Why the Midrash Has Abraham Thrown into Nimrod’s Furnace

The historical association of Abraham and Nimrod with Zoroaster, the founder of Zoroastrianism

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Zoroaster, Plaque in Atashkadeh Chak-Nak near Yazd, Iran. Touched up. CC Mark Schweizer

Abraham in the Furnace: Genesis Rabbah’s Version

Awell-known midrashic story pertaining to Abraham’s early life concerns his miraculous deliverance from a fiery furnace, into which he was cast by Nimrod, the notorious Babylonian-Assyrian biblical figure. One of the earliest rabbinic versions of this story is preserved in *Genesis Rabbah* 38:11 (ed. Theodor-Albeck, 363-364):

נסתיה ומסרתיה לנמרוד, אמר ליה נסגוד לנורא, אמר ליה נסגוד למייא דמטפין לנורא, אמר ליה ונסגוד למיא, אמר ליה נסגוד לענני דטעני מיא, אמר ליה ונסגוד לעננא, אמר ליה נסגוד לרוחא דמובלי עננא, [אמר ליה] ונסגוד לרוחא, אמר ליה נסגוד לבר נשא דסביל רוחא, אמר ליה מלין את משתעי לא נסגוד אלא לאור הריני משליכך בו ויבוא אלהיך שאתה משתחוה לו ויצילך ממנו.

He (Terah) took him (Abraham) and gave him over to Nimrod. (Nimrod) said to him: Let us worship the fire! (Abraham) said to him: Should we not then worship water, which extinguishes fire! (Nimrod) said to him: Then, let us worship the water! (Abraham) said to him: Should we not then worship the clouds, which carry the water? (Nimrod) said to him: Then, let us worship the cloud! (Abraham) said to him: If so, Should we not then worship the wind, which scatters the clouds? (Nimrod) said to him: Then, let us worship the wind! (Abraham) said to him: Should we not then worship the human, who withstands the wind? (Nimrod) said to him: You are merely piling words; we should bow to none other than the fire. I shall therefore cast you in it, and let your God to whom you bow come and save you from it!

הוה תמן הרן קאים פליג אמר מה נפשך אם נצח אברהם אנא אמר מן דאברם אנא, אם נצח נמרוד אמר אנא מנמרוד אנא, כיון שירד אברם לכבשן האש ונוצל אמ' ליה מן דמן את, אמר ליה מן דאברם, נטלוהו והשליכוהו באש ונחמרו מעיו ויצא ומת על פני אביו. הה"ד וימת הרן על פני תרח אביו.

Haran (Abraham's brother) was standing there. He said (to himself): what shall I do? If Abraham wins, I shall say: "I am of Abraham's (followers)," if Nimrod wins I shall say, "I am of Nimrod's (followers)." When Abraham went into the furnace and survived, Haran was asked: "Whose (follower) are you?" and he answered: "I am Abraham's (follower)!" So, they took him and threw him into the furnace, and his innards were burned and he died and predeceased Terah, his father. This is the meaning of the verse (Gen 11:28), “And Haran died in the lifetime of his father Terah.”

The Inspiration for the Story

At the core of this story stands what appears to be a *derasha* on the name of Abraham’s city, Ur of the Chaldeans (אור כשדים), which was creatively interpreted by some ancient exegetes to mean literally אור, fire or flames. Thus, Gen. 15:7 was understood as saying, "I am the Lord who rescued you from the midst of the fire of the Chaldeans.”

The nature of this fire was, of course, open to various interpretations, and some exegetes, doubtless inspired by the story of Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah in Daniel (Dan. 3:19-23), interpreted the phrase to mean that Abraham too was saved from a fiery furnace prepared by the Chaldeans to burn him.

In that story, whose basic form functions as the model for the Abraham version, three young men—Chananiah, Mishael, and Azariah—are cast into a fiery furnace by Nebuchadnezzar, the Babylonian king, because of their refusal to worship an idol, and are eventually saved by God.

Yoktan Throws Abraham in the Fire: Pseudo-Philo

The notion of a confrontation between Abraham and Nimrod, so prominent in the *Genesis Rabbah* version of the narrative, is apparently absent from Second Temple literature. In fact, what may have seemed like the earliest surviving text to incorporate this motif into the story of Abraham's deliverance from the flames, the *Biblical Antiquities* of Pseudo-Philo (6:16-17; circa first or second century CE), does not actually have Nimrod as Abraham’s main antagonist but a different biblical character, Yoktan.

16 They took him (=Abram) and built a furnace and lit it with fire. They threw the bricks into the furnace to be fired. Then the leader Yoktan, dismayed, took Abram and threw him with the bricks into the fiery furnace. 17 But God stirred up a great earthquake, and burning fire leaped forth out of the furnace into flames and sparks of flame, and it burned up all those standing around in front of the furnace. All those who were consumed in that day were 83,500. But there was not even the slightest injury to Abram from the burning of the fire (trans. Howard Jacobson).

Abraham Burns His Father's Idols: Jubilees

The story also seems to be dependent on the juxtaposition, exhibited several centuries earlier in the book of *Jubilees* (12:12-14; circa second century BCE), of Abraham setting his father’s idols on fire and Haran's death in these very flames trying to save them:

In the sixtieth year of the life of Abram, i.e. in the fourth week, in its fourth year, Abram arose in the night and burned the house of the idols. And he burned everything in the house. And there was no man who knew. And they rose up in the night, and they wanted to save their gods from the midst of the fire. And Haran rushed to save them, and the fire flared up over him. And he was burned in the fire and died in Ur of the Chaldees before Terah, his father. And they buried him in Ur of the Chaldees (trans. James Kugel).

Elements in the *Genesis Rabbah* Version without Precedent in Jewish Sources

Despite the shared motifs with earlier sources, some crucial elements in the *Genesis Rabbah* version of the story are clearly novel:

* The identification of Nimrod as a fire-worshipper.
* The incorporation of a theological debate between Abraham and Nimrod over the worship of fire and other natural elements.
* The portrayal of Nimrod as the arch-enemy, who stands as the sole rival of Abraham.

In what follows, we will see that these novel elements in the rabbinic account can be significantly illuminated through a set of Iranian and Christian traditions pertaining to the figure of Zoroaster (=Zarathustra), the mythical founder of the ancient Iranian religion, Zoroastrianism,[1] who was likewise said to have emerged unscathed from flames.

Zoroaster Survives the Flames

In a brief narrative from the late-first or early-second century (*Orations* of Dio Cocceianus, 36.40), Zoroaster is said to have been endangered by a fire that descended from heaven. According to this version, Zoroaster miraculously emerges from the flames unscathed, deeply impressing the Persian king:

For the Persians say that Zoroaster, because of a passion for wisdom and justice, deserted his fellows and dwelt by himself on a certain mountain; and they say that thereupon the mountain caught fire, a mighty flame descending from the sky above, and that it burned unceasingly. So then the king and the most distinguished of his Persians drew near for the purpose of praying to the god; and **Zoroaster came forth from the fire unscathed**, and, showing himself gracious towards them, bade them to be of good cheer and to offer certain sacrifices in recognition of the god’s having come to that place.

At least some elements in Dio Cocceianus' story appear in a Zoroastrian account of the early biography of Zoroaster, which depicts his being cast into a fiery furnace and his subsequent deliverance from the flames.

One version of this story is preserved in a thirteenth-century work in New Persian, known as the Zarātushtnāma (8.4):

The sorcerers were befallen by commotion and villainy, and they stole Zoroaster away from his father. Then they went to the wilderness, and piled up a mountain of firewood. **They darkened the pile with black naphtha and yellow sulphur, lit a fire, and threw Zoroaster on it. By the decree of God the Victorious, no injury reached him from the blaze. The raging fire became like water, and Zoroaster slumbered inside**.

It seems likely that these stories are based on an earlier (Zoroastrian) version, which told the story of Zoroaster’s miraculous deliverance from the flames.[2]

Abraham and Zoroaster

Several Islamic and Zoroastrian authors identified the founding father of Zoroastrianism (Zoroaster) with the first monotheistic prophet Abraham\Ibrāhīm. Considering the natural desire for different cultures living together to create a common historical narrative, the convergence of the stories of Abraham and Zoroaster is hardly surprising.Whether one story influenced the other, whether there was mutual borrowing or just a coincidental similarity in motifs is difficult to ascertain, but the two founding fathers have the following common elements in their biographies:

* Both figures are miraculously delivered from the fire.
* Both have an encounter with an evil king.
* Both are said to have been born to pagan fathers.
* Both are said to have been engaged in astronomy and astrology.
* Both are said to have rebelled against their heathen upbringing by smashing the idols of their families and townsmen.

Syncretistic Pushback: Zoroaster is not Abraham but Nimrod

Although only later Islamic and Zoroastrian sources make the identification of the two figures explicit, some Greek-Christian traditions from pre-Islamic times, like that of Eusebius,[3] place Zoroaster during the time of Abraham, albeit without identifying them as one and the same person. It stands to reason, moreover, that the association of Abraham and Zoroaster occurred not during the Islamic period, but at an earlier time, when the various legends about the two figures took shape. Thus, the association of Abraham with Zoroaster may have been known already to Jewish and Christian authors in late antiquity.

It further stands to reason that, although some adherents of Judaism and Christianity may have been susceptible to syncretic connections between one of their founding fathers and the great Iranian religious figure, Zoroaster, others, more jealous to the unique position of their own hero, would have been irked at such an association. I suggest that the latter perspective might have triggered the alternative identification of Zoroaster, not with Abraham, but with Nimrod.

Zoroaster-Nimrod Consumed by Flames (Pseudo-Clement)

Pseudo-Clement’s *Homilies* (9.4), a Christian text from late antiquity, explicitly identifies Nimrod with Zoroaster,[4] a name he is said to have received posthumously, after he was consumed by the flames of a fire set by an evil king:

In his turn in the succession, a certain man of this family (Ham's family) called Nebrod (=Nimrod) received the magic art as though he were a giant who chose to think thoughts in opposition to God; he it is whom the Greeks knew as Zoroaster. After the flood, he became covetous of the kingship, and being a great Magus, with his magic devices he constrained the star presiding over the destiny of the evil king then on the throne to yield the kingship. **However, the latter, insofar as he was ruler and had authority over the one who was attempting the violence, brought down the royal fire upon him that he might honor his oath and punish him who had first resorted to constraint.** So, when Nebrod the Magus had been slain by the lightening that had fallen from heaven to earth, his name was changed to Zoro*aster*, since the stream of living fire from the star (Greek *aster*) had descended upon him.

Pseudo-Clement’s version is missing the happy-ending we saw in Dio Cocceianus above, in which the hero (Zoroaster) is miraculously saved from the flames. Instead, Pseudo-Clement seems ambivalent about Nimrod-Zoroaster. On one hand, he fights an evil king, but, on the other hand, he is depicted as one who had thoughts against God, is covetous for power, uses magic, and ends up being killed by the reversed effects of his own spell.

It appears significant that this comes from a Christian author, who might have had reason to tarnish Zoroaster’s image, as the founder of a rival religion. Whether or not this was Pseudo-Clement’s intention, this story is a far cry from a heroic narrative of Zoroaster miraculously surviving the flames in Abrahamic style.

Nimrod as a Fire-Worshiper

It is possible that the identification of Nimrod-Zoroaster had a much broader acceptance, and is hinted at by sources, Jewish and Christian alike, which do not mention Zoroaster explicitly. The key is fire-worship. One of the elements of Zoroastrianism that stood out to ancient authors was their strong religious interest in fire, characterized (or caricatured) by opponents as “fire-worship.” To call someone a fire-worshiper was tantamount to identifying him as a Zoroastrian.

Thus, texts like *Genesis Rabbah* and the Pseudo-Clementine *Recognitiones*, which identify Nimrod as a fire-worshiper, might be alluding to the fact that he was a Zoroastrian and perhaps even Zoroaster himself.

*Genesis Rabbah* (38:11)

(Nimrod) said to (Abram): You are merely piling words; **we should bow to none other than the fire**. I shall therefore cast you in it, and let your God to whom you bow come and save you from it!

Pseudo-Clement's *Recognitiones* (1.30)

In the seventeenth generation, Nemrod was the first to hold the kingship in Babylonia, and he built a city there; he went from there to Persia and **taught the Persians to worship fire**.

The Rabbis’ Polemical Reversal: Nimrod-Zoroaster is the Bad-Guy

The rabbis in *Genesis Rabbah* do not say explicitly that Nimrod is a Zoroastrian or Zoroaster himself. As noted above, however, the claim that Nimrod was a fire-worshiper seems sufficient to reasonably posit that this is the text’s intention. Assuming this to be the case, we note that *Genesis Rabbah*’s treatment of Nimrod(-Zoroaster) is more negative than Pseudo-Clement’s ambivalence, since the rabbis subversively reverse the roles.

According to Pseudo-Clement, Nimrod *challenges* the evil king. Even though he loses, and is described in less than flattering terms, still Nimrod-Zoroaster is not the bad guy in this story. According to the midrash, however, Nimrod *is himself* the evil king, who having been theologically challenged by Abraham, attempts to cast him into the fire.

If we compare the midrash to Dio Cocceianus’ version of the story, the contrast is even starker, since Dio Cocceianus portrays Zoroaster as the hero who was miraculously saved from the flames, while the midrash reserves this role for Abraham and depicts Nimrod(-Zoroaster) as the antagonist who sought to cast Abraham into the flames.

Contrasting the Founding Fathers of Judaism and Zoroastrianism

Thus, by presenting Abraham as the hero saved from a fire, and Nimrod the fire-worshiper (=Zoroaster) as the evil king who cast Abraham into the flames, the authors of the midrash reverse the (apparently) popular association between Abraham, the “true” monotheistic prophet, and Zoroaster, who is now pictured as an evil, idolatrous king.

1. “Zoroaster” is the name generally known in the West for the prophet of ancient Iran, whose teachings inaugurated a movement that eventually became the dominant religion in Iran up until the Islamic conquest. There is an ongoing controversy in scholarship concerning the date of Zoroaster and whether or not he actually existed.
2. While this story may reflect a late Zoroastrian tradition from the Islamic period, which was created in connection with the rabbinic-Islamic tradition about Abraham/Ibrāhīm, it must be kept in mind that the Zoroastrian traditions collected in the Middle Persian and New Persian works reflect a combination of novel traditions composed in the Islamic period along with oral traditions produced in much earlier periods. Although the earlier traditions cannot always be distinguished from later elements, in the case of Zoroaster’s fiery adventures, the existence of Greek parallels seems to point to an earlier Iranian version, upon which the extant Greek versions depend.
3. Eusebius was the fourth-century CE Christian bishop of Caesarea. He makes a point of placing Abraham and Zoroaster at the same time: “The city known as Ninveh among the Hebrews was named after Ninus (a Babylonian figure remembered in Greek historiography though unattested by this name in ancient Babylonian sources), in whose time Zoroaster the Magus was king of the Bactrians. Semiramis was the consort of Ninus and succeeded him on the throne. Hence, **Abraham was contemporary with them**.” (*Preparation for the Gospel* 10.9.10)
4. Another source from roughly the same period (Epiphanius of Salamis, *Panarion* 3:2-3) also identifies Nimrod (or one of his forefathers, Cush or Ham) with Zoroaster. Zoroaster is also identified in some Christian sources with the king of the Bactrians – an ancient Iranian kingdom located in today’s Northern Afghanistan – who is said to have been defeated in battle and slain by the Babylonian king, Ninus