

# *BLACK BANNERS AND RED ROBES:*

The Influence of South Asian Religion on Early Islam

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## **Introduction**

There seems to be a startling lack of cohesion around what ‘Islam’ actually is. Recently scholars have dedicated volumes to answering these fundamental questions. Perhaps most notable is the late Shahab Ahmed, whose work showcases his erudition but also the complexity of this query. Islam defies bounds and definition, its long history presents a contradiction between its adherents and tenets and acculturation by and from supposedly foreign elements. Answering this question becomes more difficult when we consider the inclinations and tendencies of those who study Islam in the academic space. It would be difficult to argue that the study of Islam and Islamic history were not colored by contemporary events and individual dispositions.

This work attempts to provide a small insight into where the bounds of Islam lie. It does this by tracing the influence of South Asian religions on early Islam. It specifically looks at the formation of the Abbasid Revolution and how its *da’wa* campaign opens the door for all manner of religious variegation. In particular, we hope to show how elements of Buddhism and Jainism flowed into Persia and were eventually adopted by the various Mazdean religions in the region. Particular emphasis will be given to Zoroastrianism, Manicheism, and Khurrami beliefs, which we argue that the latter two were incorporated into the emerging ‘Alid and Shi’i movements. To the duration that this influence persisted, we make no definitive claims, only that these ideas were incorporated by some groups for a time.

Our discussion begins with a brief overview of both Buddhism and Jainism’s emergence in India. These faiths were both founded in the *śramaṇa* tradition in Hindustan. Their emphasis on societal retreat, mendicancy to various degrees, and belief in *samsāra* are the key elements we hope to focus on. We attempt to trace the spread of both faiths into Persia. However, the paucity of source documents around Jainism makes it somewhat difficult. Buddhism is somewhat less

difficult to trace, as there exist both remnants of a written record and archaeological traces. There is some evidence that Buddhism had a presence in areas such as Khurasan.

From there we move westward to Ctesiphon and the Sassanian empire, where we find the prophet Mani. This new faith which claims to be the final truth heralded by a man who is the ‘seal’ of the prophets before him presents a combination of ideas from Christian Gnosticism, Sassanian Zoroastrianism, and notably Buddhism and Jainism. In addition to Manichaeism, the region was also home to localized Khurrami sects. While we take a precursory look at Khurrami beliefs, we delay a deeper investigation until later in the work. This is due to the fact that Khurramism evolves over time.

From there, we arrive at the heart of our discussion centered around the years leading to the Abbasid Revolution (*dawla*) and the end of Islam’s first dynasty. The end of Umayyad rule also marked the end of its ethnoreligious state, which privileged Arab Muslims. Though bringing together the coalition of Arab and *mawali* which would engender this change was no small feat. The Abbasids relied on a broad base of support, unified principally on their antagonism towards the Umayyads. A large swathe of the popular support the Abbasids enjoyed came from those who sought to restore the Prophet’s bloodline. The intentional ambiguity by which the Abbasids would fulfill this promise allowed them to court and muster the distinct groups needed to achieve their political machinations. What we hope to demonstrate is that the need for the Abbasids to summon a large oppositional force required them to tolerate, to a degree, doctrinal differences among their supporters. This interaction between both Muslims of all shades and non-Muslims led to the influx of “foreign” ideas into Islam.

We see these ideas most clearly in the cult-like following which emerged around certain enigmatic individuals. Perhaps most well-known is Abbasid leader Abu Muslim, who was raised

to a near-divine status by some of his adherents. Similarly, a member of the *da'wa* movement, Khidāsh was elevated to a position of prominence. Though he arguably played a larger role in his own ascension. From these cases, we can see how Mazdean elements, and by extension South Asian, perhaps slipped into Islam. The struggle between the Umayyads and Abbasids reshaped the bounds of Islam. What we hope to elucidate, are the ways in which these Mazdean and Buddhist/Jain elements were incorporated into Shi'ism. Certain elements of Shi'i doctrine such as occultation may have been native or introduced through other means. However, *raj'a* and *tanasukh*, as well as other such doctrines more than likely did not have local origins.

### **Buddhism: Origins**

To establish an epistemological frame with which to discuss Buddhism, we must understand its ascension to a world religion and later contraction. What follows will be an abridged summary of centuries of history, before delving into its intermingling with Islam. Buddhism's spread was shaped by its interactions with the local empires of the regions as well as the foreign powers which surrounded South Asia. It was both a recipient of royal patronage by several sovereigns and the victim of persecution. By the time of its eventual arrival to the Middle East, it underwent significant shifts and changes as it clashed and cohabitated with local cultures and religions.

Buddhism's relevance to our discussion can be understood from two vantage points. We must first understand the founding narrative of the Buddha. The unique nuances which surround the awakening of Siddhartha Gautama are key to understanding later developments surrounding the religion's development. The specific tropes which the narrative employ re-appear across time and space when discussing other aesthetics. In this regard the Buddha narrative acts as a kind of temporal and spiritual anchor, connecting far-off traditions to the South Asian sub-continent and its religious traditions.

The second is the development of Buddhist doctrines. Buddhism's eventual spread and the means and mechanisms by which it was proliferated are also key to understanding how it influenced Islam. The royal patrons who tolerated and at times actively championed the religion allowed it to flourish and disseminate. However, this was a fickle source of support. With the passing of one monarch, the fortunes of Buddhism and its adherents could quickly change. This period of shifting patronage and persecution helped shape the geographic bounds of the religion's reach. For the purpose of our discussion, we will primarily focus on Buddhism's westward spread into Persia and the Mediterranean. While the extent to which Buddhism spread is somewhat contested, there are clear signs that at least its ideas reached Hellenic lands.

There is very little one can know with any degree of certainty regarding the historical details of the life of the Buddha. The man who would become the Buddha, Siddhartha Gautama was born in the foothills of the Himalayas in the early 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE.<sup>1</sup> Again we should take these dates as tentative guesses rather than absolute certainties. He was the son of a *rājan*, a local chieftain, among the Śākya people. The historical and legendary elements of the Buddha's biography are closely interwoven. Siddhartha's birth and early life are characterized by miraculous and fantastical detail. Similar to Jesus and Muhammed, the future Buddha's birth was preceded by pronouncements of his exceptional nature. His mother dreamt of a white elephant entering her side prior to his birth. Similarly, a prophecy was delivered to his father, proclaiming that Siddhartha would become either a great king or a mendicant scholar. The *rājan* was mortified thought of his son abandoning his royal duties for a life of mendicancy. Thus, Siddhartha's father curated his life to be devoid of suffering and misery, filling it with every form of pleasure. However, the young prince grew curious about the outside world. He decided

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<sup>1</sup> Rupert Gettin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, OPUS (Oxford; New York ; Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 13-15

to venture outside of his palace where he would encounter the suffering of the world for the first time.

The man who would come to be known as Śākyamuni, ‘sage of the Śākya’ was shaken from his life of comfort upon seeing the blight of suffering, sickness, old age, and death in the world around him. Confirming the prophecy, he renounced his wealth and privilege and set off to find true knowledge. In this early phase of the Buddha’s journey, he studied under various teachers, living as a wandering ascetic. Siddhartha’s path was not unique, he was partaking in a broader sub- or counter-culture of *śramaṇa* in India defined by withdrawal and mendicancy. The *śramaṇa* tradition predates Buddhism and emerged as a reaction to a shifting social and economic landscape in the subcontinent. It was characterized by wandering ascetics who rejected worldly things and instead focused on living austere lives and meditating to attain a higher form of knowledge. These were accompanied by the development of an intellectual tradition that undergirded these practices.<sup>2</sup> As we see from al-Biruni, the belief in rebirth (*saṃsāra*) was a well-established belief in India.<sup>3</sup>

As a short aside, classical scholars such as al-Shahrastani believed the Buddha to be the mystical figure *al-Khidr*.<sup>4</sup> While modern academics such as have postulated that the opening verse of *Sura al-Tin*, and its reference to fig trees is an homage to the awakening of the Buddha.<sup>5</sup> Siddartha is believed to have reached true awakening while meditating under a *bodhi* tree. Given the sparse source material and expansive temporal scope, it is not a surprise that Islamic

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<sup>2</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 10-11

<sup>3</sup> Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Bīrūnī, *Alberuni’s India. An Account of the Religion, Philosophy, Literature, Geography, Chronology, Astronomy, Customs, Laws and Astrology of India about A.D. 1030*, trans. Eduard Sachau, An English ed., Trübner’s Oriental Series (London: K. Paul, Trench, Trübner & co., ltd., 1888), p. 207

<sup>4</sup> Muḥammad ibn ‘Abd al-Karīm Shahrastānī, *Shahrastānī on the Indian Religions*, trans. Bruce B. Lawrence, Religion and Society; 4 (The Hague: Mouton, 1976), *milal wa-l nihil*.

<sup>5</sup> Imtiyaz Yusuf, “A Muslim’s Reflections on Saddharamapundarik sutra—The Lotus Sutra,” *Buddhist-Christian Studies* 40, no. 1 (2020): 79–104, <https://doi.org/10.1353/bcs.2020.0005>.

prophetology is more an exercise in the art of speculation than an exact science. This is made clear in *Sura Ghāfir*, where God reveals:

“Indeed We have sent messengers before thee. Among them are those whom We have recounted unto thee, and among them are those whom We have not recounted unto thee”  
(Quran 40:78).<sup>6</sup>

The extreme restriction which ascetics practiced did not agree with the Buddha. However, it was during this time that Śākyamuni developed his own distinct path toward awakening. Informed by both the life of plenty of his youth as well as the extreme renunciation of any pleasures, the Buddha developed a ‘Middle Way.’ His journey would culminate under a Bodhi tree where he meditated and came to understand the nature of suffering as well as the key to its cessation, *nirvāṇa*.<sup>7</sup> It should be understood that the teachings of Siddhartha were not wholly novel. He borrowed and re-interpreted concepts from the broader *śramaṇa* tradition. The twin principles of *saṃsāra* and *karma* are two such instances of this co-optation. The former refers to the endless cycle of rebirth, and the latter refers to moral actions which determine the form one is re-birthed into. The ultimate goal of Buddhism is to end the cycle of rebirth through the attainment of *nirvāṇa*.

The Buddha’s awakening illuminated the path to *nirvāṇa*, and by extension the Four Noble Truths, core tenets of Buddhism. These premises undergirded the entire religion and were the foundation of the path toward *nirvāṇa*. They are first, that life is suffering (*dukkha*). Secondly, suffering is caused by craving and desire. This, however, does not refer to all desires. Buddhism does acknowledge the existence of ‘positive’ desire. The ‘thirst’ (*tanha*) which causes

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<sup>6</sup> Seyyed Hossein Nasr et al., *The Study Quran: A New Translation and Commentary* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2015).

<sup>7</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 74

suffering is a perverted form of desire. The third truth acknowledges that this suffering can end. And lastly, there is a path that leads to the cessation of suffering.

After his awakening, the Buddha quickly gained a number of disciples. Five of his former teachers and fellow students became monks under him and learned how to reach enlightenment.<sup>8</sup> They were the recipients of his first sermon, becoming the first monks (*bhikkhu*) of the new religion. From here the religion grew and took on a missionary character. The first 60 of his disciples were tasked with bringing new members into the *Saṅgha* (community).<sup>9</sup> This first group were known as *Arhats* (saints), a level of awakening lesser than a fully realized Buddha. In his second sermon, the Buddha further explicated the linkages between suffering and rebirth. It is by removing this craving, we can end suffering and attain enlightenment. Though *nirvāṇa* comes in two forms, the first is achieved in life and the other only becomes possible after one's physical death. The former refers to a psychological and ethical shift in reality, while the latter is a more nebulous and somewhat ineffable term. A common analogy used to describe it is the self is snuffed out like the flame of a candle.

In the centuries that followed, practitioners articulated a canonical set of works and doctrines based on the life and teachings of the Buddha. *Arhats* began missionary work, spreading the teachings of the Buddha. *Viharas* were established as institutions of Buddhist learning. However, the formal structures of the religion were rather lax, and it remained somewhat decentralized. The lack of a central structure also gave space for differences to emerge.

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<sup>8</sup> Damien Keown, *Buddhism: a Very Short Introduction*, Very Short Introductions 3 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism* (Birmingham: Windhorse, 1994).



There was by no means, unanimity, and soon various schools of thought developed. This began at the first Buddhist council, following Gautama's death. 500 *Arhats* convened to review and consolidate the *dharma* (teaching) of the Buddha. The Buddha appointed no successor and so his followers were left to interpret his teachings. This led to schisms among his followers, at the Second Buddhist Council two factions emerged, the 'Elders' and the 'Universal Assembly.' These two groups were predecessors to the later schools which formed.<sup>10</sup> They differed on how strictly practitioners were required to follow the teachings of the Buddha. This split was a predecessor for the larger doctrinal schism which would emerge in Buddhism, between the Mahāyāna and the Hinayana.

The Mahāyāna school is of particular interest to us, as it developed in northwest India. Its proximity to Persian ideas can possibly be seen in the Amitābha Buddha (Buddha of Infinite Light). The clear invocation of light hints at Mazdean influence. This school emerged around the first century C.E.<sup>11</sup> Its emergence reflects both the internal disagreements within Buddhism, but also the shifting social and political landscape. At the start of the new millennia, this ascetic religion received generous support from wealthy rulers and nobles, as we will see in later sections. The term Mahāyāna is a self-designation meant to deride the other Buddhist schools. It translates roughly to the "Greater Vehicle," standing in contrast to the Hinayana, or "Lesser Vehicle." One of the principal differences between the two schools is the understanding of how to attain salvation and who can be saved. The Mahāyāna school urges its followers to guide others to salvation. One saves themselves by working to save others. The other schools such as the Sarvastivadin, Theravadin, and Sravakayana do not compel monks to aid others. This difference originates in part due to the fact that the Mahāyāna believed all had the potential to

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<sup>10</sup> Keown, *Buddhism*, p. 58

<sup>11</sup> Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, p. 93

become a Buddha. This egalitarianism stems from the belief that the mind was considered innately pure. Once one became enlightened, their ties to the physical plain were not completely severed. A Buddha continued to engage with the world.<sup>12</sup> However, we should not think of this schism as absolute. While there were clear doctrinal differences. Monks from the various schools often practiced at the same temple and were trained on the same texts (*nikāya*).<sup>13</sup> Though as the school developed, additional *sūtras*, such as the Lotus Sūtra did emerge. These attempted to develop and revise the existing Buddhist discourse. The belief in the innate goodness of the mind led the Mahāyāna doctrine to develop a system of ethical and moral regulation. Both monastic and lay Buddhists followed certain precepts and beliefs which guided their lives. Monks lived especially constrained lives, defined by “ten good precepts.” There were prohibitions which were physical, verbal, and mental. Killing, stealing, sexual misconduct, lust, anger, and slander among others were all forbidden.<sup>14</sup> Mahāyāna attitudes towards salvation and the ethical precepts they followed will become relevant as we move to our discussion of Manichaeism.

### **Spread of Buddhism**

As mentioned early, Buddhism was the recipient of royal patronage as it developed. Among them, no one is perhaps better known than the Mauryan king Ashoka. In the early years of his reign during the third century BCE, Ashoka spread his empire through the traditional means of conquest. His turn towards Buddhism occurred in 268 BCE while leading an assault on the state of Kalinga. This personal transformation and later ruling are captured in a number of edicts engraved in stone spread across Hindustan. Ashoka seemed to have been deeply affected

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<sup>12</sup> Hirakawa Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism: From Sakyamuni to Early Mahayana*, Asian Studies at Hawaii 36 (University of Hawaii Press, 1990).

<sup>13</sup> Skilton, *A Concise History of Buddhism*, p. 97

<sup>14</sup> Akira, *A History of Indian Buddhism*, p. 55-56

by the bloody battle and the sight of mass death.<sup>15</sup> He renounced war and pursued a pacifist form of governance and sought to spread the *dharma*. Ashoka demonstrated feverous support for Buddhism and its spread. From the traditions, he “erected eighty-four thousand large temples and eighty-four thousand stupas.”<sup>16</sup> He also supported the missionary work of the monks.

Following Ashoka, no ruler matched his zeal for propagating the religion. The succeeding empires did not engage in the same state-sponsored proselytization efforts. Though Buddhism’s spread continued under the various subsequent empires. As Buddhism spread, it began to assimilate with various local systems of culture and belief. In Central Asia, the Kuṣāṇa came closest to matching the Mauryan support of the religion. This support became most pronounced during the ‘third’ phase of the empire’s history. It was ushered in by Kanīṣka, who reigned from about 127 to 153 CE.<sup>17</sup> Under his rule, the empire’s borders were greatly expanded. Its geographic location meant that during Kuṣāṇa rule, Buddhism co-existed with other religions.

While Kanīṣka himself was not an adherent, he displayed enthusiastic support for Buddhism. This was in line with the broader policy of religious tolerance he promoted.<sup>18</sup> He is lauded for the construction of Buddhist *stupas* and monasteries, and for convening the Fourth Buddhist Council.<sup>19</sup> It was perhaps during this period that a blending of Persian and Buddhist religions began to take place. Kanīṣka, paid heed to Buddhist cosmology while also showing deference to Zoroastrian deities.<sup>20</sup> From numismatic evidence, the new coins printed by the emperor had depictions of the Buddha. Though it is unclear whether they were ever put into

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<sup>15</sup> Daisaku Ikeda, *Buddhism, the First Millennium*, trans. Watson Burton, Soka Gakkai History of Buddhism Series (Santa Monica, Calif.: Middleway Press, 2009), 38

<sup>16</sup> Ikeda, *Buddhism, the First Millennium*, p. 45

<sup>17</sup> Benjamin Craig, “The Kushan Empire,” in *The Oxford World History of Empire* (New York, NY : Oxford University Press, 2021), p. 338-9

<sup>18</sup> J.P. Asmussen, “Buddhism Among Iranian People,” in *The Cambridge History of Iran. The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanid Periods*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

<sup>19</sup> Craig, “The Kushan Empire,” p. 340

<sup>20</sup> Asmussen, “Buddhism Among Iranian People.”

circulation or served a more perfunctory role.<sup>21</sup> It should also be noted that the Buddha appeared alongside the Zoroastrian pantheon on coinage.

The messianic ideals of Judaism and Zoroastrianism can be seen in the Buddha Maitreya. The awaited savior, who gained prominence during the Kushan period. It was also during this time that Buddhism spread along trade routes into Kabul, Balkh, and Jalalabad.<sup>22</sup> The Kuṣāṇa were just one of the empires which inhabited Central Asia and Persia. Alongside them were the Śaka and the Parthians. They were also accepted by the Hephthalites. From around 200 BCE to the end of the first century CE, the region's complex history is difficult to parse out between the various empires.

The extent to which Buddhism reached during this time is somewhat murky. We can be sure that it reached Balkh, as evidenced by the famous *Naw Bahar* monastery. Under Parthian rule, it may have reached into northern Khurasan.<sup>23</sup> Al-Biruni attests to the *Baharas* of the *Shamanan* between Khurasan and India.<sup>24</sup> However, the faith affiliated with these temples is debatable. As Crone points out the Shamaniyya religion may have referred to any number of pagan pre-Islamic Persian religions.<sup>25</sup> The support and tolerance Buddhism enjoyed ended with the Sassanian conquest in the third century. The empire certainly had a more complex relationship with the faith. The Zoroastrian presence did not spell the immediate decline of

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<sup>21</sup> Craig, "The Kushan Empire," p. 340

<sup>22</sup> Asmussen, "Buddhism Among Iranian People," p. 956

<sup>23</sup> Erik Seldeslachts, "Greece, The Final Frontier? The Westward Spread of Buddhism," in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher, Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section Eight, Central Asia, 0169-8524 v. 16, Handbuch Der Orientalistik (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>24</sup> Muḥammad ibn Aḥmad Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations : An English Version of the Arabic Text of the Athâr-Ul-Bâkiya of Albîrûni or "Vestiges of the Past,"* trans. C. Eduard Sachau (London: William H. Allen & Co., 1879), p. 189

<sup>25</sup> Patricia Crone, "Buddhism as Ancient Iranian Paganism," in *The Iranian Reception of Islam: The Non-Traditionalist Strands*, vol. 2, 3 vols., Islamic History and Civilization; v. 130 (Leiden: Brill, 2016).

Buddhism. There is numismatic evidence featuring the Buddha which hints at the acceptance of non-Zoroastrian deities in the empire.

It is perhaps impossible to fully ascertain the extent to which Buddhism spread into Persia. The paucity of written source material made answering this question rather difficult. Richard Bulliet has attempted to use archaeological evidence to ascertain Buddhism's reach. He examines the proliferation of temples referred to as *Naw Bahār*. The term is a generic title given to monasteries. The most well-known of them stood in Balkh, which had been maintained by the Barmakid family. From Sabzevar to Herat there are concentrations of sites referred to as *Naw Bahār*. Hsiuan Tsiang in his travels to Balkh remarks that *Naw Bahār* was occupied by a specific sect of Buddhists. This may hint at the fact that certain schools used the term *Naw Bahār* to describe their temples. Bulliet seems to believe that it was home to a specific brand of Iranian Buddhism.<sup>26</sup> It may have been the case that Mani came into contact with these monasteries. Though it is important to note, as Bulliet does, that not all *Naw Bahār* may have been Buddhist temples.

We are also given hints and clues through the writings of the Zoroastrian high priest Kerdir. A zealot who opposed other non-Zoroastrian religions. When writing about the persecution of Buddhists, Kerdir notes traveling to Khurasan, where a number of *Naw Bahār* temples were clustered.<sup>27</sup> The region was a refuge for Buddhists hoping to escape the ire of the throne. There are several sites named *Naw Bahār* in Khurasan. The ultimate shape Buddhism took in Persia is also somewhat unclear. As it spread it interacted with local traditions and religions. In some regions of Serindia, the difficulty of travel limited the flow of people and

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<sup>26</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, "Naw Bahār and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism," *Iran* 14 (1976): 140, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4300550>.

<sup>27</sup> Bulliet, "Naw Bahār and the Survival of Iranian Buddhism."

information. Thus, the forms of Buddhism which developed here were rather insulated.

Buddhists also actively conducted missionary work.<sup>28</sup>

### **Jainism**

The widespread diffusion and the relative surplus of evidence make Buddhism an attractive focus for our study. It would be negligent to only consider this religious tradition when examining the influence of South Asia on Islam. Alongside Buddhism, another monastic, ascetical faith deserves attention. As we will see Buddhism alone does not suffice for the purpose of our examination. Jainism, with its soteriological outlook and belief in *saṃsāra*, warrants a closer look.

When discussing Jainism, a complete overview of the religion is unnecessary. We will only outline the significance of doctrinal and historical developments. As previously mentioned in our discussion of Buddhism, there is existed a strong mendicant counterculture in South Asia. Jainism was another religion that emerged from the extant *śramaṇa* tradition in the 5<sup>th</sup> century BCE. Similar to Buddhism it subscribed to a cyclical cosmology predicated on rebirth and *karma*. Individuals are caught in the cycle of *saṃsāra*, where their impurity leads to rebirth after death. The form of their rebirth is determined by the balance of their *karma*. Also like Buddhism, Jain cosmology does not require the existence of any divine creator. The universe has always existed and always will exist. This does not mean, however, that the religion denies all forms of divinity. Those in the pure, karmically free state of *paramātmān* are referred to as God at times.<sup>29</sup>

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<sup>28</sup> Xavier Tremblay, "The Spread of Buddhism in Serindia: Buddhism Among Iranians, Tocharians and Turks before the 13th Century," in *The Spread of Buddhism*, ed. Ann Heirman and Stephan Peter Bumbacher, Handbook of Oriental Studies. Section Eight, Central Asia, 0169-8524; v. 16, Handbuch Der Orientalistik (Leiden ; Boston: Brill, 2007).

<sup>29</sup> Paul Dundas, *The Jains*, The Library of Religious Beliefs and Practices (London; New York: Routledge, 1992).

Discussing the beginning of Jainism is a bit difficult, as Jains believe it was brought by 24 successive Tīrthaṅkaras (ford makers).<sup>30</sup> They were religious teachers who had reached enlightenment and achieved an omniscient state. These ford makers appeared across an unknowably long span of time, punctuating the cosmic cycle. The last of whom, appearing in our current period in time, was Mahāvīra, a contemporary of the Buddha. Mahāvīra lived around the Gaṅgā Valley in northern India. The narrative of his life bears a close resemblance to Siddhartha's. He was born into a wealthy and noble non-Brahman family. However, he soon abandoned this comfort and luxury to pursue an ascetical life without possessions.<sup>31</sup>

While the *śramaṇa* tradition undergirded many Indic religions, there are some notable and significant differences between Buddhism and Jainism. Compared to the Middle Way of Buddhism, the tenets of Jainism are much stricter. This is in part due to the fact that 'activity' or action was thought to be a driver of rebirth and suffering. The Jain solution to *saṃsāra* is to live a life absent of deeds. For some early Jains, this meant living a life that culminated in complete "immobility."<sup>32</sup>

Its adherents are bound by a strict ethical code and commitment to non-violence (*ahiṃsā*). This stems from the belief that all living things contained a *jīva* or soul.<sup>33</sup> In practice, this looked different for ascetics and lay Jains. Life can be found in everything, from animals to the air and water. This made absolute non-violence virtually impossible. For most, *ahiṃsā* manifested as a strict vegetarian lifestyle. At the core of the religion is *mokṣa mārga*, the path of

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<sup>30</sup> Bronkhorst, Johannes. 'The Formative Period of Jainism (C. 500 BCE – 200 CE)'. Brill's Encyclopedia of Jainism Online, edited by John E. Cort, Paul Dundas, Knut A. Jacobsen, and Kristi L. Wiley. Accessed March 26, 2023. doi: [http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2590-2768\\_BEJO\\_COM\\_047082](http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2590-2768_BEJO_COM_047082).

<sup>31</sup> Dundas, *The Jains*

<sup>32</sup> Bronkhorst, 'The Formative Period of Jainism (C. 500 BCE – 200 CE)'.

<sup>33</sup> Richard C.C. Fynes, "Plant Souls in Jainism and Manichaeism The Case for Cultural Transmission," *Istituto Italiano per l'Africa e l'Oriente* 46 (June 1996): 21–44.

liberation.<sup>34</sup> Jainism's origins lay in attempting to liberate the *jīva* from the endless cycle of rebirth. The soul is immortal, and without *mokṣa*, it will be continuously reborn. Here we see a significant divergence from Buddhism. Jainism accepts the existence of a soul in no uncertain terms, unlike the idea of *anātman*.<sup>35</sup> One liberates themselves by purifying the soul. In the Jain conception, *karma* has a physical nature. It also consists of eight different types, broadly grouped into "harming" and "non-harming" *karma*. It works by attaching to the *jīva*, tainting its pure nature. Enlightenment occurs through the purging of *karma*, which consists of two stages. One must remove the existing *karma* which has already adhered itself to the soul. They must also stop the stream of new *karma* from clinging to the *jīva*.<sup>36</sup> The potential for enlightenment also depends on the being. There was a hierarchy among living things, animals and plants were considered 'lower' life forms.<sup>37</sup> They are separated by their proximity to humans and levels of awareness. Animals, being more aware, are a higher form of life than plants.

Over time doctrinal shifts emerged. As adherents of faith moved farther from the period of Mahāvīra, true enlightenment became less attainable. After an immediate connection to the 24<sup>th</sup> ford maker was lost, it was determined that enlightenment was impossible to reach.<sup>38</sup> From this point on practitioners shifted their focus to gaining merit and ensuring a meritorious rebirth. The most ardent followers, monks and nuns, lived mendicant lives. Their behaviors are dictated by the five *mahāvratas* or Five Great Vows. These helped lay persons re-orient their lives to align with the tenets of Jainism. These vows consisted of rejecting killing, avoiding lying, only taking what has been given to them abstinence, and not eating after dark. Non-violence was the

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<sup>34</sup> Lawrence A. Babb, *Understanding Jainism*, Understanding Faith (Edinburgh: Dunedin, 2015).

<sup>35</sup> Gethin, *The Foundations of Buddhism*, p. 187

<sup>36</sup> Babb, *Understanding Jainism*.

<sup>37</sup> Dundas, *The Jains*, p. 20

<sup>38</sup> Dundas, *The Jains*, p. 35



highest duty of a Jain.<sup>39</sup> The spread of Jainism was somewhat limited and remained confined to India.<sup>40</sup>

### **Greek vs. South Asian Reincarnation**

Thus far we have considered South Asian sources for examining rebirth. It would be prudent, however, to consider elsewhere for alternate origins for the doctrine of reincarnation. Especially as we trace the transmission of these ideas to Persia. The extent and depth of Buddhism's spread into Persia is by no means a settled matter. It is even less likely that Jainism arrived in Persia in any significant way. Looking westward, the Greek tradition, at first glance, presents an attractive alternative to South Asia. Reincarnation (*metempsychosis*) was a well-established doctrine among Greek thinkers. In their respective writings, both Plato and Pythagoras discuss the mechanisms of rebirth in depth.<sup>41</sup> Similarly, Socrates also advocates for *metempsychosis*, nestling it within the principle of generation and the doctrine of recollection.<sup>42</sup> With life and death sharing a generative link. Interestingly though perhaps not surprising, Greek conceptions closely parallel those in South India. One may wonder whether the two groups influenced the other. As we will see the Greeks developed Hellenic parallels to *samsāra*, *karma*, and *mokṣa*.

It is likely that Plato was influenced by Pythagoras, who advocated for a cyclical temporality influenced by morals and actions. We see the former discuss reincarnation in his works, the *Meno* and *Phaedo*. Reincarnation fits into a larger divinely engineered cosmology, orienting the universe towards perfection. An individual is rewarded or punished accordingly,

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<sup>39</sup> Dundas, *The Jains*, p. 60

<sup>40</sup> Bronkhorst, 'The Formative Period of Jainism (C. 500 BCE – 200 CE)'.

<sup>41</sup> Douglas R. Campbell, "Plato's Theory of Reincarnation: Eschatology and Natural Philosophy," *The Review of Metaphysics* 75, no. 4 (June 2022): 643–65, <https://doi.org/10.1353/rvm.2022.0021>.

<sup>42</sup> Herbert S. Long, "Plato's Doctrine of Metempsychosis and Its Source," *The Classical Weekly* 41, no. 10 (1948): 149, <https://doi.org/10.2307/4342414>.

which ensures the universe at large remains virtuous. Plato's conception of the soul and understanding of reincarnation resemble what we have previously seen. The soul is immutable and immortal, existing separate from any physical body. Greek thinkers subscribed to a three-part model of reincarnation. They believed firstly that the phenomenon of reincarnation (*metempsychosis*). This process involves the soul moving from one body to another. This leads to the second point, that the soul is distinct from the body. An individual's sense of self originates from the soul.<sup>43</sup> The soul itself is "an incomposite and indestructible substance."<sup>44</sup> Lastly, the Platonic model believed that knowledge and morals dictated the form one took in subsequent reincarnations (*katharsis*). People are rewarded for their good behavior and virtuous actions through higher forms of rebirth. Those souls untainted by the physical world occupy a purer body in the next life. The process of *katharsis* is determined by individuals choosing 'virtue over vice.'<sup>45</sup> *Katharsis* as a parallel for *karma* becomes especially clear when we examine Orphic traditions.<sup>46</sup> The followers of Orpheus view the soul's internment in a physical body as a form of penance. Souls must atone for their sins before they can experience true death.<sup>47</sup> The ultimate goal was to escape from the cycle of rebirth (*luisis*). The means of escape rely on a similar type of gnosis or higher form of cognition as due to Buddhism and Jainism.<sup>48</sup> The *Phaedo* is one conception of the karmic rebirth cycle. The soul after death undergoes an evaluative process. The untainted soul is able to ascend to and live a blessed life. Though the soul that is weighed down by the impurity of the body remains trapped. When it feels compelled, it will be reborn in a form

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<sup>43</sup> Long, "Plato's Doctrine of Metempsychosis and Its Source," p. 150

<sup>44</sup> Long, "Plato's Doctrine of Metempsychosis and Its Source," p. 152

<sup>45</sup> Campbell, "Plato's Theory of Reincarnation: Eschatology and Natural Philosophy," p. 653

<sup>46</sup> Thomas McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought: Comparative Studies of Greek and Indian Philosophies* (New York: Allworth Press : School of Visual Arts, 2002), p. 100

<sup>47</sup> Long, "Plato's Doctrine of Metempsychosis and Its Source," p. 151-2

<sup>48</sup> McEvelley, *The Shape of Ancient Thought*

dictated by the actions in its previous life. Someone who lived a life of greed or gluttony would be reborn as a donkey, while a just man would return as a king or philosopher.<sup>49</sup>

However, as we can see there is a critical difference in the Greek notions are rebirth and those of Hindustan. As we can see in the *Phaedo* and similarly in the *Republic*, reincarnation involves some degree of free will, with individuals choosing their next form.<sup>50</sup> Though we should be cautious in assuming coherence between the various works and dialogues. Overall, it would seem that the doctrine of reincarnation amongst the Greeks was less coherent than their South Asian counterparts. Campbell points out that even between the *Republic* and the *Timaeus*, there are logical inconsistencies. This point to the fact that Plato “simply does not know what determines a person’s rebirth.”<sup>51</sup> There is also some contention about how an individual is punished. One would assume that reincarnation itself is a punishment. However, in the *Phaedrus*, souls suffer in interim a period in Hades between death and rebirth. There are certain intellectual gaps in understanding, especially around *katharsis*. As noted before, the philosophers seemed to have not decided how free will figures into *metempsychosis*.

### **Mani & his New Faith**

Persia existed as a religious and cultural receptacle. Buddhism was one of the many that arrived in the region. It both shaped and was shaped by the local culture. The confluence of local Persian religion and foreign elements can be seen in Manichaeism. A faith that brought together Mazdean Zoroastrianism and Christian Gnosticism, as well as South Asian elements. The biography of the religion’s founder, Mani reflects the intricate religious environment in which he lived. He was born in 217 CE to Parthian nobles. Early in his life, his father, Patik, relocated to

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<sup>49</sup> Long, “Plato’s Doctrine of Metempsychosis and Its Source,” p. 152

<sup>50</sup> Long, “Plato’s Doctrine of Metempsychosis and Its Source.”

<sup>51</sup> Campbell, “Plato’s Theory of Reincarnation: Eschatology and Natural Philosophy,” p. 652

Ctesiphon and Mani was raised in an Elchasai community.<sup>52</sup> It was here that he was exposed to ideas of Christian Gnosticism. The Elchasaites disambiguated Jesus into the man and Jesus the Christ. The former was a man who existed as the most recent embodiment of the Christ.

This was part of a larger belief in periodic incarnation. The Christ, a pre-existent and divine figure, was embodied by Adam, Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob before Jesus.<sup>53</sup> While Judaism's mark on the Elchasaites is clear, we must look outside the Abrahamic tradition to fully understand their cosmology. We can see the influence of local Persian culture. The main text of the religion, aptly named the Book of Elchasai was composed in Parthian Mesopotamia. A region where notions of the periodic incarnation were well established.

In the year 228 CE, Mani received revelation from his "twin" higher, celestial ego which commanded him to leave his community. Ibn Nadim tells us that from the year of his initial revelation at age twelve to his twenty-fourth year, Mani would receive a number of revelations from his Companion.<sup>54</sup> He at first attempted to preach among the Elchasaites. The proselytizing tone of his received message and reformist tendencies would eventually lead him to be excommunicated from his home.

The dualistic worldview of Zoroastrianism was retained. Manichaeism cosmology was centered around Kingdoms and Light and Darkness. Temporally, the world is divided into three periods, the Former Time, Present Time, and Future Time. The first of the three was marked by Light and Darkness existing separately. The Present Time, which we currently occupy is the impure mixing of the two. The Future Time will be marked by the return to the separation of the

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<sup>52</sup> G. Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: Seleucid Parthian*, ed. E. Yarshater, vol. 3, The Cambridge History of Iran (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 965–90.

<sup>53</sup> Patricia Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012).

<sup>54</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm a Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge, vol. 2, Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies ; No. 83 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970), p. 774

two realms. Mani fashioned himself as the Messenger of Light, who was continuing the work of prophets before him.<sup>55</sup> Mani directly tied his personage to several faiths. Among the prophets in which he was succeeding were Jesus, Zoroaster, and the Buddha.<sup>56</sup> However, Mani not only posited that he was their successor but that he was the Seal of the Messengers.<sup>57</sup> The revelation which he preached was a perfected message, and no others would follow him.

Following his exile, he ventured into South Asia and spread his religion. Mani's sojourn to South Asia was relatively brief and lasted less than two years. With the ascent of emperor Shapur in 242 CE, he returned to Persia. Traveling back from Hindustan, Mani continued his proselytizing mission. Among the new converts was the governor of Mesene, the brother of the emperor. This afforded Mani intimate access to the royal family. It most likely helped pave the way for him to gain an audience with the emperor. In further attempts to curry favor, Mani composed a religious work, the *Shapurakan* (also known as the *Sabuhrnama*). As the title suggests it was dedicated to the Sassanian ruler. It outlined the theology of Mani. Shapur stood apart from his predecessor Ardashir and maintained a healthy curiosity about different faiths and beliefs. did not see Mani's religion as a threat to Zoroastrianism.<sup>58</sup> This is not unsurprising as Mani articulated the faith not as a divergence from the norm, but rather a continuation of established traditions.

In appealing to the religious sensibilities of Shapur, Mani incorporated elements of Zurvanism, an offshoot of Zoroastrianism to which Shapur was partial towards.<sup>59</sup> Mani preached

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<sup>55</sup> Muḥammad ibn Ishāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm a Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, trans. Bayard Dodge, vol. 2, Records of Civilization: Sources and Studies ; No. 83 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1970).

<sup>56</sup> Birūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, p. 190

<sup>57</sup> Saïd Amir Arjomand, "The Emergence and Development of Persianate Sufism: Khorasan, Ninth to Twelfth Centuries," *Journal of Persianate Studies* 13, no. 1 (August 18, 2020): 1–35, <https://doi.org/10.1163/18747167-BJA10005>.

<sup>58</sup> Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," p. 968

<sup>59</sup> Hutter, "Manichaeism in the Early Sasanian Empire," p. 7

that he was bringing the best religion and leading those who had been led astray.<sup>60</sup> He [posited] himself as a reformer. However, not all in the royal court were sympathetic to Mani's preaching. The Zoroastrian priest Kirdir opposed what he perceived as a heretical threat to the empire. For the remainder of his life, Mani continued his missionary work, dispatching delegates to spread his message to the chagrin of the Zoroastrian clerical elite. The faith spread throughout the Middle East and Central Asia. His disciple, Mar Ammo brought Manichaeism to Khurasan and translated the works for the Parthians.<sup>61</sup> There are also some indications that it reached the deserts of Arabia. It is possible that both Yathrib and Mecca were home to Manicheans.<sup>62</sup>

Tolerance of Manichaeism and its prophet were heavily dependent on the whims of the ruler. While Shapur was open to Mani's message, this would not always be the case. With the inaugurations of both Wahram I and Wahram II, tolerance to Manichaeism fell precipitously. Under Wahram II, supported by Kirdir, Mani's followers were heavily persecuted. In somewhat gruesome detail al-Biruni describes Mani's death at the hands of the emperor. He was flayed, his body stuffed with grass, and hung from a gate.<sup>63</sup>

### **Vedic Influence on Mani**

Mani's religion was a proselytizing faith by its very nature. Unlike Zoroastrianism which remained within Persia's border, Mani fervently spread his message. His missionaries were sent in all directions, including Hindustan, China, and Khurasan.<sup>64</sup> Mani himself enjoyed a short stint of itinerancy, as we have already mentioned. Buddhists had traveled westward and settled in regions such as Khurasan.<sup>65</sup> There are some additional considerations we should keep in mind.

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<sup>60</sup> Hutter, "Manichaeism in the Early Sasanian Empire," p. 6

<sup>61</sup> Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," p. 970

<sup>62</sup> Arjomand, "The Emergence and Development of Persianate Sufism."

<sup>63</sup> Birūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, p. 191

<sup>64</sup> Ibn al-Nadīm, *The Fihrist of Al-Nadīm a Tenth-Century Survey of Muslim Culture*, p. 776

<sup>65</sup> Erik Seldeslachts, "Greece, The Final Frontier."

The gap between initial revelation and his journey to India have led some, like Crone, to argue that South Asian religions have little impact on the religion. Which have most likely already matured by 240 C.E. However, this seems a rather tenuous line of reasoning. Mani's religion could well have been completely formed before his Indian sojourn. But to argue that influence is limited to one's immediate geographic location is tenuous at best, and specious at worst. As we noted above Buddhism has moved westward, and it is possible that Mani encountered Buddhist doctrine in his homeland.

This is perhaps evidenced by the inclusion of rebirth within the Manichean cosmology. As this doctrine was entirely foreign to Zoroastrianism. One might also be tempted to look at the gnostic nature of Manichaeism and give weight to Christian and Greek sources as the primary influences on the religion. While this view would not be incorrect, it is unnecessarily limiting and ignores several salient parallels. There is the fact, as some scholars have pointed out that Mani, an Aramaic-speaking Persian, would not have had the resources to access Greek texts which discussed metempsychosis.<sup>66</sup> Yunis further argues that conceptions of Platonic and neo-Platonic thought in Persia did not include ideas of reincarnation. Manichaeism differed as well in its conception of the soul. Gnosticism attributes the soul as a distinct aspect of humanity. All living things, including plants and animals, had souls.

It is also noteworthy that the Buddha is explicitly called out in the line of prophets preceding Mani. This becomes especially relevant if we assume that the Persian-born Elchaisite drew inspiration from his immediate surrounding in constructing the cosmology of this new faith. One might be tempted to read this evidence as simply the Buddha narrative arriving in

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<sup>66</sup> Albert Henrichs, "'Thou Shalt Not Kill A Tree': Greek, Manichaean, and Indian Tales," *The Bulletin of the American Society of Papyrologists* 16 (1979): 85–108, <https://doi.org/10.1515/9783110449242-023>.

Persia. However, that would do little to explain the ecclesiastical form it would adopt which in many ways mirrored the monk/lay divide in Buddhism.

During his life, Mani established formal institutions and a monastic class. Adherents of the faith were divided between the Elects and Hearers. Elects lived under stricter conditions and were obliged to follow all of the religion's precepts. Elects were required to remain pure mentally, physically, and spiritually. These requirements were captured in the Five Commandments and Three Seals.<sup>67</sup> These seals were Seals of the Hands, Mouth, and Breast. This meant that they were forbidden from eating meat, harming plants or animals, and had to renounce marriage and remain chaste. To help serve the basic functions of society, Mani allowed for a lay class of Hearers. While lay folk, Hearers, were afforded some leniency so as to not overly encumber their day-to-day obligations.<sup>68</sup> Manichaeism recognized that the precepts followed by Elects were unsustainable to maintain life. The division between Elect and Hearers also had implications for salvation. The soul of an Elect was elevated to the Kingdom of Light, whereas the Hearers' soul remained on earth to be reincarnated. Depending on the convictions of their faith, a Hearer may eventually be reborn as an Elect and be delivered to the Kingdom of Light.<sup>69</sup>

As we have seen there was ample opportunity for cross-cultural diffusion between Persian and Buddhist religious traditions. An equally important, yet more tenuous connection can be argued between Jainism and Manichaeism. Buddhism, by itself, is insufficient to explain South Asian influence on Manichaeism. This is due to the concept of *anātman*, otherwise known

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<sup>67</sup> Samuel N. C. Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China* (Manchester; Dover, N.H., USA: Manchester University Press, 1985).

<sup>68</sup> Widengren, "Manichaeism and Its Iranian Background," p. 985

<sup>69</sup> Lieu, *Manichaeism in the Later Roman Empire and Medieval China*.



as ‘no self’ or insubstantiality. The notion of a soul or a self (*ātman*) was inimical to Buddhist thought.

Manichaeism and Jainism both outlined a soteriological worldview. Jainism sought to liberate *jīva* from cyclical rebirth (*saṃsāra*). All action generates *karma*, which attaches to the soul. In order to purify the *jīva*, Jains follow a strict lifestyle of asceticism. The monastic divide existed in both Manichaeism and Jainism. The strictures under which monks lived have several similarities. Of particular note are the limitations on diet. Both groups believed that plants held souls, and the consumption of some was equated to murder. The number of seeds some fruit carried was thought to represent the number of souls it held.<sup>70</sup> An adherent who hurt the soul of a plant would then be reborn as that same plant.<sup>71</sup> In al-Biruni’s *Athar*, he notes that Mani forbade the harm or slaughtering of animals. In the same description, he claims that Mani’s prohibition on harm extended so deep that it even extended to water and fire.<sup>72</sup>

### **Persian Religion**

Manichaeism was not the only religion to emerge in Persia that subscribed to the notion of divine incarnation. A religious movement that developed contemporaneously with Mani’s was Mazdakism. Though its origins begin almost two centuries prior with the first of its two founders. The original was Zardūsht who was active in the 3<sup>rd</sup> century. Though the namesake of the religion was Mazdak, who reinvigorated the faith during the 5<sup>th</sup> and 6<sup>th</sup> centuries during the reign of Kavad. There were populations of Mazdakites in Jibal, Azerbaijan, Isfahan, Khurasan, and Sogdiana.<sup>73</sup> Zardūsht came as a reformer of Zoroastrianism and claimed to bring the true reading of the *Avesta*. Unsurprisingly, Mazdakism was not far from either Zoroastrianism or

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<sup>70</sup> Richard C.C. Fynes, “Plant Souls in Jainism and Manichaeism The Case for Cultural Transmission,” *Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente* 46 (June 1996): 21–44.

<sup>71</sup> Henrichs, ‘Thou Shalt Not Kill A Tree’

<sup>72</sup> Bīrūnī, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations*, p. 190

<sup>73</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*.

Manichaeism in its cosmology. Though this should not be surprising given the geographic proximity. It subscribed to the same dualistic bifurcation of Light and Dark. A Supreme King ruled over the universe.

It was known for preaching a form of egalitarianism and wealth redistribution. Mazdak encouraged his followers to divide wealth, resources, and women evenly among them. The Supreme Deity of Mazdakism extolled communality. Though these practices also earned Mazdakism the ire of detractors. The idea that “wealth and women must be made common”<sup>74</sup> especially the latter led some to characterize the faith as hedonistic. Mazdak stalwartly implemented his reforms. Among the Mazdakites, he broke up large estates, discouraged hoarding, and established communal institutions to help the poor.

Mazdak and Zardūst both advocated some degree of non-violence. Zardūst preached absolute non-violence towards humans and animals. While Mazdak the Younger maintained the spirit of Zardūst’s commitment to pacificism, he allowed for significant exceptions. Among his community, Mazdak forbade hostilities and disagreement. However, it is well known that he condoned revolt. The Mazdakite adherence to non-violence did not extend to their enemies.<sup>75</sup> In fact, Mazdakites may have seen the slaying of their opponents as a mercy. This stems from their belief in reincarnation. Mazdak believed that by killing those tainted by evil, their souls were being saved. By ending their lives, their enemies were saved from committing further sins. This helped them attain a purer form in their next reincarnation. In other words, by killing their enemies, Mazdakites prevented them from accruing further karmic debt.<sup>76</sup> Their non-violence also extended to animals. Mazdak was known to have maintained a vegetarian diet. Though it is

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<sup>74</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 268

<sup>75</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 254

<sup>76</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 255

less likely that this was rooted in their belief in reincarnation. Mazdakites could not kill or consume most animals. It was permissible for them to eat animals that had died of natural causes. It was also allowed to kill 'noxious' animals, that caused harm to others.<sup>77</sup>

This emphasis on the salvation of the soul echoes both what we have seen in Manichaeism and Vedic religion. While of course, the exceptions for violence in Mazdakism are notable, the parallels should be apparent. The belief in rebirth determined through one's action and behavior resemble both Buddhism and Jainism. While the insistence on non-violence and vegetarianism can be seen as a direct implant from Jain theology. However, we cannot claim in any certain terms, that Mazdakism was influenced by South Asian religion. Simply that these clear and apparent linkages exist between Mazdakism and Buddhism and Jainism.

It was often maligned by its detractors for its antinomian practices.<sup>78</sup> The sharing of women is perhaps the aspect that is most well-known of Mazdakism. It is true that marriage laws were loosened by Mazdak. The reasoning behind these reforms is questionable and may have been to encourage inter-class mingling. Alongside Mazdakism, was another less centralized and cohesive local religion. Khurramism pre-dates Mazdakism, though it is often thought of as a 'neo-Mazdean' faith. The religion had several overlapping beliefs with Mazdakism and evolved after the advent of Islam. This will be discussed in later sections.

### **Beginnings of Shi'ism**

Having made the long journey from northern Hindustan and through Persia, what should be clear is how Persia acted as a thoroughfare and receptacle for a variety of cultures, religions, and peoples. We now continue our journey to the Arabian Peninsula on the eve of Islam. In the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Persia's border would encounter the new Islamic faith. This period of Islam was

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<sup>77</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p., 258

<sup>78</sup> Ehsan Yarshater, "Mazdakism," in *The Cambridge History of Iran: Seleucid Parthian*, ed. Ehsan Yarshater, vol. 3, *The Cambridge History of Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983), 991–1024.

defined by geographic expansion and exploration as well as intellectual reflection. The nascent religion burst from its Arabian borders into a complex and heavily saturated religious and cultural environment. As it intermingled with new peoples and ideas, it would shape and in turn be shaped by them. It is important that we dismiss any notions of a doctrinally coherent or settled Islam.

One of the many factors which complicated both the theological and political developments of Islam was the question of succession following the Prophet's death. The newly emerging community needed to decide who should lead the *umma* and the foundations of their legitimacy. A lack of consensus emerged early on. The issue only worsened over time, resulting in the assassinations of 'Uthman and 'Ali. The conflicts which punctuated the Rashidun period would lay the groundwork for the multitude of revolts and rebellions within the Muslim community. While the question of the caliphate may have initially been a political question, it soon evolved into a religious one. As factions emerged, so did varying conceptions of Islamic leadership. It was during this foundational period that allowed foreign ideas to flow in and merge with the developing Islamic theology.

As the splintering in Islam is central to our argument, our discussion begins in earnest with 'Ali and his tenure as the fourth Caliph. The circumstances of 'Ali's eventual selection as Caliph was particularly fraught. The killing of 'Uthman and calls for revenge loomed over him. Amongst his followers, a lingering resentment remained for what they saw as a snubbing of 'Ali twice before. The base of supporters consisted of a broad coalition. He was popular among those who chafed under the rule of 'Uthman.<sup>79</sup> Perhaps in an attempt to reverse 'Uthman's heavy emphasis on tribal connections and nepotistic aggrandizement, 'Ali provided a type of equality to

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<sup>79</sup> M.A. Sha'bān, *Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132) a New Interpretation* (Cambridge: University Press, 1971).

the non-Arabs by offering war booty.<sup>80</sup> ‘Ali also gained support among the Kufans, who joined him at the Battle of Siffin. The contentious circumstances of ‘Ali’s rise to power also earned him the ire of some of the Quraysh and the ‘Uthman’s family. Though after the Battle of Siffin and the process of arbitration with Mu’awiya, ‘Ali’s coalition further fractured.

‘Ali’s ascension to Caliph not only signaled a political shift for the Muslim community but also a theological one. It was around this time, that the notion of ‘Ali as *imam* began to emerge.<sup>81</sup> Partisans of the Fourth Caliph cited his alleged conference with the Prophet Muhammed at Ghadir Khumm. They claimed that it bestowed upon him unique political and religious knowledge. According to Watt and others, the origins of this belief may have been because of the inclusion of Yamani groups who held pre-existing notions of divine kingship.<sup>82</sup> During ‘Ali’s reign we also see individuals such as Abdullah ibn Saba, a Yemeni convert to Islam who claimed that the Prophet would eventually return from death.<sup>83</sup> He seems to be one of the first Muslims to articulate the ideas of *raj’a* and ‘Ali as the *wasi* of the Prophet Muhammed.<sup>84</sup> The messianic inclinations of Judaism seem a likely source for *raja’*. It will also be clear later in our discussion that *raja’* is distinct from *tanasukh*. The former is the return of an individual to the same body they died in. While the latter refers to the same soul returning to a different body. Ali rejected ibn Saba’s claims and ultimately exiled him to Ctesiphon. However, the zealous partisan still managed to gather a following, who in later works are referred to as the

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<sup>81</sup> Adel S. al-Abdul Jader, “The Origins of Key Shi’ite Thought Patterns in Islamic History,” in *Living Islamic History: Studies in Honour of Professor Carole Hillenbrand*, ed. Yasir Suleiman (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2010), 1–13.

<sup>82</sup> W. Montgomery Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought* ([Edinburgh]: University Press, 1973), ch. 2

<sup>83</sup> ‘Abd al-Qāhir Ibn Tāhir al-Baghdādī, *Moslem Schisms and Sects (al-Fark Bain al-Firak) Being the History of the Various Philosophic Systems Developed in Islam*, trans. Kate Chambers Seelye, Columbia University Oriental Studies, Vol. Xv (New York: Columbia university press, 1920)., v. 2, p. 42

<sup>84</sup> al-Abdul Jader, “The Origins of Key Shi’ite Thought Patterns in Islamic History,” p. 4

*al-Saba'iyya*.<sup>85</sup> Their exile did not deter them and following 'Ali's assassination the *Saba'iyya* believed that he would also return to life.

The transfer of power from 'Ali to Mu'awiya was somewhat jarring for the burgeoning 'Alid movement. Some refused to accept the new Caliph and the divides within the Muslim community only deepened over time. The death of 'Ali and al-Hasan's abdication of power to the Umayyads did not deter their most ardent followers. For them, while 'Ali's older son may have relinquished his claims to political power, he still remained their *imam*.

The intra-religious violence between supporters of 'Ali's line and Mu'awiya would come to a head in 680 C.E. at Karbala. Where Yazid's Syrian forces killed al-Husayn, after a long and arduous siege. The deaths of 'Ali and his sons al-Husayn and al-Hasan would serve as both a political rallying cry and the foundation of a complex doctrinal reshaping of Islam. Opponents of the Umayyads did not quietly assent to the new ruling paradigm. He and his successor still dealt with those fighting to restore the rule of the Prophet's *bayt*. While it would be inaccurate to characterize all anti-Umayyad challenges as 'Alid, many sought to install a member of the *ahl al-bayt*. Both 'Ali's death and discontent with the Umayyads promulgated revolt. The Tawwābūn, al-Mukhtār, and ibn al-Zubayr present interesting case studies of the various forms of anti-Umayyad opposition which emerged.

### **Umayyad Expansion**

As we continue our exploration of Islam's splintering, we must also review the deepening contacts between the Arabo-Islamic empire and Persia. The Umayyad expansion eastward occurred with expeditious fervor. The Syrian army entered Transoxania and the Sind with impressive success, before being repelled in Sistan. For our examination, the most significant

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<sup>85</sup> al-Baghdādī, *Moslem Schisms and Sects (al-Fark Bain al-Firak) Being the History of the Various Philosophic Systems Developed in Islam*.

expansion was into Khurasan. As we have seen, throughout its history, it hosted both Mazdeans and Buddhists. The Islamic venture into Khurasan began early on. Already by Umar's reign, the Muslim garrison town of Basra had been established. By the mid-7<sup>th</sup> century, the Sassanians had been defeated. With Muslim victory culminating at the Battle of Nihawand (c. 639 or 642 CE). In the lands of the former Persian empire, the previous administrative structure was preserved. Persian elites who chose to collaborate with the Muslims were able to maintain their positions. The local *dhiqans* were also preserved and served vital functions related to tax collection. While there were some attempts at centralization, local leaders still maintained autonomy.<sup>86</sup>

During Uthman's reign, the Muslim army in Basra was able to move onto Khurasan under the governor Abd Allah ibn Amir. The additional garrison town brought with them large swathes of Arabs to the region. In 671, Rabi ibn Ziyad settled 50,000 troops into Khurasan.<sup>87</sup> The composition of these troops is worth noting, as they were mainly from the Kufan and Basran armies. It is for this reason that Khurasan became a hotbed of pro-'Alid support. The mix of troops also led to conflict along tribal and ideological lines.<sup>88</sup>

During the beginning of Umayyad rule Iraq which had been under the governorship of Abdulmalik's brother, was passed to al-Hajjaj in 695 C.E., following the defeat of ibn Zubayr.<sup>89</sup> These shifts marked a new phase for the Umayyads. The suppression of the Meccan rebellion, allowed for a new focus was placed on eastward expansion. Al-Hajjaj continued conquests into Central Asia and opened new paths into Hindustan. Al-Hajjaj's protégé, Qutayba ibn Muslim was appointed as governor of Khurasan in 705. Al-Hajjaj's used the region as a launching

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<sup>86</sup> Elton L. Daniel, "The Islamic East," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, ed. Chase F. Robinson, vol. 1, The New Cambridge History of Islam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521838238>.

<sup>87</sup> Daniel, "The Islamic East,"

<sup>88</sup> Alexander D. Knysh, *Islam in Historical Perspective*, 2nd. edition. (New York ; London: Routledge, 2017).

<sup>89</sup> Sha'bān, *Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132) a New Interpretation*, p. 102

ground for conquest further East, until his death in 714.<sup>90</sup> By the time of Qutayba's appointment areas as far as Balkh had come under Muslim control. Within the next seven years, their domain extended to Samarqand. In 711 CE, al-Hajjaj sent forces led by Muhammed ibn Qasim al-Thaqafi into Sind. This brought Hindu lands directly under Muslim control. Though their hold on the region was tenuous at best, and they faced heavy local opposition.<sup>91</sup>

Given this rapid period of expansion, a number of ethnically and religiously diverse populations were brought under the fold of the Arab Umayyad empire. In response to these changing demographics, the empire maintained an Arab-centric attitude toward governance. The Umayyads instantiated racialized notions of Arabness. Non-Arabs were kept apart in a number of ways. The only path for upward social mobility was for non-Arabs to become clients (*mawali*) of an Arab patron. This separation between groups also manifested in the Umayyad's financial institutions. To fund the exploits of the empire, a discriminatory tax regime was implemented. It identified non-Muslims and non-Arabs as owing certain tithes and payments, not required by their Arab-Muslim counterparts. The emerging *mawali* class would become a sizeable and significant portion of the Umayyad's subjects.<sup>92</sup> During his tenure as governor, al-Hajjaj was especially cruel to the non-Arab population. He drove them out of the garrison towns in Iraq and strictly enforced the Umayyad taxation policy.<sup>93</sup>

The Islamic encounter with Persia was also accompanied by gradual conversion. Though it is difficult to discuss it in any certain terms. Though quantitative measures, as attempted by

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<sup>90</sup> Sha'bān, *Islamic History A.D. 600-750 (A.H. 132) a New Interpretation*, p. 119

<sup>91</sup> Paul Cobb, "The Empire in Syria, 705–763," in *The New Cambridge History of Islam: Volume 1: The Formation of the Islamic World, Sixth to Eleventh Centuries*, ed. Chase F. Robinson, vol. 1, The New Cambridge History of Islam (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CHOL9780521838238>.

<sup>92</sup> Cobb, "The Empire in Syria, 705–763,"

<sup>93</sup> G. R. Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam: The Umayyad Caliphate AD 661-750*, 2nd ed. (London ; New York: Routledge, 2000), p. 70



Richard Bulliet, to measure conversion did not happen *en masse* until the mid-9<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>94</sup> The reasons and rationale behind it are somewhat difficult to discern. Some converted as a means to avoid the imposition of taxes or to maintain their social status. Others may have done it superficially and continued to practice their local beliefs. The Umayyads did not have a consistent policy towards proselytization. In fact, it seemed that the majority of rulers disincentivized conversion into Islam.<sup>95</sup> They preferred to collect the additional financial revenue from the *jizya*. The exception to this was the Caliph Umar II, he actively pursued conversion as an official state policy. Qutayba also seems to have undertaken a deliberative campaign of conversion in newly conquered lands.<sup>96</sup>

Against this backdrop of territorial expansion, bureaucratization, and a growing non-Arab population discontent continued to ferment. The second-class status of the *mawali* as well as Shi'a and Kharijite opposition to Umayyad imperial claims grew. Though, at the moment, no group had the capacity to challenge Umayyad hegemony. The disparate rebellions and revolts after the first *fitna* and events at Karbala were ultimately ineffectual.<sup>97</sup>

### **Early 'Alid Revolts**

The discontent of the Umayyad's detractors would recurrently emerge. To better understand the Abbasid *da'wa* movement we must be able to appreciate the political and religious milieu cultivated by the Umayyads. It is also critical to understand these earlier movements before we delve into the Abbasid *da'wa* and *dawla*. The *da'wa* of the Abbasids should be considered the culmination of past efforts. From the ascension of Mu'awiya, there were those that resisted the new ruling paradigm. With varying success, the empire quelled

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<sup>94</sup> Richard W. Bulliet, *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period an Essay in Quantitative History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979).

<sup>95</sup> Hawting, *The First Dynasty of Islam*.

<sup>96</sup> Daniel, "The Islamic East," p. 464

<sup>97</sup> Daniel, "The Islamic East," p. 450

challenges to their rule and established a base in Damascus. However, the tumult and succession crises that accompanied the ushering of this dynasty would continue throughout their reign. The late 7<sup>th</sup> century was punctuated by challenges from varying groups including partisans of the Prophet's bloodlines. A fundamental aspect of their challenge was the perceived illegitimacy of Umayyad rule. Though opposition was not limited to political challenges.

This unsettledness was accompanied by intellectual and theological developments within Islam. This came in the form of the *qurra*, a class of Quran readers and Hadith compilers.<sup>98</sup> The early stages of *fiqh* and Islamic legal tradition were also beginning to take place. Some groups began to take a more esoteric interpretation of Islam. Muslims began to attribute 'Ali with *'ilm*.<sup>99</sup> The term took on a specific meaning, referring to, potentially esoteric, religious knowledge. 'Alid and *shi'i* partisans believed that he held this essential knowledge, and it was passed down to his bloodline. Though at this time we should not consider '*shi'i*' to designate a coherent or distinct religious tradition, as in the modern sense. These changes were pushed even further by the somewhat rapid demographic changes in the empire and the interaction with 'foreign,' i.e., non-Islamic culture. These encounters caused Muslims to look inward and the early stages of formal religious scholasticism began to take place.

The 'Alids were among the most ardent opponents of the Umayyads, with the events at Karbala irreparably fracturing the *umma* for some. The late to mid-7<sup>th</sup> century was the beginning of 'Alid forces organizing to confront the Umayyads in the name of 'Ali's bloodline. The earliest of such groups may have been the Tawwābūn in 683 CE.<sup>100</sup> These 'Alid partisans expressed

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<sup>98</sup> Marshall G. S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization. Volume One, The Classical Age of Islam*, Paperback ed., His The Venture of Islam; v. 1 The Classical Age of Islam (Chicago, Ill.: University of Chicago Press, 1977).

<sup>99</sup> al-Abdul Jader, "The Origins of Key Shi'ite Thought Patterns in Islamic History."

<sup>100</sup> Farhad Daftary, "Origins and Early Development of Shi'ism," in *The Ismā'īlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd ed (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007).

their contrition at abandoning al-Husyan through armed struggle against those that slayed him. They took advantage of the dynastic instability following the death of Yazid to begin spreading their *da'wa*. However, their movement was ultimately unsuccessful against the Umayyads. Only a fraction of the more than ten thousand supporters they had amassed took part in the battle.<sup>101</sup> However, the Tawwābūn played an important role in creating space for similar movements to rise. They represented the first public campaign centered around 'Ali and his family.<sup>102</sup>

In the wake of the Tawwābūn's defeat, new challengers to Umayyad hegemony arose. The most significant being al-Mukhtār al-Thaqafi. He led his own crusade, with a slightly different mission. His was the first openly seeking to avenge the family of 'Ali. Also unlike the Tawwābūn, he brandished the supposed endorsement of one of 'Ali's sons and the rightful *imam*, Muhammed Ibn al-Hanafiyya. As will be apparent al-Mukhtār's movement marked several distinctive shifts in the framing of 'Alid thought. While in the period prior to the defeat of the Tawwābūn, the 'Alid movement had maintained a distinctly Arab character, this was no longer the case.<sup>103</sup> His attempt at revolution led to both doctrinal innovations as well as shifts in proto-Shi'ism's composition. al-Mukhtār began his campaign in Kufa, where he was able to gain the support of large swathes of the population. His call to action cut across class and ethnic lines which allowed him to build a broad base of support. The disparate *shi'i* groups which resided in Kufa at the time found unity under al-Mukhtār's cause. He was able to do this after taking control of Kufa in 685 CE. Al-Mukhtār set himself apart from the Umayyads in his treatment of the *mawali*. He shared with them stipends and war booty.<sup>104</sup>

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<sup>101</sup> Daftary, "Origins and Early Development of Shi'ism," p. 51

<sup>102</sup> Moshe Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*, Max Schloessinger Memorial Series. Monographs ; 5 (Jerusalem: Leiden: Magnes Press-The Hebrew University ; E.J. Brill, 1983).

<sup>103</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*

<sup>104</sup> Daftary, "Origins and Early Development of Shi'ism,"

His direct involvement with the non-Arab *mawali* may be why, as Watt asserts, this period was when the *mawali* began to assert a “political consciousness.”<sup>105</sup> Though, his success in Kufa was short-lived. By ingratiating himself with the non-Arab elements of the city, the Kufan Arab *ashraf* to turn against him. His program of *mawali* and slave enfranchisement was met with Arab chagrin.<sup>106</sup> However, al-Mukhtār did not limit himself to implementing only social changes. His movement also led to shifts in religious thought. Despite the failure of his movement, al-Mukhtār left an indelible mark on the ‘Alid movement.<sup>107</sup>

Al-Mukhtār’s opposition utilized and built upon the established religious and political lexicon which was beginning to develop at the time. By tying the revolution to ‘Ali’s son, al-Mukhtār was continuing the trend started by the Tawwābūn, of tying his movement to the ‘Alid cause. Whether or not Ibn al-Hanafiyya actually endorsed al-Mukhtār is immaterial to our discussion. He declared himself the *amir* or *wazir* of Ibn Hanafiyya.<sup>108</sup> Although al-Mukhtār developed with the specific goal of avenging ‘Ali’s bloodline. It was under him the concept of *ahl al-bayt* took on a more exclusive meaning. Prior to al-Mukhtār, the term was used somewhat broadly in reference to any notable or ruling families. What we see during this time is a direct and intentional linking between the family of ‘Ali and *ahl al-bayt*.<sup>109</sup> In addition to these shifts surrounding the *ahl al-bayt*, how the imamate was perceived also began to change. ‘Alid partisans began to discuss the *nass* that was passed down from the *imam*. After Ibn al-Hanafiyya's death, some of them believed that the imamate had been passed down to Abu

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<sup>105</sup> Watt, *The Formative Period of Islamic Thought*.

<sup>106</sup> 838?-923 Ṭabarī, *The Collapse of Sufyānid Authority and the Coming of the Marwānids*, trans. G. R. Hawting, Bibliotheca Persica (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1989), p. 85

<sup>107</sup> Daftary, “Origins and Early Development of Sh’ism”

<sup>108</sup> al-Abdul Jader, “The Origins of Key Shi’ite Thought Patterns in Islamic History.”

<sup>109</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*, p. 81

Hashim.<sup>110</sup> It was also during this time that a belief in an imam's infallibility (*ma'sum*) was established.<sup>111</sup> This lexical narrowing was matched by the development of *mahdism*, also led by al-Mukhtār. The term *mahdi* gained a messianic connotation. 'Ali's son, Ibn Hanafiyya was presented as the divinely guided *mahdi* meant to restore justice to the world order.<sup>112</sup> This may be in part due to the influence of the al-Saba'iyya, who were subscribers to the notion of *raja'*. Their remnants were known to have interacted with al-Mukhtār's movement.

Al-Mukhtār had the liberty to express these novel uses of religious and political ideas, in part, due to the nascent nature of Islam. The faith's theology and doctrine were far from settled in the mind of its practitioners. This 'unsettledness' so to speak was exacerbated by the rise of a number of groups all seeking to assert their own, supposedly rightful, candidate for leadership. Without the foundation left by the Tawwābūn or al-Mukhtar al-Thaqafi, it is hard to imagine, the *da'wa* being nearly as successful as it was. Vestiges of al-Mukhtar's supporters were integrated and served key functions with the Abbasid's call to action. In his life and after his death, al-Thaqafi's maintained a group of followers named the Kaysaniyya.<sup>113</sup> These followers continued to strive to establish the rule of the *ahl al-bayt* and articulated new doctrines to frame their doctrines. With the death of Ibn Hanafiyya, none of 'Ali's living sons remained, causing another crisis of leadership. Some of the Kaysaniyya subscribed to the idea of *ghayba*, and that Ibn Hanafiyya would return as the *mahdi*. Others accepted his death, but still believed he would return to life.<sup>114</sup> Why these groups elected to subscribe to a belief in rebirth is central to our

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<sup>110</sup> Elton L. Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747-820* (Minneapolis: Bibliotheca Islamica, 1979).

<sup>111</sup> al-Abdul Jader, "The Origins of Key Shi'ite Thought Patterns in Islamic History."

<sup>112</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*, p. 106

<sup>113</sup> Ibn Ṭāhir al-Baghdādī, *Moslem Schisms and Sects (al-Fark Bain al-Firak) Being the History of the Various Philosophic Systems Developed in Islam*.

<sup>114</sup> Daftary, "Origins and Early Development of Sh'ism," p. 59-60

argument. As we will see later on, it is likely that it was a result of transmission from Persian, and by extension South Asian, culture.

Many others among Kaysaniyya and followers of Ibn Hanafiyya simply believed that the imamate was passed from father to son, namely Abu Hashim. These followers were known as the Hashimiyya, while others chose to attach themselves to al-Husayn's son Zayn al-Abidin. The Hashimiyya would form the basis of the later Abbasid *da'wa*, as over time they were able to develop a strong organizational base in the east.<sup>115</sup> After the death of Abu Hashim, they allied themselves with other branches of *ahl al-bayt* supporters.<sup>116</sup> More importantly, the imamate was thought to have been passed to Muhammed Ibn Ali, of the Abbasid line.<sup>117</sup> This served as a crucial linkage between the families of 'Ali and 'Abbas. It was around this time that Bukayr Ibn Mahan was inculcated into the movement and began his missionary work traveling from Kufah to Khurasan to spread the *da'wa*.

### **Abbasid Da'wa**

For nearly a century the Umayyads had, with varying success, managed to maintain their hold on power. However, with the passing of the Caliph Hisham in 743 CE, the third *fitna* would erupt in a tripartite bid between bidders for caliphal power. Umayyad discontent was able to fully express itself as internecine conflict collapsed the dynasty. The opposition wasted no time in taking full advantage of the moment, among them were the Abbasids. They capitalized on the perceived religious and political illegitimacy and *mawali* discontent to motivate supporters to their *dawla*. Over the last few decades, by employing an intentionally vague call to restore the Prophet's line to the throne, they were able to rally a sizeable opposition force.

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<sup>115</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*.

<sup>116</sup> al-Abdul Jader, "The Origins of Key Shi'ite Thought Patterns in Islamic History," p. 10

<sup>117</sup> Saleh Said Agha, *The Revolution Which Toppled the Umayyads: Neither Arab nor Abbāsīd*, Islamic History and Civilization; 50 (Leiden; Boston: BRILL, 2003), ch. 9

In considering how South Asian and Persian elements may have entered into Islam, the *da'wa* movement is critical. As we will see, the Abbasids needed a large base of support to launch their *dawla*. Despite the internal conflicts plaguing the Umayyads, their elite military forces were a formidable defense against any insurrection. To rally a necessarily large oppositional force, the Abbasids relied on a vague call to restore *ahl al-bayt* and *al-rida min al-Muhammad*. Though the exact details of who or what constituted *ahl al-bayt* were intentionally left undefined. This allowed them to appeal to all manner of 'Alid partisans. As the smaller, disparate movements fell under the umbrella of Abbasid *dawla*, their distinct and divergent beliefs were brought with them.

The *da'wa* movement was successful in its ability to appeal to such large swathes of the population. It reached not only the Arab aristocracy but also the non-Arab *mawali*. It is important to note that this was not, as some have argued, a Persian *mawali* rebellion against their Arab rulers. The *da'wa* contained both Arabs and non-Arabs among their leadership. Nevertheless, the *mawali* were a significant source of support for the Abbasids. The *da'is* called upon the lower and peasant class to join the Abbasids. So unsurprisingly, the Abbasids targeted their *da'wa* to the regions where 'Alids had previously enjoyed popular support. They initially began their clandestine call to action in Kufa. However, the *da'i* had limited success as the region was already saturated in tribal loyalties.<sup>118</sup> In Kufa, the Abbasids operated in complete secrecy and maintained incredibly small numbers.<sup>119</sup> This was in part because the ideas being promulgated by *da'is* found little purchase among the local population. The movement soon shifted its base to Khurasan, as it was perceived to be a landscape less saturated in the tribal and ethnic conflicts which had prevented the cohesion, the Abbasids needed for their movement to succeed. Though

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<sup>118</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*.

<sup>119</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*, p. 142

as we will see this was hardly the case. Khurasan was a critically important location for the success of both the *da'wa* and *dawla* movements. In 723, led by Abu Ikrimah the *da'wa* calling people to support *al-rida min al Muhammad* began.

Khurasan as the focus of the *da'wa* also seems logical when we consider its history in Islamic expansion. It was home to a sizeable population of Iraqi *émigré*, some of whom were battle-trained soldiers who had cut their teeth on the Islamic frontier. These migrants, especially those from Basra, brought over their inter-tribal connections and support for 'Ali. They had settled and mingled with the local Khurasani population, though they remained a small but politically significant Arab population.<sup>120</sup> For these reasons, the Abbasids found strong support for a restoration of the *ahl al-bayt* to power in the region. Their focus on the region becomes apparent when we see that Merv received 40 of the 58 *da'is* dispersed throughout the region.<sup>121</sup>

Rather than summarizing the broad trends of the movement, it would perhaps be more helpful to examine two examples of how *da'wa* allowed for the entrance of South Asian and Persian beliefs. The first comes in the example of the Abbasid general Abu Muslim. While Abu Muslim's origins are somewhat obfuscated, those who have attempted to trace his lineage, such as Agha and Sharon deny that any claims can be made with certainty. Though some have ceded that Abu Muslim may have been an enslaved *mawla*. However, Abu Muslim's life is not nearly as important to the purposes of our discussion as the legacy left after his death. There is little to no evidence that he subscribed to any notions that could be traced outside of mainstream Islam at the time. After being killed by the newly installed Abbasid Caliphate, he was raised to a revered position among his followers. They assigned messianic expectations to him, with some expecting him to return after death. Though as we have seen, this is not the first instance of expecting a

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<sup>120</sup> Sharon, *Black Banners from the East*.

<sup>121</sup> Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747-820*.



return to life after death. However, before we can discuss the followers of Abu Muslim it would help helpful to examine another notable figure.

Alongside Abu Muslim, an outspoken and ‘non-traditionalist’ found in the annals of Abbasid history is Khidāsh. He worked as a *da’i* and preached a message which mirrored both Islamic and Khurramiyya notions, the latter we will discuss shortly. Khidāsh’s origins are similar to Abu Muslim, surrounded by mystery. The earliest reference places him in Khurasan in 727 CE. He developed a sizeable following by preaching a rather unique message. He removed the obligation of prayer, fasting, and pilgrimage. However eventually, this somewhat antinomian message earned him the ire of the Abbasids. In 736 CE, he was executed for introducing or accommodating local practices.<sup>122</sup> In a familiar pattern, his death only galvanized his followers, who designated him as the true *imam*.

### **Khurramiyya**

The proselytization efforts of Khidāsh present perhaps the most obvious example of Islamic and potentially non-Islamic elements blending together as a result of the Abbasid *da’wa*. How should we understand the distinct shape that his *da’wa* took? We are comfortable labeling it as ‘non-Islamic’ due to the vehement rejection of Khidāsh by the Abbasids. What we can say at the very least is that it went against the iteration of Islam that they were attempting to construct. At the same time, simply assigning its origins to Zoroastrianism seems insufficient. We should instead take a broader lens and see Khidāsh’s message as the culmination of centuries of intercultural exchange and mobility. Take for example his preaching of ideas such as *tanasukh* (transmigration). It would not be hard to imagine that the Vedic notion of *samsāra* was carried across Central Asia and Persia, eventually being accepted by individuals like Khidāsh. We of course cannot make any definitive claims, however, it would not be unrealistic to imagine local

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<sup>122</sup>Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 85

Persian faiths incorporating these and other doctrines which emerged from the *śramaṇa* culture. Manicheans, Mazdakites, and Khurramis all preached some form of reincarnation and *karma* into their theology. This was then melded with the dualistic cosmology of Zoroastrianism. These groups persisted until the advent of Islam and for some time after. This is why the *mawali* deserves such close investigation in our examination. They played a central role in the *da'wa* movement and may have shaped parts of the *da'wa*.

We have already discussed some of the Mazdean belief systems which were present during early Islam, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, and Mazdakism. However, parallel to these three was another, Khurramism. While its origins are somewhat muddled, Crone has provided some clarity on the faith. Muslim sources point to it being a sect of Zoroastrianism, while Zoroastrians viewed Khurramism as similar to heretical Mazdakism. However, Crone argues that there is evidence to suggest that Khurramism's appearance predated the first Mazdak, Zardusht of Fasa.<sup>123</sup> Still, the image we have of the religion is somewhat muddy, as our primary interlocutors consist of Muslim scholars who interacted with a specific iteration of Khurramism. By their time, it is likely that it had already incorporated certain Islamic elements into its doctrine.

It is also important to note that the term Khurramism is used quite broadly. It is not our intention to portray these groups as homogenous or unified in any regard. The Khurramiyya consisted of multiple sects. There were those in Jurjan, the Jibal, and what is now Azerbaijan known as the red-clothed ones (*Muhammira*). While their white-clothed (*Mubayyida*) counterparts resided in Transoxiana. Our main interest is the seeming confluence of Shi'i and Khurrami beliefs. The Khurramiyya encounter with Islam resulted in an interesting, though not

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<sup>123</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*

completely unexpected religious amalgam. As we saw in Manichaeism, Mani saw himself as the continuation of a line of prophets. Similarly, Khurramism subscribed to a distinct, yet similar, notion, where divine beings were incarnated (*hulul*) into different bodies such as Adam and Jesus. Some placed Muhammed within this continuous chain of *imams* and discussed his divinity using a lexicon of light as was common among other Mazdeans.<sup>124</sup> The record of Khurrami belief is limited, so it is difficult to provide a comprehensive view of the exact doctrines to which they adhere. Ja'far ibn Harb's work is on the followers of Abdullah ibn Mu'awiya known as the Harbiyya. These were a sect of Khurramis and offers some insight into Khurrami beliefs. As the Jains, Buddhist, and Greek doctrines we have previously examined, the Harbiyya subscribed to a belief in reincarnation. They believed that the spirit moved across bodies after death. An individual's new form was determined by their behavior and character. Those who did good were granted purer bodies, culminating in an angelic body of light. Those disobedient souls were placed in dirty bodies, such as dogs, pigs, or scorpions.<sup>125</sup> For some groups, reincarnation was dictated by obedience to the *imam*.<sup>126</sup> However, unlike the *nirvana* of Buddhism, the Harbiyya believed in a cyclical timeline that would end in its seventh cycle. Though this cyclicity was not shared among all Khurrami groups, some viewed the world as eternal.

We can give some credit to Khidāsh for this melding of Khurramiyya and Islamic beliefs. He had a rather brief, but dramatic career as a *da'i* for the Abbasids. As mentioned his origins are somewhat unclear. Given his inauspicious place in Abbasid history, has also contributed to the image preserved by contemporary historians. There are some conflicting narratives around Khidāsh, with the earliest mention of him in 727 CE. By some accounts, he started as a student

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<sup>124</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 240

<sup>125</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 235

<sup>126</sup> Crone, *The Nativist Prophets of Early Islamic Iran*, p. 236

of *da'wa* himself under the tutelage of a Kufan.<sup>127</sup> While others write that he was a converted Christian. Whatever the truth may be by 736, he had caught the attention of Abbasid leadership. Bukayr ibn Māhān sent him to Khurasan to perform *da'wa* for their cause.

Khidāsh was enormously successful in this endeavor and attracted many new partisans to the cause. However, his success was predicated on an appeal to local practices. He chose to emphasize more esoteric beliefs. Rather than rooting his message in the Quran or *sunna*, Khidāsh removed nearly all religious obligations. The requirements of regular prayer, fasting, and the *hajj* were all re-interpreted. He also permitted fraternal polyandry and believed in the transmigration of souls.<sup>128</sup> Though that is not to say he ignored the Islamic scriptures, rather he reconceptualized them entirely. For example, fasting for Khidāsh meant not disclosing the *imam's* identity.<sup>129</sup> This Khurramiyya informed Islam, which emphasized the *imam* was extremely popular in Khurasan.

The circumstances of Khidāsh's demise are also somewhat unclear. It is plausible that the Abbasids thoroughly rejected the *da'is* message and had him killed. However, another account places the blame on the Umayyads. After Khidāsh spoke rudely to a governor, he was crucified in retribution. In a similar pattern, death proved an ineffectual barrier in preventing the continuance of his followers. Khidāsh's followers subscribed to *tanasukh* and thus rejected his death. They continued to refrain from traditional Islamic obligations. In a dramatic turn, however, they believed Muhammed ibn 'Ali to be the devil rather than the *imam*. A status which they had instead conferred upon Khidāsh.<sup>130</sup> The Abbasids learned from Khidāsh and his successful mission. They both tightened their control of the message being sent but also acknowledged that some exploitation or appeal to local beliefs was necessary.

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<sup>127</sup> Agha, *The Revolution Which Toppled the Umayyads*, p. 17

<sup>128</sup> Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747-820*, p. 35

<sup>129</sup> Agha, *The Revolution Which Toppled the Umayyads*, p. 17

<sup>130</sup> Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747-820*, p. 37

The *imam* played such a pivotal role among Khurramiyya Muslim groups, that many adhered to a form of antinomianism (*ibaha*). Rather than consulting or abiding by Islamic law, the *imam* operated as the one source of truth for correct conduct. We can see how these Khurrami practices incorporated the Quran to justify their antinomianism. Verses such as:

There is not upon those who believe and do righteousness [any] blame concerning what they have eaten [in the past] if they [now] fear Allah and believe and do righteous deeds, and then fear Allah and believe, and then fear Allah and do good; and Allah loves the doers of good. (Q 5:93)<sup>131</sup>

By far the most successful example of Khurramiyya beliefs in Islam is among the partisans of Abu Muslim. These Muslimiyya recognized the Abbasid general as their *imam*, a prophet, and the incarnation of the divine spirit.<sup>132</sup> Following his death in 753 CE at the hands of Caliph al-Mansur, there were a number of revolts and uprisings in his name. We see a number of sects emerge in opposition to the Abbasids, angered by Abu Muslim's murder. During the *da'wa* and eventual *dawla*, Abu Muslim played a central role. He both called people to the cause and inaugurated the revolt in Khurasan. After the Abbasids had taken Khurasan, Abu Muslim was further elevated, with some claims saying the *khutba* was given in his name.<sup>133</sup>

It seemed that he was particularly attractive to the various *ghulat* groups in Khurasan. We cannot attest to the personal piety, or lack thereof, of Abu Muslim. Similar to Khidāsh he may have sought to appeal to the local sects within Khurasan. He was rather successful, as it seems that the *ghulaww* adopted Abu Muslim as one of their own. He preserved his elevated status after death. These groups with attached themselves to Abu Muslim all fell under the label of Rawandiyya. It is likely that there was a significant overlap between the followers of Khidāsh

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<sup>131</sup> Nasr et al., *The Study Quran*.

<sup>132</sup> Wilferd Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran*, Bibliotheca Persica (Albany, N.Y.: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), p. 8

<sup>133</sup> Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747-820*, p. 57

and Abu Muslim. Again, we see those that reject his death on the basis of *tanasukh*. Similar as well to the death of Khidāsh, some claim that a devil was killed in his place. Antinomianism was also a shared practice between the groups. Following Abu Muslim's murder, the Rawandiyya abandoned all Islamic precepts "since they believed that the knowledge of the *imam* was the only requirement of religion."<sup>134</sup>

None of this should imply that these ideas were widespread or particularly common. We by no means make any claims about the prevalence of the spread of Khurrami beliefs. All that we can assert is that some degree of spread occurred. *Tanasukh* and those who subscribed to it were widely condemned by the broader Muslim community. In the doxographical works and heresiographies which examine the *ghulaww* groups which emerged around this time, we see the *ashab al-tanasukh* being reviled.

### **Khurrami Islam**

What these two episodes of Khurrami Islam show is how the Abbasid *da'wa* allowed foreign ideas to flow into Islam. Specifically, we see how doctrines of the imamate fused with the pre-existing belief in *tanasukh* and other local beliefs. Some of the Khurramiyya were known to practice non-violence to an extent and restricted themselves to a vegetarian diet. Their system of beliefs echoes much of what we have already seen in Buddhism, Jainism, Manichaeism, and Mazdakism. The belief in the transmigration of the soul, vegetarianism, and non-violence among these Islamic Khurramiyya is incredibly significant. Past scholastic attempts at identifying the origins of these groups have simply bucketed them as neo-Mazdean. However, this is a somewhat unsatisfactory answer. Having taken a much broader look at the exchange of peoples, cultures, and ideas we see how doctrine from 500 BCE Vedic India may have made its way into early Islam.

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<sup>134</sup> Daniel, *The Political and Social History of Khurasan under Abbasid Rule, 747-820*, p. 131

This eventual inception would have been extremely unlikely absent the *da'wa* movement. The Abbasids required popular support if their *dawla* was to succeed. The numerous attempts at usurpation prior to 750 CE showcase the resilience of the Umayyads. This need for a broad base of support required them to appeal to diverse groups within the Islamic empire. The most receptive audience would be those that chafed under Umayyad rule. The discriminatory racialized regime put in place by the first Islamic empire sowed the seeds of discontent among the *mawali* population. There were also those who sought to avenge 'Ali and his family and therefore also opposed the Umayyad. The confluence of these two groups occurred across the eastern bounds of the empire. Khurasan would be the eventual launching point of the *dawla*.

Khurasan, prior to being a hotbed of rebellion, was home to a diverse collection of people. From the turn of the century, various groups had gathered in the region. Among them were Buddhists and Manichaeans fleeing persecution. Following the advent of Islam, Khurasan was settled by Arab migrants and soldiers. These groups mingled with the local Khurasani population. Khidāsh was able to capitalize on this long history when spreading his *da'wa*. He called the locals to a version of Islam that resembled many of the beliefs they already held. By employing such a strategy, he drew large swathes of followers. Despite his eventual condemnation by the Abbasids and death, his partisans continued to believe in him. The followers of Khidāsh present perhaps the most dramatic example of how *tanasukh*, a qualified call to non-violence, and vegetarianism may have entered into Islam. Of course, evidence of direct transmission is lacking. However, there seems to be at least some evidence that the cosmological orientation and ascetical practices of Hindustan were present among this small yet significant sect of Islam.

## **Conclusion**

The Abbasid *da'wa* movement was no doubt successful in garnering a broad coalition of support. We have shown how their missionaries attracted sizeable swathes of the Persian *mawali* population. What is also clear is that any notions of a coherent religious message should be dismissed. There was by no means a clear or single factor that brought together the disparate groups of anti-Umayyad opposition. In particular, we see that figures like Khidāsh were impressively successful in incorporating local groups into their cause. While Khidāsh presents the extremes of *ghulaww* within the *da'wa* movement, there are other notable examples.

What is hopefully clear is the commonality of belief stemming from South Asia and entering into Islam through Persia. In particular beliefs in reincarnation and asceticism seem to have carried through the centuries. From northern Hindustan, in the middle of the *śramaṇa* counterculture, the Buddha emerged preaching the Middle Way. His message would be carried across the globe by subsequent generations of followers. Buddhism spread into Central Asia and Persia during the reigns of the Mauryan emperor Ashoka and the Kushan ruler Kanishka. This allowed doctrines of *nirvana*, *saṃsāra*, and *karma* to spread past South Asia's borders. Though Buddhism is only one of a number of religions originating from the region. Jainism, another religion from the Vedic tradition also arose around this time. A more strictly ascetic faith that preached near-absolute non-violence. Unlike Buddhism, Jains held the soul in the highest regard and viewed all living things as having a soul. While the religion did not spread quite as far as Buddhism we can still see its potential impact on Persian faiths.

Persian lands were home to a myriad of empires, religions, and peoples. It was home to a Mazdean cosmology that subscribed to a dualistic worldview. A world mired in conflict between the forces of Light and Dark. This served as a basis for a number of religions including Zoroastrianism, Manichaeism, Mazdakism, and Khurramism. However, the latter three stand in



distinction due to their belief in various forms of reincarnation. Similar to the Vedic faiths, these three believed that an individual would be reborn after death. The form of rebirth would be determined by one's actions. It would be appropriate to conjecture that reincarnation had Hellenic origins. However, the metempsychosis discussed by Plato and others lacks the cohesion of its Vedic counterpart. These groups would be persecuted by the Zoroastrian empire at times, however, they remained present in the region until the advent of Islam.

The early centuries of Islam are marked by revolution and rebellion. The Caliphate of 'Ali began the splintering of the religion. Groups emerged based on both religious and political divides over questions of leadership. After the demise of 'Ali and his sons, the Umayyads emerged victorious. Though this did not mean that their claims to caliphal power would go uncontested. Their dynasty was in some ways characterized by the opposition. The Tawwābūn and al-Mukhtār led some of the early efforts to restore *ahl al-bayt* and avenge 'Ali. These movements were accompanied by intellectual and doctrinal shifts. We see the emergence of ideas such as *raja'* and messianic connotations surrounding the *mahdi*.

These earlier movements were succeeded by the Abbasids. By appealing to a large swathe of the population under Umayyad control, the *da'wa* movement was able to gather a formidable force. They preached the restoration of *ahl al-bayt* an ambiguous term that allowed them to remain attractive to the fractured groups in the empire. This allowed the diverse groups in Persia to come into the folds of Islam, in some manner. By preaching to the masses and specifically the *mawali* population, local ideas and beliefs were incorporated into the *da'wa* movement by some. This becomes most obvious in the example of Khidāsh. The Khurasan-based *da'i* use clearly Khurrami ideas in his message. He preached *tanasukh* and was accused of *ibaha*. *Tanasukh* most clearly demonstrates the influence of Hindustan religion. Despite his

demise, his followers carried on in their beliefs. Abu Muslim is another obvious example of Khurrami Islam which fused Mazdean and Islamic beliefs. By extension, this also includes some Vedic doctrines. His partisans also believed in *tanasukh*, in its various forms.

We hope to have demonstrated, even in a minor way, that the notions and ideas which began in Vedic India did in some shape or form reach the Islamic world. While they may have not been accepted into the mainstream, they were nonetheless accepted by some. This adoption of foreign ideas was made possible due to the needs of the Abbasid *dawla*.

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