Chapter 7: New Civilizations and Empires in Western and Central Asia: 7-3a The Achaemenid Persian Empire
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7-3a The Achaemenid Persian Empire

In the mid-sixth century B.C.E. the Persians united under a brilliant warrior king, **Cyrus the Great** ((ruled 559–530 B.C.E.) Founder of the Achaemenid dynasty in Persia; permitted the Jews to return to Judea from the Babylonian Captivity.) , and quickly overcame their Iranian cousins, the Medes. In a remarkable series of campaigns between 559 and 530 B.C.E., Cyrus extended his domains from the borders of India to the Mediterranean coast. By 525 his son and immediate successor, Cambyses, had broadened the empire to include part of Arabia and the lower Nile Valley. In addition to Persepolis, the main Persian cities were at Susa (SOO-zah) and Ecbatana (Ek-bah-TAH-nah) in Iran, not in Mesopotamia. The gradual decline of Mesopotamia's importance can be dated to this time.

Cyrus had a concept of imperial rule that was quite different from that of the Assyrians. Simply stated, he was far more tolerant of his non-Persian subjects than previous rulers had been, and the empire he created was far more multicultural and integrated than previous Near Eastern kingdoms had been. He realized that many of his new subjects—peoples as radically different as the Hebrews from the Egyptians—were more advanced in many ways than his own Persians and that he could learn from them. Accordingly, his government was a sort of umbrella, sheltering many different peoples and beliefs under the supervision of the "King of Kings" (*Shahanshah*) at Persepolis. An important consequence of this was that he allowed the Jews to return to their native Judea, at which time they rebuilt the Temple in Jerusalem.

The Persian subjects were generally allowed to retain their own customs and laws. Their appointed Persian supervisors (*satraps* [SA-traps]) interfered only when the central government's policies were threatened or disobeyed. In the provinces (**satrapies** ((SA-tra-pee) A province under a governor, or *satrap*, in the ancient Persian Empire.) [SA-tra-pees]), the local authorities were kept in power after conquest by Persia, so long as they swore obedience to the monarch, paid their (relatively light) taxes, provided soldiers, and gave aid and comfort to the Persians when called upon to do so. Religion was totally free, and all sorts of beliefs flourished under Persian rule, from those of the freed-from-Babylon Hebrews to the fire worshipers of the Indian borderlands. Most remarkably, the initial move toward an ethical religion seems to have come with the teaching of **Zarathustra** (The mythical founder and chief prophet of the ancient Persian religion known as Zoroastrianism, which influenced Jewish and, later, Christian belief.) (zah-rah-THOO-strah), or **Zoroaster**, as outlined in Framing History: Patterns of Belief, "Zarathustra's Vision." Zoroastrianism, however, did not become the "official" state religion of the Persians until the time of Sassanian dynasty (224–651 B.C.E.).

Framing History

Patterns of Belief: Zarathustra's Vision

We modern people usually connect morality with our religious beliefs: moral actions are the concrete manifestations of a belief in good and evil, ultimately determined by a supernatural code or by conscience. Yet in ancient agrarian-based civilizations, people did not usually regard the gods as being concerned with human conduct beyond the sacrificial rituals executed by priests. Rather, gods were seen as incarnations of natural forces that made humans their helpless playthings unless appeased by worship and sacrifice. This attitude was as prevalent among Iranians in the sixth century B.C.E. as among any other people, but it changed radically when a prophet called Zarathustra, or Zoroaster, arose among them.

About Zarathustra's life we know nothing except that he was an Indo-Iranian and perhaps lived around 1200 B.C.E. His teachings were recorded long after his death, possibly as late as the third century C.E. This Zoroastrian scripture, known as the *Avesta* (ah-VES-tah), tells in a fragmentary way about the beliefs of a man who founded a new type of religion, a faith that linked the gods and humans in a novel fashion.

Zarathustra preached that two principles are in eternal conflict: truth and goodness versus lying and evil. Ahuramazda (ah-hoo-rah-MAHZ-dah) embodied the good and Ahriman (AH-rih-mahn) was evil incarnate, a close approximation of the Christian Lucifer. The two were thought to be locked in a cosmic fight for the souls of men—a combat in which Ahuramazda eventually would triumph. Humans, as the possessors of free will, could choose between the two gods, serving one and defying the other. In an afterlife, individuals would be made responsible for their choice. They would stand before a divine tribunal and have to answer for their lives on Earth. If the balance was found to be positive, they would enjoy heaven in eternity; if negative, hell awaited them.

The role of priests was important because they interpreted what was right and wrong conduct. The fire worship that had prevailed among Iranians before Zarathustra continued to play a significant role, and a sacred fire was at the heart of the worship of Ahuramazda. Darius I and his son Xerxes were known to be sympathizers, and under the Achaemenids, Zoroaster's teachings won many converts.

The similarities between Zarathustra's doctrines and Judaism and Christianity are not coincidental. The Last Judgment that all souls must undergo, the responsibility of the exercise of free will, the eternal bliss of heaven, and the torments of hell entered first Jewish and then Christian belief. Through Zoroastrian preaching and converts in the eastern Mediterranean region, the image of an all-powerful God who allowed humans the supreme freedom of the choice between good and evil entered the mainsprings of Western religious culture. Zarathustra's teaching that Ahriman was closely bound up with the flesh, whereas Ahuramazda was a noncorporeal entity—a spirit—would come to haunt Christianity for ages, and it appeared again

and again in various sects. The most famous of these was medieval Manichaeism (ma-nih-KEE-ism), which derived its beliefs from the Middle East and spread throughout Mediterranean Europe. It taught that the flesh is essentially evil, the province of the devil. Many people think that the puritanical element in Christianity is largely the product of this belated offshoot of the Zoroastrian creed.

What became of the religion of Zarathustra? It continued to flourish in Persia and became the formal state religion under the Sassanid dynasty (see Chapter 12). The Muslim conquest in 634 C.E. almost extinguished it, and its remaining devotees fled to India, where they became known as the Parsees. The Parsees of the region around Bombay, India, are the center of the cult in modern times. Their scripture, the *Avesta*, remains one of the first attempts to unite *religion* (worship of the immortal gods) with *ethics* (a code of proper conduct for mortal men).

Analyze and Interpret

How do Christianity and Zoroastrian beliefs converge, and how do they contrast in their treatment of the nature of sin? Why is the concept of free will a necessary precondition for a code of ethics and an ethical religion?

Darius I (DAYR-ee-uhs; 522–486 B.C.E.) was the third great Persian ruler, following Cyrus and Cambyses. During his reign the empire reached its maximal extent (see Map 7.1). One noteworthy failure of Darius's imperial ambitions was his and his successor's (*Xerxes I* [ZERK-zees; 485–465 B.C.E.]) attempts to conquer Greece. Two wars were fought unsuccessfully in 492–490 and in 480 B.C.E. (see Chapter 8).

Despite this failure, Darius introduced a stable coinage in gold and silver and a calendar that was commonly used throughout the Near East. Darius's law code was also an advanced and refined distillation of earlier codes from Mesopotamia and Egypt. For the next century, the peoples of the empire flourished under enlightened Persian leadership that continued until Alexander the Great conquered the last of the Achaemenid line, Xerxes III, in 334–323 B.C.E.