



# APOCALYPTIC I. IN ZOROASTRIANISM

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## i. In Zoroastrianism

The use of the term apocalyptic to define a particular type of prophetic utterance is a development of Judaeo-Christian studies, in which a need was felt to mark a distinction between the ancient prophets and the pseudonymous ones who flourished mainly in the intertestamental period. It is the literary products of the latter group which form Jewish apocalyptic, and which were the first within the Jewish prophetic tradition to consider all history, cosmological and spiritual, as a unity. "Apocalyptic sketched in outline the history of the world and of mankind, the origin of evil, its course, and inevitable overthrow, and the final consummation of all things" (R. H. Charles, *Religious Development between the Old and New Testament*, London and New York, 1914, p. 14 n. 1).

In Zoroastrianism this distinction between early prophecy and later apocalyptic does not apply, for Zoroaster himself spoke of all these things in his *Gāthās*. There he looks back to "eternity past" and the beginning of this world, and forward to the Last Judgement and "eternity to come," and sees all that takes place between as part of the planned cosmic struggle between good and evil, leading to the final overthrow of the later, and the accomplishment thereby of God's purposes. He has therefore been termed the "first apocalypt" (J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Hymns of Zarathuštra*, tr. M. Henning, London,



1952, p. 18). Because the thrust of his teachings was moral, he had a passionate concern for ultimate justice, hence for what has been termed “apocalyptic eschatology,” i.e., revealed knowledge of the last things (see, e.g., Charles, op. cit., p. 17). This knowledge he sought from God himself: “I ask Thee, Lord, about those things which indeed are coming and shall come” (Y. 31.14, cited in connection with later apocalyptic by E. W. West, SBE XXXVII, p. 181, n. 1). The essential features of his eschatology, adumbrated in the *Gāthās*, are spelled out in later Avestan and Pahlavi texts: There will be a final great struggle between good and evil in which good will triumph. The bodies of the dead will be resurrected, and the Last Judgement will take place. The earth will be purified by a torrent of fiery metal. Through which all mankind will pass. To the blessed it will be like walking through warm milk, but sinners will perish. Thereafter the kingdom of God will come upon an earth restored to its original goodness, this being *Frašō.kərəti* (Frašegird), the “making wonderful, or perfect;” and the blessed will rejoice there with the divine beings for ever.

Zoroaster appears to have believed that this consummation would take place not long after his own lifetime, achieved in part by another who would like himself be a *saošyant*, i.e., a bringer of salvation; and this hope was developed by his followers into the expectation that one day a son named *Astvaṭ.ərəta* would be born miraculously of the prophet’s own seed by a virgin mother, and would become the World Savior, the Saošyant. The myth that his mother will conceive him after bathing in a lake where the prophet’s seed is preserved is alluded to in verses from *Yašt* 19 which clearly predate the Achaemenian period: “(10) . . . Ahura Mazdā created many and good creatures . . . (11) in order that they shall make the world perfect, . . . in order that the dead shall rise up, that the Living One, the Indestructible, shall come, the world be made perfect at his wish . . . (88) We worship mighty X<sup>v</sup>arənah . . . (89) which will accompany the victorious Saošyant, and also his other comrades, so that he may make the world perfect . . . (92-3) When *Astvaṭ.ərəta* comes out from Lake *Kašaoya*, messenger of Ahura Mazdā, son of *Vīspataurvairī*, brandishing the victorious weapon which . . . Kavi *Vištāspa* bore to avenge *Aša* (Truth) upon the enemy host, then he will there drive the Drug (Falsehood) out from the world of *Aša*. (94) He will gaze with eyes of wisdom, he will behold all creation, . . . he will gaze with eyes of sacrifice on the whole material world, and heedfully he will make the whole material world undying. (95) His comrades . . . advance, thinking well, speaking well, acting well, upholding the Good Religion; and they will utter no false word with their tongues. Before them will flee ill-fated *Aēšma* (Wrath) of the bloody club. *Aša*



will conquer the evil Drug, hideous, dark. (96) Aka Manah (Ill Purpose, see [Akōman](#)) will be overcome, Vohu Manah (Good Purpose) overcomes him. Overcome will be the falsely spoken word, the truly spoken word overcomes it. . . . Haurvatāt (Kordād, Health) and Amərətāt (Amurdād, Long Life, Immortality) overcome both Hunger and Thirst. . . . Anra Mainyu (Ahriman) of evil works will flee, bereft of power” (see *Avesta*, ed. Geldner, II, pp. 244, 256-58; on these verses as part of Zoroastrian apocalyptic see G. Messina, “Il Saušyant- nella tradizione iranica e la sua attesa,” *Orientalia* I, 1932, pp. 149-76). The final contest here described is known as the Great Battle (Pahl. *ardīg ī wuzurg, wuzurg kārezār, Zātspram* 34.52; *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg*, ed. G. Messina, Rome, 1939, 16.35).

This prophecy is conceived in purely religious and ethical terms, and with the cosmic breadth of Zoroaster’s own vision. It is also, in the spirit of that vision, millenarian in the broad sense of the term, i.e., the prophecy is that at the end of time happiness will come on *this* perfected earth to God’s own chosen creatures, the good, the upholders of the Good Religion. Apocalyptic, it has been said, is the literature of millenarism; and again, Zoroaster is the oldest known millenarian prophet, preaching, it seems, like all revolutionary millenarians, at a time of social upheaval and stress for his people (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 1-3). As Zoroastrian apocalyptic developed, his religious, social and cosmic message became nationalized by being linked with Iranian myth and legend. So in part of *Yt.* 19.93, omitted above, it is said that the “victorious weapon” which had been welded by Kavi Vīštāspa (Goštāsp), Zoroaster’s royal patron, was the same weapon which earlier “the mighty Thraētaona bore when Aži Dahāka was slain, which the Tūra Fraṇrasyan bore when the wicked Zainigu was slain, which Kavi Haosravah bore when the Tūra Fraṇrasyan was slain.” This development is plainly old, because it presents Fraṇrasyan as an Iranian warrior-hero, not as the alien villain he later became (see [Afrāsīāb](#)).

This interweaving of religious and heroic elements is characteristic of developed Zoroastrian apocalyptic; and a concept which gave it scope was that of the comrades of the Saošyant, among whom, it came to be believed, will be heroes of old who will return then to aid the Iranian peoples—“deathless chieftains” (*rad ī ahōš*) who, immortal in the flesh, wait in hidden or remote places for the call to action. (For their names see A. Christensen, *Les Kayanides*, Copenhagen, 1931, pp. 153-56.) Prominent among them is Av. Piši. Šyaoθna, pəšō.tanu (Pahl. Pišyōtan, q.v., NPers. Pašūtan/Bašūtan). He was one of



Vištaspa's sons, and the growth of his story can be traced from that of a dead prince whose departed spirit is honored (*Yt* 13.103) to that of a hero who is "immortal, not aging, needing no sustenance, mighty of body and perfect in strength, full of glory, powerful, victorious . . ." (*Dēnkard* 7.5.12; see M. Molé, *La légende de Zoroastre selon les textes pehlevi*, Paris, 1967, pp. 64-65, and in detail on Pišyōtan M. Boyce, "On the Antiquity of Zoroastrian Apocalyptic," *BSOAS* 46, 1984, pp. 59f.). In the early stages of his legend Pišyōtan was seen as one of the Saošyant's future comrades, cf. *Zand ī Wahman Yašt*, where, after Ohrmazd has roused Pišyōtan (7.19-20), he will also summon the divine beings to play their part in the Great Battle (7.27f.). As in the *Gāthās* so in this later apocalyptic the sufferings of the good are dwelt upon; and the whole world is seen as afflicted in the last days by the power of the Evil Spirit. At that time "the sun's rays will be very level and low-slanting, and year and month and day will be shorter. And the earth . . . will contract. . . . Crops will not yield seed, . . . and plants and bushes and trees will be small. . . . And people will be born very stunted, and will have little skill or energy. . . . It will not be possible for an auspicious cloud and a just wind to bring rain at its dire time and season. Cloud and fog will darken the whole sky. A hot wind and a cold wind will come and carry off all the fruits and grains of corn. . . . And the water of the rivers and springs will shrink and have no increase. . . . The plough-ox will have small strength and the swift horse little power. . . . That wicked Evil Spirit will be very oppressive and tyrannical, then when it becomes needful to destroy him (*Zand ī Wahman Yašt* 4.16-20, 42-44, 46, 48, 66).

Probably it was as a religion preaching thus powerfully about the last things, and hope in what lay beyond, that Zoroastrianism finally won acceptance in strife-torn Iran in the 7th century B.C. (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 40). Once the Achaemenian Empire was established, however, it is likely that less emphasis was given to apocalyptic eschatology, at least in Persia proper; for the Persian kings sought to create a sense of their own God-given authority, and the stability and continuance of their rule. Yet teachings about the last times were too essential to Zoroastrianism to be neglected; and their wide currency even at this period is attested by Theopompos (b. 376 B.C.), who wrote of Iranian beliefs about the struggle between Horomazes and Areimanios (i.e., Ohrmazd and Ahriman) ending in defeat for "Hades" and happiness for mankind (apud Plutarch *Isis and Osiris* 47), and who referred also to Zoroaster's teaching that the dead would rise again (apud Aeneas of Gaza, see C. Clemen, *Fontes historiae religionis persicae*, Bonn, 1920, p. 95). It was, it seems, during this epoch, however, that Frašegird became distanced



through a triplication (characteristic of Zoroastrianism) of the figure of the Saošyant, although this development seems immediately due to a need to fill in the epochs of a scholastically created world year with periodically recurring events. Names were given to the two new Saviors which were harmonious with that of the Saošyant: Ušyaṭ.ərəta (Pahl. Ušēdār, q.v.), and Uxšaṭ.nəmah (Pahl. Ušēdārmāh, q.v.); and Iranian apocalyptic was modified accordingly. The present millennium belongs to Zoroaster, and began with his revelation; but after the golden time which attended this, evil has again gained ground, and is growing always stronger. At the millennium's end Ušēdār will appear, renew the prophet's revelation and defeat the forces of evil. There will be another golden time, another recrudescence of evil, the coming of Ušēdārmāh, and another defeat of evil; then a third repetition of golden time and decline, and at last the coming of the Saošyant, the final overthrow of evil, and all the events of Frašgird. For men living today it is the coming of Ušēdār which is of immediate concern; and to fill out the happenings of that longed-for event the apocalyptists transferred to him the aid of Pišyōtan, who in the surviving texts figures almost invariably as his comrade, bringing help thus at the end of this millennium (*Zand ī Wahman Yašt* 7.18; *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* 16.51; *Dk.* 9.41.6; *Bundahišn* 33.28; *Zurātušt-nāma*, ed. and tr. F. Rosenberg, St. Petersburg, 1904, pp. 77-78; also implicitly, *Pahl. Rivayat* 49.18; *Pahlavi Texts*, ed. J. M. Jamasp-Asana, II, Bombay, 1913, p. 105). It seems probable that these new prophecies were made current through the composition of a late Avestan text, i.e., the *Bahman Yašt* and its vernacular renderings.

It has been reasonably argued that the collapse of the Achaemenid empire in 330 B.C. must have given powerful stimulus to the cultivation of Zoroastrian apocalyptic, with the Iranians shocked and dismayed, and their society disrupted. Evidence for an immediate prophetic response has been found in verses in the *Sibylline Oracles* 3.388-95, identified as an Iranian prophecy concerning Alexander (see W. Bousset, "Die Beziehungen der ältesten jüdischen Sibylle zur chaldäischen Sibylle. . . ," *Zeitschrift für die neutestamentliche Wissenschaft* 3, 1902, pp. 33-35), and probably composed in about 325 B.C. (see S. K. Eddy, *The King is Dead*, Lincoln, Nebraska, 1961, pp. 11-14). A Persian origin has also been assigned to another prophetic utterance of probably the early 3rd century B.C., which survives in the *Book of Daniel* (generally regarded as the oldest Jewish apocalyptic text). This is the vision of four beasts representing four kingdoms, the fourth, the Macedonian, being "different from them all, very fearsome, with teeth of iron, claws of bronze, that devoured and crushed, and stamped the remains" (7:19; on the Persian



origin of the prophecy see J. W. Swain, “The Theory of the Four Monarchies: Opposition History under the Roman Empire,” *Classical Philology* 35, 1940, pp. 1-21). This is pseudo-prophecy, i.e., *vaticinatio ex eventu*, a widespread and ancient literary genre (see H. M. and N. K. Chadwick, *The Growth of Literature*, Cambridge, I, 1932, pp. 451-53, III, 1940, pp. 844-46). Much Zoroastrian apocalyptic is of this kind, though in theory all has its origin in revelation by Ahura Mazdā to Zoroaster. The surviving texts fall into three categories as to the presentation of their material: 1. The prophecies are explicitly presented as the revelation of Ahura Mazdā to Zoroaster (*Zand ī Wahman Yašt*; *Dk.* 9; *Zurātušt-nāma*); 2. they are uttered by Jāmāspa, who had obtained through Zoroaster the gift of knowledge (*Ayādgar ī Jāmāspīg*); 3. they are presented in direct narrative (*Bundahišn*; *Zādspram* 34; *Pahl. Rivayat*) though implicitly, as in 1, as part of Ahura Mazdā’s revelation to the prophet. The first group of texts alone has the concept of the millennium of Zoroaster (i.e., the present one) being divided into metallic ages. This idea is generally held to have been adopted by western Iranians from the Greeks, probably in the 3rd century B.C., and it is widely supposed to have then influenced the *Daniel* story (2.31f.) of an image made of diverse metals, representing successive kingdoms. (Otherwise J. Duchesne-Guillemin, “Apocalypse juive et apocalypse iranienne,” *La Soteriologia dei Culti Orientali nell’Impero Romano*, ed. U. Bianchi and M. J. Vermaseren, Leiden, 1982, pp. 753-61; against his arguments there for the Jewish origins of Zoroastrian apocalyptic see Boyce, in *BSOAS* 46, 1984, pp. 57-75).

As far as is known, no Iranian apocalyptic text, whether in Avestan or a vernacular, was written down by Zoroastrian priests before the Sasanian period; and apart from the *Gāthās* and the *Yt.* 19 verses, which would have been strictly memorized (the latter at least by the end of the Achaemenian period), the known texts belong to a fluid oral transmission, in which additions to the fixed elements (which included the essential core of Gathic teachings) could be made as circumstances demanded. This makes it impossible to assign a precise date to any individual work; and for the Seleucid and Parthian periods it is largely by foreign references or borrowings that the continuity of Iranian apocalyptic can be traced. Of importance in this regard are the Greek *Oracles of Hystaspes*, a work well known and respected as a source of apocalyptic wisdom in Syria and Asia Minor in the early centuries of the Christian era. (On it see H. Windisch, *Die Orakel des Hystaspes*, *Verhandelingen der Koninklijke Akademie van Wetenschappen te Amsterdam*, 28/5, 1929; and for further discussion F. Cumont, “La fin du



monde selon les mages occidentaux,” *RHR* 103, 1931, pp. 64f.; Eddy, *The King is Dead*, p. 18f.; G. Widengren, *Die Religionen Irans*, Stuttgart, 1965, pp. 199f., all with additional references.) The work is first mentioned by Justin Martyr in the second century A.D., and is chiefly known through citations from it by Lactantius in the fourth century (see J. Bidez and F. Cumont, *Les mages hellénisés*, Paris, 1938, II, pp. 361-76). The passages which Lactantius cites have close parallels, even in details, in Zoroastrian apocalyptic, notably in the *Zand ī Wahman Yašt*. Hystaspes is of course the Greek form of Vištāspa, the name of Zoroaster’s royal patron; and the king is represented in the *Oracles* as having had a wonderful dream which is interpreted to him by a prophesying child (*vaticinans puer*), who, it is suggested, was Zoroaster himself in infancy (see E. Benveniste, “Une apocalypse pehlevie: le Žāmāsp-Nāmak,” *RHR* 106, 1932, pp. 377-79). The *Oracles* are generally held either to be the work of a Hellenized Iranian, or to have been put together by a Greek from Iranian oral traditions, probably in the second century B.C. Zoroastrian doctrines also appear scattered unsystematically through Jewish apocalyptic works of the intertestamental period, notably in the *Sibylline Oracles*, where among other matters there are repeated references to the final fiery torrent which will engulf the world (see Widdisch, *Die Orakel*, pp. 28-29); and in the Ethiopic *Book of Enoch* (see G. Widengren, “Iran and Israel in Parthian times with special regard to the Ethiopic Book of Enoch,” *Temenos* 2, 1966, pp. 139-77). The Jews were themselves at this period experiencing distress and disruption, i.e., they were in a classic position to evolve or to adopt millenarian beliefs (see S. R. Isenberg, “Millenarism in Greco-Roman Palestine,” *Religion* 4, 1974, pp. 26-45); and they seem to have absorbed and made their own a number of essential Zoroastrian teachings, coming above all to see “the world . . . as a battlefield between good and evil and history as a drama, advancing towards a climax, the final judgement” (Widengren, “Iran and Israel,” p. 177; against arguments put forward by R. H. Charles and others for denying Iranian influence see, cogently, J. R.

Hinnells, “Zoroastrian Influence on the Judaeo-Christian Tradition,” *J. of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 45, 1976, pp. 1-23). Further evidence for the flourishing of Zoroastrian apocalyptic at this period is provided by Plutarch in his well-known summary of Magian teachings in *Isis and Osiris* 47; and the surviving Zoroastrian texts themselves, although all committed to writing by Persian priests, contain an acknowledgement of Parthia’s part in the continuity of the religious tradition, in that in one text out of seven “metallic ages” the honorable one of bronze is assigned to the Parthian king Valaxš



(*Zand ī Wahman Yašt* 2.26).

Naturally, however, since it is the Persian line of transmission which alone is represented by the surviving apocalyptic works, Persian interests predominate in their later elements. So various “metallic ages” are assigned, in different texts, to this or that Sasanian king or high priest (i.e., that of copper to Ardašīr and Ādurbād in *Zand ī Wahman Yašt* 3.25; in the *Dēnkard* epitome [9.8.4] the third age to Ādurbād alone). The immortals, Pišyōtan and Kay Xusraw, will, it is foretold, champion the temple cult of fire against that of image worship, i.e., these ancient heroes are represented as supporters of the Sasanian iconoclastic movement (*Zand ī Wahman Yašt* 7.26, 36-37; *Bundahišn* 32.28). Other developments seem to belong to the sixth century, when “the terrible threats of war from all directions induced the feeling . . . that the last days foretold in the sacred books had arrived” (K. Czeglédy, “Bahrām Čōbīn and the Persian apocalyptic literature,” *AOASH* 8, 1958, p. 36). So the historical figure of the sixth century rebel, Bahrām Čōbēn, merges, it appears, with the greater figure of Bahrām, *yazad* of Victory, and takes on also the role of the immortal hero, so that Bahrām too becomes thought of as one of Ušēdār’s comrades. (See Czeglédy, pp. 21-43, and A. Destrée, “Quelques reflexions sur le héros des récits apocalyptiques persans et sur le mythe de la ville de cuivre,” *La Persia nel Medioevo*, Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, Rome, 1971, pp. 639-54.)

It was not, it seems, until the 9th century A.D. that the important *Zand ī Wahman Yašt* and *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* were set down in their final fixed forms, probably losing much of their literary quality then through being recited from memory at slow dictation speed. (On the *Jāmāsp-nāmag* being a verse-text see E. Benveniste, “Une apocalypse,” 1932, pp. 337-80.) They and other Pahl. apocalyptic texts contain accordingly repeated references to the conquering Arabs and to the miseries brought by their rule, these miseries being seen as manifestations of the last age before the coming of Ušēdār. Hope of his appearance, together with Bahrām and Pešōtan, upheld the Zoroastrians during their sufferings in the centuries that followed, and reached a peak as the year 1620 approached, which by one calculation was seen as the end of Zoroaster’s millennium. (For the text see M. R. Unvala, *Dārāb Hormazyār’s Rivāyat*, Bombay, 1922, II, p. 390.8-9; for the transl. B. N. Dhabhar, *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazyār Framarz and Others*, Bombay, 1932, p. 606). The essential Gathic apocalyptic, modified by scholastic and religio-political developments down the ages, thus remained the mainstay of hope for the



community into modern times.

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T. Olsson, “The Apocalyptic Activity: The Case of J  m  sp-N  mag,” *ibid.*, pp. 21-49.

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