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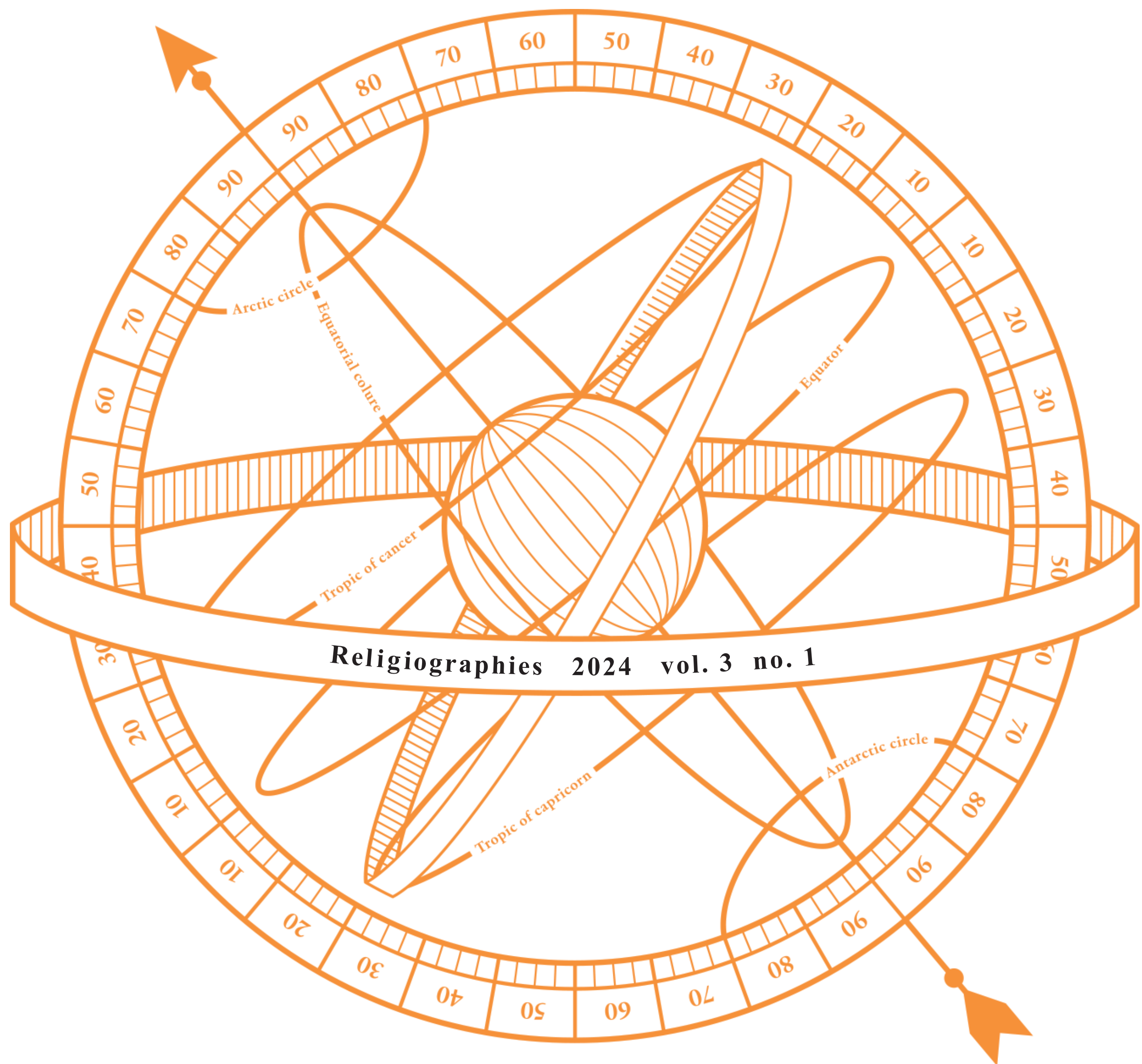

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Early American Transcendentalist Encounters with Zoroaster
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Abstract
While Parsi Zoroastrians were confronting the onslaught of Christian missionary activities in Bombay in the 1840s, members of the recently established Transcendental Club in Massachusetts were promoting their perception of Zoroaster as an early model of enlightened thought. The reception and interpretation of the "Persian religion" by prominent transcendentalists such as Ralph Waldo Emerson, Amos Bronson Alcott, and Henry David Thoreau constitute the predominant American "encounter with Zoroaster" of the time. Their appropriation of Zoroaster is connected loosely to the broader field of "Zoroastrian esotericism" via their selective presentations of "Zoroastrian" texts in lectures, "Sunday readings," and the Transcendentalist publication, *The Dial*. The text that Emerson used for his choice of Zoroastrian "Ethnical Scripture" for inclusion in the volume of *The Dial* of July 1843 was not one that would be recognized as pivotal by most Zoroastrians today, but was considered by many Parsis of the time, as also by European scholars, to be an authoritative religious work. This was an English rendition of a pseudo-Zoroastrian mystical work known as *The Desatir*, the translation of which had been commissioned by the leading Parsi Zoroastrian priest in Bombay a few decades earlier.

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The connection between American Transcendentalism and the broader field of "Zoroastrian esotericism" lies mostly in the reception and interpretation of the religion by two of its leading New England advocates, Ralph Waldo Emerson (1803–1883) and Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888). Both attended the so-called Transcendentalist Club, which was initially established in Cambridge, Massachusetts, in late 1836 to introduce a more experiential approach to discourse about religion. Meetings thereafter were held at members' homes in Boston. Participants, including several local Unitarian ministers, were particularly interested in the Romanticism inherent in the works of contemporary German philosophers, such as Immanuel Kant (1724–1804) and Georg W. F. Hegel (1770–1831), and European literati including Johann W. von Goethe (1749–1832) and Samuel T. Coleridge (1772–1834). The esoteric reading of the Zoroastrian religion and its founder that so appealed to the New England Transcendentalists finds particular context in European Romantic poetry and story, which often appropriated obscure figures from the past to transport readers to new visions of the present, albeit tinged with the orientalist biases of the time. For Americans and Europeans educated in the liberal arts, the prime introduction to an "Eastern" work that explored what could be termed a "Romantic" view of nature was a classical Sanskrit drama by Kālidāsa, which was translated first into Latin then English by Sir William Jones (1746–1794). Jones's English translation of *Sácontala, or the Fatal Ring*, initially published in Calcutta in 1789, then quickly reproduced by European presses, including a German translation by George Foster (1754–1794) in 1791, exposed Western readers to mythological and epic themes that would have been unfamiliar to them from a classroom study of Greek and Roman texts, such as Herodotus, Xenophon, Caesar, or Virgil.

Subsequent works by European authors such as Goethe became seminal in introducing Eastern languages, literary forms, and symbolism to a wider western audience, including those in North America. Although Goethe's reading interests included travelogues and histories relating to the whole of Asia, as then known, it seems that Persian literature appealed to him more than that of India, despite his enduring admiration for both Kālidāsa's play and its eponymous heroine. Goethe's awareness of Iranian mythical history and religion was not restricted to the Islamic period, nor confined to the poetry of Hāfez through Joseph von Hammer's German translation (which he first read in 1814). References in Goethe's diary entries between January and May of 1815 inform us that he knew Jean Chardin's *Voyages en Perse* and had borrowed from the library Saʾadi's *Gulistan*, von Hammer's *Die Fundgruben des Orients* ("Treasures of the Orient"), volume 1 of Heinrich Friedrich von Diez's *Denkwürdigkeiten von Asien* ("Memoires of Asia"), and the latter's translation from Persian of the *Qābus-nāmeh* as *Das Buch des Kabus*.[1]

Goethe's *West-östlicher Divan* (1819), named after the collection of poems (Pers. *divān*) by Hafez, furthered the use of themes relating to Iranian myth and lyric that had first been introduced into German literature through Christoph Martin Wieland's *Dschinnistan*.[2] The author's *Noten und Abhandlungen* ("Notes and Essays") attached to the *Divan*, includes a commentary on the "Ancient Persians" (*Ältere*

1 Momme Mommsen, "Zur Entstehungsgeschichte des Buchs der Sprüche" in *Studien zum West-östlichen Divan Goethes*, ed. Edgar Lohner (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1971), 107–8.

2 Jenny Rose, *The Image of Zoroaster: The Persian Mage Through European Eyes* (Winona Lake, IN: Eisenbrauns, 2000), 128–30, 151.

Perser) in which Goethe explains some of their religious customs and practices, with reference to Zoroaster as reforming an "original pure natural religion" into an elaborate cult.[3] The eleventh section of *West-östlicher Divan* develops some of the themes that Goethe drew from his understanding of the ancient Iranian belief system; it is titled *Parsi Nameh, Buch des Parsen* ("Book of the Parsis") with a subtitle "Vermächtnis altpersischen Glaubens" ("Testament of Old Persian Faith"). In this "Parsi book," Goethe, in company with earlier European Enlightenment literati and contemporary Romantic poets, depicts an early natural religion, which emphasizes all the elements of the world, including humanity, as manifesting a divine existence and power (cf. *Parsi Nameh*, ll. 37–52). The notion that religion evolved through the human experience of the natural world, as also from an intuitive perception of truth that is not bound to religious doctrine or authority, placed human reasoning above prophetic revelation. In his *Essai sur les Moeurs* (1756), Voltaire had succinctly summarized the view that the ancient Persian Zoroaster was the first of all philosophers to teach humans what they already knew in their hearts.[4] In this respect, Zoroaster was construed as the epitome of natural religion, and a model for moral philosophers through the ages. Goethe comments on the Ancient Persians: "Such a delicate religion, founded on the ever-present God in his works in the world of the senses, must exercise its own influence on morals [or manners; Ger. *Sitten*]."[5]

Goethe's *Parsi Nameh* develops the notion of an immanent God working in the world of the senses; he writes of the splendour of the rising sun which is greater than a king with all his jewels, since it is the light within which God is enthroned (*Parsi Nameh*, ll. 5–20).[6] The Notes refer to a "baptism in fire" (*Feuertaufe*) in explanation of the poem's allusion to the immersion of the new-born child in the fiery rays of the sun (*Feuerbade*: *Parsi Nameh*, ll. 29–31).[7] The concept of the sun's light reflecting "le feu d'Ormusd" ("the fire of Ohrmazd") would have been familiar from Anquetil Duperron's publication.[8] Human mirroring of this divine sunlike splendor is a theme that had featured in Mozart and Schikaneder's singspiel *Die Zauberflöte*, in which the protagonist Sarastro (Zoroaster), a Masonic high priest of the Temple of Wisdom, is the antithesis of the Queen of the Night, who is "banished by the brilliance of the sun" (*Die Zauberflöte* II.20).[9] At the end of the opera, the entire stage set is transformed into a sun, with Sarastro standing in an elevated position as he utters the triumphant words, "Die Strahlen der Sonne vertreiben die Nacht, Zernichten der Heuchler erschlichene Macht" ("The rays of the sun drive out the night [and] crush the fraudulently- obtained power of the hypocrite"; *Die Zauberflöte* II.30).[10]

Goethe later refers to the remnant "Parsi" religion in Persia, as "still persevering here and there in its primitive purity, even in desolate nooks" and as having brought much good through the ages.[11] The ascription of an innate morality and wisdom to the ancient Persian religion is revisited by the Transcendentalists in their presentation of Zoroaster and Zoroastrian text.

3
Johann Wolfgang Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, Band 3 (Berlin: Aufbau, 1960), 174.

4
Rose, *Image*, 99.

5
Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, 3:175, "Eine so zarte Religion, gegründet auf die Allgegenwart Gottes in seinen Werken der Sinnenwelt, muss einen eignen Einfluss auf die Sitten ausüben."

6
See Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, 3:174, "Auf das Anschauen der Natur gründete sich der alten Parsen Gottesverehrung. Sie wendeten sich, den Schöpfer anbetend, gegen die aufgehende Sonne, als der auffallend herrlichsten Erscheinung. Dort glaubten sie den Thron Gottes, von Engeln umfunkelt, zu erblicken. Die Glorie dieses herzerhebenden Dienstes konnte sich jeder, auch der Geringste, täglich vergegenwärtigen."

7
Modi supposes that this may be a reference to the injunction in the *Saddar* (16.2) to kindle a lamp or fire at the birth of a child, and that Goethe may have read this in Hyde's *De vetere religione Persarum*; Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, *Goethe's Parsi-nameh Or Buch Des Parsen, i.e., The Book of the Parsees*, in *Asiatic Papers,* part 2 (Bombay: The Times Press, 1917), 119–48; 137–38. The notion of a "baptism in fire" recalls Bernard Picart's curious depiction of 'Baptême par le Feu des Gaures' in his *Cérémonies et Coutumes* (1723–38), where the baby is passed over the flames of a fire; see Rose, *Image*, 113.

8
Cf. Abraham Hyacinthe Anquetil Duperron, *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre,* vol. 1, pt. 2 (Paris: N. M. Tilliard, 1781), 180.

9
Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte: Libretto* (New York: The Metropolitan Opera, 1990).

10
Mozart, *Die Zauberflöte: Libretto*.

11
Goethe, *Poetische Werke*, 3:177, "Willkür der Herrscher, hält sich noch diese Religion hie und da in der frühesten Reinheit, selbst in kümmerlichen Winkeln, wie der Dichter solches durch das *Vermächtnis des alten Parsen* auszudrücken gesucht hat."

Early Transcendentalist Encounters with Zoroastrian Texts

Although Goethe drew his awareness of Persian history and culture from his wide range of readings, it is not known whether he had come across Thomas Hyde's magnum opus, Historia religionis veterum Persarum (1700), which endured throughout the eighteenth century as a popular summary of the "Persian religion." Hyde referred to Arabic, Hebrew, Persian, and Syriac texts as well as Classical sources, but had no access to Avestan or Pahlavi texts, since these were as yet undeciphered by Europeans. By the time the Transcendentalist movement was underway, however, it was possible for European and American intellectuals to bring Greek philosophy into conversation with Sanskrit and ancient Iranian religious texts. The comparison resulted in the perception that the older Eastern sources promoted the same universal truths of later thinkers. This view was epitomized in the lectures and publications of the Transcendentalists, particularly of Ralph Waldo Emerson.

Emerson's approach to religion was initially influenced by his father, William Emerson (1769–1811), who was a Unitarian minister in Boston, and by his scholarly aunt, Mary Moody Emerson (1774–1863). Both senior Emersons were intrigued by Indian thought and culture.[12] As a regular contributor to the local literary journal *Monthly Anthology and Boston Review*, Revd. Emerson would have had instant access, in the June-December volume of 1805, to its publication of the first act of Jones's translation of *Śakuntalā*. The younger Emerson would have initially encountered adherents of the "Persian religion" through his study of the classics at Boston Public Latin School and then at Harvard College, where he also came across a tale of the "ancient Fire Worshippers of Persia" when he borrowed Irish author Thomas Moore's *Lalla Rookh: An Oriental Romance* from the Boston Library Society in 1819 and again the following year.[13] The third story of *Lalla Rookh*, entitled "The Fire Worshippers," was allegedly based "on the fierce struggle between the Ghebers or ancient Fire-Worshippers of Persia, and their haughty Muslim masters," but Moore acknowledged that this was a surrogate trope to address the struggles of the Irish under British rule.[14] Although Moore referenced Anquetil's *Zend-Avesta*, such deliberate deployment of ancient history as an analogy for the present required no primary knowledge of the Zoroastrian religion, since its purpose was to serve as a literary cipher.

Emerson and other Transcendentalists also conceived Zoroaster as a cipher in corroboration of their own understanding of enlightenment. Responding, somewhat disingenuously, to a letter from his aunt in the late spring of 1822 concerning her researches into the Hindu religion, Emerson wrote: "One is apt to lament over indolence and ignorance, when we read some of those sanguine students of the Eastern antiquities, who seem to think that all the books of knowledge, and all the wisdom of Europe twice told, lie hidden in the treasure of the Bramins and the volumes of Zoroaster. When I lie dreaming on the possible contents of pages, as dark to me as the characters on the Seal of Solomon, I console myself with calling it learning's El Dorado."[15] From this early period, Emerson sought beyond both romanticized myth and close reading of doctrine, to discern the latent meaning.

As a student in his last year at Harvard, Emerson borrowed Edward

12 See Alan D. Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy, and the Unitarians," *Studies in the American Renaissance* (1988), 133–48, 140–41. In a letter of May 1822, Mary Moody Emerson wrote to her nephew of "a Visitor here from India, well versed in its literature and theology"; Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy," 133. The visitor was Rammohan Roy, who became one of the founders of the Hindu-Unitarian syncretic movement known as Brahmo-Samaj.

13 Carl T. Jackson, *The Oriental Religions and American Thought: Nineteenth-Century Explorations*, Contributions in American Studies 55 (Westport, CT: Greenwood Press, 1981), 46.

14 Thomas Moore, *Lalla Rookh*: *An Oriental Romance* (Halifax: Milner and Sowerby, 1859), x; see also Rose, *Image*, 161–63.

15 Hodder, "Emerson, Rammohan Roy," 134.

Gibbon's *History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. The first of the six volumes comments on Persian rule and religion, including the remark that under the Parthians and then the Macedonians "the memory of Zoroaster, the ancient prophet and philosopher of the Persians was still revered in the East."[16] In Emerson's diary, which he began at the age of sixteen and later published as his *Journals*, among the books quoted from or referred to in the years 1820–1821 is listed "Zendavesta, (apud Gibbon)."[17] The tally also includes Montesquieu's *Lettres persanes* (1721), an early European pseudo-Oriental tale satirizing current French beliefs and social structure but portraying the "most ancient" religion of Persia with sympathy, as expounded in the book of the "law-giver (*législateur*) Zoroastre," which enlightened those who read it "without prejudice."[18]

Emerson seems to have been drawn to Gibbon's outline of the Zoroastrian religious system of belief, which emphasized the two principles, as understood through Anquetil-Duperron's *Zend-Avesta* and Thomas Hyde's older, Latin treatise.[19] Gibbon described how internal schisms had arisen concerning "the obsolete and mysterious language in which the Zendavesta was composed" and the many sects that disputed the basic teachings of the religion. He had earlier noted the difference between *Zend* as "ancient idiom" and *Pehlvi* (Pahlavi), as "the language of the commentary," which "though much more modern, has ceased to be a living tongue."[20] In keeping with western scholarship of the time, Gibbon's use of the misnomer *Zendavesta* derives from the then prevalent misunderstanding that *zand* referred not to the "living" (Pers. *zendeh*) Avesta, but to its Pahlavi commentary (Phl. *zand*).[21] Anquetil had understood the phrase to mean "living speech." In a later volume of his work, Gibbon ascribed "the Zend or Pazend of the Ghebers [Zoroastrians in Iran]" as being "reckoned by themselves, or at least by the Mahometans, among the books which Abraham received from heaven; and their religion is honourably styled the religion of Abraham."[22] According to Gibbon, the resolution of the sectarian schisms concerning the teachings of the religion took place under Artaxerxes, who had formed a council of all the priests of the realm for this purpose: it was only through the reporting of "intimate conferences with the deity" by "Erdaviraph" (Phl. Ardā Wirāz and often read as Ardā Virāf in Pers.), one of the last seven remaining learned and pious Magi, that "the articles of the faith of Zoroaster were fixed with equal authority and precision."[23] Here, the original texts of the religion are presented as authoritative, but arcane, their import lost through the passage of time, but later (re-)clarified through the reporting of a vision by the "righteous" Wirāz.

Such deliberations on the authority of religious teaching and texts apparently resonated with Emerson: after leaving college, he continued to synthesize elements from his readings, thoughts, and experiences, until he arrived at his own vision of the indwelling God, expressed by the phrase "God in thee" in a poem of 1831 titled *Gnothi Seauton* ("Know Thyself"). Just over a decade after Emerson's initial encounter with the "faith of Zoroaster," as summarized by Gibbon, he came across volume thirty-seven of the *Histoire de l'Académie des Inscriptions et Belles Lettres . . . avec les mémoires de Littérature* (Paris, 1774), which contained Anquetil Duperron's *précis* of the re-

16 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 1 (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1776), 202, https://play.google.com/books/reader?id=aLcWAAAAQAAJ&pg=GBS.

17 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 1, *1820–1824,* ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 84–85.

18 Montesquieu, *Lettres persanes*, ed. André Lefevre (Paris: Lemerre, 1873), 6.

19 Gibbon, *History*, vol. 1, 202–3.

20 Gibbon, *History*, vol. 1, xxx.

21 See Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Dan Sheffield, "Zoroastrian Scriptures," in *Islam, Judaism and Zoroastrianism,* ed., Zayn Kassam, Yudit Kornberg Greenberg, and Jehan Bagli, Encyclopedia of Indian Religions (New York, NY: Springer, 2018), 790–804, 791.

22 Edward Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*, vol. 5 (London: A. Strahan and T. Cadell, 1788), 383. The association with Abraham meant that the religion was recognized as belonging to a "people of the book"; cf. *Qur'an* Sura 2.62.

23 Gibbon, *The History*, 1:202. Although the name Virāza is found in an Avestan reference (Yt. 13, 101), the earliest text of this Zoroastrian vision of heaven and hell is in Pahlavi, dating to the nineth or tenth century CE.

ligion: "Exposition du système théologique des Perses, tiré des livres Zend, Pehlevis et Parsis." Emerson transcribed two full pages from this text, which he had borrowed from the Boston Athenaeum on April 18, 1832.[24] His journal entry for that day reads: "Strange poem is Zoroastrism [sic]. It is a system as separate and harmonious and sublime as Swedenborgianism—congruent . . . One would be glad to behold the truth which they all shadow forth . . . One sees in this, and in them all, the element of poetry according to [Francis] Jeffrey's true theory, the effect produced by making everything outward only a sign of something inward: Plato's *forms* or *ideas* which seem almost tantamount to the *Ferouers* [*frauuašis*] of Zoroaster."[25]

The "poetry" that Emerson identified as inherent in all religions, and the means through which inner reality or truth is illuminated, was, he felt, exemplified in the Zoroastrian concept of "Fire, the sun of Ormuzd." Like Plato's *forms*, Emerson understood, through his reading of Anquetil Duperron, that this concept of fire represented "though imperfectly, the original fire which animates all beings, forms the relations which exist between them and which in the beginning was a principle of union between Ormuzd and Time-*sans-bornes* ['without limit']."[26] The encapsulation of such an ontological scheme through what he termed the "fictions" of "elemental theories" and "primeval allegories" nonetheless seemed to Emerson to bring humans nearer to "divine truth" than "less pretending prose."[27]

Zoroaster, the perceived promulgator of such "fictions"—albeit transmitted via the biased and incomplete translations of Western scholars—was identified by Emerson as an early exemplar of the "alleged Light, or Conscience, or Spirit, [which] takes different names in every new receiver."[28] This allusion comes from a lecture given in early 1835 by Emerson, which focused on a much later embodiment of such illumination—the English religious dissenter, George Fox. The latter's reliance on "inner light" and a personal experience of the divine was at the heart of the revivalist movement known as "Quakerism," which became the Society of Friends. The Friends' conviction that all are capable of experiencing the divine nature of the universe, and that God speaks to all who listen and who are open to receive such messages, seems to have resonated with Emerson's own conception of each person's intuitive ability to discern religious truths. He postulated that the same internal principle that led "Zoroaster of Persia" to divine truth could be found in the enlightened teachings of other ancient sages: "Confucius in China, Orpheus in Greece, Numa in Italy, Manco Capac in Peru all asserted it. In terms and manner more remarkable Moses and Jesus in Palestine averred the same thing and an unbroken chain of witnesses ever since conspire in the same testimony."[29] Given this construction of a perennial "unbroken chain," Emerson postulated that each individual who so determined could commune with the divine. In an essay on "Self-Reliance," he declared: " 'To the persevering mortal,' said Zoroaster, 'the blessed Immortals are swift.' "[30]

Because truth so acquired was timeless, it was also, paradoxically, always new. In his article "Inspiration" in *Letters and Social Aims* (1875), Emerson wrote: "The raptures of goodness are as old as history and new with this morning's sun. The legends of Arabia, Persia and India are of the same complexion as the Christian. Socrates, Menu

24
Kenneth Walter Cameron, *Ralph Waldo Emerson's Reading: A Corrected Edition* (Hartford, CT: Transcendental Books, 1962), 19.

25
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 2, *1824–1832,* ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1909), 473–74, citing *Académie des Inscriptions*, vol. 37, 623. Scottish-born lawyer Francis Jeffrey (1773–1850) was an editor, essayist, and literary critic before entering British politics in 1829.

26
Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, 2:474–75.

27
Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 2, *1824–1832*, citing page 643 quoting from the *Histoire de l'Académie des Inscriptions*, vol. 37.

28
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 1, *1833–1836*, ed. Stephen E. Whicher and Robert E. Spiller (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press, 1966), 166.

29
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Early Lectures of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, 1:166. Numa Pompilius was said to have founded the religious institutions of Rome, and Manco Capac the Inca dynasty at the capital of Cuzco.

30
Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Emerson's Complete Works*, vol. 6, *Essays, First and Second Series* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1929), 78.

[Manu], Confucius, Zertusht [Zoroaster]—we recognize in all of them the ardor to solve the hints of thought . . ."[31] Emerson and other Transcendentalists recognized no proprietary rights of these original teachers to the "old worships" that they promulgated, which easily "domesticate themselves in the mind" and in which he found no antiquity, claiming: "They are mine as much as theirs."[32]

An entry in Bronson Alcott's journal for 1839 declares that such enduring truths should not only be accessible to the learned elite, but to all. During an afternoon with Emerson, Alcott had proposed that English readers should be exposed to the works of the great minds of the past: "Confucius, Zoroaster, Paracelsus, Galen, Plato, Bruno, Behmen [Boehme], Plotinus, More, Swedenborg etc. should be in the hands of every earnest scholar of the Soul. Had I the means, I should like to collect these works and set scholars into translating them into our tongue . . . We should have access to the truth through the purest channels."[33] Alcott's idea was to bring together all significant religions and philosophies into a "world Bible" that would transcend its component parts and unfurl its mysteries—its "truth"—to all.

31 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *The Complete Works of Ralph Waldo Emerson*, vol. 8, *Letters and Social Aims* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1917), 275.

32 Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:28.

33 Jackson, *Oriental Religions*, 71.

A Zoroastrian Esoteric Text comes to Boston

In the Spring of 1836, as the Transcendentalist movement was taking shape as a distinctive reaction within—and then challenge to—the Unitarian congregations of New England, Emerson borrowed Anquetil Duperron's three-volume *Zend-Avesta* from the Boston Athenaeum.[34] But when he came to choose a representative Zoroastrian "Ethnical Scripture" to include in *The Dial*, the Transcendentalist journal of which he was now the editor, Emerson did not opt for Anquetil's translations of parts of either the Avesta or the Pahlavi *Bundahišn* with its detailed Zoroastrian cosmogony and cosmography. Instead, he reproduced a selection of extracts that he himself had arranged from the English translation of a pseudo-Zoroastrian mystical work of the Kayvānī sect, titled *The Desatir* (Pers. *Dasātīr-e āsmānī,* "Heavenly Regulations").[35] This work was considered by some contemporary Zoroastrians in both Iran and India, as also by European scholars, to be an authoritative scripture. Jonathan Duncan (1756–1811), the British governor of Bombay, who began the English translation at the behest of the city's leading Parsi Zoroastrian priest, Mulla Firuz (d. 1830), considered it to be an authentic Zoroastrian text.[36] In his preface to the 1818 publication, Mulla Firuz quotes William Jones's words from decades earlier, after the latter had encountered reference to *Dasātīr-e āsmānī* in an extract translated from *Dabistān-e mazāheb* ("School of Doctrines," another Kayvānī work): "The primeval religion of Iran, if we rely on the authorities adduced by Mohsan Fani [the attributed author of *Dabistān*] was that which Newton calls the oldest (and it may justly be called the noblest) of all religions."[37] Jones's affirmation, and his summary of that old, noble religion and its primary sources, as he understood them, influenced the western perception of Zoroastrianism well into the following century.

On publication, however, both the rendition into modern Persian of the "heavenly" "Mahabadian"-language text and its Persian commentary, as also its English translation, were castigated by some as spe-

34 Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, 23. Emerson borrowed the *Zend-Avesta* from March 21 to April 4, 1836. For Emerson's own relationship with the Unitarian church and its tenets, see Philip F. Gura, *American Transcendentalism: A History* (New York, NY: Hill and Wang, 2007), 42–44.

35 Skjærvø and Sheffield, "Zoroastrian Scriptures," 798. For more on this sect, see Daniel J. Sheffield, "Exercises in Peace: Kayvāni Universalism and Comparison in the *School of Doctrines,*" *Modern Asian Studies* (2022), 56, 959–92.

36 Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, *Desatir, or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Prophets: In the Original Tongue; Together with the Ancient Persian Version and Commentary* (Bombay: Courier Press, 1818), ii–iii, vii.

37 Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, *Desatir, or Sacred Writings of the Ancient Prophets*, iii.

cious.[38] Those Parsis who accepted *The Desatir* as genuine, however, used it to reinterpret the religion in the light of the "hidden" doctrine that it expounded. There were a number of British subscribers to the publication in both India and Britain, and copies soon made their way to English ports.[39] Emerson does not seem to have come across the work, however, during his foray to England in 1833. Although he met with William Wordsworth at Rydal Mount in the Lake District and would have been familiar with the latter's long poem *Excursion* in which the figure of "the Persian" modelled a romantic view of ancient Persian religion based on Herodotus's account, there is no indication of any mutual awareness of *The Desatir*.[40]

Emerson seems to have received his English translation copy of *The Desatir* from Britain via Amos Bronson Alcott (1799–1888). It is not known how Alcott obtained the book, but it may have come from one of the 50 English subscribers to the publication. It is likely that some of the social reformers who shared Alcott's utopian ideals were among these subscribers, such as the business journalist Charles Lane (1800–1870), who was the editor and manager of *The London Mercantile Price Current.* This news sheet listed produce prices from around the world, including the East Indies, as well as East India ships that had recently arrived at British ports. Lane and his ten-year-old son sailed to America with Alcott on the *Leland* in October 1842, where he purchased farmland in Harvard, Massachusetts, and co-founded with Alcott the short-lived Fruitlands community. Lane's letters between 1842–1851 mention his acquaintance with Ralph Waldo Emerson and Margaret Fuller and contain a couple of direct correspondences to Henry David Thoreau (1817–1862).[41] In an essay on "English Reformers" which featured in *The Dial* of October 1842, Emerson referred to Lane as "a man of a fine intellectual nature, inspired and hallowed by a profounder faith. . . . This is no man of letters, but a man of ideas. Deep opens below deep in his thought, and for the solution of each new problem he recurs, with new success, to the highest truth, to that which is most generous, most simple, and most powerful; to that which cannot be comprehended, or overseen, or exhausted. His words come to us like the voices of home out of a far country."[42] This homage to Lane's profundity of faith and thought, and recourse to "the highest truth" which is ever present but never fully grasped, reflects Emerson's conviction that for the "self-helping man" who holds to his own path, without regard for the approval of others, "all doors are flung wide . . ."[43]

Emerson obviously considered himself to be one such "self-helping man," adhering to his own selection and interpretation of religious texts. Despite the fact that some scholars of the period doubted the authenticity of *The Desatir*, Emerson claimed that he was indifferent as to whether it or the "*Zendavesta*" were "genuine antiques or modern counterfeits," since he was "only concerned with the good sentences," recognizing all truth to be timeless and eternally relevant no matter their source "whether an hour or five centuries, whether it first shot into the mind of Adam or your own."[44]

The information in Emerson's "Preliminary Notes" to his selections from *The Desatir* for the "Ethnical Scriptures" section of *The Dial* in July 1843 is taken directly from Mulla Firuz's original English-language Preface. Emerson comments that the work "professes to

38 In fact, some of the passages are direct translations from the Arabic *ishraqi* texts of al-Suhrawardī (1154–1191).

39 Jenny Rose, *Between Boston and Bombay: Cultural and Commercial Encounters of Yankees and Parsis, 1771–1865* (Cham, CH: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 162.

40 Emerson also met with Samuel Taylor Coleridge in London and Thomas Carlisle at his home near Dumfries.

41 *Charles Lane Papers*, Series 1, Folder 1, 1842–1851; Charles Lane Papers, Fruitlands Museum, The Trustees of Reservations, Archives & Research Center.

42 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "English Reformers," in *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 3 (1843): 227–47, 235, 237.

43 Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:78.

44 Ralph Waldo Emerson, *Journals of Ralph Waldo Emerson 1820–1872*, vol. 10, *1864–1876*, ed. Edward Waldo Emerson and Waldo Emerson Forbes (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1914), 382. A discussion as to whether the "*Zendavesta*" was a genuine work of Zoroaster was contained in the translated volumes of the (third) edition of Bayle's *Dictionary, Historical and Critical*, which Emerson had borrowed from Harvard College Library in February 1824; Rose, *Image*, 95–96. See also Cameron, *Emerson's Reading*, 45. Bayle's article on "Zoroastre" summarizes the legends about him and considers the appeal of Zoroaster and the "Magian" religion to Europe from the classical period to that of Islam.

be a collection of the writings of the different Persian prophets, being fifteen in number, of whom Zerdusht or Zoroaster was the thirteenth, and ending with the fifth Sasan, who lived in the time of Chosroes, contemporary with the Emperor Heraclius."[45] This framing of *The Desatir* as a compilation of works by an otherwise unattested line of "Persian prophets" is reproduced without question by Emerson, who accepts Mulla Firuz's attribution of William Jones as the first to draw attention to the book in England in his second volume of *Asiatic Researches*.[46]

Emerson's introductory paragraph concludes with the statement that "the book was afterwards translated from the Persian by Mr. Duncan, Governor of Bombay and by Mulla Firuz bin Kaus, a Hindoo . . ."[47] This astonishing misidentification of Mulla Firuz's religious affiliation may be ascribed perhaps to his designation as "Mulla," although this was generally a Muslim, not Hindu, honorific for a religious leader. (In Mulla Firuz's case, it is thought that the honorific was bestowed on his father and himself during an extended visit to Iran, when they immersed themselves in Arabic and Persian, as well as Avestan and Pahlavi).[48] The error in religious ascription indicates that Emerson was not particularly concerned to discover anything further about contemporary adherents of the Zoroastrian religion. His interest lay in discovering how their "scriptures" supported his own understanding of the human condition.[49] This approach, particularly his selection and reorganization of some of the material in *The Desatir*, reiterates Emerson's own concept of the role of personal intuition in transcending received forms of wisdom. Within the Transcendentalists' universalist scheme, there was no impetus to meet actual adherents of other faiths since all truths could be gleaned through "self-culture." In an essay penned in 1841, Emerson wrote: "It is for want of self-culture that the superstition of Travelling . . . retains its fascination for all educated Americans . . . The soul is no traveller; the wise man stays at home."[50] Such an attitude may be said to be in keeping with the orientalist biases of the time, implicitly promoting European intellectual superiority over the contemporary "Asian Other," while extolling the ageless wisdom of their ancient predecessors.

Emerson's presentation of "Extracts from The Desatir" introduces re-arranged passages from the book under six generic headings of his own devising: "Litany;" "The prophet;" "Mezdam [Ahura Mazda, as rendered in the English *Desatir*] the first cause, speaks to the worshipper;" "The heavens;" "Morals;" and "Of Writing." The last section includes seven consecutive sentences from the presumed writings of the "Prophet Zirtusht," but for the other five extracts, Emerson combined passages from several of *The Desatir*'s "books" to create his own esoteric rendition of this pseudo-Zoroastrian illuminationist work. These extracts from the work promoted its popularity among his fellow Transcendentalists. A letter from Margaret Fuller to Emerson on November 17, 1844, notes that she has his copy: "The Desatir I want to keep awhile for *Sunday reading*. I will not keep it always."[51] It may be that Emerson's restructuring of this putative Zoroastrian text, as of translations of other Eastern scriptures, made their ideas more accessible to the predominantly Christian readership of *The Dial*.[52]

That the discussion of "Oriental Literature" was also beginning to

45 Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," in *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 4 (1844): 59–62, 59.

46 Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," vol. 4 (1844): 59–62, 59.

47 Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," vol. 4 (1844): 59–62, 59.

48 In the early nineteenth century, the term "Mulla" was also used by Jews in reference to certain Persian and Central Asian rabbis.

49 Sarina Isenberg, "Translating World Religions: Ralph Waldo Emerson's and Henry David Thoreau's 'Ethnical Scriptures' Column in The Dial," *Comparative American Studies* 11, no. 1 (March 2013): 18–36, 20.

50 Emerson, *Complete Works*, 6:80–81.

51 Ralph L. Rusk, ed., *The Letters of Ralph Waldo Emerson,* vol. 3 (New York: Columbia University Press, 1939), 269. Emerson's copy of *The Desatir* vol. 2, with his signature on the title page and marginalia notes is held in the R.W. Emerson Study Collection of the Concord Museum in Concord, MA. There is no inscription within that indicates that it was given to him by Alcott, or when he received it, nor is it certain whether the marginalia notes belong to Emerson; personal communications from Ryan Nichols, Senior Registrar & Preparator, Concord Museum, September 27, 2018.

52 Isenberg, "Translating World Religions," 24.

be of broad academic interest is evidenced from the formation of the American Oriental Society (AOS) at Harvard in 1842 by John Pickering, a scholar of Arabic and other Near-Eastern languages. The AOS is the oldest such society in America dedicated to a specific field of scholarship, and Emerson became a member.[53] The society's focus on the scholarly analysis of all "Eastern" texts, including, at an early stage, Persian cuneiform and Indian Buddhism, contrasted with the "Sunday readings" mentioned by Margaret Fuller in connection with her borrowing of Emerson's copy of *The Desatir*. The "readings" refers to the regular meetings for constructive, creative analysis of the literary extracts, as well as essay topics, which were reproduced in *The Dial*.

53 William Tolbert, "The American Oriental Society and the Growth of US Empire," *South Atlantic Review* 86, no. 4 (2021): 31–49, 33. The travel author Bayard Taylor was also a member of the AOS. For Taylor's encounters with Parsi Zoroastrians during his visit to Bombay from late 1852 until early 1853, see Rose, *Between Boston and Bombay*, 232–33, 237.

The Sacred Books of Mankind

In 1849 Amos Bronson Alcott formalized these sessions into "Sunday Readings and Conversations," a public forum at which he envisaged segments from the 'Sacred Books of Mankind' being read, "with interpretations and original teachings interspersed."[54] The meetings were to be open to those "disposed to give hospitable entertainment to the words of illuminated Mind of all times." One of the ten works recommended to Alcott for the course by the Unitarian minister of Boston's Church of the Disciples, James Freeman Clarke, was "The Zendavesta." Alcott's purpose in promoting these moments of "hospitable entertainment" was expressed in a diary entry for February 12, 1851: "A few texts, very few, will serve, and more than serve, for the Readings. Of all Mind, Zoroaster, whether he were one or several, a real or mythological Personage, is the more occult and astral of my cycle, doubled and opening into a third in Goethe—the void-mind, mythology and history alike twisted into the web of his Genius, and himself but the spokesman of the Fate that ruled him."[55]

Another work recommended by Clarke "to be sought at the [Boston] Athenaeum" was "Firdusi."[56] Early English translations of parts of the New Persian *Šāh Nāmeh*, including excerpts by William Jones, proclaimed its author, Firdausi, as "the Persian Homer" and it is in this guise that Emerson recognizes the author of the "annals of the fabulous and heroic kings of the country" as rivalling the ancient Greek epic.[57] Alcott's search for other "Sacred Books" from the Athenaeum library led him not only to several works about or ascribed to Confucius, but also to Isaac Preston Cory's translation of "The Oracles of Zoroaster," which he declared to be "superior to [Thomas] Stanley's or Thomas Taylor's."[58] In his *Society and Solitude* of 1870, Emerson's own recommendation of "the best" books of the East included "After the Hebrew and Greek Scriptures, which constitute the sacred books of Christendom . . . the Desatir of the Persians, and the Zoroastrian Oracles."[59] That he makes no reference to any Avestan or Pahlavi works reflects Emerson's opinion that—at least with regards to non-Biblical text—he must choose those "good sentences" that resonate with his own sense of the sacred. After spending the evening with Emerson in mid-August 1866, Alcott wrote in his journal that the two were in agreement that "Oriental scriptures are to be given to the people along with the Hebrew books, as a means of freeing their faith from Hebrew superstition."[60] A similar sentiment had been expressed by Henry Da-

54 Arthur E. Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism: A Study of Emerson, Thoreau and Alcott* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1972), 242.

55 Christy, 247–48.

56 Christy, 243.

57 Emerson, *Complete Works*, 8:241.

58 Christy, *The Orient in American Transcendentalism*, 244.

59 Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1993), 72.

60 Arthur Versluis, *American Transcendentalism and Asian Religions*, 101.

vid Thoreau (1817–1862) in *Walden*, when he wrote: "That age will be rich indeed when those relics which we call Classics, and the still older and more than classic but even less known Scriptures of the nations, shall have still further accumulated, when the Vaticans shall be filled with Vedas and Zendavestas and Bibles, with Homers and Dantes and Shakespeares, and all the centuries to come shall have successively deposited their trophies in the forum of the world. By such a pile we may hope to scale heaven at last."[61]

The *Oracula Chaldaica*, translated as "Chaldean or Chaldaic Oracles" had been popular from late antiquity through the mediaeval period into the Renaissance. These mystical poems of purported divine origin contained religious concepts central to various classical philosophies, including Platonic, neo-Pythagorean, and Stoic teachings, along with some Persian elements.[62] They introduce such topics as the Gnostic idea of the freeing of the soul from its captivity within the human being so that it could be reunited with God. Although George Gemistos Pletho (c. 1355–1452) had attributed authorship of the Chaldean Oracles to the Zoroastrian magi, giving them the prestige of antiquity and "Eastern" wisdom, and a sixteenth-century manuscript of Michael Psellus's commentary had referred to them as "the sayings of Zoroaster," there are no grounds for their association with Zoroaster or the Persian magi.[63] Pletho did not formally attribute the Oracles to Zoroaster but promoted the latter as the most ancient legislator and sage who revealed "the truth concerning divine matters" to the Medes, Persians, and other ancient "Asian" peoples.[64] This notion that "the truth concerning divine matters" was first revealed to and by Zoroaster was a trope that held appeal for the Transcendentalists, as later for the Theosophists.[65] Emerson presented his extracts "of all the sentences ascribed to Zoroaster" from Taylor's edition of "The Oracles of Zoroaster and The Theurgists" in *The Dial*'s "Ethnical Scripture" selection for April 1844.[66] Thoreau subsequently referred to "sublime sentences, [such] as the Chaldaean oracles of Zoroaster, still surviving after a thousand revolutions and translations, alone make us doubt if the poetic form and dress are not transitory, and not essential to the most effective and enduring expression of thought."[67]

Whereas Emerson saw a confirmation of his own notion of universal truth expressed in some ancient Indian, Iranian, and Chinese religious texts, which might galvanize a reconsideration of Christian belief and practice, Thoreau approached the Indian spiritual traditions differently, recognizing that they offered alternative truths to received western forms of religion, particularly doctrinaire Christianity. Both addressed the implications of these Eastern texts and their teachings in their own way. For Emerson this meant reproducing his own version of their literature as a means to self-transcendence; he was more interested in "the blasting light of mysticism," rather than form and ritual.[68] Thoreau, on the other hand, was drawn to the asceticism of these religions and its practical application, trying for a time "to live out the Laws of Manu on the shores of Walden."[69]

Prompted by his own attempt to assimilate Eastern religions—and their sages—as a present, lived reality for himself, Thoreau felt that all should experience the thrill of the "noble sentiment of the oldest books," including the Zendavesta, which is "wafted down to us on

61
Henry David Thoreau, *Walden, or Life in the Woods* (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin, 1938), 91.

62
Rose, *Image*, 63.

63
Rose, *Image*, 64.

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Rose, *Image*, 64.

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Cf. Michael Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die europäische Religionsgeschichte der frühen Neuzeit*, vol. 1 (Berlin: de Guyter, 1998), 436.

66
Ralph Waldo Emerson, "Ethnical Scriptures," *The Dial: A Magazine for Literature, Philosophy and Religion*, vol. 4 (1844): 529–36, 529.

67
Henry David Thoreau, *A Week on the Concord and Merrimack Rivers,* https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/4232/pg4232-images.html; see David Scott "Rewalking Thoreau and Asia: 'Light from the East' for a 'Very Yankee Sort of Oriental,' " *Philosophy East and West* 57, no. 1 (January 2007): 14–39, 22.

68
Versluis, *American Transcendentalism*, 78.

69
Versluis, 77.

the breeze of time, through the aisles of innumerable ages" and which "by its very nobleness . . . is made near and audible to us."[70] Thoreau wrote of Zoroaster, along with other teachers, including Socrates, Christ, and Shakespeare, as one of "our astronomers"—that is, as one whose senses had been attuned "to penetrate the spaces of the real, the substantial, the eternal."[71] He hoped that Zoroaster would speak "to the solitary hired man on a farm in the outskirts of Concord [a town in Massachusetts]," whose faith drives him to "silent gravity and exclusiveness,"[72] explaining:

> "Zoroaster, thousands of years ago, travelled the same road and had the same experience; but he, being wise, knew it to be universal, and treated his neighbors accordingly, and is even said to have invented and established worship among men. Let him [the hired man of Concord] humbly commune with Zoroaster then . . ."[73]

The Transcendentalists' reading of Zoroaster, as of other "Eastern" sages, was informed initially by their interest in and access to newly translated sources regarding the religion and its putative founder. Emerson's selection and re-arrangement of passages from *The Desatir* was constructed in support of his own understanding of the human condition and his approach to Christianity. In this respect, he may be said to have paved the way for the subsequent exploration of esotericism relating to Zoroastrian sources, such as pursued by Madame Blavatsky and the theosophists, which included many Parsis.

70 Henry David Thoreau, *The Writings of Henry David Thoreau: Journal*, vol. 1, *1837–1846*, ed. Bradford Torrey (Boston: Houghton Mifflin & Co., 1906), 55. Thoreau's reference to the "Zendavesta" was made in his journal entry for August 22, 1838.

71 Thoreau, *A Week,* 405.

72 Thoreau, *Walden*, 118.

73 Thoreau, 94.