

UNIVERSITY OF WISCONSIN - EAU CLAIRE

FOR THE GLORY OF AHURAMAZDA:

THE POLITICAL EFFECTS OF ZOROASTRIANISM ON EARLY ACHAEMENID PERSIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines how the Achaemenid Persian Empire, coming into existence through the efforts of Cyrus the Great in 550 BCE, and the largest empire the world had seen up until that time, was influenced by the morality-based religion of Zoroastrianism. The earliest forms of Zoroastrianism came into being around the time of the first Achaemenid Kings Cyrus, Cambyses, Darius, and Xerxes. This paper will argue that these early leaders of the Achaemenid Empire were able to use the religious ideas of Zoroastrianism to their benefit in varying ways, including legitimization of rule and later religious destruction of non-Zoroastrian religions. Through the examination of ancient inscriptions commissioned by each Achaemenid King, the earliest written remains of the Zoroastrian faith known as the *Gathas*, and through non-Persian sources such as Herodotus, this paper will determine that the Achaemenid Empire's growth could be attributed in part to the usage of Zoroastrian concepts in the political policies of the Persian Kings, allowing both the religion and the Empire to dominate the Middle East.

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“By the grace of Ahuramazda am I king; Ahuramazda has made me king.”
-Darius I, King of Persia-

“Lying is considered among them the very basest thing...”
-Herodotus, on the Persian customs-

“I praise good thoughts, good words, and good deeds and those that are to be thought, spoken, and done. I do accept all good thoughts, good words, and good deeds. I do renounce all evil thoughts, evil words, and evil deeds.”
-Zoroaster, early lines in the *Gathas*-

2500 years ago, an ancient king felt so grateful to his god and so proud of his conquests, that he carved his exploits into the side of a mountain; in three different languages. Most ordinary kings would be content with commissioning a single statue, or perhaps a new palace at a new provincial capital, but not this ruler. (He built a new capital anyways). No, for this king, ordinary was not nearly good enough to capture the achievements of his empire. People had to know who the leader was and what this king had done to achieve such greatness. And the best place to proclaim such greatness was the top of a mountainside. The mountain was located in western Iran and the king was Darius I, also known as Darius the Great; Darius the King of Kings; King of Persia; Emperor of the Achaemenids; and many other glorious titles besides. Darius the Great (the King of Kings, King of Persia, etc.) ruled what is called the Achaemenid Persian Empire in the 6th and 5th centuries BCE. The Achaemenid Persian Empire became the largest empire the world had ever seen at the time, stretching from western borders of modern India to the eastern edges of the Mediterranean in Turkey. The Achaemenid Empire lasted over 200 years, an impressive feat considering the extensive size and frequent political and cultural conflicts inherent in such an empire. But given the size and length of the Achaemenid Empire, historians still know only a relatively small amount about the actual workings of the empire, especially when compared to contemporary neighbors in Greece or China. One difficult topic within the history of the Achaemenid Empire is that of the Persian religion.

Most scholars agree that the Achaemenid Empire practiced the religion of Zoroastrianism. The religion first appeared around the same time as the creation of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. It is understandable if one does not recognize the names. Despite the obscure and foreign-sounding name, Zoroastrianism was integral during the rise of the Achaemenid Empire. Zoroastrians still exist

today, with a large sect still practicing the faith in western India. Zoroastrianism is unique for several reasons. It is a polytheist religion, but unlike other ancient polytheist religions, Zoroastrianism does not emphasize more than a handful of deities. Most important by far is the creator god Ahuramazda. So much of Zoroastrianism is dedicated to the worship of Ahuramazda that, barring certain sects, Zoroastrians seem to have more in common with monotheist religions like Judaism and Christianity than those of ancient Greece or India. The unique focus of Zoroastrianism is on the concept of duality and how it ties into morality. To a Zoroastrian, every action and thought is seen as either morally good or morally evil.

Unlike the earlier polytheist religions of ancient Iran and the Middle East, Zoroastrianism maintained a unique blend of morality and dualism in which every action was either seen as good or evil, which left no gray area and little doubt to which actions could be morally justified. This sense of morality played an important role in the development of the Achaemenid Persian Empire. The earliest Achaemenid Kings' adoption of such a morality based religious system was significant because it allowed the rulers to create a sense of kingship similar to the concept of divine right to rule, in which the Persian King would be a representative of all that was good and all who opposed were evil. This Zoroastrian concept made it easy for the Achaemenid Kings to assert their rule in both a political and spiritual sense. An examination and comparison of the first three major Achaemenid Kings shows that Zoroastrianism was used in varying ways by Kings Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes in order to strengthen the empire. Religious tolerance, legitimization of rule, and later destruction of non-Zoroastrian religious sects were all integral to the rules of these three kings. Without the adoption of Zoroastrian concepts, the Achaemenid Persian Empire may not have crumbled entirely, but it would not have reached such an impressive size and influence in the ancient world.

Historiography

Since the topic of the Achaemenid religion of Zoroastrianism is so ancient, an exhaustive amount has been written on the subject. Both the religion and the empire have been looked at from a historical context even during the time of the empire. One of the first mentions of a Persian religion comes from the Greek "Father of History," Herodotus. In his work *The Histories*, Herodotus mentions several of the religious practices of the Persian Kings, including animal sacrifices and the importance of the natural elements.¹ Herodotus is *the* primary source regarding ancient Greece as well as the one containing most of our information regarding Persian interactions with the Greeks. While Herodotus is essential in understanding the Greek and Persian Wars, historians must be wary of some of the claims he makes regarding the Achaemenid Empire, as even Herodotus can be found guilty of Greek *hubris*.² Later Roman writer Pliny the Elder was perhaps the first person to introduce the conflict of the date of birth of the Zoroastrian founder (known as either Zoroaster or Zarathustra), claiming he lived 6000 years before Plato. These two ancient sources indicate that the Zoroastrian religion was being looked at in a historical context even during the time of its greatest influence. But the languages that Darius I (King of Kings) carved into a mountainside proclaiming his excellence were not translated until the middle of 19th century at the earliest, leaving most of the work in determining the Achaemenid Empire's religion for more modern historians.

In many cases, analyses of the Achaemenid Empire and the Zoroastrian faith have been done independent of one another. One major reason for this comes from the surprising lack of direct

¹ Herodotus, *The History*, translated by David Grene (The University of Chicago Press, 1987), I.131-133.

² Greek arrogance and a sense of being better than other nations. This led to Herodotus exaggerating Greek exploits and downplaying those of non-Greeks.

evidence suggesting the Achaemenid religion. Although there are significant ruins, inscriptions, and texts suggesting Zoroastrianism was the most influential religion of the empire, scholars believe that the official Zoroastrian religion did not develop until *after* the fall of the Achaemenid Empire. What did exist at the time of the empire was a Zoroastrian religion that was in its early stages of development, with the earliest known example of Zoroastrian writing, the *Gathas*, being available to the Achaemenid Kings. In fact, the official religion of Zoroastrianism is dated to the writing of the Holy Book called the *Avesta*, which was first committed to writing around 500 CE, nearly 1000 years after the Achaemenid era.³ Therefore, the statement “the Achaemenid Empire practiced Zoroastrianism” should be met with some caution, as the empire would have practiced the most primordial form of the religion.

Despite this caveat, there are several historians who have written excellent treatises regarding Zoroastrianism in ancient Achaemenid Persia. Perhaps the most famous Zoroastrian scholar was Mary Boyce. Boyce wrote many books and papers about the Zoroastrians but her most comprehensive was *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* which was written after she spent an extensive time living within a Zoroastrian sect in India, allowing her historical research to take in a religious context. Boyce’s book begins with the origins of the Zoroastrian faith in western Iran, continues on to the adoption of its earliest form by the Achaemenid Empire, its development into a vastly different religion in the early centuries A.D., and its importance in the Middle East all the way until modern times, with an emphasis placed on current Zoroastrians that practice in India. *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* can be seen as both a religious and historical work as Mary Boyce outlines the core beliefs of Zoroastrianism, its deities, and its religious ceremonies, and then places

³ Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Barnes and Noble Books: Totowa, NJ, 1984), 3.
William Malandra, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions* (University of Minnesota Press: Minneapolis, 1983), 29.

them into a historical context to show the impact it had for more than 2000 years. The de facto expert regarding every aspect of Zoroastrianism, one who has been cited or quoted in nearly every other secondary source regarding the Persian religion, was Mary Boyce.

A contemporary of Mary Boyce, and another important figure in Zoroastrian research, is William Malandra. The major work of Malandra is *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions*. Malandra takes a similar approach to his book that Mary Boyce did, he includes both a religious and historical context, but he places more emphasis on analyzing primary sources, going into excellent detail regarding several inscriptions that are later examined in this paper. Regarding the Persian Empire, there have been thousands of historians that have written about the rise and fall of the Achaemenids, leaving no shortage of secondary sources regarding the Persians. An extensive history of the Persian Empire comes from French historian Pierre Briant. His work *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, is probably the most comprehensive collection and analysis of the Achaemenid Empire ever written. Although religion is not the major focus of Briant's work, he does include several chapters on the subject and unlike the other author's mentioned, Briant does not seem afraid to enter his own opinions about the Zoroastrian religion into his work. Having spent the greater part of his life writing *From Cyrus to Alexander*, it seems imperative that this paper addresses some of the viewpoints that Briant holds different from religious historians like Boyce and Malandra. One example of differing viewpoints comes from the treatment of the life of the Zoroastrian founder, which is addressed on page 15.

Another one of the most comprehensive works in general history comes from Amelie Kuhrt's *The Ancient Near East: c. 3000-330 BC* which, besides being a vast collection of translated primary sources regarding the Achaemenid Empire, also includes the analysis of a well-regarded scholar who has spent decades researching the region. Kuhrt's work does not focus solely on ancient religion, as

she is writing a historical summary of the entire Mesopotamian region over a 3000 year period. The differences in historical approaches between the religious historians and the general historians like Briant and Kuhrt helps in creating a paper that places equal importance on both religious and non-religious factors in history.

To best determine how the early Zoroastrian religion and the Achaemenid Empire were interdependent of one another, this paper will first examine the earliest known Zoroastrian work, called the *Gathas*. The *Gathas* are a collection of religious hymns generally attributed to being written the religion's founder Zoroaster, although there are several problems with entitling such an important collection of writings to an individual whose very existence has been debated by scholars by centuries. The *Gathas* are the most sacred and fundamental texts of the Zoroastrian faith. Within them are the first mentions of the chief deity Ahuramazda and the outlines for living the morally right Zoroastrian way of life through prayer. Since the *Gathas* were the only major Zoroastrian text that were available during the time of the Persian Empire, any mention of the religion by the Persian Kings would, if indeed they were Zoroastrians, have to coincide with what is outlined in the *Gathas*.

As for the Achaemenid texts and inscriptions, there are several that will be referenced, but a handful of them serve the most important basis of research. The most important inscription regarding the Achaemenid Empire and the Zoroastrian religion must be the Bisitun Inscription,⁴ which was carved into a mountain (in three languages) by Darius (the Great King of Persia). So much of our understanding of both the Persian Empire and Zoroastrianism has come from this inscription that it rivals the Rosetta Stone as perhaps the most significant artifact in ancient history. One could spend hundreds of pages chronicling the contributions this inscription has left on ancient history, but for the

⁴ See Page 24

purposes of this paper, it must be regulated to what the Great King Darius said about his conquests and who he attributed his rise to power to. According to him, without the grace of the Ahuramazda, he never would have become King. This is one of the most compelling pieces of evidence that suggests a link between Zoroastrians and the Achaemenids. When one takes into account the questionable rise to power of Darius I, the inscription that he left at Bisitun takes on a whole new meaning. What could have been seen as a simple recitation of conquests suddenly becomes an affirmation of Darius' right to rule when shown in the context of a Zoroastrian morality system. The founder of the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus II (Cyrus the Great) will serve as the bridge between religious viewpoints held by the Achaemenid Kings. To determine Cyrus' policies this paper will use several different accounts, from the Cyrus Cylinder which he commissioned, to Herodotus, and even to the Biblical Book of Ezra. Then the differences between Darius the Great's policies and those of his son, Xerxes, through the evaluation of several texts that support his political policies, will be examined. Through the examination of the ancient Zoroastrian *Gathas* and the inscriptions and fragments left by the first Achaemenid Kings, it will therefore become possible to determine what the relationship between ruler and religion was, how the religion affected the political landscape of ancient Persia and enabled it to succeed, and how both religion and political regime were strengthened by their collaboration.

Achaemenid Overview

In order to best understand the interplay of the Zoroastrian religion and the Achaemenid Empire, this paper will first examine the origins of the empire and the role that the most influential rulers had on their kingdoms. The Achaemenid Persian Empire had 12 official Kings, some who ruled for decades and others who had power for only a few months. Keeping track of the family can be a

difficult task, especially since many of the Kings are so obscure. Figure 2 on page 14 is a collection of the major Achaemenid Kings that are mentioned in this paper and it details their genealogies. As this paper is only concerned with the early workings of the Achaemenid Empire, the later Kings are not mentioned at all. The creation of the Achaemenid Empire is attributed to Cyrus the Great, a fitting name given some of the remarkable feats he accomplished. Not only did Cyrus unify vast areas of land under one rule, but he also employed one particularly unique (at the time) and successful method of rule, the practice of religious tolerance. Cyrus was originally proclaimed King of Persia, which was a sub-state of the more powerful Median Empire that was ruling over the Iranian region. Cyrus warred against and defeated the Medes around 550 BCE,⁵ allowing him to turn his attention to other kingdoms in the region. Over the course of roughly thirty years, Cyrus conquered nearly all major and minor kingdoms in the Middle East, including Babylon, which is of special importance regarding religion and political policy. The death of Cyrus is said to have occurred in 530 BCE, after which his son Cambyses took the throne and consequently finished his father's work by conquering Egypt.⁶ King Cambyses was beset by many problems, the least of which, according to the Greek Herodotus, was that he was crazy and evil.⁷ While these comments by Herodotus, much like the rest of his writings, have to be carefully taken at face value, they do illustrate that Cambyses' reign did not end well. According to Herodotus, Cambyses died in Egypt and an imposter took the throne, pretending to be the brother of Cambyses. The Darius Bisitun Inscription also correlates with Herodotus' story, in which the false King of Persia was overthrown by a group led by Darius I.⁸ As Darius overthrew the false Persian King, he rose to power as the new King of Persia and would later

⁵ Amélie Kuhrt, *The Ancient Near East c. 3000-330 BC volume II* (Routledge: New York, 1995), 657.

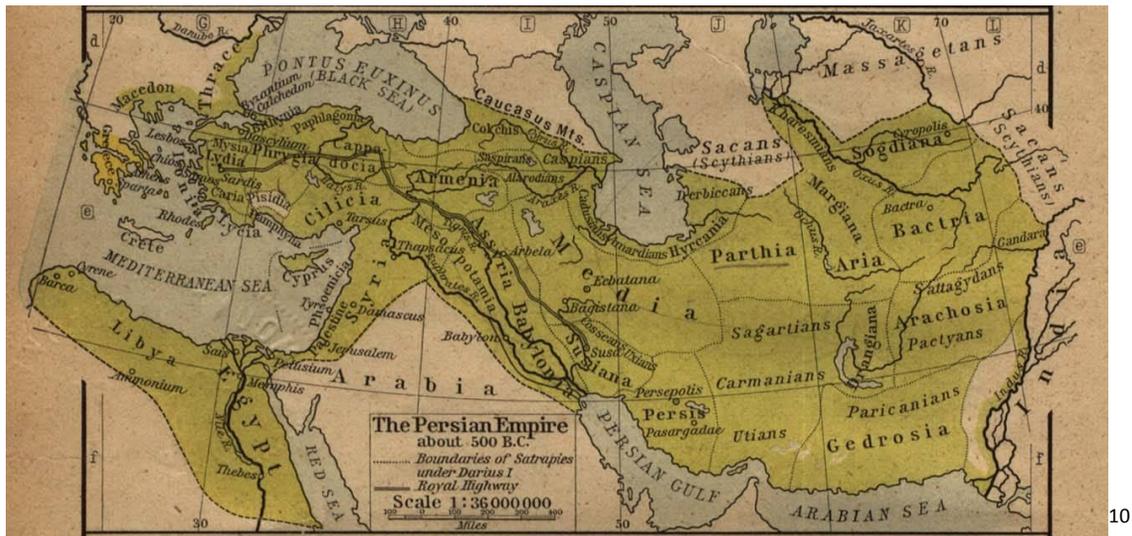
⁶ Kuhrt, 662-664.

⁷ There are several examples of Herodotus' claims to Cambyses being insane, but the most important can be seen in his supposed slaying of the Egyptian Apis Bull in III.29.1 and the murder of his own brother in Persia found in III.30.1.

⁸ "The Bisitun Inscription," translated by Maria Brosius in *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I* (London Association of Classical Teachers, 2000), Column I, §11-15. Also see Herodotus, III.67-78.

take on the title of Darius the Great. Darius is one of the most important of the Achaemenid Kings because of the Bisitun Inscription which he commissioned.

Figure 1⁹
Map of Ancient Persia:



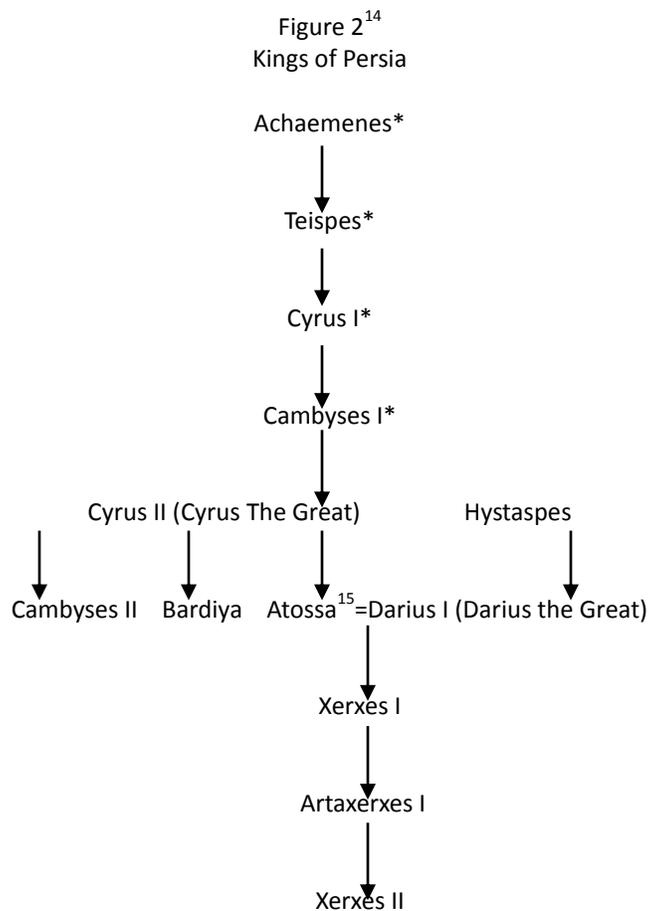
Darius is also famous for the extravagant building efforts that he commissioned, especially the creation of a new capital at Persepolis. It is likely that Darius built the empire to greater heights because of the accomplishments of his predecessors, allowing him to reap the economic and cultural rewards of an empire that already had a foundation and which had dispensed with its major enemies before Darius' rise. Under Darius, the Achaemenid Persian Empire began to flourish, a process which lasted until his death in 486 BCE¹¹ and the rise of his son Xerxes to power. Xerxes is most commonly known to western audiences as being the Persian King to fight against the Greeks in the Greco-Persian War. Xerxes reign, like that of many of the later Achaemenid Kings, ended violently, when he was assassinated by one of his bodyguards in an attempted coup. The coup failed, however, and Xerxes'

⁹ Media, the country in the middle of the map, is now modern-day Iran.

¹⁰ http://0.tqn.com/d/ancienthistory/1/0/f/O/2/persian_empire.jpg

¹¹ Maria Brosius, *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I* (London Association of Classical Teachers, 2000), 53.

son Artaxerxes I rose to the throne.¹² Less than 100 years after the creation of the empire, it had already gone through five Kings and one false ruler. As with the case of many ancient empires, several of the Achaemenid rulers were killed in battle, assassinated, or the targets of elaborate conspiracies meant to displace them. However, it would be another 100 years before the empire officially fell, destroyed by a Macedonian named Alexander in 330 BCE with the burning of the capital Persepolis and the death of the last Achaemenid King, Darius III.¹³



*=King of Persia but not King of Achaemenid Empire.

¹² Brosius, 55.

¹³ Brosius, xxv.

¹⁴ Chart adopted from Maria Brosius' *The Persian Empire*, xxiii. This chart is by no means comprehensive and does not include the final five Achaemenid Kings or the non-ruling relatives (wives, second sons) of the Kings.

¹⁵ Daughter of Cyrus II. Marriage to Darius I helped his ascension to the throne.

Zoroaster and the *Gathas*

One aspect of the Zoroastrian religion that has been touched on is the ambiguity regarding the supposed creator of the religion, the man called Zoroaster. Not all historians agree that Zoroaster even existed, as the majority of ancient sources mentioning Zoroaster come from conflicting Greek and Roman reports. There is evidence supporting the idea that Zoroaster could have been one person, but some scholars seem to think that Zoroaster could have simply been the priest attributed with writing the collection of religious viewpoints.¹⁶ For the purposes of this paper, the idea that Zoroaster was one person will be accepted. This now creates the greater question that has plagued religious scholars and historians for centuries, and is tied into the origins of the Zoroastrian religion as a whole, when did Zoroaster exist? Even ancient sources cannot point out approximate dates for the life of the man. One Greek writer claimed that Zoroaster was alive in 6000 BCE, an impossible estimate even if one took into account that the Greek attributed the creation of magic, along with other mythical deeds, to Zoroaster.¹⁷ Modest estimates of Zoroaster's life place him anywhere from 1750 to 1100 BCE, although there are several who make the case that the man existed as late as 600 BCE, less than fifty years before the rise of Cyrus the Great as King of Persia.¹⁸ Mary Boyce, considered the premier authority on the religion, hazards an estimate, based upon the ancient language patterns of the earliest Zoroastrian work and the world it illustrates, of Zoroaster living sometime between 1700 and 1500 BCE.¹⁹ But other scholars such as William Malandra, place the date of Zoroaster to

¹⁶ L.H. Mills, *The Zend-Avesta: The Yasna, Visparad, Afrinagan, Gahs, and Miscellaneous Fragments* (Greenwood Press: Westwood, CT, 1972), xxiii, 1-2.

¹⁷ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1979), 49.

¹⁸ Mary Boyce, *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Barnes and Noble Books: Totowa, NJ, 1984), 15.

¹⁹ Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 18.

later times, around 600 BCE.²⁰ Despite the discord between scholars regarding the life of Zoroaster, one thing that they all agree on is that the original text of the Zoroastrian faith, the *Gathas*, was composed either before or during the time of the Achaemenid Empire. Either way, the Achaemenid Kings were well aware of the first signs of Zoroastrianism.

The *Gathas* are considered the nucleus of the Zoroastrian religion. They are both the most ancient and important of religious texts; and they are historically attributed to being composed by Zoroaster.²¹ Despite the previously mentioned problems with the concept of a real historical Zoroaster, scholars conclude that the *Gathas had* to be written by a single individual. Reasons for this conclusion were derived from lengthy studies of the *Gathas* form and syntax. Unlike portions of the *Bible*, which has vastly differing styles from book to book and even within books to indicate that it was authored by many individuals over many years, the *Gathas* contains the same form throughout. Combined with its brevity and obscure language of origin (Old Avestan, which exists only in the *Gathas*), and the author of these religious works is assuredly a singular person. The *Gathas* make up the first of the Zoroastrian Holy Book *Avesta*. Fortunately, the rest of the Zend-Avesta was written well after the fall of the Achaemenid Empire in 330 BCE and the reader shall be spared the majority of later Zoroastrian teachings. For now, let the focus be on the origins of Zoroastrianism through the *Gathas*.

The *Gathas* are written in a unique poetic style. They are first person accounts of Zoroaster's relationship with the deity Ahuramazda, the supreme creator god of the faith. Zoroaster outlines the fundamental beliefs of his creed, how he reveres Ahuramazda, and especially how he works for the

²⁰ Malandra, 17.

²¹ Ali A. Jafarey, "The Gathas and Translation, Explanation, Interpretation and Imagination," *Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium*, edited by Farrokh Vajifdar (C.S. Podd & Son: Surrey, 1998), 68.

forces of good and opposes those that are evil. The feelings towards Ahuramazda and the purpose of the *Gathas* are summed up well in the opening of the work:

I announce and carry out...for the creator Ahuramazda, the radiant and glorious, the greatest and the best, the most beautiful, the most firm, the wisest, and the one of all whose body is most perfect, who attains His ends the most infallibly, because of his Asha,²² to him who disposes our minds aright, who sends His joy-creating grace afar; who made us, and has fashioned us, and who has nourished and protected us, who is the most bounteous Spirit!²³

Much of the *Gathas* continues in a manner similar to this passage, as Zoroaster praises to no end the glory of the creator Ahuramazda. It is here that Zoroastrianism begins its uniqueness throughout the world of ancient religions. With the exception of monotheist Judaism, there is no other religion before or during the Achaemenid Persian Empire's rise that places such an importance on one deity. To be sure, there are other deities that the *Gathas* mention, Mithra²⁴ being one of the most important,²⁵ but Zoroastrians believe that all good deities, like all of creation, were derived from this one supreme god. Therefore, to a Zoroastrian, reverence to Ahuramazda would take precedent over all other forms of worship. The *Gathas* indicate the concept that the Supreme Being Ahuramazda created all things that were good in the world. However, and this is a critical component to Zoroastrianism, there was a force acting against Ahuramazda which in later centuries would become an evil spirit, that was not created by Ahuramazda. To a Zoroastrian, Ahuramazda is incapable of evil and therefore could not have created it in the world. That gives Zoroastrians an inability to "blame" bad things on their creator, and instead leaves it to the individuals to prevent evils from happening in the world. One of the evils that beset the world comes to be called the Lie. Conversely, Ahuramazda

²² Asha=Truth and righteousness, the opposite of the Lie.

²³ Joseph H. Peterson, "Avesta: Yansa: Sacred Liturgy and Gathas/Hymns of Zarathustra," translated by L.H. Mills (1995): 1.1, <http://www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm#y28> (accessed 4 October, 2010).

²⁴ Zoroastrian Sun God.

²⁵ Peterson, 1.1.

is seen as the Truth. These two terms are of great importance when looking at the Achaemenid inscriptions, especially the Bisitun Inscription of Darius the Great.

The Cyrus Cylinder and Religious Tolerance

The first Achaemenid King, Cyrus the Great, spent much of the early years of his rule waging wars against rival nations. One of the earliest and most important Achaemenid inscriptions that scholars have found comes from one of these conquests. Called the Cyrus Cylinder, it was commissioned by Cyrus the Great after the conquest of Babylon beginning in 540 BCE. The cylinder was found in Babylon in the late 19th century and was written in the Akkadian language. According to scholar Maria Brosius, the Cyrus Cylinder is unique in the regard that it is the only Achaemenid Inscription written on a clay cylinder. Writing on a cylinder in Akkadian served as a way for Cyrus to link himself to the Babylonian tradition in an attempt to legitimize his conquest of Babylon.²⁶ The Cyrus Cylinder is a significant artifact for many reasons. The Cylinder tells us about Cyrus' campaign against Babylon and his "freeing" of the city from an "evil" king.²⁷ But where the Cyrus Cylinder is most important comes from what Cyrus did after conquering Babylon. Instead of being a King who took power by force, he portrayed himself as a liberator of the people. He did not destroy the religion of Babylon; he helped to rebuild the damaged temples. And he did not force individuals to give up their religious practices, even going so far as to invoke the chief Babylonian deity of Marduk as the reason for his success against the evil king.²⁸ These actions allow one to see the unique (at the time) approach to ruling that Cyrus introduced, a rule punctuated by religious tolerance. His idea of religious tolerance can also be seen in the Bible, as the Book of Ezra makes specific mention of Cyrus

²⁶ Brosius, 11-12.

²⁷ "The Cyrus Cylinder," translated by Maria Brosius in *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I* (London Association of Classical Teachers, 2000), §17.

²⁸ "The Cyrus Cylinder," §14-18.

the Great and his decree that the Jewish slaves in Babylon would be allowed to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple.²⁹ In concordance with Cyrus' actions in Babylon, the decree that the Jews would be able to freely return home and practice their religion can lead to two assumptions. The first is that Cyrus was religiously tolerant out of a respect for other religions, an idea that is strongly implied in the Book of Ezra, as Cyrus seemed to be inspired by the Jewish God to allow the Jews their freedom. Although we cannot take a Biblical passage in such a literal sense, it does lead to the notion that Cyrus himself did not have strong personal religious beliefs, as he is seemingly influenced so profoundly by two vastly different religions. The second assumption that can be made regarding Cyrus' actions, and one that both Brosius³⁰ and Briant³¹ embrace, is that Cyrus' religious actions were simply political movements to "win the support of the subject peoples."

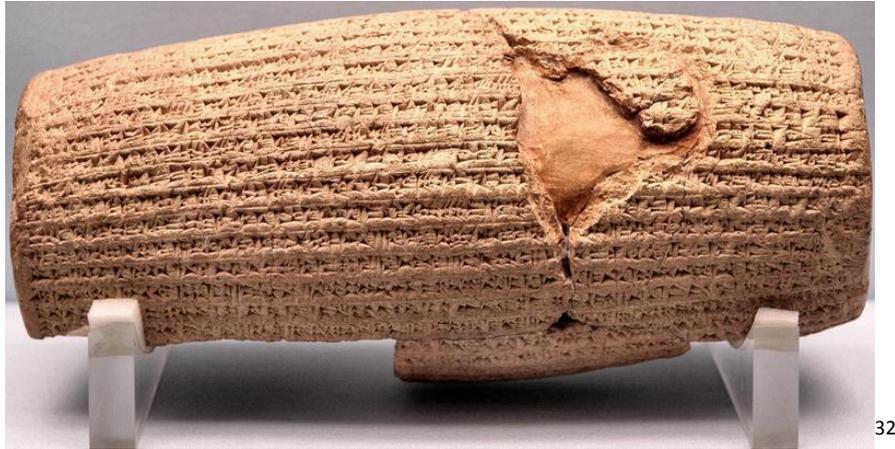
Both of these assumptions lead to the same conclusion, mainly that Cyrus' foreign and domestic policies do not seem to be influenced by personal religious beliefs. Once again, the textual sources for Cyrus the Great are sparse to begin with, but specific mention of Cyrus embracing any particular religion is almost nonexistent. This lack of specific references to the "religion of Cyrus" has left many scholars hesitant to declare the first of the Achaemenid Kings a Zoroastrian, even though the Kings after Cyrus all seemed to adhere to the earliest of the Zoroastrian faith. However, two of the most influential experts in their respective fields have conflicting viewpoints regarding Cyrus' religion.

²⁹ Ezra 1.1-5

³⁰ Brosius, 95.

³¹ Pierre Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander: A History of the Persian Empire*, translated by Peter T. Daniels (Eisenbrauns: Winona Lake, IN, 2002), 70-75.

Figure 3
The Cyrus Cylinder:



Was Cyrus the Great a Zoroastrian?

It is agreed upon that Cyrus the Great did not create religious reforms like later Persian Kings would. Middle Eastern historian Pierre Briant and Zoroastrian expert Mary Boyce have conflicting views regarding Cyrus' supposed religion. Briant argues that the only "indisputable" mention of Cyrus developing a statewide religion came from the funeral rites practiced after his death, in which sacrifices were made at the tomb of Cyrus for decades after his death. These sacrifices, which included the sacrificing of special horses, and the amount of dedication placed upon revering the sun during such sacrifices, serve as an indication that Cyrus may have instilled in his empire reverence to the Zoroastrian deity Mithra. Despite this concession, Briant argues that sacrifices at the tomb of Cyrus were the result of a "cult of Mithra," one that did not reach the full length of the empire. He also states that sacrifices likely continued because his successors wanted to "profit from the renown

³² Cyrus' cylinder. British Museum, London (Britain), http://www.livius.org/a/1/mesopotamia/cyrus_cylinder.JPG (accessed 28 November, 2010). Reproduced with permission from Marco Prins and Jona Lendering.

of Cyrus,” not because of an official religion started by Cyrus.³³ It is clear through the structure of Briant’s arguments that he is a firm believer in the idea that it is impossible to say with certainty that Cyrus was a Zoroastrian, conflicting greatly with the findings of Boyce. In her works, Boyce makes it clear that she does not doubt Cyrus was a follower of a Zoroastrian lifestyle. Her argument is based around the discovery of ‘fire-holders’ at the ancient Persian capital of Pasargadae,³⁴ which Cyrus had built and where his tomb is. These holders, not quite altars, were used extensively in Zoroastrian prayers involving fire. The Zoroastrian concept of fire represents cleanliness, and reverence to it is a core belief of the religion. Boyce makes the argument that these fire-holders at the ruins of Pasargadae are raised up, an uncommon practice, indicating that they were reserved for royalty and an indication that Cyrus himself would have prayed to Zoroastrian gods Mithra and Ahuramazda. She also believes that Cyrus’ way of conquest mirrored the Zoroastrian faith’s concept of living justly and well and Boyce believes Cyrus’ religious tolerance towards conquered people was an example of a Zoroastrian’s belief in living an “orderly and devout” life.³⁵

Despite her extensive knowledge of the Zoroastrian subject, it seems that Mary Boyce’s argument is the weaker of the two. Her only real artifact-based reasoning for Cyrus being a Zoroastrian comes from the inclusion of fire-holders at the Persian capital, but there is no indication that Cyrus himself commissioned and prayed at these altars or if he was showing another example of religious tolerance in letting Zoroastrian cults practice at the capital. Furthermore, Boyce’s argument of Cyrus adhering to a Zoroastrian style of rule by “ruling well” and allowing others to practice religion freely is explained by Briant and Brosius as being political maneuvers dedicated to preventing rebellion and gaining support for the new King. The evidence is not sufficient to suggest that Cyrus

³³ Briant, *From Cyrus to Alexander*, 96.

³⁴ The ancient capital built by Cyrus, found in southern Iran.

³⁵ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (Routledge & Kegan Paul: London, 1979), 50-52.

the Great implemented any “official” Zoroastrian religion in the kingdom. Cyrus seemed too concerned with his constant conquests and rarely dedicated time to developing the inner-workings of his empire, instead saving political and cultural changes for later Achaemenid Kings who would be able to reform the empire after its boundaries were set. That the Achaemenid Empire is able to have a ruler who does not express any particular religious preference to one who is fiercely obedient to the Zoroastrian faith in less than 50 years is quite remarkable. The man who so thoroughly changed the empire, and who introduced such dedication to Zoroastrianism was Darius the Great.

The Rise of Darius the Great

The rule of Darius is perhaps the most significant in the Achaemenid dynasty. Darius’ controversial rise to the throne and his strong references to Zoroastrianism are seen most clearly in his inscription that was commissioned at Bisitun, a photo of which can be seen in Figure 4 on page 24.

King Darius begins the five column inscription by citing his ancient heritage. According to Darius, he was the fifth generation descendant of the man Achaemenes, where the Achaemenid Empire derived its name.³⁶ Unfortunately for Darius, he was the first Persian King to mention this Achaemenes. The founder of the Achaemenid Empire, Cyrus the Great, does not mention Achaemenes, instead only dating his ancestry to whom Darius claims as the son of Achaemenes, a ruler named Teispes.³⁷ There are two possible reasons for Cyrus the Great not mentioning his ancient ancestor Achaemenes; the first is that it was unnecessary for him to date his genealogy so far back

³⁶ It may be helpful to refer back to the chart on page 14 when examining the names of the Achaemenid rulers.

³⁷ Brosius contains an excellent genealogy of the Achaemenid Kings in her book *The Persian Empire from Cyrus II to Artaxerxes I*. The website Iranica Online also has a chart available at http://www.iranica.com/uploads/files/achaemenid_dynasty_tab4.jpg/

when only a few ancestors were needed to declare his rule, the second possibility would be that Achaemenes was not a real person. The rise of Darius the Great has been a controversial topic, and most sources, even the Bisitun Inscription itself, point to a less than legitimate ascension to the throne for King Darius.

There are several sources regarding the rise to power of King Darius, but probably the two most important are the Bisitun Inscription itself and the writings of Herodotus the Greek historian. Although some of Herodotus' information about the Persian Empire shows a Greek bias, most of what he mentions regarding Darius closely fits with other ancient sources to make the account believable. According to both King Darius' Bisitun Inscription and Herodotus, the rise of Darius was facilitated by the death of King Cambyses, son of Cyrus the Great. Both Herodotus and Darius claim that Cambyses had a brother named Bardiya (Smerdis in Greek). This brother was supposedly murdered by Cambyses before he left on an expedition to conquer Egypt. The people of Persia were unaware of the death of Bardiya, and that led to the usurpation of the Persian throne by someone named Gaumata.³⁸ Gaumata, called a magus,³⁹ pretended to be the rightful King Bardiya of Persia until Darius and a group of followers exposed and then eliminated the wrongful King. Herodotus and the Bisitun Inscription disagree on Darius' involvement in the overthrow of Gaumata. According to Herodotus, Darius was simply another member of the revolt against Gaumata and was crowned King not because of any connection to the royal Persian line. Darius, using the common ancestor of Achaemenes, claimed legitimacy to the throne and that his coronation to King was his birthright.⁴⁰ Darius' claim was that his family line would make him a cousin to Cyrus the Great and Cambyses, leaving him with the right to the throne. It is of interest to mention whom Darius attributed his success to. In the

³⁸ Herodotus, III.73-87.

³⁹ Synonymous with sorcerer. Later important in Zoroastrian rituals, as they served as priests.

⁴⁰ "The Bisitun Inscription," 1, §13.

Herodotus account of Darius' rise to power, he is simply one of several men who worked together to overthrow the false King. But Darius barely mentions the men who helped them, only saying he worked "with a few men." Darius instead directly thanked Ahuramazda for his success. The final words Darius said about the destruction of Gaumata's rule are "by the grace of Ahuramazda I became king; Ahuramazda granted me the kingdom."⁴¹ The importance Darius places on Ahuramazda serves two purposes. First, it shows that Darius was committed to the idea of early Zoroastrianism. Second, and less obvious, it served as a way for Darius to legitimize his rule as King of Persia.

Figure 4
The Darius Bisitun Inscription:



Darius' Right to Rule

There are two things in the Bisitun Inscription that show Darius' adherence to a form of Zoroastrianism; the constant references to chief Zoroastrian deity Ahuramazda, and the references made to the Lie. The Lie is a fundamental concept of Zoroastrianism. The original text of the faith, the *Gathas* mentions the Lie as the opposite of what is Good. The idea of Good is everything that comes

⁴¹ "The Bisitun Inscription," 1, §13.

⁴² Relief and inscription at Bisitun, <http://www.livius.org/a/1/iran/behistun.JPG> (accessed 28 November, 2010).
Reproduced with permission from Marco Prins and Jona Lendering.

from Ahuramazda, as the deity itself is incapable of creating things that are bad. The Lie is therefore directly opposed to Ahuramazda, and is more than simply being untruth; it is everything that is opposed to what is good in life.⁴³ Darius is able to apply this Zoroastrian concept to his rule. Throughout the Bisitun Inscription, Darius gave mention of the many false kings he has overthrown. These false kings are called liars by Darius, as they claimed to be rulers of kingdoms that were actually given to Darius by Ahuramazda.⁴⁴ One can see through Darius' actions against false kings and through constant mention of Ahuramazda making him King that Darius believed in a form of divine right to rule as King of Persia. But Darius' claims go beyond divine right when one takes into account his questionable rise to the throne. The historical ancestor of Achaemenes that Darius claims Cyrus the Great and he both descended from is not mentioned before the reign of Darius, nor is there any historical record of Achaemenes that has been found. Cyrus only traced his lineage back to a King named Teispes, while Darius claims that the father of Teispes was Achaemenes. As Cyrus does not mention Achaemenes, and the only information about him comes from Darius' reign, it is possible that Darius invented Achaemenes to connect himself to the legitimate King Cyrus.

The seizing of power from the King of Persia and subsequent branding of the King as the imposter Gaumata created unrest in Persia. Judging from Herodotus and the Bisitun Inscription, Darius spent most of his reign fighting insurgencies and expanding his empire. As the empire under the previous Persian King Cambyses experienced relative stability, the catalyst for many of these rebellions could be the controversial rise of Darius. As Herodotus mentions, the people of Persia were unaware that the man Gaumata was an "imposter" and his death by a man who had to claim an obscure relative to stay in the Persian royal family could have stirred people to rebellion. Conversely, if

43 Joseph H. Peterson, "Avesta: Yansa: Sacred Liturgy and Gathas/Hymns of Zarathustra," translated by L.H. Mills (1995): 30-31, <http://www.avesta.org/yasna/yasna.htm#y28> (accessed 4 October, 2010).

44 For a summary of the nine "liar" kings, see "The Bisitun Inscription," 4, §52.

Gaumata was not an imposter, and had actually been the brother of legitimate King Cambyses, his death would have been met with the same fervor in Persia. Regardless of whether Darius was actually a relative of Cyrus the Great, Zoroastrianism afforded him the chance to cast his rule in a divine light. Darius would then be able to supersede any arguments against his right to the throne, as he was appointed King by Ahuramazda. The lengths in which Darius went to implement his rule as one of truth are shown in the Bisitun Inscription. One such example comes from a phrase of Darius after he told of the false kings he destroyed. It reads: "I call Ahuramazda to witness that is true and not lies; all of it have I done in a single year."⁴⁵ To the point of redundancy, Darius claimed to be acting against the Lie in favor of Ahuramazda. He claimed the rule of all others to be a lie and for all his deeds to be the work of good. The sense one gains from reading through the Bisitun Inscription is that Darius was affirming his right to rule to himself as much as he was to his citizens of Persia. The rise to power and claims to the royal lineage were questionable at best, and the use of a religious belief in his rule would have put him above questioning. Furthermore, those that rebelled against the rule of Darius would not only be going against the strength of the Persian Empire as a military, but would be at odds against a rapidly spreading religious doctrine that punished followers of the Lie. Darius was able to threaten his opponents both physically and spiritually, as he invoked Ahuramazda as punishment to those who did not believe what had been written at Bisitun. Ahuramazda would "slay" the individuals and the families of those who went against Darius, and give long life to those who came to believe Darius.⁴⁶

These instances of Darius' divine right to kingship are interesting because they are important examples of religious morality being introduced into politics. While it is true that previous empires would invoke deities and claim divinity, none were to the extent in which Darius proclaimed faith in

45 "The Bisitun Inscription," 4, §57.

46 "The Bisitun Inscription," 4, §66-67.

Ahuramazda and none dealt with the sheer size of such an empire as that of the Achaemenids. Through the use of Zoroastrianism, Darius accomplished two things. He was able to place himself above scrutiny in his rule, by calling forth Ahuramazda, and he was also able to expand Zoroastrianism by offering conquered cities and kingdoms the chance to convert to his religious beliefs or face destruction, a policy that Darius' son, Xerxes, later implemented.

Xerxes and the Daiva Inscription

Before his death in 486 BCE, Darius the Great had decided to pass kingship to his second son Xerxes and not his first son, as Xerxes' mother was the daughter of Cyrus the Great, thus strengthening Xerxes' royal connection to his ancestors.⁴⁷ In the immediate year of his coronation as King, Xerxes began campaigns against Egypt and began planning a large assault against the Greeks, whom Darius had fought against in the past.⁴⁸ This is perhaps the most well-remembered aspect of Xerxes rule, his launching of a massive Persian army against the Greeks. It is interesting to note that Xerxes himself was to be included in this expedition against the Greeks, something that his father Darius had not done in his wars.⁴⁹ As a King, Xerxes had the luxury of inheriting the Persian kingdom at the height of its power. Xerxes made special care to implement policies of rule that had worked for his father Darius, but there is one aspect in which the reign of Xerxes and previous Achaemenid Kings seems to differ, and that is through the idea of religious tolerance. Xerxes differs from his predecessors in that instead of practicing religious tolerance, as Cyrus seemed to do, he destroyed practitioners of cults that did not worship Ahuramazda. The destruction of other forms of worship can be seen in both Herodotus and in a tablet known as the daiva inscription. The daiva inscription is

⁴⁷ Herodotus, VII.2.

⁴⁸ Ibid, VII.7-8.

⁴⁹ Briant, 526.

actually a collection of three tablets, written in Old Persia and found at the capital of Persepolis and city of Pasargadae.⁵⁰ Structurally, the beginning of the daiva inscription is similar to Darius'

proclamation in the Bisitun Inscription. The first lines show Xerxes paying reverence to Ahuramazda:

A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Xerxes king, one king of many, one lord of many.⁵¹

Besides immediately praising Ahuramazda, both the daiva and Bisitun inscriptions go into lengthy detail of the lands that the respective rulers conquered, making sure to indicate that their conquests were "by the grace of Ahuramazda." After mentioning conquests of thirty countries, Xerxes tells of a country, not mentioning it by name, which worshipped daiva, which has been interpreted as demons. Through Ahuramazda's grace, Xerxes destroyed the daiva worshippers and in the place where the daiva were once worshipped, Xerxes worshipped Ahuramazda "at the proper time and in the proper manner." The inscription ends with Xerxes urging whoever reads the tablet to worship Ahuramazda in the proper way and to "have respect for the law which Ahuramazda has established" in order to be happy in life and blessed in death.⁵²

⁵⁰ Jona Lendering, "Achaemenid Royal Inscriptions: XPh ("daiva inscription")," *Livius*, <http://www.livius.org/aa-ac/achaemenians/XPh.html> (accessed 28 November, 2010).

⁵¹ Lendering, "daiva inscriptions."

⁵² Lendering, "daiva inscriptions."

Figure 5
The daiva inscription tablet from Persepolis:



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The daiva inscription is important for two major reasons. The first is that Xerxes continued the religious practices set down by his father by giving praise to Ahuramazda. Xerxes made it clear that worship towards the Zoroastrian deity would lead one to a happy existence, and the extent of the credit for conquering countries attributed to Ahuramazda shows that Xerxes wanted his subjects to know the power of both his rule and the rule of the creator god. The second reason the daiva inscription is important is in the treatment of the daiva worshipers. The word daiva has given historians a great deal of trouble over the years. Briant claims the word daiva is derived from a word in the *Gathas* that is used to refer to those who practice worship of Zoroastrian deities incorrectly.⁵⁴ This would correspond with Xerxes' insistence that he practiced worship of Ahuramazda in the proper

⁵³ The daiva inscription, found at Persepolis and now in the Archaeological Museum of Tehran, http://www.livius.org/a/1/iran/xerxes_tablet.jpg (accessed 28 November, 2010). Reproduced with permission from Marco Prins and Jona Lendering.

⁵⁴ Briant, 551.

manner, and would indicate that Xerxes destroyed those who practiced some early form of Zoroastrianism that differed from that of the King. The destruction of these daiva worshippers is an indication of Xerxes' shift in religious policy compared to that of Cyrus.

Herodotus also points to a religious action that Xerxes carried out in Babylon. According to Herodotus, Xerxes took a golden statue of a man from a Babylonian temple and slew the priests who tried to forbid it. Herodotus mentions that Darius did not dare to remove the statue.⁵⁵ Brosius indicates that the statue itself was not of a god, and therefore may not have been seen as a sacrilegious act like Herodotus intended.⁵⁶ However, if Darius did not remove the gold statue when he was King and Xerxes felt the need to not only take the statue, but to kill the priests who protested, it shows that Xerxes did not fear treading on this particular religious custom. Combined with his actions against the daiva worshippers, Xerxes' actions show that he changed the policy of religious tolerance that had so benefitted earlier Kings and was not afraid to be more vocal about the reverence of Ahuramazda. Through his dedication to Zoroastrian beliefs, Xerxes destroyed his enemies and not-so-subtly decreed to all those who rebelled against the empire or who did not practice Zoroastrianism that they would be destroyed by both the god and the King. For Xerxes, the way for an individual to obtain happiness in life and blessedness in the afterlife was to follow both Xerxes' laws and the spiritual guidelines set out by early Zoroastrianism.

The information we have about Cyrus the Great's religious policy points to him instituting religious tolerance in conquered lands in order to gain allies and to prevent rebellion. Xerxes did not do this. Besides needing political stability at a time when his empire was just forming, Cyrus also may have allowed religious tolerance because he did not emphasize any particular religion and therefore would not force it upon his followers the way Xerxes did. The reasons for Darius adopting the

⁵⁵ Herodotus, I.183.

⁵⁶ Brosius, 94.

Zoroastrian faith are clearer; he wanted a way to legitimize his rise to the throne and a way to indicate to all others the importance of his royal decrees by making himself an agent of "Truth." Xerxes took his father's religious fervor one step further, by beginning to subdue those that did not follow his correct form of worship and by destroying other forms of religion not associated with Ahuramazda.

Conclusion

Both the Achaemenid Persian Empire and the Zoroastrian religion have been difficult topics for historians to understand. The majority of sources regarding ancient Persia either come from Greek sources, or are small, contradictory fragments found throughout the ruins of Persia. Zoroastrianism has been equally as difficult to understand during the Achaemenid period, mainly due to the lack of a fully developed religion until a different period in history, and because of conflicting views regarding the date of the semi-mythical founder of the religion, Zoroaster. Despite these inherent difficulties, the development of the Achaemenid Empire was facilitated by the early doctrines of the Zoroastrian faith, as laid out in the *Gathas*. The Achaemenid Empire was the largest empire in the world before the conquests of Alexander the Great. Spanning from Egypt to India, the empire should be praised for its unique incorporation of the near monotheistic worship of Zoroastrian god Ahuramazda as well as its impressive size.

The first King to unite Persia, Cyrus the Great, conquered swiftly as well as intelligently, as his usage of religious tolerance and dedications to the deities of conquered nations made him into a hero figure for many cultures. The death of Cyrus the Great's son Cambyses led to a series of strange events in which the man Darius came to rule the throne, under speculation of questionable ties to the royal bloodline. Through the invocation of Ahuramazda and the tenants of early Zoroastrian worship, specifically the dualism between good and evil, Darius was able to overcome his questionable rise to

power and assert himself as the ruler of an even greater kingdom than that of Cyrus the Great. With the backing of King Darius, Zoroastrianism began to spread throughout the empire and began its “conquest” of other cults and religions under the rule of Darius’ son Xerxes. Xerxes wasted no time in adopting his predecessors’ secular policies but when it came to religion, Xerxes asserted himself and his followers as Zoroastrians, despite not claiming an official religion of Zoroastrianism within the empire. The destruction of non-Zoroastrian sects and the way in which Xerxes dealt with these other religious beliefs shows that Xerxes was perhaps the most dedicated of the Achaemenid Kings in his reverence to Ahuramazda. While strengthening his empire, Xerxes was simultaneously able to advance Zoroastrianism until it became an officially worshipped religion under his successors.

From the religious tolerance of Cyrus, to the Ahuramazda intensive decrees of Darius and the destruction of temples by Xerxes, religion has played a significant role in the development of the Achaemenid Empire. Zoroastrianism, with its unique messages of morality and dualism, was well suited to be used as a political tool by the Persian Kings. The rise of Zoroastrianism as a major religion can be attributed to its adaptation by the Kings. Without the backing of Darius the Great, Zoroastrianism would not have advanced to have such an influence on both the political and cultural landscape of the Middle East in later periods.

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