

Zoroastrianism and its Prophet Zoroaster: Where Zoroaster Communed with God?

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Zoroastrianism is one of the world's oldest religions. Zoroastrianism left a footprint in Iran many centuries before the arrival of Christianity (later established as the Church of the East/ Church of Persia) and Islam in this country. The Great Achaemenid Kings (550–330 BC) were followers of Zoroastrianism and supported its strengthening in their Empire.

However, only at the Sasanian period did Zoroastrianism become the official religion in Iran (Ērānšahr, at the time). The Sasanian King Shāpūr I (r. 239-270 CE), son of the Sasanian Empire founder Ardaxšīr I (r. 180–242 CE), proclaimed Zoroastrianism as the only official religion of the empire.

The essence of Zoroastrianism is that human beings must be on the truth (Avestan: *aša*) side, helping to support order, peace, righteousness and justice that principal God Ahura Mazdā (Avestan: *Ahuramazda*, Pahlavi: *Hormizd*) tries to maintain, while battling with the destructive spirit or evil Angra Manyu (Avestan: *Angra Ma'niiu*, Pahlavi: *Ahremen*).

There is a popular misinterpretation that Zoroastrians worshiped fire. However, the fire was a “tool” or “messenger” to communicate with Ahura Mazdā, creator and guardian of justice, and a friend of the just man. Zoroastrian magies (Pahlavi: *maguš*) or priests, as Igor Diyakonoff believed, were a specially trained tribe or caste of the Medes, who played a significant role in the Zoroastrian society, holding a significant power that the Shah could not ignore. Diyakonoff argued that the Medes (Medians) were the first to adopt Zoroastrianism, and then by the first Achaemenids.

The origin and development of Zoroastrianism are associated with a prophet (Avestan: *paygambar*) Zoroaster (Avestan: *Zarathuštra*, Greek, *Ζωροάστρης*/*Zōroastrēs*, Pahlavi: *zltw(h)št Zar(a)du(x)št*). His name in Avestan (the language of the sacred book “Avesta”) means the owner of yellow or golden (*zarat*) camels (*uštra*). His life and religious activity continue to be in the focus of historians.

Indeed, it is of great interest for scholars to identify when and where Zoroaster was born and where he came to preach. Truly, there are wide discussions among historians about when Zoroaster lived. Some scholars, such as Oktor Skjaervo, believe that Zoroaster lived 1700-1200 years before Christ. However, others, like Gherardo Gnoli, referring to Greek sources, argue that he lived around 300-500 years before the military expedition of Alexander of Macedon against the Achaemenid Empire.

Regarding Zoroaster's birthplace, some scholars, citing classical Greek sources, identify him as a Bactrian, mentioning him as Zoroaster the Magian, king of the Bactrians. However, others argue that he was from Balkh, which is now in Afghanistan. In the meantime, historians do not exclude that Prophet Zoroaster first appeared in western Iran, either in Atropatene (Greek: *Ἀτροπατηνή*, Old Persian: *Ātūrpatākān*, Pahlavi: *Ādurbādagān*) or in Media (Pahlavi: *Mada'ā*).

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Indeed, several classical sources name Zoroaster as a Mede (Median), placing him in Adarbījān or Media-Atropatene. They point out Urmia as Zoroaster's native place. Interestingly, Moses of Chorene (431 CE) mentions Zoroaster as "a Magian, the sovereign of the Medes."

The Bundahish (Middle Persian: *Bun-dahišn*(īh), "Primal Creation", a Pahlavi compilation based on Zoroastrian scriptures) mentions that his father's house stood near the river Darja/Darej (Pahlavi: *Dāraja*) that flows from Mount Sabalan/ Savalan in Ādarbījān (Atropatene) into the Aras (Araxes) river.

However, the Arabic writer Kazwini associates Zoroaster with the ancient city of Shīz or Ganzaka (Greek: Γάζακα), capital of Atropatene. Rawlinson and Minorsky identify Shīz with modern Takht-e Soleiman in Azerbaijan (Iran), where are the ruins of Ādur Gušnasp fire (now Azargoshnasp), one of the three Great Fires of ancient Iran. The Sasanians granted the rank of "cathedral" to the Ādur Gušnasp fire. The supreme Sasanian Magi Kardīr (mobedan mobed, priest of priests) was affiliated with the fire-temple of Ādur Gušnasp.

Next, the passage from Kazwini (quoted from Rawlinson) reads: "In Shiz is the fire- temple of Azerekhsh [Pahlavi: *Ādur Gušnasp/ Ādhar Gušnasp*], the most celebrated of the Pyraea of the Magi; in the days of the fire-worship, the kings always came on foot, upon pilgrimage. The temple of Azerekhsh is ascribed to Zeratusht, the founder of the Magian religion, who went, it is said, from Shiz to the mountain of Sebīlān and, after remaining there some time in retirement, returned with the Zend-Avesta, which, although written in the old Persian language, could not be understood without a commentary. After this, he declared himself to be a prophet."

According to Williams Jackson, speaking on Shīz in Ādarbījān, Kazwini continued: "Zarādusht, the prophet of the Magians, takes his origin from here (i.e., Ādarbījān). It is said that he came from Shīz. He went to the mountain Sabalān, separated from men."

Indeed, there is some evidence indicating that Zoroaster began to preach on the Mt. Sabalan/ Savalan (Pahlavi: *Sebīlān*, 4811 m). The mount is in the modern Ardabil county of Azerbaijan in Iran. The people of Azerbaijan also call Mt. Soltan Savalan, describing it as a holy mountain.

Remarkably, Jackson indicates that the Avesta mentions a hill by the river Darja where Zoroaster communed with Ahura Mazdā. He argues that the hill (*zbarah*) or mountain (*gairi*) is Mount Sebīlān. According to him, the Avesta's Darja River is possibly the modern Darya

(?), which flows from Mt. Sebīlān into the Aras River (Araxes).

Interestingly, the Avesta mentions 16 perfect lands (*asah*) and countries (*šōiθra*), which Ahura Mazdā created for His people. Avestan Geography identifies Avesta's Iran Vej (Avestan: *Ayriianəm Vaējah*, Pahlavi: *Ērān-wēz*, "the area of the Aryans") with Atropatene [Azerbaijan].

Indeed, Jackson writes that the Bundahish directly connects Iran Vej (the holy land of Zoroastrianism where Zoroaster (Zarathushtra) was born and founded his religion there) with Atropatene: "*Ārān Vej pavan kōst-ī Ātūr-pātakān*."

However, James Darmesteter (a first translator of the Zend-Avesta) identifies the province Airyanem Vaeja (Iran Vej), or Eranweij, with Arran (nowadays known as Karabagh, present-day Azerbaijan).

Darmesteter translates the passage from Avesta Vendidad/ Vidēvdād (Fargard 1) as follows: "Ahura Mazda spake Zarathushtra, saying: The first of the good lands and countries which I, Ahura Mazda, created, was the Airyana Vaeja, by the Vanguhi Daitya." He comments that the river Vanguhi Daitya (Avestan: *Vaṇuhī Dāityā* "the good Dāityā") belongs to Arran, and it should be the Aras (Araxes) river.

Truly, the region of Arran (Pahlavi: *Ārān*), also known as Caucasian Albania, is the present-day Azerbaijan. The Pahlavi and Sasanian books introduced Airyanem Vaeja around Azerbaijan. Historians like James Darmesteter and Ernst Herzfeld believed that Airyanem Vaeja's location is Azerbaijan and around the Caucasus.

In the meantime, the Bundahish indicates that the river Darja/ Darej, near which stood the house of Zoroaster's father, had been in Iran Vej. In this regard, Jackson notes that the Bundahish likewise alludes to Zoroaster's first offering worship in Iran Vej. He provides Darmesteter's translation of the passage from the Avesta: "Zoroaster communed with Ahura Mazda on the high bank of the Darej, sitting (?) before the good Ahura Mazda... "

Next, Jackson states that "With regard to localizations, there is good ground for believing that Airan Vej (Avestan: *Ayriianəm Vaējah*) is to be identified in part at least with Ādarbījān, and that the ancient river Darej of the Avesta is identical with the modern Daryai. The Daryai Rūd (river) flows from Mt. Savalān (Sebīlān), in Ādarbījān, northward into the Aras River (Araxes)."

Intriguingly, Jackson provides importantly interesting details on Zoroaster's native place and his parents: "Oriental tradition seems to be fairly correct in

assigning, as his native land, the district of Atropatene or Ādarbajān, to the west of Media, or even more precisely the neighborhood about Lake Urumiah. There is ground, furthermore, for believing in the tradition which says that his father was a native of Ādarbajān, - a region of naphtha wells and oil fountains, - and that Zoroaster's mother was from the Median city of Ragha (Rai)."

He continues: "In the latter region probably Zoroaster was born and seems to have spent there the first part of his life, probably by the river Darja. It was there his religious meditations began. That account for his name being associated with all this territory Urmiah, Shīz, Mount Sebīlān."

Finally, Jackson concludes: "There is a great reason to believe that if, as seems most likely, Zoroaster was born in Atropatene, he was drawn toward the important city of Ragha, somewhat perhaps as Christ went to Jerusalem."

In sum, Azerbaijan's Mount Savalan is one of the sacred places in Zoroastrianism where, according to some significant sources, Prophet Zoroaster received a divine revelation. The mount may be the Avestan "Mount of the Holy Communicants." Nietzsche mentions that Prophet Zoroaster ascended Mount Savalan.

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