Pars, north of modern day Shiraz), ruling as vassals of the Medes for over a century. Also in this same time period, Zoroastrianism heavily influenced the Indo-Iranians who had moved eastwards around the Caspian Sea and settled in the valleys of the Zagros Mountains. These included the six Median tribes, one of which was the Magoi (Magi), a sacerdotal tribe, who are believed to have been literate and provided the priesthood for the Medes and Western Persians.

If Cyrus was not a Mazdayasni, is it possible that the Magi, who were the Zoroastrian priests and caretakers of the Zoroastrian religion, would look after his tomb?

As mentioned previously, the Achaemenian Dynasty was founded by Cyrus II (the Great) in 558 BC, the sixth king of the Dynasty, when he revolted against his maternal grandfather Astyages. The “Nabonidus Cylinder” discovered in Babylon says of Astyages, “His troops he collected, and against Cyrus, king of Anshan....he marched. As for Astyages, his troops revolted against him, and he was seized and delivered up to Cyrus. Cyrus marched to Ecbatana, the royal city. The silver, gold, goods and substances of Ecbatana he seized, and to the land of Anshan he took the goods and substance that were gotten”xvi. Cyrus united the kingdoms of the Medes and the Persians and after wresting Babylon from Nabonidus, went on to conquer most of Central Asia and the Mediterranean colonies of Greece.

After the conquest of Babylon, in a political move, he accepted all the Babylonian Gods to forestall any opposition from the Babylonian priests and gain the acceptance of the conquered population. Citing the “Cyrus Cylinder”, the writer of the e-mails claims that Cyrus was not a “Mazdayasni” but a “Devayasni”!

The surviving inscriptions on the Cyrus Cylinder consist of 45 lines of text written in Akkadian cuneiform script. The first 35 lines are on fragment "A" and the remainder are on fragment "B"xvii. A number of lines at the start and end of the text are too badly damaged for more than a few words to be legible. The text is written in an extremely formulaic style that can be divided into six distinct parts:

Lines 1–19: an introduction reviling Nabonidus, the previous king of Babylon, and associating Cyrus with the god Marduk;

Lines 20–22: detailing Cyrus's royal titles and genealogy, and his peaceful entry to Babylon;

Lines 22–34: a commendation of Cyrus's policy of restoring Babylon;

Lines 34–35: a prayer to Marduk on behalf of Cyrus and his son Cambyses;

Lines 36–37: a declaration that Cyrus has enabled the people to live in peace and has increased the offerings made to the gods;

Lines 38–45: details of the building activities ordered by Cyrus in Babylonxviii.

The Cyrus Cylinder bears striking similarities to older Mesopotamian royal inscriptions. Two notable examples are the Cylinder of Marduk-apla-iddina II, who seized the Babylonian throne in 722/1 BC, and the annals of Sargon II of Assyria, who conquered Babylon twelve years later. As a conqueror, Marduk-apla-iddina faced many of the same problems of legitimacy that Cyrus did when he conquered Babylon. He declares himself to have been chosen personally by Marduk, who ensured his victory. When he took power, he performed the sacred rites and restored the sacred shrines. He states that he found a royal inscription placed in the temple foundations by an earlier Babylonian king, which he left undisturbed and honored. All of these claims also appear in Cyrus's Cylinder. Twelve years later, the Assyrian king Sargon II defeated and exiled Marduk-apla-iddina, taking up the kingship of Babylonia. Sargon's annals describe how he took on the duties of a Babylonian sovereign, honouring the gods, maintaining their temples and respecting and upholding the privileges of the urban elite. Again, Cyrus's Cylinder makes exactly the same points. Nabonidus, Cyrus's deposed predecessor as king of Babylon, commissioned foundation texts on clay cylinders – such as the Cylinder of Nabonidus, also in the British Museum – that follows the same basic formulaxix.

The text of the Cylinder thus indicates a strong continuity with centuries of Babylonian tradition, as part of an established rhetoric advanced by conquerors. The familiarity with long-established Babylonian tropes suggests that the Cylinder was authored by the Babylonian priests of Marduk, working at the behest of Cyrusxx.

The author of the e-mails starts from Line 20 of the Cyrus Cylinder and, among others, quotes lines 34 and 35 in support of his supposition that Cyrus was a worshipper of Marduk. These lines are:

34. I returned them unharmed to their cells, in the sanctuaries that make them happy. May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries,

35. every day before Bel and Nabu, ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds, and say to Marduk, my lord, this: “Cyrus, the king who fears you, and Cambyses his son,

However, if one reads the lines together without a break, it reads, “May all the gods that I returned to their sanctuaries, every day before Bel and Nabu ask for a long life for me, and mention my good deeds....”. It appears, therefore, that it is not Cyrus who is praying to the Babylonian Gods, but rather Cyrus asking all the gods he has restored to their previously destroyed sanctuaries to ask the Babylonian Gods to grant him, Cyrus, a long life. This is a far cry from claiming that Cyrus was a worshiper of Bel and Nabu!

Cyrus will always be remembered for his forbearance against the rulers and the populations of all the nations he conquered, from Lydia to Sardis and the Greek colonies of Phrygia, Mycenae and Ionia. It is common knowledge that Cyrus' decree on the rights of peoples forms the basis of the Charter of the United Nations. But history's greatest remembrance of Cyrus will always be the freeing of the Hebrews from the Babylonian Captivity by the “Edict of Cyrus” in 538 BC, which allowed the Jews to take the gold and silver vessels, captured by Nebuchadnezzar, back to Jerusalem and rebuild the Temple. This act is forever immortalized in the Old Testament Book of Isaiah. “Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him, and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him, that gates may not be closed. I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron, and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by your name”xxi.

Because of the salutary mention of Cyrus in the Old Testament, some scholars have gone so far as claiming that Cyrus was a Jew!

It may be well to repeat what Dr. Lawrence Heyworth Mills, Professor of Philology at the University of Oxford had to say: “If God was anywhere present in any human event, He was active at the taking of Babylon. Had Cyrus failed there, where would our post-exilic Judaism and pre-Christianity have been now. Cyrus and his successors not only saved the Jewish national existence, but restored Jewish worship with its very Temple. To ignore what Persia did under the hand of God for the Jews and for ourselves would be more than ingratitude – to deny it would be sacrilege, impugning either Divine omnipotence or benevolence in one of its most glorious manifestations”^{xxii} . Finally, from his actions and decrees, in which he epitomized the religious creed of Zarathushtra, one can have no doubt that he was a Zoroastrian. As a result of Cyrus’ respect and reverence for the different religions of his subject peoples, to claim that he was a worshiper of many gods, and was a “devayasni” is not only ludicrous, but blasphemous of one of history’s greatest leaders.

ⁱ A.V.W. Jackson, “Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran”.

ⁱⁱ Xanthus of Lydia (fifth century BC).

ⁱⁱⁱ Jatinchandra Mohan Chatterjee, “Atharvan Zarathushtra, the Foremost Prophet”.

^{iv} Richard Frye, “The Heritage of Persia”, Maneckji N. Dhalla, “History of Zoroastrianism”.

^v Dinkard, edited by Peshotun Dastoor Behramjee Sanjana translated by Ratanshah E. Kohiyar; Iranian (Greater) Bundahishn, translation of Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria; al-Biruni, “Athar-ul-Bakiya”.

^{vi} A.V.W. Jackson, “Zoroaster, the Prophet of Ancient Iran”.

^{vii} Jatinchandra Mohan Chatterjee, “Atharvan Zarathushtra, the Foremost Prophet”.

^{viii} Encyclopedia Wikipedia.

^{ix} R. Ghirshman, “Iran, From the Earliest Times to the Islamic Conquest”.

^x Herodotus of Hallicarnassus, “The Histories”.

^{xi} Ardeshir Jehanian, “The Religion of the Achaemenians”.

^{xii} Jamshed C. Tarapore, “Cyrus the Great, a Brief Study”.

^{xiii} A.V.W. Jackson, “Persia Past and Present”.

^{xiv} Yasna 33.7: ‘yâ sruyê parê magâunô ‘ = ‘ so I can be heard beyond Magi.

^{xv} Meherjibhai Noshervanji Kuka, “An Enquiry into the Order of the Parsee Months and the Basis of their Nomenclature”, K.R. Cama Memorial Volume

^{xvi} Jamshed C. Tarapore, “Cyrus the Great, a Brief Study”.

^{xvii} Berger, pp. 155–159, Encyclopedia Wikipedia.

^{xviii} Wiesehöfer (2001), pp. 44–45, Encyclopedia Wikipedia.

^{xix} Kuhrt (2007), pp. 174–175, Encyclopedia Wikipedia.

^{xx} Dyck, pp. 91–94, Encyclopedia Wikipedia.

^{xxi} The Old Testament Book of Isaiah, 44 and 45.

^{xxii} Lawrence Mills, “Our Own Religion in Ancient Persia”.

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