



ASTVAṬ.ĒRĒTA

ASTVAṬ.ĒRĒTA, the Avestan name of the Saošyant, the future Savior of Zoroastrianism. Zoroaster, according to the tradition of his community, lived to old age, and must therefore have realized that he would not himself see the coming of *Frašō.kərəti* (transfiguration of the world; see *Frašegird*). It seems that he taught his followers accordingly to look for a man who would come after him, and who would lead mankind to final victory over the forces of evil, after which the kingdom of God would be established on earth. A direct reference to this teaching has been seen by H. Lommel in the difficult Gathic verse *Y.* 43.3, which in his translation runs: “And the man shall come who is better than a good man, who would teach us . . . the straight paths of salvation who is faithful, resembles you, O Mazdā, who possesses the right knowledge and is wise.”

Zoroaster’s community held ardently to hope in the coming of this man, to whom was given the title Saošyant, “He who will bring benefit,” and gradually it came to be believed that he would be born of the seed of Zoroaster himself, miraculously preserved at the bottom of a lake, where it is watched over by the *fravašis* (see *Frawahr*) of the just. When *Frašō.kərəti* is near, it is held, a virgin will bathe in this lake and become with child, and will bear a son, the Saošyant; and a name was fashioned for him, Astvaṭ.ērēta, “He who embodies righteousness.” This name is evidently derived, with a small dialect difference, from Zoroaster’s own words in *Y.* 43.16: *astvaṭ ašəm hyāṭ* “may righteousness be embodied.” His virgin mother too received a name, Ērēdaṭ.fəδrī “She who brings fulfillment to the father.” She is also called *Vīspa.taurvairī* “She who



conquers all,” and her *fravaši* is revered by both names in *Yašt* 13.142. This evolved belief in the miraculous conception of the Saošyant demonstrates the profound Zoroastrian respect for lineage, so that the future Savior came to be looked for from the prophet’s own blood. Despite the miracle of his birth, he remains fully a man, born of human parents, and so there is no betrayal here of Zoroaster’s teaching about the vital part which mankind has to play in the salvation of the world.

Astvaṭ.ərəta will be accompanied, as his father was before him, and as all righteous kings and heroes are, by Xvarənah, Divine Grace (see *Xwarrah*), and it is in *Yašt* 19, which celebrates Xvarənah, that the extant Avesta has most to tell of him. There the worshippers declare: “We sacrifice to the mighty . . . kingly Xvarənah . . . which will accompany the victorious Saošyant . . . so that he may make existence new again, not ageing, not dying, not decaying” (*Yt.* 19.88-89). “When Astvaṭ.ərəta comes out from Lake Kāsaoya, the messenger of Mazdā Ahura, son of Vīspa.taurvairī, brandishing the victorious weapon which the mighty Əraētaona bore when Aži Dahāka was slain, which the Tūra Fraṅrasyan bore when the wicked Zainigu was slain, which Kavi Haosravah bore when the Tūra Fraṅrasyan was slain, which Kavi Vištāspa bore to avenge Aša upon the enemy host, then will he drive Falsehood out from the world of Aša. He will gaze with the eyes of wisdom, he will behold all creation he will gaze with the eyes of sacrifice upon the whole corporeal world, and heedfully will he make the whole world undying.” (*Yt.* 19.92-94.)

The Lake Kāsaoya (q.v.), where Astvaṭ.ərəta will be conceived, drew its waters from the river Haētumant (modern Helmand), and so can be identified as the Hāmūn lake in southeastern Iran (Sīstān). It seems probable that the beliefs about the Saošyant’s miraculous conception evolved in that region, during the centuries which passed between the lifetime of Zoroaster (perhaps between 1400 and 1200 B.C.), and the adoption of his faith in western Iran (perhaps in the late 7th century B.C.). Because of its name Kāsaoya (Pahlavi Kayānsih), the lake came by popular etymology to be associated with the *kavis* (see Kayanids), i.e., the dynasty of Vištāspa, Zoroaster’s royal patron, and so, it seems, with the prophet himself.

Subsequently the Zoroastrian priests of western Iran evolved, presumably under Babylonian influence, a chronology for the events of world “history” as recorded or prophesied in the religious tradition. According to this, cosmic history was divided into a succession of millennia (six, nine, or twelve, according to different versions); and within each of the last three millennia,



which compass all human activity, similar events recur. Probably to meet the needs of this scholastic system, and also because Zoroastrianism tends to create triads, it came to be taught that Astvaṭ.ərəta will be preceded by two earlier Saošyants, his brothers. The fully developed doctrine, as recorded in the Pahlavi books, is as follows: Zoroaster thrice approached his third wife, Hvōvī. “Each time the seed fell upon the ground. The *yazad* Nēryōsang took the light and power of that seed and entrusted them to the *yazad* Anāhīd to guard . . . and 99,999 *frawahrs* of the just are appointed for their protection, so that the *dēws* may not destroy them” (*Bundahišn*, p. 236.5-10, tr. XXXV.60). The seed thus given to the *yazad* of the waters is preserved in Lake Kayānsih, where “even now are seen three lamps glowing at the bottom of the lake” (*ibid.*, p. 220.10-11, tr. XXXIII.37). Zoroaster was held, according to the schematized history, to have received his revelation in the world-year 9000, when he was thirty years old; and almost a millennium later, in 9970, a virgin will bathe in the lake (*ibid.*, p. 220.11-15) and conceive the first of the Saošyants, named Uxšyaṭ.ərəta “He who makes righteousness grow,” Pahlavi Ušēdar or Hušēdar. When he in his turn will be thirty, in the year 10,000, Ušēdar will lead the forces of good against the evil which is once more gaining strength in the world, and will gain a noble victory, thus ushering in the next millennium with joy and happiness. The pattern of events is then repeated, with evil gathering strength once more, and in the year 10,970 the second Saošyant will be conceived, Uxšyaṭ.nəmah “He who makes reverence grow,” Pahlavi Ušēdarmāh/Hušēdarmāh; and when he is thirty, in 11,000, this second Savior will fight against even worse evils than his brother, and gain an even greater victory. Finally, when the world seems nearly overwhelmed again by wickedness and physical blights, Astvaṭ.ərəta himself will be conceived, in 11,943; and when he is thirty he will lead the forces of good on earth into a last great battle, in which *yazads* and *dēws* will also take part. This battle and what attends it (see [Eschatology](#)) will last for twenty-seven years—the auspicious number of thrice nine; and then in the world-year 12,000 *Frašō.kərəti* will come, with eternal bliss for the saved.

The names of the first two Saošyants seem formed on the pattern of Astvaṭ.ərəta’s; and imitation is even more striking in the case of their virgin mothers, who are called Srūtaṭ.fəδrī “She who has a famous father,” and Vanhu.fəδrī “She who has a good father” (both names clearly patterned on Ērədaṭ.fəδrī’s). All four names occur in *Yašt* 13 (vv. 128, 141), before those of Astvaṭ.ərəta and Ērədaṭ.fəδrī; and, being used there with a fixed formula, could have been added at almost any date. According to the priestly



scholastics, the first two virgin mothers were descended from Zoroaster's eldest son Isadvāstr (Isaṭ.vāstra, q.v.), so that in their case the miraculous conception was within the framework of a *xwēdōdah* (q.v.) union (see *Dēnkard*, p. 667 ll. 1ff., 671 ll. 4ff.)

These highly artificial systematizations became part of Zoroastrian priestly tradition, and were transmitted from generation to generation; but it is unlikely that their details were ever grasped by ordinary believers, who continued to look for the coming of Astavaṭ.ērēta, later known simply as the Savior, the Saošyant, Pahlavi Sōšāns. (Hence no Middle Persian form exists of his Avestan proper name.) However, since none of the world-Saviors has yet appeared, the priests teach that it is Ušēdar who will come to save mankind from its present plight. In popular belief, however, the coming of the Saošyant is expected to bring about a final end of human suffering and to usher in eternal bliss, the ancient doctrine of the one world-Savior thus triumphing over scholastic complexities. The belief, whether priestly or popular, proved a source of strength for the community during its tribulations after the coming of Islam. The tiny band of the faithful which held out in Iran itself tended to look for the coming of the Saošyant from the east, that is from China, where the last Sasanian crown prince had taken refuge from the Arabs; and their messianic hopes are vividly documented in letters written by Irani priests to their Parsi brethren in India. By their calculations, the tenth world-millennium should have been drawing to a close early in the 17th century A.D.—a time of much hardship for their community; and they were strengthened to endure by their conviction that “the millennium of Ahriman is ended and the millennium of Ormazd is at hand, and we hope to look upon the face of . . . Hošēdar” (M. R. Unvala, *Dārāb Hormazyār's Rivāyat*, Bombay, 1922, II, p. 159 lines 18-19). The passing of the crucial year, 1630 A.D., without his manifestation must have brought bitter disappointment to them; and though faith in the Savior's coming persists, it has never since then attached itself to a definite date in any actual calendar.

The basic Zoroastrian belief in a virgin-born Savior of the world must have become widely known throughout the Near East in the Achaemenid period, i.e., from the 6th century B.C. onward, when almost all the eastern Mediterranean lands were under Persian rule; and it appears to have exerted some influence on Judeo-Christian thought. It is also considered possible that it contributed, in the eastern border-lands of the Achaemenid empire, to the evolution of the doctrine of Maitreya (q.v.), the coming Buddha, held by the



northern Buddhists.

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