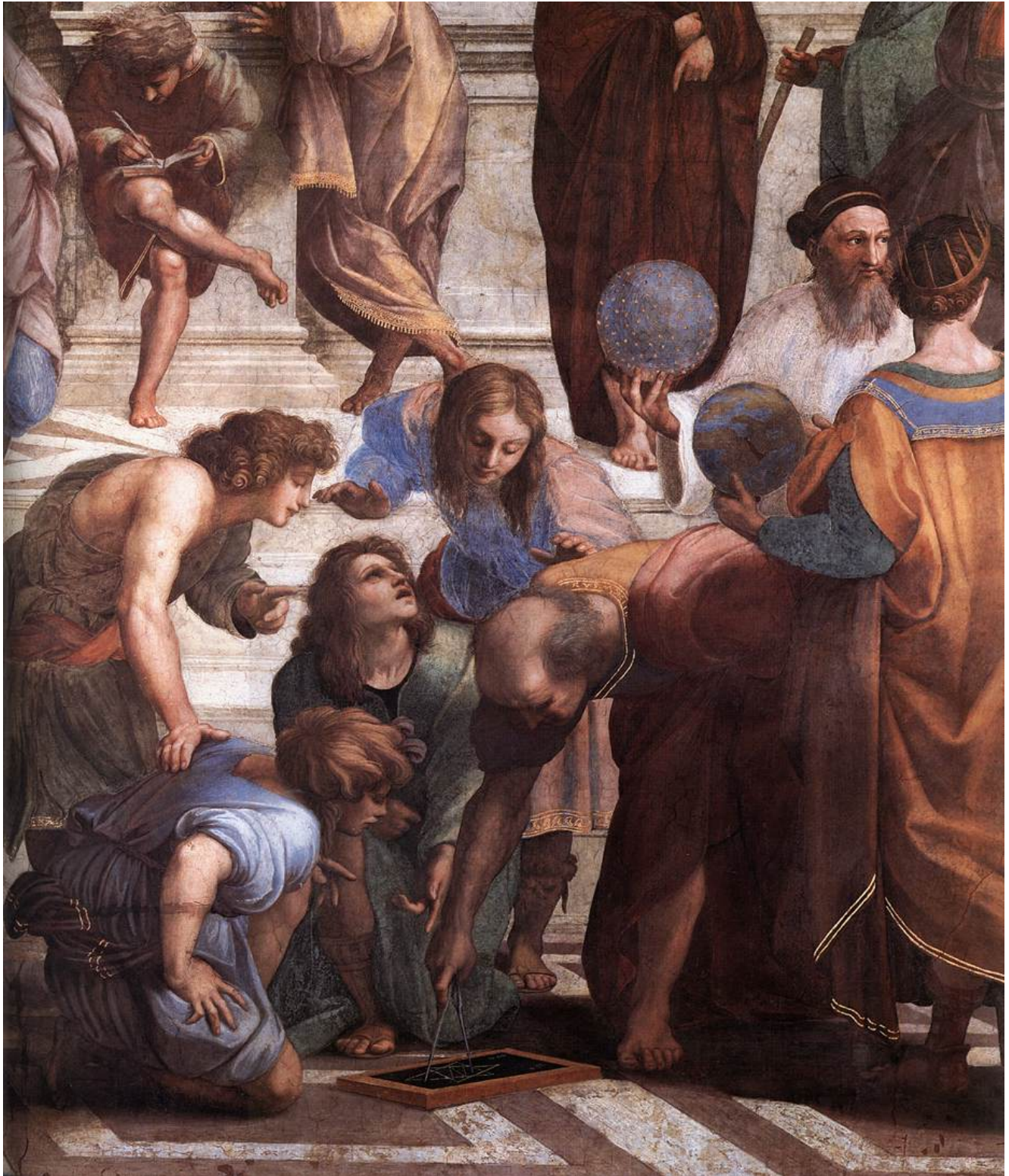


Thus, More or Less, Spake Zarathustra

by [Jillian Becker](#) (July 2023)



The School of Athens (detail of Zoroaster holding the

celestial sphere), Raphael, 1509

Perhaps a great many educated people of the West know a little or much about Zoroastrianism, the religion founded by the Persian priest Zarathustra. I had no knowledge of it at all until I thought of finding out what I could about its origin and doctrine.

I learned that Zarathustra certainly existed, certainly founded the religion. He was born somewhere in Iran, probably between 1700 and 1500 BCE. There is a collection of poetic sayings called the Gathas which are authoritatively ascribed to him. And that's all that can be asserted of him with any degree of confidence.

But the great spin-doctor Legend has filled out his story with a set of anecdotes. Among them are these:

- He was born of a virgin.
- All nature rejoiced at his birth.
- He laughed at the moment he was born.
- For a certain period as a young man he withdrew to live alone on a wild mountain, meditating on righteousness, conversing with angels, growing in knowledge and wisdom, until he was ready to descend and teach a new faith.
- A tempter came to him and tried to bribe him to give up his faith, but Zarathustra scorned him, and the evil one was defeated.
- He experienced a vision of divinity as he emerged from a river in which he had been ritually purified.
- His life was ended by an act of cruel murder.
- Three thousand years after his death, a son procreated by his own seed will be the ultimate Saviour of mankind.

Zarathustra was never held to be a god, only the prophet of the one true God revealed through him. This, his monotheism (as it is called despite some reasons for caviling, which we shall come to), was a new idea in Iran. The old religion of Iran—that is to say, the Aryan folk-religion—was a polytheistic cult, the same as that of the Aryans of India. (The words ‘Aryan’ and ‘Iranian’ have the same derivation.) Zarathustra’s new religion—which we call Zoroastrianism after the Greeks, who transcribed its founder’s name as Zoroaster—retained some of the old forms of worship. He also preserved but revolutionized some of the old beliefs by—astonishingly perhaps—inverting their moral significance. Thus he declared the former good spirits, the *deva*, to be evil; and the former evil spirits, the *asura*, to be good. The Iranian form of the Indian *asura* was *ahura* and Zarathustra’s one true God himself bore the title of *ahura*: he was Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord or the Lord Wisdom.

The existence of good and evil powers, however they were named, was the most important idea that Zarathustra’s new religion took over from the old. But there was also in the old cult a seed of another, related, idea which through Zarathustra’s teaching was to become in time a world-changing religious concept: that humanity has a necessary part to play in the cosmic drama of divine creation.

When the rituals of worship, such as the sacrifice of beasts, were enacted by the devout of the old cult, the belief was that the mortal creature was thus helping to maintain natural order. Seedtime and harvest, cold and heat, summer and winter, and day and night, set in their rhythmic rightness by divine powers, were reinforced by the actions of men, who were its beneficiaries. By pleasing the gods, they were doing themselves good. Along with the desire for good to befall them, went the fear of evil; fear that without demonstration of human gratitude, without supplication and propitiation, the divinities might withdraw from mankind the benefits of the

natural order on which their survival depended. Men needed the gods, and had some power to sway them, but the gods did not need men.

Zarathustra endowed mankind with far more power and grandeur. He saw man as the indispensable partner of God in the work of creation. Humanity has an essential role in the realization of the divine scheme—nothing less than saving creation from the destructive power of evil by defeating it utterly and so bringing about the perfection of God's ultimate ends.

It was perhaps the greatest, certainly one of the most far-reaching of religious ideas: that humanity has a necessary part to play in the cosmic drama of divine creation. It is the very idea of human beings having a purpose in the divine order of the universe. Every one of us has this purpose, set for us by Providence in the Great Scheme of All Things. It is a moral mission. By knowing what is good and acting on that knowledge, we human beings can save God's universe from destruction by the evil powers. (It is an idea ascribed to Abraham and his progeny too. Abraham predates Zoroaster by—possibly—half a millennium.)

But that very statement gives rise immediately and unavoidably to a confounding question: if the Wise Lord is the one God and sole Source of this world, whence came these evil powers?

It is here that doubt may arise as to whether the word monotheism is strictly applicable to the Zoroastrian religion. For the answer to the question is: from Ahura Mazda's twin brother, Angra Manyā.

The names of the twain evolved into Ormazd and Ahriman. Zoroastrianism itself was to change through the centuries, as all religions do. Later generations brought it nearer to monotheism by recognizing a Source beyond and above Ormazd and Ahriman, and the name of the Source, or First Principle, is Zrvana Akarana, Boundless Time. But even so, whether Ormazd

and Ahriman were two matching creative Spirits, one Good and one Evil; or the creator God of this world and mankind opposed by a jealous, rebellious, inferior Spirit seems never to have been settled within the faith itself.

Zarathustra taught that Ormazd is Life, Light, Truth, Purity. All good comes from him, all order; the laws of nature and the ethical laws by which mankind should live. Ahriman is his antagonist, from whom comes all evil; he is Death, Darkness, Falsehood, Filth. The war between them is the history of the world. Their battlefield is the human soul. And it is for conquest of the human soul that the war is waged. At the end of time, with our human help if we keep our hands clean and our hearts pure by doing and thinking only the good, Ormazd will defeat Ahriman, and there will be a new heaven and a new earth. His Kingdom will come. Darkness will be banished and the sun will shine forever.

Zarathustra believed that the end of time was near. He felt that he had been sent into the world by Ormazd to teach humanity its mission of redemption just before the final battle. He hoped and believed that he and all who followed him would live to witness the victory of the Good and the dawning of the Kingdom.

But the Prophet died with that hope unrealized. Time went on, and still the end of days seemed far off. So new prophecy foretold a future Saviour. Three helpers to salvation would be born, a thousand years apart, and the third would be the Saviour himself. All of them would be the sons of Zarathustra. Their mothers would be virgins, each of whom in her time would bathe in a lake in which the Prophet had deposited his sperm for the purpose of procreating a son. After the third and last son, Shayosh, is born and fulfils his earthly mission, the Kingdom will come. Then will Ormazd vanquish Ahriman and evil be destroyed forever. The dead shall be raised and there will be a Last Judgement.

Every soul will have been judged once before, when the life of the person it belonged to ended in death. Zoroastrianism has a Heaven and Hell (and a Purgatory too, introduced at some late, uncertain stage). When death releases an individual soul it goes to its reward or punishment. Its journey takes it to the Bridge of Judgement where it is met by a personal spirit-conductor to guide it to its destination. The spirit who meets a good soul is beautiful and guides it to Heaven, where it will know only joy in the company of angels and archangels, feasting and singing with them. The spirit who meets a sinful soul is hideous and guides it to the dark underworld ruled by Ahriman, where it will undergo relentless torment. At the first sight of the spirit on the bridge, each human soul instantly knows its fate, for it recognizes the one who has come to meet it: it's own True Self, made beautiful or ugly by the thoughts, words and deeds of its life.

What influence Zoroastrianism had on religions born later and they in turn had on Zoroastrianism as it continued to exist and develop among a comparatively small following (dwindled now to little more than 100,000 worldwide), cannot be authoritatively resolved.

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Jillian Becker writes both fiction and non-fiction. Her first novel, *The Keep*, is now a Penguin Modern Classic. Her best known work of non-fiction is *Hitler's Children: The Story of the Baader-Meinhof Terrorist Gang*, an international best-seller and Newsweek (Europe) Book of the Year 1977. She was Director of the London-based Institute for the Study of Terrorism 1985-1990, and on the subject of terrorism contributed to TV and radio current affairs programs in Britain, the US, Canada, and Germany. Among her published

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