

# RELIGIONS OF IRAN

*from prehistory to the present*

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ONEWORLD

A Oneworld book

Published by Oneworld Publications 2013

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Parts of Chapters 15 and 19 previously appeared in  
an article entitled “Zoroastrians in Iran: What Future in  
the Homeland?”, *Middle East Journal* 65/1 (2011): 73-84.

978-1-78074-307-3 (hardback)  
978-1-78074-308-0 (paperback)  
978-1-78074-309-7 (ebook)

Typeset by Cenveo Publishing Services, India  
Printed and bound in the US by Lake Book Manufacturing Inc.

Oneworld Publications  
10 Bloomsbury Street  
London WC1B 3SR  
England

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## TAXONOMY AND HISTORICAL APPROACH

The human mind inevitably circumscribes reality in order to conceptualize it. To process an idea we have to fit it into a framework, although in doing so we necessarily forfeit the big picture. When talking about a historical phenomenon such as religion, there exists a strong temptation to reify reality into a mentally manageable notion of a “core tradition” that remains in place over time and space. In the case of Iranian religion, scholars since Martin Haug in the nineteenth century and Mary Boyce in the twentieth have started from the premise that the available material should be understood in relation to a putative “orthodox” Zoroastrian tradition—whether measured in accordance with a preferred sacred text or with the claims of contemporary practitioners—an approach which led them to relegate any divergence from this contrived standard to the status of “heterodoxy,” or worse, heresy.

And yet, the more one explores and contemplates the various information history provides, the harder it becomes to force the data into a coherent and internally consistent whole. One is at times tempted to abandon such a project altogether and simply posit a given religious tradition as a collective of expressions, withholding judgment as to which form is most “authentic.” This approach has become popular in the field of religious studies, displacing to some extent the earlier tendency of starting from a body of canonical texts and marking everything else as a deviation (and thereby discounting the validity of most of the available data).

While it is unrealistic for any scholar to claim complete objectivity, I believe that it is both possible and desirable for us to remain mindful of our own cultural lenses and their incumbent biases, and to an extent correct for them in our analysis of the material being studied. One of the most common of these biases is the tendency to project contemporary understandings back into the past, leading to forced interpretations which result in anachronistic readings of history. A more circumspect approach would involve constantly reminding ourselves that the issues and values of the present age—democracy, nationalism, human rights, gender equality, etc.—are not necessarily those of people who lived in other places and times. A society can be best understood in terms of its own basic principles and assumptions, and little is achieved by measuring it against ours.

### *Defining Religious Tradition*

The same is true for how ideas are defined, including religion. The word “religion” is itself culturally constructed, with a culture-specific etymology and historical development, and translates awkwardly into non-Western contexts. It derives from the Latin verb *religare*, “to bind,” perhaps in the double sense of that which “binds [a group together]” and that which one is “bound” to do. Scholarly understandings of

“religion” today range from the relatively restrictive definition of Jonathan Z. Smith and William Scott Green, according to which it is seen as “as system of beliefs and practices that are relative to superhuman beings,” to the more expansive one of David Chidester, who considers as religious any “ways of being human [that] engage the transcendent—that which rises above and beyond the ordinary.”<sup>2</sup>

Both definitions leave considerable scope for variation and pluralism. Yet when referring to a specific religious tradition, there is always the urge to identify a particular strand as normative, which can be used to define the religion in question. This urge ought to be resisted, but then, how is one to conceptualize the religion so that it can be talked about? One solution would be to think not in terms of normative expressions, but rather threads of continuity (over time) and commonality (over space). To take one example, the sacrificial religion of the ancient Israelites described in the book of Leviticus may bear little outward resemblance to the Judaism of the Talmud, but they are connected by a continuous cultural stream. The question remains, however, of what exactly to name this continuous stream, since simply to call the whole thing “Judaism” would be highly misleading. Even today, Judaism, like all living religions, plays out in a wide range of forms, possessing a fluid range of commonalities and differences.

This is even more the case with the national pre-Islamic religion(s) of the Iranians. In my opinion, to refer to its best-known strand as “Zoroastrianism” (even if its current practitioners mostly don’t seem to mind) is as inappropriate as referring to Islam as “Muhammadanism,” and reinforces a parallel early modern European mindset. Moreover, notwithstanding the undeniable antiquity of the Avestan liturgy, the evidence for a specifically “Zoroastrian” religion prior to the Sasanian period is not very widespread, and it clearly existed alongside a number of parallel traditions, some of which it rejected and some of which it consciously tried to incorporate as the Younger Avesta shows.<sup>3</sup>

Thus, it is one thing to acknowledge the continuity of the Avestan oral tradition over a very long period of time within a particular priestly community, but quite another to imply, as many scholars continue to do, that it somehow served as a basis for the religious life of an entire society. More likely, as Bausani noted half a century ago, “we are not dealing—as some believed when these studies started in Europe—with one Iranian religion, but with various ‘religions’ or types of religiosity characteristic of one or another branch of the Iranian family.”<sup>4</sup>

### *The “Pool Theory”: Possibilities, not Essence*

My own approach to the notion of “religion,” which sees the term as being, for practical purposes, nearly synonymous with “culture” and not a separate category, places less of an emphasis on providing a

description as such, than on identifying a pool of ideas and behaviours from which communities and individuals may draw in constituting their particular worldviews. I shall call this approach the Pool Theory: it posits that religion/culture is best understood not in terms of essential features, but as a set of possibilities within a recognizable framework, or “pool.”<sup>5</sup> Some of these possibilities will be seen as so widely occurring as to be nearly universal, others as exceedingly rare. The Pool Theory resists, however, the assumption that near universality is proof of essentiality, since such an assumption will falsely exclude some elements from the data set.

This book devotes separate chapters to what appear to be the three most visible religious tendencies in pre-Islamic Iran: the worship of Mithra, of Mazda, and of the Goddess (who is most recognizable as Anahita). In accordance with the Pool Theory, they are not mutually exclusive. Zoroastrianism, in my view, is most properly viewed as a relatively late-developing sub-expression of the second of these three broad tendencies, which we can call Mazdaism—a more precise term, which also happens to reflect the actual self-identification of its pre-modern adherents. As to the contemporary forms of Zoroastrianism, once again, alongside the many obvious commonalities one also finds considerable differences, not just between its Indian and Iranian practitioners but also in terms of such basic questions as who can claim membership in the community and whether ancient rituals can be altered to better suit the present age.

### *What is “Monotheism”?*

The very nature of monotheism tends toward another kind of back-projection. Monotheisms are notoriously exclusivist and intolerant. Yahweh is said to be a jealous god, but apparently so are Jesus, Allah, and—perhaps by contagion, since he is neither Semitic nor Near Eastern—Ahura Mazda. Since the followers of these singular deities now collectively represent most of the world’s population, it is easy to take religious exclusiveness and intolerance to be universal historical norms. There is danger, however, in allowing ourselves to assume that monotheism represents “a more advanced stage in the development” of religion, not least because a progressive notion of history is itself a cultural construct not universally shared among human societies, many of whom even today see history as cyclical or even degenerative.

If we attempt to suspend our own culturally-generated preconceptions about religion, a number of current interpretations begin to seem less certain. The oft-held notion of a global trend toward monotheism emerging during an “axial age”<sup>6</sup> of “monotheistic” figures called “prophets” is riddled with problems, and only really makes sense if one has decided in advance that the facts should fit into this particular

historical paradigm. Even then, Zoroaster can be cast as a prophet and a monotheist only by applying extraordinarily broad definitions of those terms. Similarly, the “monotheism” of Moses (“Thou shalt have no other gods before me”) is relative, not absolute as one finds in later “monotheisms.”

In fact, a comprehensive view of human history would suggest that the default religious norm is in fact polytheistic and non-exclusive. Throughout the world, prior to and alongside the various monotheisms—which, by the way, historically speaking were mostly imposed by force—we find a much less restricted religiosity, where on a local level people may have their own particular favorite deity but not exclude the existence or at times even the worship of others. (The nineteenth-century German scholar Friedrich von Schelling coined the term “henotheism” to describe this phenomenon.) One can still see this approach today in South and East Asian religions, and the ancient Iranians held to it as well. Thus, the history of Mazda-worship is intertwined with that of Mithra, Anahita, and numerous other divine figures, even into the Sasanian period, when Mazdaism became the officially-approved religion for Iranians.

### *Orthodoxy and Power*

Against this pluralistic backdrop, the emergence—or, as is more often the case, the imposition—of monotheism appears closely connected with the consolidation of power by a particular group. Accordingly, the ancient Mesopotamian god Marduk’s rise to supremacy is tied to that of the centralizing efforts of his devotees among the Babylonian elite. Cyrus the Great, living at a time when the Iranians were a newly arrived presence in the region, accommodated his religious policy to the existing situation, whereas a few decades later, Darius I felt sufficiently emboldened to assert the superiority of his preferred deity, Mazda, over the “other gods who are ...” But that was Darius’ preference, and not necessarily that of the Achæmenids as a whole. The partisans of Mazda would have to wait another six centuries before they could suppress their rivals with full government support, and even then their success would not be complete.

Mazdaean orthodoxy, moreover, like all suppressive projects, could not eliminate unauthorized views and practices, though history has long accepted its claims to have done so. While scholarship has at last begun to take seriously the multifarious religio-cultural expressions long obscured by a singular reliance on “authoritative” sacred texts for describing the world’s religious traditions, it remains difficult to form a clear picture of these alternate realities, mostly because their principal custodians have been the illiterate rural masses. Rustic societies are prized by anthropologists for the wealth of ancient rituals and beliefs they often preserve, but these are not always easy to isolate and identify.

It is a universal and ever-recurring historical pattern that when urban elites attempt to impose their religious norms upon the non-urban majority, the latter find subversive ways of stubbornly maintaining their own traditions by reshaping and redescribing them according to the models of the former. The Kurdish Yezidi and Yaresan communities, who preserve traces of ancient Iranian beliefs and practices up to the present day, offer interesting case studies in this regard. It is worth remembering that for rural peoples the preservation of ancient rituals, especially those connected to the cycles of nature, was often considered by them to be a matter of life and death, since failure to properly observe a ritual could result in drought, famine, infertility, and other catastrophes.

### *What is “Iranian Religion”?*

The question remains whether such a thing as “Iranian religion” can be said to exist in its own right. The non-sectarian tradition of the Iranian new year, *Nō rūz*, along with its attendant ceremonies, provides perhaps the most visible example that it does. Also, since the Sasanian period at least, large numbers of Iranians have resisted the imposition from above of any kind of state religion, whether Zoroastrian, Sunni, or Shi‘i, outwardly following the prescribed motions but privately favoring the esoteric teachings of heterodox spiritual masters. Generally speaking, an affinity for hidden interpretations (*‘erfān*) and a usually passive resistance to imposed religious authority can be considered characteristic of Iranian spirituality.

Alessandro Bausani and Henry Corbin are two well-known Iran scholars of the twentieth century who sought to identify an unbroken strand of specifically “Iranian” religiosity throughout history, though their efforts focused mainly on demonstrating continuities from Zoroastrianism to Iranian Islam.<sup>7</sup> A roundtable of Iranists held in Bamberg, Germany in 1991 likewise took the continuity of Iranian religious ideas as its theme.<sup>8</sup> More recently, in discussing the range of local resistance movements that emerged in Iran during the period following the Arab conquests, Patricia Crone has claimed to describe “a complex of religious ideas that, however varied in space and unstable over time, has shown a remarkable persistence in Iran over a period of two millennia.” Crone’s thesis is somewhat circumscribed, however, since she largely limits it to “the mountain population of Iran.”<sup>9</sup>

Numerous examples taken from the Iranian religious “pool,” including notions and customs connected with water, fire, and light, as well as marriage ceremonies and other life-cycle rituals, are often dressed up in new garb or considered simply as “old superstitions” that nobody understands or questions. Nowhere is this more evident than in popular customs associated with the countless sacred sites that dot the Iranian landscape, including transformed goddess temples such as the

Bibi Shahrbanu shrine in Rayy, south of Tehran, as well as the country's ubiquitous *emāmzādehs*—ostensibly shrines to the numerous offspring of the various Shi'ite Imams but which in former times were probably in most cases Zoroastrian fire temples or other holy sites.

One striking example of this phenomenon of unwitting preservation could be seen in a report broadcast by Iranian state television on 19 March 2012, on the eve of Nō rūz, from the shrine of Halimeh and Hakimeh Khatoon in Shahr-e Kord, in the Zagros Mountains of Western Iran. The report showed women bringing lamps to be lit at the shrine, which they would then take home again. Unbeknown to themselves, these women were most likely preserving an ancient ritual by which Iranians carried back to their individual houses a portion of the sacred fire kept at their local temple. The televised report made no such connection, but as will be obvious to the reader of the pages that follow, the belief that Iran's deep cultural continuity is both real and important underlies the writing of this book.



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## Mithra and Mithraism

As noted in Chapter 1, Mithra (Skt. Mitra) is one of the principal deities of the early Indo-Iranian pantheon. Originally the god of contracts<sup>1</sup>—his name means “that which causes to bind”—his enforcement of verbal commitments was central in a pastoral–nomadic society that lacked any formal policing agency. Spoken agreements were the very foundation of social stability; failure to uphold them could lead to anarchy.

Mithra was (and to some extent remains) an object of veneration in Zoroastrianism and Hinduism, with both Avestan and Vedic rituals devoted to him. Also, for several centuries his cult enjoyed unparalleled popularity within the army of the Roman Empire, leaving hundreds of archaeological traces across Europe. Yet only in the Roman context—where the actual connections with Iranian religion are unclear—does one typically speak of “Mithraism” as a distinct religion.

It may be that the proper status of Mithra-worship in the ancient Iranian world has been underestimated. Most often subsumed under Mazda-worship, as in Sasanian Zoroastrianism, Iranian Mithraism may deserve to be considered a religion in its own right. As has been argued in the Preface, too much of Iranian religious history is read as backward projection. This tendency has led even respectable scholars to categorize all manner of pre-Islamic Iranian religiosity as “Zoroastrian,” an overgeneralization not warranted by the available data. In fact pre-Sasanian Iranian societies were highly diverse, in religion as in other domains, and there is little justification for assuming that most of their rituals and beliefs were specifically Zoroastrian.

The codified form of Mazda-worship now referred to as Zoroastrianism took shape rather late, during the Sasanian period (224–651 CE). Prior to the political efforts of the early Sasani-ans (backed by fanatical and ambitious Mazdaean priests such as Kerdīr) to articulate and forcibly impose a particular Zoroastrian orthodoxy upon

a very religiously heterogeneous Iranian society, it seems more likely that across the Iranian lands there were at least three major religious tendencies (alongside many minor ones). Of these, Mazdaism is the best known, but its establishment by a favored priestly caste does not in and of itself prove that it was the preferred religion of most Iranians. Among the general population there is much evidence of Mithraism, which may actually be the older tendency.

The survival of Mithraic elements in the Iranian world was largely a rural phenomenon, consistent with the observation made earlier about the importance for rural peoples of preserving their rituals. Mehrdad Bahar has emphasized the role of the bull sacrifice in rural areas of Western Iran, even arguing that it predates the migration of the Iranian tribes into the region. Pointing out that the sacrifice and consumption of cattle was abhorred in both the Vedic and Zoroastrian traditions, Bahar suggests that the bull sacrifice was a pre-existing tradition that was preserved by the Mesopotamian and Elamite peoples who came under Iranian subjugation. According to Bahar's analysis, as rural populations became Iranicized they adopted Mithra as the most sympathetic Iranian deity—being associated with justice, something of which they, as an underclass, were so often deprived—and came to associate their most important ritual with him.<sup>2</sup>

Beginning in the Achæmenid period (ca. 550–330 BCE), evidence of Mazda-worship is strongest in the western parts of Iran; further east, Mithra appears to have been the more prominent god. Even in the west Mithra was worshipped, however, while in later Achæmenid times the most popular divine figure seems to have been the goddess Anahita. Similarly, her Central Asian counterpart Nanai was apparently the principal deity of the Sogdians up to the Islamic conquest. The Mazdaean magi sought to co-opt rival religious tendencies by incorporating them into their own religious framework. Thus, Mithra- and Anahita-focused religiosities are subsumed under Mazda-worship in the Zoroastrian texts.

## INDO-IRANIAN ORIGINS

Mithra first appears in recorded history as one of four Indo-Iranian deities invoked in a contract between the north Mesopotamian Mitanni ruler Kurtiwaza and the Hatti king Shuppiluliuma I, dated to between 1375–1350 BCE.<sup>3</sup> The other deities mentioned are the easily recognizable Varuna, Indra, and Nasatya. Some of the material pertaining to these four deities that appears in the Avesta and the Rig Veda may be older than the Mitanni contract, but the written forms of these texts do not appear until many centuries later. An even earlier piece of evidence, a Mitanni royal seal from ca. 1450 BCE, depicts a bull-slaying scene in which the bull-slayer may be Mithra.<sup>4</sup>

The Mitanni rulers, who were from the Indic branch of the recently divided Indo-Iranians, entered Mesopotamian society as a military elite, so their attachment to Mithra is consistent with his role in later Iranian and Roman (but not so much Vedic) traditions. One of Mithra's recurring features is as an enforcer: when people don't abide by their contracts, he punishes them without mercy.<sup>5</sup> It is not difficult to see how the warrior class might identify with such a deity, notwithstanding the greater importance given to Indra in the Rig Veda.

In its visible traces—which are mostly but not exclusively Roman—Mithra-worship is associated foremost with the tauroctony, the bull sacrifice illustrated on the walls of Mithraic temples across Europe and the Near East. The cosmic significance of this ritual can be seen in the association of Mithra with the “unconquered” sun and its relationship to the moon, symbolized by a bull, which is “killed”—indeed *must* be killed—every month so that life may be regenerated. The cosmogonic myth found in the Zoroastrian *Bondahešn* is but one version portraying this belief.

In later Roman times the Mithra cult appears to have been exclusively male, and this may also have been the case among the ancient Iranians. Paul Thieme has suggested that this is because in ancient Indo-Iranian culture the concluding of contracts was done between men; Frantz Grenet has observed that in the Kushan Empire the Mithra cult seems to have been paired with that of the goddess Aši, which would indicate the existence of parallel male-female cults.<sup>6</sup>

## MITHRA-WORSHIP IN ACHÆMENID TIMES

While the early Achæmenids are usually claimed to have been Mazdaists, the picture is actually more complicated than that, and evidence for Mithra-worship is abundant. Cyrus the Great, known for his accommodation of religious diversity, may even have considered Mithra the supreme deity: the entrance to his tomb features a Mithraic-looking solar disc.<sup>7</sup> Mithra holds an important place in Cyrus' royal procession, as described by Xenophon; Philippe Swennen goes so far as to suggest that the ceremony was originally Mithraic, and that Mazda's introduction into it was an innovation.<sup>8</sup> The head of Cyrus' treasury in Babylon was an individual named Mithradata; in fact this name (“given by Mithra”), along with its variants, is one of the most commonly occurring names in documents from ancient Iran up through the Parthian period. The name Mithrayazna (“Mithra-worshiper”) is also frequently found. Such names also regularly appear in mentions of Persian settlers in Achæmenid Mesopotamia and Egypt. A Mithra temple in Memphis, Egypt has been dated to the fifth century BCE.<sup>9</sup> According to Alexander the Great's chronicler, Arrian, a white horse

## 22 Religions of Iran

was sacrificed at Cyrus' tomb every month, which may also indicate a Mithraic connection.<sup>10</sup>

Darius I (550–486 BCE) is considered on the basis of his inscriptions to have been a Mazda-worshiper, but these same inscriptions acknowledge the help of other, unnamed gods. Moreover, Aramaic tablet records at Persepolis during the time of his reign actually indicate a higher number of donations for rituals in honour of Mithra than for Mazda.<sup>11</sup> The Achæmenid kings Artaxerxes I (465–424 BCE) and Darius III (ca. 380–330 BCE) were devotees of Mithra, as was the prince known as Cyrus the Younger (died 401 BCE; he was killed accidentally by one of his own soldiers, ironically enough named Mithradata).

The Greek writer Xenophon (ca. 430–354 BCE) observes that Persian rulers “swore by Mithra,”<sup>12</sup> which is consistent with the deity's role as guardian of contracts. Inscriptions of Artaxerxes II (404–358 BCE) and Artaxerxes III (ca. 425–338 BCE) name Mithra and Anahita together with Mazda; this fact is generally taken to indicate the sovereigns' recognition of the three deities who held the greatest followings in Iranian society at the time.

Richard Frye believes that in Achæmenid times the Mithra cult was restricted to the military, noting that it could have existed “within the Mazdayasnian religion.”<sup>13</sup> But he provides no reason why we should assume that Mithra-worship was restricted to the military, or that it was subsumed within a broader Mazdaist tradition; these impulses seem rather to be the result of reading later conceptions backward.

### MITHRAISM UNDER THE PARTHIANS

The northeast Iranian Parthian (*Aškānī*) dynasty (247 BCE–224 CE) is generally described as being “religiously tolerant,” having no official state religion. However, there is some evidence that the ruling elites and perhaps much of their subject population in eastern Iran were primarily Mithraists. No fewer than four Parthian kings were named in Mithra's honour (Mithradata, “given by Mithra”), and the easternmost of the three sacred fires known from Sasanian times, Burzin-Mehr (“exalted is Mithra”), was likely established in Parthian times.

Parvaneh Pourshariati has recently advanced an intriguing (though hotly contested) argument according to which the Mithraist tendencies of elite Parthian families such as the Karens and the Mehrans (whose name itself means “Mithraists”) remained a source of tension throughout the Sasanian period. She points out that the late sixth-century rebel Bahram Čubin was known in Armenian sources as Mehrvandak, “servant of Mithra,” and that his movement centered on the Burzin-Mehr fire in opposition to the two Sasanian fires further west. Pourshariati concludes that the religiously expressed tensions between

the Sasanian and Parthian elites ultimately led to the breakdown of Sasanian imperial power during the mid-seventh century, when the Parthians, ever resentful of their Mazdaist rivals in the west, chose to ally themselves with the invading Arabs.<sup>14</sup>

The earliest documented association of Mithra with the sun is found in Strabo (63 BCE–24 CE).<sup>15</sup> It is in the Parthian language that Mithra's name first comes to be used as the word for "sun" (*mehr*); this equivalence is maintained in New Persian, where it acquires the additional meaning of friendship or love. Ilya Gershevitch has argued that the association of Mithra with the sun from Parthian times onwards derives from Manichaeism, which identified Mithra with the third divine emanation, called the Third Messenger, and referred to the sun as Mihryazd ("God Mithra"). The Manichaean Third Messenger "dwells within the sun," whereas in the Avesta Mithra is said to *rise before* the sun, representing for Gershevitch a fundamental change transforming Mithra into a solar deity.<sup>16</sup>

It is significant that in his own writings Mani referred to the Third Messenger as "Naryosangha," who in the Avesta is Mazda's messenger, not Mithra's. The shift in association to Mithra among the Parthians and Sogdians as Manichaeism spread east may constitute evidence that these peoples preferred Mithra to Mazda. In addressing his Persian audience Mani assigned Mithra the identity of the demiurgic Living Spirit, which led Porphyry to identify him as a creator god, displacing Mazda.

In Bactria, at the time of the Kushans (first to third century CE), who were eastern contemporaries of the Parthians, numismatic evidence from Kapisene and elsewhere suggests that Mithra (Bactrian: Miuro or Mioro) was the most popular male deity.<sup>17</sup> Oddly, this has been taken by scholars including Mary Boyce, Nicholas Sims-Williams, and Frantz Grenet as evidence of "Bactrian Zoroastrianism." A more elegant treatment of the facts would conclude that, just as in much of eastern Iran, a preponderance of Bactrians at that time were Mithraists, not Mazdaists. Indeed, in this and other contexts where the evidence for Mithra-worship outweighs that of that for Mazdaism, describing the former as merely a component within a generalized Zoroastrian culture seems a nonsensical proposition, rather like stating that "worship of Ba'al was prominent within the Judaism of the Canaanites."

Reflecting a Greek presence dating back to the time of Alexander's conquest, Kushan coins visually depict Mithra with the iconography of the Greek sun god, Helios, with whom he is identified. In other cases Mithra takes the place of Zeus, lending weight to the hypothesis that for at least some eastern Iranians he was the principal deity.<sup>18</sup> As one moves further eastwards into Gandhara and Kashmir, Mithra is still represented, but as one among a number of popular deities. This may indicate a diluted presence of east Iranians in northwestern India at that time.<sup>19</sup>

## MITHRAISM IN THE ROMAN WORLD

Communities of Iranians existed throughout the eastern Mediterranean from ancient times. Presumably most had established themselves there for purposes of trade; others likely came as soldiers or slaves. At times Egypt, Syria and Anatolia had been under Achæmenid rule, which facilitated the settlement and flourishing of groups of Iranians. As these territories came under first Greek, then Roman control, Iranian expatriates continued to live there. Despite their minority status, many seem to have thrived, since Iranians are mentioned as underwriting the building of public structures and sponsoring athletes. The influence of Iranians was also felt in what would become a major movement in Roman society, particularly the army: namely, the cult of Mithra.

This cult appears to have taken shape in the culturally mixed environment of northwestern Mesopotamia and Asia Minor during the first century BCE, and by the late first century CE it had spread throughout the Roman Empire. Plutarch, in his *Vita Pompei*, mentions a group of pirates from Cilicia, defeated in 67 BCE, who practiced a Mithraic cult. The famous site at Nimrut Dagh (now in eastern Turkey) erected by Antiochus of Commagene (69–34 BCE) contains a sculpture and tomb inscription dedicated to Mithra. Franz Cumont observes that the crude workmanship of a bas-relief near Antioch depicting a Mithraic bull-sacrifice “implies that it was dedicated by humble people.”<sup>20</sup>

In its Roman form, Mithraism was a secretive, exclusively male cult. If, as it appears, this movement first took shape among bands of thieves or soldiers, the notion of basing membership on an inviolable pact, enforced by a ruthless deity, would have been appealing. Its central ritual was a re-enactment of the primordial myth, the tauroctony, according to which Mithra slays a bull. Apart from some inscriptions in the ruins of Mithraic temples, no texts have survived which can shed light on the details of their rituals, apart from a few mentions in outside sources.

Scholars have therefore been divided on how to fill the void of knowledge regarding the specifics of belief and practice when discussing Roman Mithraism. Some (for example Franz Cumont) assume a basic continuity from Iranian Mithraism and seek to explain the evidence from Mithraic temples and references in Greek and Latin sources by supplying Iranian models. Others (for example Stig Wikander) reject any such continuity, believing that in Roman Mithraism little more than the name of the god himself is Iranian, the rest having Mediterranean origins. Still others simply throw up their hands in despair, and insist that such questions cannot be answered from the available evidence.

John Hinnells comes down tentatively on the side of continuity, noting a number of similarities between elements in the artistic scenes

found in Roman Mithraic temples and attested Iranian rituals. Bread, fruit, wine and water offerings figure in both, as does the presence of a dog (who in Zoroastrian rituals is the first to be offered the sacrificial food). In a particularly interesting parallel, Mithraic worshipers wore animal masks, a practice that continued among Iranians celebrating *Mehragān*. In light of this evidence, Hinnells considers it “plausible that some of these details on Roman monuments represent archaic survivals of ancient Iranian ideas whose significance may no longer have been appreciated.” Thus, “. . . the Roman Mithraic reliefs depict the divine sacrifice which gives life to men, a concept which ultimately derived from Iran but which was expressed in terms meaningful to people living in the Graeco-Roman world.”<sup>21</sup>

Bruce Lincoln likewise sees Iranian survivals in Roman Mithraism, not just the tauroctony ritual but also in the association of Mithra with the sun and “his role as savior or conductor of the soul.”<sup>22</sup> It is interesting that in at least two Zoroastrian texts, the *Mehr Yašt* (10.93) and a passage from the *Vīdēvdāt* which seems to be based on it (19.28–9), Mithra is depicted as saving the devotee from death’s bonds and assisting the ascension of his soul just as he assists the rising of the sun.

Roman Mithraism centered on the notion of the soul’s journey upward through seven spheres, symbolized by the devotee’s passage through the seven stages of secret initiation: the Raven, the Bridegroom, the Soldier, the Lion, the Persian, the Sun-Runner, and the Father. Each stage was associated with a planet and had its own set of symbols. Mithra was held to be the god of salvation, associated with the sun. Not insignificantly, his birthday was celebrated on 25 December, and his depiction in popular stories celebrating “the infant Mithra” is remarkably Jesus-like.

The Mithraea, where devotees of Mithra congregated to perform their ceremonies, were underground temples meant to evoke the cave where, according to myth, Mithra had captured and killed the primordial bull—an echo of the bull sacrifice in ancient Iranian religion, but which the Zoroastrian tradition attributes to the evil deity Ahriman. The Roman Mithra cult, which was exclusively male, fostered camaraderie among its adherents, particularly soldiers who were frequently relocated from one post to another and thus lacked social roots.

The rituals of Roman Mithraists can be guessed at only through analysis of the panel reliefs and paintings which adorn the walls of Mithraeum temples. From these it would appear that some kind of animal sacrifice, mimicking the original tauroctony, was the central ritual. Another important ritual, evoked by initiation and banquet scenes, seems to have entailed the consumption of the sacrificed animal’s flesh and may, according to Franz Cumont and some others, have preserved

elements of the ancient Indo-Iranian *haoma* sacrifice. Parallels for these scenes can be found in the Christian Eucharist and in the Manichaean Bema feast, in which the actual killing and consumption of flesh have been sublimated.

Mithra is depicted in these temple panels in the company of the Invincible Sun, *sol invictus*, inherited from the Romans and the Syrians. Another recurring image is of a winged, lion-headed figure entwined with a snake, which inscriptions identify as Arimanius. Presumably this is a Romanization of Ahriman, but his function and role in the Mithraic mysteries are unclear. It is interesting that the tenth-century catalog of Ibn Nadim quotes Mani, the founder of Manichaeism, as describing the devil as having the head of a lion and the body of a dragon.<sup>23</sup> David Bivar has proposed that the iconography of the lion-headed figure seen in Mithraea derives from that of Nergal, the Babylonian god of the underworld.<sup>24</sup> Thus, Mithraic rituals devoted to Arimanius may have aimed at appeasing the god of death. A related interpretation holds Arimanius to be the god of Time (bringer of death), which would connect him with the Iranian Zurvan.

Roman sources marvel at the rapid spread of Mithraism throughout the empire during the early centuries of the Common Era. To date some four hundred and twenty Mithraea have been identified across Europe and the Near East, from northern England (Carrawburgh) to upper Mesopotamia (Dura-Europos). But with the adoption of Christianity as state religion of the Roman Empire in the early fourth century CE, Mithraism along with other pagan cults and heterodox Christian groups was increasingly persecuted and soon disappeared.

## MITHRA-WORSHIP IN ZOROASTRIANISM

Mithra is not mentioned in the Gathas, so in the strictest sense he is not a “Zoroastrian” god. However, as noted above, the Mazdaean magi attempted to incorporate his cult (possibly as early as the Achæmenid period), and included a liturgy devoted to him, the *Mehr Yašt*, in the Avesta (Yašt 10). The *Mehr Yašt*, while reflecting a Mazdaist vision, likely preserves some pre-Mazdaean ideas. It is thus our principal source of information for Iranian conceptions of Mithra. Other Avestan sources include Yašts 1 and 3, *Vīdēvdād* 4, and the *Khoršīd Niyāyeš* (“Liturgy of the Sun”) in the Zoroastrian prayer-book, the Khorda Avesta. The Young Avesta places Mithra within a so-called “ahuric triad” along with Mazda and Apam Napat, god of the waters (a male deity whose features are later taken over by the goddess Anahita).

The *Mehr Yašt* begins with the statement that Ahura Mazda created Mithra, and made him “as worthy of sacrifice, as worthy of prayer as myself” (10.1.1). Later, it is said that Mithra is “master of the world,”



but with the qualification that this position has been granted him by Ahura Mazda (10.23.92). These would seem to be fairly transparent attempts on the part of the Mazdaist clergy to accommodate the huge importance of the Mithra cult among Iranians while subordinating him to Mazda by making the latter the original creator figure.

In the *Mebr Yašt* and elsewhere, Mithra is frequently described as overseeing the pastures where livestock graze. One assumes this to be a reflection of the fact that in the pastoral–nomadic society of the proto-Indo-Iranians livestock were the major form of wealth, and that covenants among tribes were the only restraint on indiscriminate raiding which was the primary source of social instability. When such covenants were transgressed, it was incumbent upon the warrior class to go out and set things right.

Watching over these societies, Mithra is described as having a thousand (or ten thousand) eyes and ears, and as always being awake. In other words, no misdeeds can escape his notice. Contract-breakers may flee, but cannot outrun him. Spears thrown by his enemies will fly backwards towards those who fling them. He “breaks the skulls of *daēvas*,” and saps the strength of havoc-wreakers, taking away their glory and beating them with “ten thousand strokes.” He provides homes to the truthful, and destroys those of liars. In sacrificing to him, devotees hope that he will:

(33) Give us the following boon(s) for which we ask you, O strong one, by virtue of the stipulation of the given promises: riches, strength, and victoriousness (*vərəθraγna*), comfortable existence and ownership of Truth (*aša*), good reputation and peace of soul, learning, increment, and knowledge, Ahura-created victoriousness, the conquering superiority [deriving from] Truth which is what is best, and the interpretation of the incremental divine word (*manθra*), (34) so that we, being good in spirit, cheerful, joyful and optimistic, may overcome all opponents, so that we, being good in spirit, cheerful joyful, and optimistic, may overcome all enemies, so that we, being good in spirit, cheerful, joyful, and optimistic, may overcome all hostilities of evil gods and men, sorcerers and witches, tyrants, hymn-mongers, and mumblers . . .

(93) Now then, in both lives, O grass-land magnate Mithra, in both—this material existence, and the one which is spiritual—do protect us from Death and Wrath (*aēšma*), the two owners of Falsehood (*drvatat*), from the evil armies of the owners of Falsehood who raise a gruesome banner, from the onslaughts of Wrath, which are run by Wrath the malignant with [the cooperation of] the Disintegrator [of the body] with whom the evil gods created! (94) Now then, grass-land magnate Mithra,

give strength to our teams, health to ourselves, much watchfulness against antagonists, ability to strike back at enemies, ability to rout lawless, hostile, opponents!<sup>25</sup>

Mithra the Enforcer is assisted by some well-known figures in Iranian mythology, including the dragon-slayer Vərəθraγna (Bahrām) and the spirit of wakefulness and obedience, Sraoša (Sorūsh), symbolized in later art as a rooster. He is also accompanied by Rašnu (the Judge) and the goddess Aši (“Reward”). Mithra appears alongside Sraoša and Rašnu in the myth of the Činvat Bridge, over which the dead must pass, though it is Sraoša who actually conducts souls across the bridge. Mithra is the bestower of divine glory, *x<sup>u</sup>arənah* (*farr*), symbolized in art as a halo, flames, or ribbons encircling the head of the figure who possesses it.

Zoroastrian fire temples are called *Darb-e mehr*, “Gate of Mithra.” The reason for this is obscure, and may go back to a very ancient period. In any case, as John Hinnells observes, “Such a nomenclature could have developed only if Mithra was traditionally a god of outstanding ritual significance.”<sup>26</sup> Zoroastrian priests receive a bull-headed “mace of Mithra,” called a *gurz*, when they are initiated, and their power in performing important ceremonies is believed to derive from Mithra.

Another mark of Mithra’s importance in Zoroastrianism is found in the calendar, which dedicates the sixteenth day of each month, and the seventh month of the year, to Mithra (Mehr). The great fall harvest festival, moreover, is devoted to him.

### *Mehragān: the Festival of Mithra*

Mehragān (Old Persian Mithrakāna) is historically one of the most important Iranian celebrations, mirroring the New Year festival, Nō rūz, which is held at the spring equinox. Originally the Iranian peoples, like the Indo-Aryans, may have considered the new year to begin in the fall; thus, the annual festival of Mithra was likely the most important occasion of the year. The spring celebration of Nō rūz, on the other hand, most probably originated in Mesopotamia, and was adopted by the Iranians after they migrated into the region.

In Achæmenid times both Mithrakāna and Nō rūz were major official occasions presided over by the state. The Achæmenid Mehragān ceremony culminated in the ritual killing of a bull. Until recent decades, Iranian Zoroastrians celebrated Mehragān by conducting an animal sacrifice, usually a sheep or a goat. Significantly, Mehragān is the only Zoroastrian festival in which (some) priests omit a formal dedication to Ahura Mazda, dedicating the ceremony instead to Mithra.<sup>27</sup> According to Mary Boyce:

It seems very possible that the intention of the ancient Iranian blood sacrifice to Mithra was the same as the Athenian sacrifice

of a bull to Apollo at the autumn festival of the Bouphonia, and of similar harvest rites among other peoples, namely to fertilize the fields with life-blood and so ensure that the corn and other crops would sprout afresh in the coming year.<sup>28</sup>

Iranian myth reflects the pairing of the fall and spring equinox festivals, with Mehragān being the occasion where the hero Өraētaona (Fereydūn) kills (or imprisons) the evil serpent-king Aži Dahhāka (Zahāk) in revenge for the latter's slaying of Yima-xšaēta (Jamshīd), the primordial ruler who first established Nō rūz; the cosmic balance is thereby restored. The eleventh-century scholar Abu Rayhan Biruni noted that the Iranians "consider Mehragān as a sign of resurrection and the end of the world, because at Mehragān that which grows reaches its perfection . . ." <sup>29</sup>

### *Yaldā*

The Iranian imagination saw the winter solstice—the shortest day of the year—as the culmination of the sun's annual "dying" trajectory. Iranians therefore believed they should stay awake throughout longest night, seen as inauspicious, and collectively work to regenerate the sun by eating red (therefore "solar") fruits, such as pomegranates and watermelons, to help it get stronger so that the days would start to grow longer again. This ritual was likely associated with Mithra, since he was the principal solar deity. Moreover, myths about Mithra's birth (which mirror those of the Christian Nativity) have him born the following day.

The all-night winter vigil known as *shab-e yaldā*, which is still practiced by Iranians, has its roots in this ritual. The term *yaldā* is borrowed from Syriac, and means "birth," perhaps conflating the annual rebirth of the sun with legends about the birth of Mithra. *Yaldā* is the first day of the forty-day period known as *chelleh*, which culminates in the winter fire festival of Saddeh. The end of winter at the vernal equinox is also marked by a fire ritual on Chahār shanbe sūrī, the Wednesday before Nō rūz. Since fire is associated with the sun, the three winter celebrations would seem to have ancient connections.

## MITHRA AND THE PRIMORDIAL BULL SACRIFICE

As mentioned in Chapter 1, bull sacrifice was apparently one of the main rituals of the ancient Indo-Iranians, seen by them as a re-enactment of a primordial event by which life, symbolized by the bull, had to be killed (at the beginning of winter) so that it could be resurrected (in the spring). This paradigm is present in ancient Mesopotamia as well, as evidenced in the myth of Dammuzi and other stories. (Note that in Mesopotamian mythology a primordial bull sacrifice is carried out by Gilgamesh.) Scenes from the stone reliefs at Persepolis of a lion

attacking a bull may be representations of the Iranian version of this regeneration myth.

In Iranian mythology, the seasonal cycle of death and rebirth is replicated at the daily level by the “death” of the sun at nightfall and its “resurrection” every morning. Thus, the mythological association of Mithra with the sun/lion and the bull with the moon suggests a connection with the bull sacrifice ritual which may date to a very early, pre-Zoroastrian period. For this reason, some scholars see the version of the myth in which Mithra kills the bull as being the original form, with the Zoroastrian version where Ahriman plays this role being a later innovation.<sup>30</sup> The reason for the substitution, according to Bahar, is that since the Zoroastrians saw death as evil and polluting, it could not be associated with a beneficent deity.<sup>31</sup>

An echo of the Mithraic tauroctony from the Muslim period may be seen in the story from the *Kalila and Dimna* animal fables in which the lion-king is persuaded by a duplicitous jackal advisor to kill his own best friend, a bull by the name of Shanzabeh. The scene is illustrated in miniature paintings from several well-known *Kalila and Dimna* manuscripts (see Figure 2).

## SURVIVALS OF MITHRAIC IDEAS IN OTHER RELIGIONS

Some of the most evident survivals of Mithraic elements are found in Christianity, notably the custom of celebrating Jesus’ birthday on 25 December. This arbitrary choice of date, decided upon by the Church Fathers in the fifth century, was deliberately calculated to re-brand celebrations of Mithra’s birthday which Roman Mithraists had held on that date. (In modern times the government of Pakistan has attempted a similar transference by declaring 25 December “Muhammad Ali Jinnah Day.”) Moreover, Mohammad Moghaddam has argued that the virgin birth story was appropriated from a myth in which the baby Mithra, a future Saošyant, is born of a virgin, Anahita.<sup>32</sup> The sign of the cross, formed by the elliptic and the celestial equator, was one of the symbols associated with Mithra. And finally, the mitre (Latin *mitra*) worn by many Christian bishops and abbots, may be derived from the Phrygian cap in which Mithra is represented in countless friezes.

Aspects of the Mithraic cult survived in heterodox sects of the Islamic period, notably in Kurdistan among the Yazidis and the Yaresan (Ahl-e Haqq). Both groups preserve the myth of a primordial contract, sealed by the sacrifice of a bull. This sacrifice, moreover, involves first setting the bull to run free and be chased by its designated slaughterer, just as in the Mithra myth.

The actual extent of Mithraic influence during the Islamic period is unclear, however. Hassan Pirouzjou goes so far as to argue that

“within the resurgence of ancient cults, it is first and foremost Mithraism that occupies the center stage.”<sup>33</sup> Pirouzdjou sees Mithraism as the inspiration for radical movements from the Mazdakites to the Sarbedars to the Horūfīs to the Qizilbāš, and while his argument may be somewhat overextended, he does draw some interesting parallels between the Mithraic tauroctony and a sacrificial ritual attributed to the followers of the rebel Bābak “*khurram-dīn*” in the ninth century.<sup>34</sup> He also points out that the *khurram-dīniyya* and other related groups were referred to as “those who wear red” (*sorkh-jāmegān*), the colour of clothing in which Mithra is generally depicted.

The art historian, Abolala Soudavar, goes so far as to argue the presence of Mithraic symbols in the royal iconography of every period of Iranian history from the Achæmenids onwards. The halo of divine glory (*farr īzadī*) in particular, which is a constant in Iranian art, he sees as an ever-present evocation of Mithra’s power. This solar symbol reaches its highest form of expression in the art of Mughal India beginning with the reign of Akbar the Great (1555–1605), in the shape of a starburst (*šamseh*) seen in many royal Mughal illustrated manuscripts.<sup>35</sup>

Similar to Pirouzdjou but relying less on forced interpretations, Mehrdad Bahar has detected Mithraic survivals in the rituals of various kinds of fraternities that have survived up to the present day in Iran, notably the *pahlavān* (“heroes”) associated with the traditional gymnasias known as “Houses of Strength” (*zūrkhāneh*), which are underground and cave-like.<sup>36</sup> Bahar also sees echoes of Mithraic ethics in the codes of behaviour (*ādāb*) adhered to by contemporary *pahlavān*.

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## Two Kurdish Sects: The Yezidis and the Yaresan

**T**he history of religions—like history in general—is usually told from the side of power, which in religious terms means established orthodoxy. However, over-reliance on such narratives obscures the reality of life “on the ground,” which in many cases paints a very different picture. Even terms like “minority” and “marginal” can be misleading, since in some cases non-establishment norms can be upheld by most of the population. Recognizing this fact, one may reject using the term “heresy” in the usual pejorative sense, and instead apply it in a more neutral way to perspectives belonging to various non-elite groups.

Orthodox authority is typically urban-centered, and decreases with distance from centers of political power. Thus, villages often show more local distinctiveness than towns, and mountain areas, being difficult to access and control, the greatest resistance of all to central authority. The Kurds, an ancient Iranian-speaking people who have long inhabited the Zagros of western Iran, and other mountainous regions, provide an excellent example of how independent traditions can retain their character through centuries of resistance to external forces.

Since the Kurds are an Iranian people and given their history of independent-mindedness, it is not surprising to find many survivals of very old Iranian religious beliefs and customs among the various Kurdish peoples of Iran, Iraq, Turkey, Syria, and the Caucasus. Such traces are blended with a range of other influences, primarily Islamic, but their fundamental Iranian character is immediately obvious. A number of Kurdish groups, while clearly drawing from an ancient Iranian cultural pool of beliefs and symbols, have maintained their own traditions parallel to the Iranian mainstream. Two specifically Kurdish types of religious expression stand out: those of the Yezidis (referred to in Iran as *Īzadīs*) and the Yaresan, also known as the Ahl-e Haqq (“People of the [Divine] Truth”).

Philip Kreyenbroek has noted the “unexpected and striking similarities” between the legends and imagery of these two groups, which he takes as an indication that “both cults spring from a common, well-defined, non-Islamic tradition.” He goes on to suggest that at least some of these shared elements “go back to an ancient faith which was probably dominant among speakers of Western Iranian languages [i.e., proto-Kurdish] before Zoroastrianism became prominent in their areas.”<sup>1</sup>

Reza Hamzeh’ee echoes this assessment when he says of the Yaresan that they “have adopted many religious ideas with which they have come into contact, but their basic tenets are an independent development of pre-Islamic ideas.”<sup>2</sup> Thomas Bois has highlighted the survival throughout Kurdistan of belief in nature spirits inhabiting trees, rocks, and water sources, recalling the ancient Iranian notion of *mainyus*. Such natural sites are commonly connected today with shrines to Muslim saints, but as Bois observes, “. . . the cult of saints which has thus often substituted for the cult of the forces of nature has not been able to be extirpated from the hearts of the popular masses despite the severe interdictions of orthodox Islam.”<sup>3</sup>

Kurdish scholar Mehrdad Izady has gone even further and proposed an underlying “original” Kurdish religion, which he calls Yazdanism, or according to his translation, the “Cult of Angels,”<sup>4</sup> though his invented religion certainly owes more to contemporary Kurdish national sentiment than to actual religious history. The Kurds are Iranians, and as such have inherited a wide-ranging and ancient cultural pool from which the various Iranian peoples have each assembled their own mix of symbol and ritual.

## THE YEZIDIS

Yezidis today are spread across the Kurdish region, with communities in Iraq, Iran, Syria, and the Caucasus, as well as large numbers of expatriates (mostly from Turkey) living in Germany and other Western countries. Estimates of their total number range wildly, but they probably number over half a million worldwide, with the largest proportion living in northern Iraq, where their most important shrines are located.

Yezidism as a distinct religious community traces its origin back to the twelfth century, when a Lebanese Sufi master from Baghdad by the name of Shaykh ‘Adi (died 1162) moved to the Hakkari mountains in northern Iraq, where he acquired a devoted following among the local Kurdish population. Although the sources describe him as an orthodox Muslim, his followers appear to have retained many aspects of their own local, Iranian religion.<sup>5</sup> And while they did at least superficially

adopt some Islamic symbols and concepts, adding elements to the existing Iranian pool, by the fourteenth century the Yezidis had come to be considered as a separate, non-Muslim group.

The very name of the sect, whose members refer to themselves in Kurdish as *Êzidi*, is itself problematic. Some consider it to be a corruption of the Persian word *īzadī*, from either *yazata*, “a being worthy of worship,” or Yazdan, a name for God, either of which would evoke pre-Islamic origins. Others attribute it to a movement, mentioned even before Shaykh ‘Adi’s time, of mountain-dwellers, mainly Kurds, who venerated the Umayyad Caliph Yazid, detested by Shi‘ites as the figure they hold responsible for the killing of the third Shi‘ite Imam, Hussein b. ‘Ali. It does not seem possible to answer the question definitively either way; ultimately, since the movement that took shape in the centuries after Shaykh ‘Adi appears to have brought together a number of disparate elements, the name “Yezidi” may in fact draw on more than one source.

Like numerous other Sufi groups, the ‘Adawiyya, as they were known in Muslim sources, were known for extreme veneration of their leaders and were thus sometimes seen as a political threat. During the leadership of Shaykh Hasan, who was executed in 1254 by the provincial government, which feared his power, Muslim writers noted the prevalence of non-Islamic norms among the ‘Adawiyya; this likely referred to surviving pre-Islamic beliefs and practices, in addition to what these writers disparagingly described as “saint-worship.” As Kreyenbroek suggests, “there can be little doubt that ideas, practices and attitudes deriving from the culture of the local Kurds gained a degree of acceptance among those members of the ‘Adawiyya who resided at Lalish” (the village where their principal shrine is located—see Figure 10).<sup>6</sup>

Indeed, a similar process through which originally foreign Sufi masters established themselves among rural populations by accepting and incorporating elements of local belief and practice can be seen throughout the Islamic world, even up to the present, whether in sub-Saharan Africa, India, or Indonesia. In this respect the ‘Adawiyya represent an extreme—though not unique—case, in that their views and practices differed enough from those of mainstream Islam that they eventually came to be considered non-Muslims.

Interestingly, the remarkable spread of Yezidism among the Kurds during the fifteenth century seems to be linked to an increasing openness among the ‘Adawi leaders to traditional Kurdish beliefs and practices. The result was persecution by Muslim authorities and the eventual exclusion of the ‘Adawiyya from the Islamic community by the ‘*ulemā*’. In a sense this could be seen as mostly a formal gesture, since in reality a majority of the people concerned may never have been very strongly integrated into the Islamic *umma* in the first place.



Indeed, the Yezidis' strong sense of separate identity, expressed in an origin myth according to which they alone of all peoples are the true descendants of Adam, may well go back to pre-Islamic times and reflect their desire to resist and distinguish themselves from the Zoroastrian elites of the Sasanian period. Noting that the Yezidi and Zoroastrian creation stories seem to be variations on the same original myth, Christine Allison suggests a taxonomy according to which "Yazidism would be, not a form of Zoroastrianism, but a religion possessing an Iranian belief-system akin to it."<sup>7</sup>

In short, the story of Yezidism can be read as an example of the survival of local religious tradition. This is not to say that it is immediately visible as a pre-Islamic Iranian religion. On the contrary, since the time of Shaykh 'Adi and perhaps earlier, Yezidism has acquired such a complex veneer of superimposed terms, symbols, and possibly practices as well, that unraveling its pre-Islamic Iranian elements is challenging to say the least. Moreover, there are many variations among the oral traditions of various Yezidi communities. Until recently reading and writing was forbidden to them, and their texts did not exist in written form. Moreover, the two "sacred books" attributed to the Yezidis, the *Mashafā Reš* and the *Ketēbā Jelwa*, are now considered to be early twentieth-century forgeries made by Westerners. A more authentic expression of Yezidi beliefs can be found in their hymns, called *qawls*. Nevertheless, with a little digging a number of ancient Iranian traces can be extracted from Yezidi sources.

### *Iranian Elements in Yezidism*

One of the most important Yezidi rituals is the annual slaying of a bull, which Mehrdad Bahar takes as evidence that the religion is fundamentally Mithraic.<sup>8</sup> Bahar also sees echoes of Mithraism in the fact that Yezidis pray facing the sun. Another ancient element surviving in Yezidism is the myth of the hero who slays the serpent. In a Yezidi story that exists in several versions, Shaykh 'Adi is given the hero's role; in an interesting parallel with a feat attributed to Indra in the Rig Veda, Shaykh 'Adi not only kills the serpent but "releases the waters" which have been sequestered within the rock.<sup>9</sup>

Another fairly transparent Iranian survival is the Yezidi belief in a Divine Heptad, called by them the Seven Mysteries (*haft sirr*), mirroring the Zoroastrian paradigm of Ahura Mazda and the six *Aməša Spəntas*. In the Yezidi version, the identities of these seven holy beings are blurred and somewhat fluid, an ambiguity explained by the notion that in the end they are all expressions of the Divine. This confusion of identities is compounded by the fact that Yezidis believe in reincarnation, which they refer to as "changing the shirt." Thus, when referring to saints or

holy beings they may name any number of individual manifestations. The Yezidis pay special reverence, however, to a being they know as Malak Tavus, the Peacock Angel, who is their most prominent divine figure. Four of the other aspects of the divine heptad are associated with the elements: Earth, Air, Fire, and Water, and at times with the Islamic archangels Jibra'il, Mika'il, Israfil, and 'Azra'il. The remaining two are identified with Shaykh 'Adi and one of his successors, Shaykh Hasan.

Like the Zoroastrians, the Yezidis believe that the world will be perfected at the end of time, following a final struggle, after which it will be "smooth like an egg," with neither mountains nor sea. The Yezidis also have numerous taboos against polluting nature, as well as restrictions on interactions with "impure" outsiders. The notion of ritual impurity also applies to women during menstruation. Forbidden foods include not only the usual suspects such as pork, but, rather curiously, such items as lettuce, okra, and cauliflower. For reasons not entirely clear, Yezidis shun the colour blue.

Similar to other Iranian peoples, the Yezidis celebrate four seasonal festivals. Their spring festival is slightly later than the Iranian Nō rūz, however, taking place in early April, and is less important than the Festival of the Assembly (*ježna jema'iyye*) which takes place in late September. The latter celebration likely came to fill the place of Mehragān, the festival of Mithra—which, as has been suggested in a preceding chapter, may have been the most important annual event for Iranians in the pre-Zoroastrian period.

The Festival of the Assembly, held at Lalish in northern Iraq, is meant to mirror the annual gathering together of the Seven Mysteries. All Yezidis are called to participate if they can. The ritual of the bull sacrifice is held on the fifth day, accompanied by music and dancing.

### *The Question of "Devil-Worship"*

The Yezidis have long been characterized as "devil-worshippers," particularly by their Muslim neighbors. This identification is problematic, and in short, unsupported by the evidence. On the simplest level it should probably be understood as merely a form of anathema commonly used in the polemics of various religious traditions against their ideological competitors. The Zoroastrians may have associated the peacock with Ahriman,<sup>10</sup> which could have played a role in their diatribes against the Yezidis' pre-Islamic predecessors.

In later times, the Yezidis' views on Satan can probably be connected to the teaching of Shaykh 'Adi, who—like many other Sufi masters from Hallaj to 'Adi's own contemporary, Ahmad Ghazali—portrayed the fallen angel Eblis (Satan) as the ultimate lover of God, unwilling to prostrate himself before Adam and prepared to suffer expulsion from

Paradise as the price of his singular devotion. Thus, while they cannot be said to worship Satan, the Yezidis observe a respectful taboo on naming him. In the end, what outsiders perceive as the Yezidis' reverence for evil may in fact stem from their notion that good and evil are equally necessary, one not being possible without the other.

## THE YARESAN

While there are many similarities between the Yezidis and the Yaresan, another, ostensibly Sufi-related group existing among the Kurds of Iran and Iraq, the major difference would seem to be that while the Yezidis are not considered and do not consider themselves to be Muslim, the Yaresan are seen as a heterodox sect within Shi'ite Islam, even though its members do not observe Islamic rituals.<sup>11</sup> They are also egalitarian in their social structure, unlike the Yezidis, who have a firmly established caste system. Reflecting their differences in geographical distribution, the Yaresan speak mainly southern Kurdish (Gurani) as opposed to the Yezidis who mostly speak the northern Kurmanji dialect. The Yaresan are centered in the regions of Luristan and Kermanshah, with some small communities in northeastern Iraq, where they are known as the Kaka'i. Their total population is unknown, but is estimated at anywhere from one to seven million.<sup>12</sup> Traditionally, the Yaresan, like the Yezidis, did not accept converts or intermarriage. More recently, however, the Elahi branch of the Ahl-e Haqq has begun to welcome initiates willing to "entrust [their] head" (*sar sepordan*) to a Yaresan master (*seyyed*).

The hereditary priesthood is divided among eleven "Spiritual Households" (*khāndān*), each of which is led by its own *seyyed*. The initiation ritual itself is seen as a renewal of the primordial contract between God and the "eternal master," named as Jebra'il but considered to have returned in a number of incarnations, most notably one known as Benyamin. This primordial contract, of course, suggests an ancient precedent connected with Mithra.

The Yaresan have historical affinities with a number of extremist Shi'ite movements (*ghulāt*) but began to take on their present form in the late fourteenth/early fifteenth century under the leadership of Sultan Sohak (Eshāq), whose followers believed him to be an incarnation of God. Mehrdad Izady claims that Sultan Sohak can be identified with Aži Dahāka, the demon-king Zahhāk of Iranian mythology. Izady considers the latter to be a historical figure, specifically the last Median king Ršti-vegā, known to the Greeks as Astyages, maternal grandfather of Cyrus the Great. He believes that this "historical" Aži Dahāka—whose name, it will be recalled, gets transformed into the Persian word for "dragon"—became demonized at the beginning of the Achæmenid period by a Zoroastrian priesthood allied with Iran's new Persian ruling class.<sup>13</sup>

The Yaresan resemble other Sufi orders in a number of respects. These include absolute devotion to one's master, performance of mantras (*zeker*), music and dance to induce ecstasy, and the notion of spiritual perfection by stages. What is most distinctive about the Yaresan view is that this process can take many lifetimes, as explained on the group's website:

It is obvious . . . that such a tremendous task cannot be accomplished in just one lifetime. In His mercy, therefore, God has allotted each soul one thousand lives to achieve the ultimate goal. In His justice, however, this limit is the same for all souls and cannot be extended, although it is possible, and certainly beneficial, to reach the task in less than a thousand lives.<sup>14</sup>

As has been noted in previous chapters, belief in metempsychosis is found in a number of earlier Iranian religious expressions. The recurrence of this and other beliefs has led certain scholars to imagine they represent some kind of unity among a wide range of Iranian sects, overlooking their sometimes dramatic differences. For example, Hamzeh'ee identifies egalitarianism, nativism, millenarianism, and dualism as the central features of the Yaresani religion, remarking that "these were exactly the main features of many Iranian social movements of the past."<sup>15</sup> He includes not just the Kurdish sects under discussion but also others such as the Mazdakites and the Babakites, Isma'ili Shi'ites including the Qarmatians, the Horufis—in short, the full gamut of Iranian heterodox movements. Membrado would remove millenarianism from this list, however, since as she points out, the existing Yaresan texts "are more focused on the fate of the individual soul than on the collective advent of the end of time . . . There exist very few texts on this latter aspect, which doesn't seem to preoccupy the [Yaresan] to a degree that would justify characterizing them as a millenarian movement."<sup>16</sup>

Indeed all these various sects can be shown to have certain shared elements, but to draw from this the conclusion that they all somehow represent expressions of a single "original" Iranian religion would surely be overstating the case. A more cautious approach would admit the widely attested continuity of a broad range of ancient Iranian features, without necessarily attributing to them any kind of meaningful coherence.

## **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN THE YEZIDIS AND THE YARESAN**

Nevertheless, among all the above-mentioned groups the Yezidis and the Yaresan show the most easily visible common traits. The centrality of the bull sacrifice, which is found in both traditions, has already been

mentioned, as has the belief in a divine heptad and in reincarnation (referred to by both groups as “changing the shirt”). Other similarities include the existence of a hereditary priesthood, a three-day fast in mid-winter, and the use of sacred musical instruments to accompany recitations of their holy texts. Both forbid their men to shave their facial hair, possibly a reflection of ancient Iranian notions that dead hair is impure. The two traditions have an institution by which every individual is required to enter into a contract with a “spiritual brother” (or sister) who will testify on their behalf on the Day of Judgment.<sup>17</sup> This notion is also found in the Avesta, and since it involves a contract, recalls Mithraism as well.

The cosmologies of the two sects are remarkably similar, suggesting that they reflect an ancient Iranian origin myth which differs from that found in Zoroastrianism and may predate it. In their shared version, the Creator first makes a pearl which contains all future creation. He then brings forth the divine heptad, with whom he establishes a contract (cf. *miḡra*), according to which the principal figure of the heptad is designated as being in charge of the world.

The following excerpts from a Yezidi hymn provide some glimpses of their creation myth:

O Lord, in the world there was darkness,  
There were neither mice nor snakes.  
You brought it to life for the first time  
Flowers almost burst from it.  
...  
Earth and sky existed  
The world was wide, without foundation;  
There were neither men nor animals.  
You yourself brought order to it.  
In the ocean there was only a pearl  
—It did not progress, it did not progress—  
You quickly gave it a soul,  
You made your own light manifest in it.  
...  
Our Lord, you are merciful  
You brought four elements for us.  
...  
One is Water, one is Light,  
One is Earth, one is Fire.  
...  
Between Adam and the Seven Mysteries there is a strong barrier.  
The Seven Mysteries circled around and came overhead.  
The shape of Adam had remained without movement.  
They said, “O soul, why do you not enter it?”<sup>18</sup>

In the Yaresan version of the creation myth, two of the seven original angels (*haftan*) are transformed into a lion and a bull; the earth is set upon the horns of the bull, the lion stands upon the bull's back, and the heavens upon the back of the lion. The bull, for its part, stands upon the back of a white stone which rests upon the back of a huge fish in the primordial ocean. This cosmological structure, or variations on it, is immediately recognizable to anyone with a basic knowledge of Iranian mythology. Indeed, to this day there is a folkloric notion among Iranians that at the precise instant of the New Year (*tabvîl-e sâl*), the bull tosses the world from one horn to the other and the fish wiggles. In this way popular culture explains the frequency of springtime earthquakes in Iran.

The primordial sacrifice of a bull, which follows upon the process of creation, is another basic feature of the common Iranian mythology. But in contrast to Zoroastrianism, which attributes this act to the evil deity, Ahriman, both the Yezidis and the Yaresan see it as a positive occurrence because it makes possible the generation of subsequent life. Since in the Vedic creation story this primordial sacrifice is also seen as beneficial, Kreyenbroek proposes that the Zoroastrian version must be a later innovation, with Mithra having been the original sacrificer.<sup>19</sup> Mehrdad Bahar (who, as noted above, sees the Kurdish sects as being essentially Mithraic in character) reaches a similar conclusion.<sup>20</sup> The Yaresan refer to their sacrifices as "making green"; that is, ensuring fertility and regeneration.

The Yezidis and the Yaresan each consider themselves to be uniquely privileged within creation. The Yezidis see themselves as being descended from Adam, with the rest of humanity descending, disgustingly, from Eve. The Yaresan consider that they are created from "yellow soil," in contrast to other races, destined for damnation, which are made from black. Interestingly, while the Yaresan today refer to the first human couple as Adam and Eve, formerly they used the Zoroastrian names Mašyā and Mašyānē.<sup>21</sup>

The two groups share a dualistic view of the cosmos which is closer to Zurvanism than Zoroastrianism, in that they see good and evil as coming from the same source. Both consider evil to be a necessary counterpoint to good, and refrain from insulting Satan who is conceptualized as the Peacock Angel, Malak Tāvus.

Recent years have provided an additional, unfortunate parallel between these two Kurdish sects in the form of violent persecutions at the hands of their Muslim neighbors. For the Yaresan in Iran this has come mainly from government agents, while for the Yezidis in Iraq the perpetrators have mostly been Sunni extremists. In Iran many Yaresan have been imprisoned by the authorities on various pretexts, while in Iraq the Yezidis have been the subject of mass murders.

In both countries these persecutions have involved the destruction of holy sites.

Given the theory outlined above, according to which the Yezidis and the Yaresan can be seen as preserving a version of Iranian religion that predates Zoroastrianism and may have been historically hostile to it, it is interesting that for the past several decades a number of Yezidis have sought to identify themselves as Zoroastrian. Contacts have been established with Indian Parsis, and in France and Germany there are associations of “Yezidi-Zoroastrians.” Predictably, conservative Parsis have reacted with hostility to these developments.<sup>22</sup>