

Benevolent Persian Empire

Fariborz Rahnamoon

"By the time of his death in 530 BCE, Cyrus (Kurosh) had changed the face of the civilized world, but I think the point that most deserves to be stressed is his judicious treatment of the many peoples under his rule. This introduced a new concept of benevolent. For the first time, on a very large scale, great force was used to protect, not degrade, the human condition."

David Stronach - epithet to the reign of Kurosh. ⁽¹⁾

While the Egyptians built pyramids for the dead, Daryush (Darius) built a canal in Egypt joining the Mediterranean to the Red Sea through the Nile.

Surviving inscriptions on a monument proclaims; ' Says Daryush the King: I am a Persian.... . I gave the order to dig this canal from a river by the name of Nile, which flows in Egypt to the sea, which goes from Persia.'

The Persians are known to have introduced rice into Mesopotamia, pistachio nuts into Syria and sesame into Egypt. They introduced the science of manufacturing linen from flax, which was otherwise used to abstract oil only. They introduced fruits and vegetables throughout the Empire, wherever the right environment existed for them but were unknown to the local population. The Alfalfa, which was good forage for animals, was introduced in the Mediterranean region from Media. ⁽²⁾

What could have been the cause of such different approaches to life and death? Why when every other nation in the region destroyed and looted its enemies, and enslaved its defeated citizens, the Iranians tried their best to win the war with the least blood shed, and then allowed cooperative vanquished leaders to rule and the people to follow their own religion and culture.

Each time the Babylonians and Assyrians defeated their enemy they destroyed the temples and replaced its defeated gods with their own gods. While it is well known how Kurosh the Great not only did not destroy any temple in Babylon but also went to the extent of respecting the Babylonian god Marduk.

The Iranians avoided displacing the population or taking slaves but instead are known to have released those who were enslaved and helped the displaced population to return to their homeland. Pythagoras who was one such prisoner in Babylon was released and given the opportunity to live among the Iranians and

gain knowledge. Upon going back to Athens he was recognized as a philosopher. The system of building Ghanats (underground cannel) by the Iranians gave Pythagoras his famous theorem.

What made the Iranians do what they did, was their way of life and their beliefs. From the inscriptions left behind by the Iranian we know that they believed in Ahura Mazda the unique God introduced by Zarathushtra, the great teacher and intellect who lived among the Aryans long before they came to the Iranian Plateau.

What Zarathushtra taught was the TRUTH (Asha Vahista) and nothing but the TRUTH. He asks everyone to use their good mind (Vohumana) and seek the truth (Asha Vahista) in all fields. Having found the truth he wants that it be used in a good way by making good rules, producing good products, and giving good services (Khash Atra Vairya). His teachings were plain and simple; it involved no parables and laid down no hard rules but left it for every society to find what is best for its situation. The only recommendation that he made was that one should avoid the evil part of the mind (Ahrimana) and not use the knowledge that is gained in a wrong way.

Zarathushtism was not limited to theology. In fact, theology was just one part of the many parts. Zarathushtism included the study of human beings and everything that affected and surrounded them. By the use of Vohumana a Zarathushti had to seek Asha Vahista in all fields. Philosophy, psychology, astronomy, geology, mathematics, music, medicine, chemistry, physics, ecology, the study of the effects of the sun, moon, stars, radiation, sound waves, thought waves etc. Having obtained the knowledge it had to be used for the benefit of mankind. It was a continuous process that demanded progress towards betterment and perfection.

The Early Iranians followed the teachings of Zarathushtra. They understood the universe and the forces involved. They made good rules (Khash Atra Vairya) and progressed without going against nature. They used the knowledge not for personal gains but for the mutual benefit of mankind. Herodotus says:

"The actual worshiper is not permitted to pray for any personal or private blessings, but only for the king and the general good of the community, of which he is himself a part." ⁽³⁾

From the documents that we have in hand at present it is not easy for many to see the ancient form of Zarathushtism. Because in the centuries that followed, the pagan converts symbolized the teachings of Zarathushtra. Some of the Asha Vahista (Truth, knowledge) was used by the Romans to enhance the powers of their pagan gods.

Especially after the Greeks conquered the Persian Empire in 330 BCE. Paganism progressed with the help of the newfound knowledge; they had found answers to some of the mysteries. Some of the knowledge that was beyond their cognizance, they either called it magic or changed them. Like Ferdows or Paradise, which was on earth, was moved beyond the skies and reserved for the dead.

In the following millenniums, the paganising of the acquired knowledge continued steadily and a thick curtain was woven, which covers our thinking and our way of life and hides the Truth from us. Its effect has been so strong that even today progress and science is looked upon by religion as an evil and interference in the work of God.

What has remained of the ancient knowledge is translated today by scholars with reference to these ancient pagan religions or in the light of later religions, thereby misinterpreting the greatest of all men - Zarathushtra.

For example in the words of L.H. Mills an Avesta translator and scholar. " No one should think of writing with originality on the Gathas, or the rest of the Avesta, who had not long studied Vedic Sanskrit, and no one should think of pronouncing ultimate opinions on the Gathas, who has not to a respectable degree mastered the Pahlavi commentaries."

The Avesta language being contemporary with Sanskrit and today Sanskrit being a better-known language, scholars tend to find meanings for Avesta words by referring to Sanskrit. This has to a great extent been helpful, but there are philosophic differences between Sanskrit and Avesta, as such the same word may have a different meaning. Whereby today's Avesta has become the most complicated philosophy. An extreme example is the word 'DAEVA' which means a god in Sanskrit, but demon in Avesta.

Taking help of the Pahlavi commentaries imports the thoughts of the scholars of later period. The period after Alexander had left his mark. Alexander tutor was none other than Aristotle, who is reported to have told Alexander, that if he destroyed the Persians he will have destroyed one of the pillars of excellence of civilization. Alexander followed his advice, apart from all the destruction he took thirty thousand youth to Rome trained them and sent them back. Thus to be able to understand the teachings of Zarathushtra we need to look back into the history of the ancient Iranians.

When the Iranians came to the rugged Plateau they moved east till they reached the Zagroos range of mountains. Beyond the Zagroos they saw fertile land but

they also saw that it was occupied and a civilization in its own right was in existence. That was enough to stop them, for they believed in peaceful co-existence. For a recorded 400 years they paid heavy tributes in exchange for peace. Finally they decided to intervene, for they felt it is their duty to improve the lives of the people on the other side of the Zagross.

Kurosh (Cyrus) the Great assumed leadership of the Zarathushties and embarked on a mission of benevolence. Kurosh II or Cyrus the Great, was the first Emperor in the World and so great was his impact on the ancient world that he is seen as a Saviour in the Bible. The Jews believed in him as their Saviour and in fact with his coming the ancient Semitic world stepped into a new era.

The reputation earned by the Iranians won them many battles before they were fought. They were looked upon as saviours. The defeated armies readily opted to fight along side the Iranian army and within no time the First Empire in history was founded.

The Babylonians who had cooperated with the Madhs (Medes) to defeat the common enemy the Assyrians were allowed to flourish. But their leader Nobonidus who was the son of the priestess of Sin at Harran, was causing hardship to his people, he had imposed heavy taxation on his people to be able to build temples and support the introduction of a new god.

The Iranians under Kurosh the Great went to the help of the people who proclaimed Kurosh as the Protégé of god Marduk; this has been preserved for us in their cuneiform texts. As usual the Zarathushties who went to war looked for a way to achieve their goal without much bloodshed. We can claim that the first Engineering Corps of the Army was set up by the Zarathushties, with the motto to ' Save life on both sides and win the war'. In 539 BCE when they decided to take over Babylon, they began by diverting the water of the Euphrates when the river was low. Then they used the riverbed to enter the fortified city. At the same time they advanced against the army of Nobonidus's son Belshazzar who had remained at Opis and cut it from the capital, defeating them without difficulty. Others like Kubaru (Gobryas) the governor of the province between Zab and Diyala joined the Iranians and the supporters within the walls helped bring about the end of the war much easier than expected, for otherwise Babylon had a triple fortification and immense wealth to keep the war going on for a long time.

The defeated Nobonidus was interned in Kerman where he lived till his death. Zarathushtism was not imposed on the people but they were free to follow their pagan gods. The high mental and spiritualist demands of the Teachings of Zarathushtra were not what could be easily assimilated by these cultures. What Zarathushtra had to say was absolutely the opposite of what these civilizations

believed in. The Iranians had knowledge of human psychology, they knew it was impossible to force a sudden change. They had to create a desire in the people and motivate them to understand themselves better. This could only be done in an evolutionary manner, slowly and steadily in steps.

First, without using force and without going against the beliefs of the people, they had to do away with the Temple Cults. This they did, not by destroying it but by neglecting it. Next, to usher in the change, the living standards of the people had to be improved. Communication and education had to improve. At the same time the Iranians had to be an example to the rest of the people.

Wars were fought for the benefit of the conquered and not for personal gains. The first Charter of Human Rights, which was written and adhered to, is a proof of their intentions.

Their calculation were correct, all this created security, compared to the previous turbulence of life in those ancient civilizations. People joined force with the Iranians and we see from the layered sediments of Sush (Susa) as an evidence of the violent ages and the age of development of arts, of governments, of commerce and the mind.

Free from the fear of invasion, the agriculture of the region improved in leaps. The irrigation system introduced by the Zarathushties changed the face of these lands, flood and famine became a thing of the past, only to be mentioned in the Epic of Gilgamesh and the story of Noah's Ark.

Although they saw the belief in Pagan gods to be wrong they initially allowed the conquered people to continue with their way of life. For they knew these things could not be changed by force but required well planed program of education and understanding. Zarathushtism had no statues or temples, so they were not worried about replacing the old pagan ones. Theirs was a way of life based on TRUTH, truth about everything, in other words, knowledge. Their first step was to educate the people, for increase in knowledge would pave the way for the automatic discarding of the pagan gods.

The Kings defeated by Kurosh were worshiped as gods and were the center of mystic rituals but Kurosh and the other Iranians kings did not allow such worship of themselves. For, in each human being there is the potential of achieving a oneness with Ahura Mazda, as such it was not seen right to degrade or humiliate him. Although they had complex court ceremonies and manners, they never allowed their hand or feet to be kissed. The visitors would bow before the Emperor and kiss their own hands, touch it to their foreheads and raise it above

their heads as a sign of respect. The bas reliefs at Takht-e-Jamshid (Persepolis) give evidence of this.

The dignity of human beings was respected and one was not allowed to degrade himself by falling at the feet of anyone not even God.

' We revere you so we BOW down our heads to you so we are indebted to you O Ahura Mazda'. (Haptan Yasht Karda V:4 - Yashts in Roman Script with Translation by T R Sethna.)
(The word for Bow is NEMAKHYAMAHI. NEMA means half; KHAYAMAHI means bend.)

Next came Daryush (Darius) who was a great administrator, he divided the Empire into Khsathrapavan (Strapies or protectors of the kingdom) and divided its powers between two or more person to avoid any temptation of one to take over. Moreover the army was always directly responsible to him and took orders only from him.

In 519 BCE he visited Egypt which he was familiar with, since he had spent some years there during the reign of Kambujiya (Cambyses). He knew of the defects in the Egyptian system and also knew of the power of the Egyptian priests. He initially set about reforming the agricultural and the taxation system. He was very successful in them. He next set about completing the project of digging the canal joining the Red Sea to the Nile, which had been initiated by Kambujiya and is the predecessor of the present day Suez Canal.

Surviving inscriptions on a monument proclaims; ' Says Daryush the King: I am a Persian.... . I gave the order to dig this canal from a river by the name of Nile that flows in Egypt to the sea that goes from Persia.'

This shows the aim of the Iranians by conquest was not narcissistic. They did not conquer and transfer the wealth to their country, as was the practice in those days. Their endeavor was to improve the life of all human beings. Egypt like Babylon and Elam was a rich and ancient civilization but they were on the wrong path. There was a lot to be done to improve the life of its people. This the Iranians took upon themselves to do. It was a war against Ahriman, the evil mind of the rulers that brought suffering and hardship on the people.

The Zarathushties knew that it was the leaders who lead the people on the evil paths, so on conquest they restored the prestige of the people and led them on the right path. This was exactly what Daryush was doing in Egypt.

For the Empire to prosper the Iranians saw the need for quick communication and so set to build a road from the capital Sush to Sardis a distance of 1500 miles. A network of roads also interconnected other parts of the Empire. Babylon was linked to Egypt on one side and Hangmatana on the other. Another road extended upto Kabul and so was Sush linked to Pars via the mountains of Izeh. (In 1973 the Phalavi regime had started rebuilding this royal route which was completed in 1997 and goes to Shiraz via Esfahan and reduces the distance by more than half.)

The roads were made safe by having post-stations at intervals, manned by troops. Fords and mountain passes were guarded by forts. At a distance of a day's journey caravansaries (rest houses) were built for travelers to rest. All this promoted trade, commerce and improved the living standards of the people.

The first international postal system was designed by the Iranians in the reign of Daryush. A postal system which is today the aspiration of the postal system of the United States of America, who have adopted a version of Herodotus's commentary on the ancient Iranian postal service, as their Motto. Herodotus says:

'Nothing mortal travels so fast as these messengers. These men will not be hindered from accomplishing at their best speed the distance that they have to go, either by snow, or rain, or by the darkness of the night.'⁽³⁾

The Iranians had postal stations at given intervals where men and horses were kept in readiness and by a system of relay the message was delivered in the shortest possible time. In case of Royal messages, where secrecy was essential, a system of security post was used, where the messenger memorized the message and traveled the distance with minimum of rest, at times only dismounting to change horses at the stations. If necessary he would sleep and eat on horse back without stopping or slowing down. The other type of service was the use of pigeons. At flying distance Pigeon houses (Kabutar Khaneh) were built and pigeons were trained to carry messages between these houses. The message was relayed by pigeons between these houses till it reached the destination.

Daryush was looking for natural boundaries for the Empire. He extended the Empire to include Punjab in India and thereby the Empire was bounded by natural boundaries on nearly all sides. Starting from the East was the Indus then Syr and Amu Darya (Jaxartes and Oxus), the Caspian sea, the Black Sea, the Mediterranean, the deserts of Africa and Arabia and the Persian Gulf.

The Iranians were busy improving the life style of the ancient civilizations now included in their Empire. They had to educate them and slowly and steadily make them realize the meaning of life and its purpose, which was embodied in the teachings of Asho Zarathushtra.

The Iranians did not believe in monuments and temples because their God was not a statue, nor lived in temples. Even Herodotus has reported that; '.... the Persians had neither temples, altars, nor statues of gods.'⁽³⁾ The conquest of Elam, Babylon and Assyria by Kurosh left thousands of sculptors and builders jobless. The Iranians did not destroy temples but at the same time they did not built any new ones.

To keep the sculptors busy and away from attempting to built statues and temples for a living, a great palace was commissioned at Takht-e-Jamshid (Persepolis), to which annexes were made by all subsequent rulers of the Hakhamaneshian (Achaemenian) Dynasty. The Capital was at Sush (Susa) and this palace other than keeping the sculptors occupied, served as a cultural capital, a holiday resort and a place to celebrate festivals.

During the days of Daryush the principles of Zarathushtism was practiced in the whole Empire. The people were not required to do any thing phenomenal but strive for perfection. They had to live a just life, tell no lies, do no evil, think no evil, and aim for perfection in their profession. The signs of Zarathushtism can be seen in their deeds, in their quest for knowledge and in the means applied for betterment of life.

War, Malevolence and Debts are looked upon as Ahrimanic, bad and undesirable. It was against the very nature of a Zarathushti to be malevolent. Throughout their history Zarathushties have been known for their benevolence and truthfulness and were relied upon. We can see Zarathushtism in the inscription of Daryush, when he prays to keep Malevolence (Durj) away from his multi cultural Empire. Malevolence, famine and war are rated equally bad.

'.... ... May Ahura Mazda protect this country from a hostile army, from famine, from the malevolent ! Upon this country may there not come an army, nor famine nor malevolence; this I pray as a boon from Ahura Mazda....'

We also see the qualities of a Zarathushti in the inscription on the tomb of Daryush, which according to Pagliaro's interpretation reads:

' A great God is Ahura Mazda who created this excellent work which you see, who created PEACE for mankind, who endowed Daryush the King with wisdom and strength. Saith Daryush the King: By the desire of Ahura Mazda this is my

nature: To that which is just I am friend, to that which is unjust I am no friend. I do not wish the weak should suffer harm at the hands of the powerful, nor that the powerful should suffer harm at the hands of the weak. Whatever is just, that is my desire. The follower after falsehood do I detest. I am not vindictive. If anything raises up anger within me, I restrain myself with reason; I am master of my emotions. Who works for me I reward according to his work. Who does ill I punish according to the ill he has done ... If one man speaks ill of another, I do not give him credence until he has provided proof. If a man acts to the best of his ability, I am satisfied ... '

We see the Iranians working to improve the life of their fellow humans, having commissioned the land route and the Daryush Canal (Suez Canal). Daryush also set up a fleet on the Indus River near Kabul. This is reported to have taken thirty months to complete. The Iranians who had for centuries, to the envy of their neighbours, produced wealth out of the rugged Iranian plateau were now set to make best use of the new resources. The correct use of which could improve the life of all the people, educate them and pave the way for progress and the achievement of the aims of Zarathushtism. Which was PERFECTION - KHORDAD.

Khordad Baad
Fariborz Rahnamoon

References

- 1- Clive Irving - Crossroads of Civilization -3000 years of Persian History.
- 2-The Legacy of Persia Edited by AJ Arberry - Oxford Clarendon Press
- R.Ghrishman - Iran - Pelican Book- 1954
- 3- Herodotus - The Histories - Translated by Aubrey de Selincourt -Penguin Books 1959
- 4-Xenophon - The Persian Expedition Translated by Rex Warner Penguin Books 1949
- 5-Reading the Past- Ancient writing from Cuneform to Alphabet - By J T Hooker and CBF Walker
- 6-The Civiliazation of Babylonia and Assyria By Morris Jastrow Jr. Arno Press New York 1980
- 7-History of Rome to AD 565- By William G Sinnigen & Authur E.R. Boak. Macmillan Publishing Inc 1977
- 8-Yashts in Roman Script with Translation by T R Sethna.
- 9-The Persians By Alessandro Bausani Translated from Italian by J.B.Donne Elek Books Ltd London 1971
- 10-Pythagoros - Lover of wisdom By Ward Rutherford, 1984, The Aquarian press.

