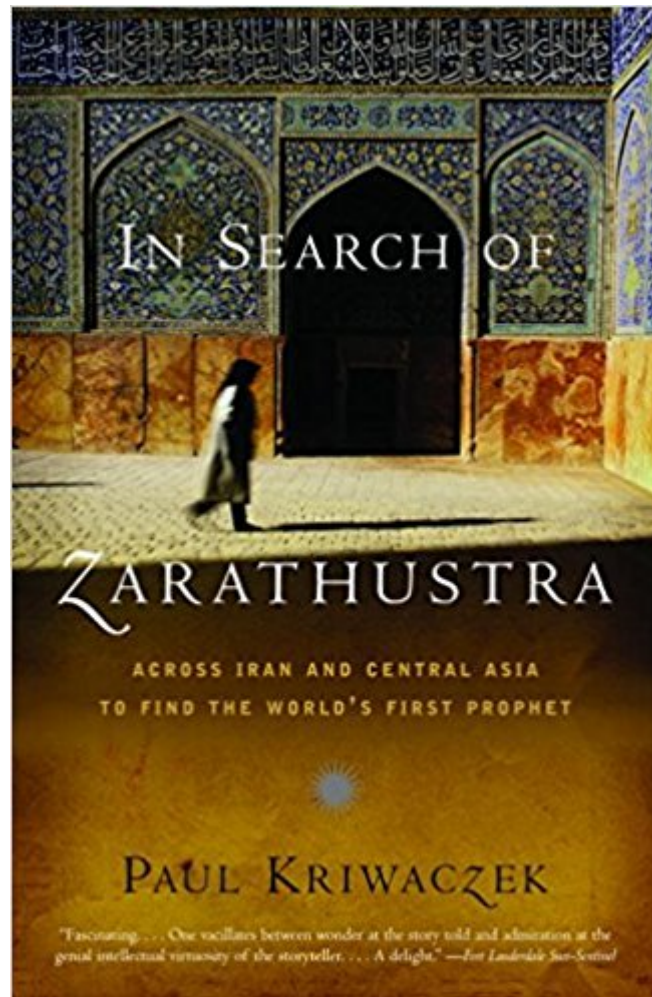


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In Search Of Zarathustra: Across Iran And Central Asia To Find The World's First Prophet



Synopsis

Long before the first Hebrew temple, before the birth of Christ or the mission of Muhammad, there lived in Persia a prophet to whom we owe the ideas of a single god, the cosmic struggle between good and evil, and the Apocalypse. His name was Zarathustra, and his teachings eventually held sway from the Indus to the Nile and spread as far as Britain. Following Zarathustra's elusive trail back through time and across the Islamic, Christian, and Jewish worlds, Paul Kriwaczek uncovers his legacy at a wedding ceremony in present-day Central Asia, in the Cathar heresy of medieval France, and among the mystery cults of the Roman empire. He explores pre-Muslim Iran and Central Asia, ultimately bringing us face to face with the prophet himself, a teacher whose radical humility shocked and challenged his age, and whose teachings have had an enduring effect on Western thought. The result is a tour de force of travel and historical inquiry by an adventurer in the classic tradition.

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

The ancient Persian prophet Zoroaster taught that the world was caught in a struggle between good and evil. He believed in one God, called Ahura Mazda, in a struggle with the forces of darkness. He was a theological monist and an ethical dualist. Human beings had the responsibility of working to bring about the good and eliminate the evil. The good would triumph in the end. Zoroaster was one of the first religious teachers to preach the afterlife. He founded a religion called Zoroastrianism which remains one of the fundamental religions of man and, although it has relatively few adherents, it survives today. Paul Kriwaczek has written a fine book which is travelog, political commentary,

history, and study of Zoroastrianism all rolled into one. Mr. Kriwaczek was trained as a dentist but subsequently joined BBC as a specialist in Central and South Asian affairs. It is good to see a nonspecialist who can write on Zoroaster with enthusiasm and knowledge and convey something of both to his readers. The book is written in the form of a reverse chronology beginning with the present-day and progressing through successive chapters to the hazy early days (perhaps 1800 B.C.) of Zarathustra himself. We see many interesting figures along the way, and Kriwaczek is full of entertaining stories and digressions. This mostly makes the book a pleasure to read, but there are moments when the organization becomes confusing and the story gets a bit off track. Kriwaczek spends a great deal of time on Frederick Nietzsche and his famous work "Thus Spoke Zarathustra." He explains well the sources of Nietzsche's fascination with the ancient Persian prophet and he discusses the advances in scholarship contemporary with Nietzsche that helped make Zoroaster accessible.

With the eyes of the news media focused on Iran and its undeniable influence in the Middle East, few have questioned the essential differences between Shia and Sunni Islam and the history that has led the Shiites to consider Iraq holy ground and Iran the center of a new Islamic civilization. When questions are finally asked, one answer rings clearly: Mesopotamia and Persia are the very cradles of western dynastic civilization, Islamic or otherwise. Few human memories or legends are as old as these places. One tradition in particular echoes throughout the works of scribes and cantors: the faith of Zarathustra, the first messenger of the dominion of one Eternal God. The downfall of the Shah of Iran and rise of fundamentalist Islam was America's first national experience of Middle Eastern theocratic extremism. The taking of American hostages in 1979 not only placed Shia Islam in the center of world attention, but also affected American internal politics as it doomed the Carter administration to electoral failure. Many in the West received a crash course on divisions within Islam as journalists, policy makers, and academics struggled to make sense of this new wrinkle in the rich and varied history of Iran. The many cultures, peoples, languages, and belief systems that have crossed the landscape of ancient Persia and modern Iran have come under intensive scrutiny and careful study in the last quarter century. While travel has been restricted across Iran at various times and for various reasons, scholars, tourists, and pilgrims have had opportunities to explore the rich undercurrents of history and faith that lie beneath the thin, but firm veneer of fundamentalist Shia Islam.

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