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# THE ORIGINS OF ZOROASTRIAN PHILOSOPHY

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The Iranian religion variously known as Mazdaism, Magism, Parsism, ‘the Persian religion’ and Zoroastrianism is the oldest of the credal (as opposed to ethnic) faiths. It was founded in a region where there was then no knowledge of writing, and no long-lived kingdoms or other chronological markers by which to date events. The only dates assigned in antiquity to its founder Zarathushtra—better known in the West by a Greek form of his name, Zoroaster—were both invented by Greeks. One set him 5,000 years before the Trojan War, i.e. at c.6000 BC, the other at ‘258 years before Alexander’, that is, before the Seleucid era which began in 312 BC, i.e. at 600 BC. The first, fantastically too early, was proposed by disciples of Plato; the second was evolved in the Hellenistic period on the basis of the fiction that Pythagoras had studied in Babylon with the great oriental sage (Kingsley 1990). This second one was adopted by Magian scholastics, doubtless to supply what they felt to be a lack in their own tradition, and so gained some credence among western academics in modern times. Thanks to finding distinguished and eloquent champions, this date became widely accepted as indicating approximately when Zarathushtra lived; but gradually the majority of scholars working in the field came to agree with what some had always maintained, that it is far too late to be reconciled with other data. It was therefore dismissed by most specialists as worthless even before its fictional origin was clearly demonstrated. Their conclusions have, however, been slow to filter through to the larger circle of those generally interested in the subject.

With both these dates rejected, Zarathushtra’s time can be reckoned only approximately from the evidence of the Avesta, the collection of Zoroastrian holy texts. These, composed orally over generations, are in an otherwise unknown eastern Iranian language, called therefore simply Avestan. In it two stages are clearly distinguishable, of which Old Avestan is represented by only a small corpus of texts. These include the all-important Gāthās, seventeen hymns attributed to the prophet himself. They were strictly memorized by his followers and, arranged according to metre, were transmitted as manthras, inspired utterances, recited to form a protective frame round the rites of the yasna. This is the main Zoroastrian act of worship, whose liturgy was later extended around them, so that they are now cited as Y(asna) 28–34, 43–51, 53. The rites themselves were accompanied by the other main group of Old Avestan texts, the Yasna Haptanhaiti, a short liturgy almost certainly composed by Zarathushtra (Y. 35–42. Narten 1986, Boyce 1992:87–94).

Old Avestan is very close to the language of the Rig Veda (held to have been composed between c.1500 and 900 BC), but is in some respects the more archaic (Kellens and Pirart 1988:13). A considerable time is thought to have been needed for Old Avestan to develop into early Young Avestan, and Young Avestan then evolved further before the canon of the holy texts was closed. This, as their contents show (being related solely to eastern Iran), took place before Zoroastrianism, which had spread among eastern Iranian peoples, was adopted in western Iran by the Achaemenian royal family and became the state religion of the first Persian Empire (539–331 BC). So if the latest Young Avestan texts belong to the sixth century or earlier, the earliest probably go back to at least the eighth or ninth centuries, with the Gāthās being very considerably older. One of the first scholars to attempt to date them on the linguistic evidence set them at c.1400 BC (Geldner 1885:653–4), and such a date remains possible in the light also of the social conditions reflected in them. Gathic society appears simpler than that of the Young Avesta, a pastoral one whose members were mostly herdsmen living close to their cattle, so that a single word, *pasu-vīra*, ‘cattle-(and)-men’, described their community. The only distinct professional group appears to be that of priests. The horse-drawn chariot was known (first attested on the Inner Asian steppes around 1500 BC (Gening 1977), but there is no evidence that a class of ‘chariot riders’, i.e. a warlike aristocracy, had yet evolved (Boyce 1987). Young Avestan society is formally divided into three groups: priests, ‘chariot riders’, and peasant-farmers, with agriculture, instead of cattle-herding, playing a large role. This more complex social structure may reasonably be supposed to have evolved in consequence of the great migrations (Polomé 1982:170). The Iranians then followed their Indo-Aryan cousins south off the steppes into Soviet Central Asia, and then, branching westward, made themselves masters of what came to be called after them Iran. This movement is generally thought by archaeologists to have been at its peak around 1200–1000 BC. The indications thus all point to Zarathushtra having lived before then, sometime between perhaps 1400 and 1200 BC (c.1000 BC according to Gnoli 1980: ch. 5).

The tradition preserved in the Young Avesta about his homeland is that it was called Airyana Vaejah, ‘The Aryan (or Iranian) Expanse’, with fainter indications (Boyce 1992: ch. 1) that it lay far to the north of Iran. Presumably it was a region on the steppes once claimed as their own by his people, whose exact location was forgotten after they moved away; and in time it became for them a semi-mythical holy land lying at the centre of the world, not only the home of the prophet but the scene of all the great mythical and legendary events in their prehistory.

## **THE OLD IRANIAN RELIGION**

The Old Iranian religion in which Zarathushtra was trained as a priest can be partially reconstructed from those elements in Zoroastrianism which are to be found also in the Vedic religion of India, since these can reasonably be presumed to be a common inheritance from the time when the Iranians and Indo-Aryans were one people. Their evolution linguistically into two distinct groups is generally thought to have taken place c. 2000–1800 BC.

A dominant concept of the Old Iranian religion is thus known to have been *asha* (Vedic *ṛta*), the principle of order, that which ought to be, which is right. This should rule all aspects of existence. It was in accord with *asha* that the sun rose and set, the seasons changed, and rain fell and made the grasses grow and the creatures flourish. It was also through observing *asha* that humans thrive, living thus in accord with their true nature: upholding justice, truth and fidelity, fulfilling family and tribal duties, and giving due worship to the gods. The opposite to *asha* was *drug* (Sanskrit *druh*), ‘that which is crooked, deceiving’; but this is not prominent in Vedic thought, and was probably less vividly apprehended than *asha* by the proto-Indo-Iranians, whose outlook seems on the whole to have been positive and optimistic.

The gods whom they worshipped were many, for they were animatists, believing that all things, whether tangible or intangible, animate or inanimate, possessed an invisible inner power which they perceived as sentient spirit, *mainyu*. Probably most *mainyu* were thought to be *spenta*, a word which basically meant ‘possessing power’, and which, used of divinities, implied ‘having power to aid, furthering, supporting, benefiting’. (For references see Boyce 1975:196 n. 26.) Attempts to render this adjective more exactly include ‘bounteous’ and ‘incremental’, but these lack the religious overtones which *spenta*, which is roughly the equivalent of ‘holy’ in its original sense, had probably already acquired by Zarathushtra’s day; and ‘holy’ is accordingly often used to translate it.

Some concepts of *mainyu*—for example those of ‘nature’ gods, such as the spirits of the sky and earth, sun, moon and stars—remained simple ones, spirit and physical phenomenon being conceived as always in union. Others gathered complexity and evolved into great gods with manifold aspects and powers. Lesser divinities then became associated with them, for the Indo-Iranians characteristically saw their gods as collegial beings, acting in groups or at least amicably associated. The pantheon was thus not static, but continually if slowly evolving through priestly thinking about, and evocation of, the gods. (This process can be observed taking place in the Vedic religion.) In general the divinities were thought of as cosmic beings, without links to any particular places, a consequence presumably of the Indo-Iranians living on the vast plains of Inner Asia, where man had built no cities and raised no temples to house the gods.

The most important group of divinities in the pre-migration days appears to have been the trinity of Ahuras, ‘Lords’, who were the especial guardians of *asha*. Preeminent among them was *Mazdā*, by origin the spirit of wisdom; and beneath him were a close fraternal pair, *Mithra* and *Vouruna Apam Napāt*, respectively by origin the spirits or forces inherent in the solemn pact or covenant, and the formally declared oath. (The name ‘*Varuṇa*’ does not appear in Iranian usage, in which this divinity is called simply by cult epithets.) Their Vedic equivalents appear to have been the *Asura*, *Mitra* and *Varuṇa Apam Napāt* (Thieme 1957:406–10; Boyce 1975:40–8; 1986:148–50; 1993, 35–40). Another Indo-Iranian god who was prominent at the time of the migrations was *Indra*. His original concept may have been that of the spirit or force which inspired the valiant herdsman when he was called upon to fight; but (to judge from the Vedic evidence) he evolved from a heroic into a virtually amoral war god (see Benveniste and Renou 1934:189–95), delighting in combat for its own sake and granting favours in return for lavish offerings.

The gods, it was believed, had made the world, it seems from pre-existing materials (Boyce 1975:131; 1992:57) with Varuṇa apparently regarded as a chief actor in this, perhaps because of the power attributed to the truly spoken word. The world was held to be composed of seven separate 'creations': the 'sky' of stone (the literal meaning of the word for it, Avestan *asman-*, Vedic *aśman-*), that is, a hard shell enclosing all the rest; water in the lower part of this shell; earth as a round, flat disk lying on the water; and at its centre a plant, an animal (the 'Uniquely created Bull'), and a man. Seventh and last there was fire, which gave warmth and life to the rest. The Vedic cosmogony is rather different; but it can be reasonably assumed that the Old Iranian scheme had evolved to this point before Zarathushtra's lifetime (Boyce 1975:146). The gods then sacrificed the plant, animal and man, which, thus consecrated, generated in dying all plants, animals and peoples of the world. They also set in motion the sun, the greatest manifestation of the creation of fire, which began to regulate life according to *asha*.

Man had the duty, through worship, to strengthen the gods and so help them to maintain the world. As long as he performed this duty, and himself lived according to *asha*, he could expect the world to continue, and the generations of men. Among these he could hope would be the line of his own descendants, maintaining annual offerings for the benefit of his soul. At death a few—probably only leading men—could look forward to escaping the common fate of descent into a shadowy, joyless underworld, and to ascending instead to the realm (*khshathra*) of the gods, a radiant place of all delights, set above the solid sky. To enjoy its pleasures fully the soul needed to be again incarnated; and this, it was believed, would be done from the bones of its former body. The Indo-Aryans rid these bones of flesh by cremation and then buried them; the Iranians may already before Zarathushtra's day have exposed the corpse for the flesh to be devoured by dog and bird. To judge from Indian evidence the union of soul and recreated body was held to take place about a year after death.

Forces of evil were perceived, malevolent beings which inhabited this earth. Although they could do harm, they were thought of as less than the gods, and the individual could seek to propitiate or ward them off with offerings and spells.

### ZARATHUSHTRA AND THE *GĀTHĀS*

Zarathushtra, it is evident from the *Gāthās*, was a qualified and practising priest, and according to Indo-Iranian custom he would have begun his training in childhood, learning about the gods and the rituals for their proper worship, and being taught myths and legends, priestly lore and the craft of composing religious verses, which if inspiration came could become mantras, holy words of power. For some pupils with especial gifts—which the prophet undoubtedly possessed—there was probably also training in the techniques of attaining mantic experience.

The *Gāthās* suggest that Zarathushtra grew up in a stable pastoral society, whose chief worship was offered to the Ahuras, and that he became deeply imbued with the values of its ordered ways; but that he then experienced ruthless raids on that society by predatory bands—'non-herdsmen among herdsmen' (Y. 49.4)—who carried off cattle and goods with shedding of blood. These raiders were evidently fellow-Iranians; and their activities

seem to belong to a turbulent time on the steppes which preceded the migrations. Some men then, having abandoned traditional ways, sought apparently to live by preying off their fellow-tribesmen until eventually the chiefs of their war-bands led them south off the steppes to find richer plunder elsewhere.

The experience of such raids, and the contrast between the law-abiding herdsmen and the greedy predators, evidently had a profound effect on Zarathushtra and was a vital factor in the evolution of his new beliefs, by which he sought to account for the human predicament and the encounters of good and evil. Having failed to persuade his own community to accept these beliefs (Y. 46.1), he left it, and gained a hearing for them from Vishtaspa, the chieftain of another tribe, who brought all his people to adopt the new faith. According to the tradition (Jackson 1899: chs 8–10), Zarathushtra lived long after this, married and had children; and so he was presumably able himself to establish his religion firmly, linking beliefs to observances in ways that enabled it to endure, despite harsh vicissitudes, from those distant preliterate times down to the present day.

Part of the enormous strength of this religion lies in the logic and comprehensiveness of its doctrines. Once its premisses are granted, the whole system coheres in an intellectually satisfying way, and its doctrines, although complex, can be made accessible through observances to its simplest adherents. Moreover, its teachings satisfy human hopes, offering not only explanation and coherence, but also closure, a final blessed ending; and the actions which they require, though morally demanding, lie within the scope of ordinary human endeavour. But though Zarathushtra's ethical teachings can be applied in modern life, and though his doctrines are in some measure generally familiar (through borrowings by Judaism, Christianity and Islam) (Boyce and Grenet 1991: ch. 11), in other respects they are immensely strange and difficult for modern urban man to comprehend, fashioned as they were by a prophet who, though one of the great innovators in man's religious history, was himself nurtured in archaic ways of thought.

These difficult elements in his doctrines remained significant for his own community, and have continued to shape their lives because of an unbroken tradition of belief and practice; but Western scholars necessarily approached them mainly through texts alone, especially the Gāthās. These short hymns are subtle, passionate, personal utterances, many of their verses being addressed to Ahura Mazdā himself. In them there is no question of a full or systematic exposition of doctrine, but the whole essential Zoroastrian theology, as known from the later literature and living faith, appears assumed there, and some crucial beliefs are conveyed with poetic and visionary power.

These hymns present enormous difficulties for the translator, and probably even when they were first composed were fully understood only by the learned and the already enlightened. Layers of meaning appear present in their densely packed, richly allusive verses; and since the corpus of Old Avestan texts is small, they contain for the modern student the added difficulties of unknown words and intricate problems of syntax. Without the help of the later Zoroastrian literature and living tradition they would have been baffling in the extreme; but with it, many verses can be essentially understood. Others are likely to continue to defy satisfactory interpretation, although new light is being steadily shed on these texts through close comparisons with Rig Vedic vocabulary and usages. They present a major challenge and source of interest to students of Vedic and Old Avestan, and the most recent translations of them have all been made by scholars whose primary interest is language, and who tend to treat the Gāthās as a closed corpus,

thus avoiding the need to consider them seriously in relation to the Zoroastrian religion. H.Humbach (1959) offered valuable identifications of ritual terms and allusions, previously misunderstood, but made little attempt to elucidate a system of doctrine; S.Insler (1975), in contrast treated all ritual and many doctrinal allusions allegorically, seeking throughout a lofty, somewhat vague theism; and J.Kellens and E.Pirart (1988) produced an idiosyncratic and over-sceptical rendering of what they maintained were no more than very restricted ritual texts, composed by a group of working priests. These translations need therefore to be used with caution and preferably together, with reference also to some earlier, more conservative ones, for example those of J.Darmesteter (1892–3), C.Bartholomae (1905), H.Lommel (published posthumously, 1971) and J.Duchesne-Guillemin (1952), which, if outdated linguistically, pay more respect not only to Zoroastrian exegesis and later literature, but also to the actual beliefs and practice of the community—a magisterium which has only slowly been impaired in modern times. For the Zoroastrians themselves the Gāthās had become with the passage of time great sacred manthras, whose meaning it was not necessary to comprehend; and modern translations by them have either depended closely on western ones (principally Bartholomae’s) or have been idealistically free renderings (for example Taraporewala 1951).

### ZARATHUSHTRA’S TEACHINGS

Among the essential elements in Zarathushtra’s thinking appear his love for this world and his conviction of its goodness when ordered by asha. Looking at it in this respect with the same eyes as his ancestors, he apprehended spirit, mainyu, in all things, to be revered and cherished. Those spirits which were spent a were perceived by him as upholding asha, and man’s own aim should be to live according to asha and thus to become ashavan, ‘possessing asha’. This is the central moral precept of Zoroastrianism, and it implies living an ordered purposeful life in ‘thought, word and act’. This series of words recurs, with subtle variations, throughout the Gāthās (Humbach 1959:I.55–6), and it seems probable that Zarathushtra’s emphasis on the need for all-embracing moral activity in these three ways reflects the pattern of his own training as a priest, which required that the gods should be worshipped with right intention, right invocation and right rituals. Living according to asha meant that the individual strove to acquire the virtues believed to be proper to a human being, notably wisdom, justice, truthfulness, loyalty, valour. These were thought of not as inherent qualities to be cultivated, but as external forces or spirits, mainyu, which through rightly directed endeavour might be brought to dwell within one.

Part of ashavan activity was offering regular worship to the gods at the traditional times of dawn, noon and eve (Y. 44.5). Priests would naturally have been engaged more often and longer in worship, and so have had constant occasion to fix their thoughts on the divine. Zarathushtra himself had evidently been brought up deeply to venerate the trinity of Ahuras, whom he twice names in the Gāthās by an evidently ancient formula, ‘Mazdā—(and-the-other) Ahuras’ (Y. 30.9; 31.4; Boyce 1975:225). This formula shows that pre-eminence among the Ahuras was attributed to Mazdā before Zarathushtra’s day, a fact attested also for the Old Persian religion, in which for him alone title and name

became fused through constant evocation, so that he was worshipped as Ahuramazda (Middle Persian Ohrmazd). To Zarathushtra himself, however, can be attributed the development of this veneration of Mazdā to the point where he saw him not only as greatest of the Ahuras but greatest of all the gods, in fact God himself in the sense of the one immortal eternal divine Being. This was such a huge theological step that it inevitably invites speculation as to how he came to make it. There is no evidence for the existence of a supreme ruler among the Iranian steppe-dwellers to provide an earthly model for a king of the gods. On the contrary, the Gāthās indicate a turbulent society with a number of chieftains, many of whom the prophet fiercely condemned (for example Y. 32.11; 46.11). It seems more likely, therefore, that he reached his lofty new concept of Mazdā through meditating on priestly speculations about the origins of life; for if in the beginning there had been one plant, one animal and one man from which all the rest had sprung, why should matters not have been similar in the divine sphere, with one original spenta God who brought into being from his own essence all other spenta divinities?

Zarathushtra must have meditated deeply on these matters before reaching his new concept of Mazdā, which his own words show rested also on mystical experience, on the conviction that he had seen and spoken with him. In accord with Indo-Iranian tradition, he perceived him anthropomorphically, with mouth and tongue, eye and hand (Y. 28.11; 31.3, 13; 43.4), but also as majestic beyond common imagining, wearing the sky as garment (Y. 30.5). Nevertheless he was Spirit, Mainyu, the 'most spenta' of all spirits, Spenishta Mainyu (Y. 30.5). This transcendent Being the prophet perceived as acting, and being at will immanent, through a power or force which he termed his spirit, naming this the Holy but also the Holiest Spirit, Spenta Mainyu, Spenishta Mainyu. The use of the latter term reflects the fact that Zarathushtra apprehended Mazdā's spirit sometimes as a distinct force, sometimes as virtually identical with Mazdā himself. This perhaps mystical blurring of concepts was logically clarified in the Young Avesta, where Spenishta Mainyu is reserved for Ahura Mazdā as one of his regular invocations (Vendidad, passim; Y. 1.1; Yasht 1.1, 12) and Spenta Mainyu is kept for his Holy Spirit (with an exception in Yasht 19.44, 46).

Zarathushtra further perceived Mazdā as possessing six other great spenta forces to which he had given existence as separate spirits, but which remained part of his being in ways that distinguished them from other gods. These formed with him or his Holy Spirit a divine Heptad, a concept which is at the heart of Zoroastrian moral and dogmatic theology (Jackson 1904:161; Lommel 1959, 1964), but which is difficult for non-Zoroastrians to grasp. One of the greatest of these beings, ethically and doctrinally, is (Vohu) Manah, whose name is variously rendered as '(Good) Thought' or 'Purpose'. (With the names of members of the Heptad epithets occur in the Gāthās which become fixed only in the tradition.) In one of the Gāthās Zarathushtra speaks allusively of his enlightenment (Y. 43.7ff.), and there it is Vohu Manah who comes to him with Spenta Mainyu. It seems that he then actually 'saw' these two great beings with inward, visionary eye. Also one of the greatest of the six is Asha, once (Y. 28.8) called Vahishta, 'Best', which became his fixed epithet. He is the hypostasis of the principle of asha, and his name as ethical divinity is usually rendered as 'Righteousness' or 'Truth'. He has great importance, appearing often with Vohu Manah, but invoked even more frequently. Their closeness to Mazdā is brought out by the fact that although Zarathushtra usually addresses his god with the singular 'Thou', sometimes when he invokes him with

members of the Heptad, or, as it seems, with them in mind, he uses the plural, 'You'. For example, against 'Tell me the things which Thou knowest, Ahura' (Y. 48.2) there is 'With Asha do You, O Mazdā, acknowledge me.... Approach now, Ahura, through our gift to You' (Y. 29.11).

A second pair within the Heptad are linked through having a complementary character and moral status. These are (Spenta) Armaiti and Khshathra (Vairyā). Armaiti's name is usually rendered as '(Holy) Devotion' or 'Obedience', Khshathra's as '(Desirable) Dominion'. The latter concept is the more complex, since the noun khshathra can mean not only dominion but, secondarily, the place where dominion is exerted, realm, kingdom. Vedic kṣātra has the same range of meanings, and in both languages the word is used for the kingdom of the gods on high. As ethical divinity, Khshathra embodies the power of spenta authority, which almost all can exert in one way or another (Lommel 1959 apud Schlerath: 257–8).

The last pair of the great six are Haurvatat, 'Wholeness, Health' and Ameretat, '(Long) Life, Immortality'. They have no epithets and are less prominent than the others, presumably because what they hypostatize is less immediately obtainable through moral striving. Their concepts appear to have evolved from Zarathushtra's deep sense of the positive good of health and life. Like the others', their names recur in the Gāthās and all six are named together, with Spenta Mainyu, in Y. 47.1: 'Through the Holy Spirit and Best Purpose, by act and word in accord with Truth, They shall grant him [i.e. the just man] Wholeness and Immortality—Lord Mazdā together with Dominion and Devotion.'

It would be possible in this verse to render haurvatat- and ameretat- as common nouns, and this is often the case with names of members of the Heptad in the Gāthās, for the virtues or qualities which they hypostatize not only belong to God and are divine but can be brought to dwell in men. There is, it must be admitted, a logical problem here, for presumably to entertain Asha within oneself one must already be partly, or at least striving to be, ashavan; but this perhaps accounts for the great importance of Vohu Manah, Good Purpose, in what is essentially a religious, not a philosophical, system.

Since, as the tradition establishes, Zarathushtra held that Mazdā brought all spenta divinities into existence from his own originally unique selfhood, it seems natural that he should use the metaphor of fatherhood in speaking of Mazdā's relationship with members of the Heptad, i.e. of Asha (Y. 44.3; 47.2), Vohu Manah (Y. 31.8; 45.4; 47.8) and Armaiti (Y. 45.4). The prophet calls him also the creator (dāmī-) of Asha (Y. 31.8); and using a synonym, dātar-, declares him further to be 'Creator of all things by the Holy Spirit' (Y. 44.7). How he was held to have performed the act of creation is perhaps indicated in a verse where Zarathushtra says to him: 'In the beginning Thou didst fashion for us by Thy thought creatures and inner selves (daēnā-) and intelligences.... Thou didst create corporeal life' (Y. 31.11).

The world which Ahura Mazdā created was that of the seven separate creations described above; and by another remarkable step in thought, Zarathushtra saw each of these seven creations as having one of the Heptad as its protector, dwelling within it. The transcendent creator was thus immanent through his hypostatized powers in the good world of his creation, which he helped in this way to sustain and defend. The links (in the order of creation) are as follows (Zaehner 1956:32–3; Boyce 1975:205ff): Khshathra, strong Dominion, is guardian of the sky of stone; Haurvatat, Wholeness, of health-giving water; Obedience of the patient earth that bears all; Ameretat of life-sustaining plants;

Good Purpose of the beneficent cow; the Holy Spirit of the ashavan man, who with his capacity for wisdom and exercising choice is the nearest of the creations to God; and Asha of fire, which through the sun regulates the natural world, and through the fire of the ordeal helped to administer justice. The concept of members of the Heptad being present in the seven creations has been perceptively analysed in the following words:

For us... Good Purpose and the tending of cattle are admittedly two wholly different things. But must it always have been so? Could not at a certain epoch abstract and concrete have appeared to the human spirit as of unified being, the abstract as the inner reality of the concrete? So that, for instance, Pious Devotion and the earth were the spiritual and material aspects of the same thing. A division of this kind in general goes very deep in the Avestan concept of the world, and if this touches on 'speculation', I do not know why this word so readily attracts the adjectives 'learned, priestly, theological', whereby apparently it is intended to characterize a secondary development—secondary in opposition to the way of thought of a creative time or personality. I do not believe that speculation was solely or even predominantly a matter for theologians as distinct from the creative prophets, who were able to unite visionary perception with meditative speculation. Or do we consider something which is strange to us, and therefore appears artificial, as speculation, when it is unsought primary intuition?

(Lommel 1926:31–2 apud Schlerath 1970)

Such intuitions could have come to Zarathushtra the more readily because this manner of perceiving reality was not new for his people. For example, since proto-Indo-Iranian times both lesser Ahuras had themselves been associated with two of the creations, in which they also were believed to dwell at will—Mithra in fire, Varuna in water (hence his ancient epithet of Apam Napāt, 'Son of the Waters'). In their case these associations appear to have been perceived because of the use of fire and water in judicial ordeals, presided over by these divinities as guardians of asha (Meillet 1907:156–8, Lüders 1951:655–74). Belief in the immanence of the Heptad was reached by Zarathushtra most probably through meditation on the priestly act of worship, the yasna. Since its rituals are essentially those of the Brahmanic yajña, the yasna evidently goes back to proto-Indo-Iranian times. At it three main offerings were made: a blood sacrifice devoted to one of the divine beings, an oblation to fire from that sacrifice, and a libation to water, the parahaoma, from the expressed juice of the haoma mixed with water and milk. The intention of the service appears to have been to gratify and strengthen the divinity to whom it was offered, and to purify and strengthen the life-giving creations of fire and water and through them the whole natural world. As priest, Zarathushtra speaks of sacrifice (izhā-) and of the spirit or power within the sacrifice, Izhā (Vedic Iḍā). 'In the famed footsteps of Izhā I shall circumambulate You, O Mazdā, with hands outstretched' (Y. 49.10). At the yasna the divinity invoked was believed to descend, seating himself on herbage strewn to receive him; and these words suggest how vividly the prophet apprehended the real presence there of his God. Further, all the Heptad could be thought of as present regularly, at every service, through the things which there represented their

creations: Khshathra, of the sky of stone, through the stone pestle and mortar for crushing the haoma; Haurvatat through the pure water for the parahaoma; Armaiti through the earth of the ritual precinct; Ameretat through the haoma; Vohu Manah through the sacrificial beast; Spenta Mainyu through the officiating ashavan priest; and Asha through the ritual fire. Zarathushtra could thus be profoundly aware of the immediate presence of the Heptad within and around him as he worshipped, strengthening him with their powers while he consecrated their creations by consecrating the ritual precinct and the objects in it, and so in turn strengthened them. (The Indo-Iranians conceived of even their great gods as powerful but not all-powerful, and not without need of men's worship to give them added strength. So Zarathushtra addressed Mazda himself: 'Arise ...take to thyself might through devotion', Y. 33.12.) To judge from the tradition, the prophet taught his followers to be aware thus of the Heptad in their acts of worship, in the world around them, and, ideally and as a spiritual and ethical goal, as indwelling in themselves through their own strivings. This was not pantheism, for the members of the Heptad personify distinct powers, emanating from and of the same essence as the one eternal Being, but existing as separate divinities through his creative act.

Although the doctrine of the Heptad is at the heart of Zoroastrian theology, forming an essential element in its coherent system, and also in Zoroastrian devotional and ethical life, a number of scholars have denied that it is to be found in the Gāthās. The reasons for this are multiple. One is that there is a widely held theory that Zarathushtra taught not merely an original but an enduring and absolute monotheism, denying the existence of any beneficent divine being other than Ahura Mazda. Even apart from the many invocations of members of the Heptad (seen by such scholars as mere abstractions), there is a whole range of other data in the Gāthās to disprove this theory; but it has been repeated so often since it was first advanced (before the Gāthās were known in the West) that it has gained academic respectability and survives against the evidence. There appears, moreover, to be a fairly general assumption, especially perhaps among those with a Christian background, that a complex theology is likely to have evolved over centuries in religious schools rather than being created by the founder of a faith. But Zarathushtra, trained from childhood in matters of religion, was uniquely qualified among the great prophets to evolve a completely thought out and coherent system, one which bears the imprint of a single, highly gifted mind and spirit.

A more scholarly reason for not attributing the full doctrine of the Heptad to Zarathushtra is that the relations of only five of them with their creations is attested in the Gāthās, those of Spenta Mainyu and Khshathra being lacking; and so it is argued that the full system evolved only later. But since the Gāthās are hymns, not theological treatises, gaps must be expected in the attestation of doctrine there. Moreover, belief in the Heptad not only appears to be an integral part of Zarathushtra's theology but is archaic in character; and no satisfactory explanation has ever been offered as to why such a doctrine should have been evolved in later times and have become part of the very essence of his religion. (On the weaknesses of the solitary attempt by Narten 1982:25–7 see Boyce 1984:160.)

That this doctrine was based on apprehensions reached by the prophet through meditating on the yasna is borne out by the fact that other spenta divinities named in the Gāthās have links with the cult (Boyce 1975:195). Of these the one who was later to gain most prominence was Sraosha, the spirit or force within hearkening, by which men hear

and obey divine commands, and gods listen favourably to men's prayers (Kreyenbroek 1985:7ff.). His was a concept evolved, it is suggested, by Zarathushtra himself (Spiegel 1873: vol. II, 90; Kreyenbroek 1985:164–5, 169) through meditation on a traditional ritual phrase that is closely paralleled in Vedic: *s̥raoṣō iḍā astū*, 'may hearkening be here' (Y. 56.1), cf. Vedic *astu śrauṣa* (Rig Veda 1.139.1). *Sraoṣa* is linked in the Gāthās with 'great-gifted *Ashi*' (Y. 43.12), probably in the old religion a goddess of fortune, but in Zarathushtra's highly ethical one the spirit of recompense bringing to each his deserts. Recompense for the *ashavan* was not perceived by the prophet as solely spiritual, for he thought that this good world of *Mazdā*'s creation was to be enjoyed. So the acquiring by the 'herdsman' of the 'joy-bringing cow in calf' (Y. 44.6) is probably not to be taken merely metaphorically. Cattle-imagery in the Gāthās, like sheep-imagery in the Bible, is undoubtedly rich in symbolic, religious overtones, but appears to have its basis in the solid realities of stock-keeping life.

This cattle-imagery is used impressively in one of the most difficult of the Gāthās, Y. 29, where the prophet appears to speak of his own mission, appointed by *Mazdā* for all his lack of worldly power to bring aid to the upright man and helpless cattle. Here underlying a sense of cosmic sorrow and suffering appears to be harsh experience of the cattle-raid, by which the bloodthirsty and wicked (Y. 48.11) cruelly injured 'cattle-and-men' (Y. 31.15), i.e. ordered pastoral society. These marauders Zarathushtra saw as directly opposed in their lawlessness and greed to the *ashavan* herdsman, patiently tending the *spenta* cow; and he declared them to be *dregvant*, that is, attached to the principle of *drug*, 'crookedness', 'that which is contrary to *asha*. This principle, as we have seen, was probably only vaguely apprehended in the old Iranian religion, as in the Rig Veda; and its perception as an active aggressive force, an evil *mainyu*, is generally attributed to the prophet himself, as

based on the most personal experiences he has had.... He himself has seen into *Asha*'s order, and he proclaims it for him who will hear. But he who has heard must choose whether he will fight with thought, word and deed on *Asha*'s side for the life-strengthening powers, or will follow the *Drug*.  
(Barr 1945:134)

In the old Iranian religion, as in the Vedic, all men are likely to have venerated all gods, and it seems to have been part of Zarathushtra's new demands on his followers that they should venerate only those beings whom he saw as *spenta* and 'created' by *Mazdā*, wholly rejecting those especially worshipped by the *dregvant* (Y. 49.4), whom he called *daēvas*. *Daēva*, an ancient word for 'god' (cognate with Latin *deus*), was restricted by him to a group of divinities whom presumably the war-bands and their chieftains most frequently invoked. He names none of them individually, but in the Young Avesta (Vendidad 10.9) martial *Indra* is repudiated, together with *Sarva* (Indian *Śarva*, equivalent in later texts to the violent Vedic *Rudra*), and *Nanhaithya* (cf. the Vedic *Nāsatyas*). The *daēvas*, the prophet declares, had 'chosen the worst purpose' and had 'rushed to Wrath with whom they afflicted the world and mankind' (Y. 30.6). Such beings could not be of the same divine essence as *Mazdā*, like the *spenta* divinities, and he came to apprehend a wholly different origin for them. They were of the race or nature (*chithra*-) of *Bad Purpose* (Aka *Manah*) and *drug* (Y. 32.3), and had been deluded by the

Deceiver (Y. 30.6), elsewhere (Y. 45.2) called by him the Evil Spirit, Angra Mainyu. Even as he had come to believe in a self-existent, original, spenta Spirit, Mazdā, so, logically and analogically, Zarathushtra came to postulate also a self-existent, original Spirit who is opposed to what is spenta, one who is bad, destructive, a negating force. In two Gāthās this doctrine is declared in terms which suggest that, perhaps after logic had guided his thinking, the prophet saw these Spirits with visionary eye as they first encountered, before the world was made.

‘Then shall I speak of the two primal Spirits (Mainyū) of existence, of whom the One more spenta spoke thus to the Evil One: neither our thoughts nor teachings nor wills, neither our choices nor words nor acts, not our inner selves (daēnā) nor our souls agree’.

(Y. 45.2)

Truly there are two primal Spirits, twins.... In thought and word, in act they are two: the better and the bad. And those who act well have chosen rightly between these two, not so the evildoers. And when these two Spirits first came together they created life and not-life, and how at the end Worst Existence shall be for the dregvant, but (the House of) Best Purpose for the ashavan. Of these two Spirits the Dregvant chose achieving the worst things, Spenishta Mainyu, who is clad in hardest stones, chose asha, and (so do those) who shall satisfy Lord Mazdā continually with true acts.

(Y. 30.3–6)

The tradition unequivocally identified the two opposed Spirits of these verses as Ahura Mazdā and Angra Mainyu (Ohrmazd and Ahriman). But since the prophet, characteristically, varied his terms (Holier, Holiest Spirit for Mazdā, Evil, Bad Spirit for his adversary), scope exists for those who reject the tradition to interpret the doctrine otherwise. This goes back to Martin Haug, the brilliant nineteenth-century scholar who identified the Gāthās for the West as Zarathushtra’s own words. He came to their study with knowledge of the Zurvanite heresy (see Chapter 2 below), and a heritage of Christian abhorrence of dualism, which to him and others after him appeared unworthy of the great Iranian prophet. Accordingly he took Spenishta Mainyu to stand here for Spenta Mainyu, and the word yema, ‘twins’, to mean not ‘pair’ but ‘born of the same birth’, arguing from this an implication that Mazdā was ‘father’ of both the Holy and Evil Spirits, good and evil having thus a single source, as in the three Semitic monotheisms. There is no trace of such a doctrine anywhere in orthodox Zoroastrianism before the nineteenth century, when some reformist Parsis, living under Christian rule and anxious to rid their faith of the slur (as Christian missionaries presented it) of dualism, adopted Haug’s interpretation (see Chapter 4 below). This interpretation, put forward when the scholarly study of the Gāthās had just begun, flatly contradicts the burning conviction of the ‘absolute heterogeneity’ of good and evil which imbues them (Corbin 1951:163, cf. Lommel 1930:27–8. Bianchi 1958: ch. 5; further references apud Boyce 1975:194). This well-intentioned imposition of an alien theology on Zarathushtra still has, however, its

academic supporters (among them Gershevitch 1964:32–3; Gnoli 1980:213; Gnoli 1987:581), and has come to be widely accepted by his own reformist followers.

The Gathic passages show that Zarathushtra apprehended the differences between the two Spirits as essential, not accidental: they were by nature opposed. Yet though according to Y. 31.8 Mazda is creator of Asha, in Y. 30 he chooses asha, as if the principle already existed. This anomaly is explicable by the fact that Zarathushtra, although a thinker, was primarily a prophet, one who sought to win his hearers to act upon his words. If they and the world were to be saved from evil, they must be inspired to choose to uphold asha, not drug; and the myth of the primeval choices of the two Spirits, so powerfully conceived by him, gave his teaching dramatic force. The spenta divinities did not, it appears, repeat Ahura Mazda's choice: they were of his essence, innately ashavan; but the daēvas, who once, it seems, despite their bad nature, acknowledged Mazda's pre-eminence (Y. 32.1), were deluded by Angra Mainyu into choosing 'Worst Purpose' (Y. 30.6); and they then themselves deluded their worshippers, depriving them of good life on earth and of immortality (Y. 32.3–5).

With regard to the hereafter, Zarathushtra, as we have seen, inherited beliefs in two possible fates for the soul: a blissful, reincarnated one on high with the gods, or a joyless disembodied one in the underworld kingdom of the dead. There was thought to be a crossing place between this world and the next, perhaps originally a ford or ferry to the underworld, but a bridge to heaven, reaching from earth to sky. This is called in the Gāthās the Chinvat Bridge. Probably according to the old religion heaven was to be reached only by great men, but Zarathushtra taught that it was attainable by all who accepted his teachings and were ashavan, while the underworld kingdom was to him a place of retributive punishment, the worst existence, that is, hell, which awaited the dregvant.

Whosoever, Lord, man or woman, will grant me those things Thou knowest best for life—recompense for truth, power with good purpose—and those whom I shall bring to Your worship, with all these shall I cross the Chinvat Bridge. False priests and princes by their powers yoked mankind with evil acts to destroy life. But their own soul and Inner Self tormented them when they reached the Chinvat Bridge—guests for a long lifetime in the House of Drug.

(Y. 46.11)

Heavenly glory shall be the future possession of him who comes (to the help of) the ashavan. A long life of darkness, foul food, the crying of woe—to that existence, O dregvants, your Inner Self shall lead you by her actions.

(Y. 31.20–1)

The inner self, daēnā, also rendered as 'conscience', was a powerful concept apparently evolved by Zarathushtra from a myth that the soul of a man destined for heaven would be met at the bridge by a beautiful girl, thereafter to be his guide and companion. This hedonistic belief Zarathushtra transformed into an ethical one. What met people there was their own daēnā, the hypostasis of an inner self which they had made beautiful or

ugly by their own conduct, and which then took them up to heaven or down to hell (cf. Y. 49.10–11). The word *daēnā* has been derived from the verbal root *dāy*, ‘see’, with implication of an inner or mental vision (Gnoli 1980:195 n. 70), by which was gradually formed ‘the sum of the spiritual and religious qualities of a person, his spiritual and religious individuality’ (Bartholomae 1904:666). ‘He who makes better or worse his thought, O *Mazdā*, he by act and word (makes better or worse) his *Daēnā*; she follows his leanings, wishes and likings. At Thy will the end shall be different (for each)’ (Y. 48.4). This end was to be decided by weighing each person’s good thoughts, words and acts against the bad, the soul’s fate being decided by how the scales tipped. There will then be unswerving justice ‘for the dregvant as well as for the *ashavan*, and for him whose falsehood and honesty are assessed as equal’ (Y. 33.1). It is part of the practical strength of *Zarathushtra*’s teachings that evil thoughts, words and acts can be directly compensated for in this life by good ones, and so need not form a long-lasting burden of guilt.

The references to the *Chinvat Bridge* and *daēnā* can only be fully comprehended through the tradition, and the tradition has also to be drawn on to explain the recurrent allusions in the *Gāthās* to a decision to be made through ‘bright blazing fire and molten metal...to destroy the dregvant, to save the *ashavan*’ (Y. 51.9; cf. Y. 31.19, 43.4, 34.4). The doctrine behind the words is that when *Mazdā* and the *spenta* powers and creations finally defeat evil, and *Angra Mainyu* and his forces have been destroyed, souls will be brought back to earth from heaven and hell and enter their resurrected bodies, so that with those still living they can undergo the last judgement physically. (This doctrine of the ‘future body’, as it is called in later Zoroastrian creeds, appears to be a modification by *Zarathushtra* of the earlier concept of a resurrected body to be enjoyed soon after death by the fortunate in heaven on high.) The universal judgement will be by an ordeal analogous to that by molten metal which was part of ordinary Indo-Iranian judicial processes. In it, as in the judicial ordeal, the guilty will perish, and the just be saved by divine intervention (Lommel 1930:219ff; Boyce 1996:23–4). The last vestiges of evil will thereby be destroyed. Then the world will be made ‘wonderful’, an approximate rendering of *fareša* (Y. 30.9; 34.15), restored, that is, to its pristine state of wholeness and goodness. The resurrected bodies of the righteous will be made immortal, and they will live for ever joyously in the kingdom (*khshathra*) of *Ahura Mazdā* to be established here on earth. This will be stable, enduring, with no more mutability or corruption. The concept of an absolute end to the processes of birth and death and change is not the least radical and influential of *Zarathushtra*’s innovative thoughts; and it appears to have been wholly original, not traceable anywhere in the world before his time (Cohn 1993). It is of profound importance in his teachings, which are essentially concerned with salvation and an end to evil; and it forms the concluding belief in a system which unites in a remarkable way some notably archaic elements (animatism, the strong sense of man’s fellowship with the beasts, ancient cosmogonic ideas) with powerful new doctrines and a noble theology.

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