

Devil Worshipers: the Yazidis

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The purpose of this paper is to give a brief account of the various theories put forward by scholars regarding the origins and history of the Yazidi sect. As we shall see later on, one theory derives them from Persia. There is also the Kurdish connection regarding the language of their sacred texts, in addition to the Iranian elements to be found in their religion - hence the reason for including this paper in this Seminar of Iranian Studies. This piece briefly outlines the scope and nature of the religion of the Yazidis, some of their outstanding features, their tenets and beliefs. Moreover, it throws light on some of the complicated ritual requirements of the religion of the Yazidis, and contains some extracts from their sacred books.

The Yazidis, or Azdis, frequently called "Devil Worshipers" are a small and obscure religious sect (numbering about 100,000) of western Asia. They are scattered in Syria and Southern Russia, but are concentrated chiefly in the mountains of Kurdistan and Sinjar Hills near Mosul in Northern Iraq.

Questions of Origin

The origins of this sect are very obscure. Its name and its beliefs are all matters of dispute and have been the subject of much discussion by numerous writers,¹ but no satisfactory solution of the problem has as yet been reached. The following are some of the theories put forward by scholars regarding the origin of the Sect:

- i) There are some who regard them as the remains of the Ancient Manichaeans or the descendents of the old Mardi who were an old sect who worshipped the principle of evil, and from them it is believed that the Yazidis inherited the devil worship.
- ii) It is perhaps surprising that no Syriac writer has ever spoken of the Yazidis, in spite of the fact that Syrian historians, both Nestorian and Jacobite, were always among them. The eleventh book of Theodore Bar-Kewani's *Scholia* contains interesting information about all the Pagan, Christian and Gnostic sects. If Theodore did not mention the Yazidis, it probably was because he had identified them with another sect. The ninth chapter of John Bar-Penkaye's book give us some information about all the Pagan divinities Eastern and Western, but he is utterly silent about the Yazidis, his neighbours.²

It is worth noting that the Syriac-speaking Christians in the villages near Mosul in Northern Iraq called the Yazidis *Daisanites* or followers of Bardesanes. One wonders whether this name shows that they are the partisans of the famous astrologer Bardesanes of Edessa, who, in the second century, played an important role in the history of Syriac literature. The daily worship which these Yazidis direct to the stars, to the sun and the moon, may perhaps throw some light on this appellation. It is written in the Yazidi books: "When they see the sun rise, they kiss the place where his rays first fall; they also kiss the spot where the moon first casts its rays and the one which last receives them".

- iii) Others assert that they are the descendents of Yazid ibn Mu'awiyah I (AD 680 - 683), the second Ummayyad Caliph.

¹ For a comprehensive bibliography on the subject of the Yazidis, see G. Awwad, *al-Maiajic 'an al-Yazidiyyah* in *al-Machince*, 63 (1969): 673-732. This gives an exhaustive list of works on the Yazidis in both Arabic and other languages.

² cf. A. Mingana, introducing *Sources Syriaques*, Leipzig, 1907, vol. 1, pt. 2, p. vii.

- iv) Some scholars have suggested that the name Yazidi is derived from the Persian “Yazdan” or “Yazd”, meaning “God” or “Good Spirit”, in opposition to Ahriman, the evil principle. This is perhaps the most probable view, bearing in mind the fact that they all today speak Kurdish, i.e., a Medo-Persian provincial dialect.

So much for the supposed origins of this mysterious Sect.

The Religion of the Yazidis

One of the central problems for students of the Yazidi religion concerns the origin of the two holy books of the Yazidis, the “Book of Revelation” and the “Black Book” - so named because in it mention is made of the descent of the Lord upon the Black Mountain. Both of these short scriptures are known in Arabic and Kurdish versions. Furlani considers that the language of the Kurdish texts is a mediaeval Kurdish dialect of a type not otherwise known.³ Internal evidence⁴ strongly suggests that it was translated from an Arabic original. However, comparison of the Kurdish text with the published Arabic version shows that it could not have derived from any of them,⁵ and we are therefore faced with the problems of whether the original Arabic text still exists, and if so where,⁶ and the exact status of the various published Arabic texts.

The religion of the Yazidis seems to consist of a confused medley of beliefs and legends overlaid with superstitions. Thus it includes old Pagan elements (including worship of the sun and the moon); Iranian elements (echoes of Persian dualism); Jewish elements (prohibition of certain foods); features from Christian sects, especially Nestorians (e.g. baptism, a kind of eucharist, breaking of bread, etc.); Muslim elements (circumcision, fasting, sacrifice, pilgrimage, Muslim inscriptions on tombs, etc.); Sabaeen (transmigration of souls), etc.

The Yazidis are regarded by Muslims as “apostates” from Islam and consequently the accounts given of them are often distorted. Their religion is centred around the shrine of a certain saint named Sheikh ‘Adi. He lived till the age of 90 years and died in AD 1160.

The Yazidis derive the origin of the human race from the same beginnings as the Jews, claiming that while Christians, Jews and Muslims were sprung from Adam and Eve, their own Patriarchs were the descendants of a certain Shadid, the son of Adam alone.

They believe in seven divine beings, one of whom came down to earth and created Adam and Eve, and all of whom descend in turn to rule the earth for 10,000 years, perform miracles and lay down laws for the human race.

The Holy Scriptures of the Yazidis

It would appear that the Yazidis, although of Kurdish race and speaking the Kurdish language, employ Arabic as their sacred language. This would explain the composition of the original sacred texts in the Arabic, rather than the Kurdish language.

The “Book of Revelation” contains five chapters, arranged like the *surahs* of the Qur’an in order of decreasing length. In all five chapters of this book the words of God are given in the first person, in contrast to the following “Black Book”, which records the acts of God in the third person.

In Chapter One of the “Book of Revelation” we find first of all the Yazidi doctrine of the nature of God, who is made to declare that he is the author of what “outsiders call evils”. The rest of this chapter deals with the exercise of the divine power. Chapter Two describes the omnipotence of God

³ G. Furlani, *Religione dei Yezidi. Testi religiosi dei Yezidi (Testi e documenti per la storia delle religioni, 3)*, Bologna, 1930, p. 63

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 63

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 63

⁶ G. R. Driver states that the original text of the “Book of Revelation” is kept in the Yazidi village of Ba’idn, and that of the “Black Book” in the village of Qasr ‘Izz al-Din, but qualifies this by remarking that there is some doubt as to their authority. See G.R. Driver, Notes on “The Religion of the Kurds”, in *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 2 (1921-23): 511. For further details of the location and condition of the two alleged original texts, see I. Joesph, “Yezidi Texts”, *The American Journal of Semitic Languages and Literatures* 25 (1909): 247, n.1; 248, n.2.

and mentions briefly the doctrine of the transmigration of souls. Chapter Three treats of the omnipotence of God, and begins with the unexplained statement that God guides without a scripture. Chapter Four contains a warning against outsiders, and enunciates a doctrine concerning the "corruption" of holy books very similar to that of the Muslims. Chapter Five is a short exhortation to the faithful.

The "Black Book" is not divided into chapters and is longer than the "Book of Revelation". The first half of it gives an account of the Creation, beginning with the creation of a white pearl and the Peacock Angel. There follows an account of the Fall (in which the forbidden comestible is wheat), and the creation of Eve *after* Adam has been driven from Paradise. This is followed by an obscure statement of the names of certain ancient kings who are claimed to have belonged to the Yazidi community. Next comes a statement of certain food taboos of the Yazidis, certain prohibitions connected with personal hygiene and finally certain verbal taboos. The discussion then reverts to the subject of ancient kings alleged to have been Yazidis, and the Book concludes with another account of the Creation, which diverges quite considerably from the first.

The Devil Cult

The Yazidis recognize an evil spirit of whom their dread is so great that they will not utter his name. This evil spirit or the Devil is represented by the bronze known as the "Malak Ta'us", i.e., King Peacock or the Peacock Angel. The chief symbol of the Peacock Angel is always kept with the great sheikh and is carried about with him wherever he may go. Other copies of this symbol, however, are carried in procession by the priests round the Yazidi districts in order to collect money through visiting houses, etc.

Satan, then, is believed to be the chief of the angelic host - all powerful and hereafter to be restored to the high celestial dignity from which he has fallen. He is so feared by the Yazidis to the extent that he is worshipped by them. They bow down to him and sing hymns to him.

According to their Holy Scriptures, next to Satan (or *Malak Ta'us*), but inferior to him are ranked six archangels who are held to exercise great influence over the world. They are: *Dardi'il*; *Israfil*; *Mikha'il*; *Jibra'il*; *Shamna'il*; *Nura'il*.

Christ also they regard as a great angel who took the form of a man, but they deny that he died on the cross, maintaining rather that he ascended into heaven without dying. They hold also that Muhammad, whom they consider to be a prophet of the Isma'ili sect, was inspired by God.

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In A.H. 1289 (1872 CE) the Ottoman Government made an attempt to conscript the Yazidis for military service. A petition was drawn up by the religious leaders of the sect and presented to a representative of the Ottoman Government. The fourteen points of this petition, which explain why the Yazidis had to refuse conscription into the army, give a good general picture of the complicated ritual requirements of the Yazidi religion. The following are some of these rituals:

- * According to the Yazidi religion it is incumbent upon every individual of them, great and small, women, girl and man, to visit three times every year the image of the Peacock Angel, from the beginning of the Byzantine month of April up to the end of it; from the beginning of the month of September up to its end; and from the beginning of the month of November up to its end; and if this is not performed as stated, i.e., if the Yazidi does not make such a visit, it constitutes infidelity.
- * It is necessary for every person and individual of the Yazidi sect to visit the grave of Sheikh 'Adi once every year, between the fifteenth of the month of September and the twentieth. If they do not carry this out it constitutes infidelity.
- * Every day every individual Yazidi, at sunrise precisely, must visit the place where the sun rises, no Muslim, Christian or Jew being able to see him. If he does not comply with this it constitutes infidelity.

- * Every Yazidi individual must every day kiss the hand of his “brother”, his “brother of the hereafter” i.e., the servant of the Mahdi, and the hand of his Sheikh and *Pir*. If he does not carry this out it constitutes infidelity.
- * A Yazidi cannot bear to listen to the praying of a Muslim because he says, “I take refuge with God from the Devil, who is worthy to be stoned!” If a Yazidi hears this, according to the rules of his religion it is incumbent upon him to kill the one who utters it, and if he cannot do that, to kill himself. If he does not act in this way he is accounted among them as an infidel.
- * When a Yazidi is dying his “brother of the hereafter”, his Sheikh, his *Pir* and a *Qawwal* must attend to recite over him three things: “Oh servant of the Peacock Angel! He dies in the faith of our Deity, namely the Peacock Angel, and dies in the faith of no other; and if any one come to you and say to you “Die thou in the faith of Islam!” or of the Christians or of the Jews or any other sect, do not give credence to them or believe in them. If you give credence or believe in a religion other than that of our Deity, you will die an infidel!”
- * If a Yazidi travels and remains in another country for an extended period, such as a year, on his return his wife is forbidden to him. And they give him no other wife. If they did so, it would constitute infidelity.
- * A Yazidi may not wear a dark blue garment under any circumstances. He may not comb himself with the comb of a Muslim or a Christian or a Jew or any other (non-Yazidi); nor may he shave his head with the razor of one of these above mentioned. But if necessity compels him, he must wash it with the water of Sheikh ‘Adi; to contravene this is infidelity.
- * There are many differences between what a Yazidi may eat and what may be eaten by other sects. A Yazidi may not eat fish; nor pumpkins, nor okras, nor beans, nor cabbage, nor lettuce, so that even a place which has been sown with lettuce is forbidden and unclean to them ... For these and other reasons it is not possible for a Yazidi to be a soldier.

Finally, the following extracts from the Yazidi sacred “Book of Revelation” and from their Principal Prayer may be quoted in order to throw some light on the scope and nature of the religion of the Yazidis, their tenets and beliefs: The Existent before all creatures was the Peacock Angel. He sent the servant of the Peacock to this world in order that he might set his chosen people apart and instruct them [to save them] from error. This was to be achieved first by [oral] tradition and then by means of this book of “Revelation”, which may not be read by outsiders.

I was, I exist now, and shall remain until eternity, ruling over creation, and managing the interests and affairs of all those who are in my possession. I quickly come to those who trust in me, and call upon me when in need. I am omnipresent, I am concerned in all the events which outsiders call evils, because they are not wrought in accordance with their wishes. Every age has a Director, appointed by my decree...

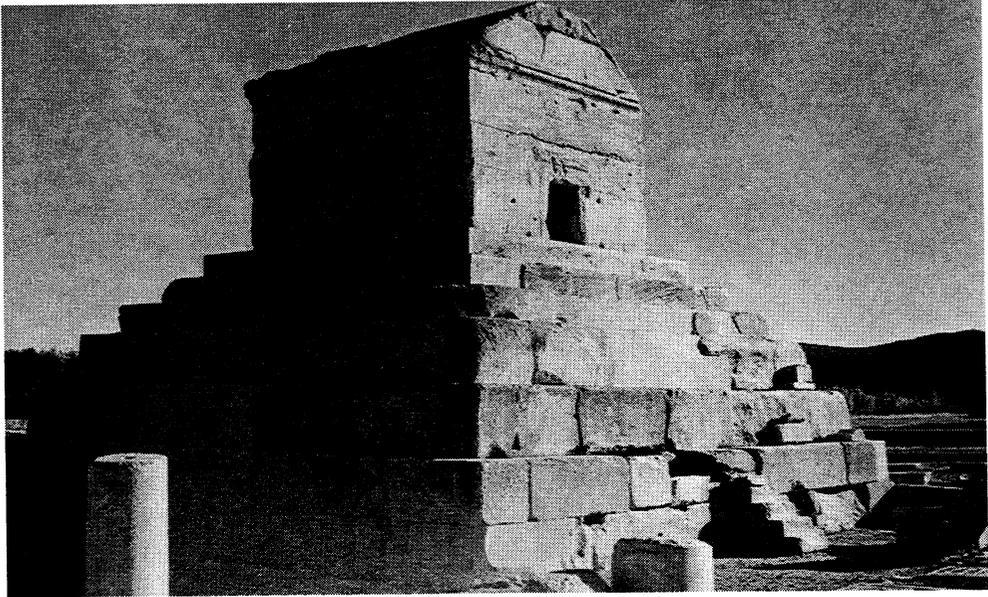
He who opposes me shall have regrets and be grieved. The other gods have no way of interfering with my work or of preventing me from [doing] whatever I have decreed ... I call attention to matters and instigate necessary activities in their seasons. I guide and teach those who follow my teaching. They find pleasure and joy in accord with me.

I recompense and I requite this progeny of Adam and [all the] different ways which I know. In my hand is dominion over the earth and above it and under it. I do not allow other worlds to clash. I do not impede their welfare, particularly of those who are my chosen people and obey me... I take away and I give. I enrich and I impoverish. I make happy and I make miserable according to circumstances and occasions, and there is not one who has the right to interfere with, or hinder, any of my dispositions. I bring pains and sickness to those who oppose me. The man who is attuned to me does not die like the rest of mankind. I permit no one to live in this lower world longer than the time which has been set by me. If I wish I send him a second and a third time to this world, or to another, by transmigration of souls ...

Honour my person and my image, because they will remind you of my ordinances and laws which you have neglected. Obey my servants and listen to the instruction they will give you in the knowledge of the Unseen which comes from me.

We will conclude with the the Principal Prayer of the Yazidis:

1. Amen, Amen, Amen!
2. Through the intermediation of Shams-ad-din,
 3. Fakhr ad-Din, Nasir-ad-Din
 4. Sajad ad-Din, Sheikh Sin (Husein),
 5. Sheikh Bakr, Kadir ar-Rahman.
6. Lord, thou art gracious, thou art merciful;
 7. Thou art God, king of kings and lands,
 8. King of joy and happiness,
 9. King of good possession (eternal life).
 10. From eternity thou art eternal.
11. Thou art the seat of luck (happiness) and life;
 12. Thou art lord of grace and good luck.
 13. Thou art king of jinns and human beings,
 14. King of the holy men (saints),
 15. Lord of terror and praise,
 16. The abode of religious duty and praise,
 17. Worthy of praise and thanks.
 18. Lord! Protector in journeys,
19. Sovereign of the moon and of the darkness,
 20. God of the sun and of the fire,
 21. God of the great throne,
 22. Lord of goodness.
23. Lord! No one knows how thou art.
24. Thou hast no beauty; thou hast no height.
25. Thou hast no going forth; thou hast no number.
 26. Lord! Judge of kings and beggars,
 27. Judge of society and of the world,
28. Thou hast revealed the repentance of Adam.
29. Lord, thou hast no house; thou hast no money;
 30. Thou hast no wings; hast no feathers;
 31. Thou hast no voice, thou hast no colour.
 32. Thou hast made us lucky and satisfied.
 33. Thou hast created Jesus and Mary.
 34. Lord, thou art gracious,
 35. Merciful, faithful.
36. Thou art Lord; I am nothingness,
 37. I am a fallen sinner,
 38. A sinner by thee remembered.
39. Thou hast led us out of darkness into light.
 40. Lord! My sin and my guilt,
 41. Take them and remove them.
 42. O God, O God, O God, Amen!



The Tomb of Cyrus



The Shrine of Hafiz in Shiraz