

and, still expressing themselves through imaginative pictures and legends, moved towards a larger spiritual perspective. These legends were thus not all to be found in Zoroastrian literature; or at least, not in the orthodox writings. They figured instead in the 'Zoroastrian apocrypha', the fragments that have come down to us from the Magi of the 'dispersion' in Babylonia and Syria, sometimes preserved in later Syriac, Greek and Armenian writers.

The most famous Magi in history are, of course, the 'three kings' who came to Bethlehem. The Magi were however much more numerous. For they were an ancient priestly tribe or caste of the Medes, and from them the Zoroastrian religion drew its priesthood. At what precise juncture the Magi had adopted the teachings of Zarathustra is not known, and certainly they added to it elements from their own lore. What concerns us now is the spread of the Magi westwards, from the period of the great Iranian empires (6th century BC), so that by the time of Christian origins there were established centres of Zoroastrian teaching far beyond the frontiers of Iran. Wherever the 'Great Kings' had extended the rule of the Medes and Persians, priests had been needed to carry the Religion. Subsequently, many of the territories were lost to the Greeks or Romans, leaving pockets of Zoroastrianism and schools of Magi, cultivating the mysteries in an alien environment. At the same time, they were able to absorb ideas from Babylonian science, Greek geography and history. They evolved a cosmopolitan perspective, as was necessary in the greater world that opened up in late Antiquity as communications improved and barriers were broken down. Their vision was needed to accommodate the wider religious perspective: to appreciate the sheer scale of the redemptive work with which the Illuminator was connected.

Their works have not survived in complete form. From quotations and summaries of later authors we must be content to puzzle out some of their ideas. And we can do this easily, thanks to the brilliant work of two scholars, Jean Bidez and Franz Cumont, who collected nearly all the available information in their two volumes, *Les Mages Héliénisés*.

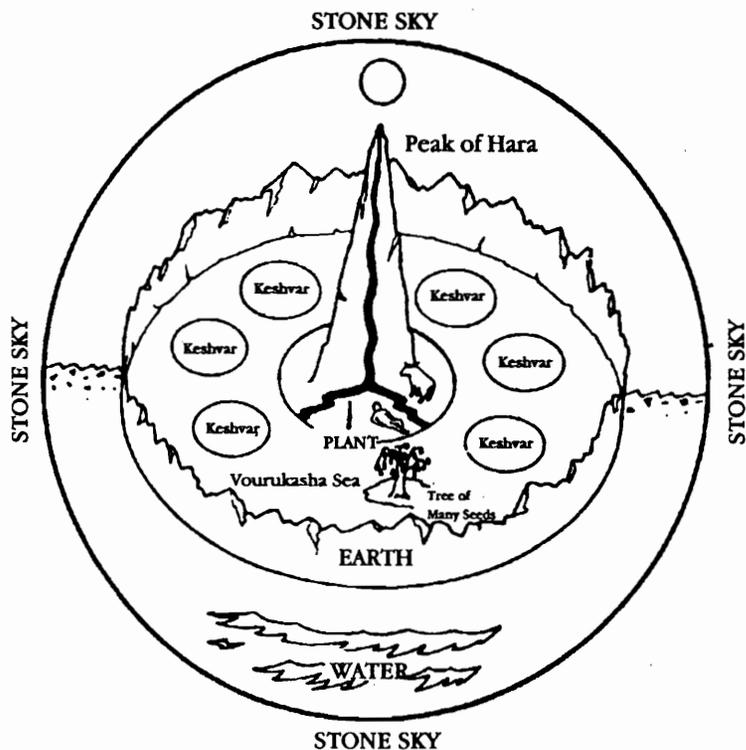
A good deal is said in these fragments about Zarathustra. Much of it does not seem to fit the prophet known from the Iranian literature, however, to the perplexity of scholars, so that it has generally been dismissed as inauthentic. But there is another way

of looking at it. Some of it surely derives from the reappearances of the Illuminator, when the prophecies of his reincarnations were fulfilled. When we hear of a Greek Zarathustra, or a Babylonian Zarathustra, or a Zarathustra in India — the information may come from his rebirth as one of the Saoshyants, announced prophetically in the *Avesta* but known to have happened by the later Magi. By their time it was no longer prophecy, but could be given a local habitation and a name. The compiler of the *Apocalypse* knew a complete cycle of no less than twelve incarnations. And the evidence is that the Magi of the 'dispersion' in Babylon and the West had already had to expand their framework to include more incarnations than originally anticipated. They had had to absorb the further teaching of the Illuminator in his incarnations outside Iran, and a message that now had to include the entire known world.

The underlying framework itself, on the other hand, was authentically Iranian. For the early myths of Iran give us a world-picture embodying the different consciousness of primitive man. Man did not then feel himself to be an outsider, wandering and observing, building up knowledge of his environment as he went. He felt directly related to his world. His environment was a 'centre' to which everything in the world — and the universe — stood in spiritual relationship. He could not detach himself from it. For the primitive Iranians the plateau of Iran was the world. We moderns can relate ourselves more freely as individual 'egos' to the world through which we move, but the archaic Iranians were part of Iran, and arranged their experience around their homeland as we do around our centre of consciousness or ego. The world appeared to them, therefore, roughly as follows: in the centre was Iran, and the world-mountain from which the heavenly water flowed down to earth was identified with the Elburz range, to the south of the Caspian Sea. This and the other seas were inlets of the all-encompassing sea (like the Okeanos of the Greeks) that surrounded the continent, called by them the Vourukasha Sea.

In the surrounding sea, however, were six other continents. The earth is thus divided into seven regions (*kesbvars*) (Fig. 1, p. 26). It is apparent in the myths about them, however, that the other six *kesbvars* are in some ways a cycle spread out in time as much as in space. They are mentioned, for example, at the time of the flood,

Figure 1. The old Iranian world-picture showing the central continent with the world-mountain, and the six other *Keshvars*. (After Mary Boyce).



when the seed of a new race crosses over from one continent to another. And it is said that at the end of things the *keshvars* will all be joined in one land-mass, restoring the state of the beginning. Hence at the End of time there will be only one continent, but it will have absorbed all that took place on the other *keshvars*. Plainly behind the myth stands an understanding of the cycles of continents that we have, more scientifically expressed, in modern esotericism. In fact, the cyclic aspect of the Iranian world-picture is its most predominant feature. It means that for the ancient Iranians everything that happens on the other *keshvars*, i.e. among the other peoples, is either a left-over of the past or an anticipation of the future of man; but Iran itself is the focus of man's present reality.

This point of view had its justification in the Old Iranian cultural epoch (c. 5000 — 3000 BC); as Rudolf Steiner describes, the evolution of man achieved there a step forward in consciousness. It had to be modified, however, in later times!

We can see the cyclic aspect especially clearly when we come to note a further development of the Saoshyant teaching. Some versions said that there were to be seven Saoshyants rather than three: one incarnation for each *keshvar*. In the myths it sometimes sounds as though the seven would come simultaneously at the End of time, at the Transfiguration, with Zarathustra returning as the Saoshyant for our own, central continent. But a deeper interpretation shows this to be a way of summing up the development of the whole, whose meaning emerges at the end with the 'Transfiguration' of the earth. The very basis of the Saoshyant myth, after all, is the idea of births at long intervals when the virgins come to bathe in the Lake. The aspect of 'simultaneity' comes in when the sequence of births is conceived as phases of a single whole. This indeed is a great difference from the Jewish expectation of the Messiah: the Jews saw his coming as a decisive intervention in history, turning it from its old channel and bringing about a radically new condition of humanity. For the Iranian mind, the changes in the human condition are brought about by the cyclic, rhythmic world-process. At the very beginning of the world, Ohrmazd set in motion the chain of events, the sequence of times that will lead to Ahriman's defeat. Though the Saoshyant is at the centre of the struggle, and himself a sign of imminent victory, he does not mark a new intervention in the Jewish sense. The Saoshyant comes at the appropriate juncture in the cycle. Hence the recurring nature of his work, and the allocation of his appearances to the cycle of *keshvars*. In other words, in Iranian thought we have a prophology, not a prophecy of a decisive redeeming figure.

It was the Essenes who realized that the two concepts had to be brought together to give the greater picture. It was Christianity which burst the bounds of both earlier systems of thought to express the reality of what actually happened. But before we enter upon such staggering events, we must complete our picture of the older cyclic ideas and their elaboration.

There are cycles, and cycles. The pattern of six *keshvars* plus a central continent reproduces a structure that runs through the