

# Notes for Quiz #3

History of Ancient Religion • Fall 2022

## 1. Who was Zarathustra? What change did he bring about in ancient Iran?

Zarathustra was a religious reformer living in Iran in the early Iron Age (historians disagree about the actual century). He promoted two key elements of later Iranian religion. First, the Iranian pantheon was rethought to focus on Ahura Mazda as an organizing force—not a creator god, but one who gave creation form and structure.

Second, he taught that the divine world, and its influence on Earth, was balanced between two opposing forces: one of truth and order, represented by Ahura Mazda, and one of falsehood and disorder, represented by Ahriman. Ahura Mazda and Ahriman were presented as twin deities, who each made a choice early in cosmic history—Ahura Mazda choosing truth and Ahriman choosing falsehood.

These teachings are the basis for the Iranian religion known as *Zoroastrianism*, which in subsequent centuries became central to Iranian culture. The key element of Zoroastrianism in terms of human behavior is the emphasis on *free will*: like the twin gods, all mortals have a choice between true and false actions.

This two-force perspective can be described as *dualism*, in contrast to polytheism and monotheism.

## 2. According to the text, what was the distinction between *magic* and *religion* in the ancient world? Give an example.

The text argues that what is called magic and what is called religion tends to overlap in forms and practices: both disciplines involve clearly defined rituals; the use of sacred words to invoke divine power (prayer, incantations, forms of divination); sacred objects (relics, talismans, divination stones); and practitioners possessed of unique knowledge.

What distinguishes magic from its religion is that it is external to the observer's religion. Its exotic nature means that magic is both taboo, as outside religious prescription, and alluring—something outside the rules of the local religious system has the freedom to accomplish what religious practitioners cannot.

Magic practitioners, since they were able to expand on or exceed orthodox ritual, were also thought of as having more control over the power of the divine world, compared with priests and other religious figures, who were dependent upon the gods' participation.

This can mean magic practitioners becoming an alternative to official religious institutions, especially for the common folk—though note that the Hittites, when seeking multiple channels to understand the gods' will, sometimes consulted village wise women in addition to the official palace augurs.

## 3. What are some of the ways words and language played a role in ancient magical practices?

Expertise with words was considered a primary characteristic of the magic practitioner. These included the ability to produce *curses* tailored to the individual and the circumstance using longstranded ritualized formulae. *Secret words* were kept as potent means of unlocking divine force. *Narratives within spells* were a means of including the lore being a spell in order to ground them in the origin of the power being invoked. In some cases the literal *eating of words* was thought to have an inciting effect on the forces being called upon.

Also related to this is the power of *names*: magic focused on a human target was usually understood to require something elemental to that person (hair, blood, etc.); in some cultures a person's true name could be used in this way, as a focal point of targeted magic.

## EC1 Traditional worship of ancient Iranian gods involved all of the following EXCEPT:

(c) rites of cleansing involving bathing in butter and soft fruits

## EC2 This week's reading was "The First Civilized Man". What do you think this reading suggests about the ancient Iranians, and how they understood the relationship between gods and mortals? Give an example of what you mean.

This is subjective, but there are a number of things that can be mentioned here, including the presence of free will in Yima's refusal to impose Ahura Mazda's laws upon his people, instead seeking to provide a model for civilized behavior. The interactions between Ahura Mazda and both Yima and Zarathustra suggest it was based on mutual respect (rather than on a master/servant model), with the gods' role to care for the world and its people. Another point is that civilization is seen as a process, one that is ongoing through Yima's life and still developing in Zarathustra's day.