Reconsidering the Concept of *Revolutionary Monotheism*

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Zarathustra:
A Revolutionary Monotheist?

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Introduction

The debate whether Zoroastrianism is to be classified as monotheistic, dualistic, or polytheistic has at times been fierce in the field of Old Iranian studies but not unique, as this conference has demonstrated.[1]

Zoroastrianism originated among the Iranians in Central Asia in the second millennium B.C.E., before some of the tribes migrated onto the Iranian Plateau around 1,000 B.C.E. and later founded the Median (ca. 700–558 B.C.E.) and Achaemenid (558–330 B.C.E.) empires. It was the religion of the Achaemenid kings and, later, of the Parthian (ca. 247/38 B.C.E.–224 C.E.) and Sasanian (224–651) kings until the Arab conquest in 651 C.E. After some three hundred years under Arab rule, a group of Iranian Zoroastrians migrated to India, where they settled on the west coast and became known as the Parsis (Parsees).

The religion is referred to as Zoroastrianism, from Zoroaster, the Greek name for Zarathustra (Zarathushtra, etc.), or Mazdaism

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1. From the substantial secondary literature, see, e.g., C. Herrenschmidt, "Once upon a Time Zarathustra," *History and Anthropology* 3 (1987) 209–37; J. Kellens, *La quatrième naissance de Zarathushtra* (Paris: Seuil, 2006); and M. Stausberg, "Monotheismus, Polytheismus und Dualismus im Alten Iran," in *Polytheismus und Monotheismus in den Religionen des Vorderen Orients* (ed. M. Krebernik and J. van Oorschot; Munster: Ugarit-Verlag, 2002) 91–111; P. G. Kreyenbroek, "Theological Questions in an Oral Tradition: The Case of Zoroastrianism," in *Götterbilder, Gottesbilder, Weltbilder: Polytheismus und Monotheismus in der Welt der Antike* (ed. R. Kratz and H. Spieckermann; Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck, 2006) 199–222. Translations of many of the texts referred to here can be found in W. W. Malandra's *Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983). Note that the transcription of Iranian words has been simplified throughout this essay.

(Mazdayasnianism), from the Avestan term *mazda-yasna* 'someone who sacrifices to Ahura Mazdā'. Much later, the Sasanian Zoroastrian priests referred to themselves by the latter term (*mazdēsn*) and to their tradition as *dēn māzdēsn* or *dēn ī mazdēsnān* 'the *dēn* of the Mazdayasnians' (see below on the terminology).

In Western scholarship, claims made for Zoroastrian monotheism or dualism are linked to the premise of "Zarathustra's reform," according to which Zarathustra rejected the inherited Indo-Iranian beliefs and preached a reformed religion as reflected in his five *Gāθās* 'songs', the oldest part of the *Avesta*. Studies have therefore tended to focus on the precise nature of Zarathustra's reform and the extent to which later religious beliefs remained true to "Zarathustra's own teachings."[2]

This, in turn, has encouraged the notion that there is little need for studying this religion or its literature as part of organically evolving traditions, and nonspecialists writing about or referring to Zoroastrianism often do so, uncritically, on the basis of the sometimes rather diverging descriptions of Zarathustra and his reform in 20th-century secondary literature.

Here, I shall first give an overview of the sources; second, I outline the discussion surrounding the historicity of Zarathustra and his teachings and then review the textual basis for the Avestan Zarathustra to see to what extent the Western scholarly reconstruction of Zarathustra is faithful to the Gathic Zarathustra; and, third, I shall summarize the Zoroastrian belief system as we see it throughout its ancient history.

On this basis, I hope we shall be able to answer the questions posed at this symposium: Was Zoroastrianism as known in the pre-Islamic sources a monotheism? If it was, was it revolutionary; that is, was it the result of a reform? If so, was the reform that of a single individual? And, if it was, can this individual be identified with a historical person, more precisely, with someone called Zarathustra?

The Zoroastrian Literature

The *Avesta* is a collection of texts composed orally, presumably in the second and first millennia b.c.e., and then transmitted orally until they were written down, perhaps a little after 600 c.e.[3] The oldest manuscripts are only from the 13th–14th centuries, however.

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2. E.g., J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "La religion des Achéménides," in *Beiträge zur Achämenidengeschichte* (ed. G. Walser; Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner, 1972) 60–61; see also J. Kellens, ed., *La religion iranienne à l'époque achéménide* (Gent: Iranica Antiqua, 1991).

3. See idem, "Considérations sur l'histoire de l'Avesta," *Journal asiatique* 286 (1998) 451–519.

The orality of the *Avesta* has not been emphasized till quite recently, and the texts have been studied on the tacit assumption that they could be treated as written literature. It was therefore common in the 19th and 20th centuries to speak of "the books" or "writings of Zoroaster." Yet, even with the increased understanding in the 20th century of oral literature and history as well as the problematic "author," the oral nature of the *Avesta* has been little focused on by Iranists and non-Iranists alike.[4]

Our corpus must have originated in a period when ritual texts and hymns were composed by generations of poets who obeyed the principle of making "new songs," which consisted of recomposing existing material in more or less new form. This collection of oral texts has been transmitted to us in crystallized form, however—that is, in the linguistic form it had at specific points of time in history (which cannot be determined exactly), when it was decided that the text was to remain, from then on, immutable, presumably because it was considered sacred.[5]

Two linguistic forms are present, one older and one younger, referred to as Old and Young(er) Avestan; hence, the *Avesta* is divided into the *Old* and *Young(er) Avesta*.[6] The *Old Avesta* contains the five *Gāθās*, the literary authorship of which (since Haug) is traditionally ascribed to Zarathustra in the West; and the *Yasna Haptaṇhāiti*, a hymn in praise of Ahura Mazdā and his creations.[7] Among Young Avestan texts that I shall

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4. See my "Importance of Orality for the Study of Old Iranian Literature and Myth," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān: The International Journal of Ancient Iranian Studies* 5/1–2 (2005–6 [publ. 2007]) 9–31. See also P. G. Kreyenbroek, "The Zoroastrian Tradition from an Oralist's Point of View," in *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute: Second International Congress Proceedings* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996) 221–35; and A. Hintze, "Zur Überlieferung der ältesten Zeugnisse indoiranischer Sprachen," in *Europa et Asia polyglotta: Sprachen und Kulturen. Festschrift für Robert Schmitt-Brandt zum 70. Geburtstag* (ed. Y. Nishina; Dettelbach: Röll, 2000) 67–85.

5. See, e.g., E. J. Bakker, *Poetry in Speech: Orality and Homeric Discourse* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1997) 21 n. 12 (on crystallization); Hintze, "Zur Überlieferung," 72–73; and Kreyenbroek, "The Zoroastrian Tradition," 224–25. This also happened in the transmission of the Old Indic sacred literature, from the *Rigveda* on.

6. On the chronology of the Avestan languages and texts, see my "Antiquity of Old Avestan," *Nāme-ye Irān-e Bāstān* 3/2 (2003–4) 15–41; A. Panaino, "Chronologia Avestica: Tra cronologia linguistica a storia religiosa (Filologia e storia del testo avestico, I.)," in *Disputationes Iranologicae Vindobonenses, I* (ed. A. Panaino and V. Sadovski; Vienna: Österreichische Akademie der Wissenschaften, 2007) 7–33.

7. There are numerous editions, among them H. Humbach, *Die Gathas des Zarathustra* (Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959); S. Insler, trans., *The Gāthās of Zarathustra* (Acta Iranica 8; Tehran: Bibliothèque Pahlavi / and Leiden: Brill, 1975); A. Hintze, *A Zoroastrian Liturgy: The Worship in Seven Chapters (Yasna 35–41)* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007). There are also numerous translations by Zoroastrians, among them:

mention here are the *Yasna*, the text accompanying the morning ritual (see below); the *Yasht*s, which are hymns to individual deities; and the *Videvdad* 'the rules for keeping the *daēwa*s [bad old gods] away', which contains rules about pollution and purification.

The Old Persian cuneiform inscriptions of the Achaemenid kings at Persepolis, Susa, and elsewhere, mainly Darius I (522–486 B.C.E.), Xerxes I (486–465 B.C.E.), and Artaxerxes II (404–359 B.C.E.), are the earliest Iranian *written* texts. In addition, a large number of clay tablets in Elamite have been found containing records of provisions for rituals with invaluable information about the ritual in this period. Other sources include a few Aramaic inscriptions on ritual implements used in the *haoma* ritual and the personal names found, for instance, in the Aramaic letters from Elephantine.

The 3rd-century C.E. Sasanian kings all left inscriptions, some of them substantial, in which they also expressed their religious stance, but the most important sources from this century are the inscriptions of the high priest Kerdir.

There are no surviving manuscripts or books from the Sasanian period, but there must have existed a large corpus of oral traditions (referred to as the *dēn*; see below). These were committed to writing only from the 9th century on (judging from the colophons of our extant manuscripts), partly, perhaps, because the oral traditions were threatened with weakening and disappearing under Arab rule. This written corpus is what we refer to as the Pahlavi Books—that is, the Zoroastrian texts written in (Book) Pahlavi, another name for the Middle Persian language.

Among these books are several encyclopedic compilations, of which the following three are cited here: the *Bundahishn* and the *Selections of Zādspram* on cosmology, anthropology, eschatology, and so on; and the *Dēnkard*, which contained nine books (only 3–9 extant), of which, book 7 contains the stories about Zarathustra's life.[8]

The Pahlavi literature also includes Pahlavi translations of large parts of the *Avesta* with glosses and commentaries. The translations are traditional (not always—though often—linguistically accurate) and show us how the Sasanian priests understood their sacred tradition, the *dēn*.

D. J. Irani, *The Gathas: The Hymns of Zarathushtra* (ed. K. D. Irani; n.p.: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1999). All translations as given here are mine.

8. For editions, see the articles in the *Encyclopædia Iranica* (ed. E. Yarshater; various publishers, 1982–; also online at iranica.com); and, most recently, C. G. Cereti, *La letteratura pahlavi: Introduzione ai testi con riferimenti alla storia degli studi e alla tradizione manoscritta* (Milan: Mimesis, 2001). The somewhat outdated translations in the *Sacred Books of the East* from ca. 1900 are online at avesta.org.

Zarathustra, Historical Prophet and Reformer?

The Western Debate about Zarathustra

Already in the Achaemenid period, the Greek writers referred to Zoroaster as the author of the Persian laws, but what they say about him belongs in the realm of myth. They give his date as 6,000 years before Plato or 5,000 years before the War of Troy and associate him with the popular stories about Ninus and Semiramis.[9]

Much later, the medieval historians, in their quest for a continuous and consistent narrative in which a time and place were assigned to the ancient names of all known cultures, associated or even identified Zoroaster with known biblical characters, among them Nimrod and Abraham.

In European intellectual history, Zoroaster, connected with the three Magi (hence also exposed to Christianity), was known as the great legislator of the East, the founder of the seven liberal arts, as well as a prophet and philosopher.[10] The current view was summed up in 1700 by Thomas Hyde: Zoroaster was a reformer, teacher, and philosopher who was "not unfamiliar with the Old Testament" and who "some thought was born in Palestine."[11] Almost three hundred years after Hyde, M. Boyce still stated, "It is widely held that Zoroaster was himself a mystic, as well as a thinker and teacher."[12]

When, however, the scholarly community was introduced to the genuine Zoroastrian writings brought back from the Parsis by Anquetil-Duperron and published in 1771,[13] Zoroaster's laws appeared as a chaotic jumble of ritualistic rules that had nothing in them of the exalted thought expected from the great legislator, and doubt was expressed whether Zarathustra was the author.[14] Analysis of the language of the

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9. See A. de Jong, *Traditions of the Magi: Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 1t997).

10. See M. Stausberg, *Faszination Zarathushtra: Zoroaster und die Europäische Religionsgeschichte der Frühen Neuzeit* (2 vols.; Berlin: de Gruyter, 1998).

11. Thomas Hyde, *Historia religionis veterum Persarum, eorumque magorum . . .* (Oxford: Sheldon, 1700) 16 (and elsewhere). See G. Stroumsa, "Thomas Hyde and the Birth of Zoroastrian Studies," in *Studies in Honour of Shaul Shaked* (Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 26; Jerusalem, 2002) 1:222–23.

12. M. Boyce, "On the Orthodoxy of Sasanian Zoroastrianism," *BSOAS* 59 (1996) 27. See also her review of J. Narten, *Die Aməša Spəṇtas im Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1982) in *BSOAS* 47 (1984) 161: "Zoroaster is unique among the founders of world-religions in that he was himself priest and theologian."

13. A. H. Anquetil-Duperron, *Zend-Avesta, ouvrage de Zoroastre, contenant les idées théologiques, physiques & morales de ce législateur . . .* (Paris: Tilliard, 1771).

14. See William Jones, *Lettre à Monsieur A*** du P***: Dans laquelle est compris l'Examen de sa Traduction des Livres attribués à Zoroastre* [London, 1771] 38, 45; *The*

texts soon proved they were genuine, however, not fabrications by the Zoroastrians, as some thought.

Nevertheless, the traditional Zarathustra image that had already made it into Western historiography from the 16th century on remained, as reflected in the first volume of E. Gibbon's *History*, published five years after Anquetil's work in 1776: "there are some remarkable instances, in which Zoroaster lays aside the prophet, assumes the legislator, and discovers a liberal concern for private and public happiness, seldom to be found among the grovelling or visionary schemes of superstition." [15]

Much later, in 1843, the Rev. John Wilson published an attack on Zoroastrianism, which he "refuted" by comparing it with Christianity. [16]

All of this negative reception triggered what I think of as the "defense of Zarathustra," which was to preoccupy scholars of Zoroastrianism into the 21st century. For over a century and a half, in the absence of any tangible historical data about Zarathustra, scholars have been free to construct a variety of historical and theological scenarios (depending on individual biases) that they have ascribed to him.

The first influential reaction against this negative reception came from Martin Haug, who was the first scholar to single out, with linguistic arguments, the *Gāθās* as the oldest part of the *Avesta* and, hence, as he concluded, the only texts attributable to Zarathustra himself. [17] Contra Haug, F. Spiegel pointed out that Zarathustra's vita was a legend, and what we see in the *Gāθās* is exactly what we see in the rest of the *Avesta*. [18]

The effect of Haug's limitation of Zarathustra's responsibility for the *Avesta* to a tiny part of it was to disassociate him from the rituals described in the clearly polytheistic *Yasna* and *Videvdad*, which seemed completely heathen to Western sensibilities. In this way, the obvious cosmological *dualism* in Zoroastrianism—which in the 18th and 19th centuries still, no doubt, smacked strongly of heresy—was finessed.

Letters of Sir William Jones [2 vols.; ed. G. H. Cannon; Oxford: Clarendon, 1970] 1:561–64]). Voltaire dismissed the Zoroastrian scriptures as an abominable hodge-podge (*Dictionnaire philosophique* [Paris: Didot, 1816] 14:235).

15. E. Gibbon, *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (2nd ed.; London: Strahan, and Cadell, 1781) vol. 1, chap. 8.

16. J. Wilson, *The Pársí Religion as Contained in the Zand-Avastá, and Propounded and Defended by the Zoroastrians of India and Persia, Unfolded, Refuted, and Contrasted with Christianity* (Bombay: American Mission Press, 1843). See also M. Stausberg, "John Wilson und der Zoroastrismus in Indien: Eine Fallstudie zur interreligiösen Kritik," *Zeitschrift für Religionswissenschaft* 5 (1997) 87–114.

17. M. Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis* (Bombay: Bombay Gazette, 1862) 218–19. On Haug, see Herrenschmidt, "Once upon a Time Zarathustra."

18. F. Spiegel, *Grammatik der altbaktrischen Sprache, nebst einem Anhange über den Gâthâdialekt* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1867) 340–41.

Haug also distinguished between a monotheistic speculative philosophy of the prophet himself and a later dualist teaching reflected in other texts.[19] We may note, however, that the monotheism of Zarathustra and the picture of him as a prophet were strongly influenced by the Old Testament's Moses,[20] which helped reestablish the severely compromised antiquity and dignity of Zoroastrianism.

Elaborating on this evolutionary model, half a century later, the highly influential Iranist Christian Bartholomae imagined that Zarathustra had developed his teaching in several stages: after a first revelation, he had begun teaching monotheism in his native country but, after encountering opposition, he had to modify the system by incorporating evil.[21]

Still later, scholars such as James H. Moulton and Robert Zaehner explained away all the features of Zoroastrianism that they considered unworthy of Zarathustra's exalted ethical teaching (see below) by ascribing them to the Median Magi.[22]

Another way of maintaining Zarathustra's *monotheism* in the face of the overwhelming evidence that it was polytheistic was to manipulate the language and translations. Already Haug called the *yazata*s 'angels' and the Life-Giving Immortals 'archangels'.[23] This practice was canonized, as it were, in the Avestan and Pahlavi translations incorporated in the grandiose *Sacred Books of the East* at the end of the 19th century.

A very different view was presented after World War II by the outstanding philologist Walter B. Henning in his 1951 criticism of two new Zarathustra images presented by the archaeologist Ernst Herzfeld, who placed Zarathustra at the Achaemenid court; and the Old Testament scholar Henrik S. Nyberg, who tried to see Zarathustra in the

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19. Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language*, 259–60. See also Herrenschmidt's ("Once Upon a Time Zoroaster," 230–32) analysis of Haug's presentation in a Hegelian scheme of Thesis (polytheism), Antithesis (Zarathustra's monotheism), and Synthesis (the two side by side), and her suggestion (p. 229) that it was Haug's Protestant background that led him to emphasize Zarathustra's monotheism, rather than a desire to produce "a challenger for Moses."

20. Herrenschmidt, "Once upon a Time Zoroaster," 230; see the discussion on pp. 228–30. See also, for instance, J. H. Moulton's comparison between Moses and Zarathustra in his *Early Zoroastrianism* (London: Williams & Norgate, 1913) 300–302.

21. C. Bartholomae, *Zarathuštra's Leben und Lehre: Akademische Rede (Heidelberg 22. November 1918)* (Kultur und Sprache 4; Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1924) 12–14.

22. See my "*Videvdad*: Its Ritual-Mythical Significance," in *The Age of the Parthians* (The Idea of Iran 2; ed. V. S. Curtis and S. Stewart; London: Tauris, 2006) 112–15.

23. Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language*, e.g., p. 175; Bartholomae, *Zarathuštra's Leben und Lehre*, 13: "they play a role quite similar to angels in Semitic religions and in Chrisitianity."

light of recent research into shamanistic practices.[24] Ridiculing both approaches, Henning stated his own view, based on the assumption that Zarathustra lived just before the overthrow of the Median state by Cyrus in 550 B.C.E., that he was "an original thinker . . . the first to put forward this protest, based on reasoning, against monotheism," while being "far less advanced than the peoples of the Near East, whom he nevertheless surpassed in thought."[25]

Thus, by the mid-20th century, there was serious disagreement regarding whether Zarathustra's teaching (as expressed in the *Gāθā*s) was monotheistic or dualistic.

The Scholarly Basis for Opinions on Zarathustra

It is important to keep in mind that the Old Avestan language was not at all well understood when Haug studied the *Gāθās* and that his interpretation was based on the traditional but inexact and often erroneous interpretation found in the Pahlavi translation. Similarly, Bartholomae's translation was based on his view of the historical Zarathustra, extracted and rationalized from the later mythical and legendary traditions. Notwithstanding the great progress he had made compared with his predecessors, his approach to the grammar of the *Gāθās* lacked rigor, a fact that was not recognized until the late 1950s.

Haug and Bartholomae as well as their contemporaries and successors reconstructed Zarathustra's life and career by imposing the Western preconception of Zarathustra on the later hagiography. In this way, not only the events of his historical life were reconstructed but also his emotional and intellectual development. This reconstruction was then literally inserted into the *Gāθās* in order to be reextracted from them. Haug's and Bartholomae's conclusions were therefore based on largely circular arguments but were avidly embraced by Western Iranists, who were now free to start constructing their own Zarathustras.[26]

From the end of the 19th century and throughout the 20th century, arguments for Zarathustra's historicity were then also produced, the most common being the vivid and personal Zarathustra image in the

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24. W. B. Henning, *Zoroaster: Politician or Witch-Doctor?* (London: Oxford University Press, 1951); E. Herzfeld, *Zoroaster and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1947); H. S. Nyberg, *Irans forntidiga religioner* (Stockholm: Svenska Kyrkans Diakonistyrelses, 1937); trans. H. H. Schaeder as *Die Religionen des alten Iran* (Leipzig: Hinrichs, 1938).

25. Henning, *Zoroaster*, 46–47. Echoing Gibbon, he distinguished Zarathustra "from the cringeing primitive . . . or from the trembling believer of the contemporaneous religions of the Near East."

26. For a recent but traditional reconstruction, see M. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (HO 1/8: Religion 1.2.2A; Leiden: Brill, 1975) vol. 1, chap. 7: "Zoroaster."

Gāθās.[27] From a modern point of view, the vividness of literary characters does not prove, of course, that they were real people, yet the argument was still wielded at the end of the 20th century, as illustrated by M. Boyce's "recognizably real figure of the Gathas" (see below). More problematic is the fact that the passages adduced as examples of this vividness are among the most unclear in the *Gāθās*,[28] which allowed scholars to interpret them on the basis of the traditional views of Zarathustra. Of course, scholars realized that the late sources used to reconstruct the prophetic vita were legends and could not be relied on unconditionally; in fact, most of the legendary narrative would need to be scrapped to find the real Zarathustra in its core. Once that had been done, however, no doubt remained that the traditional Zarathustra would be recovered. Compare Bartholomae in 1924: "[I]n fact, we have to take a very sharp knife and apply it mercilessly if we wish to cut the historical core out of all the confusion (*Wirrsal*)." There was some criticism against this procedure at the time; for instance, the historian C. P. Tiele criticized Jackson for not distinguishing clearly between what *can* be historical and what *must* be historical. Nevertheless, in 1975, Boyce was still able to say: "In dealing with this tradition it is necessary to distinguish between facts . . . and the embroideries. . . . The facts of Zoroaster's birth and life as far as they can be determined from [the *Old* and *Young Avesta* and the Pahlavi texts] are as follows."[29]

No further serious attempt was made in the 20th century by those supporting the traditional Zarathustra concept to provide up-to-date scholarly arguments for it. Thus, for more than a century after Haug, Western scholars have adhered to the notion that Zarathustra was a prophet and a reformer, that his vita could be recovered from the Sasanian and early modern Persian tradition, and that the *Gāθās* contained his teachings. There is nothing in the *Gāθās*, however, to suggest that they contain "teachings" (other than in Bartholomae's interpretation and translation), and this idea was definitively disproved by philological

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27. See A. V. W. Jackson, *Zoroaster the Prophet of Ancient Iran* (New York: Macmillan, 1899) 3–4; K. F. Geldner, "Awestalitteratur," in *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie* (2 vols.; ed. W. Geiger and E. Kuhn; Strassburg: Trübner, 1895–1904) 2:29. C. Bartholomae, *Altiranisches Wörterbuch* (Strassburg: Trübner, 1904) col. 1675.

28. See my "Rivals and Bad Poets: The Poet's Complaint in the Old Avesta," in *Philologica et Linguistica: Historia, Pluralitas, Universitas: Festschrift für Helmut Humbach zum 80. Geburtstag am 4. Dezember 2001* (ed. M. G. Schmidt and W. Bisang; Wissenschaftlicher Verlag Trier, 2001) 351–76.

29. Bartholomae, *Zaraθuštra's Leben und Lehre*, 4; C. P. Tiele, *Geschichte der religion im altertum bis auf Alexander den Grossen* (2 vols. in 3 parts; ed. G. Gehrich; Gotha: Perthes, 1889–1903) 2/2:275 n. 1; Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 182. See also Jackson, *Zoroaster*, 68, on the details of Vištāsp's conversion.

work in the 1950s, which also witnessed the first modern challenge to the traditional view of the historical Zarathustra and the *Gāθās*.

In his doctoral thesis, completed by 1957, two years before the appearance of Helmut Humbach's first edition of the *Gāθās*,[30] Marijan Molé maintained that the *Gāθās* were ritual texts and that the task of the Gathic scholar was not to reconstruct the historical milieu of the prophet but to analyze the religious function of the *Gāθās*. Although Molé did not deny the historicity of the prophet, he suggested that, already in the *Gāθās*, the historical Zarathustra had been transformed into a ritual model and that the legend of Zarathustra was the myth corresponding to the Gathic sacrifice. He also questioned the traditional construct of the philosopher and reformer, emphasizing the improbability that such a religion could have existed in the first millennium, let alone the second millennium B.C.E.[31] Molé's opinions were, at the time, refuted with reference to the traditional arguments and the common opinion.[32]

The Common Opinion, Pillar Passages, and the Axial Period

As the foundations of the historical Zarathustra image crumbled and arguments for it became increasingly difficult to produce, scholars in the late 20th and early 21st centuries began using the common opinion as a touchstone for new theories. It was used for the first time after World War II, I believe, by Henning, who stood by "the common opinion on Zoroaster, the opinion gradually developed by scholars during the last one hundred and fifty years" and concluded the book: "It is a fallacy to think that a novel opinion is necessarily right, or an old opinion necessarily wrong" (recall Boyce's "It is widely held," above).[33]

Gherardo Gnoli, currently the most outspoken supporter of Zarathustra's historicity, has frequently cited the common opinion as superior to disagreeing voices. For instance, in a survey of current tendencies in Zoroastrian studies, he stated his hope that he had shown that what we might define as the common opinion in solving these problems is far from having been destroyed and recently proposed that it is the gen-

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30. H. Humbach, *Die Gathas des Zarathustra* (2 vols.; Heidelberg: Carl Winter, 1959).

31. M. Molé, *Culte, mythe et cosmologie dans l'Iran ancien: Le problème zoroastrien et la tradition mazdéenne* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1963) vii, x, 4, etc.

32. See J. Duchesne-Guillemin, "Rituel et eschatologie dans le Mazdéisme: Structure et évolution," *Numen* 8 (1961) 46–50, part of an exchange between Duchesne-Guillemin and Molé in *Numen* 7–8; Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 182 n. 4.

33. Henning, *Zoroaster*, 13, 51.

erally accepted historicity of Zoroaster "that would have to be proved false."[34]

It must be pointed out, however, that we are not dealing with a large number of specialists who have admittedly studied the *Gāθās* in detail in the original, either philologically or from the point of view of history of religions, and we need to keep in mind Jean Kellens's diagnosis: "It tends to be forgotten, but also needs to be stressed, that the value of an opinion is no more and no less than that of its supporting arguments, and it is worthy of attention to the degree that its author is familiar with his or her subject."[35]

Scholars have occasionally looked for more substantial arguments. Moulton, for instance, turned to the notion of "pillar passages,"[36] which he borrowed from "the nine pillars of a truly scientific life of Jesus" of Paul W. Schmiedel, which were passages from the Gospels that Schmiedel regarded as indubitably historical.[37] Schmiedel's idea was that the narratives in these passages were of the sort that it was impossible for later ages to have invented them. Much later, without citing Schmiedel or Moulton, Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin stated that a single passage of this sort sufficed to dismiss the adversaries of Zarathustra's historicity; while Boyce, with reference to Moulton, cited the pillar passages as one of the safest bases on which to build the edifice of Zarathustra's life,[38] pointing out that "[c]asual detail provided by the sources (of proper names, personal relationships and isolated events) give this account fragmentary though it is, an impressive reality."[39] Personally, I regard these passages as a traditional literary component of the poems, "the poet's complaint."[40]

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34. G. Gnoli, "Tendenze attuali negli studi zoroastriani," in *The Notion of "Religion" in Comparative Research: Selected Proceedings of the XVI IAHR Congress. Storia delle Religioni* (ed. U. Bianchi; Rome: "L'Erma" di Bretschneider, 1994) 62; idem, *Zoroaster in History* (New York: Bibliotheca Persica, 2000) 186–87.

35. J. Kellens, "Réflexions sur la datation de Zoroastre," in *Studies in Honour of Shaul Shaked* (Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 26; Jerusalem, 2002) 1:14; see also idem, *La quatrième naissance de Zarathushtra*, 111–17.

36. Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, 348 n. 4.

37. W. Schmiedel, *Die Person Jesu im Streite der Meinungen der Gegenwart* (Leipzig: Heinsius Nachfolger, 1906); and his article on the Gospels in *Encyclopaedia Biblica* (1901) 2:1881–82, no. 139. See also A. Schweitzer, *Geschichte der Leben-Jesu-Forschung* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1984) 552–53 and n. 54 with further references.

38. J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l'Iran ancien* (Paris: Presses Universitaires, 1962) 141, citing specifically *Yasna* 51.12 and *Yasna* 46.1; Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 186 with n. 28.

39. Ibid., 189.

40. Skjærvø, "Rivals and Bad Poets."

Still more recently, Gnoli invoked the notion of Axial Period in support of Zarathustra's existence: "[T]he *Achsenzeit* would be seriously lacking without Zoroaster."[41]

Zarathustra in the Texts

Since so much of the discussion about the monotheism or dualism of Zoroastrianism is based on the scholarly opinions of Zarathustra, it is important to know what the ancient Zoroastrian texts say about him. They are, in fact, quite clear on this point.

In the *Young Avesta*, Zarathustra battles the Dark (or: Evil) Spirit and his minions, thus contributing to placing Ahura Mazdā back in command of the world. He is also repeatedly presented as the first human to reject the *daēwa*s, the (bad) old gods, and to praise Ahura Mazdā's order and sacrifice to him (*Yasht* 13.89). Thereby, he would drive the old gods and even the Dark Spirit himself back underground and into Hell (*Yasna* 9.14–15, *Yasht* 17.18–20, *Videvdad* 19).[42]

Subsequent poet-sacrificers follow the model of Zarathustra (*Yasna* 12.6): "And thus again and again did Zarathustra forswear company with the old gods. . . . And thus do I too, as a Mazdayasnian and a Zarathustrid, forswear company with the old gods."

About Zarathustra's birth, at which all living beings rejoiced, the texts are relatively specific. According to the praise hymn to the Haoma (*Yasna* 9), he was the last of four sons to be born to four fathers who pressed the sacred drink, *haoma*—that is, who performed a *yasna* ritual.

The Pahlavi Books and the indigenous tradition place Zarathustra at a turning point in the 12,000-year history of the temporal existence, at the end of the 3,000 years of "mixture" of good and evil in the world, heralding the final 3,000 years, at the end of which evil will be overcome and banished for ever, and the world will return to its original state.

Since this Young Avestan Zarathustra image is "nonhistorical," compared with the image in the *Old Avesta*, where its "vividness" guarantees its historicity, Western scholars from Haug on decided that it had been mythologized after the prophet's death. Compare Boyce: "Yet he is also drawn into the divine and mythic worlds, and thereby piously trans-

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41. Gnoli, *Zoroaster in History*, 4. See also J. Kellens, "Zoroastre dans l'histoire ou dans le mythe? À propos du dernier livre de Gherardo Gnoli," *JA* 289 (2001) 171–84.

42. See my "Zarathustra in the Avesta and in Manicheism: Irano-Manichaica IV," in *La Persia e l'Asia centrale da Alessandro al X secolo . . . (Roma, 9–12 novembre 1994)* (Rome: Academia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1996) 597–628; idem, "Eastern Iranian Epic Traditions III: Zarathustra and Diomedes—An Indo-European Epic Warrior Type," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 11 (1997 [pub. 2000]) 175–82.

formed from the recognizably real figure of the *Gathas* into a revered, semi-legendary one."[43]

One of the most "vivid" passages featuring Zarathustra is *Yasna* 29, in which Western scholars have found, not only a description of the historical Zarathustra's call to prophethood, but also one of the pillars of his reform, the condemnation of the bloody sacrifices.

The first *Gāthā* opens with the *Ahuna Vairiya* strophe, which sets out the purpose of the ritual: to regenerate a new existence (*ahu*) on the model (*ratu*) of Ahura Mazdā's first existence and provide a pastor for the poor. It is followed by *Yasna* 28, which introduces the poet-sacrificer and his work (praise of Ahura Mazdā's creation and sacrifice to keep it up) and the desired result of the ritual: to regenerate the existence and obtain a reward for his work.

In *Yasna* 29, we then hear the cow's breath-soul (*urwan*) and that of the poet ascend to the assembly of the gods and present their complaint about the current chaos, darkness, and violence. The cow now finds herself without a shepherd and asks the divine assembly to remedy her plight. Ahura Mazdā reports that he has already fashioned the components of the sacrifice, and now all that is needed is someone to take them down to the world of men. It is pointed out that the perfect person is right there—namely, Zarathustra, who is ready to perform. The soul of the cow complains, however (*Yasna* 29.2, 7–9):[44]

> Then the fashioner of the cow asks Order: "How [was] your model (*ratu*) for the cow, when you [gods] who are in command established her together with her pasture as 'cow-nourishing activity'? Whom do you (all) wish to be a [ruling] lord for her, someone who may push back Wrath together with those possessed by the Lie?"
>
> . . .
>
> The Lord, who has the same pleasure as Order, fashioned that poetic thought (*manthra*) to be that of the fat dripping for the cow, and also the milk, he, the All-knowing One. *He* is life-giving for the meager ones by his ordinance. "Whom do you have, [O fashioner of the cow?] who, by his good thought, shall bring them down to the mortals?"

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43. M. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism: Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour* (Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda and Bibliotheca Persica, 1992) 113.

44. There are many philological problems in the *Gāθās*; here, uncertain translations are marked with an asterisk (*); square brackets [. . .] contain words not in the original. Translations are based on my study of the texts and my concept of the Old Avestan ritual and myths. See my "Avestan Yasna: Ritual and Myth," in *Religious Texts in Iranian Languages: Symposium Held in Copenhagen May 2002—Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab* (ed. F. Vahman and C. V. Pedersen; Copenhagen: Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab, 2007) 57–84.

"This one here is one found by me, who alone listens to our ordinances, Zarathustra Spitāma. He wishes, O All-knowing One, to make heard for us and for Order poems of praise. . . ."

And, thus [promised), the breath-soul of the cow lamented: "[Am I one] to *direct a forceless [voice] at the *pleasing [of the heavenly judges?], the voice of a man without life-giving power? He whom I wish [here and now] to have command through this invigorant—when shall *he* ever be there who shall give *him* help with his hands?"[45]

According to the later Zarathustra myth in *Dēnkard* 7.2.14–15, it was at the beginning of the second 3,000-year period of the temporal existence, at the point when Ohrmazd transferred the world of the living from the world of thought to the world of the living but before the assault by the forces of evil that Ohrmazd fashioned Zarathustra's preexisting soul, his *frawahr* (Avestan *fravashi*) and sent it down to the world of the living.

It takes much good will to see in this (in part, quite obscure) passage a historical call to prophethood. What we have is, in my opinion, a myth of the first sacrificer and an event taking place *in illo tempore*, not in a historical time and place. The scene is the world that had been ordered by Ahura Mazdā's first sacrifice but that has now reverted to chaos, and a human sacrificer is needed to start the cycle of sacrifice in the world of the living to boost the divine world. In my opinion, we witness in this text Zarathustra's installation by Ahura Mazdā as the first human sacrificer, the same function he has in the later *Avesta*. His task is to bring the elements of Ahura Mazdā's cosmogonic sacrifice down to the world of the living and re-perform the sacrifice there in order to fight evil, dispel chaos, and disable the forces of darkness in the form of the demon of Wrath.[46]

Another much-cited "vivid" passage is *Yasna* 46.1, which Boyce translated, following the Western tradition: "To what land to flee, where shall I go to flee? From the kindred and sodality they thrust me out. Not satisfying to me is the community to which I should belong, nor yet the wicked rulers of the land," commenting: "After long years, discouraged by the obduracy of his fellow-countrymen, the prophet resolved, it seems, to depart from them, crying out in darkness of spirit: . . ."[47]

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45. See my "Praise and Blame in the Avesta: The Poet-Sacrificer and His Duties," in *Studies in Honour of Shaul Shaked* (Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam 26; Jerusalem, 2002) 1:29–67.

46. See idem, "Zarathustra: First Poet-Sacrificer," in *Paitimāna: Essays in Iranian, Indian, and Indo-European Studies in Honor of Hanns-Peter Schmidt* (ed. S. Adhami; Costa Mesa, CA: Mazda, 2003) 157–94.

47. Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 187. Note her "it seems," which she commonly appends to uncertain interpretations.

There are numerous problems with this interpretation, as first shown by Humbach.[48] Most importantly, the words rendered 'flee', 'country', and 'refuge' mean, literally, 'bend', 'earth, ground', and (probably) 'land for grazing'—that is: "to what ground am I bending, where shall I go to (find) a pasture?" I therefore regard this strophe as another example of "the poet's complaint."[49]

Zarathustra's Reform

In Western scholarship, the narrative in *Yasna* 29 was also interpreted as an illustration of one of the keystones of Zarathustra's reform: the condemnation of the bloody sacrifices practiced by his pagan ancestors and contemporaries. Another was the assumption that he banished the ritual plant *haoma* from his sacrifice, which was supported in two ways. On the one hand, it was assumed that the *Gāθās* contained all of Zarathustra's teachings and that what was not in them was consciously excluded by the prophet, and thus the lack of explicit mention of the *haoma* proved its demotion. On the other hand, it did seem to be referred to by its epithet *duraosha* (Old Indic *durosha*) in a passage that was traditionally interpreted as derogatory and that was also adduced as evidence that Zarathustra condemned the bloody sacrifice (*Yasna* 32.14).[50] The crucial line is nearly incomprehensible, however, by modern philological standards, but it appears to be referring to the ritual practices of those who wish to promote chaos: mistreatment of the cow and abuse of the *haoma*.[51]

Yet another much-discussed element of the reform was the elevation of Ahura Mazdā to sole god and the demotion of the other gods—among them, Mithra and the old Indo-Iranian *daēwa*s, good divinities in the Old Indic *Rigveda* (*deva*; compare Latin *deus*). The question how the *daēwa*s became evil demons was traditionally answered by reference to the reform.[52]

Finally, to Duchesne-Guillemin, Boyce, and others, the Seven Life-Giving Immortals (see below)—or the Heptad (thus Boyce)—was one of the cornerstones of Zarathustra's reform. The difficulties with this assumption were demonstrated by Johanna Narten, who proved (if proof

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48. Humbach, *Die Gathas des Zarathustra*, 2:67.

49. See my "Rivals and Bad Poets," 370–71.

50. See also my "Smashing Urine: On *Yasna* 48.10," in *Zoroastrian Rituals in Context* (ed. M. Stausberg; Leiden: Brill, 2004) 253–81.

51. See idem, "Rivals and Bad Poets," 365–66.

52. Haug appears to have been the first to suggest that Zarathustra broke away from Indo-Iranian polytheism (*Essays on the Sacred Language*, 248–50: "Causes of the schism"). See Herrenschmidt, "Once upon a Time Zarathustra," 224.

was needed), that they are not a closed group in the *Old Avesta*, as opposed to in the *Young Avesta*.[53]

The philological work in the 1950s showed that most of the elements that were once assigned to Zarathustra's reform were based on faulty interpretation of the texts—for instance, that he banished the *haoma* and condemned the bloody sacrifice. The result has been that, today, scholars have widely diverging definitions of Zarathustra's reform, which in turn highlights the fact that there is no clear evidence for it in the texts.

One recurring definition has it that Zarathustra reinterpreted the ancient, inherited beliefs at a higher, nobler, and subtler level. The idea dates back at least to the 18th century, although it was developed especially by Hermann Lommel in the 1920s–30s,[54] but is impossible to prove (or disprove), since it was not based on the wording of the text but on whatever one could deduce from it. Compare Boyce: "[O]ne can deduce that Zoroaster held to the basic theology of the old Iranian religion, with all its *yazatas*, and that his reform consisted largely in reinterpreting its beliefs at a nobler and subtler level, in the light of an intensely personal apprehension of the supreme God, and of the struggle to be waged between good and evil."[55]

The *Young Avesta* shows hardly any trace of these reforms, however, and it is traditionally agreed that the mythology of the *Young Avesta* represents a return to the pre-reform beliefs of pagan Iran and a corruption of Zarathustra's teachings.

The construction of Zoroastrianism as the reformed monotheism of Zarathustra, whose life and teachings can be extracted from the *Gāθās* in Bartholomae's interpretation became standard also among historians of religion, writing in the 20th century. For instance, Raffaele Pettazzoni in an article in 1954, just before the philological revolution in Avestan studies, cited (as most did and still do) the beginning of *Yasna* 46, interpreting it in the usual way, commenting: "[T]he new faith preached by a Prophet who, in his indomitable energy, set persecutions and suffering at naught," and stating that the current Zarathustra image made him a prophet like other famous prophets and founders of religions: "[T]he drama of Zarathustra is likewise in a way the drama of Moses, of Mahomet, and of Jesus, or if you like of Paul."[56]

Comparisons of this sort between Zarathustra, Jesus, and Mohammad and Zoroastrianism, Christianity, and Islam are found throughout

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53. Narten, *Die Aməša Spəṇtas*; and Boyce's review in *BSOAS* 47 (1984) 158–61.

54. Herrenschmidt, "Once upon a Time Zarathustra," 218. H. Lommel, *Die Yäšt's des Awesta* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1927) 107.

55. M. Boyce, "On Mithra's Part in Zoroastrianism," *BSOAS* 32 (1969) 34.

56. R. Pettazzoni, *Essays on the History of Religions* (Leiden: Brill, 1967) 8.

the history of our studies, as exemplified by Jackson: "[W]e may suppose that this Jerusalem—if we may with all reverence adopt the phrase of our own Scriptures—the city which had stoned the prophet, at last received and blessed him that came in the name of Ormazd"; Bartholomae (regarding *Yasna* 46): "[H]e had to flee, just as in the case of Mohammad"; and Boyce: "Zoroastrianism received, like nascent Christianity and Islam, an early baptism of blood."[57]

Remarkably, non-Iranist historians of religion or writers of textbooks seem to have little or no problem with the scholarly dogma that a historical person called Zarathustra and identical with the Zarathustra of the *Gāθās*, either about the 13th century B.C.E. or 700 years later, in the 6th century B.C.E., reformed the inherited Old Iranian religion, itself descended from an earlier Indo-Iranian, polytheistic religion, turning it into a monotheistic one, with the ancient polytheism surviving alongside it and resurfacing in the post-Zarathustrian Zoroastrian literature![58] Only very rarely do they question these postulates. One example is Julian Baldick's criticism of Boyce, that Boyce projected her conclusions into the sources;[59] another is Michael Stausberg, who in his new history of Zoroastrianism is very cautious in unquestioningly accepting the traditional opinions.[60]

The historical scenario we are asked to believe strains credibility: At some unknown point in the preliterate prehistory of the Iranian tribes, a priest was inspired to abandon what he had come to regard as pagan polytheism in favor of a single god. Although he kept the vocabulary and style of the ancient poetry, it is clear to (some) modern scholars that he filled the words with modern Judeo-Christian-type ethics. His oral teachings were learned, kept, and propagated unchanged by his followers, although, a few centuries later, his teachings had been forgotten in mainstream religion. The ancient pagan beliefs, which had survived

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57. A. V. W. Jackson, "Where Was Zoroaster's Native Place?" *JAOS* 15 (1893) 228, 230; Bartholomae, *Zarathuštra's Leben und Lehre*, 10; Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, 191.

58. See, for example, W. von Kloeden, "Zarathustra," in *Biographisch-Bibliographisches Kirchenlexicon* (ed. F. W. Bautz and T. Bautz; Hamm [Westf.]: Traugott Bautz, 1998) 14:344–55; B. Lincoln (*Religion, Empire, and Torture: The Case of Achaemenian Persia, with a Postscript on Abu Ghraib* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007] xiii): "whether we regard the imperial [Achaemenid] religion as Zoroastrian in a strict and narrow sense (i.e., consciously adhering to religious reforms effected by Zarathustra). . . ."

59. J. Baldick, "Mazdaism ('Zoroastrianism')," in *The World's Religions* (ed. S. Sutherland et al.; London: Routledge, 1988) 556.

60. M. Stausberg, *Die Religion Zarathustras: Geschichte — Gegenwart — Rituale* (3 vols.; Stuttgart: Kohlhammer, 2002–4).

alongside the reformation, came back, suffused by the now hardly recognizable teachings of the prophet, and the prophet himself had been turned into a myth. Furthermore, the knowledge of the actual historical events is supposed to have survived millennia of oral transmission, but so overgrown that Western scholars need sharp sheers to uncover what they recognize as historical facts.

One fundamental problem with all the speculations about Zarathustra's break with the pagan tradition is that we do not know what this "tradition" was. We know nothing about the Iranian religion before the *Old Avesta*, and it is not enough simply to assume that it was more or less identical with the Old Indic religion. After all, the Indian and Iranian Aryans had parted quite a few centuries earlier, and their world views must have evolved on both sides. It is, for instance, possible to think of scenarios where the demotion of the *daēwa*s was the result of the development and sharpening of the Indo-Iranian cosmological dualism, which was, presumably, based on ambiguities present in the ancient deities. The Old Indic Varuna, for example, had potential for both good and evil (from a human point of view). This is what the *Gāθās* themselves suggest: once upon a time, the *daēwa*s had apparently been good (*Yasna* 44.20), but when the time came for them to choose between good and evil, they were confused by the cosmic deception, the Lie (see below) and made the wrong choices (*Yasna* 30.6). The demonization of the *daēwa*s was therefore probably not a result of religious propaganda but of the way the Indo-Iranian view of good and evil developed among the Iranians.

The Mazdayasnian daēnā

Western scholars' assumption of a reform is also implicit in the term 'religion' used to render Avestan *daēnā*, especially the rendering of *daēnā māzdayasnish*, literally, 'the *daēnā* of those who sacrifice to Ahura Mazdā', as the 'Mazdayasnian religion'. They clearly use the term here to denote one organized 'religion' as opposed to others, in the modern sense, contrasting with the paganism of the pre-Zarathustra Iranians. This concept of religion, however, dates to relatively late in the history of Christianity and cannot be applied directly to the ancient Iranian religion with all the implications of Christianity.

The *Avesta* also does not support this sort of interpretation of the term. In the *Old Avesta*, the *daēnā* appears to be a mental faculty that "sees" in the other world, and one of her functions is to guide the sacrifice through the intermediate space currently occupied by the forces of darkness and fight the obstacles met on the way, in particular, the "Ford of the Accountant" (*Yasna* 46.11). The successful *daēnā*s are then characterized as 'victorious' (*Yasna* 39.2; cf. *Yasht* 13.154).

In the *Young Avesta*, the victorious *daēnā māzdayasnish* is presented as the sister of the deities who fight the forces of evil in *Yasht* 17.16, and she is described after the battle in *Yasna* 12.9 as unharnessing her chariot and laying down her weapons. Moreover, in a passage in the hymn to Haoma (*Yasna* 9.26), she was probably also identified with a star or constellation and served as the charioteer of the (life-giving) Poetic Thought (*manthra spenta*), apparently the chariot of the sun.

The parallel with Christianity is, traditionally, further developed by projecting the later mythological "battle over the *dēn*" in the Pahlavi *Memorial of Zarēr* (a literary parallel to the *Song of Roland*) into the distant past as a record of an actual war fought by Zarathustra's alleged princely patron, Vishtāspa, and his Iranians against the Khionians.[61] There is no record of such a war in the *Avesta*, however, where the struggle was probably between good and evil sacrificers;[62] and the war, in my opinion, is a later reinterpretation of the ritual competition, much in the way the Old Germanic mythical struggle described in the Old Norse *Volsungasaga* was reinterpreted in the Middle German *Niebelungenlied*.

In the Pahlavi texts, moreover, the term commonly refers to the totality of the (oral) tradition (for example, "it says in the *dēn*, it is apparent in the *dēn*," and so on), perhaps as a kind of "insight" into the world of thought (see below), which is the knowledge transmitted orally and kept in one's mind.

Life without Zarathustra

The *Avesta* is fundamentally ahistorical, located in mythical times and places, and all mentions of Zarathustra in the *Young Avesta* and the Pahlavi Books are of the same kind: Zarathustra's locus is the Aryan Territory—that is, the mythical homeland of the Iranians, thought to have been located in the central continent of the earth, surrounded by the six others. In fact, the *Avesta* and the Pahlavi texts contain no nonmythological, "historicizing" Zarathustra narrative.

To sum up the problem of Zarathustra's time and place: If Zarathustra is placed in Central Asia in the second or early first millennium B.C.E., then there is no historical record to confirm or contradict it. We simply have no historical record of this area from that time aside from the archaeological evidence, which is mute with respect to people.[63] If

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61. D. Monchi-Zadeh, *Die Geschichte Zarēr's* (Uppsala: Almqvist & Wiksell, 1981).

62. See my "Rivals and Bad Poets."

63. M. Boyce filled this vacuum, to some extent, with the help of H. M. Chadwick's reconstruction of a Heroic Age, in turn based on his analysis of various European epic traditions—Teutonic, Homeric, Slavonic (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism*, 39–40). On the possibility of identifying archeological remains with peoples speaking specific languages, see C. C. Lamberg-Karlovsky, "Archaeology and Language:

he is placed in the seventh or sixth century B.C.E., then he must either be located in Eastern Iran, for which, again, we have no history, or in Western Iran, for which we have substantial evidence from Old Persian, Greek, and Mesopotamian sources, but where no single religious personality coming forth in Iran at that time is mentioned.

The earliest Greek authors who talk about Zoroaster refer to him as a mythical or legendary person and provide no historical detail. Most remarkably, the three Greek authors who wrote about the Persians in the Achaemenid period do not mention him. Herodotus, who actively sought information about Iranian customs and beliefs, mentions Zoroaster nowhere; nor does Ctesias of Cnidus, who was a hostage and physician at the court of Artaxerxes II; or Xenophon (ca. 430–354 B.C.E.), a mercenary in the defeated army of Cyrus the Younger in 400 B.C.E. The earliest reference to Zoroaster is therefore by Xanthus of Lydia, who wrote in the fifth century B.C.E., even before Herodotus, and was quoted by Diogenes Laertius (third century C.E.?).[64]

It is, of course, as impossible to prove Zarathustra's nonhistoricity = (historical) nonexistence as it is to prove the existence or nonexistence of any nonexistent object. At most, we can scrutinize the times and places proposed as the loci of such an object and try to find traces of it; and we find none in the case of Zarathustra. The conundrum is perfectly illustrated by the appeals to the vividness of his literary description, the common opinion, and the Axial Period as arguments for Zarathustra's historicity.

Some scholars have therefore chosen an agnostic attitude to the problem of Zarathustra's historicity, suggesting that it is irrelevant to the studies; but as long as the specter of the Western Zarathustra image looms, it remains relevant. If we accept the historicity of Zarathustra, we cannot, in good methodology, not try to date him and investigate his life.

I have no personal vendetta against Zarathustra. My aim is not "to spirit Zaraθuštra out of history"[65] but to investigate the reasons for believing he was ever *in* history. In my opinion, Zarathustra was spirited

The Case of the Bronze-Age Indo-Iranians," in *The Indo-Aryan Controversy: Evidence and Inference in Indian History* (ed. E. F. Bryant and L. L. Patton; London: Routledge, 2005) 142–77.

64. W. S. Fox and R. E. K. Pemberton, *Passages in Greek and Latin Literature Relating to Zoroaster and Zoroastrianism Translated into English* (Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute 14; Bombay: Taraporevala, 1929) 80. See also Gnoli, *Zoroaster in History*, lecture 2 (with references).

65. H.-P. Schmidt, "Zaraθuštra and His Patrons," in *Ātaš-e dorun. The Fire Within: Jamshid Soroush Soroushian Memorial Volume* (ed. F. Vajifdar and C. Cereti; Bloomington, IN: 1st Books Library) 372.

into a history he never belonged to and, even if he ever was *in* history, that history is now irretrievably lost.

Zoroastrian Beliefs

The Texts

The *Young Avestan* texts are mostly ritual texts and, with a few exceptions, do not contain systematic narratives but, rather, bits and pieces of narratives. Their scattered references and allusions to cosmology and eschatology can only be understood by comparing them with the Old Indic and much later Pahlavi texts. In view of the great time spans involved, we should not, however, simply interpret the Sasanian system into the Avestan system, or, indeed, the Avestan and Sasanian systems into the Achaemenid, as is frequently done when scholars search for Iranian influences in the Bible, for instance.

Thus, we have no systematic and detailed description of the Zoroastrian belief system until the Pahlavi Books. The cosmology and eschatology are today mostly quoted from the *Bundahishn* and the *Selections of Zādspram*, but other texts provide important additions, adjustments, and corrections. Much of the material in these books clearly belongs to very old strata of the tradition, as it reflects ideas already present in the *Avesta* and Kerdir's inscriptions, for instance; but there is always the possibility that it had been updated by the time it was written down.

The Old Avestan texts, especially the *Gāθās*, in addition to their numerous linguistic and philological problems, are written in an elliptic and allusive poetic style, and we are still far from a complete philological understanding of them, let alone of the accompanying ritual itself and the underlying myths to which the text alludes.

As long as the *Gāθās* were thought to be Zarathustra's private teachings, scholars were able to interpret into them what they thought these teachings contained. Today, however, this sort of procedure, although not uncommon, is not up to modern standards of critical analysis and disregards a century of advances in our understanding of the Gathic text and the ancient Iranian ritual and myths reflected in it, as well as of ancient religions, oral literatures, and historiography.

Creation in the Old Avesta:
The Dual Duality

According to the *Old Avesta*, the ordered cosmos came into being when Ahura Mazdā, 'the all-knowing (ruling) Lord', performed a cosmogonic sacrifice in which he fashioned its ingredients and thought (forth) the cosmic Order (*Yasna* 31.19), causing the heavenly spaces to be suffused with light (*Yasna* 31.7): "He who was the first to think those

[thoughts]: The free spaces are blending with the lights—it was by his guiding thought (*khratu*) that *he*, the *dāmi*, [thought] Order (*asha*), by which he upholds best thought."

The ordered cosmos consisted of two kinds of 'existences' (*ahu*): "that of thought" and "that which has bones" (*Yasna* 28.2, etc.; often, somewhat anachronistically, rendered 'material')—that is, the world humans can only reach with their thoughts, or the "other" world; and the world we live in. The good existence is "engendered, born" (for example, *Yasna* 43.5, 48.6), perhaps by Ahura Mazdā, as suggested in *Yasna* 44.3: "Who is, by birth/engendering, the first father of Order?" and stated explicitly in the *Bundahishn* (see below). The existence "with bones" therefore corresponds to a fetus that is born after it has developed bones. In fact, the ritual reconstruction of the new (daily/yearly) existence is complete once the poet-sacrificer (Zarathustra) has offered up the supreme gift of his life breath and his bones to give life to the unborn fetus (*Yasna* 33.14, 37.3).

Once brought forth, Ahura Mazdā's new world of thought was populated with various objects, some fashioned by sculptors and wood cutters,[66] then set in their proper places according to the principle of Order. These later become the models (*ratu*s) for the corresponding objects in the world of the living; for instance, the divine year is the model for all years, the divine social structure is the model for all social structures, and so on (see on the sacrifice, "Gods in the Old Avesta and the Life-Giving Immortals," p. 344 below).

The denizens of the ordered cosmos are typically *spenta* 'life-giving', a term found, notably, in *spenta manyu* 'life-giving spirit' and *amesha spenta* 'life-giving immortal'. The word is derived from a verb meaning 'to swell' (that is, I suppose, with vital juices). Its literal meaning is seen in *Yasna* 29.7: "*He* is life-giving (literally, "swelling") for the meager ones" (above). By performing a perfect sacrifice, the sacrificer becomes a *saoshyant*. This is the future participle of the verb corresponding to *spenta*, literally, 'he who shall make (the world) swell (with vital juices)'.

The terms relating to the ordering process are notably problematic to translate. The verb is *dā-*, which literally means 'set in place' (Old Indic *dhā-*, Greek *títhēmi*, etc.).[67] Ahura Mazdā as "creator" is 'he who sets

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66. The Carpenter (*thvarshtar*, *Yasna* 29.6) and the Fashioner (*tashan*) of the Cow (*Yasna* 29.2). The carpentry terminology belongs to the inherited poetic language, because it is also used in Old Indic.

67. See J. Kellens, "Ahura Mazda n'est pas un dieu créateur," in *Études irano-aryennes offertes à Gilbert Lazard* (ed. C.-H. de Fouchécour and P. Gignoux; Studia Iranica Cahier 7; Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iranniennes, 1989) 217–28. Note that, in Old Iranian, two verbs merged in *dā-*: 'to place' and 'to give'

(things) in place' or 'he who has set (everything) in its place' (where it is now), and the "creations" are the *dāman*s, traditionally equated with Old Indic *dhāman* 'establishment' (or similar). Stanley Insler, however, has suggested that Old Avestan *dāman* is related to Old Indic *dāman*,[68] which refers to 'tying, tethering' and in Iranian survives in Middle Persian as *dām* 'net' (for example, for hunting; hence also 'trap'). It is therefore possible that the poets thought of *dāman* in the sense of (woven) 'fabric' or, simply, 'artistic creations'. The term *dāmi* (also traditionally thought to mean 'creator') is probably derived from *dāman* and may denote the one who stretches out the 'fabrics', perhaps the cosmic weaver.[69] The creations are all the expert artworks of Ahura Mazdā, the expert artisan (*Yasna Haptanghāiti* 37.2 [below], 38.3; Young Avestan *Yasna* 71.10, *Yasht* 5.85, etc.).

The world, futhermore, oscillates between two states—one good and one evil—corresponding to light, health, and life as opposed to darkness, illness, and death, the mythological expressions of the daily and yearly cycles.

The ruler of the good world is Ahura Mazdā, 'the all-knowing, ruling Lord', and, when he is in charge, the world operates according to Order (*asha*).[70] Order, like its Old Indic equivalent *rta*, is the cosmic, ritual, and behavioral order obtaining in Ahura Mazdā's universe. We should note that the word is rendered 'truth' by one part of the scholarly community, usually with the argument that *asha* is the (semantic) opposite of *druj* 'lie'; but neither term is used for 'speaking the truth' or 'lying'.[71]

Ahura Mazdā's Order is thus regularly replaced by chaos, during which the governing principle is the Lie (*druj*), the cosmic Deception, which deceives humans and gods with regard to the true nature of the world but which can be overcome by Order (for example, *Yasna* 48.1). Those who support Ahura Mazdā's Order are *ashawan*s 'sustainers of

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(Greek *títhēmi* and *dídōmi*). The Achaemenids may well have thought of the creations as Ahuramazdā's gifts to them.

68. S. Insler (*The Gāthās of Zarathustra*, 267), who rendered it as (abstract) 'bond'.

69. See my "Poetic and Cosmic Weaving in Ancient Iran: Reflections on Avestan *vahma* and Yasna 34.2," in *Haptačahaptāitiš: Festschrift for Fridrik Thordarson* (ed. D. Haug and E. Welo; Oslo: Novus, 2005) 267–79.

70. P. O. Skjærvø, "Ahura Mazdā and Ārmaiti, Heaven and Earth, in the Old Avesta," *JAOS* 122 (*Indic and Iranian Studies in Honor of Stanley Insler on His Sixty-Fifth Birthday*, ed. J. P. Brereton and S. W. Jamison; 2002) 399–410.

71. Avestan and Old Persian use words meaning 'straight, real' and 'crooked, unreal' to express 'truth' and 'lie'. See my "Truth and Deception in Ancient Iran," in *Ātaš-e dorun. The Fire Within: Jamshid Soroush Soroushian Commemorative Volume* (2 vols.; ed. C. Cereti and F. Vajifdar; Bloomington, IN: 1st Books Library, 2003) 2:383–434.

Order', while those overcome by the Lie are *drugwant*s 'filled *or* possessed by the Lie'.

In the *Old Avesta*, the origin of this duality lies in the 'two spirits' (*manyu*), the Life-Giving spirit (*spenta*) and the Dark spirit (*angra*, Pahlavi Ahrimen), described as 'two twin sleeps' (*Yasna* 30.3)—that is, in my opinion, as the twin embryos developing into the two worlds to be engendered by the sacrifice.[72] By choosing between the two, all beings in the two worlds determine whether the new existence is to be alive and healthy or sick and dying (*Yasna* 30.3). The two spirits are personified in a passage where they converse about how they differ in every way (*Yasna* 45.2).

The meaning of *manyu* 'spirit' is difficult to delimit, but it appears to be an active force for creation and destruction in the world of thought. In the context of the poet-sacrificer, it probably also denotes the divine spirit that communicates with him—his 'inspiration' (*enthousiasmos*).

Exactly what the myth referred to in *Yasna* 30.3 and 45.2 was escapes us (notably, the identity of the womb containing the two embryos), but it clearly fits into the birth-creation scenario.

Creation and the Dual Duality in the Later Texts

The dual duality permeates the *Young Avesta* and the Pahlavi Books, where the entire world is divided into two worlds (*ahu*): 'that of the spirit' (Young Avestan *manyawa*, Pahlavi *mēnōy*) and 'that of living beings' (Young Avestan *gaēθiya*, Pahlavi *gētīy*) or 'that which has bones'.

The two spirits are demiurges, each establishing its own world (*Yasna* 57.17): "when the two spirits set in place (*dā-*) their creations (*dāman*): the Life-Giving Spirit and the Dark one." The first chapter of the *Videvdad* describes how Ahura Mazdā 'sculpted forth' the Aryan lands, after which the Dark Spirit 'whittled forth' natural plagues for each of them.

We now also find the *fravashi*s intimately involved in the creation processes. These are preexisting 'souls', of which each entity in the ordered cosmos (including all those in the world of thought) has one; but they are also Ahura Mazdā's assistants.

In the hymn to them (*Yasht* 13), the creation is described as a three-stage ordering process, in which, with their help, the creations are 'spread out and held up' (*vidāraya-*). First, Ahura Mazdā spread out the sky, the heavenly river Anāhitā, the earth, and sons in the wombs, arranging their body parts in orderly fashion. If the *fravashi*s had not aided him, we read, the Lie would have been in charge of the universe, but now waters flow, plants grow, and winds blow, and sons are born.

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72. The word *xwafna* means 'sleep' but has traditionally been thought to mean 'dream' (Persian 'see a sleep' = 'dream') in the sense of 'vision'.

Second, the *fravashi*s themselves spread out the sky, and so on, plus the cow. And, third, the Life-Giving Spirit spread out the sky, and so on, plus the *fravashi*s, themselves. This complex process is not well understood.

The assault of the Dark Spirit on Ahura Mazdā's creation is described in the same hymn: when he invaded the creation, the *fravashi*s formed a wall against him, and the Fire and Good Thought held him back so that he was unable to stop the waters from flowing, and so forth. Instead, the Dark Spirit was now trapped inside the sky, where he could be observed and his damage minimized (*Yasht* 13.76–78).

We should note that the identical terminology for "stretching out" the sky and the sons in the wombs shows that the creation process here was also thought of as a birth, as it also is in the Pahlavi texts. Here the process is also in three stages, but different from the Young Avestan stages: first, production of the world of thought; second, production of the world of living beings in the world of thought, developing like a fetus in the womb; and, third, the birth of the world of living beings into the world of living beings (*Bundahishn* 1.58–59):

> Ohrmazd nurtured his creation in the world of thought in such a way that it was in moisture, unthinking, unseizable/unseizing, unmoving, like semen. . . . After the mixture there was a *rolled-up lump, like a fetus. . . . Still, in the world of the living, they are formed in the womb of the mother and born and nurtured in that way.
>
> By establishing the creation, Ohrmazd is father and mother of the creation. For, when he nurtured the creation in the world of thought, that meant he was its mother. When he placed it in the world of the living, that meant he was its father.

In the Pahlavi texts, as in the *Old Avesta*, the creation was a primordial sacrifice (*Bundahishn* 3.23): "At Midday, Ohrmazd, together with the *amahrspand*s (Avestan *amesha spenta*s; see below) prepared the sacrifice (*yazishn*) in the world of thought. During the performance of the sacrifice, the creation (*dām*) was established (*dād*)."

Note on Translations

Already by Young Avestan times, the term *Ahura Mazdā* was probably no more than a name whose original meaning was no longer understood, and should not be translated, and *a fortiori* in the Old Persian inscriptions (*Ahuramazdā*). It is therefore inappropriate to render the name 'Wise Lord' for all periods, as is often done. In the *Young Avesta* and later, there is no adjective *mazdā* meaning 'wise' or similar, and it is doubtful whether *ahura* had any specific meaning. Pahlavi *Ohrmazd* cannot even be analyzed into two parts.

The Pahlavi terms *ahlaw* and *druwand* (Avestan *ashawan* and *drugwant*) probably meant, more or less, 'good' and 'evil, wicked' ('righteous' and 'unrighteous') in the sense of belonging to and supporting the good or evil creations, respectively.

The term *spenta*, literally, 'endowed with swelling (power)' or similar, which I render 'life-giving', is often rendered 'holy', a vague term in English. Translations such as 'Holy Spirit' for *spenta manyu* and 'Holy Immortals' for *amesha spenta*s (see below), Pahlavi *amahrspand*, are clearly inspired by Christian terminology. In Pahlavi, the word is rendered 'making/containing increase' (*abzōnīg*), hence also translations such as 'incremental'.

The term *saoshyant*, related to *spenta*, is often rendered 'Savior', implying similarity with the Judeo-Christian Messiah figure and providing the basis for a considerable literature on similarities between Zoroastrian and Christian eschatologies.

Finally, the creation verb *dā-* no longer existed in that meaning by the Achaemenid period, when it was translated into Akkadian as 'build' or 'give', after Old Persian *dā-* 'give'. What precisely it was thought to mean in Pahlavi we cannot tell.

The Yasna *as Reordering and Re-creation Ritual and the* Saoshyant

As we have seen, the ordered world was produced by Ahura Mazdā's cosmogonic sacrifice; Zarathustra then introduced it to men, who ever since have repeated it, thus playing a crucial role in the cosmogonic and eschatological events.

The principal sacrifice is the *yasna*, a morning ritual performed to put Ahura Mazdā back in command, for him to overcome chaos and reestablish his cosmos (*Yasna* 8.5–8),[73] that is, to reproduce the new day after a period of darkness.

The word *yasna* is derived from the verb *yaza-*, which means 'to sacrifice something (to)', in the technical sense of performing a ritual in which objects are consecrated and offered to god as countergifts for *his* gifts to the world in a complex procedure involving thoughts, words, and actions (compare with *mazda-yasna*).[74] To achieve this, the performers of the ritual construct a microcosmic replica of the cosmos that is

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73. See my "Avestan Yasna."
74. On the ritual gift-exchange in the *Avesta*, see A. Hintze, "'*Do ut des*': Patterns of Exchange in Zoroastrianism," *JRAS* 14 (2004) 27–45; and my "Gifts and Counter-Gifts in the Ancient Zoroastrian Ritual," in *Classical Arabic Humanities in Their Own Terms: Festschrift for Wolfhart Heinrichs on His 65th Birthday from His Students and Colleagues* (ed. M. Cooperson and B. Gruendler; Leiden: Brill, 2008) 493–520.

then offered up in sacrifice and, by its "sympathetic magic," contributes to the re-creation of the macrocosm.

In this construction, first the models (*ratus*) of all the individual entities of which the original creation in the world of thought consisted are named and accounted for: Ahura Mazdā and the Six Life-Giving Immortals; then the divisions of time + social divisions + their protective deities (Mithra, Rashnu, Sraosha, Ashi, and so on; see below); the fire/ sun, waters, plants; mountains, places, oceans, and so forth. Next, they are 'attached', perhaps to the ritual loom or to the sacrificial chariot that conveys them into the beyond; and, finally, they are sent on their way. The verb used is *āyese*, which is related to Old Indic *āyata* 'attached' found in the famous hymn *Rigveda* 130, in which the Fathers are preparing the loom on which the sacrifice is woven,[75] but the term is also used in the context of harnessing.

All these entities are the direct objects of the verb *yaza-*. By the traditional rendering of the verb as 'worship', obviously, the Zoroastrians would be credited with an inordinately large number of miscellaneous worshipable entities, which is precisely where the Rev. John Wilson aimed his criticism.[76] By retaining the intrinsic meaning of the verb as 'sacrifice' (something to somebody), this impression is revealed as one of language only, not of fact.

In the *Young Avesta*, the term *saoshyant* is applied to Zarathustra's three eschatological sons, who, according to the Pahlavi texts, will be born at thousand-year intervals after Zarathustra and, by their sacrifices, will bring the world closer to perfection. The last, the *saoshyant par excellence* (Pahlavi Sōshāns) is described in *Yasht*s 13 and 19 as 'he who shall make Order have bones'—that is, he who shall make Ahura Mazdā's ordered world a permanent living thing (Pahlavi: the Final Body), filled with vital juices (*frasha*). Together with his companions, he will raise the dead and deprive the Dark Spirit of command forever (*Yasht* 19.11–12, 92–96; *Bundahishn* 34.23).[77] In the Pahlavi texts, at the end of the world, Zarathustra then performs the last sacrifice in this world and Ohrmazd the last in the other world to produce the Final Body (*Dēnkard* 9.33.5, *Bundahishn* 34.29–30).

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75. See, for instance, W. D. O'Flaherty, trans., *The Rig Veda* (New York: Penguin, 1981) 33.

76. Wilson, *The Pársí Religion*, chap. 5.

77. See, e.g., J. R. Hinnells, "Zoroastrian Saviour Imagery and Its Influence on the New Testament," *Numen* 16/3 (1969) 161–85.

Gods in the Old Avesta *and the*
Life-Giving Immortals

Determining the pantheon of the *Old Avesta* is problematic.[78] The Old Avestan *Gāθās* and the *Yasna Haptanghāiti* are hymns addressed to Ahura Mazdā and his creation, and mention of other deities is not necessarily expected. Moreover, the allusive and cryptic nature of the *Gāθās* makes it difficult, if not impossible, to determine which of the Young Avestan divinities are already present there.

Throughout the 20th century, the pervasive notion among Iranists that Zarathustra, as a strict monotheist, had rejected all gods other than Ahura Mazdā therefore led them to reject or explain away any possible mentions of deities in the *Old Avesta*. For instance, at the end of the *Old Avesta*, Airyaman (the Old Indic Aryaman) is invited, presumably in his function as healer of the world (*Yasna* 54.1): "Let speedy Airyaman come here for support for [our] men and women, for the support of Zarathustra's good thought, by which [his] *daēnā* may gain a well-deserved fee." Since the divinity of Airyaman is relatively explicit in this strophe, this was long taken as proof that the strophe was not composed by "Zarathustra himself."

Sraosha and Ashi (see below) are mentioned several times in terms that suggest that they are more than common nouns, and Sraosha, in particular, appears to have the same function as in the *Young Avesta* (*Yasna*s 31.4, 43.12).[79] In addition, there are other *ahura*s 'lords' (and *ahurānī*'s 'ladies') besides Ahura Mazdā in the *Old Avesta*.

The most prominent entities other than Ahura Mazdā mentioned in the *Old Avesta* are the Life-Giving Immortals, which are Ahura Mazdā's first creations in the *Young Avesta*: Good Thought, *Vohu Manah* (Pahlavi *Wahman*); Best Order, *Asha Vahishta* (Pahlavi *Ashwahisht*, *Ardwahisht*); Well-Deserved Command, *Khshathra Vairiya* (Pahlavi *Shahrewar*); Life-Giving Humility, *Spentā Ārmaiti* (Pahlavi *Spandārmad*); Wholeness, *Haurwatāt* (Pahlavi *Hordad*); Immortality, *Amertatāt* (Pahlavi *Amurdad*)

In the *Old Avesta*, some of the six are personified: "Then the fashioner of the cow asks Order" (*Yasna* 29.2). Several of them were Ahura Mazdā's children: "the father of Good Thought, which invigorates, while his daughter is Humility of good works" (*Yasna* 45.4); "*He* is the father of Order, he, the All-knowing One" (*Yasna* 47.2). In my opinion, these were all generated by Ahura Mazdā as part of his primordial sacrifice, and their functions are the following.

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78. See J. Kellens, *Le panthéon de l'Avesta ancien* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1994).
79. See my "*Videvdad*," 124–26; and "Smashing Urine," 274–77.

Good Thought was the ordering agent of the sacrifice and, probably, the birth tissue (the sky) inside which the new existence developed.[80] Traditionally, 'good thought' has been interpreted as an "ethical" term, but this is an assumption based on another, that Zarathustra imbued his terminology with "ethics." The term is also rendered 'good intent', but nowhere is this sort of meaning suggested by the context. Rather, the triads thoughts, words, actions and thinking good thoughts, speaking good words, performing good actions show clearly that the meaning is 'thought', which, no doubt, was the (oral) poet-sacrificer's most treasured possession.

Best Order is the cosmic order that is reestablished by the successful ritual and that is seen in the sunlit heavenly spaces.

The Well-Deserved or Worthy (royal) Command is the reward for the successful sacrifice, which places Ahura Mazdā in command. It appears in various shapes in the scholarly literature. For 'well-deserved', we often see 'to be chosen', which is an etymological translation; the word is used about rewards for well-performed rituals, however, and never has verbal function ('to be chosen *by* somebody'). The term 'command' is sometimes rendered 'dominion', but it never means 'realm' as a political or geographical entity, nor does it ever refer to an eschatological 'kingdom', as sometimes suggested.[81]

Life-Giving Humility is the Earth, explicitly so in the *Young Avesta* and the Pahlavi Books. Once her father (and, presumably, spouse), Ahura Mazdā, is in command, she begins her works to produce all good things for mankind. The term, *ārmaiti*, is variously rendered 'right-mindedness' or similar. My rendering as 'Humility' is based on her function as the obedient daughter and spouse of Ahura Mazdā and her association with the earth; and the similar semantic development of English *humble* from Latin *humilis* from *humus* 'earth'.

Literally, Wholeness and Immortality probably refer to the qualities of not having defects and not dying before one's time, but they also represent the beneficial effects of the sacrifice in the form of rain and the growth of plants and are the rewards of the good (*Yasht* 1.25).

Gods in the Young Avesta

Among the entities inhabiting the other world were numerous gods, all endowed with specific roles in the functioning of the ordered cosmos.

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80. See idem, "Poetic and Cosmic Weaving in Ancient Iran," 270–72.
81. See, for instance, Moulton, *Early Zoroastrianism*, 156–57; H. Lommel, *Die Religion Zarathustras nach dem Awesta dargestellt* (Tübingen: Mohr, 1930) 55–57.

The term for a male deity was *yazata*, literally, 'someone worthy of sacrifice', from the verb *yaza-*.[82] It is found only once in the *Old Avesta*, referring to Ahura Mazdā, but in the *Young Avesta* it is the common epithet of all important male divine beings other than Ahura Mazdā, especially Mithra, but also the earth (*zam*). The term also refers generally to all those worthy of sacrifice in the two worlds, and its meaning is therefore 'god' in the same sense that this term is applied, for instance, to the Indian and Greek and Roman pantheons.

Among the most important deities of the Young Avestan pantheon are Anāhitā, the great goddess of the heavenly waters, also in charge of procreation; the great god Mithra, who fought the powers of darkness to give the sun a free path to travel across the sky (identified with Venus by the Greeks); Sraosha (originally 'readiness to listen', men to gods, gods to men), the principal opponent of Wrath, the embodiment of the dark night sky; and his female companion *Ashi*, Mithra's charioteer, as well as Zarathustra's(?);[83] and Airyaman, the divine healer. Other *yazata*s included the sun and moon, the star Tishtriya (Sirius), the ritual plant Haoma, as well as Zarathustra (see *Yasna* 16.1–2) and numerous others (*Yasht* 6.1):

> We sacrifice to the radiant Sun with fleet horses, immortal, resplendent. When he makes the sun shine with light . . . those worthy of sacrifice in the world of thought stand by hundreds and thousands. . . . They apportion that Fortune (*xwarnah*) over the earth set in place by Ahura Mazdā.

Several deities listed in the *Yasna* have individual rituals devoted to them. Of special interest in our context are the statements in the hymns that certain deities were established as equal to Ahura Mazdā, for example: "I established, O Spitāma Zarathustra, yonder star Tishtriya, as great in sacrifice-worthiness . . . as even me, Ahura Mazdā" (*Yasht* 8.50). Ahura Mazdā also instituted the sacrifice to them in order to strengthen them, by sacrificing to them as the first in the world of thought, and exhorts Zarathustra to do the same in the world of the living: "I, Ahura Mazdā, shall sacrifice to Tishtriya . . . with a sacrifice in which his name is spoken. I shall bring him the strength of ten horses" (*Yasht* 8.25).

In the *Young Avesta*, as well, several of the gods and goddesses are children of Ahura Mazdā and Spentā Ārmaiti (e.g., *Yasht* 17.16), and they are all in Ahura Mazdā's house (*Yasht* 1.25).

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82. There is no corresponding female **yazatā*. Old Avestan *gnā* 'woman' may refer to female 'deities'.

83. See my "Zarathustra in the Avesta and in Manicheism" and "Eastern Iranian Epic Traditions III."

Gods in the Achaemenid and Sasanian Inscriptions

In the Achaemenid inscriptions of Darius, Xerxes, and their successors, Ahura Mazdā is the one who ordered the cosmos, but he is also said to be the greatest among the gods (*baga*) and the kings' special protector. Other gods are not mentioned by name until the inscriptions of Artaxerxes II and Artaxerxes III (359–338 B.C.E.), where Anāhitā and Mithra are invoked, as well. The Persepolis tablets and personal names, for instance, in the Aramaic letters from Elephantine, confirm that the Achaemenid pantheon was quite crowded and included the Avestan deities.

The Sasanian royal and private inscriptions of the third century C.E. tell the same story. All the kings refer to themselves as *mazdēsn*, but Shapur I (239/40–270/272), in his great inscription, does not mention Ohrmazd by name and, in the exhortatory epilogue of the inscription, he recommends the service of the gods (*yazd* from *yazata*) in general, with none specified. According to their investiture reliefs at Naqsh-e Rostam and Naqsh-e Rajab near Persepolis, Ardashir (224–239/40), Shapur, and the others, however, all received the diadems from Ohrmazd. Differently, Shapur's youngest son, Narseh (293–302), in his inscription at Paikuli, mentions Ohrmazd, Anāhīd the Lady (from Anāhitā), and "all the gods"[84] and, in his relief, receives the diadem from Anāhīd. Among later kings, in the investiture reliefs at Tāq-e Bostān, Shapur II (309–379) receives the diadem from Ohrmazd in the presence of Mihr (Mithra), while Ardashir II (379–383) receives his from Ohrmazd in the presence of Anāhīd.

The Sasanian high priest Kerdir (Kartir, etc.) was a priest (*ēhrbed*) already in about 240 C.E. under Shapur I and was still in office as "*mowbed* [high priest] of Ohrmazd" when Narseh became king.[85] He left several inscriptions, the best preserved on the Ka'ba of Zardosht at Naqsh-e Rostam.[86] These are the only indigenous contemporary religious texts from the Sasanian period, and in them, Kerdir refers to "the gods" and "Ohrmazd and the (other) gods" and to himself as being in "the services to Ohrmazd and the gods," quoting his title as Kerdir, High Priest of Ohrmazd, "after the name of Ohrmazd the god." He was also placed in charge of the fire to Anāhīd, however, dedicated to the goddess by Ardashir I.

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84. P. O. Skjærvø, *The Sassanian Inscription of Paikuli*, part 3/1: *Restored Text and Translation* (with H. Humbach; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1983) 35.

85. Ibid., 41.

86. D. N. MacKenzie, "Kerdir's Inscription," in *The Sasanian Rock Reliefs at Naqsh-i Rustam* (ed. G. Herrmann; Iranische Denkmäler: Lieferung 13. Reihe II: Iranische Felsreliefs I; Berlin: Reimer, 1989) 35–72.

Sasanian Dualism Defended

Sasanian Orthodoxy and Heresy: Zurvanism?

Some time before the third century C.E., Ahura Mazdā apparently merged with the Life-Giving Spirit, making him de facto the Dark Spirit's brother. This appears to have prompted two lines of thought: One tried to separate them, which led to the standard narrative of the Pahlavi Books, in which Ohrmazd and Ahrimen exist from eternity, and both give birth to and establish their separate creations. The other line logically led to the question who the progenitor was. Because one of the few entities in the Young Avestan system, conceivably a preexisting god, was eternal Time (Zruwan, Pahlavi Zurwān), one logical conclusion was that the progenitor may have been Time, around whom a myth evolved commonly referred to as the Zurvanite myth.[87]

In line with early Christian ways of thinking, it has frequently been proposed that there were movements within Zoroastrianism in the early Sasanian period, and even before, that deviated from orthodoxy. Needless to say, it is difficult enough to determine what orthodoxy (in the sense of an officially agreed-upon version of the religion) was in a highly underdocumented period of the religion, and proving heresy is even harder.

Nevertheless, the notion that Ohrmazd and his evil counterpart were twins, born from the same womb (see above) was explicitly proscribed by the Sasanian Zoroastrian theologians, as recorded in book nine of the *Dēnkard* (book 9, commentary on *Yasna* 30.3–6): "About the utterance of Zarathustra about how the demon Arsh shouted to mankind: 'Ohrmazd and Ahrimen are brothers in one womb.'" The proscription is attested indirectly even earlier, however—namely, in two Manichean texts, the more famous in a Middle Persian polemical hymn (M 28 I): "And they say that Ohrmezd and Ahrimen are brothers. And on account of this speech they will come to destruction."[88] This means that this version of the myth probably dates back to the early Sasanian centuries, perhaps even to the time of Mani (d. ca. 276 C.E.) himself and thus also of Kerdir.

Zurwān was also chosen by Mani or his followers as the name of the Father of Greatness, the supreme deity in Manicheism. From this, some Zoroastrian scholars have concluded that the early Sasanians were in

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87. In the *Young Avesta*, Zruwan is only mentioned together with other great cosmic deities: Vayu, the space intermediate between the two worlds, and Thwāsha, the firmament (e.g., *Yasna* 72.10).

88. Henning, *Zoroaster*, 50; P. O. Skjærvø, "The Manichean Polemical Hymns in M 28 I," *Bulletin of the Asia Institute* 9 (1995 [pub. 1997]) 245.

fact Zurvanites, but there is no good reason for this conclusion. On the one hand, Zurwān is not mentioned in the Sasanian inscriptions; on the other hand, Mani's deities, although bearing Zoroastrian names, rarely have exactly the same function as their Zoroastrian namesakes. Mani may have chosen Zurwān because of his remote nature in Zoroastrianism, where he plays a very small part in the texts. He had assigned the name of Ohrmazd to his First Man, who went to do battle with the powers of evil, which is one of the functions of Ohrmazd in Zoroastrianism, and so he needed another name for his Father and chose Zurwān.

The Zurvanite speculation must have existed, however, since it was proscribed, but it was not necessarily a new line of thought but something that followed logically in the way the ancient Old Avestan myth of the "two twin sleeps" developed over time and was interpreted in Zoroastrian thought.[89]

Sasanian Polemics in the Pahlavi Books

Since this essay focuses on pre-Islamic Zoroastrianism, I cannot discuss in any detail controversies from the Muslim period, and a few references must suffice.

Among the issues frequently brought up is the issue of the ontological nature of Ahrimen. In the Pahlavi texts, Ohrmazd and Ahrimen have both always been and are, but only Ohrmazd will be—that is, after the original existence is permanently renewed at the end of time; but Ahrimen is also said to have no existence in the world of the living, only in the other world.[90]

There are also polemical texts from the Sasanian and Islamic periods, in which Zoroastrian priests discuss the merit and tenability of the position of Mazdaism versus the merits and tenability of other religions.[91] One example is a short text about a dispute between the heretic Abālish

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89. See also S. Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran* (Jordan Lectures 1991; London: School of Oriental and African Studies, 1994) 15–22.

90. See S. Shaked, "Some Notes on Ahreman, the Dark Spirit, and His Creation," in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion, Presented to Gershom G. Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends* (ed. E. E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and C. Wirszubski; Jerusalem: Magnes, 1967) 227–34; H.-P. Schmidt, "The Non-Existence of Ahreman and the Mixture (*gumēzišn*) of Good and Evil," in *Second International Congress Proceedings* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1906) 79–95.

91. The best-known of these texts is the 9th-century Doubt-Breaking Explanations (Shkand-gumānīg wizār) by Mardānfarrokh son of Ohrmazddād. See J. de Menasce, *Une apologétique mazdéenne du ixᵉ siècle, Škand-gumānīk Vičār, la solution décisive des doutes: Texte pazand-pehlevi transcrit, traduit et commenté* (Collectanea Friburgensia: Publications de l'Université de Fribourg en Suisse n.s. 30; Fribourg, 1945). ET available at avesta.org.

and a *mowbed* at the court of al-Ma'mūn. The first of seven questions asked by Abālish is "Who created water and fire?" The *mowbed* answers: "Ohrmazd." Question: "Then, why do they strike and kill one another?" Answer: "There is nothing created by Ohrmazd to which Ahrimen has not brought an adversary, and it is the adversary in the water or fire that strikes and kills, for which we should not blame the water and fire themselves." With this answer, the text says, Ma'mūn was very pleased, and there are no additional questions regarding the existence of Ahrimen or how he was permitted to do what he did.

Was Zoroastrianism a Monotheism?

Returning to our original questions, I think we can state with confidence that there was no revolutionary reformer, hence no reform or monotheism, and thus also no revolutionary monotheism in ancient Iran.

Determining what Zoroastrianism was is less simple. After all, it originated some four millennia ago, during which the cosmology developed with changing ideas about the cosmos. The dualist position was not abandoned or questioned until after the Arab conquest, and even then the Sasanian priests emphasized the lack of logic in having to ascribe the origins of evil and imperfection to a supremely good and omnipotent god.

The pantheon was never eliminated, and Zoroastrianism, in some sense at least, remained a polytheistic religion throughout its history, although, today, the many deities have lost their individual divine character and are worshiped not for themselves but as god's creations or have been reinterpreted as allegories or symbols. Thus, modern Zoroastrianism is probably best described as monotheistic, certainly as monotheistic as Christianity with its Trinity and angels, though less monotheistic than Judaism and Islam.

In the end, although stringent terminology is useful, to me categorizing seems less important than describing as accurately as possible the form of the system in the various periods, which is still very much a work in progress. Young Avestan and Old Persian Zoroastrianism is certainly a monotheism in the sense of henotheism but not in the sense of Christian monotheism, and there is dualism in the cosmogony and the cosmology. Obviously, any single term is not going to give a complete idea of the nature of Zoroastrianism.