



AHURA MAZDĀ

AHURA MAZDĀ (Old Persian Ahuramazda, Parth. Aramazd, Pahl. Ohrmazd/Hormizd, NPers. Ormazd), the Avestan name with title of a great divinity of the Old Iranian religion, who was subsequently proclaimed by Zoroaster as God. His Indian counterpart, it has been argued, was the nameless, exalted Asura of the Rigveda; but this identification is not universally accepted. There is controversy also over the grammatical form of his Avestan name. Some scholars render it as Mazdā, others as Mazdāh; some interpret it as a substantive, “Wisdom,” others as an adjective, “wise,” qualifying Ahura “lord.”

The earthly prototype for Mazdā’s ancient concept seems to have been the high priest, who gave counsel and leadership through his wisdom and knowledge of the law. Ahura Mazdā maintains the cosmic law of *aša*; and the two lesser Ahuras, Mithra and *Vouruna, identified by the present writer with [Apam Napāt](#), are vigilant and active in carrying out his ordinances. Some of the words spoken of Ahura Mazdā in the Avesta have echoes in Vedic celebrations of Mitra and Varuṇa. In one evidently archaic verse (Y. 41.3) his worshippers say to him, “We establish Thee as the god possessing good supernatural power (*maya*-), zealous, accompanied by *aša*,” while in the Gāthās Zoroaster hails him as “all-seeing” (Y. 45.4) and “seeing afar” (Y. 33.13), the one “whom none deceives” (Y. 43.6). The prophet also speaks of him as “clad in hardest stone” i.e. the sky (Y. 30.5), although he also uses terms which suggest an anthropomorphic concept, in keeping with general Indo-Iranian religious tradition, e.g. “the tongue of Thy mouth” (Y. 31.3, cf. Y. 28.11), “the



hand with which Thou holdest. . .” (Y. 43.4). Zoroaster gave a wholly new dimension to his worship, however, by hailing him as the one uncreated God (Y. 30.3, 45.2), wholly wise, benevolent and good, Creator as well as upholder of *aša* (Y. 31.8). But even as the good man, the *ašavan*, is opposed on earth by the wicked man, the *drəgvant*, so too, Zoroaster apprehended, there was an adversary of God, like him uncreated and in this respect his “twin.” This is the Hostile Spirit, Angra Mainyu. Zoroastrian tradition (e.g., *Bundahišn* 1.3) states plainly what is adumbrated in the Gāthās, that Ahura Mazdā became the Creator (Av. Dadvah, Dātār, Pahl. Dādār)—this being his constant appellation—to destroy Angra Mainyu, and so to achieve a universe that was wholly good. In one Gathic verse he is said to have achieved creation by his “thought” (Y. 31.11), but elsewhere his instrument is said to have been his Holy or Bounteous Spirit, Spənta Mainyu (Y. 44.7; 31.3; 51.7). The relationship between Ahura Mazdā and the Holy Spirit is theologically as subtle and hard to define as that between Yahweh and the Holy Spirit in Judaism and Christianity; and it has been repeatedly argued that Christian doctrine owes a debt in this respect to Zoroastrianism. Spənta Mainyu appears as the active principle by which Ahura Mazdā accomplished the acts of creation. It is also through Spənta Mainyu that he “comes to the world” (Y. 43.6), and so can be immanent in the wise and just man (cf. Y. 33.6).

The first of Ahura Mazdā’s creative acts was to emanate the six great Beings known from the tradition as the Aməša Spəntas, who likewise are aspects of his own being, and with Spənta Mainyu make up a mighty heptad. Each of the seven takes for his own one of the seven creations, man being that of the Holy Spirit, i.e. he belongs especially to Ahura Mazdā. This fundamental doctrine is alluded to in the Gāthās, and is set out systematically in the tradition (e.g. *Bundahišn* 3.12; *The Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest nē-šāyest*, ed. and tr. F. M. Kotwal, 1969, 11.5). The relationship of Ahura Mazdā to the six Aməša Spəntas is again a subtle one, and its closeness is expressed metaphorically by the prophet when he calls Ahura Mazdā the father of Aša and of Vohu Manah (Y. 31.8, 44.3, 45.4, 47.2), and speaks of Ārmaiti as his daughter (Y. 45.4); but it is conveyed even more vividly by his addressing Ahura Mazdā now as “Thou,” now (when he conceives of him together with one or more of the Aməša Spəntas) as “You,” e.g. “Lord, with Aša may You grant to these strength and dominion have known Thee truly, O Mazdā” (Y. 29.10); “I first entreat all (You), O Mazdā, for that by which Thou mayst satisfy the purpose of Vohu Manah . . .” (Y. 28.1).



As creator and upholder of *aša*, Ahura Mazdā is the guardian of justice, and a friend of the just man (Y. 47.5 et pass.). It is therefore with trust that Zoroaster speaks to him, seeking enlightenment and help. “Teach me” (he entreats) “through the eloquence of Thy Spirit” (Y. 28.11), “Tell me the things which Thou knowest, Lord” (Y. 48.2). He is “eager to behold and take counsel” with him (Y. 33.6), and there is no doubt of his certainty that he has actually seen Mazdā in prophetic vision, and conversed with him. The prophet has accepted the task of telling mankind of the truths which he has thus learnt (Y. 45.3, 5; 31.1 et passim), and when rebuffed he looks for help and support from his Lord. “I lament to Thee. Take heed of it, Lord, granting the support which friend should give to friend” (Y. 46.2).

Yet the prophet feels also the awe due to the God who is “Creator of all” (Y. 44.7), and who, as Lord of *aša*, presides over a strict justice for mankind by which the wicked, who have chosen to act “at Lie’s commands” (Y. 31.1) will be in due course condemned. Their destination is the Worst Existence, i.e., Hell, which has been brought into being by Angra Mainyu (Y. 30.4). Mazdā has “appointed recompenses” (Y. 43.5), decreeing that “the end shall be different for each” (Y. 48.4); but he “has left to men’s wills (the choice between) holy and unholy” (Y. 45.9), and it is their own inner selves (*daēnā*-) which lead sinners to destruction (Y. 51.13). In taking the immense step of seeing Ahura Mazdā as God, rather than only as one of the great gods of the Iranian pantheon, Zoroaster stopped short of conceiving him as omnipotent. According to his revelation, suffering and evil in this world, and torment in the next, have a source other than Ahura Mazdā. He can diminish and in the end annihilate them, but not control or direct them in the present.

The modifications of Old Iranian doctrine in the light of this revelation can be observed in the Avesta other than the Gāthās, and in the Pahlavi texts. Passages from *Yasna Haptañhāiti* suggest the process by which Mazdā as supreme Creator took over the creative functions of *Vouruna Apəm Napāt, and also (at the heart of the *yasna* liturgy) those of Mithra in connection with fire. In course of time moreover the epithet *ahuradāta*- “created by the Ahura,” which probably referred originally to *Vouruna, came to be understood as meaning “created by Ahura [Mazdā],” and thus as a synonym of the commoner *mazdadāta*-. The Zoroastrian faith itself is described in the creed, the *Fravarānē*, as “Worship of Mazdā” (*Mazdayasna*), and its adherents are Mazdā worshippers, those whose worship is all ultimately directed to Mazdā, even when its immediate recipient is a lesser divinity. The tradition



makes plain the doctrine implicit in the Gāthās, that all beneficent divinities were evoked by Ahura Mazdā to aid him, and so to worship any of them is in reality to worship him.

The Younger Avesta is full of invocations of Ahura Mazdā, and those Younger Avestan texts which are of pre-Zoroastrian origin were duly Zoroastrianized by the addition of such formulas as “Ahura Mazdā said to Spitāma Zarathuštra.” The whole of the Avesta was regarded by the orthodox as representing Ahura Mazdā’s words received by his prophet. This belief (still held by some Zoroastrians) was challenged in Islamic times, when the Pahlavi *Dēnkard* presents a “heretic” as saying that he could accept only the Gathic (*gāhānīg*) texts as truly the utterances of Ohrmazd (*Dēnkard* 3.7). The defense against this was that the other Avestan texts are derived from the Gathic ones, and are thus also shaped by the power of Ohrmazd’s omniscience, and do not originate in merely human knowledge.

The earliest reference to Ahura Mazdā in western Iran appears to be in an Assyrian text, probably of the 8th century B. C., in which *as-sa-ra ma-za-aš* is named in a list of gods. This would presumably be the Old Iranian divinity, rather than Zoroaster’s God. There is now evidence to show that Cyrus the Great was a Zoroastrian (see Achaemenid religion); and there are many references to “Ahuramazda” (his name and title being thus fused in Old Persian) in the Achaemenid royal inscriptions, and especially in those of Darius the Great, which duly celebrated him as Creator: “A great god is Ahuramazda, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness (D[arius] N[aqš-e Rostam]b 1-3). The last words appear doctrinally significant, in that according to Zoroaster’s teachings the supreme Lord is Creator only of what is good. Darius expresses again and again his conviction that he is Ahuramazda’s instrument for establishing order and justice on earth: “When Ahuramazda saw this earth turbulent, then he bestowed it on me By the will of Ahuramazda I set it again in its place” (DNa 31-36). “After Ahuramazda made me king in this earth, by the will of Ahuramazda all (that) I did was good” (DS[usa]i 2-4). In the early Achaemenid inscriptions Ahuramazda only is named, although occasionally “with all the gods” (DP[ersepolis] 14, 22, 24). On one of the Elamite tablets from Persepolis he appears with “Mithra-(and)-the Baga (i.e., *Vouruna),” the last two names being joined in an ancient pair-compound (Persepolis Fortification Tablets no. 337); and at the end of the Achaemenid period Artaxerxes III again makes this invocation (e.g. A³Pa 24-25). This usage is parallel to Zoroaster’s own



invocation of “Ahura Mazda-(and-the-other)-Ahuras” (Y. 30.9, 31.4); but earlier Artaxerxes II had invoked a new triad, “Ahuramazda, Anāhita and Mithra” (e.g. A²Sd 3-4); and the latter two divinities were to be the most popular, under Ahuramazda, in the Sasanian period. Ahuramazda’s name appears linked with Mithra’s in the theophoric personal names of Mesoromasdes, Mihrohrmazd, in both epochs. A votive inscription in Greek (set there presumably in Seleucid times) was found in the late Achaemenid “Frātadāra” temple at Persepolis, which invokes Zeus Megistos, that is Ahuramazda, with two other divinities, presumed to be Mithra and Anāhita.

In the monist heresy of Zurvanism, evolved probably in the late 5th century B.C., Ahuramazda was held to be, not eternal God, but a subordinate creator-god, one of the twin sons (together with Angra Mainyu) of Zurvan “Time.” The Zoroastrian calendar, created apparently in the 4th century, appears to reflect Zurvanite influence in the dedication of four days to Ahuramazda. (Zurvan was worshipped as a quaternity, and so tetrads seem to have been used to adumbrate his concept esoterically.) These days were explicitly devoted to Ahuramazda as Creator (which would have been acceptable to orthodox and Zurvanite alike); and so too was the month of December-January. The coincidence of month- and day-names meant that four “name-day” feasts were thereafter celebrated in Ahuramazda’s honor at that time of year. This observance continued down into modern times.

No representations of Ahuramazda are recorded in the early Achaemenid period. (The winged symbol with male figure, formerly regarded by European scholars as his, has been shown to represent the royal *xvarənah*.) However, it seems that from the reign of Cyrus the Great down to that of Darius III, it was customary for an empty chariot drawn by white horses to accompany the Persian army. This chariot was sacred to “Zeus,” i.e., Ahuramazda, who was doubtless invoked to station himself in it invisibly (Herodotus 1.189, 7.40; Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, 8.3.12; Curtius Rufus, *History of Alexander*, 3.3.11). The use of images in Zoroastrian worship probably began in the western satrapies in the late 5th century B.C., although the first literary reference to it comes from the reign of Artaxerxes II. It was, it seems, under this king, in 365 B.C., that (according to a Greek inscription excavated at Sardis in 1974) a Persian governor of Lydia set up a statue to “Zeus the Lawgiver (*baradāta*-).” Ahuramazda’s name was regularly thus “translated” as Zeus by Greeks, the first attestation of his proper name, as Horomazes, being in the 4th century (*Alcibiades*, 1.121). Subsequently a brief citation from the works of Aristotle



(Fragment 6) contains the statement that the Persian magi acknowledged “two first principles, a good spirit and an evil spirit, one called Zeus and Oromasdes, the other Hades and Areimanius.” The name Ahuramazda occurs written in Aramaic script as *ʾwhrmzd* in the Aramaic version of Darius’ Behistun inscription, and also in one of the Arebsun inscriptions, which probably belong to the late Achaemenid period. In another of the Arebsun inscriptions his name appears “translated” by that of Bēl, whose “queen, sister and wife” is there said to be the “Mazda-worshipping religion.”

The worship of “Aramazd” with images is attested during the Parthian period, especially (through the accident of surviving sources) in Armenia (see Armenian religion). Zoroastrian iconoclasm, traceable from the beginning of the Sasanian period, gradually put an end to the use of all images in worship; but “Ohrmazd” appears represented in Sasanian investiture scenes as a dignified male figure, standing or on horseback, who wears a turreted crown and on occasion carries the *barəsman* (*barsom*) of the priests (see, e.g., *Survey of Persian Art*, plates vol. I, pp. 154, 156, 160). The Sasanian dynasty, though Zurvanite, declared its devotion to Ohrmazd in diverse other ways also. Five kings bore the name Hormizd; and Bahram II created (it seems) the title of “Ohrmazd-mowbad” (Kirdēr’s inscription on the Ka’ba-ye Zardošt, line 9), which continued in use into Islamic times, apparently for a priest of great learning or authority. The forms of Zoroastrian devotional life first become clearly known from the Sasanian and post-Sasanian periods. All devotional acts, whether priestly or lay, begin with a formula of homage to Ahura Mazdā. The obligatory prayers, to be recited five times daily, are prefaced with the declaration, in Middle Persian, that “Ohrmazd is Lord” and embody the Gathic verse *Y. 46.7* (“Whom, Mazdā, hast thou appointed my protector . . . ?”), while the Avestan part of the constantly recited *Ātaš Nīāyeš* begins with the Gathic verse *Y. 33.12*: “Arise for me, Lord (Mazdā)” By day Zoroastrian prayers may be said in the presence either of fire or the sun; and this fact may conceivably explain the usage whereby the Khotanese Sakas came to call the sun *urmazde*. (The sun is still named *ormozd* in the living Iranian dialects of Yidğa and Munjī.)

The surviving Pahlavi literature contains Zurvanite elements, but also, in the commentary to *Y. 30.3* (the Gathic verse on whose exegesis the heresy rested) a repudiation of its basic tenet, that “Ohrmazd and Ahriman were brothers,” as well as a positive statement of orthodox belief in “the separate origin of light and darkness,” i.e., of good and evil (*Dēnkard* 9.30.4-5). Zurvanism seems to



have been well represented among Zoroastrians down to the 10th century A.D., after which it disappears. It was rediscovered for Europe from Persian and Arabic sources in the 17th century by Th. Hyde, who deduced from it that Zoroaster had himself taught an original monism. His interpretation was refined on in the 19th century by M. Haug, who, making a new interpretation of Y. 30.3, attributed to Zoroaster the doctrine that the twin Spirits of that verse were Spənta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu, and that the “father” of both was Ahura Mazdā. There is no trace of such a doctrine in Zoroastrian tradition (which most Western scholars at that time disregarded, as a corruption of Zoroaster’s own teachings); but when Haug propounded it in Bombay, Parsi reformists adopted it gratefully, as offering them an escape from the dualism for which Christian missionaries had been attacking them. In due course Parsi reformist writings reached Europe, and were taken there to express an independent Zoroastrian tradition, corroborating Haug’s interpretation. Accordingly the opinion became widespread that Zoroaster had himself proclaimed Ahura Mazdā as God omnipotent, the ultimate source of evil as well as good.

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