

Cooking up for a Storm: Some Preliminary Remarks concerning Zoroastrian and Jewish Domesticity

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For Carmen

Fire and heat provide modes of explanation in the most varied domains, because they have been for us the occasion for unforgettable memories, for simple and decisive personal experiences. Fire is thus a privileged phenomenon which can explain anything... It lives in our heart. It lives in the sky... Among all phenomena, it is really the only one to which there can be attributed the opposing values of good and evil. It shines in Paradise. It burns in Hell. It is gentleness and torture. It is cookery and it is apocalypse...

Gaston Bachelard

No historian disputes the vast contribution of both Zoroastrianism and Judaism to our shared human consciousness. Although not classified as missionary religions, both assisted and to a certain degree still assist in the construction of the ways by which human beings have imagined themselves to be. They even go about it in a similar vein. In what seems to be a striking contrast to other archaic religions in which the believer was expected to maintain the given cosmic order, the Zoroastrian and Jew are involved in transforming it through proper thoughts and appropriated deeds.¹ In turn, those thoughts and deeds provide us with the locus for what became the cardinal creed-like affirmation for the two traditions - the virtue of setting apart. To a certain degree, this setting, or in other words, holiness through separation, haunts my entire discussion.

Discussions in the history of religions tend to concentrate on the Great Tradition where domesticity or the little tradition has but a faint voice.² Often grouped with other issues that 'deal' with women and religion, discussions concerning domesticity seems to be even further marginalized within this cluster of academic discourse, as most studies to date engage either with the role of the female in the institutionalized/crowd-oriented religion or with exceptional women who have broken away from tradition. Other studies have taken the rather troubled road by constructing matrilineal genealogies or elaborating on the theme of the goddess and her demise within a hierarchical and patriarchal order.³ Domestication, which deals with the lives of real women and their everyday tasks, is therefore a new domain for the academic inquiry. There is virtually nothing on the importance of domesticity for the understanding of contemporary crisis within Zoroastrianism. Shahin Bekhradnia, in a recently published article, writes of the crucial role domesticity has played for the continuation of tradition. Although according to him it is not only within the women's configuration

¹ For some striking similarities between Zoroastrian and Jewish notions regarding the apocalypse and cosmic order, see N. Cohn, *Cosmos, Chaos and the World to Come: the ancient roots of apocalyptic faith*, New Haven 1993, ch. 13.

² The term 'Great Tradition' refers in this paper to a scibal culture and is taken from R. Redfield, *Peasant Society and Culture*, Chicago, 1956, ch. 3.

³ Though they do this with all the trappings of feminist and post-feminist critique they still provide us with, to name a few, invaluable tools such as intertextuality and the ethics of difference. Some of the famous discussions, however, seem to maintain a condescending and ethnocentric approach; as e.g., J. Kristeva, *About Chinese Women*, London, 1977.

of religion, domestication is mainly women, who because of their exclusion from positions of power, seek to affirm and transfer their beliefs through a variety of occupations such as cooking and charity. A fine example of the work in the domain of women's religion is addressed in Susan Starr Sered on the Lives of Elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem. In her book, she points to the overwhelming lacuna of an analytical approach towards the subject⁴ In a modest way, this paper tries to address this lack by locating some of the issues which arise in discussing the encounter between the Jewish and Persian religious traditions. However, I would like to begin with a few words of caution.

When one approaches Zoroastrian and Jewish traditions, their own relative marginalization as a whole has to be reckoned with, and this is coupled with another and perhaps more sinister feature. Both living traditions gained the double-edged designation of 'origins', or wellsprings of subsequent culturo-religious developments. Whilst Judaism was entombed as the mother of Christianity and Christianlike traditions, Zoroastrianism found itself entangled with Romantic and neo-Romantic movements of the so-called secularized West. Modernity, with its infamous turn towards the subject, used these traditions first to exotify and later to appropriate them for its diverse political configurations. This process of fossilizing a living tradition can be found in most scholarly and semi-scholarly works on both religions. But it would be highly misleading to blame only modernity and its vicissitudes. Some of the responsibility for the solidification of the two belief-systems lies deep within these traditions themselves and their reluctance, speaking of some strands within the Jewish realm, to accommodate certain changes. Another difficulty regarding the relationship between the two aforementioned traditions is the two extreme positions taken by some scholars over the question of influences. While some works observe an overwhelming influence from the Persian tradition on to the Judaic, other works ignore the Persian effect altogether and allow only for an organic and internal growth within Judaism. Other scholars, although admitting some influence, tend to be inflicted with the bias of Eurocentrism. This bias would lead to a 'reading' of Jewish history through Graeco-Roman eyes although most of the developments in formative Judaism took place within or along the borders of the Persian Empire. Still other problems concerning any comparative studies between the two traditions arise from the inherent difficulties in the study of each of the religions. Persian literature, for example, reaches us in a quite fragmentary state and it is almost impossible to reconstruct some of its more important stages, let alone conduct an inquiry into influences and movements of communication. Lastly, the danger of over-generalization should be mentioned. Apropos the domestic scene, in most known societies purity laws and the segregation of female members of the community form part of the culture. As a result it would be highly mistaken to imply an all-in-all uniqueness of the Persian and/or the Jewish situation, and an awareness of womanhood in most other traditions should be kept in mind throughout the paper.⁵

Biblical Encounters between the Jewish and Persian Traditions

Judaic reflections on the multifaceted encounter with the Persian traditions is given in several books of the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps the most striking of all is Cyrus' attribute as God's anointed, a term later used among the Messianic formulae. Cyrus' double gift to the Jewish people, by both putting an end to the Babylonian captivity and his permission to re-build the House of God, is sacred. Indeed, it has remained without parallel in Jewish history! And yet, in a similar fashion to all gifts, this one, too, is shrouded in mystery. Instead of addressing the political reasons behind the ruler's

⁴ S. Bekhradnia, "The Decline of Zoroastrian Priesthood and its Effect on the Iranian Zoroastrian Community in the Twentieth Century", in *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 23/1 (1992): 37-47. S. Starr Sered, *Women as Ritual Experts: the religious lives of elderly Jewish women in Jerusalem*, New York, 1992, p. 7.

⁵ For a brief summary on the problems regarding any comparative study between the Jewish and Persian tradition and any possible influences see: S. Shaked, "Iranian Influences on Judaism: First Century B.C.E. to Second Century C.E.", in W.D. Davies and L. Finkelstein (eds.), *The Cambridge History of Judaism: vol. 1: Introduction: the Persian period*, Cambridge, 1984, pp. 308-325.

decision, the writer of the Biblical event chose to rely on the recounting of Cyrus' dream-like awakening. The narrator's choice of language achieves two significant results: first, the re-establishment of the link between Cyrus and the dreams of two other world leaders who have assisted in shaping Jewish history, Pharaoh and Nebuchadnezzar; and second, the introduction in a narrative form of the chief ideological idiom for the return to the ancestral homeland.⁶ Yet, apart from these two inter-textual connections, we find in the books of Chronicles and Ezra a stroke of editorial genius, with the double appearance of the dreamlike awakening serving as a literary device known in Biblical scholarship as a frame. This dream-frame, which both opens Ezra (1:1) and closes Chronicles (2 Chron. 36:22[-3]) and thus the Biblical redaction of Ezra's well-hidden religious reformation, serves to gloss any difficulties that might arise due to some of his innovations.⁷

In comparison to the well-documented state of the theological revolution in Judaism after the loss of the Second Temple, little is known of the revolution which occurred with its construction. As they currently rest within the Biblical text itself, the Ezriatic innovations seem, before the undisciplined eye, to present a mere continuation of the older tradition rather than the creating of a new set of references. This could be the result of their form, obscuring the multi-layered nature of his innovations, since one of Ezra's first moves was to change the Hebrew script from the older version to a more square-like one, in the Babylonian rather than the Canaanite style. His changes, however, were more than merely grammatical. Being a scribe (סופר) he was the first to implicate a system of numbering words and pointing to the difference between written text (כתיב) and oral reading (קרי). Regarding the priestly role Ezra went even further by abolishing the Urim and Thumim and enshrining the role of the sacred books as the first reference guide for the Jewish tradition. In addition, he warned against and discouraged the tradition of marrying women outside the religion, and affirmed the already established gap between Jews and non-Jews. The Biblical evidence is, as always, silent on the possible influences of Persian or Babylonian religions on Ezra's innovations. His formulations are perceived as a natural growth of captivity and return. However, some possible inter-cultural relations both of rejection and acceptance through transformation can be observed in some chapters in the complex poetics of Deutero-Isaiah.

The most celebrated passage from Deutero-Isaiah in connection with Persian-Jewish relation is the one referring to Cyrus as God's anointed. Perhaps this reference is due more to later Judaic and Christian messianic formulation than to the character of the Persian ruler himself. However, on reflecting back to the Biblical narrative and without taking away from Cyrus' political talent, it is not an uncommon thing to attribute world leaders with religious connotations. Perhaps even more so since the Davidic kingship was in reality being replaced by a priestly and scribal order. Further, this attribute is given to Cyrus in a context where some of the Persian religious practices and in particular the fire ritual are being condemned. Yet, condemnation is always after the act, and within the same book one finds some Persian influences, as Shaul Shaked is quick to note, in the language of addressing and describing God's actions.

When we move back to the subject of domesticity, there is not much, at least on the surface, to work with. However, it is easy to note the relations Ezra makes between the community of priests and cultic purity in relation to women. Again, in a similar fashion to all his other innovations, Ezra

⁶ On the place of the dream in the Biblical narrative and its variety of usages including the theme of apocalypse, see R. Lewin(-Broit), 'Crossing the Dream or Dreaming the Cross: A typography of Conversion in Roman North Africa' (paper delivered to XXII Incontro di studiosi dell' antichità cristiana, Augustinianum, 7 May 1993), Rome 1993. For the dream as an ideological idiom in Second Temple Judaism, see A. Agus, *The Binding of Isaac and Messiah: law, martyrdom and deliverance in early Rabbinic religiosity*, New York, 1988, ch. 4.

⁷ An interesting reminder of the possible problems arising out of Ezra's religious reformation can be seen through the certain resentment held towards him among Yemenite Jewry, one of the oldest Jewish communities which claims its origins in king Solomon's times. [Note for clarification that Ezra 1 begins the third last book of the Hebrew Bible or Tanakh and closes 2 Chronicles the very last book. Eds.]

does not operate outside the already given tradition as presented in the book of Leviticus. His role is simply to facilitate and re-apply the traditions after the Exilic period. It might have been seamless web, to use Hart's legal terminology, if for one word. This word is *Dat* (דַּת) which appears several times in Aramaic and only once in Hebrew in the book of Ezra and which was to be of crucial significance for the whole of Jewish history. *Dat* is a difficult term, not the least because it crosses the boundaries between Hebrew and Aramaic. Its origins are obscure and its usage is limited to only three books in the Bible: Ezra, Daniel and Esther, where it appears in relation to women. In Hebrew, the term appears only twenty-one times, twenty in Esther and once in Ezra, and these only in connection with the Persian court. In addition to the difficulties associated with a term of limited usage, *Dat* presents us with a different reflection on 'Religion' than we find, for example, in Latin and Arabic. While in Latin and Latin-derived languages *religio* denoted the bringing together of at least two components and the Arabic *din* points to a legalistic-judgemental formulation, the word *Dat* simply signifies a distinction, and in later Judaism will be used in connection with the marital bond and in association with the female members of the congregation. And it is perhaps within this context that the affinities between Judaism and Zoroastrianism become so suspiciously close. But before addressing this subject, the curious book of Esther commands our attention.

Within the Jewish calendrical year, the book, or rather, scroll of Esther, belongs to the festal readings. It is read during the festival of Purim, the holiday associated with the cult of Esther and Mordecai. Its importance to our discussion, apart from the one already mentioned in connection with the word *Dat*, is multifaceted. First, it gives an interesting and unique perspective regarding the Persian court. Whether fictional or not, the book presents a complex political mechanism of governing an empire of an enormous size and from its capital where diverse groups of people meet and conduct their affairs. It is also a book on women's politics in a male-oriented environment and it celebrates female ingenuity and manipulations. At the very least, it adds to our rather poor information regarding Persian court life.⁸ It is quite a curious book in which the narrative, at least from a structuralist perspective, has the quality of a many-coloured patchwork.⁹ It tells the amazing story of the salvation of the Jews in the Persian empire through the working of an uncle and his orphaned niece. The scroll is written in Hebrew but contains many words in Persian and it has the rather strange quality of not specifying God's name even once throughout the whole narrative. In exchange for this 'omission' a variety of religious activities are recalled, such as the solving of dreams, fasting, reading the history of kingship, and dice-throwing (קַוָּוָּ). In addition to these, some other religious activities which are prefaced by the term *Dat* attract the attention of the reader in the Hebrew. Habituated to relate *Dat* to the relations between God's commandments and the individual within a communal setting, it is quite surprising that in the book of Esther the term is used in other connections. These are, generally speaking, associated with drinking in the presence of the king, royal communications which are despatched directly from the palace, concubines' relations to the monarch, and women's affairs. All of which reveal the inner workings of the domestic affairs inside the Persian palace which was, politically speaking, located at the centre of the empire. Of all of these matters, it is the last that will be picked up by Rabbinical Judaism after the loss of the Second Temple by the hands of Persia's arch enemy - Rome.

The Loss of the Temple and Formative Judaism

In sharp contrast to Christian polemical literature, the loss of the Temple for the majority of Jewish thinkers did not mean the loss of God's providence regarding the his people. According to the

⁸ On the complexity of working on Persia and women therein, see H. Sancisi-Weerdenburg, "Exit Attosa: images of women in Greek historiography on Persia", in A. Cameron and A. Kuhrt (eds.), *Images of Women in Antiquity*, London, 1983, pp. 20-33.

⁹ An excellent example of modernist Biblical scholarship on the book of Esther is provided by E. Bickerman, *Four Strange Books in the Bible*, New York, 1967.

famous anecdote, Rabbi Akiba is depicted as being joyous when he sees the Temple's ruins. When he is asked about his seemingly strange behaviour, he replies that, after he has seen the first part of the prophecy, meaning destruction, being fulfilled, he has full belief that its latter half, redemption, would follow suit. However, as this anecdote clarifies, there was a need to develop a new way of thinking, or in other words, a new ideological framework to accommodate the different situation. In an important study on the social metaphors of Judaism at the times of the Dual Torah, Jacob Neusner lists a number of options, among which was the metaphor of the family as the metaphor for "Israel". With these we can begin to plot Judaism's shift towards still greater identity within domestic metaphors.

According to Neusner, rabbinic Israel inscribed itself especially in terms of genealogy. Children were expected to follow the example of their parents, and Genesis was read anew with as great an emphasis on how the *descendants* of patriarchs and matriarchs behaved as on the righteousness or behaviour of the earliest ancestral figures themselves. Against the Christians came the retort that, if they claimed to be 'Israel after the Spirit', Jews could rest on the truth of being 'Israel after the flesh', with any other than a genealogically-based claim to be Israel being seen to be spurious. Thus the family became the vital identifiable social identity, with Israel now more conceived as an Extended Family. The basic family (already extended by modern standards) contained within itself all the pressures of obligations and responsibilities that then spilled out into family-to-family relations, inter-village activity, and then care for All-Israel.¹⁰

At this point we see Judaism has moved on and the connections with Zoroastrianism have lessened because the focus of Jewish life has moved away from the courtly and more to a plain survivalism centred on resilient, smaller social configurations, with families playing a crucial role. Yet in this we can still reflect on some continuous glimmerings of prior Judaeo-Persian interactions. Within the book of Ezekiel, for example, written in the Exilic period, there emerges the conception of the Little or miniature Temple (cf. Ezek. 11:16). We started with a contemplation of the little in relation to the great, and now we return to it. The fact is that in Rabbinic Judaism the Little Temple became a crucial metaphor in discussing the religious significance of the *family*. Most of the material reflecting this is in the Babylonian *Talmud*, the *Talmud* more normative for Judaism than the Jerusalem one, and the *Talmud* significantly compiled under Zoroastrian rule until the coming of Islam. Under this rule, Jewry was also at work preserving its culture through the domestic sphere. This even reaches into the specifics of sexual behaviour. Domestic romance, for example, is often referred to under the old adage of the "unending honeymoon" between husband and wife because Israel's purity laws prevent them from becoming too 'familiar' with each other, this notion of unending honeymoon also betokening the continuing relationship between Israel and God.¹¹ Men and women are bound by covenant with God, yet in the nature of that relationship there is often estrangement. This reflects a wisdom: that one should be too familiar with God, and that estrangement engenders desire for God.¹² In more general terms, though, we conclude by agreeing with Goldberg and Rayner when they write

...it has been a major feature of Judaism that it is not only in the synagogue, but in the home, that daily prayer and study take place, the sabbath and festivals are celebrated, and the life-cycle events, from birth to death, are ritually observed.

To enter an observant Jewish home is therefore to enter a place hallowed by 'the practice of the presence of God', a fact visually manifested by the ritual objects and sacred books to be found within it, and by the so-called *mezuzah* ('doorpost') ... (Deuteronomy 65:4-9

¹⁰ 10 For the definition of social metaphor and full discussion see J. Neusner, "Israel: Judaism and its Social Metaphors", in *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 55/2 (1987): 331-361.

¹¹ N. Polzer, "Ideologies of *Taharat ha-Mishpahah*", *Australian Journal of Jewish Studies* 10/1-2 (1996): esp. 39.

¹² Cf. G. Scholem, *Major Trends in Jewish Mysticism*, New York, 1972

and 11:13-21)... affixed to the right-hand post of the main entrance and of the living-room doors.¹³

These are the signs of a 'Peculiar People' maintaining its identity, but ones which carry further implications about Jewish relations with other traditions; and in this article we have seen both points of mutuality and separation between the Judaism and Zoroastrianism that teach us of common quests and the need for respect between religions. There are certainly comparabilities to Jewish domestic life in traditional Zoroastrian households and these are obviously worthy of further investigation, and important for Women's Studies in Jewish and Persian cultures. Others will doubtless pick up from where I leave matters here.

¹³ D.J. Goldberg and R.D. Rayner, *The Jewish People: their history and their religion*, Harmondsworth, 1989 edn., p. 320.