



ĀB-ZŌHR

ĀB-ZŌHR “offering of water,” the Middle Persian form of a Zoroastrian technical term, Av. *Ape zaoθra*. Currently, the Irani Zoroastrians speak of *āb-zōr* (Dari, with metathesis, *ōw-rūz*), while the Parsis use a half-Gujarati expression, *zor-melavvi* “giving the offering.”

Making the offering of water is the culminating rite of the main Zoroastrian act of worship, the *yasna*; and preparing and consecrating it is at the center of the rituals of the second part of this service. The offering is compounded of the pith of dried *haoma/hōm* twigs and the sap of fresh pomegranate leaves (expressed by pounding in a mortar), together with milk. Consecrated water is also added, but these three ingredients seem to be the essential ones, representing as they do plants and animals, which depend for their survival on water and thus, symbolically, return to it the life it has given them. In Avestan the offering is described accordingly as “possessing *haoma*, possessing milk, possessing pomegranate” (*zaoθra haomavaiti gaomavaiti haānaēpatavaiti*, Y. 66.1 et passim). It is also called the *parahaoma*, Mid. Pers. *Parāhōm*, and sometimes, in Middle Persian, the *hōm-zōhr* (*Bundahišn*, p. 91.1); also more briefly (when the meaning is clear from the context), simply *hōm* or *zōhr* (e.g., *Zātspram* 19.3; *Mēnōg ī xrad* 62.2-3).

During the Sasanian times the word *zōhr* came evidently to be pronounced *zōr* “offering” and *zōr* “strength,” as in the following Manichean Middle Persian texts (in which Zoroastrian imagery is being used): “I am the water which is fit that you should give me the offering to water, that I may become strong” (*an hēm āb īg passazag ku-m āb-zōhr dayād ku zōrmand bawān*, M 95 V; for the



Manichean fragments, see Boyce, *Cat. Man. Script.*); “he carries the offering to the water, and gives it power so that it becomes strong” (*barēd zōhr ō āb u-š tad nērōg ku bawād zōrmand*, M 653). The belief that by the offering the vital creation of water, which sustains all living things, is made “stronger,” that is purer and more abundant, invests the giving of the *āb-zōhr* with great significance. According to tradition, Zoroaster received his revelation at a river bank, after drawing pure water for the *haoma* ceremony (*Zātspram* 21.1). It is said that he regularly made the offering to water (*hōm ō āb rīxtan*), as one of the most meritorious of actions (*ibid.*, 19.2-3); and in Zoroastrian cosmogony Ahura Mazdā is represented as saying to the spirits of the three great rivers of the world, which dread their inevitable pollution, “I shall create one [i.e., Zoroaster] who will pour the *hōm-zōhr* into you and cleanse you again” (*Bundahišn*, p. 91.1).

That the offering is given to water to purify it is clearly stated in the *yasna* liturgy, *Y.* 68.1: “This shall we give thee, O wife of Ahura [i.e., the Water], for averting [?] that injury which we have done thee. These offerings, possessing *haoma*, possessing milk, possessing pomegranate, shall compensate thee, O wife of Ahura” (*aētaṭ te ahurāne aiṅhe avayam dāmahī yaṭ θwā didvišma. aēša zaoθra paiti.jamyāṭ tava ahurahe hoamavaiti gaomavaiti haḍānāēpatavaiti*). The concept that the offering was given to compensate for human pollution made *āb-zōhr* an appropriate atonement to impose upon anyone who was known to have harmed water in any way. So in *Vendidad* 14.4 it is enjoined that a man who has killed a water animal—an otter—shall “as atonement for his soul” (*urne čīθīm*) give *zaothras* to the “good waters.” The *āb-zōhr* is also imposed as part of a general penance in *Vendidad* 18.72. As an atonement the rite was also performed as part of the preparation for meeting one’s end, and in a passage in the *Dēnkard* (8.25.24; ed. Sanjana, XVI, p. 12), which is derived from the Avesta, “carrying the offering to the water nearest to the battlefield,” (*zōhr-barišnīh ī āb ī kārezār gyār nazdtar*) is prescribed for soldiers before a fight.

It is probable that on such a solemn occasion the offering envisaged was the threefold *parāhōm*, duly consecrated in a *yasna* service by the priests accompanying the army. A sacred precinct or *pavi* could be swiftly made on any flat, clean piece of ground; and after the service had been solemnized there, the priests would leave the precinct and, avoiding contact with any impurity, carry the *parāhōm* in a covered vessel to the nearest source of pure water, a spring or running stream or well. There the offering would be made



ritually, in three pourings, with the recital of Avesta. This is the observance also at a fire temple (which must therefore always be built near a source of water).

In addition to the *āb-zōhr* consecrated in the *yasna* ceremony, a simpler offering to water is still made by conservative Zoroastrians in the orthodox villages of Yazd. For this too the libation consists of three ingredients, as for the *parāhōm*, again milk and two things from the vegetable kingdom, such as marjoram leaves, rose petals, or the fruits of the oleaster (*senjed*) tree. The latter are simply placed in a bowl of milk, with no elaborate preparation such as is necessary in the *haoma* ceremony. In present usage the offering is prepared, with strict purity, by a lay person, who takes it to the village priest. The priest then carries it to the bank of a stream, and there makes a slow, ritual libation, dropping the liquid by the spoonful into the water, while reciting the *Drōn-e āb-zōhr* (Dari, *Drīn-e ōw-zūr*). In an old orthodox community this rite is performed on behalf of nearly every Zoroastrian household twice a year, in the months of Ardibehišt and Āḍar (which, being dedicated to *yazatas* of fire, are especially sacred, so that to perform pious acts during them is highly meritorious). It is often carried out, at any time that seems fit, on behalf of a dead person to atone for possible sins committed by him in life against water; and it may be done also by a living person who is aware of having polluted water.

In India the practice of making offerings to water (apart from the *zor-melavvi* of the *yasna* ceremony) somewhat resembled similar Hindu customs, and so in the 19th century it came to be frowned on by reformists as an alien usage. Nevertheless, the more conservative Parsis continued to maintain the *palli* ritual, which approximates the lay *āb-zōhr* of Iran, down to the present century. This consists of casting a threefold offering of sweetballs (*palli*), coconut candy, and flowers into the waters of a river or the sea. The rite was performed by women, but at the feast of Ābān Ardisūr, that is, on the day of Ābān of the month Ābān, a more general threefold offering of coconut, sugar, and flowers was made by men also.



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