

Some elements of Zoroastrianism related to apocalyptic literature [adapted from Norman Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come* (2nd edition, 2001, Yale University Press)]

ZOROASTER THE MAN

- J **Probably, but not certainly, lived between 1500-1200 BCE**, when the Persian/Iranian area was still primarily occupied by pastoralists
- J He wrote many liturgical hymns, collected in the *Gathas*.
- J **He was also known as “Zarathustra,”** made famous by Nietzsche’s book, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, a philosophical, fictional engagement with the tradition of Zarathustra as well as by the Strauss musical composition of the same name, made famous as the primary soundtrack of “2001: A Space Odyssey.”
- J **He began as a priest of an older religion, which he sought to reform, not replace** (as Jesus and Mohammed)

ZOROASTRIANISM: HISTORY AND TRADITION

- J Over roughly a thousand (!) years, Zoroaster’s teaching spread throughout large parts of current day Iran, being accepted by people of all classes. By the 7th century BCE, the traditional priests, known as *magi* (see Matt 2.1ff), had been converted.
- J The **Persian king, Cyrus the Great (see Ezra 1.1ff; Isaiah 45.1), the founder of the Persian Empire in 549 BCE, was likely a Zoroastrian.** It quickly became the official religion of the empire.
- J It continued to flourish as a state religion until the empire was overthrown by Muslim armies in the 7th century CE.
- J **The sacred scriptures are known as the Avesta.** The version used today was written in the 5th or 6th century CE and likely contains a small fraction of the original. It includes the *Gathas* composed by Zoroaster.

PRIMARY DOCTRINE THAT SPAWNED ELEMENTS OF APOCALYPTIC LITERATURE IN THE BIBLE AND BEYOND

- J Earlier, **imperial religions of the ancient world were united around some form of the “combat myth”:** the eternal battle between order/chaos. In this myth, the emperor/king was the agent of order and creation was the source of chaos. Hence, “civilization” defeated chaos. The Babylonian *Enuma Elish* is one expression of this view.
- J **Zoroaster understood things differently, proposing a conflict within “limited time” between the source of goodness, Ahura Mazda, and the source of evil, Angra Mainyu.** At the end, Angra Mainyu would be destroyed and an eternity of earthly bliss would begin known as “the making wonderful.”
- J **The battle would require “allies” in the war,** hence, the creation of six, divine companions, known as “the Shining Ones.”
- J Angra Mainyu also had allies, parallel to “demons” in the biblical tradition, or the angels who are loyal to the Dragon in Revelation. These “demons” were understood to be responsible for illness and other forms of disorder.
- J **Humans were called on via moral actions to side with Ahura Mazda in the battle.**
- J **Those humans who lived a moral life would, at death, cross a bridge where their deeds would be measured,** and if goodness outweighed evil, the person would dwell in the presence of Ahura Mazda and the Shining Ones forever. If not, they would end up in the dark realm of Angra Mainyu forever.
- J **At the end of “limited time,” the dead would get new bodies in a universal resurrection.**
- J Zoroaster’s original ideas were almost certainly of an urgent battle that would be resolved in a relatively short time. However, **with the advent of the Persian Empire, new stories were developed that supported the imperial status quo and put off the “making wonderful” by a series of “thousand year” intervals.**
- J **A savior, known as the Saoshyant, would be born from the seed of Zoroaster** than had been preserved in a lake, watched over by the souls of the righteous dead. **A virgin would come to swim in the lake and become pregnant with the prophet’s seed.** In the final years before the “making wonderful,” the Saoshyant would resurrect dead people and assemble the dead and the living for a final, fiery ordeal of purification.
- J **In the final version, the final three thousand years are divided into three, equal intervals in which a new Saoshyant would appear.** Thus, the original, moral urgency of Zoroaster’s vision was replaced by a state religion that would remain stable for “a thousand years.”