



AHRIMAN

AHRIMAN (Avestan: Angra/Anra Mainyu; not attested in Old Persian), demon, God's adversary in the Zoroastrian religion. He seems to have been an original conception of Zoroaster's; and the scanty evidence in the Gathas on this point may perhaps be supplemented from later sources. But the notion of Ahriman did not remain unchanged through the centuries. In the Gathas Angra Mainyu is the direct opposite of Spənta Mainyu; both spirits are essentially actors in the primeval choice, a great drama dominating the life of man and the destiny of the world. This feature, the drama of the choice, is missing in the cosmogonies in the Pahlavi books, where Ahriman serves as the negative counterpart, not of the other spirit, but of God, Ohrmazd. Other variations in the concept of Ahriman were due to heresy, or to differences in the level of culture or intelligence. At one end of the spectrum it is said that, since Ohrmazd *is*, then Ahriman is not, i.e., has no material existence. At the other end, on the level of folktale, there is the story of Ahriman transformed into a horse and ridden for thirty years by Taxma Urupi. The following review of the evidence is chronological so far as is possible.

The Gathas. The name Angra Mainyu appears only once (Y. 45.2), when the "more bounteous of the spirits twain" declares his absolute antithesis to the "evil" one in all things. The same spirit is intended (Y. 30.3) as one of the twin spirits who made the great choice, although the epithet used there is *aka* ("evil"); this same epithet recurs in Y. 32.5, when Aka Mainyu is apostrophized with all the *daēvas* who have deceived mankind and themselves. The *daēvas* are said (Y. 32.3) to be the offspring, not of Angra Mainyu, but of Akəm Manah



(“evil thinking”). But in Y. 30.6 it is the “deceiver,” *dābaaman*, most probably Angra Mainyu, who induces them to choose *acištəm manah* (“The worst thinking”). The abode of the wicked in the hereafter is said (Y. 32.13) to be the abode of this same “worst thinking,” not of Angra Mainyu. One would have expected the latter to reign in hell, since he had created “death and how, at the end, the worst existence shall be for the deceitful” (Y. 30.4).

It can be deduced from a comparison with India that there must have existed in Iranian belief, before Zoroaster, gods and demons, notably demons of death. Among the great gods was Vayu, an ancient god (perhaps already Indo-European according to Abaev [see bibliog.]), ambiguous like Roman Janus and liable to split into two opposites. There existed also tales, if not myths, of the birth of wonderful twins. Zoroaster, who propounded belief in one supreme god, yet wanted to explain the existence of evil—a fact of life—as a consequence of free choice. The myth of the Twin Spirits is a model he set for the choice every person is called upon to make. It can not be doubted that both are sons of Ahura Mazdā, since they are explicitly said to be twins, and we learn from Y. 47.2-3 that Ahura Mazdā is the father of one of them. Before choosing, neither of them was wicked. There is therefore nothing shocking in Angra Mainyu’s being a son of Ahura Mazdā, and there is no need to resort to the improbable solution that Zoroaster was speaking figuratively. That Ohrmazd and Ahriman’s brotherhood was later considered an abominable heresy is a different matter; Ohrmazd had by then replaced the Bounteous Spirit; and there was no trace any more, in the orthodox view, of the primeval choice, perhaps the prophet’s most original conception.

The Seven Chapters. Whereas Ahura Mazdā was said in the Gathas (Y. 44.5) to have created both light and darkness, he appears in one of the Seven Chapters (Y. 37.1) as the creator of “light and the earth and all good things.” From this it can be inferred that the creator of darkness was Angra Mainyu.

The Younger Avesta. Vd. 19.47, Yt. 15.43, and *Aogāmadaēca* 28 place Angra Mainyu’s sojourn in the nether world, a world of darkness. According to Vd. 19.1 and 44, he dwells in the north, the region of the *daēvas*.

Angra Mainyu is the chief of all the *daēvas* and is called (Vd. 19.1, 43-44) *daēvanqm daēvō* “the *daēva* of *daēvas*.” This expression probably imitates the title of the Achaemenid rulers, “king of kings.” But the superlative *daēvō.tama* is not attributed to him but to the demon Paitiša (“opponent,” at the end of an enumeration in Vd. 19.43 beginning with Angra Mainyu), who is also called



daēva of *daēvas*. Nowhere is Angra Mainyu said to be the creator of the *daēvas* or their father.

The fight between the two spirits for the possession of *xʷarənah* is recounted in *Yt.* 19.46ff.; in *Y.* 57.17 and elsewhere the two of them are said to have created the world. But the *Vendidad*, in its first chapter, gives a different picture; here it is Ahura Mazdā's creation, not Spənta Mainyu's, which is challenged by Angra Mainyu's counter-creation. To the creation of each of the sixteen countries by Ahura Mazdā, Angra Mainyu replies by creating some evil being, illness, scourge, or vice. This shift in the position of Ahura Mazdā, his total assimilation to this Bounteous Spirit, must have taken place in the 4th century B.C. at the latest; for it is reflected in Aristotle's testimony, which confronts Ariemānos with Oromazdes (*apud* Diogenes Laertius, 1.2.6).

At the beginning of creation, the recital of the *Ahuna Vairya* prayer by Ahura Mazdā put Angra Mainyu to flight (*Y.* 19. 15). Angra Mainyu created Aži Dahāka (*Y.* 9.8); but he recoiled in fear from Mithra's mace (*Yt.* 10.97 and 134). He broke into Aša's creation (*Yt.* 13.77) but had to flee from the face of the earth (*Yt.* 17.19) when Zoroaster was born. He nevertheless tempted the prophet, promising him the sovereignty of the world, if he would only reject the faith of Mazdā (*Vd.* 19.6ff.). On Zoroaster's refusal, he let loose legions of demons to assail him, but Zoroaster scattered them in flight (*Vd.* 19.46-47). He seeks to prevent the waters from flowing and the plants from maturing, but the Fravašis are a defense against him (*Yt.* 13.12-13, 71, 78) and he can not destroy Tištrya (*Yt.* 8.44). In the final struggle, he will be vanquished and reduced to impotence (*Yt.* 19.96). The grotesque episode of Taxma Urupi riding Angra Mainyu for thirty years is mentioned twice in the Avesta (*Yt.* 15.12, 19.29).

Zurvanism. Almost simultaneously with the appearance of the Ahura Mazdā-Angra Mainyu opposition, the question arose of their origin. Zurvanism was an answer to that question. Eudemos of Rhodes, a contemporary of Aristotle, is quoted by Damascius (5th-6th century A.D.), who was asking himself what Intellect or the All-Infinite might have been for the ancient Iranians. Eudemos said that, for some, it was Time, for others, Space, from which Ohrmazd and Ahriman proceeded, or else light and darkness before these (text in C. Clemen, *Fontes Historiae Religionis Persicae*, Bonn, 1920, p. 95). Zurvanism must have spread fairly widely in Iran from then on; when an orthodoxy tried under the first Sasanians to define and assert itself, with Tōsar and Kirdēr as its champions, the chief heresy it probably had to combat was Zurvanism. Some



Zurvanite features were retained and incorporated into Mazdean dogma. This is one reason why Zurvanism should be dealt with before orthodoxy, whose documents, the Pahlavi books, are very late. Another reason is that an ancient detail of Zoroastrian theology which was to disappear from orthodoxy survived in Zurvanism, namely that Ahriman is evil by choice. “It is not,” he says, “that I can not create anything good, but that I will not.” And to prove this, he created the peacock. The 5th-century Armenian Christian writer, Eznik of Kolb, comments: “He is evil through his own wish, not from the fact of his birth” (Eznik, *De Deo* 2.8 [ed. Paris, 1924]). A Manichean fragment proves the relatively early date of the Zurvanite theology: “They say Ohrmazd and Ahriman are brothers; in consequence of this doctrine they will meet with their destruction” (cited in Zaehner, *Zurvan*, p. 431). Eznik of Kolb depicts Zurvan at the beginning of things, offering sacrifices for a thousand years in order to obtain a progeny. Giving birth to twins, one good, bright, and sweet-scented (Ohrmazd), the other evil, dark, and foul-smelling (Ahriman), he divides the sovereignty between them. Ahriman will be king of the world, but Ohrmazd will, as a priest, be above Ahriman (see Zaehner, *Zurvan*, pp. 419-29).

Ahriman’s genesis is accounted for more precisely. When Zurvan was making his offerings, he had a doubt as to the efficacy of his action; from this doubt Ahriman was born. The Syriac author Theodore Abū Qorra says about the same thing; and other sects, whose beliefs were recorded by Šahrestānī (tr. Haarbrücker, Leipzig, 1923, I, pp. 277ff.; Zaehner, *Zurvan*, pp. 433-35), taught, not very differently, that there is always something evil with God, either an evil thought or an evil corruption, and that this is the origin of Satan. According to the Gayōmartīya, Ahriman was a creature of God and not eternal like him. He sprang from a doubt of God (see S. S. Hartman, *Gayōmart*, Uppsala, 1953). Once born, the twins proceed each to produce his own creation. Ohrmazd created the heavens and the earth and all things that are beautiful and good; but Ahriman created the demons and all that is evil and perverse. Ohrmazd created riches, Ahriman poverty.

The next step, not recounted in any Zurvanite source but plausibly reconstructed from orthodox ones, is the treaty or pact between Ohrmazd and Ahriman, by which they were to fight for 9,000 years. According to orthodoxy (*Bundahišn* 12) Ohrmazd proposed the period to Ahriman, who accepted the challenge. *Mēnōg ī Xrad* (ed. F. C. Andreas, Kiel, 1882) 8.9, on the contrary, relates that it was “Ahriman who for 9,000 years made a treaty with Ohrmazd,” adding, most significantly, that this happened through Infinite



Time. This is more frankly stated by Zātspram (*Selections* 34, 35) who says that it was Zurvan who suggested the treaty to Ahriman. We are not told that he suggested it to Ohrmazd also, but we do know from the orthodox version (*Bundahišn* 1.12) that Ohrmazd, when his offer of peace to Ahriman was rejected, realized there was only one expedient—to fix a time for battle. He must, in other words, resort to Time. Only the Zurvanite theory, therefore, seems to make sense; for it is difficult to see why Ohrmazd should have found it necessary to offer a treaty to Ahriman at all, if he knew the battle would end with his victory; whereas in the Zurvanite speculation it is Zurvan who divides the power between his sons, Ohrmazd and Ahriman. Perhaps the notion of the millennia also was essentially Zurvanite, since the ascription of the whole history of the world to a fixed number of years—and to a number of millennia corresponding to that of the signs of the zodiac—does seem to imply a recognition of Time as almighty.

Another interesting, unorthodox episode about Ahriman is recorded by several sources: “When Ahriman saw,” writes Eznik (loc. cit.) “that Ohrmazd had created beautiful creatures, yet knew not how to create light, he took counsel with the demons, and said: . . .” “If he were wise, he would go in unto his mother, and the Sun would be born as his son; and he would have intercourse with his sister, and the Moon would be born.”” This story too seems Zurvanite, for the Manichean fragment, cited above as condemning those who think Ohrmazd and Ahriman are brothers, goes on to say that a demon taught Ohrmazd to make the world light. Another myth, attested only in the Syriac *Acts of Adurhormizd and Anahid*, recounts that Ahriman, when the water came up to him, said to Ohrmazd: “Your animals should not drink of my water.” Ohrmazd is perplexed, till a demon inspires him to reply: “Take away the water from my earth.” Then the frog, created by Ahriman, drinks up all the water, and Ohrmazd is once again distressed, till Ahriman’s creatures come to his aid. A fly enters the frog’s nose and makes it vomit the water. Notable here is the encroachment on Ohrmazd’s almightiness and the correction of Ahriman’s stupidity. In the light of such notions, it will appear not quite unreasonable that Ahriman should sometimes have been rendered a cult.

The Cult of Ahriman. That there existed Ahriman worshippers is attested by Plutarch and in a *Dēnkard* passage. The former (*Isis and Osiris* 46) says that Zoroaster taught the Persians to sacrifice to Areimanios “offerings for averting ill, and things of gloom. For, pounding in a mortar a herb called omomi, they



invoke Hades and darkness; then having mingled it with the blood of a slaughtered wolf, they bear it forth into a sunless place and cast it away.” And the *Dēnkard* (p. 182.6) says: “The perverted, devilish, unrighteous rite of the “mystery of the sorcerers” consists in praising Ahriman, the destroyer.” Such a cult must have passed to the mysteries of Mithra, where dedications are found *Deo Arimanio*. The possibility of statues of Ahriman will be discussed below.

The Dead Sea Scrolls; Satan. There is a parallel, though probably no historical connection, between the Iranian myth and the doctrine of the two Spirits taught in the *Manual of Discipline* (tr. T. H. Gaster, *The Dead Sea Scrolls*, 3rd ed., New York, 1976, pp. 44-65). Yet Iranian influence, especially during and after the exile of the Jews in Babylonia, may very well have helped in bringing about the change in the conception of Satan from a servant of God (e.g., in Zechariah, 3:1ff.) to his adversary. Satan’s promotion is conspicuous in two successive versions of one and the same episode: II Samuel 24 recounts how God’s wrath was unleashed against Israel and how he prompted David to a census of his people. In I Chronicles 21 Satan has taken the place of God: “And Satan stood up against Israel, and provoked David to number Israel.”

Manicheism. Although of Gnostic origin (like the other aspects of Manichean religion), the Manichean devil owes a good deal to Iran, including his name. For example, “Āz, Ahrmēn, the *dēvs* and *parīgs* will be imprisoned forever” (*Mir. Man.* I, p. 184). Un-Iranian, on the contrary, is the myth of Āz forming man with a soul out of Ohrmizd’s substance but a body out of Ahrmēn’s (W. Sundermann, *Berliner Turfantexte* IV, Berlin, 1973, lines 1351ff.). In Sogdian, the name corresponding to Ahrmēn is Šimnu. E.g., “When God was fighting maleficent Šimnu . . .” (T II S 20); the conception is the same. The name appears in the Talmud (Sanhedrin 39a) under the form *’hwrmyn* and among the Buriats under the form Arima.

Pahlavi Texts. The name *’hl(y)mn*, Ahriman, is often written upside down as a sign of contempt and disgust. Very frequently it is replaced by Gan(n)āk Mēnōg, “the Stinking Spirit.” Apparently evil smell is emphasized because it belongs to death, illness, filth, and foul food. The lot of the wicked in the hereafter, according to *Y.* 31.20, is darkness, foul food, and cries of woe. The voice of Ahriman is said (*Bundahišn*, p.188) to be a horrible noise. For he is the complete antithesis of Ohrmazd, who is luminous, sweet-smelling and sweet-voiced. Pahlavi books make no reference to the choice made by the two spirits, at the beginning of all things, between good and evil, depicting them as two direct adversaries having contrary and incompatible natures. One is on high,



the other below; between them is Space or the Void (Vāy). They seem to have existed in this state eternally till the invidious assault of Ahriman set things into motion. The question of their origin is not even raised. Since this question had been raised and an answer found in current speculations on Zurvan, the omission was deliberate and in keeping with the *Dēnkard* passage (p. 829.1-5) condemning the doctrine whereby Ohrmazd and Ahriman were brothers in one womb.

Ohrmazd, in his omniscience, knows of the existence of Ahriman and of the inevitability of an attack from that quarter. During the first 3,000 years Ahriman becomes aware of the existence of Ohrmazd; but “seeing valor and supremacy superior to his own, he fled back to the darkness and fashioned many demons—a creation destructive and meet for battle” (*Bundahišn* 4.12). Ohrmazd meanwhile had created or given birth to the form of fire, out of which the universe is to develop. He chanted the *Ahunvar* prayer by which he revealed to Ahriman his own final victory; Ahriman swooned and fell back into the darkness and lay there unconscious for 3,000 years (*Bundahišn* 1.15). At the end of this period, Ahriman, who until then has resisted the exhortations of his demons, is incited to attack by Jēh, the Whore, who joins herself to him who defiles her. From this stems the fact that all women are afflicted with menstruation and some with sterility. Ahriman then attacks Ohrmazd’s creation. He floods it with his own creatures, all impure and evil, from reptiles to planets. Plutarch’s version (*Isis and Osiris* 47) preserves the memory of the cosmic egg; Ohrmazd, having made twenty-four gods, puts them in an egg (obviously the celestial sphere); Ahriman engenders an equal number of evil spirits which bore through the egg, whence the mixture of good and evil. The entire universe is divided between Ohrmazd and the other *yazds*, on one side, and Ahriman and the other *dēvs*, on the other. Ahriman slays the Primal Bull, then the Primal Man, Gayōmard. And the battle goes on, between Ohrmazd and Ahriman, in the soul of every man and in the whole universe.

But the battle is unequal, for Ahriman is stupid. Two theologians (*Zātspram* 3.23 and the author of the *Škand Gumānīg Vičār* 4.63-79 [ed. J. de Menasce, Fribourg en Suisse, 1945]) have seen clearly that the world was created by Ohrmazd as a trap and snare for Ahriman: “By his very struggles in the trap and snare the beast’s power is brought to nothing.” A third theologian, Mardan-Farrox, in his *Dādistān ī dēnīg*, justifies somewhat differently the divine attitude. It would have been against God’s justice and goodness to punish Ahriman before he wrought evil; this is why the world is created.



Ohrmazd in his omnipotence could have prevented Ahriman from invading the world; but Ahriman would then have been able to torment it eternally from outside.

An interesting view on Ahriman's nature is illustrated in the *Dēnkard* (p. 534.5-6), which states that "Ahriman has never been and will never be," a logical consequence of his being almost the perfect antithesis of Ohrmazd, who is; not quite the perfect antithesis, however, for then he would cease to exist altogether and no Zoroastrian can intend this. What is meant is shown in *Dādistān ī dēnīg* 18.2-3: Whereas Ohrmazd is present in the material world through his creation, Ahriman has no *gētīg* corresponding to him at all. There is thus no symmetry between Ohrmazd's and Ahriman's material creations. The shapes taken on by Ahriman (of a snake, fly, lizard, or man), as well as those of his creatures, such as Aži Dahāka, are not their own, but borrowed for a limited period and will "be smashed and annihilated in the millennium of Zoroaster" (*Dēnkard*, pp. 98-100).

This moralistic conception tended to reduce man's struggle with Ahriman to a spiritual combat within his own soul. Another, very philosophical view (*Dēnkard*, p. 282.21ff.) is, in Zaehner's paraphrase, that Ohrmazd, at the beginning, as wisdom and the knowing faculty, was latent and potential only; he was not yet actualized. This groping awareness sought an object outside itself, and, finding none, an object generated itself without God willing it, and this self-generated object was none other than Ahriman.

Eschatology. Views vary as to the final fate of Ahriman, whether he will be reduced to powerlessness (*Mēnōg ī Xrad* 8.11-15) or annihilated (*Dēnkard*, passim). The *Bundahišn* and *Māh Fravardīn* 38 (tr. K. J. Jamasp Asana, *K. R. Cama Memorial Volume*, Bombay, 1900, pp. 122-29) recount that he is led back to the hole through which he first entered the world; and according to the latter, he is then decapitated. According to the *Pahl. Rivayat* (pp. 48, 93ff.), "The Foul Spirit rises up and goes towards the Bounteous Spirit [a rare instance in Pahlavi of the ancient Twins opposing each other] and cries out thus: "I created this creation; and Āz, the demon-created, who has swallowed my creation, now desires to swallow me: I make thee judge over us." Ohrmazd arises with Srōš the blessed; and Srōš the blessed smites Āz, and Ohrmazd smites the Foul Spirit."

Portraits of Ahriman. Ahriman is represented in human shape, crushed under the feet of Ohrmazd's horse in the Sasanian Ardašīr I's investiture relief at



Naqš-e Rostam. Like Ohrmazd facing the king, Ahriman's figure is a mirror-image of Ardavān V lying under the feet of Ardašīr's horse. But he has animal ears and snakes in his hair. The personage lying under the feet of both Ohrmazd and Ardašīr II in the latter's relief of investiture at Ṭāq-e Bostān is also most probably Ahriman. The idea of interpreting as Ahriman the lion-headed statues in the Mithraic mysteries must be abandoned since J. R. Hinnells' novel and decisive interpretation ("Reflections on the Lionheaded Figure in Mithraism," a paper of the Second Congress of Mithraic Studies, Tehran, 1975).

The Persianrewāyats and the Saddar. Among the numerous mentions of Ahriman in these texts, only a few original features appear. In *Saddar* 20, the soul of Keršasp recounts how the wind was deceived by the speech of Ahriman. In the *rewāyats* of Bahman Esfandīār and of Narīmān Nošang it is announced that the millennium of Ahriman is nearing its end. The conception of Ahriman, following a trend already noted in the *Dēnkard*, tended to become more and more spiritual, as an allegory of the evil tendencies in man. This was to end up in the complete disappearance of Ahriman; a catechism written by a Parsee high-priest in 1910 does not even mention him.

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