

Dr. Anthony J. Tomasino, Judaism Before Jesus,

Session 4, Persian Influence on the Jewish People

© 2024 Tony Tomasino and Ted Hildebrandt

This is Tony Tomasino and his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session number four, Persian influence on the Jewish people.

So, one of the more important topics when talking about Persia, not even so much these kings that nobody knows much about or cares much about, but really it's the impression left by the Persians and their culture upon people like, for instance, the Jews.

And we don't think very much about Persian culture in our day. We got Persian rugs. We have Persian cats.

But what really do we know about these people? They're not on the top of our minds most of the time. We are products of Western culture and, unfortunately, are rather ignorant of what happened in the East. But Persian culture is very important to the development of Judaism and really to the development of Christianity as well.

So, let's talk a little bit about Persian culture. Yes, those are Persian cats. Ah, but one of the things that amazed the Greeks about the Persians is that they viewed the Persians as being probably the most. The only word I can come up with is eclectic.

You know, they were people who drew elements from a lot of different cultures and made them their own. And remember, of course, these people were originally these nomads who rode horses all over the place and came down from the mountain hill country where they weren't really building a lot of buildings or anything of that sort. So where do they, what do they do to build their culture and to develop themselves as a people? Well, they borrow from other people.

So, for instance, their architecture, deeply influenced by the Babylonians. And one of the things that the Persians are famous for is their gardens. Ah, in fact, the, one of the late Hebrew words for garden actually comes from Persian.

So, these people became, to a certain extent, sort of the epitome of gardeners. But where did they get that idea from? These were nomads, right? They got it from the Babylonians. Think of the hanging gardens of Babylon, right? Well, the Persians adopted the idea from the Babylon, Babylonians and took it one better.

So, and this was kind of common for them is to, is to borrow a good thing when they see it and then improve upon it. Aramaic, the use of the Aramaic language. Now, the Persians were not Aramaic speakers.

Natively, they had their own Indo-Aryan language, Persian, you know, that they spoke. But when they conquered the Babylonian empire, the Persian language, or that was it, was found to be less useful to them than the Aramaic language. The Aramaic language was used all over the Babylonian empire.

And so, rather than insisting that everybody learn how to speak Persian, which is what the Babylonians would have done, what the Greeks would have done. Rather, instead, what they did was they said, well, let's use Aramaic. And remarkably, much later on, some of the texts that, that have come down to us from the, from the Parthian era and from the Sassanid era are written in a form of Aramaic, we know as Syriac.

And so, Aramaic continued to be a living and active language for them for, for some time. They imported wine. They didn't grow, they didn't, wine was not native to the Persians.

It was not native to the Medians. They got it from the Babylonians, but remarkably wine became a really important part of their culture. Now, once again, you have to take this with a grain of salt because this comes from Herodotus, who liked the, liked his stories.

But according to Herodotus, the Persians, important Persians would never make a decision until they had gotten very drunk with wine. And so, and they, they said that they believed that that somehow that they would become, influenced by the spirit in that way. Now, there's nothing in the Zoroastrian religion that has anything to do with wine.

That sounds much more like a Greek thing to me, but at any rate, it's a tested in other places too, though, that, that the Persians, would drink a lot of wine. We have the receipts. So, we know that they were consuming a lot of wine, but they, this was something apparently that they learned from the Babylonians.

but, yeah, so Herodotus said that whenever they would want to make an important decision of the state, they'd get drunk, which, you know, could explain some things, but then, said that they would try to reconsider it once they sobered up a little bit. But at any rate, so yeah, so this culture was borrowing from all these different elements. the religion.

Now, before the time of Darius, maybe even before the time of Cyrus, we don't know. the Persian religion was a very polytheistic kind of faith. You know what I mean? They had a lot of gods, and some of their gods included Mithra and Mithra.

Mithraism became a very important religion during the days of the Roman empire. So, not so much among the Persians at that point, but Mithra was one of their gods. Uhura was one of their gods, gods.

They also worshiped a number of devas or demigods. So you have this pantheon of many different gods. What do we really know about these gods? Almost nothing.

Really, we don't know very much at all about the religion of the Persians before the time that Zoroastrianism became their state religion. Zoroastrianism is named after the prophet Zoroaster, or you might have heard him called Zarathustra. he was a Persian prophet who lived sometime between a thousand and 500 BC.

Well, is that a range or what? Simply put, we don't know when he lived. We've got the traditions; some traditions say a thousand, and some traditions say 500. One of the few things that we do know about him is that he wrote a, the, the foundation of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the Avesta, a portion that's called the Gathas.

And then, they're attributed to him because the fact of the way they're written, the language that they're, that they're written in a very archaic form of the, of the Persian language and, becomes the basis for the, for the Zoroastrian faith. by the way, if you've, you might have heard that, as I said, that name Zarathustra and, you might've heard it from Nietzsche and the book thus spoke Zarathustra. There's a rigid reason why, Nietzsche decided to use Zarathustra as this, figure in his book.

The, the figure that he, creates, the mythical figure in his book, really doesn't bear a lot of resemblance to the actual historical figure of Zarathustra or Zoroaster. But the reason why he used it is because one of the things we do know about Zoroaster is that his religion was kind of an ethical monotheism, a religion where the worship of God was related to an ethical code of behavior, right? And, Nietzsche thought that Zoroaster was the first person to ever do this. Well, I would say, you know, we can trace it back a little earlier than that to somebody named Moses.

But at any rate, so, so this was why he was, he was using Zarathustra to explore the question of, of good and evil and what this has to do with, rooting our, our morality in our, in our religion and that kind of thing. Anyway, another point: just don't confuse Zarathustra in Nietzsche's work with the actual prophet Zoroaster, who was a very different person. What we do know about Zoroaster is that he taught there was, there was one good God, and he was called Ahura Mazda.

Ahura, of course, is the name of one of the traditional Iranian gods. Mazda, apparently a word meaning wisdom. So, it means the great wise God kind of thing.

Okay. But he also taught that there was an evil spirit by the name of Angra Mainyu, who was kind of almost like a, an anti-God, always in perpetual conflict. Angra Mainyu is the source of all evil, all misfortune, all bad deeds.

Ahura Mazda is all good. Only good comes from Ahura Mazda. All good things, all truth, all light, all grace, all peace.

Okay. so these two are, are in this perpetual conflict, but not eternal conflict because according to Zoroastrianism, eventually Angra Mainyu will be destroyed in a lake of fire. Sounds familiar.

All right. the earliest forms of Zoroastrianism are difficult for us to determine. We, we've got the Gathas and we can see the ethical teachings, involved there.

You know, that's a very strong emphasis on the importance of preserving life and respect for other living things, of a really, really strong emphasis on integrity and lying versus falsehood. There's, there's all these dualisms, you know, the truth versus the lie, the light versus the darkness, et cetera, et cetera. Very, very important to Zoroastrianism.

But essentially, the earliest forms of Zoroastrianism, are outside of what we know in the Gathas. We don't really know a lot about them. So, anything that I say about, the influence of Zoroastrianism upon other religions can be taken with a slight grain of salt because, because it's sort of like what, it's sort of like a mystery, influencing another mystery.

Now we don't really know what Judaism was in say the time of even Ezra or the, the people in the Persian empire period, because, there were, it was still undergoing this flux. It was still being codified. It was still being solidified.

We don't know what Zoroastrianism was at this period, either. So, trying to talk about which influenced which and how the two influenced one another is, you know, everything has to be treaded upon lightly. That doesn't stop us, of course, from talking about it.

But again, we don't know when Zoroastrianism became the official religion of Persia. Most likely, it seems to have become so by the time of Darius and Darius's response to this village, where he finds the people worshipping demons and how Ahura Mazda aids him in the destruction of those people and their demons. That seems a little bit more intolerant than typical Zoroastrianism.

But on the other hand, it would seem to me like the zeal of a recent convert. So, there is a cultural contact conundrum. This is sort of a tongue twister, but it's also,

something that to bear in mind when we talk about what happens when you have nations that come in conflict with one another or contact with one another.

the Jews were dominated by the Persians for about 200 years. And that's only in the land of Judah because Judaism then continued in Babylon, and it continued in Persia for several hundred years more after that time, all that time there under the rule, under the domination of the Persians and under the influence of, we might say, the Zoroastrian tradition of the Persians. So, the question is, how does that affect Jewish culture and religion? Now, of course, sometimes we can see when one culture comes in conflict or contact with another, we can almost guess what's going to happen because it's logical.

You know, it's logical that if you have one very dominant culture and another people are living in the midst of a very dominant culture, they tend to get assimilated, right? You know, my great-grandfather came over from Italy. He lived in a kind of an Italian neighborhood. I don't speak Italian today.

I've still got the name, but that's about all I've got. We have been pretty fully assimilated into American culture, and that's what kind of happens when one culture is brought into close contact with another. Sometimes, there's an interchange of cultural elements, and we can say that both are kind of enriched through that process.

And oftentimes this will happen when there's something very attractive or something very powerful or compelling about, the cultured people, one people who are cultured by another. There's a saying, that, and I don't remember who this is attributed to, but it says that, that the Romans conquered the Greeks and then they were captivated by their, their captives. Now, the Romans were much more powerful.

They conquered Greece, and yet they adopted so much Greek culture. And it's really quite remarkable some of the things they adopted and some of the things they rejected. But, we can see that it's not always simply the more powerful nation, strips the other nation of its culture.

Sometimes, it works in the other direction as well. So, even though some things work in predictable ways, other things in not such predictable ways. Something else we have to bear in mind here, too, is that a lot of times, people react very badly to the idea that the Jews might have been influenced in their religious beliefs by another nation or another people.

And what they think is, well, you're saying that the Jewish faith was contaminated. You know, we read back in the books of Moses and so on, there was this idea that you don't want to have contact with, with the Hittites and the Amorites and the

Midianites and so on because it's going to contaminate your faith. You're going to go worshipping their gods.

And, of course, this is exactly what we see happening with, people like Solomon, for instance, who gets drawn away by these pagan gods. And so, there's this idea that a lot of people have and justified to some extent of, can Judaism be shaped by another religion's religious tradition, or does it only result in apostasy? And my thinking along those lines is that God can reveal the truth to his people in any way God chooses to reveal the truth to his people. You know, God can use pagans if he chooses to do so, to teach truth to his people.

And we see this happen even in the Bible. For instance, Jethro is the Midianite priest, the father-in-law of Moses, and we see Jethro teaching Moses, about leadership skills and, other things of that sort. we really don't even know, about, how much the Midianite faith might have, influenced and shaped, Moses's early beliefs and so on.

There have been questions about that as well. There's this fellow by the name of Balaam. You know, Balaam was a priest, a pagan, a prophet, I should say, a pagan prophet, who had a donkey, who, the donkey sort of warned Balaam, of course, about, things like, invisible angels and so on.

But also, Balaam is responsible for some very powerful prophecies about the coming of the Messiah. So, here God used a pagan to speak truth to his people, and he also used a donkey to speak truth to his people. You know, Greek philosophy and Christian theology.

Now, I know this one's a little bit more iffy, you know, because there is, that old question of what hath Athens to do with Jerusalem. You know what, what, what can Greek philosophy tell us about Christianity? But there can be no question that Greek philosophy has shaped many of our Christian beliefs. Saint Augustine, who was the father of very much of our Christian, theology that we, that we hold true to this day, was deeply and unapologetically, indebted to Greek philosophers.

Saint Thomas Aquinas, who, shaped much of Catholic theology, was very much beholden to Aristotle. So, we know that Greek philosophy has been used to shape Christian theology. And even though many people in the pews don't realize how many of their beliefs have come from those pagan sources, oh yeah, they're there.

They are there. And all you have to do is scratch a little beneath the surface and you'll find them. So, I don't think it's, it's, wrong to say that God can use whatever sources he wants, including pagans, to teach truth to his people.

And we would do wise to be humble and to be willing to listen to some of those voices sometimes. Now, again, we have to use caution here because a lot of the

Zoroastrian beliefs that we see and that are typically believed to have influenced Judaism might well have developed much, much later. And might well have developed with Judaism, as opposed to before Judaism.

So, we can't really say for certain when these beliefs came into existence and how they might have influenced Judaism in the intertestamental period. So, again, everything I say here as far as religious influence is concerned has to be taken tentatively. Now, before we get into the religious aspects of the cultural context, con, contact, let's talk about the societal and cultural effects of Persian domination of the Jews.

One of the things we see happen here is an increasing prominence of the priesthood. This was already going on during the end of the Old Testament period, and we can see that without a king, the Jews were looking to leadership to their high priests. Now, there were governors in these days, and the governors were typically natives, but not necessarily Jewish natives.

And the leader of the local Jewish community, now I'm getting a little bit controversial because there are some scholars who disagree with this, but I believe that very frequently, the native leader was the high priest. During those times when the high priest was leading the country as its leader, there was a certain prestige attached to his role. In the book of Malachi, we can see that the prophet Malachi lays many of the ills of the people on the feet of the priesthood, that he sees the priesthood as being a major problem at that point because he says that the people should be seeking wisdom from the mouth of the priest, which is, again, kind of a new role for the priesthood because of course, in the old days, the priests are performing the sacrifices, the priests are doing these rituals, the priests are saying their prayers, but the priests don't really seem to be teachers all that much, you know, but by the time of the Persian domination, the notion of the priest as pre, as teacher is very thoroughly entrenched.

We see this not only in the book of Malachi but we see throughout the intertestamental period and well, as well into the Dead Sea Scrolls, the spread of Jews throughout the Mediterranean world. I already mentioned the fact that travel was becoming safer, and because travel was becoming safer, Jews could travel from one part of the nation, one part of the empire, to another part of the empire. They could find a place there where they could do business and trade, and they would probably find people who spoke Aramaic.

Since they spoke Aramaic and the people around them spoke Aramaic, they could all cooperate, form unions, and do business with one another.

It wasn't always easy. In fact, we do see, even near the end of the intertestamental period, that there was, in some places in the empire, great prejudice against the Jews

for various reasons. But, but for the most part, we see the Jews managing to spread throughout the Mediterranean world at this time.

Interesting bit of trivia here. During the time of Jesus, Jews probably constituted the largest ethnic group in the Roman Empire. main reasons for this? Jews had big families.

They had lots of kids. Okay? Greeks did not. Romans did not.

And many other nations had adopted the Greek custom of having one or two kids at one time. Jews had tons of kids, okay? And so they were growing rapidly. And that was one of the reasons why they resented, by the way, because it seemed like you couldn't turn around without bumping into one of them.

So, lots of Jews in the Roman Empire. And that's only counting the Roman Empire. There are lots of Jews in Persia and Parthia.

There are lots of Jews down in Egypt. Jews were spread all over the place in that time and in that region. This was facilitated by the Persian Empire and by its conquests.

A language issue, of course. I already mentioned the adoption of Aramaic as a lingua franca. I also already mentioned the bifurcation of Hebrew.

How Hebrew became a language of the intelligentsia and a nationalistic language, but also was a language of the common people, the people of the land, and became kind of a vulgar tongue as well. But we also see the use of Persian loan words in the last books of the Old Testament. A book for law, for instance, that is a word that comes from Hebrew and Aramaic from Persian.

And then we get to later Hebrew, the Hebrew of the Dead Sea Scrolls, and the Hebrew of the Mishnah. We see many more of these loan words being added. Raz, another one.

Mystery. So these are words that have become adopted and become part of a very important part, actually, of the Jewish means of expression and the Jewish culture and even of their philosophy—standardization of laws and rituals.

We talked about how Darius required the standardization of laws. Would that have happened naturally among the Jews? Well, maybe, but who knows? You know, at any rate, what we do know is they got a shove. They got a shove from Darius and later from Artaxerxes, pushing them in the direction of standardizing the laws.

And we might even say maybe canonizing their scriptures. And no other peoples in the ancient Mediterranean world had a canon of scriptures the way that the Jews

had a canon of scriptures. But there was certainly a movement in that direction, which was being inspired by some of these Persian policies.

One of the things that bears witness to this is these letters called the Elephantine letters. I'm going to talk about these in a little bit more detail in a few minutes here, particularly a text called the Passover papyrus, which shows how the notion of the centralization and standardization of rituals was becoming important to the Jews in this era. Elephantine papyrus.

This is one of them. As you can see, it's kind of broken and rotted in places and so on. Elephantine was a Jewish military colony in Egypt.

And these papyri were found there in Elephantine, and they date from about 495 BC to 405 BC. And we can date them very precisely because they're dated, which is a wonderful thing, they tell us when they were written. But they founded this military colony by the time that these texts were being written.

It's no longer so much a military colony. That was how it started. But in this era, there were a lot of common people doing a lot of things.

And many of their documents are Jewish. It wasn't just Jews living here either. There were other people, Syrians and native Egyptians as well.

The contents of these papyri include personal letters, contracts, literary work, a story called the story of Ahikar, which was very popular among the Jews. They loved this story. They had copies of it here.

I mentioned the book of Tobit earlier, which is in the Apocrypha, which is about this young Jewish fellow who gets rescued from a demon. According to the book of Tobit, Tobit was the cousin of Ahikar. Ahikar was originally a Syrian hero, but he became very popular to the Jews.

So, they adopted him. But anyway, some of the especially significant texts here among the Elephantine papyrus. Marriage contracts.

Now, what makes marriage contracts so interesting and significant? Well, one thing is they give us a lot of insight into marriage customs. One of the things that we think about, we think about prenuptial agreements as being a modern thing. Oh, no, they're not.

No Jew back in those days would have ever thought of entering into a marriage without a ketubah, a marriage contract which laid out all the responsibilities of each party and what would happen if they got divorced. One of the things that's interesting that is revealed by these Elephantine papyri is divorce was extremely

common among the Jews in these days. Some of these people have been divorced several times.

And this was something that continued to be a problem up until Jesus's day. And this is one of the reasons why Jesus addresses the issue of divorce. You know, Jesus is asked, is it lawful to divorce your wife under any circumstances? And Jesus says, well, that's not the way God intended it.

Right. And we sometimes people read this and they think, oh, wasn't Jesus mean because he tells people they can't get divorced? Well, the reason why was because it was so common in such a horrible practice that it was you had people like, you know, they would marry when they were young, and they would get a good deal from the family, and then they would get a little older and their wife would get a little older. So they'd divorce her and get a new one.

You know, and so this was a justice issue. Jesus says, you marry a woman, you stick with her. Yeah.

And so that's the light in which those words should be read, not the light of this idea that, oh, this poor woman is being beaten by her husband, but she can't get divorced because Jesus said you shouldn't divorce your spouse. No, that's not what this was intended for, anyway. And so divorce was quite common.

We found that another thing that is a little more disturbing is intermarriage was very common in this military colony here you would have people, parents with Jewish names, and their grandkids would have pagan names. And so, you had a syncretism going on that the Jews were adopting some of the names and some of the customs of their neighbors. We find this reflected in all of these elephantine papyri, particularly in some of these marriage contracts.

Now, the Passover papyrus and what makes this so significant is it kind of reflects the desire of Darius II to standardize Jewish customs throughout his realm. And one of the things that, well, the main purpose of this papyrus was to instruct the Jews in elephantine about how to celebrate Passover. Think about this.

Here, we have a group of Jews living in Egypt. They don't know how to celebrate Passover. And so, the leadership in Jerusalem is sending them this letter instructing them on the proper way to observe this major feast of the Jewish year, Passover.

And then one more here, which is really almost comical in a way, but not comical in another way, the petition to Bacchus. He is the governor in Jerusalem, and he's Jewish. And in a sense, apparently, he also has authority over these Jews in Egypt. We're not quite sure how that all worked out legally, but apparently, he does have some kind of an influence there, legally speaking.

Well, the Jews in the military colony in Egypt were writing to the governor of Jerusalem, asking for his intervention so that they could rebuild their temple. The Jews in Egypt had built a temple in Egypt. And there, in Egypt, they were sacrificing animals.

Well, this was causing some trouble because they were sacrificing goats. And one of the largest temples in that region was dedicated to the Egyptian goat God. And so, the priests of the Egyptian temple went over and burned down the Jewish temple.

Well, now the Jews are requesting permission to rebuild their temple. This put the governor of Jerusalem in a bit of a bind because on the one hand, he wants them to have a place to worship, but on the other hand, they're not supposed to be sacrificing. According to the book of Deuteronomy and then the Deuteronomic reforms and the reforms of Josiah, you weren't supposed to be sacrificing any place but in Jerusalem.

So, they've got to figure out what to do about this little situation here. And what they did was they sent a letter back to the Jews at Elephantine. They arranged it so they could rebuild their temple, but they were not to do any animal sacrifices there.

They could sacrifice grains. They could do their prayers there. The temple was built so that its door was facing toward Jerusalem.

There were also a couple of other temples, by the way, in the ancient world whose doors also were facing Jerusalem, but animal sacrifices were only to be done in Jerusalem. So that was kind of the compromise that they worked out there. It is remarkable, though, because it shows you again the way that there was this lack of standardization of Judaism throughout the Persian Empire.

And by means of the Persian mail system, they were beginning to form a standardized identity throughout the entire empire. How about the religious impact? We know that there are big differences between the Jewish religion in the Old Testament, or what we might call the Yahwistic religion of the Old Testament, and the Jewish religion of the New Testament. And some of those things that we see that just really stand out to us are things like the belief in angels and demons.

Of course, we have angels in the Old Testament, but they seem to have a different kind of function than what they do in the New Testament. The devil. We're going to talk about the devil a little bit, because the devil, in the way that we think of the devil in the New Testament, is the enemy of God's people.

He isn't anywhere in the Old Testament, really. Demons and demon possession. Now, there are demons in the Old Testament.

They're kind of hidden in the cracks. And we'll talk a little bit about those as well. But the idea of demon possession, you never see that in the Old Testament, you know? And then, of course, the resurrection of the dead, which is central to our New Testament faith.

Very, very important to the Pharisees. It's still not really nailed down as a certain Jewish belief in the intertestamental period. A little bit later, in the writings of the Mishnah and the Talmud, the Jews would proclaim that anyone who doesn't believe in the resurrection of the dead has no part in the resurrection of the dead.

Eventually, it became an article of faith among the Jews that you had to believe in the resurrection of the dead. Nowadays? Kind of questionable. But anyway.

So, these are some of the differences. And the question is, where do these differences come from? How do they arise? Part of what we see happening here is a trajectory from Old Testament beliefs, and then just following their natural trajectory, maybe being inspired or encouraged, perhaps, by contact with Zoroastrianism. There is a lot of common ground between Zoroastrianism and Judaism.

Like Judaism, Zoroastrianism taught that there was one ultimate God who is good. One God is the creator of all things. According to Zoroastrianism, there is only one creator, God.

That kind of sets it apart from many other religions of the day, but again, it gives it nice common ground with Judaism. Now, there are questions about when you could say that Zoroastrianism became monotheistic.

Or even if it is monotheistic. Because Angra Mainyu, the evil god, is in a sense, a god. So, there is that question of whether or not you could consider it monotheistic.

But most people would regard it as being one of the monotheistic faiths. Like Judaism, Zoroastrianism taught that Ahura Mazda is the source of morality. And I was just talking recently in a sermon about that.

You know, no Greek god ever said anything like the Jewish god, who says to his people, Be holy, for I, the Lord your God, am holy. At the very best, what the Greek gods could have said is, Do as I say, not as I do because the Greek gods were not exactly known for their upstanding morals.

That's not true of Zoroastrianism. Ahura Mazda is the source of all goodness and the model of all goodness, according to Zoroastrianism. And so, this is another point of contact between Zoroastrianism and Judaism.

Zoroastrianism drew strong contrasts, sharp contrasts between truth and falsehood, between light and darkness. We see similar kinds of contrasts in, of course, many texts in the Old Testament. And this understanding that there aren't a lot of shades of gray.

Now, the idea that there is right and wrong, that there is truth and falsehood, that there is good and there is evil. This is a core of the Jewish faith as well, of the Yahwistic faith. This became a central issue in Zoroastrianism as well.

So, it's a common ground in issues like this that allowed the Jews to enter really into dialogue with Zoroastrian teachings. And we see this happen much later in Babylon and then later in Persia, particularly in the Parthian and Sassanid eras. So we're going to talk a little bit about dualism here because sometimes it is said that Zoroastrianism is the only true dualistic religion.

As I've said, there are questions about how dualistic Zoroastrianism is. But for the most part, what we mean when we talk about dualism is that there are good and evil spirits that are locked in conflict with one another and that it's real conflict, not fake conflict. There are those who believe, even among Christians, that the devil basically is a puppet, that God is using the devil to kind of do all kinds of bad stuff to test us, and that the conflict isn't real.

It's really more of a kind of a sham battle between God and the devil. Well, dualism says that's not true. Dualism says there are powers that are locked in conflict with one another and that it is real.

Pure dualism posits the existence of two equal opposing powers. So, a pure form of Zoroastrianism, and I'd say I've seen Zoroastrianism characterized in this way. I don't think it's true.

But there are those who believe that in Zoroastrianism, that Angra Mainyu, the evil god, the evil god, and Ahura Mazda were viewed as being equals in power and so on. I don't think that's true. Otherwise, Ahura Mazda couldn't destroy him at the end.

But it really kind of reminds me of one Hollywood movie, one of the Oh God movies, where George Burns played God and the devil, and it was like they were both equal. You know, that's dualism. I mean, that's thoroughgoing dualism.

But we don't need to go quite that far to have a dualistic religion. Dualism is not a major focus of the Old Testament. Spiritual warfare does not occur a lot in the Old Testament.

It pops up every now and then, but no, not really, not a big thing. And in fact, it seems, in a sense, in a way, to be kind of deliberately suppressed for reasons I'll go into in just a minute. On the other hand, in the New Testament, dualism is a major feature of New Testament religion.

We are in conflict against our enemy, the devil. He is going about like a prowling lion seeking someone to devour. His spirits, the demons, are at work against our souls, seeking to destroy us and to drag us away from God.

This is a dualistic religion that we embrace. And eventually, you know, we know who wins. So we're willing to endure that dualistic part of it for now.

In the Old Testament, one of the features of the ancient world is something that we call the combat myth. And it kind of pokes its head out every now and then in the Old Testament. What do I mean by the combat myth? In the ancient Near East, A&E stands for, you know, the ancient Near East; typically, the chief god attains his office by defeating an evil god.

In most of these myths, it's a sea monster of some sort. Marduk, the great Babylonian god, has to defeat Tiamat to become the chief of the gods. Baal, the guy who pokes around a lot in the Old Testament, has to defeat a fellow named Lothan to become the chief god.

So, these spirits, these conflicts, are kind of foundational to the mythologies of these religions. Pre-biblical Israel apparently knew of these kinds of legends. And as I say, every now and then, they poke their heads out a little bit.

But they're only hinted at. They're rejected as being historical. So, for instance, we have in the Book of Psalms, we have references to Leviathan, which is the etymological equivalent of the name Lothan.

He appears in Psalm 74:13 and 14, Psalm 27, and very likely is also the equivalent of Rahab in Job 26:12. In these texts, what we see is that Leviathan gets kind of, what we might say, historicized. The mythological figure who might have at once, in some prehistorical time, been regarded as some kind of a rival for God is now simply another creation.

A created being that God can demonstrate his power over this thing. In some places, it's a personification of Egypt with its snaky river and all these kinds of things. But the idea that God ever had to fight a battle to become the Lord is nowhere in the Old Testament.

So, are there opponents to God in the Old Testament? Not officially. Some of the imagery of the combat myth is used. God's conquest over Egypt is used in Psalm 74.

And that combat myth is kind of drawn upon there as an illustration. It might be the way that somebody might talk about how somebody is as strong as Hercules. That doesn't mean we believe in Hercules, but we're using it as an illustration.

That's the way I think we should understand this kind of language in the Book of Psalms. In Job 41, Leviathan is basically a crocodile. And so, we have the great combat myth now historicized and naturalized in this person of the crocodile.

In the intertestamental era, the conflict reasserts itself. We see that there are angelic patrons of pagan nations that are actually at war with the angels of God and the patrons of Israel, and they're actually trying to thwart the plans of God.

This appears in Daniel chapter 10 but also appears in other intertestamental texts. But in Daniel 10, we hear how Daniel is praying for insight into why God hasn't restored his nation. And the angel Gabriel says, I tried to come a while back, but I couldn't get here because the prince of Persia was fighting against me.

I couldn't come. Then Michael, the great prince, came and fought against that prince. That allowed me to come here and bring you the message.

So, we have a real struggle there going on behind the scenes. A struggle between the archangel Michael and the angelic patron of Persia. And he warns us also, he says, now the prince of Greece is coming.

So, we now got the idea that there's an angelic prince behind Greece as well. And that this, too, is going to bring this spiritual conflict and this warfare that's going on behind the scenes. But what about Satan? Where does he figure into all this business? I mentioned the idea of Satan earlier.

In most Old Testament texts, we do have the word satan, which appears several times in the Old Testament. In most Old Testament texts, Satan is not a proper name. You know, Satan is a proper name in the New Testament, not so much in the Old Testament.

Okay, typically, it's a title. Satan simply means an adversary. And oftentimes in the Old Testament, it's used of somebody who's brought a charge against somebody else.

Interesting thing about the Old Testament is that very frequently, when we think of somebody bringing a charge, we might think of them as a prosecuting attorney. In the Old Testament, prosecuting attorneys were allowed to badger their witnesses. They were allowed to harass them.

They were allowed to use real badgers if they could get one. But in various ways, the court system allowed people to use various kinds of nasty sort of underhanded tactics in order to trip people up and get them to reveal their guilt. So if you're bringing a charge against somebody in court, you know, you could sometimes treat them in some really nasty ways in order to try to prove their guilt.

So, as we go through the Old Testament, we see some of these references to Satan. Several times this refers to human adversaries. In 1 Samuel 29, 1 Kings 11, Psalm 109, clearly the Satan is a human adversary.

Somebody who has come against somebody either physically to do battle against them or to take him to court and drag him to court and do nasty things to them. It's like, you know, one text reads, you know, may the adversary and may the Satan stand at his right hand. In other words, I'm cursing this guy for getting hauled into court.

Now, in Numbers 22:22, an angel stands against Balaam, the prophet. And we're told that this angel who opposes him is the Satan. Is he evil? No, he's doing God's will.

So, this is clearly not the devil we're talking about here. He is acting on God's orders to oppose Balaam as Balaam is on his way to apparently curse the Israelites. In Job chapters 1 and 2, here's one of the more controversial uses of the term.

But we are told in the book of Job that the sons of God presented themselves before the Lord and the Satan was in their midst. What does the Satan mean? Depends on which translation of the Bible you use. Because some translations of the Bible translate that Satan with a capital S. That just grates because, you know, there's that definite article there, the Satan, and it should be translated the adversary.

But what adversary? My feeling is, and again, this is, you know, we're kind of treading on a little bit of thin ice here. But my feeling is that this is kind of like a prosecuting attorney. This is one of the officers of heaven.

His job is to investigate people. So God says to Satan, Hey, what have you been up to there, Satan? And Satan says, well, I've been going all over the earth and checking everybody out. And God says, yeah, what about my man Job there? Now, there's a good guy.

And the Satan says, you know, the only reason he's good is because you're blessing him so much. Let's see what happens if we take away all those blessings. This is precisely the way a prosecuting attorney would work in the ancient world is they want to create doubt, and they're willing to get physical to do it.

So, the satan in the book of Job seems to not be the devil of the New Testament. Now he prefigures the devil of the New Testament. He does.

But that's, you know, another topic, which I really can't go into very much right now. Anyway. Zechariah chapter one and two.

Once again, we have the Satan. And the accuser is accusing the high priest Joshua. What he's accusing him of, we don't know.

But it says that it's a vision where the prophet sees the high priest standing there dressed in dirty robes. And the Satan is standing there accusing him of all kinds of nasty stuff. And Michael defends the satan and says, you know, the Lord rebuke you.

So we have Michael acting as kind of like the defense attorney there, which is kind of a kind of a neat image when you think of it. Yep. First Chronicles 21.1. This is the only place in the Old Testament where we can say for certain that the word Satan is used as a proper name.

Here we are told that Satan tempts David. And this is a remarkable statement. This text is clearly written in the Persian era, maybe fairly well further far into the Persian era.

And we can contrast this with 2 Samuel 24, which tells the same story. It's about how David was tempted to number the people of Israel and do a census of the people. And the king wasn't supposed to do a census.

But according to 2 Samuel 24, we're told that the Lord tempted David to do a census of the people. Now, that's a difficult passage. It's a difficult passage because, you know, we read in the book of James that God doesn't tempt people to do evil.

But that's not what 2 Samuel says. Well, First Chronicles kind of fixes that because First Chronicles tells us it was Satan who tempted David to number the people of Israel. Theologically, we can reconcile that, okay? We can say, well, you know, if he's the prosecuting attorney, he's acting on God's orders.

Theologically, we can do that. Historically, it might not be so clear. So how does this Satan become the devil? Well, in Zoroastrianism, we've got a Hramazda locked in perpetual combat with this evil dude by the name of Angra Mainyu, okay? This very powerful, strong, evil person.

Angra Mainyu is the source of all evil. He is the father of lies. And that also sounds familiar to us.

We're familiar with the New Testament. But beneath this chief fiends, there is a legion of evil spirits who do his work, okay? And according to Zoroastrianism, this is very, it's ordered like an army. It's ranked like an army.

And they've got the names of all the various spirits. And very much this sort of reminds me of the New Testament, where Jesus is casting out demons, and the scribes and Pharisees say he casts out demons by the prince of demons. Which, of course, assumes this hierarchy of spirits, just like what we see in Zoroastrianism.

Eventually, we're told Hiramazda is going to destroy Angra Mainyu and his minions. And of course, we know the end of the story of the book of Revelation, where the devil and all of his evil minions are cast into the lake of fire. That imagery is very much at home also in the Zoroastrian religion.

Now we can ask, which came first? And I do think that's a legitimate question. Was Judaism already on a trajectory toward an understanding of Satan as an opponent of God and an opponent of God's people? It doesn't seem to be before the intertestamental period. But by the intertestamental period and in those days of the Persian domination, we see this come much more to the fore.

We could possibly surmise that the influence of Zoroastrianism helped the Jews understand the devil as a separate spiritual entity, actually literally opposed to the work of God. They understood that they could do this, they could embrace this idea without having to believe in two gods. See, that was an important thing to them because they believed in only one God.

But if they believe that these other spirits are not God, then they can entertain this kind of dualism without sinking into a form of polytheism. Angels are another aspect of this whole process. In the Old Testament, angels play a kind of minor role.

They are God's messengers. They are God's warriors. We hear about the angelic hosts.

They seem to be part of the divine council, though this is kind of questionable. In the intertestamental period in Judaism, on the other hand, angels become much, much more prominent. It's really in the book of Daniel that we first see angels given names.

Of course, we know the Book of Daniel was written in the Persian period and then, of course, into the Greek period. But angels then take these roles as being kind of emissaries of God more so than in the Old Testament. Angels are individuals.

They have names. Angels are specialists. And we find this out, particularly in texts like 1 Enoch.

And 1 Enoch is deeply interested in angels and has a very highly developed angelology. And that kind of idea much deeply carries on into Judaism, into the New Testament era into the rabbinic era and so on. Angels have various ranks.

We already see a little bit of that in the Old Testament. I can think of one passage where Joshua meets an angel before he goes out, and he says, so are you for us or are you for our enemies? And the angel says, I am here as the captain of the Lord's hosts. So, already in that book of Joshua, we see the idea that angels could have different ranks, but it's not emphasized a lot.

Well, when we get to intertestamental Judaism, they all get ranks. They all get specializations. They get very explicit descriptions of their different responsibilities and so on.

So, we see these as very similar to the minions of Ahura Mazda in Zoroastrianism. Again, the question is how much influence was really involved here? We cannot say for sure, but what we can say is that there was clearly an idea developing that there were spirits other than the Lord who did not threaten God's soul position as being the only God. There could be this understanding that there are spirits that are not necessarily divine beings in that sense.

And the same, of course, is true of demons. The Old Testament knows of the existence of demons but doesn't say a lot about them. The idea of demonic ranks, the idea of demon possession, and even the idea of demons tempting people don't appear at all in the Old Testament.

Of course, it is very important in the New Testament. The role of demons in the Old Testament is very similar to the role of demons that we find in Mesopotamia and Syria. They're troublemakers.

They bring the bad winds. They cause disasters. They hide out in the realms between the lands, and they haunt the ruins there.

So, in the ancient world, the belief in spirits was universal. Everybody believed in spirits, demons as we call them sometimes. A lot of times in the Mesopotamian religions, these demons were believed to be the offspring of gods.

Sometimes, they were believed to be spirits of the dead. A spirit of the dead who hadn't been properly propitiated with offerings could become a demon. Demons inhabited, as I say, the realms between the earth where people lived and the heavens where the gods lived.

They're the spirits of the sky. In the New Testament, Paul talks about the prince of the powers of the air, and he's speaking there about the demons, of course. So, that was the realm of demonic spirits.

Demons can be responsible for the disease. They can cause trouble, but they were never really thought of as causing humans to sin. That's on us.

So, again, in the Old Testament, I believe that there is a deliberate avoidance of the theme of demons. Really, primarily because there was this understanding among most ancient peoples that demons were gods. They're minor gods, but they were gods.

The main theme of the Old Testament, the main idea that they want to establish, is there is only one god. So, you can't have a lot of talk about demon spirits because that would just be confusing to people. You know? There is no word in the Old Testament equivalent to the word demon in the New Testament.

When we read the word demon, we know what it's talking about in the New Testament. In the Old Testament, there are a lot of different spirits that seem to be demons—the Shadim, which appear to be storm demons, which are mentioned in Deuteronomy 32.

The Saarim seem to be goat demons in Leviticus 17 and Isaiah 34. Lilith, the night hag. Now, Isaiah 34.

Azazel might be the hairy goat demon. You know, there are questions about that as well. Now, there is controversy around all these figures because many people believe that these refer to demons.

Other people think that they refer to natural animals. In the context, it seems demons is very possible. But these demons are depicted as living in wilderness areas and they are worshipped by apostate Israelites.

And that's one of the reasons why I don't think we're talking about animals here. Because the Israelites would go out into the wilderness to worship these spirits, again, they could cause trouble, but they were not regarded as tempters.

In Zoroastrianism, demons are a little bit different because they play important roles there. Demons are the minions of Angra Mainyu. They do his dirty work.

They have names. They have specializations. They go about doing bad stuff.

All right. The idea of demons having names, does that appear in the New Testament? Oh, yeah, it does. Yeah.

Jesus, talking to the demons, says, tell me, what is your name? And it says, our name is legion for we are many. So, the idea that demons could have personal names is something that seems to be new to the New Testament. Persian kings distinguished between the worship of the local gods, which was tolerated, and the worship of demons, which was treated harshly.

We already read Xerxes' talk about how he destroyed the worship of the demons. So , they made this clear distinction between the different forces and the different features of these forces. Gods are gods.

Demons are demons. Demons are not gods, according to Zoroastrianism. So was the interest in demons in the intertestamental era encouraged by contact with Zoroastrianism? And this one, I think we can see that it could have definitely been something that could have helped the Jews to understand how there could be evil spirits in the world, how there could be spirits that are not God, spirits that have evil intentions on us, and spirits that are not working just chaotically, but rather whose tasks and whose duties are in some sense coordinated.

So, the idea of the demonism of the New Testament coming and being, or at least being inspired by some of these ideas from Zoroastrianism to me, is pretty plausible. Now, life after death. This is the final one we're going to talk about here, and it is kind of one of the classic examples used by biblical scholars to talk about the influence of Zoroastrianism.

The Old Testament is not very interested in the subject of life after death. And this is kind of surprising because this is an idea, a theme that absolutely infatuated Israel's ancient Near Eastern neighbors. I mean, the Egyptians built these giant pyramids in order to preserve the souls of their pharaohs after death.

The workers, the common men in Old Kingdom Egypt, wanted to be buried in the shadow of the pyramid so that they could live on after death. In the middle and later kingdoms, of course, the common people were even being mummified so that they could survive death. In cities of Canaan, like Jericho, they would literally bury the dead under the floor of the houses so that they could continue to take care of their spirits after their death.

In Mesopotamia, we have tombs that are equipped with feeding tubes so that people could pour libations into the tombs to keep the dead happy. So, all around Israel, we've got people who are infatuated with this idea of life after death. And then we read the Old Testament and almost nothing.

Well, not almost nothing, but what is there is kind of questionable. In the Old Testament, dead people were often considered demigods. The idea of a spirit of the dead person being a divine being was fairly common.

And we even see this sneak through a little bit in some Old Testament texts when Saul, the king, goes to the witch of Endor and asks her to bring up the spirit of Samuel. When that spirit appears, the witch of Endor cries out in fear. And Saul says, what do you see? And she says I see a God rising from the earth.

So, the idea that the spirits of the dead were in some sense gods was prevalent and present even in Israel. And so when the primary theme of the Old Testament is to establish that there's one God and one God only, you can understand why they might have a little bit of trouble with everybody being obsessed with spirits of the dead, when the common understanding was that these were gods.

Care of feeding of the dead. I talked about that a little bit already. So was the Old Testament deliberately avoiding the theme of life after death in much of its narrative? I think so.

I think so. I think that it was not until really the end of the Old Testament that the idea of life after death could be talked about with some openness. Now, this isn't to say that there was some imagery, of course, in the book of Isaiah and in the book of Ezekiel, there is imagery that talks about resurrection.

But interestingly enough, that imagery is used to talk about the nation being restored to life again, not individual people being restored to life again. The idea of an individual surviving death and coming back to life again that's something you don't see in the Old Testament. Really, not until you get to what might have been the last book written in the Old Testament, which is the book of Daniel.

So, the ideas of resurrection are beginning to emerge at the end of the Old Testament. Now, we hear of this place called Sheol. The dead do not go to heaven.

You'll never find any place in the Old Testament that talks of the dead going to heaven. For that matter, there isn't a lot about it in the New Testament either. But at any rate, you don't find the idea of the dead going to heaven.

They're waiting in Sheol for the resurrection of their bodies. During the intertestamental period, we start to see a diversity of views on resurrection. We see 1 Maccabees, which I already talked about, with no mention of the resurrection of the dead.

Your hope for life after death is that somebody is going to remember you and say good things about you after you're dead. Second Maccabees, the righteous are going to be restored to life again. The dead are going to lay in the tomb and rot.

And we find this continuing into the New Testament era, of course. The Sadducees denied in the New Testament era that there was any such thing as a resurrection of the dead. The Pharisees, on the other hand, believe very strongly in the resurrection of the dead.

We also have the idea in many texts of the double resurrection, the resurrection of all people, good people, to an eternal life of bliss and in the presence of God, the resurrection of the bad people for eternal torment in the lake of fire. Did Zoroastrian beliefs influence Jewish ideas of the afterlife? Now, as I already mentioned, this is kind of a classic example that scholars use to talk about Zoroastrian influence in Judaism because, according to many Zoroastrian texts, the Zoroastrians have a very elaborate understanding of the afterlife. But here's the thing.

We don't know when those ideas arose. So the Zoroastrians speak of a lake of fire and the dead and the good righteous passing through a lake of fire. The righteous, when they pass through this lake of fire, they're purified.

They become holy and ready for the presence of God. The evil, when they pass through this lake of fire, well, they're burned up. And so that imagery could be compatible with, say, the book of Revelation and the New Testament in a way.

But we don't know where that imagery came from. Was Judaism influenced by Zoroastrianism, or was this a case in which they sort of influenced one another? So, what I'm going to say is, it is possible, of course, that Zoroastrianism influenced in Jewish thinking along lines that were already developing in the book of Ecclesiastes. We have the author of Ecclesiastes who's questioning the idea of life after death.

And at one point, he says, well, who can say, you know, who can say if the story of the soul of a man goes up and the soul of an animal goes down? Who can really say? He's kind of agnostic about it, right? And this is such a far cry from what we get in the New Testament where we're told, you know, that the dead shall live again, that we shall rise as Jesus rose. Of course, you know, we've got the benefit of the resurrection of Jesus Christ. But that obsession with the New Testament, that obsession with the idea of life after death, could have been encouraged by that kind of contact with Zoroastrianism.

But again, we cannot say that with certainty, because we know there was already imagery in the Old Testament that used language of resurrection. That imagery came from somewhere. Were the ideas already there, percolating among the people of Judah even before the time of the intertestamental period? It seems likely to me.

And so, what we might have seen, again, is an encouragement for the Jews to think along those lines, but not necessarily a sense where the ideas actually originated in Zoroastrianism and then were adopted by Judaism. That said, we are going to leave the idea of the Persian influence, but we need to remember that the contact between the Jews and the Persians continued for centuries after the fall of the Persian Empire. And so, the opportunities for contact and cross-fertilization continued for a great period of time.

We need not fear the idea that the Jews might have learned something about their own god from their contact with other peoples. And that's a good lesson for us as well. You know, I don't think that it is apostasy for us to learn about the religions of our neighbors.

To worship their gods is another thing, but to learn about them is, of course, can be a enriching experience for all of us.

This is Tony Tomasino and his teaching on Judaism before Jesus. This is session 4, Persian Influence on the Jewish people.