



AHURA

AHURA, designation of a type of deity inherited by Zoroastrianism from the prehistoric Indo-Iranian religion. In the *Rig Veda*, *asura* denotes the “older gods,” such as the “Father Asura” (10.124.3), Varuṇa, and Mitra, who originally ruled over the primeval undifferentiated Chaos. The emergence of the dualistic cosmos was a process of polarization in which some of the *asuras*, such as Agni (Fire), Soma, Varuṇa, and Mitra, went over to the “younger gods,” the *devas*. The other *asuras* were driven away from the earth and remained as exiles in the nether world. The *Rig Veda* still preserves a terminological distinction between “*asuras* that have become *devas*” (*devā’v ásurā* 8.25.4, cf. 7.65.2) and “*asuras* that are non-*devas*” (*ásurā adevā’ḥ* 8.96.9). In the later texts the term *asura* is limited to the latter group. Varuṇa was incorporated into the ordered world as the lord of the subterranean world, including the cosmic waters on which the earth rests, and of the cosmic law (Ṛta); but his character remained ambiguous. According to the later *Mahābhārata*, his exiled brothers were either his servants in the nether world or his prisoners. In the *Rig Veda* he was, although dreaded, at the same time worshiped as the god who initiated his devotees as mystical seers (7.88); i.e., he made them *médhira* “wise” like himself (7.87.4). This wisdom, “(revealed) insight into the cosmic order” (*medhā’ rtásya*), was the exclusive privilege of seers (8.6.10). Iranian *mazdā* was equivalent to *médhira*.

The Old Iranian high god was historically identical with Varuṇa (in part also with the dual deity *Mitrā’Vāruṇā*), but had no proper name. He is simply referred to as Ahura or **Ahura Mazdā**, “the wise Ahura.” Zarathuštra



considered him the Ahura *par excellence* (“Thou who art the mightiest Ahura and the Wise One,” Y. 33.11; “the Wise One and the (other) Ahuras,” 30.9, 31.4); he also called him *Mazdā* “the Wise One” or *Mazdā Ahura* (sometimes *Ahura Mazdā*). In quite the same way Varuṇa is referred to in the *Rig Veda* as Asura “the Wise One” (*práçetas* 1.41.1, 8.83.2; *medhira* 1.25.20) and “the wise Asura” (*asura pracetas* 1.24.14, cf. 5.71.2), while in a Yajurvedic formula “Práçetas” is a substitute for “Varuṇa.” In the later Avesta traces of a pre-Zoroastrian mythology are preserved in *ahuraδata* “created by the Ahura” (L. Renou and E. Benveniste, *Vrtra et Vrθragna*, Paris, 1934, pp. 42-09), in *ahura* as an epithet of Mithra and the mythological figure Apam Napāt “grandson of the waters,” and in *ahurānī* “wife of Ahura” as an epithet of the waters and the name of a deity of the water. Cf. Varuṇa as the lord of the waters. In the archaic metrical formula *Miθra Ahura bərazanta* “Mithra and Ahura, the exalted ones” (Yt. 10.113, etc.), which corresponds to Vedic Mitṛā-Váruṇā, Ahura is clearly the pre-Zoroastrian counterpart of Varuṇa. The question as to what was his ancient Indo-Iranian name can not be answered, because taboo substitutes can have arisen at any time (Nyberg, *Irans forntida Religioner*, Stockholm, 1937, p. 108; F. B. J. Kuiper, “The Bliss of Aša,” *IJ* 8, 1964-65, p. 109, n. 68). Cf. Práçetas in the *Yajur Veda*, and *anāmaka* “nameless” and *Daθuš* “Creator” in the Old Persian and the Zoroastrian calendars respectively.

Apart from these traces of Ahura, *mazdā* has in Younger Avestan become an integral part of the name *Ahura Mazdā*. In western Iran the corresponding form has coalesced to Auramazdā (cf. Mid. Pers. Ohrmazd [q.v.]). This does not prove that the Achaemenid kings had adopted Zarathuštra’s god. Since the religious terminology reflects a non-Zoroastrian religion (Widengren, *Numen* 2, p. 87, Kuiper, *IJ* 4, 1960, pp. 184-86), it is rather the name of the pre-Zoroastrian high god of Iran, the addition of *mazdā* having become current in western as well as eastern Iran, though this is debated. (See, e.g., E. Benveniste, *The Persian Religion according to the Chief Greek Texts*, Paris, 1929, p. 39ff., Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart, 1965, p. 81 ; contra: J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *La religion de l’Iran ancien*, Paris, 1962, p. 167ff.) The practice in Iran of personal, mystical devotion to Ahura is exemplified by Zarathuštra’s songs, parallel to the Varuṇa hymns of the *Rig Veda* 7. Both in Old Persian religion and in Zarathuštra’s theology, Ahura Mazdā is regarded as the creator of heaven and earth. From both is excluded worship of the *daivas*—“non-orthodox gods” in Old Persian; “god, wrong god, demon” in Zarathuštra’s terminology (Duchesne-Guillemin, *Religion*, p. 189); but later exclusively “demon” in Iran proper. In contrast to this modification of religious attitudes



in Iran, there occurred in India principally a change in terminology; in the later Vedas, application of *asura* became confined to the *ásurā adevāḥ*.

In Zarathuštra's religion Ahura Mazdā stands for the dual deity *Mitrā'-Váruṇā* of the Veda, the inauspicious aspects of Varuṇa being outweighed by the propitious ones of Mitra (except, perhaps, in the doctrine of the Twin Spirits, Y. 30.3-5). In western Iran the situation is not clear. The compound **Miçā-Auramazdā* is attested in "Mesorromásdēs" (Plutarch *Ad principem ineruditum* 3; see S. Wikander, "Mithra en vieux perse," *Orientalia Suecana* 1, 1952, pp. 66-68). This term can not, for formal reasons, be a recent formation but must be a transformation of **Miçā-Ahura*, the southwest Iranian variant of the archaic formula Mithra Ahura. If so, Mithra must have been worshiped all the time alongside the (pre-Zoroastrian) Auramazdā, although he occurs for the first time (with his Median name *Mithra*) in the late inscription of Artaxerxes II Mnemon (404-358 B.C.).

Cf. the interpretation given in Apam Napāt.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

See also A. D. Nock, *AJA* 53, 1949, pp. 280ff.

J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Western Response to Zoroaster*, Oxford, 1958, pp. 52ff.

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On the interpretation of Ahura Mazdā as "Lord Wisdom," see Kuiper, *IJJ* 18, 1976, pp. 25-42; also P. Thieme in *Zarathustra*, ed. B. Schlerath, Darmstadt, 1970, pp. 406ff.