

# Zoroastrianism

Zoroaster asks God in

Hormazd Yeshr: 'How and when will I recognize you, my God?' and the Spirit of God entered his mind and the answer was revealed unto Zoroaster: "I am in everything and everywhere. If the smallest seed is broken and there seems nothing, remember I am in that seed and the very essence which seems nothing is Me. If you call on Me from anywhere I will be or your service from wherever I am and through any aspect of Mine, for the moment you think of Me I am there. I do not mind how you worship Me for I am in everything and everywhere. Only remember, I am fundamentally and essentially Truth and I am part of your conscience. If you remember this you will learn, that to be really good you have to be better than good, better than better, really the Best in everything you do or think or speak"

Gook K.S. Shavakshal

## I. HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

### Parsis Today: A Living Faith

THERE ARE a little over 115,000 Parsis practicing today, most of whom live either in Bombay or in towns and villages to the north of it. As their name indicates—Pars being the ancient area of their origin—they are the descendants of Persian ancestors. They, as well as 10,000 of their cousins in Iran, make up most of the world-wide following that has remained loyal to their God—Ahura-Mazda—and His prophet, Zoroaster (Zarathustra). In India, though not really a caste, they are a well-defined community. They emigrated to India in the tenth century because of persecution following the Arab conquest of Iran.

Parsis were of the first to open themselves to European influence under the British rule, and this was one reason they prospered. Yet ironically, they remain a closed community: neither do they marry outside of their faith nor do they seek to spread their customs and beliefs. They were farmers under a Hindu prince and his Muslim successors, but with the advent of the British, with whom they were the most cooperative, they moved swiftly into commerce, earning them the title, the Jews of India. <sup>2</sup> From the middle of the nineteenth century on, whatever was established in India in the way of shipbuilding, railroads, iron mills, etc. was largely their work.

But their wealth and industry was not all for which they are noted: they were distinguished in their charities and their education, exemplified by the schools, orphanages and hospitals that they founded without distinction of race or religion. They adopted successfully as well British manners and costume, borrowed the European tradition of education for women and abolished the custom of infant marriages. Several Parsis were knighted by the British Crown, two served as members of Parliament, and one became a baronet. <sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Zoroastrianism. Symbols and Values*, Harper and Row, N.Y., 1966, p. 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 2.

What enabled the Parsis to excel in this way? An American geographer, Elsworth Huntington of Yale, studying the general effect of race and environment on the development of civilization, cites the Parsees as typical of a community tried but fortified by natural selection, which allows only the fittest to survive. It had required some courage to escape Islam; then, in the course of the exile in the mountains and the exodus to India, in successive stages up to an installation which was at first precarious, the less valiant among them had perished from the toils and hardships, diseases and despair. Thus the small surviving band possessed latent energies only waiting for an opportunity to blossom forth. They can in this respect be compared with the Pilgrims, those English Puritans who, fleeing from religious persecution, went out to found what was to become in two centuries the grandeur that is the United States of America.<sup>4</sup>

### **Zoroaster the Man and Prophet**

Our knowledge of Zoroaster is largely a matter of scholarly conjecture. Like all ancient religious figures, his life is obscured by the mist of miracle and mystery the devout use to express their adoration for one who has given them the true faith. Everything depends upon how much or how little credit is given to the traditions handed down from the past and treasured by centuries of followers. Because of conflicting textual remains we cannot be at all sure when Zoroaster was born, or where, the nature of the religious reform he attempted, his original teachings and how he died. Parsis who continue to venerate him as the Prophet, like western scholars, disagree amongst themselves on all these matters. A Parsi high priest in Karachi, wrote: "We know everything of the life of Mohammed; we know something of the lives of Buddha and Jesus; we know practically nothing of the life of Zoroaster."<sup>5</sup>

According to Professor A. V. Williams Jackson of Columbia University, Zoroaster lived during the middle of the 7th century

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*Ibid*, pp. 2, 3.

Dastur, M.N. Dhalla, *History of Zoroastrianism*, N.Y., 1938, p. 310.

about the time the Jews were carried into Babylonian exile, nearly 300 years prior to Alexander the Great. This would put him in "the axial period"—a time of religious and intellectual renaissance throughout the ancient world, from Greece to China. Dr. E.W. West dates Zoroaster's life quite specifically as 660-583 B.C. on the basis of a careful study of the extant materials. Aristotle thought the Persian prophet lived about 6000 B.C.'

Where Zoroaster came from is also a matter of debate. On the basis of the material available to us, some experts claim he came from western Iran while others are equally certain he was born in the far eastern part of that country. Jackson argues that he was born in Adarbajjan, west of Media—a region of naphtha wells and oil fountains. If this be correct, then he spent time in the east as a wandering holy man. For it was Iran to the east of the great central desert that was the scene of the birth and first expansion of the Zoroastrian religion. It was here too that the oldest sacred literature was composed.

The third bone of contention involves the nature of Zarathustra's work. Many non-Parsi scholars have preferred to interpret his mission as that of a prophet of righteousness, a teacher who in the name of ethical idealism opposed the degraded popular faith of Persia. Others see him as a theological innovator, a spokesman for one God or—to cite the opposite opinion—a champion of religious dualism. Adding further complications, a few scholars explain that Zarathustra's chief role was to provide an ideological defense of the settled, peace-loving farmers against both marauding Aryan nomads and an Iranian ruling class devoted to the love of warfare. Or was he primarily a religious foe of the ancient Indo-Aryan polytheism represented by the Brahmin priesthood and the Vedas? At least one scholar sees Zoroaster as being very adept in ideologically manipulating the conceptions of the revered gods of Indian and Iranian popular religion into Ahura-Mazda's camp, lining up some to support him as subordinate beings, while discarding others entirely.'

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" A. V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster, The Prophet of Ancient Iran*, AMS Press, N.Y., 1965, is the most readable biography in English.

Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ibid*, p. 35.

## ZOROASTRIANISM

Whatever vocation best describes him, our sources stress the fact that Zarathustra was gifted with mystic visions. If he were a moralist, a social reformer, a theological innovator, he was primarily a prophet and seer. At age thirty he had his first vision and Ahura-Mazda, the supreme God of Parsi faith, appeared to him. This was followed by six other visions which prompted his lifetime work. In these, the six archangels of the later Zoroastrian creed successively manifested themselves. From this point, the powers of the upper world commissioned his prophetic ministry which prompted their counterparts in the demonic world to no less clearly signify their opposition—in one legend a she-devil Spendarmat tried unsuccessfully to seduce him.

Zarathustra's first convert was his cousin—ten years after the call to a prophetic life was issued. Then Zoroastrian fortunes took a fateful turn: the Iranian King Vishtaspa and his court adopted the new faith. The prophet now had his Constantine—a royal patron, protector and propagandist. This alliance with the monarch of Bactria in eastern Persia guaranteed the success of his mission. Nor was this merger of church and crown a merely accidental event. Since the prophet conceived of religion in martial terms, a war for God against His Adversary, it was quite natural for him to rely on a powerful secular ally.

Vishtaspa was converted, tradition asserts, because Zoroaster was able to heal the ruler's favorite black horse. This incident portrays another side of Zarathustra's career: his fame as a wonder-worker like the earlier Moses and the later Jesus. When the prophet first came to the royal court, he was opposed by the priestly advisors to the king and finally cast into prison. Suddenly, the royal horse was stricken with paralysis. Zarathustra promised to restore the steed to perfect health if the king met certain conditions. The king agreed. When the horse's right fore-leg was healed, Vishtaspa accepted the Zoroastrian faith; when its right hind-leg was restored, the king's warrior son had to become a crusader for the new religion; the queen was converted as the third leg was cured; and to climax his victory, the death of Zarathustra's chief enemies at court was demanded, upon whose execution the

black horse jumped up and leaped about.

It is said that subsequently King Vishtaspa made four requests of the prophet: to have an invulnerable body; a soul that will not leave his body before the resurrection; knowledge of how he will die and his place in Paradise; and the ability to predict the future. Arguing that no single mortal can be the recipient of that many boons, Zarathustra persuaded the king to limit his desire to a vision of his place in Paradise. Three archangels thereupon appeared at the palace, promising the monarch a long reign, an earthly life covering 150 years and an immortal son, Peshyotan. An archangel gave the king a drink from the fountain of life, made his son immortal, bestowed invulnerability upon the prince to defend the faith, and blessed the grand vizier with universal knowledge. Though pious exaggerations most probably embellish this conversion story, the main point—historically valid—is that the triumph of the prophet had become assured.

For the last twenty years of his life the prophet was involved in two holy wars on behalf of his faith and according to one account he was killed by an assassin while tending the holy flame. Later Arab chroniclers argued that Vishtaspa converted his people and others with fire and sword. Whatever the means, the Zoroastrian religion spread from Asia Minor to western India. All the way from the Aegean to the Arabian Sea fire temples were erected to enshrine the sacred flame—the visible sign of Mazda's presence. In a comparatively brief length of time the Zoroastrian theology became the official faith of the Medes and Persians. If Xerxes had succeeded in his invasion of Greece, the cause of the prophet might have become Europe's faith as well. However, Alexander the Great destroyed the power of Persia and in a moment of drunken sport burned the imperial palace at Persepolis which housed many priceless Zoroastrian religious hooks. Zarathustra's faith emerged again eight centuries later. Thus there are two distinct periods in Zoroastrianism: the earlier under the Achaemenids, and the later under the Sassanid kings. But after the latter another well nigh fatal blow was struck by the Muslim conquests in the seventh century—thus the Parsi emigration to India.

The historic Zoroaster was very human, writing in despair "To what land shall I flee? How am I to please Thee, Mazda Ahura? I am without success! Few cattle are mine! I have but few folk! I cry unto Thee. See Thou to it, Ahura, granting me support as friend gives to friend! Teach me by the Right the acquisition of Good Thought!" However, later legends appended a variety of supernatural phenomena to his life. He was born from a virgin mother who conceived from a heavenly light. According to Zoroastrian scripture, he was also pre-existent, was equal to the archangels and had lived 3000 years before his incarnation."

When one tries to assess the influence of Zoroaster beyond the confines of his own following, he is confronted with a variety of conjectures. Many scholars have argued that Zoroastrianism played an enormous role in the exilic and post-exilic development of Jewish thought. Others have attempted to show its influence upon Plato, neo-Platonism, Gnosticism, the mystery religions, Christian apocalypticism and medieval heretical movements like the Cathari, Bogomils and Albigenses. In the Bible, Zoroastrian kings are mentioned in eight books of the Old Testament, and are the only individuals of another religion not to be condemned by the Bible. In fact some are distinctly commended. The Zoroastrian King Cyrus is addressed by Jehovah as "His Messiah" and "My Shepherd" several hundred years before these descriptions were applied to Jesus." St. Matthew's magi were undoubtedly Zoroastrian priests. Beyond that, the effect of Zoroastrianism upon Judaism and Christianity as well as Greek thought is still subject to scholarly debate."

### Beyond Zoroaster

Several sects emerged from the Zoroastrian religion—some

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\* Yasna, 46:1-2; Moulton, J.H., *Early Zoroastrianism*, Williams & Norgate, London, 1913, p. 372.

° R.E. Hume, *The World's Living Religions*, Scribners, N.Y., 1959, p. 207.

!° Isaiah 45:1, Isaiah 44:28.

° I For one account of the situation, cf. the Ratanbia Katrak Lectures for 1956 given by Prof. J. Duchesne-Guillemin of the University of Liege, Belgium, in *The Western Response to Zoroaster*, Greenwood Press, Westport, Conn., 1973, Orig. pub. Oxford U. Press, 1958.

to expire quickly, others to emerge and compete with Zarathustra for the allegiance of Iranian and near Eastern believers. Two minor and two major sects are dealt with here. Mazdak (d. 529 A.D.) advocated the absolute community of goods, sharing the wealth and wives, and complete vegetarianism. In his opinion, the desire for pleasure and possessions are the twin causes of hatred and strife. Prince Nurshivan of Iran murdered him and his most prominent followers, so the movement persisted only briefly.

A second sect were followers of the god Zurvan—who is mentioned in the Zoroastrian sacred writings as either a maker of paths leading to the hereafter or as "Infinite Time." Most probably this group consisted of nobles and theologians at the Persian court. If Zurvanites were at court, this could explain their quick decline at the time of the Muslim conquest; for those nobles quickly embraced Islam to retain some shred of power.

The worshippers of Mithras represented a third Zoroastrian sect. Mithras, the giver of immortality, was the savior lord of a mystery religion which became a formidable rival to Christianity in the heyday of the pagan Roman empire. Through bas-reliefs and paintings, we know that Mithras' birth was celebrated on December 25—a festival which Christians borrowed for the birth of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

In Zoroastrianism, killing the divine bull is attributed to Ahriman, whereas in Mithraism this is carried out by Mithras. Because of this sacrifice he could offer the gift of immortality to men. Through the ritual slaying of a bull, whose blood enabled initiates to experience union with divinity, Mithraists received saving knowledge and partook of eternal life. That is, one was "washed in the blood." Like original Zoroastrianism, Mithraism extolled the martial virtues, thus attracting many Roman soldiers to its cause. However, such an appeal excluded women, and this fact, along with the expense of sacrificing bulls (of necessity limited to privileged classes), gave a distinct advantage to Christianity. In any case after appearing in the Roman world about 75 B. C. and ranking as a principal competitor of Christianity for 200

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<sup>2</sup> Cf. Rudolf Bultmann, *Primitive Christianity*, Meridian Books, N.Y., 1956, pp. 156-161.

years the cult of Mithras gradually disappeared.

Manichaeism likewise grew out of Persian soil to become a major rival to early Christianity. Mani, a native of the Baghdad area and the son of well-born Persians, proclaimed himself a prophet about 242 A.D. He acknowledged Zoroaster (whose theory of dualism he radicalized), Buddha, and Jesus (whose followers' salvation doctrine he adopted) as preparators for his own all-inclusive revelation. When his preaching aroused the opposition of the orthodox Zoroastrian priest, he was banished. During at least twenty years in exile Mani taught in northern India, Tibet, Chinese Turkistan and elsewhere. By combining the essentials of Zoroastrianism with Hindu, Buddhist, Christian and Gnostic ideas he hoped to found a universal religion. Mani equated evil with matter and good with spirit, hence providing a natural foundation for asceticism and certain types of mysticism; but as we shall see he enlisted a type of dualism that Zoroastrianism never accepted.

Augustine was once a Manichaean and his version of Christianity bears many traces of his earlier faith. Much later Muslim mystics too were profoundly affected by Mani's teaching. In some respects the Bahais, who also originated in Persia and likewise bear traces of Zoroaster's spirit," represent in the 19th century a more successful attempt to combine the best insights of the older faiths—the goal of Mani seventeen centuries before. Mani was allowed to return from exile (finding favor with a different king), yet only to be, in 274 A.D., cruelly executed at the instigation of priests of the established Zoroastrian faith. In spite of violent persecution Manichaeism was propagated throughout the breadth of the Roman Empire in the west and as far as China in the east.

### **Zoroastrian Sacred Writings**

The chief sacred writings of the Zoroastrians have been given the name *Zend-Avesta*, but they comprise only a small portion of the original literature. According to a Greek philosopher, Zoroas-

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<sup>13</sup> Though most would relate the religion of Baha'-ullah to Islam, its optimism, practicality and healthy-mindedness remind one of Zoroastrianism.

ter composed a total of two million verses and an Arab historian reports that the prophet's writings cover 1200 pieces of parchment. Alexander the Great is generally accused of destroying most of the Parsi books and to his vandalism should be added the ravages of the conquering Muslims. Originally the revealed Zoroastrian literature consisted of 21 books of holy scripture (*Avesta*) each of which had an accompanying commentary (*Zend*). Only the 19th is preserved complete. For orthodox Parsis the entire *Zend-Avesta* is divine revelation, comparable to the Jewish Torah or the Christian Bible.

The holy book contains several sections. The most sacred, and the earliest of these is the *Yasna*. Within it are contained seventeen *Gathas*—*psalms* of Zoroaster himself. The *Visperad* is a liturgical work of lesser importance, which contains invocations to "All the Lords" and which, along with the *Yasna*, is used in worship. The *Vendidad* (Law against the Demons) is a code of ceremonial laws dealing with the liturgical side of Zoroastrian dualism yet contains cosmological, historical and eschatological material. Certain of these laws are said to have been the best hygienic practices before the start of modern medicine. All of the above parts of the *Zend-Avesta* served exclusively for priests.

The *Gathas* of Zarathustra are generally believed to be the oldest part of Parsi scripture. It is important to note the tremendous value of these psalms: they are the most reliable guide to the nature and character of Zoroaster. Of them and their author, a contemporary high priest in Bombay notes: "It is refreshing to turn from the elusive Zarathustra of tradition and the pasteboard figure of recent research to the flesh and blood reality of the man depicted in the *Gathas*." A popular prayer of the prophet follows:

With uplifted hands and deep humility, I beseech, O  
Lord of wisdom, first and foremost, this, the abiding  
joy of Thy Holy Spirit.  
Grant that I may perform all actions in harmony with

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" Dastur Framrose Ardeshir Bode and Piloo Nanavtty, *Songs of Zarathushthro*, Allen and Unwin, London, 1952, p. 20.

Thy Divine Truth, and acquire the wisdom of the Good Mind, so that I may illumine the very Soul of Creation. . . .

I shall weave songs of praise as was never done before you, O Divine Truth and for you, O Good Mind, and for you, O Lord of wisdom, for through them flourish Divine Devotion and the immeasurable Lords' Mighty Majesty. So descend, O Powers from above, in answer to these invocations for my joy and my delight.

In truth, when singing Thy praises, I shall attune my soul to the Good Mind and be aware of the holy blessings which flow from holy deeds undertaken for the sake of the Lord of wisdom. As long as I have the will and strength, so long will I preach the desire for Divine Truth. . . <sup>15</sup>

Besides the religious warmth and fervor behind such words, the prayer lends itself to two divergent interpretations. On one hand—possibly for the prophet himself—the hymn can be an expression of a profound intellectual and moral love for God in the spirit of a Spinoza or Thomas Jefferson. Or, on the other hand, it can be viewed as an example of heartfelt popular devotion not only to Mazda, but also to the lesser gods Spenta Mainyu, Vohu Mana, Asha, Aramaiti and Xshathra (whose names are recast in English as "Divine Truth," "Divine Devotion," etc.). In one case we have a religion that worships one good God; in the other we find personal devotion to the living divinities of a polytheistic pantheon.

The Gathas, as well as other sacred texts, according to some contemporary Parsis, were used in a mystical context which western scholars usually overlook. In the early stages of his mission, the prophet formed the Circle of Contemplative Thought, in which the chanting of the *Gathas* and other sacred texts was used to induce an ecstatic communion with the divine and to generate

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid, pp. 43-44 (adapted by replacing the names of Mazda, Vohu Mana, etc. with their English equivalents).

energy and devotion. Through singing hymns to Ahura-Mazda men beheld God in His majesty and saw Armaiti (Perfect Devotion) clasp Asha (Truth). In the mystic experiences derived from such worship in front of the holy flame, the disciples of Zoroaster charged themselves with vitality to spend in the service of humanity. Thus is the ethical thrust of the Good Religion, as it is called, grounded in the divine-human encounter."

Besides the above literature the Avesta also contains the Yashts: an anthology of religious poetry comprised of sacrificial hymns to twenty-one angels (or gods?) and other heroes. These are generally recognized to have been composed much later than the works of Zarathustra and the earlier sources in the Avesta. The Yashts represent a very different type of theology from the Gathas, and for western experts at least, are attributed to neo-polytheists, representing "a re-paganization of the Zoroastrian reform."<sup>17</sup>

In addition to the *Zend-Avesta*, there is a large collection of books and pamphlets written in Pahlavi, the official language of Sassanid Iran. They elaborate the orthodox Zoroastrian dualism which became the official ideology of the Parthian empire, beginning with the reign of Shappur II in the fourth century and lasting over four centuries until the Muslim invaders supplanted it. One can compare these books to the writings of medieval Catholicism, when the Church was the established religion of Europe. Zaehner observes that this Pahlavi material represents the natural continuation of the Gathic doctrine, plus the neo-polytheism of the later yashts and a greater refinement of the original *Zend-Avesta*."

Finally, there are modern interpretations of Parsi religion, theology and ritual prepared by Zoroastrians themselves. A few of

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" *Ibid*, pp. 21-22. Zaehner, however, claims that as a matter of historical fact, Zoroastrianism has never developed any form of mysticism. (*The Teaching of the Magi*, p. 54). Bode and Nanavtvy confess that the Circle of Contemplative Thought is not mentioned explicitly in the Gathas. Yet one can scarcely believe that fireworshippers would lack a mystic sense. As for historical fact, Zoroastrianism did produce the esoteric Mysteries of Mithra.

<sup>17</sup> R.C. Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi*, George Allen & Unwin, London, 1956, p. 13.

<sup>18</sup> An easily accessible handbook of Pahlavi texts is Zaehner's *The Teachings of the Magi* (Ethical and Religious Classics of East and West).

these have been translated into European languages or written in English by educated priests from India. With these it is possible to see how the revelation of the prophet is defended in the light of rival Hindu, Christian and Muslim systems. While such recent publications lack the authority of sacred scriptures they offer the distinct advantage of presenting a living faith and expounding in a contemporary way its basic insights concerning God, man and cosmic destiny."

## II. ZOROASTRIAN COSMOLOGY

### The Good God and His Helpers

Any study of Zoroastrian cosmology should be prefaced by a word on allegory and symbol in Parsi sacred scriptures. Are the personalities, entities, and events mentioned symbolic or literal? How were such intended? One of Zoroastrianism's modern high priests writes: "Some portions of the Avesta, if taken literally, would seem absurd. Mountains, rivers and similar topographical features do not refer to any physical locations, but probably to some psycho-physiological features, some psychic currents within the human body (brain, nerves or some plexus or gland, etc. . .)." Though this view may be exaggerated, "one should be careful not to go to the other extreme and pretend that all allegorical interpretations are adventitious." <sup>2</sup>

Professor Martin Haug (d. 1876) of the University of Munich was one of the early European scholar-translators of Parsi literature. For him the key to original Zoroastrianism is **to** be found in theological monotheism, philosophic dualism and ethical trinitarianism. <sup>3</sup> That is, theologically, Zarathustra was a monotheist, protesting against the crude and often immoral polytheism regnant

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<sup>19</sup> Sir Rustom Masani, *The Religion of the Good Life*, Allen & Unwin, London, 1954; J.J. Modi, *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees*, Bombay, 1937; M.N. Dhalla, *Zoroastrian Theology*, 1914 and *History of Zoroastrianism*, N.Y., 1938.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Dastur Khurshed S. Dabu, *Message of Zarathushtra*, Bombay, 1956.

<sup>2</sup> Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ibid*, p. 19.

<sup>3</sup> M. Haug, *Essays on the Language, Writings and Religion of the Parsis* (4th ed.), Philo Press, Amsterdam, 1971, pp. 300, 302.

in the Persia of his day. Philosophically, Zoroaster's speculative metaphysics presupposed two primeval causes of the world. And finally, his system of ethics moved in the triad of thought, word and deed.

Haug and his many followers argue that Ahura-Mazda is in essence identical with Elohim or Yahweh in the Old Testament. Ahura-Mazda—who rewards the good and punishes the wicked—is praised as the Creator of the earthly and spiritual life, the Lord of the whole universe, and the source of light, intellect and wisdom. A Pahlavi text attached to the *Shayast La-Shayast* ("Book of the Proper and Improper") gives us insight into Zarathustra's quest into the nature of Mazda, and reminds us to some extent of the New Testament book of Revelation:

"It is revealed by a passage of the Avesta that Zarathustra, seated before Ahura-Mazda, always wanted information from him; and he spoke to Ahura-Mazda thus: Thy head, hands, feet, hair, face, and tongue are in my eyes just like those even which are my own, and you have the clothing men have; give me a hand, so that I may grasp thy hand. Ahura-Mazda said thus: I am an intangible spirit; it is not possible to grasp my hand." <sup>4</sup>

Even though later followers may have altered their master's monotheism, in Haug's estimation, a separate evil spirit of equal power in opposition to the good God is entirely foreign to Zarathustra's theology. For Haug, to think otherwise is to confuse Zarathustra's *philosophy* with his theology. He cites this pivotal verse from the *Gathas* which he believes clearly expressed the prophet's monotheism:

From His most beneficent spirit all good has sprung in the words which are pronounced by the tongue of the Good Mind, and the works wrought by the hands of the earth. By means of such knowledge, Mazda himself is the father of all rectitude.'

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<sup>4</sup> Sacred Books of the East, **V**, p. 372.

s Yasht 57:1-2.

However, according to one of the Zoroastrian *Yashts* composed specifically to praise the supreme God, Ahura-Mazda Himself (who was later called Ormazd) is said to give a list of His twenty different names, thus complicating the issue, as we shall see further. In the light of Hebrew thought, it is interesting to note here that the Persian God declares, "My first name is 'I am,' O holy Zarathustra," reminding one of Jehovah's words in Exodus, "I am who I am." Others include: the Giver of herds, perfect holiness, all-wise, omniscient, etc.

It is also important to observe that so far as scholars are able to discover, Zoroaster coined a new name for the supreme God. He did not borrow it from the many available in the Indo-Iranian pantheon of the *Rig-Veda*. Nor did he turn to the celebrated gods and goddesses of the great Mideastern empires of the past: Marduk, Sin, Bel, etc. Ahura-Mazda is a compound noun, a combination of two words, one meaning "Sovereign," the other "Knowledge." Professor Jackson suggestively translates Ahura-Mazda as "Lord Wisdom." Most ancient deities relate to specific natural forces (e.g. Zeus the sky god and Baal the storm god) or valued human activities and attributes (Mars the god of war, Aphrodite the goddess of love). The intellectualist nature of Zoroaster's faith is particularly notable and would not reappear in the western world until the Gnostic movement of a much later time.

Having treated Haug's first characteristic of Zoroastrianism—theological monotheism—we turn to his second—philosophic dualism. For many commentators on *the Zend-Avesta*, dualism is the most striking feature. The warfare between two supernatural spirits and the antagonism between the principles of good and evil represent fundamental ideas in Zarathustra's *Gathas* as well as later Mazdaist scripture. Jackson observes that this dogma is constantly preached by the prophet himself and is doubtless the product of his own invention.'

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<sup>6</sup> Dastur F.A. Bode writes, it was the Prophet's genius which made him, choose Ahura, Lord of Life, and combine this deity with Mazda, Lord of Wisdom, as the One Eternal God, Creator of the universe, a God of Righteousness and Truth...a God of Mercy and Love...." Bode and Nanavtty, *Songs of Zarathushtra*, p. 27.

*!bid*, p. 28.

In what has been called Zarathustra's Sermon on the Mount, he declares:

In the beginning there was a pair of twins, two spirits, each of a peculiar activity; these are the good and the base, in thought, word and deed. Choose one of these two spirits: Be good, not base!

And these two spirits united created the first (the material things); one, the reality, the other, the non-reality. To the liars existence will become bad, whilst the believer in the true God enjoys prosperity.

Of these two spirits, you must choose one, either the evil, the originator of the worst actions, or the true, holy spirit. . . . You cannot belong to both of them. <sup>8</sup>

Zarathustra's theology resulted from his mystic visions, but his philosophic dualism can be traced back to his strong moral sense. As the prophet of a new religion anxious to win converts, he quite naturally contrasted the worth of *his* God with the worthlessness of the ordinary gods accepted by the Persian populace. Appalled by the common practice of animal sacrifices and the excesses associated with the sacramental drinking of the intoxicating soma juice, the reformer emphasized the goodness of his God and the evils of the daevas. In the most literal manner, he declared to the priests of the established faith, "Your gods (devas) are my devils (daevas)."

Zoroaster's denunciation of the false gods of polytheistic nature worship was not mere sectarianism or bigotry. It was based on a profoundly ethical interpretation of the universe and man's purpose in it. As a modern Parsi, Sir R. Masani, explains, Zoroaster postulates the independent existence of evil: evil is an irreducible fact which cannot be explained away. It is not just a corruption of goodness nor good in the process of formation. Much less is it the mere absence or negation of good. For the Zoroastrian, evil is a

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<sup>8</sup> Yasht 30:3-6.

distinct principle and an active enemy of the good. If one takes an honest look at our world he will recognize that the conflict between good and evil is a fundamental fact of existence. In this cosmic warfare, man is challenged and inspired to become a co-worker and fellow-combatant on the side of the God of righteousness. Life should be understood as a crusade against the forces of evil and imperfection. For the Zoroastrian it becomes both logical and ethical to acknowledge two primeval powers at war with each other, a philosophy of "Eternal Polarism."<sup>9</sup> Masani, in similar fashion as Haug, claims that such a belief reinforces—not lessens—an uncompromising monotheism.

Masani explains that a merely abstract conception of divinity does not satisfy the yearnings of the human heart; ordinary men need something more tangible and personal to which they can dedicate themselves. Hence six immortal benefactors came to be worshipped along with Ahura-Mazda to form a heptarchy of celestial beings. Besides the supreme Lord Wisdom, the Parsi prays to Vohu Manah, Asha Vahishta, Khshathra Vairya, Aramaiti, Haurvatat and Ameretat. For a well-educated contemporary Zoroastrian these are not separate gods and goddesses (or even archangels) but merely six outstanding "attributes" of the Supreme Being, six "divine abstractions" which simply personify and deify abstract ideas. Such "abstractions" suggest the diversity within the unity of the Godhead. To prove his point Masani translates the meaning of the six immortals as the Good Mind, the Best Order, the Absolute Power, High Thought or Devotion, Perfection and Immortality."

In line with this, the *Zend-Avesta* declares:

We worship the good, strong, beneficent guardians—  
spirits of the righteous, immortal benefactors, the rulers  
with their watchful eyes, the high- powerful, swift,  
living ones of everlasting truth, who are seven of one  
thought, who are seven of one word, who are seven of  
one deed, whose mind is the same, whose speech is the

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<sup>9</sup> Ibid, p. 99.

<sup>10</sup> R. Masani, Ibid. pp. 62-63.

same, whose deeds are the same, and whose Master and Ruler is the same, the Creator, Ahura Mazda."

Anyone familiar with Christian thought will immediately recognize the basic similarity between the Church's efforts to explain the Trinity and the Zoroastrian attempt to do justice to the heptarchy. Whereas the post-Nicean Fathers developed a theory of three hypostases in one ousia, Parsi theologians espouse a unity of thought, word and deed to bind together the distinct seven manifestations of the one God. In Haug's terminology, we are now in the domain of "ethical trinitarianism."

Historians of religion are not completely convinced by such an explanation nor by the suggestions of some modern Parsees who see the above seven "guardians" as archangels. For the student of comparative religions, it looks as though the popular polytheism Zoroaster drove out the front door crept in through the backyard as soon as the prophet died. For all practical purposes Zoroastrianism worships seven gods and goddesses (Amesha Spentas), each of which is the guardian genie of a specific part of creation or a special area of human interest.<sup>1 2</sup> The attempts to spiritualize or reinterpret these gods and goddesses may have been caused by Muslim attacks on Zoroastrianism for failing to believe in one God or more recent Christian missionary complaints in India that Parsis are practicing polytheists.

The monotheistic aspect of Zoroastrianism is further compromised by the worship of the "Adorable Ones." Besides Ahura-Mazda and the six Amesha Spentas, Parsi theology recog-

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<sup>1</sup> Fravardin Yasht 22:82-83.

<sup>2</sup> "Ahura-Mazda said thus. . . I tell thee, O Spitami Zarathushtra! that each individual of us has produced his own one creation for the world, by means of which they may set going in its body, in the world, that activity which they would exercise in the spiritual existence. In the world that which is mine, who am Ahura-Mazda, is the righteous man, of Vohu Manah are the cattle, of Asha Vahisthta is the fire, of Khshatha Vairya is the metal, of Aramaiti are the earth and virtuous woman, of Hauvavat is the water, and of Ameretat is the vegetation. — (Shayast La-Shayast 15:4-5). What this passage says is that each of the 7 Amesha Spentas was the creator as well as ruler of a part of the world. Earlier Parsi theology restricted creating to Ahura-Mazda.

nizes the existence of a group called *Yazatas*. Plutarch reported that the Persians of his time believed in twenty-four gods who were created after the six Amesha Spentas. Jackson and other Western scholars with a Christian background refer to the *Yazatas* as angels. Each has a special day of the month dedicated to him or her and a special form of ritual by which he is worshipped.

Mithras is one of the *Yazatas*. Zoroaster left him out of the original *Gathas*, but he is frequently mentioned in later parts of the *Zend-Avesta*. It is easy to understand how during the Roman empire this supernatural being became the center of his own cult: as the divine lord, he could bestow immortality upon those who were initiated into his Mystery, ate his sacred meal and were baptized in his name."

Parsi religion also propounds the existence of a mighty army of benevolent spirits called the Fravashis. Jackson refers to them as a sort of guardian angel assigned to each human being. They live in heaven until the time they descend to earth to take up residence in a human body. At death the soul unites with the Fravashi, which implies that while a man is alive the Fravashi guards the soul but is not identical with it. Among the Parsis, these guardian angels are worshipped throughout the first month of the year, the nineteenth day of every month and the last ten days of the year—obvious signs of their significance for popular Zoroastrianism.<sup>14</sup>

The question is often raised as to whether the followers of Zarathustra were monotheists or dualists, or even polytheists. Such problems may look rather academic in the light of the teachings of the *Zend-Avesta* and the Parsi rituals for the whole Host of Heaven. Yet we must be careful about premature judgments. With considerable justification, Christianity claims to be a monotheistic religion while holding belief in the Trinity, praying to God the Father and Jesus, invoking the protection of the saints, affirming the existence of angels and archangels, and looking forward to an afterlife of fellowship with the host of heaven.

<sup>13</sup> M.G. Vermaseren, *Mithras, The Secret God*, Barnes & Noble. N.Y.; 1963.

<sup>14</sup> A.V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroastrian Studies*, Columbia University Press, N.Y., 1928, pp. 37-65.

### **Ahriman and the Demons**

Historically no religion, ancient or modern, has a more profound awareness of the fact and power of evil, and the reality of Satan, than Zoroastrianism. Human history as a whole is described as the battleground in which Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman clash head-on. Creation itself exhibits the scars of cosmic warfare.

The Persians believed that after Ohrmazd had created twenty-four gods he placed them in a cosmic egg; Ahriman countered by producing an equal number of evil deities to penetrate the world and pollute it. What this means is that the Zoroastrians thought of the world as a sphere and credited Ahriman with a large measure of creative power, however malicious. By contrast with orthodox Christianity, the Parsi Devil is not a fallen angel: Ahura-Mazda did not make him or his demonic aides. The general name for these "aides" incidentally, is "daeva": in the later Persian language it became "diu"; this in turn became the origin of the English word "devil."

In the *Zend-Avesta*, Ahriman is blamed as the source of error, destructiveness, ignorance, and spite. These vices on the intellectual and moral level are matched by his evil work on the physical environment. The Evil Spirit and his helpers (including seven demonic powers to match the seven Amesha Spentas of Ahura-Mazda) cause disease, curse the crops of the farmer, hex the herds of the cattleman, produce noxious creatures like snakes and frogs, pollute the air and water, and disrupt the heavens with meteors. They appear to men in the form of serpents, toads, flies, grotesque monsters and seductive women. But most of the time they remain invisible, skulking around cemeteries and filthy places, wherever possible trying to soil the creation which they are unable to destroy.

If Ahriman is not a fallen angel, where did he and his evil spirits come from? According to orthodox Parsi theology, while some of the demons were created directly by Ahriman, at least a few of the lesser ones appeared as a result of the mating of evil

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<sup>15</sup> Cf. A.V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroastrian Studies*, pp. 67-109 for details.

powers with wicked men. In the *Vendidad*, for example, it is reported that a female monster wed four humans who made her pregnant with a whole brood of fiends." But what of the source of evil, the chief foe Ahriman? Early Zoroastrianism seems not to have raised such a question, and perhaps this was the view of the prophet himself. Like Ahura-Mazda, Ahriman just was. He existed from the beginning. One can no more ask how he was born than to enquire into the origin of Ahura-Mazda. The two rivals co-exist, the good God dwelling in the realm of eternal light, His foe abiding in the abyss of endless darkness. Only Zurvanites at a later time came up with another explanation.

They, with modern Parsis, deny the above view. The modern Parsis insist that Ahura-Mazda gave birth to twins, a holy spirit called the Spenta-Mainyu and its exact opposite, Angra-Mainyu (or Ahriman). These do not exist by themselves but only in relation to each other. Whenever anything is created, the existence of its opposite is logically implied. The positive by very definition involves the negative. What can goodness mean if there is no evil by which it can be recognized? Each exists in polarity with its opposite, yet both are derived from and merge into the higher unity of Ahura-Mazda. Zurvanites themselves expressed a variation of this opinion: Zurvan (Time) was the original first cause from whom came the warring Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman. Time is the fundamental factor in existence without which neither good nor evil has meaning—a thesis much like that defended by process theology and philosophy in our day.

In an exceedingly important Pahlavi cosmological treatise, the *Bundahis*, written in the early Muslim period, the Parsi doctrine of Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman nevertheless reflects—as opposed to the Zurvan and modern views—the orthodox explanation:

Revelation is the explanation of both spirits together; one who is independent of unlimited time, because Ahura-Mazda and the region, religion and time of

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<sup>1</sup> Ibid. p. 100.

Ahura-Mazda were and are and ever will be; while Ahriman in darkness, with backward understanding and desire for destruction was in the abyss, and it is he who will not be; and the place of that destruction, and also of that darkness, is what they call the 'endlessly dark.' And between them was empty space, that is, what they call 'air,' in which is now their meeting. Both are limited and unlimited spirits, for the supreme is that which they call endless light, and the abyss that which is endlessly dark, so that between them is a void, and one is not connected with the other; and, again, both spirits are limited as to their own selves. . . . And again, the complete sovereignty of the creatures of Ahura-Mazda is in the future existence, and all is unlimited for ever and everlasting; and the creatures of Ahriman will perish at the time when the future existence occurs and that also is eternity."

Here both spirits occupy limited space, possess the faculty of reason and have set their will on definite purposes. Neither is omnipresent, and more importantly, neither is omnipotent. But the two are not equal. Whereas Ahura-Mazda is omniscient, Ahriman's understanding is partial and backward. While the battle with evil will be long and bitter, the righteous God knows that sooner or later victory will be His. Thus, Zoroastrianism abides by its faith in an eschatological restoration of God's universe: "And may we be such as bring on this great renovation, and make this world progressive. —'<sup>8</sup>

Consequently, Zarathustra came to the Persians as a prophet of righteousness, inspiring men to enlist in the cause of the good God. This implies an emphatic denunciation of Ahriman; when a boy is given the sacred thread and shirt which make him a full-

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<sup>17</sup> E.W. West, translator, *Pahlavi Texts, Sacred Books of the East*. M. Banarsidass, Delhi, 1970, V, pp. 3-5 (Bundahis 1:2-7). The above quotation has been slightly altered by changing Auhainazd to the more common Ahura-Mazda and Aharman to Ahriman.

<sup>18</sup> *Sacred Books of the East*, XXXI, 33-34.

fledged Parsi at age 15, he confesses his faith as in this catechism:

I have come from the unseen world, nor was I (always) of this world. I was created and have not (always) been. I belong to Ohrmazd, not to Ahriman. I belong to the gods, not to the demons, to the good, not to the wicked. I am a man, not a demon, a creature of Ohrmazd, not of Ahriman. . . . To perform my function and to do my duty means that I should believe that Ohrmazd is, was, and ever more shall be, that his Kingdom is undying, and that he is infinite and pure; and that Ahriman is not, and is destructible; that I myself belong to Ohrmazd and his Bounteous Immortals, and that I have no connection with Ahriman, the demons and their associates. . . .<sup>19</sup>

### Creation and Fall

The orthodox account of creation and its fall is contained in the Pahlavi *Bundahis* and the later *Greater Bundahis*. In several respects the former deserved to be called the Zoroastrian "Genesis"; it contains information on both the origins of the universe, as well as its intended and deviated nature—though, we might add, in a much more extended and detailed form.

Mazda (now called Ohrmazd) in his creation of the world reveals himself to have both a masculine and feminine nature:

Even now on earth do men in this wise grow together in their mother's womb and are born and bred. Ohrmazd by the act of creation is both father and mother to creation: for in that he nurtured creation in unseen form, he acted as a mother, and in that he created it in material form, he acted as a father. <sup>20</sup>

Ohrmazd's first creative act is the limitation of time: he knew that if Ahriman (whose existence he had become aware of, and

.. "Bundahis," 1:14, E.W. West, *Pahlavi Texts*, Sacred Books of the East, V, p. 6.

<sup>20</sup> Quoted, Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, Weidenfield and Nicolson, London, 1961, p. 250.

whose inevitable enmity he knew he would have to face) were to be eliminated, "he would have to be lured out of eternity, actualized in finite time, and forced out into the open."

In Zaehner's account of God's awareness of a destructive principle in creation, we are reminded of Teilhard de Chardin, who explained evil as "an enemy, a shadow which God inevitably produces simply by the fact that he decides upon creation":<sup>22</sup>

For all eternity he had been a latent canker in the divine unconscious, and it is only when God became conscious of this canker that he could become conscious of himself, and with the dawn of this consciousness of his own eternal essence, he realized that such a canker not only existed, but also stood over against him as a separate and implacably hostile principle. This principle, however, did not share his own eternity and could be utterly destroyed; and the only means of doing this was to create. True, the other principle might incapacitate what he created for a while, but he could not utterly destroy it since all that issues from the hand of the Eternal must share in his eternity.<sup>22</sup>

While Ohrmazd had acted to limit time, Ahriman was also becoming conscious: unfortunately, when he did become aware of the light of Ohrmazd and his superior creation, he could not admit its superiority, and turned to envy and spite. This, along with the awareness that his own creation would end, was the motivation for his frenzied desire to spoil Ohrmazd's work.

In the sphere of the intellect, Ahriman acted first: he created 'lying speech' (false speech) even as in the Genesis story, the serpent deceives Eve through words. And as the Judeo-Christian-Islamic God responds by giving true words (revelation), so does

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*Ibid.* p. 252.

<sup>22</sup> Pierre Teilhard de Chardin, *Christianity and Evolution*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Inc., N.Y., 1969, p. 84.

<sup>23</sup> Zaehner, *Ibid.*, p. 252.

Ohrmazd create True Speech in which "the productiveness of the Creator was revealed."<sup>24</sup>

All of this takes place in the first three thousand years of a cosmic cycle to last twelve milleniums, each of which corresponds to one sign of the Zodiac. In this first period existence hovered on the brink between eternity and finite time. The last nine thousand years would pass to three equal periods: the first would see Ohrmazd's will alone actuated; the second would see a mixture of Ohrmazd's and Ahriman's desires; the final period would witness the defeat and subsequent decline of Ahriman and evil.

The fall of the material creation begins as soon as Ahriman invades it: he overruns the sky, the waters, the earth, the plants, but most significantly, the "Ione-created Bull" and Gayomart, Primal man, who is also called Righteous or Blessed Man. This represents the beginning of the third period of three thousand years; Ahriman had spent the second, previous period in a stupor after Ohrmazd had chanted the sacred *Ahuna Vairya* prayer, revealing to him in a blinding flash his own ultimate fate and "the powerlessness of the Destructive Spirit, the destruction of the demons, the Resurrection, the Final Body, and the freedom of [all] creation from aggression for ever and ever." <sup>23</sup>

Gayomart and the Primal Bull are Ohrmazd's showcases of creation; the latter was "white and lustrous, like the moon,"<sup>26</sup> while the former shone like the Sun and from the beginning "thinks upon perfect Righteousness."<sup>27</sup> Thus it is no small achievement for Ahriman when he corrupts them: but his victory is short-lived, for all his interference in the material world has trapped him there. And even in his destruction of Primal Man and Primal Bull, he has inadvertently set in motion beneficial events; for when the Bull died all manner of life miraculously came into being from his body. From his various members, issued all forms of plant life, from his blood, the fruit of the vine; from his marrow,

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<sup>24</sup> Quoted, Mid, p. 255.

<sup>25</sup> Quoted, *Ibid*, p. 257.

<sup>26</sup> Quoted, Mid, p. 263.

<sup>27</sup> Quoted, *Ibid*, p. 260.

sesame; and from his seed, which had been purified by the light of the moon, all species of animal life, except 'noxious' beasts, reptiles and harmful insects. Nor did Gayomart pass away uneventfully: as he died his seed was carried to the sun where it was purified by its light. One third of it was returned to the earth where it was buried for forty years. At the end of that period the Iranian Adam and Eve, Mashye and Mashyane, emerged from the earth in the form of a rhubarb plant, from which they later separated themselves in their human forms.

If Gayomart was the primal man, Mashye and Mashyane represent the first couple. Even in the beginning the powers of evil, though controlled, were very active. And it was not long before they, like the Adam and Eve of Genesis, committed their original sin:

So Ohrmazd warned them, saying: 'Ye are human beings, the father (and mother) of the world: do your work in accordance with righteous order and right-mindedness. Think, speak, and do what is good. Worship not the demons.' Thus warned, they confessed that Ohrmazd was the creator of 'water, the earth, plants, cattle, sun, moon, and stars, and of all fertile things'. But temptation was soon to come their way and very quickly did they succumb to it; for the Aggressor assailed their minds and corrupted them, and they cried out: 'The Destructive Spirit created water, the earth, plants, and other things.'"

From this came a host of other sins. The couple captured a white-haired goat and milked it "from the udder with their mouths,"<sup>29</sup> which "enhanced the power of the demons."<sup>30</sup> The reason this act was so grievous is not altogether clear. At any rate, a little later, after vomiting up the goat's milk, hunger drove them to

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<sup>28</sup> Ibid, p. 267.

<sup>29</sup> Bundahis, 15:10.

<sup>30</sup> Bundahis, 15:12.

find and slaughter a sheep, which was all right until they threw a piece of meat to the sky as an offering, and a vulture seized it. During the next fifty years they learned how to weave cloth, carve wood and smelt iron but could not get along with each other, evidenced by their intense jealousy and their fights in which they tore each other's hair." Finally, they gave birth to a son and daughter. But alas, they ate them shortly thereafter.

Scholars like Zaehner find the Parsi Adam and Eve story quite unedifying,<sup>32</sup> even if the point that the *Bundahis* makes is much like that in Genesis—separation from God leads to the worst depravity. When finally Ohrmazd eliminated the first couple's fondness for human flesh and children are given to them to initiate separate races of men, we must nevertheless admit, with Zaehner, that these beginnings of the human race were somewhat unpromising.<sup>33</sup>

### III. ETHICS

Zoroastrian morality has two basic thrusts: the maintenance of life and the struggle against evil. Because the eventual "luring out" of Ahriman depends on the progress and expansion of Ohrmazd's creation, this world should not be abandoned by man; in fact a man's first duty after professing the Zoroastrian faith is "to take a wife and to procreate earthly offspring and to be strenuous and steadfast in this." Such an emphasis on earthly prosperity is at the root of personal, social and political ethics.

#### Personal Ethics

Though man was created essentially good in both body and soul, he has inherited a false nature brought into the material world by Ahriman. Thus man must maintain a mastery over his desires in the way a knight controls his horse. Man must restrain his body

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<sup>31</sup> Quoted, Zaehner, *Ibid*, p. 267.

<sup>32</sup> Zaehner, *The Teachings of the Magi*, p. 68.

<sup>33</sup> Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight*, p. 268.

through his preference for goodness. That he is thus capable by his free will gives him lordship over creation and superiority over Ahriman. Man becomes the "commander-in-chief" of the entire material creation even as his own soul presides over his body.

Dualism can lead to an ascetic denial of the flesh. However, classical Zoroastrianism sets its face against such an ethic of physical negation. The body, far from being an enemy of the soul, is its garment and instrument. Only Ahriman would try to upset the delicate balance between body and soul, disrupting its essential psychosomatic unity. Both the ascetic who believes that the physical as such is evil and the voluptuary who concentrates on a life of pleasure alone fall prey to deception. Iranian and Indian piety are poles apart on this matter; Zoroastrianism even resisted the very qualified mortification practiced by Christianity and Islam. Fasting, a custom observed by Jews, Christians and Muslims, is strenuously opposed. Such a practice weakens one in the struggle against evil.

For the Parsi, body and soul are so closely linked that an illness in the body denotes some sickness in the soul. Therefore, enjoyment "is the natural ambience of the body, for 'the body naturally wants material prosperity, gracious living, wit, display, music, and pleasure.'"<sup>2</sup> "That man is consistently good who always enjoys himself. . . . That man is consistently evil (who is always) miserable."<sup>3</sup> Such exhortation from the later texts of the Zoroastrianism that re-emerged during the Sassanid period in Iran (226-652 A.D.) is the logical outcome of not only the Prophet's own teaching, but also a healthy reaction against the bizarre practices of both the Manichaens and Christians, who were vying against each other in their anti-materialism. Amidst this, the Mazdeans seemed to tread the path of the golden mean, taking Aristotle's motto as their own. They became neither this-worldly nor otherworldly; they strived, in Zaehner's terminology, to be "both-worldly."

Besides following the path of moderation, one must take an

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Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight*, p. 277.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted from the *Denkart* 266:1 ff., /bid, pp. 276-277.

active role to assure his entry into heaven. Liberality is the first good work. Industry, honesty, gratitude and contentment should also follow. The good man manufactures no discord with anyone, advances his own happiness and secures it for others. In addition, of course, the virtuous man carries out his religious duties, ascribing every benefit to Ahura-Mazda and all misery to Ahriman, as the one sure way to salvation is to recognize God as absolutely good and the Devil as absolutely evil. Just as the Torah and the Quran provide salvation to the Jews and Muslims respectively, and just as Christ offers salvation to Christians, so does such "Right Knowledge" become the source of all good, in this world and the hereafter.

What then are the religious duties for Zoroastrians? At an early age (varying from seven in India to ten in Iran), the Parsi is initiated into the faith at which time he receives a sacred thread (*kusti*) and a sacred shirt (*sadre*). The shirt, which should be white, represents purity and renewal. The *kusti* is the obligatory emblem of every Parsi: the Mazdean religion is said to be brought to the people as a girdle, or *kusti*. It signifies obedience ("girding up the loins," in the Bible) and denotes a division of the body into the noble part (above) and the ignoble (below). Further, its threads (72) represent the 72 chapters of the Yasna, which when knitted together symbolize a universal brotherhood.

Among the most important of the other religious ceremonies are the *baresnum* and the *Yasna*. The former ritual is usually performed by a priest as a purification before he can perform other sacred duties. It is done for the benefit of the person who pays the priest or for whom he is paid. The candidate to be purified must undergo, among other things, a thorough rubbing with sand, water and *gomez*. Gomez is bull's urine; it was thought to possess power to overcome death, a notion derived from the assumption that the bull's sperm was contained in the urine.

The major ceremony is the *Yasna*, or sacrifice. In this ritual are involved two central symbols of Zoroastrianism—the sacred liquor (*haoma*) is offered to the sacred fire. This life-giving rite is never performed in front of a crowd nor in the company of the

unbeliever. The sacred fire, the distinguishing mark of a Parsi temple, has varying legends of its origins and significance: among the semi-savage tribes it was thought to ward off evil spirits; among Eastern Christians stories were told of the infant Jesus giving the Magi a stone, which they later wearied of carrying, and left in a pit—only to turn and see a divine flame rising from it. At any rate, through the fire, the priest invokes Ohrmazd and other celestial beings. In the sacrificial offering of the *haotna*, we find an interesting similitude to the Roman Catholic Eucharist:

The haoma is not only a plant and a liquor, it is also a god. . . . Being a god, he is killed as he is pounded (with mortar and pestle). The Brahmanas tell the same thing of Soma: Tor Soma is a god and they kill him in that they press him'. . . . The sacrifice of Haoma is therefore that of a dying god offered to a god. If one recalls that, after the offering, the priest and the faithful swallow the victim and, by so doing, partake in the god's immortality, it will be recognized. . . that this conception strikingly resembles the Catholic mass.'

This ceremony is most often invoked for the deceased and is performed by one or more pairs of priests.

The fact that such a ceremony is so beneficial for one who has died relates to the next religious duty. The Parsi "for the love of the soul effects a next-of-kin marriage. " <sup>5</sup> This obligation, for E.W. West at least, is due to the fact that offspring were indispensable because of the rigid requirements of ceremonies such as the *Yasna* for departed members of the family. <sup>6</sup> Thus extraordinary measures to produce children were occasionally justified.

What such marriages originally involved is a matter of debate. According to Greek travellers and historians, Persians in the

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Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ibid.* p. 82.

<sup>5</sup> *Dina-i-Mainos-i-Khirad* 37:12.

<sup>6</sup> E.W. West, "The Meaning of Khvetuk-das or Khvetudad", *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. XVIII, pp. 389-430.

golden age of Darius (d. 486 B.C.) and Xerxes (d. 465 B.C.) believed that fathers should marry their daughters, mothers wed their sons, and brothers and sisters engage in conjugal relations. Modern Parsis indignantly deny that such practices were ever encouraged. Next-of-kin marriages imply, today's Parsis insist, the marital alliance of first cousins or more distant relatives, thus protecting a religious minority from alien influences.

### Ethics and Creation

When Zarathustra asked Ahura-Mazda how to advance the true religion, God replied, "Incessant cultivation of corn!" In the Vendidad we learn that demons cough when the grain begins to sprout, shed tears when the stalks appear and take flight when the ears fill out. The cultivation of grain advances true religion with a hundred feet, suckles it with a thousand breasts and gives it, so to speak, ten thousand offerings, says Ahura-Mazda, who perhaps summed it all up best: "Who so cultivates corn cultivates righteousness. —<sup>7</sup>

In agriculture as in every aspect of the Parsi faith the key to success is aggressive action rather than contemplation. Perhaps in this it is easiest to see the contrast between Indian and Persian religion. The ancient Iranian was noted for his action, exertion and practical view of life. The Indian, on the other hand, tended towards introspection and meditation. "The Hindu, with his pantheistic speculation, evolved the quietism of the Upanishads; the Persian, whose sacred books ring with the call of 'up and doing,' was summoned to fight the good fight in the mighty struggle between the warring powers of Good and of Evil. —<sup>8</sup>

The Parsi was created to be a worker, a doer. Thus, the superior man is seen in such terms: "Just as God exerts himself most in the performance of His task, so among man he who exerts himself most at his task by being what he is, shares in the attributes and activity of God and is closest to God on the scale of value. "—<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup> R. Masani, *The Religion of the Good Life*, pp. 124-125.

<sup>8</sup> Jackson, *Zoroastrian Studies*, p. 133.

<sup>9</sup> Quoted in Zaehner, *Ibid*, p. 283. From the *Denkart* ("Acts of the Religion"), a Pahlavi work of the ninth century A.D.

The semi-sacred character that agriculture takes on in Zoroastrianism—which is quite absent in the other prophetic faiths, and for that matter, all of the major living religions—is further enhanced by the homage of the faithful to the guardian spirit of the earth, who for all practical purposes is worshipped as a mother goddess. To live close to the earth and to stay in tune with its seasonal rhythms is for the Parsi to keep in touch with natural holiness. But, as we shall see, this respect for nature goes further than simply recognizing the benefits of farming.

In the *Bundahis* extensive concern is also shown to various species of mammals and birds. In addition, the *Sad Dar*, an ancient manual of religious and secular ethics, contains some rather uncommon instructions regarding plant and animal life. For instance, if a man plants a fruit tree or berry bush he will benefit from every good deed done by those who later eat from it.<sup>10</sup> Also, every time a person eats he should save at least four morsels for his dog, and never should the animal be beaten." Nor should a rooster be killed simply because it crows at an unseasonable hour, as it is really warning the owner of an approaching demon.<sup>12</sup> Similarly, if one slaughters an animal needlessly, every one of its hairs will become a sword piercing his soul in the next world.<sup>13</sup> To kill a beaver will send a man to hell and cause an end to his family."

Then there is the special veneration of the white bull, which may shed some light on the *Yasna* ceremony. Dr. Marcus Bach explains on the basis of first-hand knowledge the prominent place it holds in present-day Parsi religion:

One of my secret ambitions had always been to get inside a Zoroastrian temple. . . . I had heard that a white bull was kept within the temple court and that the Zoroastrians worshipped him.

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<sup>10</sup> *Sad Dar* 19:2 (Sacred Books of the East, vol. XXIV.)

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid*, 31:1-2.

<sup>12</sup> *Sad Dar* 32:1-5.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid*, 34:1-3.

*Ibid*, 86:1-2.

What about the temple bull?, I asked my Parsi friend. . . . Escorting us to a balustrade, he invited us to look down into a grassy court some thirty feet square. Here, tethered to a stake, was a huge white bull. My friend anticipated my question. It would not be right to say we worship him, he said. He is a symbol. Of what?

Of God's creative and procreative power in the universe. . . . The urine of the bull is sacred. Blessed by priests in a special ceremony, it actually undergoes a chemical change, I was told. Drops of it are used for special religious ceremonies."

Ahura-Mazda created most living creatures; some, however, were produced by Ahriman. Here again the fight-ethic predominates, as in the domain of personal morality. To kill creatures thought to be created by Ahriman (frogs, snakes, scorpions, ants, mice, gnats and leeches) is a "great good work." And Parsis were deadly earnest about this holy war: in the *Sad Dar*, the killing of a mouse is as beneficial as destroying four lions; to eradicate a corn-dragging ant is equal to reciting holy scripture; swatting a flying ant is as pleasing to Ahura-Mazda as saying prayers for ten days; and to rid the world of a snake is as salutary as killing an apostate who has abandoned Zoroastrianism in favor of Christianity or Islam."

### **Social and Political Ethics**

Because man is "commander-in-chief" of creation, or incarnate lord, so is "kingship itself sanctified along with the whole hierarchy of delegated monarchical authority."<sup>15</sup> "The headship of a household, or village-community, or province, or the Empire, is of the creative dispensation of the beneficent, omniscient, om-

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<sup>15</sup> M. Bach, *Major Religions of the World*, Abingdon Press. Nashville, 1959, pp. 33, 44.

<sup>16</sup> *Sad Dar* 43:1-9.

<sup>17</sup> Zaehner, *Dawn and Twilight*, p. 272.

nipotent Lord, just as is (man's lordship) over his own body." <sup>18</sup>

Because Zoroastrians saw the interlocking relationships of man and society, it is no surprise that the basic unit, the family, was considered of great importance. The kings commended large families for their virtuosity, and rewarded them for being bulwarks to the throne. The family was also to retain its role after the world becomes restored to Ahura-Mazda: "At the end the resurrection of man will take place, which will efface all distinction between good and evil through the latter's annihilation, and will set up an existence in human form, in family groups, exempt from all sin and a source of eternal bliss." <sup>19</sup>

The position of women in Parsi society was the same as in India and other Oriental nations. Submission to her "lord and master" is taken for granted and the woman who is "obedient" is especially praised. Although in ancient times polygamy and concubinage found their way into the Zoroastrian faith, among today's Parsis strict monogamy is practiced and infidelity or prostitution are virtually unheard of.

From the beginning the Zoroastrian ethic was devoted to a new social order and a reconstructed world. It is no surprise then that the founder of the Sassanian dynasty should be quoted as saying: "Religion and kingship are two brothers, and neither can dispense with the other. Religion is the foundation of kingship, and kingship protects religion. For whatever lacks a foundation must perish, and whatever lacks a protector disappears." <sup>20</sup>

It appears that the degree to which the Mazdean rulers considered themselves divine differed during the two major Persian empires. In the earlier Achaemenid reigns the monarchs appear to have regarded themselves less than gods, though they did impose a great deal of respect on their subjects. Cyrus and Darius regarded themselves solely as proteges of Ahura-Mazda. Sumerians, Babylonians, Assyrians and Chaldeans took the belief in the sacred king for granted: the wise and secure rule of the earthly monarch

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<sup>18</sup> Quoted, Mid, p. 272.

<sup>19</sup> Quoted, Duchesne-Guillemin, Ibid, p. 5.

<sup>20</sup> Zaehner, Ibid, a quotation from Mas'udi, Muruj, H, p. 162.

visibly manifested cosmic orderliness.

However, the later Sassanid kings, in reviving the Zoroastrian ethic, added an extra theological dimension. They became completely divine, gods in themselves. The divine right of kings became the rule of divine kings. "Both in Greek and in Pahlavi they called themselves gods, of divine descent. <sup>-2</sup> ' One called himself *theos* (god); another, *theopator* (divine father); a third, "almighty god." All imitated the mythical gods in their attire, especially in their crowns, which were believed to hold quasi-magical powers.

In Pahlavi texts of that period, the ethical stratification of society was clearly laid out. "Ahura-Mazda created the Good Religion in the form of a mighty tree with one trunk, two great boughs, three large branches, four smaller ones growing out of these, and five roots. The single trunk is the golden ethical mean between two extremes. The two great boughs signify the importance of acting rightly and abstaining from wrong. The three branches represent thinking good thoughts, speaking good words and doing good deeds. In the four off-branches are seen the indispensable classes of society: the priests, warriors, farmers and artisans. And the whole tree is grounded and secured by five roots, namely, the individual householder, village chief, tribal leader, provincial governor and Zoroastrian supreme pontiff. Apart from these and above them stood the reigning monarch—named the King of kings." <sup>22</sup>

Although Zarathustra had been severely critical of the great mythical king Yim who was said to have founded Persian civilization, his successors in the Sassanid period used Yim as the model for an ideal monarch. His was the golden age in which for a thousand years men lived in prosperity and peace: before him kings had fallen prey to concupiscence and error. In his reign Yim practiced the mean between excess and insufficiency, banished licentiousness and established a society built upon wisdom. For a

<sup>21</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ibid.*, p. 118.

<sup>22</sup> Zaehner, *Ibid.* pp. 284-285.

whole millennium the will of Ahura-Mazda had been embodied. Subsequent history witnessed a tragic fall from Yim's perfect world order, but Zoroaster came to initiate its return and universal realization.

Zoroastrians spared no effort in venerating good kings: "The King is the centre on which his subjects converge; and it is therefore essential that he should be happy. For, just as it is the first duty of man to love himself so that he may extend his self-love to others, so is it not so much the duty as the very nature of a king to be happy; and the royal felicity cannot fail to extend in ever-widening ripples to his subjects. Thus, 'the principal characteristic of kings is pleasure. . . pleasure is consonant with kingship provided it is rooted in greatness. Pleasure rooted in greatness does . not pass away.' This is typical of the whole Zoroastrian ethos; the King is the centre of the universe, and the goal of the universe is happiness."<sup>23</sup> Good kings remained embedded in the Zoroastrian memory long after their departure from this world—" just as Christianity has its communion of saints, Zoroastrianism has its communion of kings."<sup>24</sup>

However, the Sassanids failed to realize the danger implicit in identifying their faith too closely with an earthly monarch. And all too soon, Zoroastrianism found that excessive dependence upon the Sassanian emperors could be fatal. Since the Persian faith and the imperial hierarchy were treated as two aspects of a single indivisible reality, a political defeat entailed a religious disaster. When the Sassanian monarchy was toppled, the Parsi state religion was badly crippled. By relying on Caesar, Ahura-Mazda almost suffered the fate of Caesar. To follow the prophet Zarathustra in the eyes of the Muslim conquerors was not only a theological error, but also a quasi-political crime. Hence, until Parsi refugees fled in considerable numbers to India and reconstituted themselves as a religious community in exile, Zoroastrianism appeared to be doomed to extinction.

The fact that the Good Religion was seen as the religion best

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<sup>23</sup> Zaehner, *Ibid.*, p. 299.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.* p. 301.

equipped to bring about creative evolution in society, often resulted with non-Iranian religions suffering under Zoroastrian rule. Zarathustra himself preached holy war and enjoined the faithful to treat the wicked badly (justly). "Under the Sassanids, from the time of Karter onwards, Manichaens, Christians, and Buddhists etc. were persecuted."<sup>25</sup> Zarathustra was adamant in urging "that the forces of Lie should be combated by arms."<sup>26</sup> However, under Muslim rule, Zoroastrianism lost its aggressive stance.

Despite their high code of ethics the Parsi faith of today, like the other orthodox prophetic religions, often is cursed with a negative spirit of legalism and ritualism. Classic explications of Zoroastrian ethics, for example, include commandments to bury one's nail parings, to avoid throwing out water after dark, to refuse a drink from an earthenware cup used by an unbeliever, or to require that the dead be placed on top of a tower to be eaten by vultures. However, in taking an overall view, those who have studied Parsi morality from ancient times til the present, conclude, with Jackson, that "If we take the Zoroastrian religion in its entirety and view it in the light of the early period to which it belongs, we shall come to the conviction that outside of the Jewish and Christian scriptures it would be hard to find a higher standard of morality, a nobler code of ethics, than that embodied in the teachings of the great prophet of Ancient Iran."<sup>27</sup>

#### IV. ZOROASTRIAN ESCHATOLOGY

##### Eschatology and the Afterlife

While apocalypticism and eschatological expectancy as such play a negligible role in modern Parsi thought, there is hope yet that sometime, probably in the distant future, Ahura-Mazda will restore the universe according to His plan. Historically, however, the features of the end times were quite vivid in the Zoroastrian mind.

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<sup>25</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ibid*, p. 148.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid*, p. 148.

<sup>27</sup> Jackson, *Zoroastrian Studies*, p. 141.

Jackson writes: "Among the nations of antiquity there seems to have been none that had a more clearly developed system of eschatology, a firmer conviction of the immortality of the soul, and a surer belief in a resurrection and a future life, than had the ancient Iranians so far as we can judge from their sacred literature."

In the *Gathas*, Zarathustra expresses his unshakable faith that Ahura-Mazda will emerge victorious in His millenia-long battle with Ahriman. He is certain that in the hereafter the good will be rewarded and the wicked punished. Further, at the end of history when the good God reasserts His rightful sovereignty over His creation, the world will be restored to perfection; the dead shall arise to enjoy immortal life; and happiness will become the franchise of all mankind.

In his preaching and poetry the prophet gives utterance to an essentially eschatological hope. He is much more than a religious reformer. Nor can he be fully portrayed as an ethical teacher proclaiming the need for higher morality. Beyond his abhorrence of nature worship and animal sacrifice, Zarathustra is the herald of a new age-to-come. A mighty crisis is impending; each of us should feel challenged to choose the side of righteousness. "The Good Kingdom," as the Parsis call it, is within reach. If enough people flock to God's standard, He can defeat Satan and establish the dominion of good over evil. Further, ahead of mankind awaits the inevitable judgment in which those who are righteous will be cleansed and the wicked tortured. According to this, Zoroaster resembles John the Baptist. He like John proclaimed the approaching Kingdom of the judging and redeeming God. <sup>2</sup> A few scholars think that Zarathustra expected such a cataclysmic Day of the Lord in his own time. If so, later editors of the *Gathas* have carefully removed almost all traces of such an imminent apocalyptic reckoning.

Nevertheless, we can be sure of the general beliefs which together constitute Zoroastrian eschatology: a coming age of perfection, the appearance of the Saoshyans (Savior), the resurrection

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<sup>2</sup> A.V. Williams Jackson, *Ibid*, p. 143.  
Jackson, *Ibid*, pp. 111-115.

of the dead, the punishment of the wicked and cleansing of the righteous in a flood of molten metal, the purification of hell, and the regeneration of the entire universe when Ahura-Mazda restores His sovereignty. The role of man in this cosmic drama is indicated in the *Zend-Avesta* prayer: "And may we be those who shall make this world perfected."

The Zoroastrians do not believe any men are condemned to an eternal torment in hell. Sinners are punished but the sentence is only temporary. No *good* God could tolerate an eternal hell, for such a place would be in violation of His benevolence as well as His justice. He makes Ahriman eternally powerless and evil disappears. Ahriman himself is not destroyed but disintegrates into unconscious, inoperative atoms which have lost their destructive power.<sup>3</sup>

Since Zarathustra was a millenarian prophet, some or most of Parsi eschatology is derived from his preaching and some from that of his immediate followers. Because "the Good Kingdom" did not come as soon as the prophet hoped, Zoroastrianism turned its attention to the fate of the individual after death, much as Christianity began to stress the personal pilgrimage from earth to heaven when the apocalyptic hope faded and churchmen doubted that the Kingdom of God would be realized. During the four centuries of the Sassanian empire, Zoroastrians may have felt their state-supported faith was a foretaste of Ahura-Mazda's universal Kingdom-to-come. By the time the Muslim armies had overrun Persia and outlawed Zoroastrianism, the coming Kingdom must have seemed very distant indeed. Scholars have conjectured that in such an age the original Zoroastrian theory of history was reinterpreted. If so, Parsis possibly saw man to be still living in the millennial epoch of battle between Ahura-Mazda and Ahriman, as opposed to the final era in which Ahriman is rendered powerless.

In regards to physical death, because Parsis are so conscientious about not defiling themselves or polluting the "good earth," serious problems arise. Zoroaster himself denounced both ordi-

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<sup>3</sup> Zaehner, *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, p. 315.

nary customs of eliminating the corpse. Burial pollutes the earth; burning it defiles the sacred fire. To solve these difficulties, Parsis built towers on top of which the bodies of the dead would be placed until the bones were picked clean by vultures. When the scavengers had accomplished their work, the bare bones would be dropped into pits where they gradually turn to dust. Such "towers of silence" are still used by the Parsis in and around Bombay, and distinguish them from any other faith.

As for the journey of the soul, Zoroastrians believe that three days must pass between the physical death of a person and his ultimate fate.<sup>4</sup> A righteous soul will be welcomed to heaven. This paradise is called "the abode of song," probably because the prophet was a poet and balladeer. Wicked men on the other hand, especially demon-worshippers, are consigned to languish for a time in hell. For those who are not intolerably evil nor patently good, there is an in-between, limbo-like destination where they remain until the day of final restoration.

What takes place in the three day period immediately after death is a subject of considerable discussion in Parsi sacred literature. We read that the righteous soul sings hymns of praise to Ahura-Mazda while the wicked bewail their fate and try to get back into their bodies. Every person is either attacked by lurking demons or protected by guardian spirits. Prayers on behalf of the deceased seem to be especially useful to ward off attacks by evil spirits; on the whole, however, Zoroastrianism insists that one's earthly deeds and only these determine his future destination.

On the fourth day, the moment of truth dawns: the soul meets its conscience. If he is good, he sees a beautiful young maiden; if not she is quite the opposite. Islam appears to have adopted this conception that the departed soul meets the personification of its actions, though the woman of the Parsis becomes male in Muhammad's faith.<sup>5</sup> The "houris" that await the faithful follower of Muhammad also are found in the ancient Iranian faith.

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Jal Dastur Curseji Pavry, *The Zoroastrian Doctrine of A Future Life*, AMS Press, N.Y., 1965.

<sup>3</sup> Vide pp. 167-170, "Apocalyptic Preacher."

What will happen to mankind following Zoroaster's death is recorded in the *Bahman Yast*, in the form of a vision Ahura-Mazda gives Zoroaster. The pessimistic picture of history in continuous and rapid decline that Zarathustra received is peculiar to apocalyptic thinking, Jewish, Christian or Parsi. God's inauguration of His age of righteousness, peace and piety is not due to man's gradual progression to ever-higher levels of material achievement or spiritual insight. Far from it. Man is rather sliding so rapidly to the bottom of the pit that God will have to act in a decisive, astonishing manner to keep the human race from final doom.

### **The Apocalyptic Vision**

Like all apocalyptic faiths, Zoroastrianism had seers who claimed to have received revelations about the whole future of mankind. Much in the same fashion as the Jewish visionaries and the Christian prophets, Pahlavi mystics were granted a preview of forthcoming events and received from Ahura-Mazda detailed knowledge of the eschatological time-table. In fact, in the *Bahman Yast* one finds a type of religious literature comparable to the Old Testament book of *Daniel* or the New Testament *Apocalypse* of John of Patmos.

Apocalyptic is said to be the child of an age of widespread disillusionment and despair. Zoroastrianism, as we have seen, had its age of troubles. After the conversion of Vishtaspa and the brilliant era of the Persian empire of Cyrus, Darius and Xerxes, Alexander the Great and his idol-worshipping Greeks ravaged the Middle East. Then again, following the four-hundred year Sassanian empire which restored Zoroastrianism to its former niche as the state faith came the onslaughts of the Muslims. Both of these invasions furnished fertile soil for apocalyptic thinking. When conditions are so unfavorable and Ahriman seems to be *in* such complete control of the world, surely Ahura-Mazda would initiate a counter-offensive and reassert His rightful sovereignty!

Quite naturally, the age before the final Rehabilitation is marked by the presence of monstrous evils, and feels, to use a Jewish expression, the birth-pangs of the Messiah. Apocalyptic

writers are at their best in depicting the horrors of the last days prior to God's dramatic reversal of the course of history. Sons will no longer love their fathers. In seven out of ten cases the corn fields will yield a diminished crop. Children will be born stunted. Those from the lower classes will marry the daughters of the nobility. Affection for one's country will disappear. Deceit, rapacity and misgovernment will devastate all of Persia. <sup>6</sup>

Political mismanagement, social decay and natural disorder will be accompanied by religious decline. Out of five possible sins, priests and their disciples will commit three. Only one "in a hundred, in a thousand, in a myriad" will continue to believe in the Good Religion.' The fire temples, which once had a thousand attendants, will be reduced to a solitary caretaker. Among the believers, sectarianism and false opinions will flourish. Further, Iran will be conquered by little foreigners with dishevelled hair. But perhaps the worst of all, throughout the world men will be washing, clothing and burying the dead, thereby disregarding the rules laid down by Zarathustra.

Only when the world is in such complete disorder will a supernaturally conceived son of Zarathustra, Hushedar, be born. According to the Parsi millennial time-table, this event should have occurred between 593 and 635 A.D.", 1000 years since the time of V ishtaspa. The end of the Sassanian monarchy came at about that time. The millenium of Zoroaster was believed to be under the guidance of Capricorn. His savior son Hushedar would follow in Aquarius. The trouble with this Zoroastrian eschatological time-table is that so far as one can discover Hushedar did not make his advent.' Zoroastrianism had no renaissance following the terrors of the "last days." There was no revival of interest in the prophet's faith and no restoration of his cult as the state religion of Persia. Hushedar was supposed to prove his power as the long-expected Prophet by making the sun stand still for ten days and nights.

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<sup>6</sup> *Bahman Yast* 2:23-35.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*, 2:37.

<sup>8</sup> The time of Muhammad's rise.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. footnote by E.W. West, *Sacred Books of the East*, vol. V, pp. 219-220.

Neither secular history nor Parsi writers offer evidence that any such event took place. Vahram the Vargavand of Samarkand was supposed to aid Hushedar with an army which would drive out the demonic invaders and so utterly destroy the wicked that none would be left to pass into the coming millenium. He too is unknown in history. Instead, we have the Muslim conquest, the Mongol invasion and the coming of the Seljuk Turks, none of which was in the slightest way favorable to the Zoroastrian cause.

The next millenium, that of Zarathustra's second son Hushedar-mah, was to have begun about 1600 A.D., according to the prophecies in the *Bahman Yast*. Though prophetic information about this age is scanty, a couple of predictions are notable:

And afterward, when the millenium of Hushedar-mah comes, through Hushedar-mah the creatures become more progressive, and he utterly destroys the fiend of serpent origin (Az-i-Dahak) and Peshyotanu, son of Vishtaspa, becomes, in like manner, high priest and primate of the world. In that millenium of Hushedar-mah mankind becomes so versed in medicine, and keep and bring physic and remedies so much in use, that when they are confessedly at the point of death they do not thereupon die... .<sup>10</sup>

For the Parsi, the second thousand winters after Zoroaster will be characterized by material and social progress, amazing medical advances, the birth of a world religion supervised by a defender of the Periiian faith and the toleration of innumerable theological heresies. For the author of a book prepared so long ago (the final editor lived prior to the 13th century), to so aptly predict the main characteristics of modern times is a remarkable feat indeed.

According to the *Bahman Yast*, the religious tolerance of an era or its indifferentism gives encouragement to Ahriman. "Az-i-Dahak," the frightful monster of illegal government, who has

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<sup>10</sup> Bahman Yast 3:52-54.

been chained ever since his regime had been overthrown thousands of years before, is recalled in the last days to reinstitute his oppressive rule of mankind.

Parsi theology is attempting to recount a profound truth. In the last analysis, the final, most hideous foe of man is oppressive government. Just as the Christian *Apocalypse* identified the anti-Christ with the Roman State (which claimed to be divine), so did the Zoroastrian apocalypticist point out that the ultimate enemy of the human spirit is a revolutionary and insurrectionist power which turns out to be tyrannical. Furthermore, warns the *Bahman Yast*, such a demonic force will be let loose on the world at a time of material and intellectual progress, scientific advance and all sorts of religious novelties.

For the unknown author of the *Bahman Yast*, the unlawful government that destroys a third of mankind is the inevitable prelude to Ahura-Mazda's final triumph. It is at this point that one of the most debatable points of prophetic theology, and also one of the most enduring, comes into play.

In Christianity today, this doctrine—the literal resurrection of the dead—is one of the most difficult for the modern scientific mind to accept. It seems, if we are to believe the account of Zatspram, a ninth century Zoroastrian priest, that this doctrine also proved difficult for Zarathustra to accept:

Zoroaster asked Ohrmazd: 'Shall bodily creatures that have passed away on earth receive their bodies back at the final Rehabilitation, or will they be like unto shades?'

Ohrmazd (said): 'They will receive their bodies back and will rise again.'

And Zoroaster asked: 'He who has passed away is torn apart by dog and bird and carried off by wolf and vulture: how will (their parts) come together again?'

Ohrmazd said: 'If thou who art Zoroaster hadst to make a wooden casket, would it be easier to make it if thou hadst no wood and yet hadst to cut and fit it, or if thou

hadst a casket and its parts were sundered one from the other and thou hadst to fit it together again?'

Zoroaster said: 'If I had a branch of wood, it would be easier than if I had no wood; and if I had a casket (and its parts were sundered the one from the other), it would be easier (to fit it together again than if I had no wood and yet had to fashion and fit it).'

Ohrmazd said: 'When those creations were not, I had power to fashion them; and now that they have been and are scattered abroad, it is easier to fit them together again. . . .''

Presiding over this phenomena will be the third and last supernaturally conceived son of Zarathustra, the Saoshyans, who will arrive as King and Savior. First, he will raise the bones of Gayomart, mankind's first ancestor, then Mashye and Mashyane, mankind's first parents, and finally all men, both those who are saved and those who are damned.

Concerning the state of the restored universe details are comparatively sparse in Pahlavi religious literature. From most accounts the new world appears very materialistic, though "words. . . are once again inadequate to the reality, for 'the joys of the final body. . . are such as cannot be known by the finite intellect and reason of man, nor can they be spoken of.'"<sup>12</sup> It is known, however, that a man will be reunited with his wife or wives, having "his pleasure of them though no children will be born."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps the eminent Zoroastrian theologian Manuschihr provides us with the most lucid contrast between the evils we have suffered and their absence in the age-to-come. In *Dadistan-i-Dinik* (Religious Opinions) this late 9th century Parsi high priest outlines the Zoroastrian affirmation which remains for many believers today a very vivid option:

After the renovation of the universe there is no demon, because there is no deceit; and no fiend, because there is

<sup>11</sup> Quoted in Zaehner, *!bid*, p. 317.

<sup>12</sup> Zaehner, *'bid*, p. 319.

*/bid*, p. 320.

no falsity; there is no evil spirit, because there is no destruction; there is no hell because there is no wickedness; there is no strife, because there is no anger. . . on the disappearance of evil, every good is perfected, and in the time of complete goodness it is not possible to occasion any pain or distress whatever, by any means, to any creatures."

## V. THE MEANING OF HISTORY

In his lectures at the University of Liverpool, published under the title *History, Time and Deity*, Professor S.G.F. Brandon compares Judaism and Zoroastrianism as two religions which agree that the course of human events seen through the eyes of the believer "is the revelation of divine purpose." <sup>14</sup> For followers of Moses, Zarathustra and Jesus, history is fraught with positive teleological import. Whereas for Vedanta Hinduism, Plato and Neo-platonism, man finds eternity above and outside of the temporal dimension, Zoroastrians confront the enigma of time and claim to disclose its meaning.

However, for a variety of reasons, the Parsi faith has not developed its philosophy of history in an extended form comparable to Augustine's *City of God*, for example. And beyond that, one confronts in Parsi writings two exceedingly complicated problems: the function of myth and the meaning of "holy history." Myth in this context refers on the one hand to tales about the gods which are purely fictitious; that is, meaningless and incredulous for modern man. The orthodox Zoroastrian story that the first man and woman grew out of a rhubarb plant is a mythical account in this pejorative sense. On the other hand, myth may also refer to an interpretation of nature and human destiny so profound that it can only be revealed in powerful poetic imagery. For all of the world religions that type of myth seems to play a crucial role. Sublime use of

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<sup>14</sup> *Dadistan-i-Dinik* 37:120-122.

<sup>15</sup> S.G.F. Brandon, *History; Time and Deity*, Barnes and Noble, 1965, pp. 140-147.

temporal language is employed to suggest transtemporal meaning. Certain levels of meaning and deep layers of reality can only be touched in an indirect and highly symbolic fashion. C.G. Jung has particularly emphasized this aspect of the psyche and its grasp of reality.

In the Parsi creation story we find such a myth. The biologists can tell us with reasonable certainty that there was never a three thousand year epoch in which life on earth was restricted to a single man (Gayomart) and a gigantic ox. Are we then dealing with a primitive cosmology which is hopelessly obsolete?

The very fact that the *Bundahis* makes explicit reference to the signs of the zodiac suggests that we are confronted with a mystical cosmology rather than a scientific one. Then is there a deep truth that Parsi myth has penetrated? Gayomart and the ox seem to symbolize the ultimate significance of manhood and physical creativity: in the last analysis—the myth seems to emphasize—nothing is quite so important in creation as the vitality which man shares with other living creatures. Man and beast exist in a symbiotic relationship. Though they are dissimilar—one representing the distinctly human (and thus God-like) condition, one signifying the purely vital, procreative force—they mutually benefit from each other, and fulfill a fundamental bipolarity.

In terms of "holy history," students of Parsi thought express surprise that there is no religious glorification of the great Persian emperors like Darius, Cyrus, Xerxes and Artaxerxes. Aside from making Alexander the Great into an agent of Ahriman, Zoroastrians seem to take little interest in the dispensational significance of specific political happenings. Whereas Israelite prophets and annalists judged the reign of each monarch from a doctrinal perspective, Parsi theologians—though adhering to the monarchy in general—left specific applications of their philosophy of history to the discretion of individual believers. It is conceivable that they had sufficient acquaintance with the ambiguities and relativities of politics to avoid simplistic judgments about the *modus operandi* of God or Satan in national affairs. Whatever their motivation, from all the evidence, Zoroastrian theology is marked by its realistic

assessment of human events. It avoids the pitfalls of both exorbitant optimism and extreme gloom. By stressing the element of struggle at the heart of history, it fosters the assiduous practice of virtue. By accentuating the magnitude of man's free will, it never succumbs to fatalism.

A theology of history is based on the thesis that God (or Satan) is known by His acts. Then, positive valuation is placed upon the passage of time. Time in itself is thought to possess revelatory meaning. In opposition to those faiths which advocate an escape from the realm of time, Zoroastrianism affirms its importance. Not in a super-terrestrial world, but here, now, God and man labor to subjugate evil.

In the Gayomart and ox myth one can see how time is conceived for classic Parsi thought. Although the myth transcends the limitations of time in any ordinary sense, the story is securely placed in a temporal frame. This mixture of time and eternal significance, however, can easily lead to misunderstanding. Gayomart and the ox did not exist at some earlier period in history but are ideal models by which one can comprehend all history. They are not creatures of clock-time but represent archetypal realities by which one can judge human existence at any period. They point to the temporal sphere and have no import apart from it; yet they are not immersed in time or subject to it. That is, Gayomart and the ox cannot be interpreted as past realities because they possess an eternal validity. Zoroastrianism, like Judaism and Christianity, tries valiantly to insist on the metaphysical significance of time with a very inadequate language by which to distinguish between existential time and calendar time."

In considering the meaning of history for the Parsi, perhaps of greatest moment is the grand finale that his theology postulates.

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<sup>16</sup> Chronological and existential time can however be easily distinguished. Chronological time is the product of an exercise in technical reason based on solar or lunar changes of observable regularity and is employed for convenience in ordinary measurement. Existential time involves moments of great personal significance—a birthday, puberty, parenthood, conversion, for example. Paul Tillich uses the two Greek words—*kronos* and *kairos*—to differentiate between simple duration and moments alive with meaning for an individual or a civilization.

Here, the positive aspect of the apocalyptic hope is highlighted. The triumph of Ahura-Mazda is not a doomsday. God's victory implies a cleansing, it is true; but for all mankind without exception the final destiny will be a happy one. As the *Dadistan-il-Dinik* clearly states. . . "the good creator granting forgiveness and full of goodness would not abandon any creature to the fiend." <sup>17</sup>

Zoroastrian philosophy of history attempts to synthesize two very different beliefs which would ordinarily be considered antithetical. First, the Parsi theologian asserts that God reveals Himself and manifests His purpose inside history. That is, the human record of achievement in some real and demonstrable sense represents the movement of God. History contains a vertical as well as horizontal dimension.

Nevertheless, a second conviction is expressed with equal enthusiasm. For Ahura-Mazda to triumph, history must have an end-time. God wins only as the temporal process we now experience concludes. The meaning of history can only be clarified in a realm beyond it. When the hardworking Ahura-Mazda takes His rest, time ceases. In a very important sense, history, though meaningful, is not in itself a redemptive process, because it must be transcended or at least transformed in the most dramatic fashion. Complete sovereignty for Ahura-Mazda can be exercised only through the creation of a new heaven and new earth. It would hence seem as though Zoroastrianism lives by a temporary this-worldliness in preparation for an ultimate other-worldliness. Time looks to be of merely provisional validity.

One cannot overlook the sharp line of demarcation between this world and the world-to-come. In the Parsi view—though certain features bear resemblance—there is at best only an analogical similitude between our age and the Kingdom. A river of liquid metal separates them. Man will no longer have a shadow, eating will not be of any interest to men, etc.

In this respect, within the very structure of Zoroastrian theology have been planted seeds which could cause its dissolution.

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<sup>17</sup> Sacred Books of the East, vol. XVIII, chap. 75:3.

Many found the tension between this-worldliness and other-worldliness too great to bear. At least in some forms of Sassanian Zoroastrianism the religious ethic was reduced to conventional respectability. Since God lives and works in history, man simply adjusted to the present situation and made his peace with the world. On the other side, the opposite tendency in the course of Zoroastrian religious development has been no less evident. Mithraism—exceedingly popular in the Roman empire—concentrated on the thirst for immortality. Like some types of Christianity at the same time, it was primarily interested in a felicitous after-life. Manichaeism, the later offshoot, became avowedly anti-worldly and preached a gospel of the most rigid asceticism. Since the world-to-come was alone of worth, this life was denied in every way possible.

Those who accept the basic validity of an apocalyptic interpretation of history can learn from the experience of Zoroastrianism what pitfalls to avoid. Zoroaster himself would have insisted that an eschatological hope means an appreciation for the values of this world, in opposition to his otherworldly successors. He would likewise insist that such a hope would involve a new social order and not merely a personal quest for immortality.

How he would view the Parsis in India today is another matter. Certainly their status is in no wise secure. Since the independence of India in 1947, Parsis have been diminished by a regime which "tending towards a form of socialism or state capitalism, attacks the private fortunes. Since nothing can henceforward subsist without state help, the Parsee schools, for instance, will have to open their doors to non-Parsees—or perish. What will presently be left of their beliefs and customs, of the very consciousness that they form a group, and of their will to maintain it? It is conceivable that the Parsee community may vanish into the melting pot of the new India. The smallest of the great religions would then cease to exist.""

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<sup>18</sup> Duchesne-Guillemin, *Ibid*, p. 14.

## The Zoroastrian Heritage

Some scholars, like George Foot Moore of Harvard, lay great stress on the geography and climate of Iran which were peculiarly potent in molding the Zoroastrian religion. The climatic environment and the conditions for earning one's livelihood greatly helped the Persian to be energetic, courageous, resourceful and watchful. Therefore it was almost inevitable for the Iranian genius to focus upon practical matters.

Hard reasonableness marks its thinking  
adaptability distinguishes its action."

Because men had to wring a meagre living from an unkindly nature, cursed with violent extremes of heat and cold, they recognized the value of an industrious spirit. Since Persians also had to defend themselves from marauding desert nomads and predatory mountain tribesmen, life was interpreted as an unceasing battle with hostile powers, both visible and invisible. To stay alive a man had to combat evil and do all he could to overcome it. Through faith in Ahura-Mazda, the Parsi was saved from frustration and despair. With the guidance and leadership of sacred powers, he became assured that good is mightier than evil and will ultimately prevail. Such a faith provided the qualities needed to seize control of the Middle East and govern it effectively. To a large degree, Zoroastrianism inherited from the older folk religion a strenuous and militant ethic, refined it, and spread it from the borders of India to the beaches of Asia Minor.

Yet Persian military might and imperial splendor had their day and vanished. The lasting significance of Zoroastrianism must be found elsewhere. Aside from the stalwart little band who still revere the Prophet Zarathustra and observe the ancient rites of the Good Religion, Zoroastrianism is of permanent value because of its ideological impact on exilic Judaism and later Christianity. It planted seeds which sprouted, grew, blossomed and produced fruit

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<sup>19</sup> G.F. Moore, *History of Religions*, Scribner's, N.Y., 1920, vol. 1, p. 358.

in the synagogue and church for many centuries.

An eschatological world view and an apocalyptic hope are Zarathustra's major contributions to mankind's dawning world religion. In the opinion of many scholars, from the Zoroastrian religion the Jews in Babylonian captivity learned about the malice of Satan, the host of angelic servants of God, the cosmic battle between good and evil, the resurrection of the dead, the reality of hell and the kingdom of God to be established on earth through the mission of the Messiah. All of the essential doctrines Judaism transmitted to Christianity in regard to the Messianic hope came to the people of Israel from the Zoroastrians. Cyrus the Great allowed the Hebrews to return to their homes; but his nation bestowed upon them so much more—the gifts of an apocalyptic philosophy of life and a mood of eschatological expectancy. Nor should the vertical direction in history be overlooked. A very limited view would restrict the infusion of Zoroastrian apocalypticism into Judaism as simply an historical fact without providential significance. Yet the theist affirms God's impact on human events and attempts to understand them in that light. Who is to say that God could not instruct exilic Jews through the Zoroastrians (who were monotheists themselves) even as He instructed them through their own prophets? Can not the Creator of this vast and intricate universe foresee circumstances that would lead two peoples together and use them for enriching man's spiritual knowledge?

However much the Zoroastrians may have erred in their timing of the apocalyptic age, surely civilization has benefitted spiritually from the Messianism of Israel and Christianity which was inherited from the Parsees. And the fact remains that the basic elements of the hope for a new age revealed 25 centuries ago to the Persian prophet by the God who is beyond time, and whose truth is eternal, are very much alive in the consciousness of men of religion today.

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