

Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Jesus Christ

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Introduction

In this paper I compare and contrast Zoroastrianism and Judaism from an evangelical perspective, and (hopefully) prepare the reader to witness the Gospel to our Jewish (and Zoroastrian) friends.

Similarities

Both Zoroastrianism and Judaism claim their revelations were given by a deity to a prophet. Zoroastrians believe *Ahura Mazda*, the creator deity and god of the sky, revealed his commandments to Zarathustra (Zoroaster) on the Mountain of the Two Holy Communing Ones, which some scholars associate with Mount Damavand in present-day Iran.¹ Jews believe that *Yhwh* communed with Moses on Mount Sinai in present day Egypt, imparting to him the *Torah* and, famously, the Ten Commandments.²

Both religions teach that one's earthly actions determine one's after-life status. In Zoroastrianism, those who obey *Ahura Mazda* with good thoughts, words, and deeds in life are thereby admitted to eternal paradise upon death.³ Jews' beliefs are similar, except that from Jewish scripture, scholars have inferred that *Yhwh* employs a sort of preponderance of the evidence standard on judgment day: those that do more good than bad will be rewarded in the *Olam Haba* (The World to Come).⁴ The precise nature of *Olam Haba* is not well-defined in Judaism.⁵

Both religions have messianic ideas. Zoroastrian founding-prophet Zarathustra uses the term *Gathas*⁶ to refer to his own prophetic mission and to the community of his followers who 'bring benefit' to humanity.⁷ Moreover, Zoroastrian texts prophesy the coming of *Saoshiyant*, a future savior-figure who will spread divine truth and lead humanity in the final battle against evil.⁸

Similarly, the prophet Isaiah, the first of the latter prophets of the *Nevi'im*, speaks of a savior who will deliver the nation of Israel from exile (Isaiah 49-57). Believed to have been written during the Babylonian exile, a major theme of Isaiah is the suffering servant, a figure who will endure hardship and pain to redeem His people. Christians recognize this person as Jesus Christ, so one

¹ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, "Zoroastrianism | Definition, Beliefs, Founder, Holy Book, & Facts," Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 20, 1998, accessed October 31, 2024.

² Exodus 20:2-17.

³ "Zoroaster's Teachings | Online Library of Liberty," Libertyfund.org, last modified 2024, accessed October 31, 2024.

⁴ Ahavas Israel, "Judaism and Christianity," Congregation Ahavas Israel, last modified February 21, 2023, accessed October 31, 2024.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ *Gathas* also refers to the seventeen Avestan hymns, traditionally believed to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself, which form the core of the Zoroastrian liturgy (the *Yasna*).

⁷ "Zarathustra and His Faith," Islam Ahmadiyya, last modified 2024, accessed October 31, 2024.

⁸ "Saviour Figure in Zoroastrian," Wikipedia.org (Wikimedia Foundation, Inc., November 8, 2004), last modified November 8, 2004, accessed October 31, 2024.

may say that Judaism in a sense gave birth to Christianity, much in the way that the New Testament was born of the Old.

Zoroastrianism also influenced Christianity, but not nearly as strongly. However, “striking parallels” in the eschatological teachings of Zoroastrianism, Judaism and Christianity include the “doctrines of a regenerate world, a perfect kingdom, the coming of a Messiah, the resurrection of the dead, and the life everlasting.”⁹

Both Zoroastrianism and Judaism have a purification code. Zoroastrianism’s *Avestan Vendīdād* establishes rituals to prevent contact with dead or unclean matter “quite as elaborately as in the Levitical code”¹⁰ (*tumah* in Judaism), and both may have originated as a method of prophylaxis against disease.¹¹

Differences

The principal difference between the two religions is that in Judaism, *Yhwh* is the source of both good and evil, while in Zoroastrianism, *Ahura Mazda* is exclusively good. Zoroastrians believe in a separate evil entity called *Angra Mainyu* who represents the forces of darkness and evil. Judaism therefore presents a monotheistic view where God controls all aspects of existence, while Zoroastrianism is dualistic, separating good and evil into distinct beings.¹² There are also lesser divinities in Zoroastrianism. The agents of *Ahura Mazda*, *yazatas*, and those of *Angra Mainyu*, *daevas*, are similar but not identical to the angels and demons of the Abrahamic religions.¹³

The “monotheistic conception of Yahweh may have been quickened and strengthened by being opposed to the dualism or quasi-monotheism of the [Zoroastrians],” and there is little doubt that “Judaism was strongly influenced by Zoroastrianism in views relating to angelology and demonology, and probably also in the doctrine of the resurrection, as well as in eschatological ideas [the part of theology concerned with death, judgment and destiny].”¹⁴

Judaism is probably more ancient than Zoroastrianism, originating with Abraham around 1,800 BCE, while Zoroastrianism was founded in Persia by Zarathustra as late as the 6th century BCE, although some scholars argue that the two were more contemporaneous.¹⁵

Zoroastrians keep a sacred ‘victorious fire’ (*Atash Behram*) continuously burning, and recite prayers (*Gah*) five times a day. Both practices are extremely ritualistic, for example:

⁹ “ZOROASTRIANISM,” Jewishencyclopedia.com, last modified 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Yitzhaq Feder, PhD, “Tum’ah: Ritual Impurity or Fear of Contagious Disease? - TheTorah.com,” TheTorah.com, last modified 2019, accessed October 31, 2024.

¹² “ZOROASTRIANISM,” Jewishencyclopedia.com, last modified 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

¹³ “Zoroastrianism - Wikipedia,” Wikipedia.org, last modified 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

¹⁴ “ZOROASTRIANISM,” Jewishencyclopedia.com, last modified 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

¹⁵ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “Zoroastrianism | Definition, Beliefs, Founder, Holy Book, & Facts,” Encyclopedia Britannica, last modified July 20, 1998, accessed October 31, 2024.

Atash Bahram fires are extraordinarily difficult to start, which explains why there are so few of them. The oldest fire in India, for example, has stayed burning for more than 1,000 years in a village called Udvada, north of Mumbai. To start it, Zoroastrian priests had to walk back to Iran to fetch a collection of sacred items called the *alat* – such as holy ash, a ring and the hair of a bull. En route they had to hide to avoid enemy armies and could not cross any rivers or seas, because fire and water cannot mix. It then took 14,000 hours of ritual. But here's where it got really difficult: an Atash Bahram must be made by combining 16 different fires, taken from the homes of various professions such as a bricklayer, baker, warrior and artisan, plus the fire of a *burning corpse* and the *fire of lightning*. The latter fire is particularly difficult to source, because two Zoroastrians have to witness the lightning, and within a rainy storm hope that the strike sets something alight.¹⁶

In comparison, practicing even orthodox Judaism is a relatively simple affair. Orthodox Jews pray three times a day (*Shacharit* in the morning, *Mincha* in the afternoon, and *Ma'ariv* after sunset), and observe other daily ritual practices such as keeping *kosher*, studying the *Torah* and *Talmud*, observing gender separation in religious settings, and dressing modestly.¹⁷ No need to burn corpses or to wait for lightning to strike.

Witnessing to Jews

I was raised Catholic, and only recently joined an evangelical church, so I haven't had the occasion to formally witness to anyone. But I've discussed theology with people of many faiths, including Jewish friends, and when I do have the opportunity to bear witness to a Jew, I will keep the following in mind.

The Book of Isaiah, the first of the major prophets in the Hebrew *Tanakh*,¹⁸ clearly prophesied the birth, life, and death of Jesus Christ. For example, Isaiah speaks of the Messianic King: The Mighty God (Isaiah 9:2-7); the Salvation of Jehovah (Isaiah 11:1-12:6); the Servant of Jehovah, the Covenant of the People, and the Light of the Gentiles (Isaiah 42:1-25). In Isaiah 52:13–53:12, this Messiah is described as a servant who is simultaneously a priest, sacrifice, conqueror, sufferer, intercessor, and the channel of God's grace to sinners. Isaiah prophesied the coming of a wonderful counselor, a mighty God, an everlasting Father, and a Prince of Peace (Isaiah 9:6). In this same passage, the Messiah is described as *both Son and Father*.

Christians recognize the person described above (and in the Jewish *Tanakh*) as the promised Messiah: Jesus Christ of Nazareth, the Son of God. Isaiah 11:1 states:

¹⁶ Richard Fisher, "The Fire That Never Goes Out," Long Now, last modified April 13, 2023, accessed October 31, 2024 (emphasis added).

¹⁷ "The Delicate Power of Modern Orthodox Judaism," Harvard Divinity Bulletin, last modified 2018, accessed October 31, 2024.

¹⁸ The word *Tanakh* is an acronym derived from the book's component parts: *Torah* (the first five books of the Bible, also known as the *Pentateuch*, which contains the law of God as Moses received it), *Nevi'im* (the books of the prophets, of which Isaiah is first and primary of the latter generation) and *Ketuvim* (the writings, which include the psalms and wisdom literature).

The Branch From Jesse

A shoot will come up from the stump of Jesse;
from his roots a Branch will bear fruit.
The Spirit of the Lord will rest on him—
the Spirit of wisdom and of understanding,
the Spirit of counsel and of might,
the Spirit of the knowledge and fear of the Lord—
and he will delight in the fear of the Lord.

He will not judge by what he sees with his eyes,
or decide by what he hears with his ears;
but with righteousness he will judge the needy,
with justice he will give decisions for the poor of the earth.
He will strike the earth with the rod of his mouth;
with the breath of his lips he will slay the wicked.
Righteousness will be his belt
and faithfulness the sash around his waist.

The *Tanakh* even anticipates the unborn Messiah in his mother's womb. Isaiah 49, for example, predicts seven centuries in advance the virgin birth of Jesus by Mary:

The Servant of the Lord

Listen to me, you islands;
hear this, you distant nations:
Before I was born the Lord called me;
from my mother's womb he has spoken my name.
He made my mouth like a sharpened sword,
in the shadow of his hand he hid me;
he made me into a polished arrow
and concealed me in his quiver.
He said to me, "You are my servant,
Israel, in whom I will display my splendor."

There are numerous additional references to Jesus in the Jewish *Tanakh* or in the *Ketuvim* (Writings) of which the spiritually scrupulous Jew should be aware: Ezekiel 18:4 ("For everyone belongs to me, the parent as well as the child—both alike belong to me. The one who sins is the one who will die."); Daniel 12:2 ("multitudes who sleep in the dust of the earth will awake: some to everlasting life, others to shame and everlasting contempt.") Daniel 9:24–27 (the angel Gabriel speaks of an anointed one using the same Hebrew word from which *messiah* is derived; this figure will arrive and soon be "cut off"); and Micah 5:2 ("His times of coming forth are from long ago, From the days of eternity.").

Finally, Isaiah Chapter 53 prophesied God's atonement for humanity's sins through Jesus' suffering, rejection, and death:

Who has believed our message

and to whom has the arm of the Lord been revealed?
He grew up before him like a tender shoot,
and like a root out of dry ground.
He had no beauty or majesty to attract us to him,
nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.
He was despised and rejected by mankind,
a man of suffering, and familiar with pain.
Like one from whom people hide their faces
he was despised, and we held him in low esteem.

Surely he took up our pain
and bore our suffering,
yet we considered him punished by God,
stricken by him, and afflicted.
But he was pierced for our transgressions,
he was crushed for our iniquities;
the punishment that brought us peace was on him,
and by his wounds we are healed.
We all, like sheep, have gone astray,
each of us has turned to our own way;
and the Lord has laid on him
the iniquity of us all.

He was oppressed and afflicted,
yet he did not open his mouth;
he was led like a lamb to the slaughter,
and as a sheep before its shearers is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.
By oppression and judgment he was taken away.
Yet who of his generation protested?
For he was cut off from the land of the living;
for the transgression of my people he was punished.
He was assigned a grave with the wicked,
and with the rich in his death,
though he had done no violence,
nor was any deceit in his mouth.

Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.
After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.
Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

Given the abundance and accuracy of the prophecies of the birth, life, death and even arguably the resurrection of Jesus Christ in the *Tanakh* and elsewhere in the Jewish canon, the question naturally arises as to why Jews, are...well, Jews (and not saved).

One reason is that the good news has been suppressed by Jewish religious authorities, likely in an effort to retain that authority (and their synagogues). For example, rabbis once read Isaiah 53, but removed it from the *Haftarah* (a selection of readings from the books of the Prophets that is read in Jewish synagogues after the *Torah*) after it caused “confusion and arguments.”¹⁹ I bet it did!

Another issue is that unlike Christians, Jews are not necessarily *religious*.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, around 73% of U.S. Jews identify as “Jews by religion,” meaning they consider their Jewish identity primarily through their religious affiliation, while the remaining 27% are considered “Jews of no religion” indicating a stronger cultural or ethnic connection to Judaism without active religious practice.²⁰ However, while most Jews identify as Jewish by religion, a significant portion are not highly observant, with only a small percentage practicing Judaism regularly and strictly.²¹ This is not surprising where, as Winfried Courdan suggests, “[b]eing Jewish is (usually) not a choice, but a tradition one is born into.”²²

As I’ve shown above, there are plenty of compelling textual, spiritual, and historical arguments that evangelicals can make to their Jewish friends about the good news, some of which they may not even be aware, because the truth has unfortunately been suppressed. But a Jew is unlikely to be receptive to those arguments if his Judaism is secular, simply due to lack of interest. Moreover, as Courdan aptly notes, the two millennia of persecution suffered by the Jews, including the “extermination of six million people in the Holocaust” are still at the fore of the Jewish cultural memory, and there is a high risk that evangelism will be viewed with skepticism, and even offense.²³

Faith, like the *Atash Bahram*, can thus be difficult to ignite in the unbeliever, particularly among our Jewish friends. However, once the tinder catches flame, the Fire of Victory will burn for all eternity, illuminating both this world and the next. The promise of salvation is well worth that effort.²⁴

¹⁹ “Forbidden Chapter of the Tanakh | Jewish Voice,” Jewishvoice.org, last modified 2016, accessed October 31, 2024.

²⁰ Katherine Schaeffer, “Jews in U.S. Are Far Less Religious than Christians and Americans Overall, at Least by Traditional Measures,” Pew Research Center, last modified May 13, 2021, accessed October 31, 2024.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Winfried Courdan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 88.

²³ Winfried Courdan, *Neighboring Faiths: A Christian Introduction to World Religions*, Second Edition. (InterVarsity Press Academic, 2012), 89.

²⁴ “The Forbidden Chapter in the Tanakh” YouTube, last modified July 28, 2015, accessed October 31, 2024.