

RELIGION,

The Case of Achaemenian Persia

EMPIRE,

With a Postscript on Abu Ghraib

AND TORTURE

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Preface

This book is concerned with two timely topics: religion and empire. More precisely, it explores the contribution of religious discourse, practice, imagination, and desire to emergent imperial ambitions. In exploring this theme, I hope to get past the familiar debate on whether ideals and beliefs or material interests constitute the *real* motive force in history. As most serious observers have long since realized, productive discussion begins with the recognition that consciousness and material circumstances are dialectically related and mutually sustaining. The problem to be addressed in any concrete study is not the chicken-egg dilemma—“Which comes first?”—but how a given group reshapes its consciousness (of self, other, morality, and purpose) through select acts of discourse such that its members feel licensed—or, alternatively, inhibited—in pursuing their material advantage in increasingly aggressive ways. Further, how the practices they develop in that pursuit and the success (or failure) they experience reshape their consciousness, discourse, and practice over the empire’s later history.

Creating an empire is no easy matter, nor is maintaining one. Whether new or old, any empire involves massive projects of military conquest, political domination, cultural encompassment, and economic extraction that are necessary for its survival. When would-be imperialists come to regard these practices—and the violence that goes with them—as religiously wrong or morally repugnant, the likelihood that they will realize their ambitions is, thereby, greatly diminished. Conversely, when the frontline troops, administrators, strategists, tax collectors, lackeys, toadies, and lords of empire succeed in persuading themselves that their tasks are somehow just, holy, and sacred, the project is, thereby, enormously facilitated.

Although these issues have acquired new urgency and cachet since the cold war gave way to America's War on Terror, attempts to engage them on contemporary terrain encounter real difficulties. To do so successfully, one would have to resolve the following questions: (1) Has the American Republic effectively become an empire, or is it in the course of such a transformation? If so, over what period of time did this happen? Alternatively, what further steps are necessary for the completion of the process? (Here, one obviously needs to provide a clear, cogent model of what constitutes "the imperial"). (2) Has American religion and/or the role it plays in American politics—domestic and international—changed as well? If so, over what period of time, in what ways, and with what consequences? (And, here, a cogent model of what constitutes "the religious" is equally requisite). (3) Are there ways in which the observed changes in the religious have produced or facilitated changes in the political that incline the United States toward empire? Have changes in the political produced similar changes in the religious? And how do these interact with other factors (e.g., the economic, the technological, and the demographic)?

These questions have been much discussed, occasioning sharp disputes among academics, journalists, activists, officeholders, and ordinary citizens. In all these circles, passions run high, perspectives differ markedly, and debate serves largely to reinforce well-entrenched opinions. None of this is surprising, for the stakes are enormous, and there is no agreement on basic terms, or on what data might have relevance, let alone on the proper means for their interpretation.

In the face of such difficulties, an obvious gambit is to engage the problem obliquely by considering examples sufficiently removed from our own as to afford some critical distance. To this end, the religious politics and political religions of the British, Roman, Ottoman, Chinese, and Japanese empires have been studied in recent years, as have those of the Hapsburgs, Romanovs, Aztecs, Incas, and occasional others.

The present volume is meant to extend this discussion by taking up a case that has received surprisingly little attention, given that it is of foundational importance, reasonably familiar, and extraordinarily revealing. Founded by Cyrus the Great ca. 550 BCE, and overthrown by Alexander of Macedon some 220 years later, Achaemenian Persia was by far the largest, wealthiest, most powerful empire of the ancient world prior to the emergence of Rome, controlling territory that stretched from Thrace and Egypt in the west to India and Sogdiana in the east. Over the past twenty-five years, our knowledge of the political, cultural, and social history of this empire has improved dramatically, but work on Achaemenian religion has neither kept pace with nor benefited from these other studies. Thus, of the 14,295 items listed in the

comprehensive bibliography of the Achaemenian Empire compiled by Ursula Weber and Josef Wiesehöfer in 1996, only 33 are devoted to the religion of the dynasty and 28 to its religious policies. Nor has the situation changed much since that bibliography was completed.

Since the Achaemenian royal inscriptions were first deciphered in the middle of the nineteenth century, virtually all who have studied their religious content have felt obliged to concentrate their attention on the vexed question of whether the Persian kings and their people were Zoroastrians or not. That the debate should have continued so long is understandable, the evidence being maddeningly ambiguous, but the energy that this issue has consumed is quite disproportionate to its importance. For our purposes, it is relatively inconsequential whether we regard the imperial religion as Zoroastrian in a strict and narrow sense (i.e., consciously adhering to religious reforms effected by Zarathustra) or more broadly as Mazdaean (i.e., marked by worship of “the Wise Lord,” Ahura Mazdā, who is understood as a pan-Iranian, and not a strictly Zoroastrian, deity). Far more important than the question of labels and classification is identifying the core principles of the Achaemenians’ cosmology, ethics, and soteriology—their sense of space, time, history, and purpose—and understanding how this interacted with their will to empire.

Fortunately, there are a few works that suggest ways in which such an inquiry might be pursued. The first of these is Clarisse Herrenschildt’s “*Désignation de l’empire et concepts politiques de Darius I^{er} d’après ses inscriptions en Vieux Perse*” (1977), which showed the overwhelming importance a myth of creation had in Achaemenian discourse. Thus, of the twenty-nine longer royal inscriptions (i.e., those having three or more paragraphs), eighteen (62 percent) open with this myth, thereby investing all that follows with a cosmogonic consciousness: a concern for how the Creator conceived his world and what he intended for it. Notwithstanding the brevity and formulaic nature of this account, Herrenschildt showed how intricate is its diction and conceptualization, how crucial it was for the empire’s self-understanding. Pursuing her pioneer study, there is more that can be said regarding the project the Achaemenians set for themselves: that of restoring perfection on earth, as it was originally created.

Whereas Herrenschildt’s article identified a cosmogonic consciousness as a central part of Persian imperial religion, Marijan Molé’s *Culte, mythe, et cosmologie dans l’Iran ancien* (1963) called similar attention to the Achaemenians’ soteriology and eschatology, including their active sense of responsibility for accomplishing the world’s salvation. A key part of Molé’s argument was his consideration of the word *fraša*, which occurs in several different Iranian dialects. In Avestan and Pahlavi (the languages of the Zoroastrian

scriptures), it is a technical term, denoting the cosmic renovation expected at the end of history, when all evil will be swept away and the pristine perfection of the cosmos restored, consistent with the Wise Lord's original intentions. Further, as Molé skillfully showed, every performance of certain Zoroastrian rituals—above all, the daily sacrifice—anticipates the Renovation and helps lead the world toward its fulfillment. In Old Persian (the language of the Achaemenian inscriptions), however, *fraša* occurs in two different contexts. First, in some variants of the creation account, this word encompasses God's first two (or three) creations and designates them a “wonder” or a “marvel” (the word's most literal meaning). Elsewhere, the same term is used for the most sumptuous palace built by the king, which is, thereby, described as, not just a wonder of comparable status, but an act of quasi-divine creation, a microcosm patterned after the world itself, and—like the Zoroastrian rituals—an undertaking through which a privileged actor (here the king, there the priests) helps accomplish the world's eschatological renovation.

Strikingly original, Molé's book was decades ahead of its time, and many of the initial reactions were hostile. Most devastating of all was the response of Émile Benveniste, who refused to accept it as Molé's *thèse de doctorat*, prompting Molé's suicide. While some of his views remain controversial, Molé's understanding of the ways in which cosmogony and eschatology, as well as priestly ritual and royal action, were related in pre-Islamic Iranian religions is now widely accepted and has important implications for our understanding of Achaemenian religion.

Although Herrenschildt's article points us toward speculation about creation and Molé's book toward that on time's end, there remains the space of history in between. In Achaemenian discourse, cosmogony and eschatology converge, moreover, on the same historical figure, for the myth of creation ends when the Wise Lord made Darius king, just as the Renovation begins with the wonder that Darius produced in his palace at Susa.

We are, thus, led to reflect on Persian kings and kingship, for which there is a fairly large and thorough literature. Best of the lot is Gregor Ahn's *Religiöse Herrscherlegitimation im Achaemenidischen Iran* (1992), which focuses on the question of how Achaemenian rulers sought to legitimate their power. Toward that end, Ahn explores numerous items of discourse through which they represented themselves as God's chosen agents, continuous beneficiaries of his support, and defenders of the cardinal virtues—“truth” (*arta*) above all—against their adversaries. Chief among these was “the Lie” (*Drauga*), a demonic force that corrupted all those it inspired: rebels, foreigners, and enemies of the king being regularly perceived, defined, and, thereafter, assaulted as such.

Such operations were crucial for the formation of empire, and it is easy to understand them as instances of false consciousness or, simply, bad conscience, to use a different theoretical vocabulary. Such judgments rest on the perception that the relation of discourse and practice was distorted, self-serving, and cynical. Legitimation, however, is not just an argument of convenience that the powerful advance after the fact to justify their privileged position and aggressive actions. Admittedly, that is so in some extreme cases, but cynicism is not the only possibility, for it is often the case that those who would persuade others are themselves most persuaded of all. They do not invent theories of legitimacy to serve their purposes but, instead, inherit, embrace, and, occasionally, in finite measure, adapt these to their use. Such theories shape the consciousness of the theorists and help determine their actions while simultaneously helping determine how others will perceive and judge them. Rather than simply providing an *apologia ex post facto*, they constitute an indigenous metaphysic of power and an ideological precondition for the confident, relatively guilt-free use of same.

Taking up the lines of inquiry suggested by Herrenschmidt, Molé, and Ahn, the chapters that follow pursue a set of interrelated questions. How did the Achaemenians understand their place in the cosmos (chapters 1 and 2) and their moral status in relation to others (chapter 3)? What was their view of cosmos, creation, and the struggle of good and evil (chapter 4)? What consequences did this have for their sense of historical mission, including their desire to regain paradise lost (chapter 5)? How did this lead them to deal with enemies and critics as imperial power ran its course (chapter 6)?

In the chapters that follow, I hope to show how Achaemenian Persia perceived itself as God's chosen instrument for the project of world salvation and, as such, supreme benefactor of the peoples it conquered. Beyond this, I am led to argue that such a perspective led the Achaemenians into severe contradictions, which they attempted to suppress and deny, using some rather desperate measures toward that impossible end. This analysis suggests comparison to certain contemporary data, which I consider in the postscript. For some readers, this discussion will seem the payoff for wading through the ancient materials; for others, it will seem dispensable and gratuitous. I can understand and respect both reactions.

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Note on the Text

Translations of the Hebrew Bible are taken from the Revised Standard Version. All other translations are my own unless indicated otherwise. Editions for the original-language texts are listed in the bibliography.

The abbreviations with which one conventionally cites the Achaemenian inscriptions were established by Roland G. Kent in his *Old Persian* (1953). Briefly, the first (capital) letter denotes the king responsible for a given text, with regnal number where appropriate (C = Cyrus; As = Arsames; D = Darius, D² = Darius II; X = Xerxes, A = Artaxerxes; A² = Artaxerxes II, A³ = Artaxerxes III); the second (capital) letter denotes the site (B = Bisitun, E = Elvend, H = Hamadan, M = Murghab, N = Naqš-i Rostam, P = Persepolis, S = Susa, V = Van, Z = Suez); the third (lowercase) letter differentiates among texts discovered at the same location. For example, DPd = Darius, fourth inscription published from Persepolis. Most of the inscriptions are trilingual, including Old Persian, Elamite, and Babylonian (i.e., Akkadian) versions. Unless otherwise noted, all citations and translations refer to the Old Persian. When other versions enter the discussion, this is indicated by a parenthetical reference to “Bab.” (Babylonian) or “Elam.” (Elamite). Readers interested in a fuller explanation should consult Kent 1953: 4.

I

Wherever the Achaemenian Empire spread, servants of the Great King built walled gardens, inside of which they exercised every possible care to create an atmosphere of peace, tranquillity, relaxation, and well-being. Irrigation canals were constructed to carry cool water and keep everything moist. Dense collections of shade trees were planted to keep temperatures pleasant. Plantings were arranged in geometric patterns to create a sense of perfect order and exquisite beauty. Plants of every conceivable species were imported from all corners of the empire, transplanted, and made to flourish. The same was done with animals, some of which served as game for royal hunts, while others were left to wander. At their leisure, the king and his nobles frequented such sites, understanding them, not only as ideal spaces of repose, but also as models of the empire they were more actively laboring to create and prefigurations of what the world would be when their work was fully accomplished. To these exquisite gardens they gave the name “paradise” (Old Persian *paridaida*), and the word, with all its nuances, resonances, fantasies, desires, and connotations, spread from them throughout the world.

This charming image of what the Persian Empire was like and what it took itself to be stands in stark contrast with another. Offended by the conduct of a Persian soldier, King Artaxerxes II (r. 404–359 BCE) had him subjected to the torture of “the hollowed-out troughs.” This involved two troughs designed to fit tightly with one another and crafted in such a fashion that a man’s head, hands, and feet could project outward while the rest of his body was en-

cased within. Once the man was locked in this device, the king's henchmen fed him lovely foods and let the resultant excrement accumulate inside. Not only did the latter stink; it also spawned worms, maggots, and insects, which swarmed over the victim's flesh and slowly ate through it, fighting their way to his vital organs. After seventeen days, the poor man was dead, and the troughs were opened for all to see. And, however much this gruesome spectacle may repulse us, it was meant to instruct, for it had a profoundly religious significance and motivation.

The contrast between these two vignettes—the elevated pleasures of the paradise and the degrading agony of the troughs—frames the problematic of this book, which makes use of these and other Achaemenian data to concentrate on two issues. First, what is the relation between religion and empire? Or, to put it more concretely, how is it that the highest religious ideals—the desire to perfect creation, to act as God's instrument of salvation, and to establish a realm of ideal morality in which all living beings can flourish—come to animate and legitimate the project of imperial conquest, domination, and exploitation? Second, at what point do the contradictions between the grandeur of such a religious vision and the brute facts attending the exercise of power become so extreme and pernicious as to become uncontainable, even obscene? When—and how—does the pursuit of paradise find itself inside the troughs? And what does empire tell itself on that unfortunate day?

This book is written for a general audience in a world where the realities of Guantanamo and Abu Ghraib make these issues far from academic. Rather than adding one more *cri de coeur* against the contemporary outrages, however, I have found it more useful to explore an example quite removed in time, space, and cultural particularities, but where similar issues arise in a form that is particularly dramatic and particularly revealing. This is why Achaemenian Persia holds considerable interest.

The picture of Achaemenian religion, politics, and culture that I present is based on painstaking examination of virtually all the relevant primary texts in a variety of languages, together with a few choice pieces of iconographic evidence (albeit regrettably less than art historians might think ideal). For the most part, in the interest of providing a clear and accessible account, I have chosen not to burden nonspecialist readers with philological details and technical discussions. Those are available in articles that have been published elsewhere, reference to which is provided in the notes, where those so inclined will also find suggestions for further reading. Since my discussion presumes no more than a passing familiarity with the Achaemenians and their world, it seems useful to provide in this introductory chapter a historical overview, a sketch of the sources, and a few words on method, before en-

gaging the issues and primary source materials. Those for whom such background is unnecessary can skip directly to chapter 2.

II

The older Persian Empire is commonly referred to as “Achaemenian,” and I will continue this practice, for all that it is something of a misnomer. But the fact is that the empire was founded on two different occasions by audacious usurpers, both of whom history has rewarded with the epithet “the Great.” The first of these, Cyrus (r. 558–530 BCE), began as a local ruler who seized power from his Median overlords. While Darius (r. 522–486 BCE) might have been equally justified in depicting himself as having started a new line and a new era, he chose, instead, to stress continuity, and, toward that end, he employed several different strategies to connect himself and his descendants to the royal line of Cyrus. Shortly after ascending the throne, for instance, he took Cyrus’s daughters and the wives of Cyrus’s sons as his own. By the foremost of these women, he fathered Xerxes (r. 486–465 BCE), whom he made his heir, in place of a son born earlier to a wife who could claim no relation to Cyrus. As a result, all subsequent Achaemenian kings descended from both royal families.

If these royal marriages provided a biological means to suture one family line to another, the manipulation of genealogies gave Darius a discursive instrument with which to advance the same project. Thus, in the longest and most revealing text written by Cyrus and his scribes, a text commonly referred to as the Cyrus Cylinder and dated to 539 BCE, the first Persian dynasty-founder identified himself as follows:

I am Cyrus, King of the World, Great King, Mighty King, King of Babylon, King of Sumer and Akkad, King of the Four Quarters, *son of Cambyses, Great King, King of Anšan, grandson of Cyrus, Great King, King of Anšan, descendant of Teispes, Great King, King of Anšan.*

(Cyrus Cylinder, lines 20–22)

Several things are noteworthy about this genealogy. First, Cyrus assumes much greater titles for himself than he accords his ancestors, signaling a move from local kingship to imperial status. Second, none of the names that enter this list—his own included—have an identifiable etymology, least of all one that would place them in the Iranian language family. Third, there is no mention of Achaemenes, whose name is Iranian, but who enters history

some twenty years later in the first text authored by Darius, a trilingual inscription cut into a rock face at Bisitun and dated around 519. There, the second dynasty-founder introduced himself in this fashion:

Proclaims Darius the King: I am Darius, Great King, King of Kings, King in Persia, King of lands/peoples, *the son of Hystaspes, grandson of Arsames, an Achaemenian. My father is Hystaspes. Hystaspes' father is Arsames. Arsames' father was Ariaramnes. Ariaramnes' father was Teispes. Teispes' father was Achaemenes.* Therefore we are proclaimed Achaemenians. From long ago we are noble. From long ago our lineage has been royal. There are eight of my lineage who were kings before. I am the ninth. Nine, now as before [*or: in two lines*], we are kings.

(DB §§1–4)

Again, there are several points to be made. With regard to the royal titles, these have been changed, reflecting changes in circumstance and Darius's different concept of the empire. With regard to the family line, two of those named—Darius's father and grandfather—were still alive when the inscription was written, as indicated by the use of the present tense (“is,” rather than “was”). With regard to the names, all save one have a clear Iranian etymology. The way this lineage is connected to that of Cyrus also holds interest, for it is done by implication, not directly. Thus, the only ancestor whose name is not Iranian—Teispes—happens to recur in the genealogy Cyrus gave for himself. Whereas Teispes held the paramount position in the Cyrus Cylinder, however, at Bisitun Darius puts Achaemenes in the spot of highest privilege, with Teispes set just below him.

The impression that Teispes has been appropriated and made to serve Darius's purpose (i.e., connecting his lineage to Cyrus's while subordinating the latter to the former) is reinforced by an extraordinary word that appears in the last line quoted above. This is Old Persian *duvitāparanam*, a word that is deliberately ambiguous. On the one hand, it most properly means “now as before,” which stresses the continuity of this royal lineage while also faintly suggesting its restoration to power after some disruption. The word's phonology is such, however, that it invites a second, alternative interpretation: “in two lines [*or: wings*].” The effect is to conjure up a family with Achaemenes—Darius's ancestor—as its founder, from whom it is named “Achaemenian.” Teispes then appears as Achaemenes' heir and successor, after which the family splits into an elder and a cadet lineage. The former leads to Cyrus, but—as readers of the Bisitun text would know—that line ended with the death of Cyrus's sons in the turbulent year 522. The cadet line then leads to Darius, who assumed the kingship and provided continuity in that same year of crisis (see figure 1).

these events in chapter 3, but of interest for the moment is the royal title that Cyrus accorded his ancestors, and used for himself on an earlier occasion, but dispensed with when his status became imperial. This is the older—and decidedly lesser—title “king of Anšan,” which was not based on any Babylonian (or Assyrian) precedent but had its origins in a different locale.

The site in question lies to the east of Babylon, more precisely, in what was once the kingdom of Elam but was divided into two fragments perhaps as early as the eighth century: a western piece, centered on the great city of Susa, and an eastern piece, centered on Anšan. The former of these fell to the Assyrians under Assurbanipal in 646, while the latter—more distant from Assyrian power—saw the gradual influx of a new population. This was an Iranian-speaking group whose members called themselves the Parsa, Parsua, and/or Parsuma that migrated from the central Zagros Mountains under circumstances that are still very badly understood. It is these people and their descendants whom history designates as the Persians. And, as the land formerly known as Anšan came under their control, it was renamed by and for them.

Cyrus’s ancestors were, thus, petty kings, located in the southwest corner of modern Iran (ancient Parsa or Persis [as the Greeks called it], the modern Iranian province of Fars). Cyrus himself began his career with similar status, a vassal of the Medes, another Iranian people who, in combination with the Babylonians under Nabopolassar, had overthrown Assyrian domination and destroyed the Assyrians’ capital at Nineveh in 612. These two powers jockeyed with one another during Cyrus’s youth, a situation that ended when Persian troops under his command vanquished the Medes in 550. Persian power continued to rise with his conquest of the Lydians under Croesus in 547, and in subsequent years Cyrus gained control over Elam, Armenia, Parthia, Central Asia, eastern Iran, and the Mediterranean littoral, Babylon itself finally falling in 539. With these victories he obtained mastery over Syria, Palestine, Anatolia, and parts of Arabia.

Cyrus thus established the largest, most powerful empire the world had seen to that time. As his adoption of older titles suggests, he—or, more properly, the scribes who worked at his direction—appropriated certain pieces of royal ideology from those he overthrew, as is clear from table 1.

In addition, the scribes responsible for Cyrus’s propaganda churned out a steady stream of fabulous narratives (dream omens, childhood exploits, etc.) designed to establish his extraordinary gifts and divine charisma. Many of these, including the theme of the royal child abandoned at birth for fear of its powers but miraculously saved and raised by animals, had their origin in legends associated with Sargon I (r. ca. 2334–2279 BCE), the founder of the dynasty of Akkad. Other patterns of discourse and royal practice were adopted from Elam, Babylon, and the Medes, with whom the Persians shared certain

TABLE 1: Royal Titles Inherited and Adopted by Cyrus the Great as He Moved from Local to Imperial Kingship

Titles of the Teispid Line ^a	Early Titles of Cyrus the Great ^b	Titles of Nabonidus ^c	Later Titles of Cyrus the Great ^d
	King of the World		King of the World
Great King		Great King	Great King
King of Anšan	King of Anšan		
		Mighty King	Mighty King
		King of the World	(King of the World)
		King of Babylon	King of Babylon
			King of Sumer and Akkad
		King of the Four Quarters	King of the Four Quarters
		Caretaker of Esagila and Ezida	

^a From the Cyrus Cylinder.

^b From the seal found at Ur.

^c Text found on a brick at Ur, available in Schaudig 2001: 549.

^d From the Cyrus Cylinder.

pan-Iranian aspects of language and culture. Unfortunately, the Medes left no written records, and there has not been serious archaeological investigation of Ecbatana (modern Hamadan), their capital city. Most of our knowledge about them comes via Herodotus, whose accounts have received critical scrutiny in recent years. As a result of the doubts that have been raised, one can no longer have full confidence in the Herodotean *Medikos logos* as a precise record of historical events, but it retains considerable value as an ethnographic sketch of cultural tendencies and orientation.

Cyrus established his capital at Pasargadae, close to where he won victory over the Medes, marking the site with a palace and a garden. Ultimately, it also housed his tomb, after he died fighting the Massagetae in 530 while attempting to expand his empire to the far northeast. On his death, the kingship passed smoothly to his son, Cambyses, who had earlier served as his coregent.

Almost equally ambitious as his father, Cambyses conquered Egypt in 525 and kept marching west until checked in Libya. Surviving Egyptian records suggest that Cambyses tried to style himself a proper pharaoh, adopting indigenous titles, and performing the requisite rituals in traditional fashion. Herodotus gives a very different picture, however, drawing on stories cir-

culated by Cambyses' enemies—whether Egyptian, Persian, or Greek is unclear—that depicted him as mad, impious, and arrogant. Whatever the reality may have been, his long stay in Egypt created problems back in Persia and Media, where his brother Bardiya seized the throne in March 522. In July, Bardiya had himself crowned king and proclaimed a three-year suspension of taxes and military service as a means to cement his popularity.

Confronted with this, Cambyses headed home to meet the challenge but died en route under mysterious circumstances. Bardiya's rule, however, was brief, for, in September 522, he was assassinated by a conspiratorial group of seven Persian nobles, one of whom—Darius—subsequently assumed the throne.

IV

Darius's accession was not well received. Almost immediately, rebellions broke out across the empire, and his armies had to suppress uprisings both at the core (Persia, Elam, Media, Babylon) and the periphery (Assyria, Egypt, Parthia, Margiana, Sattagydia, Hyrcania, Sagartia, Armenia, and Arachosia). The monumental inscription at Bisitun was erected to celebrate his victories in these struggles. There, Darius claimed that, within one year of taking the throne, he had vanquished nine rebels, winning nineteen battles in the process. The battles, moreover, were bloody. Casualties in excess of 120,000 dead are reported, and all the rebels were executed, often by impaling, and accompanied by scores of their noble supporters. Special treatment was accorded two rebels (Fravarti and Tritantaxma) who claimed to be descendants of the Median royal line. These unfortunates were tortured, mutilated, and placed on public display, lest anyone think it was possible to roll back the clock and restore the situation that preceded Persian supremacy.

The cases made by each of the rebels were similar, to judge from the brief, formulaic, and highly prejudicial descriptions provided by the Bisitun text. Each one claimed to be the rightful heir to an old royal lineage in a kingdom that had been encompassed by the expanding Persian Empire. In this way, they offered themselves as the rallying point for nationalist sentiments, embodying their people's desire to extricate themselves from Persian rule. In response, Darius passed the harshest judgment available on these men and their aspirations, a judgment simultaneously political, legal, moral, and religious. Stating of each one in turn, "He lied," he dismissed their claims and pretensions, thereby construing them—and all they represented—as illegitimate, deceitful, and corrupting. Not kings, but imposters; not the heroes of independence, but instruments of "the Lie" (*Drauga*), an entity that Achaemen-

ian ideology construes as the incarnation and source of all evil. More will be said on this topic in subsequent chapters.

Once having vanquished those whom he associated with the Lie, Darius availed himself of the opportunity to assert the “truth” (*arta*), that is, to control the historical record. The first four columns of the Bisitun text were inscribed on a dramatic cliff overlooking the main north-south highway between Susa and Babylon, shortly after 521. The final paragraph of this text (DB §70) suggests that the Old Persian (cuneiform) script was invented for this occasion, and it also says that copies were made on clay and parchment for distribution throughout the empire. Some of these have turned up, including a version in Aramaic, and it is clear that the new king meant to disseminate as widely as possible his version of how the relevant characters and events ought to be understood. His discourse advanced his cause no less than did his armies, perhaps showing even greater strategic acumen.

At Bisitun, Darius consistently represented himself as God’s chosen (a theme to which I return in chapter 3), the savior, not just of his family, his people, and the Persian Empire, but of law, order, all that is good and true. In properly dualistic fashion, he depicted his enemies as liars and malefactors.

Worst of them all was the man Darius replaced on the throne: Bardiya, son of Cyrus, who—as certain Babylonian documents make clear—had been accepted as king through much of the empire. However one might have felt about his usurpation, in September 522 Bardiya was dead, and Darius was the only surviving claimant to the Teispid kingship since Cambyses had left no progeny. Bardiya’s murder thus constituted nothing less than regicide and the extinction of Cyrus’s lineage. To exculpate himself from such charges, Darius invented an audacious fiction. In DB §§10–14, he announced that it was actually Cambyses who had killed Bardiya, this having supposedly been done in 525, just before Cambyses left Persia for Egypt. What is more, Cambyses kept the deed secret until 522, when a wily magus (i.e., a Median priest) named Gaumata took advantage of the situation by assuming the dead prince’s identity and proclaimed himself king. The man Darius and his fellow conspirators slew was, thus, represented as having been no legitimate monarch in any sense but the first instantiation of the Lie, the one that gave rise to all others.

V

In the second year of his reign (521–520), Darius had another Elamite rebellion to suppress, and he also waged his first campaign of aggressive war, adding a group of Asiatic Scythians to the empire. To celebrate these accom-

plishments, he added a fifth column to the Bisitun text, and, in that context, he sought to justify his war against the Scythians. Being unable to portray the Scythians as rebels, since they had never been under Persian rule, and equally unable to depict their king as a liar, since he was exactly what and who he claimed to be, Darius's scribes were forced to produce a new category to account for their military initiatives. The Scythians were "vulnerable to the Lie" (Old Persian *arika*), they charged, which is to say that, although the Lie was not yet manifest in their words and deeds, it had begun penetrating their thoughts and worse was sure to follow. Darius's invasion thus acquired the character of a preemptive strike launched in prudent self-defense against the gathering forces of evil.

Darius remained on the throne for another thirty-four years, during which time he added conquests in India (ca. 517) and Thrace and Macedonia (516–512); suppressed serious rebellions by the Ionian Greeks (499–493) and the Carians (496); introduced sweeping administrative, legal, and fiscal reforms; and mounted unsuccessful campaigns against Scythian populations north of the Black Sea (ca. 512) and mainland Greece (490). None of these events, however, leave the slightest trace in the epigraphic record. After Bisitun, the last phase of which was completed by 518, none of Darius's inscriptions show much concern with history, save to register the Great King's pride in his vast construction projects (palaces at Susa and Persepolis, the canal at Suez), about which more will be said in chapter 6. Typical, in this regard, is the earliest inscription that Darius placed in his new capital of Persepolis:

Proclaims Darius the King: This land/people Persia, which the Wise Lord bestowed on me, which is good, whose horses are good, whose people are good, by the will of the Wise Lord and of me, Darius the King, it does not feel fear of any other. Proclaims Darius the King: May the Wise Lord bear me aid, together with all the gods, and may the Wise Lord protect this land/people from the enemy army, from famine, from the Lie. Against this land/people may the enemy army not come, nor famine, nor the Lie. This boon I ask the Wise Lord, together with all the gods. May the Wise Lord, together with all the gods, grant this boon to me.

(DPd §§2–3)

Surely the diction is formulaic, so much so that it lulls most modern readers into a state of torpor. Yet, as Clarisse Herrenschildt, the most astute interpreter of these texts, has consistently stressed, formulaic discourse is exceptionally dense, efficient, and economical. As such, it requires the most meticulous attention. To make sense of a given passage, it must be read

against others to which it is related, and even the smallest variations in form can contain nuances of great importance. Read with such care, this inscription discloses a great deal, and it can be regarded as an early programmatic statement that touches on the most important themes of the whole Achaemenian corpus.

To begin, we should note the privileged position that it accords to Persia, an issue considered more fully in chapter 2. This passage is, in fact, the only place where any territory or population is described as “good,” and the term the text uses—Old Persian *naiba*—holds deep religious significance. It denotes an existential perfection that derives from the Wise Lord, being harmonious with his intentions for the creation and ideally suited to make all life flourish, as the specification “whose horses are good, whose people are good” indicates. *Naiba* is, moreover, a term that stands in implicit contrast with the term for “evil” (Old Persian *duš-*), evil having its source in the Lie. This opposition of good and evil, God and the Lie, Persia and others, is regularly associated with other binary oppositions, for example, light and dark, center and periphery, moist/warm and cold/dry, life and death, above and below, and fragrant and foul, to name some of the most important. Of particular interest, however, is the opposition of “happiness” (Old Persian *šiyāti*) and its loss or absence, a theme taken up in chapters 4 and 6.

Beyond characterizing Persia and the Persians as uniquely good, this passage also depicts them as without fear, something that is, once more, said of no other land and people. This freedom from fear is attributed to the cooperative relation between the Wise Lord and King Darius. In all his other inscriptions, Darius was careful to depict himself as the grateful beneficiary and subordinate instrument of this omniscient, absolutely benevolent (but not omnipotent) deity. Here, however, in the phrase “by the will of the Wise Lord *and of me, Darius the King*,” he claims greater status than he does at any other moment in his proclamations, representing himself as God’s near-equal partner in the project of keeping Persia fearless.

Fear, as he goes on to specify, is a reaction to the presence—or even the proximity—of three entities filled with menace: the enemy army that threatens invasion; famine born of crop failure (most literally, “a bad year”); and, worst of all, the Lie. Fearlessness is the state of confidence that results when these threats are held so firmly in check that one ceases to worry about them: when peace is guaranteed by the strength of one’s army; when food is abundant and the means for its production sure; when truth is guaranteed by the righteousness and integrity of the king. Darius prays to the Wise Lord for assurance that he will keep these threefold menaces at bay, and he shows confidence that this prayer will be granted. But he also implicitly claims to have

TABLE 2: Darius's Implicit Claim to Have Overcome the Three Great Menaces, Thereby Establishing the Conditions for Fearlessness and Well-Being

Menaces ^a	Instantiation of the Threats ^b	Darius's Response ^c
The enemy army	Now, that [rebel] came with an army to make battle against me. (DB §19 etc.)	Then we made battle. The Wise Lord bore me aid. By the Wise Lord's will, I defeated that army utterly. (DB §19 etc.)
Famine	The pastures and livestock and servants and houses of the people, which Gaumata the Magus had taken from them. (DB §14)	I restored the pastures and livestock and servants and houses of the people. (DB §14)
The Lie	When Cambyses went to Egypt, then the people became vulnerable to the Lie, and the Lie grew greatly. (DB §10)	For this reason the Wise Lord bore me aid, he and the other gods that are: Because I was not vulnerable to the Lie, I was not a liar, I was not a deceit-doer. (DB §63)

^a DPd §3.^b DB.^c DB.

secured the conditions for fearlessness by his own actions since, in the earlier Bisitun text, he showed himself victorious over instantiations of these same three threats, as table 2 makes clear.

VI

Having mastered these threats during the crisis year of 522–521, Darius implicitly claimed to have established the conditions for an enduring—perhaps even eternal—state of well-being in Persia and its domains, and this is reflected in the tenor of all his subsequent inscriptions. Thus, of the fifty-three texts that postdate Bisitun, not one acknowledges turbulence, difficulty, or struggle, except in the most indirect fashion. Rather, they are resolutely ahistorical, depicting a stable political, moral, and cosmic order, established by the actions that the Great King undertook as God's chosen, and maintained by his ongoing relation with the divine.

What is more, the inscriptions of Darius's successors all adopt these later texts of his as their model. They too project a timeless calm and a profound disinterest in the vicissitudes of mundane existence. The most one gets is an

occasional hint, as when Xerxes replaced one of his father's more expansive royal titles, "King of lands/peoples of *all* races," with a more modest substitute, "King of lands/peoples of *many* races," to acknowledge that the global nature of Achaemenian ambition had been checked when the Greeks defeated his forces at Salamis (480) and Plataea (479). Even here, however, change coexists with continuity, for this title stands third in a set of four, which otherwise is identical over multiple generations of Achaemenian kings. Starting with the smallest, most modest of their claims—"I am X, Great King"—these expand in their scope, asserting that the Persian monarch rules over other kings, other lands and peoples, and, ultimately, over the entire world. The term used to denote the world, moreover, Old Persian *būmi*, originally meant "earth" (like its cognates in Avestan and Sanskrit) but was adopted by the Achaemenians to denote the political formation they introduced, that which we call "empire." Through this terminology, it was, thus, implicitly conveyed that, in its ideal form, the empire is coterminous with the earth. Although it may fall short of that ideal in the present moment, this situation reflects the flawed and fragmented nature of historical existence. The Wise Lord intended for all humanity to be united, just as he intended for all living beings to thrive. The extent to which actuality falls short of this ideal results from the corrupting activity of the Lie, and, as the Lie is overcome, humanity will be united under the Persian king. In that moment, the actual empire achieves its proper global scope. And, for all that Xerxes may have backed away from his father's claims regarding lands and peoples, he maintained those regarding empire and earth, claims that will still be advanced by Darius II (r. 423–404), Artaxerxes II, and Artaxerxes III (r. 359–338) (see table 3).

TABLE 3: Set of Four Titles Employed from Darius the Great through Artaxerxes III, Showing Levels of Ambition That Expand to the Global

Darius ^a	Xerxes ^b	Later Kings ^c
I am Darius, Great King,	I am Xerxes, Great King,	[I am X], Great King,
King of Kings,	King of Kings,	King of Kings,
King of lands/peoples of <i>all</i> races,	King of lands/peoples of <i>many</i> races,	King of lands/peoples,
King in this great, far- reaching earth/empire.	King in this great, far- reaching earth/empire.	King in this earth/empire.

^a DN_a §2, DSe §2, DZc §2.

^b XP_a §2, XP_b §2, XP_c §2, XP_d §2, XP_f §2, XP_h §2, XE §2, XV §2.

^c D²Sb §1, A²Sa, A²Sc §2, A²Sd §1, A²Ha §1, A²Hc §2, A³Pa §2.

VII

For information about any historical events after Xerxes' accession, we are dependent on foreign sources: mostly Greek, but occasionally Babylonian, Egyptian, Latin, and biblical. Were we to rely on the inscriptions alone, we would be ignorant of the invasions of Greece by the Persians and the defeats they suffered (480–479; also the earlier war of 490); the rebellions they put down in Egypt (486–484, 460–454, 405), Babylon (484, 482–481), Syria (ca. 454), Media (410–408), and Phoenecia (349–344), not to mention the period when Egypt reestablished its independence (393–342); or such events as the murder of Xerxes II (424), the revolt of Cyrus the Younger against his brother, Artaxerxes II (401), the great satrapal revolt (367–359), the murder of Artaxerxes III (338), and the final conquest by Alexander (334–330).

Obviously enough, foreign authors do not report things from a Persian perspective, and one must guard against naturalizing and reproducing their Orientalist tropes as regards Persian luxury, decadence, despotism, and palace intrigue, to cite some of the most common examples. But, if one exercises reasonable caution, there is a wealth of information to be gathered from Herodotus, Aeschylus, Xenophon, Aelian, or Polyaeus, as Pierre Briant has amply demonstrated in his numerous writings, and the reporting of even so biased an author as Ctesias can prove useful, particularly if one dispenses with his interpretive additions. What Ctesias and others describe with disdain as “luxury” (Greek *tryphē*, a term that has connotations of wantonness, self-indulgence, softness, and effeminacy), for instance, can provide a useful picture, not only of Persian wealth, but also of the extent to which it was deployed in ritual practice and symbolic displays, the significance of which was utterly lost on outsiders. This is true, for instance, in the case of the Great King's banquet table, which was simultaneously a means of redistribution, a display of royal generosity, and a microcosmic image of the empire at large. A similar mix of reasonable accuracy in the details and very partial understanding as regards evaluation and interpretation is also evident in Greek reports of many practices through which the Persians instantiated royal virtues, including those that the Greeks (mis)construed as arrogance, cruelty, and the like.

One is able to guard against such misunderstandings by extricating these data from the distortions of a Hellenocentric perspective and restoring them to a Persian, or at least an Iranian, context. Sometimes it is sufficient to compare the Greek texts to the Achaemenian inscriptions, iconography, and archaeological remains. Thus, for instance, Herodotus's contention that the Persians pray, not for benefit to themselves, but only for the king's welfare and that of the Persian people (1.132) preserves—but also distorts—the

much more complex ideology of the inscriptions, where the Wise Lord bestows kingship on the ruler, who thereafter mediates all significant dealings between the human and the divine.

Other cases are somewhat more difficult since the language of the inscriptions is brief and allusive, assuming familiarity with religious and cultural constructs of considerable complexity. While the authors and initial readers of those texts may have possessed the requisite knowledge, we can recover it only through some painstaking operations. Of greatest value in this regard is the evidence from Zoroastrian texts, written in other Iranian languages that are separated from Old Persian by space (as in the case of Avestan, an east Iranian dialect) or time (as in the case of Pahlavi, a middle Iranian dialect of western Iran).

Comparisons of this sort have frequently been entangled with the question of whether the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians, a question that has been much debated, with very inconclusive results. Those who wish to make the case tend to stress the similarities, including the fact that the supreme deity named in the inscriptions, like that of the Zoroastrian scriptures, was called “the Wise Lord” (Avestan and Old Persian *Ahura Mazda*, Pahlavi *Ohrmazd*). Conversely, those on the other side of the question stress those places where the two corpora differ, for example, the Wise Lord’s great adversary, whom Zoroastrians call “the Evil Spirit” (Avestan *Angra Mainyu*, Pahlavi *Ahriman*), “the Adversary,” and “the Lie,” while Achaemenians speak only of “the Lie” (Old Persian *Drauga*, cognate to Avestan *drug* and Pahlavi *druz*). Complicating things further are a host of terms that are cognate and concepts that are similar in their broad outlines but show significant differences in their particulars. As an example, one might note the Old Persian *paridaida*, a pan-Iranian term that denotes a walled enclosure but that the Achaemenians (as we have seen) used to describe their pleasure gardens and the Avesta used to denote a space in which those most tainted by death could receive purification (Avestan *pairidaēza*).

These relations can be understood in one of two ways. Conceivably, the Achaemenians (from Darius, at least) were Zoroastrians whose views were inflected by political—and, perhaps, also other—considerations such that they differed from the ones priestly authors spelled out in more strictly religious texts. Alternatively, the Zoroastrian texts and the Achaemenian inscriptions can be understood as two variants within a broad, pan-Iranian tradition that one might label “Mazdaean.” Both thus inherited common linguistic, cultural, and religious features that they developed in their own fashions and for their own reasons. These two hypotheses are not mutually exclusive, and to affirm the second—as I do—does not necessarily falsify the first.

In truth, I find the question of whether Cyrus, Darius, Artaxerxes, or any

of the others was Zoroastrian in any meaningful sense to be of relatively little interest. Ultimately, I suspect that it is either unresolvable or simply a matter of semantics. In either case, the question has received more attention than its importance merits, and I would far rather turn to matters of broader significance.

Although this book will focus exclusively on the Achaemenians, I treat them as a spectacularly instructive example that lets us consider more general issues, not as an object of inherent fascination. The issue of prime interest is, as I suggested initially, how religion, empire, and torture can be interrelated. More specifically, I hope to explore how certain Achaemenian religious constructs that resemble those found elsewhere—reverence for a benevolent creator, a theology of election and vocation, a dualistic ethics, eschatological expectations, and a sense of soteriological mission—helped inspire the project of empire and informed even its most brutally violent aspects.

As part of this study, I am led to consider certain aspects of Achaemenian cosmology, a cosmology that I have come to understand as self-consciously moral and acutely political. Among the most important aspects are religiously valorized constructions of time and space, self and other, ruler and ruled, unity and fragmentation, happiness and its corruption, all of which found expression in Achaemenian discourse and practice. The chapters that follow thus take up a set of interrelated questions. How did the Persians orient themselves in space, and how did this affect their dealings with other peoples (chapter 2)? What relation to deity and virtue did political power claim for itself (chapter 3)? What pattern and purpose did the Persians perceive in history, and how did this inform their sense of sacred mission (chapter 4)? What ideals did the empire mean to pursue, and how did it work to realize them (chapter 5)? What gaps opened up between ideals and performance, or, more pointedly, how did its ideals lead the empire into contradiction (chapter 6)?