

Cyrus the Great was no Zoroastrian.

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Cyrus the Great does not make mention of Ahura Mazda in any of his inscriptions. In fact many of his inscriptions betray a sense of plurality that is not found in the texts of later kings of the Achaemenid dynasty. A very famous inscription of his illustrates this. This is the Cyrus Cylinder, found in Babylon, which contains a decree justifying his rule in the city of Babylon. In it he relates how Marduk, the local god of Babylon and chief god of Babylonia, appointed him to be king over Babylon. Later in the text he commands that temples be rebuilt and the various local cults be started up again. He then asks that these gods bless him. This text has a parallel in Ezra 1:1-4 in the Hebrew Bible. The portion of the text reads: "May all the gods whom I settled in their sacred centers ask daily of Bel that my days may belong, and may they intercede for my welfare. May they say to Marduk, my lord, As for Cyrus, the king who reveres you, . . ." ¹

This inscription betrays in Cyrus a plurality which the later Achaemenid kings rejected. In this inscription he invokes Marduk and Bel, a title for Marduk, to bless him, and mentions a number of other gods. Mary Boyce, once again trying to fit this text into her interpretation of the Achaemenid kings's religion has observed, "Doctrinally, it is impossible to reconcile his acknowledgment of alien great gods with his own acceptance of Ahura Mazda as the one true God." ²

Impossible, indeed. This is actually part of the reason for supposing for a later Zarathustra, because there is no textual evidence for his existence or his religion until after the reign of Cyrus the Great, in the mid sixth century b.c.e. Cyrus does not seem to be a worshipper of Ahura Mazda, at least not exclusively, nor does he seem to be an adherent of the teachings of Zarathustra.

Egypt is an interesting case for the discussion of the religion of the Achaemenid kings, as both Cambyses and Darius were installed as Pharaoh with, at least initially, all the related religious associations. Cambyses, the Persian king between Cyrus and Darius, only ruled for seven years, and appears to have been very involved in the Egyptian religion. Pierre Briant observes that Cambyses had a particularly strong sense of devotion towards Neith, an Egyptian goddess, including making donations to build her a temple. ³

Darius I, interestingly enough, also seems to have had some connection to the Egyptian religion, in that his cartouche has been found in Egyptian temples. ⁴ However, in general, the rule of Persians was not positive for the Egyptian gods and the priesthoods that maintained their cults. Quite the contrary, in fact, Lisbeth Fried has argued that all foreign religions and religious observances were tools of the Persian state, observing that "Persian rule had a strongly negative impact on the growth, development and autonomy of Egyptian temples." ⁵

However, this discussion gets more complicated with Darius, one of the most powerful kings of his line, and a strong devotee of Ahura Mazda. The first mention of Ahura Mazda in a royal inscription dates to the reign of Darius, and the primary god he mentions is Ahura Mazda. ⁶

Other gods are mentioned, but only in secondary usage. That Darius viewed Ahura Mazda as the premiere and the greatest god is clear from his

inscriptions. One of the most famous of these is the Behistun Inscription, in which he describes the strength of his empire and of his reign. There is throughout his inscriptions a great ideological element including his divine kingship and "insisting especially on the privileged protection of Ahura Mazda." For example he claims that "By the grace of Ahuramazda"⁷

I am the king; Ahuramazda brought the kingdom to me."⁸

Here we can clearly see that Darius portrays his kingship as a divine gift from god Ahuramazda.

There are evidences from classical sources for Darius's adherence to a religious system same as Zoroastrianism. One of these includes a recognition of ritual purity and the impurity found from dead bodies. Herodotus records a story, and although he gives his standard anti-Persian spin on it, it is easy to see contained within it the idea of ritual purity. A certain Babylonian queen insisted, upon her death, on being entombed over a gate into the city of Babylon. It is recorded that Darius I was squeamish about passing under the gate for reasons not given by Herodotus.¹⁸

We can assume that it was part of his religious devotions that made him squeamish, as it is unlikely a warrior king was overly upset over the mere presence of a corpse.

For Darius, Ahuramazda was the supreme god, the highest and holiest of beings, a god worshiped in his inscriptions with a singular fervor, similar to that found by the Hebrew prophets in the Hebrew Bible. He praises Ahura Mazda saying, "A great god is Ahuramazda who created this earth, who created yonder heaven, who created man, who created peace for man, who made Darius king."⁹

There seems to be a logical progression from one thought to the next. Thus first, Ahuramazda creates heaven and earth, then he creates man, and then he creates peace for man. How is it that he creates peace for man? He makes Darius the king. Here we have both a compelling piece of propaganda as well as an interesting statement of Darius's fervent belief in his appointment by Ahura Mazda and his willingness to serve him.

It has been argued that one of the purposes of the Achaemenid kings in the spreading of their Persian Empire was to establish Zoroastrianism as the state religion and to spread it abroad throughout the Near East.¹⁰

Even with the strength of Darius's conviction in Ahura Mazda as discussed above, this seems to be unlikely, especially since the kings subsequent to Cyrus followed his policy of official religious tolerance, as observed in the above discussion of the Cyrus Cylinder. According to the book of Ezra, in the Hebrew Bible, Darius I renewed Cyrus's proclamation and continued his policy toward the Jews living in the Persian province of Yehud (Ezra 6:1-12). Once again quoting Boyce, "it is impossible to reconcile his acknowledgment of alien great gods with his own acceptance of Ahuramazda as the one true God."¹¹

1. Cyrus Cylinder (COS 2.124, 3 I 4 _I 6)> trans. Mordechai Cogan

2. Mary Boyce, A History of Zoroastrianism, vol. 2 (Leiden: Brill, 1982), 65.

3. Briant, *Cyrus to Alexander*, 473.
4. Lisbeth S. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King: Temple-Palace Relationships in the Persian Empire in Biblical and Judaic Studies*, vol. 10 (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2004), 106.
5. Fried, *The Priest and the Great King*, 106.
6. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, 2.103.
7. In Old Persian the divine nam-e of Ahura Mazda is written as a single word.
8. Darius the First, DiB 1.11- 12, as quoted in A.V. Williams Jackson and Louis H. Gray, "The Religion of the Achaemenid Kings. First Series. The Religion According to the Inscriptions," *Journal of the Oriental Society*, vol. 2, *Index to the Journal of the American Oriental Society*, vols. 1-20 (1900): 162.
9. Darius, DNa, in Jackson, "Religion of Achaemenid Kings," 162.
10. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol-2.49.
11. Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism*, vol-2.65.