PERSIA

Lesson	Chapters
PER001	Chapter 1
PER002	Chapters 2, 3
PER003	Chapters 4, 5
PER004	**Chapter 6**
PER005	Chapter 7

Chapter 6. Religion

The original form of the Persian religion has been already described under the head of the third or Median monarchy. It was identical with the religion of the Medes in its early shape, consisting mainly in the worship of Ahura-Mazda, the acknowledgment of a principle of evil--Angro-Mainyus, and obedience to the precepts of Zoroaster. When the Medes, on establishing a wide-spread Empire, chiefly over races by whom Magism had been long professed, allowed the creed of their subjects to corrupt their own belief, accepted the Magi for their priests, and formed the mixed religious system of which an account has been given in the second volume of this work, the Persians in their wilder country, less exposed to corrupting influences, maintained their original faith in undiminished purity, and continued faithful to their primitive traditions. The political dependence of their country upon Media during the period of the Median sway made no difference in this respect; for the Medes were tolerant, and did not seek to interfere with the creed of their subjects. The simple Zoroastrian belief and worship, overlaid by Magism in the now luxurious Media, found a refuge in the rugged Persian uplands, among the hardy shepherds and cultivators of that unattractive region, was professed by the early Achaemenian princes, and generally acquiesced in by the people.

The main feature of the religion daring this first period was the acknowledgment and the worship of a single supreme God--"the Lord God of Heaven"--"the giver (i.e. maker) of heaven and earth"--the disposer of thrones, the dispenser of happiness. The foremost place in inscriptions and decrees was assigned, almost universally, to the "great god, Ormazd." Every king, of whom we have an inscription more than two lines in length, speaks of Ormazd as his upholder; and the early monarchs mention by name no other god. All rule "by the grace of Ormazd." From Ormazd come victory, conquest, safety, prosperity, blessings of every kind. The "law of Ormazd" is the rule of life. The protection of Ormazd is the one priceless blessing for which prayer is perpetually offered.

While, however, Ormazd holds this exalted and unapproachable position, there is still an acknowledgment made, in a general way, of "other gods." Ormazd is "the greatest of the gods" (_mathista baganam_). It is a usual prayer to ask for the protection of Ormazd, together with that of these lesser powers (_hada bagaibish_). Sometimes the phrase is varied, and the petition is for the special protection of a certain class of Deities--the _Dii familiares_--or "deities who guard the house."

The worship of Mithra, or the Sun, does not appear in the inscriptions until the reign of Artaxerxes Mnemon, the victor of Cunaxa. It is, however, impossible to doubt that it was a portion of the Persian religion, at least as early as the date of Herodotus. Probably it belongs, in a certain sense, to primitive Zoroastrianism, but was kept in the background during the early period, when a less materialistic worship prevailed than suited the temper of later times.

Nor can it be doubted that the Persians held during this early period that Dualistic belief which has been the distinguishing feature of Zoroastrianism from a time long anterior to the commencement of the Median Empire down to the present day. It was not to be

expected that this belief would show itself in the inscriptions, unless in the faintest manner; and it can therefore excite no surprise that they are silent, or all but silent, on the point in question. Nor need we wonder that this portion of their creed was not divulged by the Persians to Herodotus or to Xenophon, since it is exactly the sort of subject on which reticence was natural and might have been anticipated. Neither the lively Halicarnassian, nor the pleasant but somewhat shallow Athenian, had the gift of penetrating very deeply into the inner mind of a foreign people; added to which, it is to be remembered that they were unacquainted with Persia Proper, and drew their knowledge of Persian opinions and customs either from hearsay or from the creed and practices of the probably mixed garrisons which held Asia Minor, Syria, and Egypt.

Persian worship, in these early times, was doubtless that enjoined by the Zendavesta, comprising prayer and thanksgiving to Ormazd and the good spirits of his creation, the recitation of Gathas or hymns, the performance of sacrifice, and participation in the Soma ceremony. Worship seems to have taken place in temples, which are mentioned (according to the belief of most cuneiform scholars) in the Behistun inscription. Of the character of these buildings we can say nothing. It has been thought that those two massive square towers so similar in construction, which exist in a more or less ruined condition at Murgab and Nakhsh-i-Rustam, are Persian temples of the early period, built to contain an altar on which the priests offered victims. But the absence of any trace of an altar from both, the total want of religious emblems, and the extremely small size of the single apartment which each tower contains, make strongly against the temple theory; not to mention that a much more probable use may be suggested for the buildings.

With respect to the altars upon which sacrifice was offered, we are not left wholly without evidence. The Persian monarchs of the early period, including Darius Hystaspis, represented themselves on their tombs in the act of worship. Before them, at the distance of a few feet, stands an altar, elevated on three steps, and crowned with the sacrificial fire. Its form is square, and its only ornaments are a sunken squared recess, and a strongly projecting cornice at top. The height of the altar, including the steps, was apparently about four and a half feet.

The Persians' favorite victim was the horse; but they likewise sacrificed cattle, sheep, and goats. Human sacrifices seem to have been almost, if not altogether, unknown to them, and were certainly alien to the entire spirit of the Zoroastrian system. The flesh of the victim was probably merely shown to the sacred fire, after which it was eaten by the priests, the sacrificer, and those whom the latter associated with himself in the ceremony.

The spirit of the Zendavesta is wholly averse to idolatry, and we may fully accept the statement of Herodotus that images of the gods were entirely unknown to the Persians. Still, they did not deny themselves a certain use of symbolic representations of their deities, nor did they even scruple to adopt from idolatrous nations the forms of their religious symbolism. The winged circle, with or without the addition of a human figure, which was in Assyria the emblem of the chief Assyrian deity, Asshur, became with the Persians the ordinary representation of the Supreme God, Ormazd, and, as such, was placed in most conspicuous positions on their rock tombs and on their buildings. Nor was the general idea only of the emblem adopted, but all the details of the Assyrian model were followed, with one exception. The human figure of the Assyrian original wore the close-fitting tunic, with short sleeves, which was the ordinary costume in Assyria, and had on its head the horned cap which marked a god or a genius. In the Persian counterpart this costume was exchanged for the Median robe,

and a tiara, which was sometimes that proper to the king,23 sometimes that worn with the Median robe by court officers.

Mithra, or the Sun, is represented in Persian sculptures by a disk or orb, which is not four-rayed like the Assyrian, but perfectly plain and simple. In sculptures where the emblems of Ormazd and Mithra occur together, the position of the former is central, that of the latter towards the right hand of the tablet. The solar emblem is universal on sculptured tombs, but is otherwise of rare occurrence.

Spirits of good and evil, the Ahuras and Devas of the mythology, were represented by the Persians under human, animal, or monstrous forms. There can be little doubt that it is a good genius--perhaps the "well-formed, swift, tall Serosh"--who appears on one of the square pillars set up by Cyrus at Pasargadae. This figure is that of a colossal man, from whose shoulders issue four wings, two of which spread upwards above his head, while the other two droop and reach nearly to his feet. [PLATE LIX.] It stands erect, in profile, with both arms raised and the hands open. The costume of the figure is remarkable. It consists of a long fringed robe reaching from the neck to the ankles--apparently of a stiff material, which conceals the form--and of a very singular head-dress. This is a striped cap, closely fitting the head, overshadowed by an elaborate ornament, of a character purely Egyptian. First there rise from the top of the cap two twisted horns, which, spreading right and left, become a sort of basis for the other forms to rest upon. These consist of two grotesque human-headed figures, one at either side, and of a complex triple ornament between them, clumsily imitated from a far more elegant Egyptian model.

The winged human-headed bulls, which the Persians adopted from the Assyrians, with very slight modifications, were also, it is probable, regarded as emblems of some god or good genius. They would scarcely otherwise have been represented on Persian cylinders as upholding the emblem of Ormazd in the same way that human-headed bulls uphold the similar emblem of Asshur on Assyrian cylinders. Their position, too, at Persepolis, where they kept watch over the entrance to the palace, accords with the notion that they represented guardian spirits, objects of the favorable regard of the Persians. Yet this view is not wholly free from difficulty. The bull appears in the bas-reliefs of Persepolis among the evil, or at any rate hostile, powers, which the king combats and slays; and though in these representations the animal is not winged or human-headed, yet on some cylinders apparently Persian, the monarch contends with bulls of exactly the same type as that which is assigned in other cylinders to the upholders of Ormazd. It would seem therefore that in this case the symbolism was less simple than usual, the bull in certain combinations and positions representing a god or a good spirit, while in others he was the type of a deva or evil genius.

[The most common representatives of the Evil Powers of the mythology were lions, winged or unwinged, and monsters of several different descriptions. At Persepolis the lions which the king stabs or strangles are of the natural shape, and this type is found also upon gems and cylinders; but on these last the king's antagonist is often a winged, while sometimes he is a winged and horned, lion. The monsters are of two principal types. In both the forms of a bird and a beast are commingled; but in the one the bird, and in the other the beast predominates. Specimens are given taken from Persian gems and cylinders.

Such seems to have been, in outline, the purer and more ancient form of the Persian religion. During its continuance a fierce iconoclastic spirit animated the princes of the Empire, who took every opportunity of showing their hatred and contempt for the idolatries of the neighboring nations, burning temples, confiscating or destroying images, scourging or slaying idolatrous priests, putting a stop to

festivals, disturbing tombs, smiting with the sword animals believed to be divine incarnations. Within their own dominions the fear of stirring up religious wars compelled them to be moderately tolerant, unless it were after rebellion, when a province lay at their mercy; but when they invaded foreign countries, they were wont to exhibit in the most open and striking way their aversion to materialistic religions. In Greece, during the great invasion, they burned every temple that they came near; in Egypt, on their first attack, they outraged every religious feeling of the people.

It was during this time of comparative purity, when the anti-idolatrous spirit was in full force, that a religious sympathy seems to have drawn together the two nations of the Persians and the Jews. Cyrus evidently identified Jehovah with Ormazd, and, accepting as a divine command the prophecy of Isaiah, undertook to rebuild their temple for a people who, like his own, allowed no image of God to defile the sanctuary. Darius, similarly, encouraged the completion of the work, after it had been interrupted by the troubles which followed the death of Cambyses. The foundation was thus laid for that friendly intimacy between the two peoples, of which we have abundant evidence in the books of Ezra, Nehemiah, and Esther, a friendly intimacy which caused the Jews to continue faithful to Persia to the last, and to brave the conqueror of Issus rather than desert masters who had shown them kindness and sympathy.

The first trace that we have of a corrupting influence being brought to bear on the Persian religion is connected with the history of the pseudo-Smerdis. According to Herodotus, Cambyses, when he set out on his Egyptian expedition, left a Magus, Patizeithes, at the capital, as comptroller of the royal household. The conferring of an office of such importance on the priest of an alien religion is the earliest indication which we have of a diminution of zeal for their ancestral creed on the part of the Achaemenian kings, and the earliest historical proof of the existence of Magism beyond the limits of Media. Magism was really, it is probable, an older creed than Zoroastrianism in the country where the Persians were settled; but it now, for the first time since the Persian conquest, began to show itself, to thrust itself into high places, and to attract general notice. From being the religion of the old Scythic tribes whom the Persians had conquered and whom they held in subjection, it had passed into being the religion of great numbers of the Persians themselves. The same causes which had corrupted Zoroastrianism in Media soon after the establishment of the Empire, worked also, though more slowly, in Persia, and a large section of the nation was probably weaned from its own belief, and won over to Magism, before Cambyses went into Egypt. His prolonged absence in that country brought matters to a crisis. The Magi took advantage of it to attempt a substitution of Magism for Zoroastrianism as the religion of the state. When this attempt failed, there was no doubt a reaction for a time, and Zoroastrianism thought itself triumphant. But a foe is generally most dangerous when he is despised. Magism, repulsed in its attempt to oust the rival religion, derived wisdom from the lesson, and thenceforth set itself to sap the fortress which it could not storm. Little by little it crept into favor, mingling itself with the old Arian creed, not displacing it, but only adding to it. In the later Persian system the Dualism of Zoroaster and the Magian elemental worship were jointly professed--the Magi were accepted as the national priests--the rights and ceremonies of the two religions were united--a syncretism not unusual in the ancient world blended into one two creeds originally quite separate and distinct, but in few respects antagonistic--and the name of Zoroaster being still fondly cherished in the memory of the nation, while in their practical religion Magian rites predominated, the mixed religion acquired

the name, by which it was known to the later Greeks, of "the Magism of Zoroaster."

The Magian rites have been described in the chapter on the Median Religion. Their leading feature was the fire-worship, which is still cherished among those descendants of the ancient Persians who did not submit to the religion of Islam. On lofty spots in the high mountain-chain which traversed both Media and Persia, fire-altars were erected, on which burnt a perpetual flame, watched constantly lest it should expire, and believed to have been kindled from heaven. Over the altar in most instances a shrine or temple was built; and on these spots day after day the Magi chanted their incantations, displayed their barsoms or divining-rods, and performed their choicest ceremonies. Victims were not offered on these fire-altars. When a sacrifice took place, a fire was laid hard-by with logs of dry wood, stript of their bark, and this was lighted from the flame which burned on the altar. On the fire thus kindled was consumed a small part of the fat of the victim; but the rest was cut into joints, boiled, and eaten or sold by the worshipper. The true offering, which the god accepted, was, according to the Magi, the soul of the animal.

If human victims were ever really offered by the Persians as sacrifices, it is to Magian influence that the introduction of this horrid practice must be attributed, since it is utterly opposed to the whole spirit of Zoroaster's teaching. An instance of the practice is first reported in the reign of Xerxes, when Magism, which had been sternly repressed by Darius Hystaspis, began once more to lift its head, crept into favor at Court, and obtained a status which it never afterwards forfeited. According to Herodotus, the Persians, on their march into Greece, sacrificed, at Ennea Hodoi on the Strymon river, nine youths and nine maidens of the country, by burying them alive. Herodotus seems to have viewed the act as done in propitiation of a god resembling the Grecian Pluto; but it is not at all certain that he interpreted it correctly. Possibly he mistook a vengeance for a religious ceremony. The Brygi, who dwelt at this time in the vicinity of Ennea Hodoi, had given Mardonius a severe defeat on a former occasion; and the Persians were apt to treasure up such wrongs, and visit them, when occasion offered, with extreme severity.

When the Persians had once yielded to the syncretic spirit so far as to unite the Magian tenets and practices with their primitive belief, they were naturally led on to adopt into their system such portions of the other religions, with which they were brought into close contact, as possessed an attraction for them. Before the date of Herodotus they had borrowed from the Babylonians the worship of a Nature-Goddess, whom the Greeks identified at one time with Aphrodite, at another with Artemis, at another (probably) with Here, and had thus made a compromise with one of the grossest of the idolatries which, theoretically, they despised and detested. The Babylonian Venus, called in the original dialect of her native country Nana, was taken into the Pantheon of the Persians, under the name of Nansea, Anaea, Anaitis, or Tanata, and became in a little while one of the principal objects of Persian worship. At first idolatry, in the literal sense, was avoided; but Artaxerxes Mnemon, the conqueror of Cunaxa, an ardent devotee of the goddess, not content with the mutilated worship which he found established, resolved to show his zeal by introducing into all the chief cities of the Empire the image of his patroness. At Susa, at Persepolis, at Babylon, at Ecbatana, at Damascus, at Sardis, at Bactra, images of Anaitis were set up by his authority for the adoration of worshippers. It is to be feared that at this time, if not before, the lascivious rites were also adopted, which throughout the East constituted the chief attraction of the cult of Venus.

With the idolatry thus introduced, another came soon to be joined. Mithra, so long an object of reverence, if not of actual worship, to the Zoroastrians, was in the reign of

Artaxerxes Mnemon, honored, like Anaitis, with a statue, and advanced into the foremost rank of deities. The exact form which the image took is uncertain; but probability is in favor of the well-known type of a human figure slaying a prostrate bull, which was to the Greeks and Romans the essential symbol of the Mithraic worship. The intention of this oft-repeated group has been well explained by Hyde, who regards it as a representation of the Sun quitting the constellation of Taurus, the time when in the East his fructifying power is the greatest. The specimens which we possess of this group belong to classical art and to times later than Alexander; but we can scarcely suppose the idea to have been Occidental. The Western artists would naturally adopt the symbolism of those from whom they took the rites, merely modifying its expression in accordance with their own aesthetic notions.

Towards the close of the Empire two other gods emerged from the obscurity in which the lower deities of the Zoroastrian system were shrouded during the earlier and purer period. Vohu-manu, or Bah-man, and Amerdat, or Amendat, two of the councillors of Ormazd, became the objects of a worship, which was clearly of an idolatrous character. Shrines were built in their honor, and were frequented by companies of Magi, who chanted their incantations, and performed their rites of divination in these new edifices as willingly as in the old Fire-temples. The image of Bah-man was of wood, and was borne in procession on certain occasions.

Thus as time went on, the Persian religion continually assimilated itself more and more to the forms of belief and worship which prevailed in the neighboring parts of Asia. Idolatries of several kinds came into vogue, some adopted from abroad, others developed out of their own system. Temples, some of which had a character of extraordinary magnificence, were erected to the honor of various gods; and the degenerate descendants of pure Zoroastrian spiritualists bowed down to images, and entangled themselves in the meshes of a sensualistic and most debasing Nature-worship. Still, amid whatsoever corruptions, the Dualistic faith was maintained. The supremacy of Ormazd was from first to last admitted. Ahriman retained from first to last the same character and position, neither rising into an object of worship, nor sinking into a mere personification of evil. The inquiries which Aristotle caused to be made, towards the very close of the Empire, into the true nature of the Persian Religion, showed him Ormazd and Ahriman still recognized as Principles, still standing in the same hostile and antithetical attitude, one towards the other, which they occupied when the first Fargard of the Vendidad was written, long anterior to the rise of the Persian Power.