ZOROASTRIAN SAVIOUR IMAGERY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE NEW TESTAMENT

BY

JOHN. R. HINNELLS

Newcastle upon Tyne.

ZOROASTRIAN SAVIOUR IMAGERY AND ITS INFLUENCE ON THE NEW TESTAMENT 1)

Although influence of Zoroastrian eschatology on the Judeo-Christian tradition is widely recognised, 2) so far little attention has been paid to the parallel concepts of the saviour in the two traditions. 3)

1) Based on a paper read to the British Section of the International Association for the History of Religions in London, Sept 18th, 1968.


3) Parallels between the Messiah and Sōsyantr were noted by L. H. Mills, Zarathustra, Philo, the Achaemenids and Israel, Chicago, 1906, p. 437; R. Otto, The Kingdom of God and the Son of Man, London, 1938, p. 251 and Von Gall argued that the post exilic Messiah was influenced by the Sōsyantr imagery, θεοσκέλητον θεού, Heidelberg, 1926, pp. 251 ff. On the other hand N. Söderblom argued that the two figures developed independently, La Vie Future d'après le Mazdeisme, Paris, 1901, pp. 305-308. J. Duchesne-Guillemin, likewise, believes that the parallels between the two figures are vague and general, La Religion de l'Iran Ancien, Paris, 1962, p. 261. W. Staerk contends that the two are very different, since in Zoroastrianism the saviours are not related to the mythical figure of the Primordial Man and the Primordial King. Zoroaster and the other helpers, according to Staerk, are not returning figures of the primordial time;
This is rather surprising since it may be thought doubtful if there could be influence on the eschatological scene generally and not on the central figure of that scene. Further, it is generally held that the form of the later Jewish and Christian concept of the devil or Satan was influenced by Iranian tradition. If this be accepted then it has serious implications for the understanding of a saviour or Messianic figure. When Satan is thought of as the prosecuting counsel within God’s court, as he is in the Book of Job, then he is not a figure with whom the saviour has to deal. When this figure becomes truly demonic, ruling over hell, leading a horde of demons and attacking the world, then the saviour is given a new task. Instead of defeating human forces at the end of the world, in the shape of Edom and Egypt, he must now defeat a supernatural being. This new task demands new imagery, and if the devil imagery be thought to come from Iran, then a most natural source for the developed saviour imagery would be, similarly, Iran.

The intention of this paper is, therefore, to trace the development of the saviour concept in the Zoroastrian tradition in order to see if it casts any light on the vexed question of the origin of the New Testament imagery.

It is important to begin by asking precisely what is meant by the term ‘influence’. While this may imply the transference of a total concept from one tradition to another, it is a fact of everyday experience that to be influenced by someone or something is usually an unconscious process of modifying or developing one’s own beliefs, in accord not only with the source of influence but also with one’s own theological or philosophical convictions. It must be held to be highly unlikely that any religion would incorporate ideas totally alien to its existing faith. Since a religion is more open to influence from doctrines which bear some degree of similarity to the beliefs which it already...