



COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY I. IN ZOROASTRIANISM/MAZDAISM

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i. In Zoroastrianism/Mazdaism

The “orthodox” myth. The extant Avesta contains no systematic exposition of the cosmological beliefs of the people among whom it was composed and who eventually brought Zoroastrianism to western Iran. Such expositions are known only from much later, in the Pahlavi tradition of the Sasanian period. The main texts are the *Bundahišn* and the *Selections of Zādspram*, both of which, however, clearly contain material from the Older Avesta. According to these texts, in the beginning Ohrmazd (Av. *Ahura Mazdā*) dwelt on high, in pure light; *Ahriman* (Old Av. *Angra Mainiiu*, Young Av. *Anra Mainiiu*) dwelt in the depths, in darkness. Between them was the void. Ohrmazd was aware of *Ahriman*’s antagonism, and, to prepare himself for battle, he first shaped his creations in a spiritual (*mēnōg*) state, in the form of “bright, white fire” (*Bundahišn* 1.44). The creations remained in this state for 3,000 years. In the meantime *Ahriman* made his demonic creatures out of darkness. He then attacked the luminous world. Ohrmazd initially offered peace, which was rejected. Finally, the two spirits made a treaty (*paymānag*) to wage war for a limited period of time (a speculative duration of 9,000 or 12,000 years is given)



in a well-defined arena: the world. The three stages in the cosmic drama were the (material) creation (*bundahišn*), which began with the treaty; the mixture (*gumēzišn*) of good and evil; and the separation (*wizārišn*) of evil from good. The last stage, however, was to fall outside historical time.

The period of (material) creation, also to last 3,000 years, began after the treaty, when Ohrmazd recited the *Ahunwar* (Av. Ahuna Vairiia) prayer, revealing to Ahriman his ultimate defeat and causing him to fall back into the darkness in a stupor, which lasted for the entire period of the creation. During this time Ohrmazd fashioned his creations in material (*gētīg*) form, by celebrating a “spiritual *yasna*” (*Bundahišn* 3.23). He placed each creation under the protection of one of the seven Amahraspands (Av. *Aməša Spənta*). First he created the sky (protected by Šahrewar, Av. Xšaθra Vairiia), which enclosed the world like the shell of an egg (cf. Bailey, pp. 135-36). The second creation was water (protected by Hordād, Av. Haurvatāt), which filled the lower half of the “egg.” The third creation, earth (protected by Spandārmad, Av. Spənta *Ārmaiti*), shaped like a flat disk, floated on the primeval waters. On it stood the fourth, fifth, and sixth creations, respectively the single plant or tree (protected by *Amurdād*; Av. Amərətāt), the uniquely created bull (protected by Wahman, Av. Vohu Manah), and the first man, Gayōmard (Av. Gaiiō.marətan, protected by Ohrmazd himself). The seventh creation, fire (protected by *Ardwahišt*; Av. Aša Vahišta), was said (e.g., *Bundahišn* 3.8) to have permeated all other creations. During the 3,000 years of the period of material creation these creations were motionless, and the sun stood still in the middle of the sky.

Eventually Ahriman successfully renewed his attack. Ohrmazd rescued the “prototypes” (*karb*) of the plant, bull, and first man by placing them in the heavenly spheres of stars, moon, and sun (*Bundahišn* 7), but Ahriman penetrated the sky, polluted the waters, made a hole in the earth, caused the plant to wither, killed the bull, attacked and eventually killed Gayōmard, and tainted fire with smoke. Initially he was thus victorious: The world had become dark (*Bundahišn* 4.22; *Dādestān ī dēnīg* 36.34; *Zādspram* 2.11, 2.18-19, 3.1). Then movement entered the world, and Ohrmazd’s creations began to fight back. As a result, Ahriman was said to have been trapped in the sky, which prevented him from reaching the heavenly spheres (*Bundahišn* 4A; *Zādspram* 3.2). Night alternated with day. The waters flowed and could thus be purified; salt water was separated from sweet. The mythical lake Frāxwkard (Av. Vourukaša) was formed, from which other seas and lakes developed (see



below). The earth was anchored by the roots of the mountains that grew up on it. The first rain divided the original landmass into seven continents. The dried first plant was pounded and mixed with water, which caused plant life to develop. More plants are said to have sprung from the limbs of the bull (*Bundahišn* 6.2), whose seed became the source of animal life. Similarly, Gayōmard's body produced metals (*Bundahišn* 6F.8; *Mēnōg ī xrad* 27.18), and the first human couple developed from his seed. Fire protected the world of righteousness and made life and movement possible; it was closely connected with the concept of *xwarrah* "fortune, glory" (*Zādspram* 3.77ff.). All these developments took place in the stage of mixture, the current stage, the total duration of which was to be 3,000 years. At the end of that time the "separation" of evil from good would be achieved, and after a final *yasna* ceremony (*Zādspram* 35.15-16; cf. *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 35.29) the renovation (*frašegird*; Av. *frašō.kərəti*) would begin.

The evidence from the Younger Avesta is too scanty to show conclusively how this myth developed. In a number of passages the creations are enumerated in approximately the same order as in the later tradition (e.g., *Y.* 19.2.4; *Vd.* 9.33.42, 11.2.9-10). In some instances fire is omitted altogether (*Y.* 23.1; *Yt.* 13.22, 13.28; *Visprad* 7.4), but elsewhere it is apparently represented by a reference to the dwelling places of the righteous dead (*Yt.* 13.86) or by the sun (*Y.* 19.8). The *Yasna Haptarhāiti* equally attests close links among fire, sun, and *Aša* (*Y.* 37.4, 36). In *Yasna* 37.1 Ahura Mazdā is worshiped as the creator of "the bull and *Aša*, the waters and plants, those lights and the earth." Man and fire appear to be represented there by Ahura Mazdā and *Aša* ("those lights" referring to the bright sky; see below). This association strongly suggests an early connection between the creations and the entities (pace Narten, p. 119).

It is widely held that the Gathas contain allusions to such links (Lommel, pp. 120-21; Boyce 1970; idem, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 203-04). The nature of these texts is such, however, that it cannot be conclusively proved or disproved that the dogma of the seven creations formed part of Zoroaster's teaching. The gathic evidence does agree with that of the later tradition, however, in stressing Ahura Mazdā's role as the sole creator of the universe (e.g., *Y.* 43.5, 44.3-5) and in attributing the present state of the world to the destructive activities of the power of evil (*Y.* 45.1: "The one of evil doctrine shall not destroy existence a second time"; cf. Ahura Mazdā's epithet *ahūm.biš* "healer of existence"; *Y.* 44.16).

Traces of different myths. According to the Pahlavi *Rivāyat* accompanying the



Dādestān ī dēnīg (46; Williams), Ohrmazd placed all the creations into an (apparently human) body, where they gestated. The perfected creations were then brought forth from the different parts of this body. This myth has been connected with the Indian Puruṣa myth (Zaehner, pp. 136-37) and with that of the Iranian first man (Williams). A comparable link between macrocosm and microcosm may be found in the *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, 1.a.10), where the earth is said to have been created “in the semblance of a man,” and in *Zādspram* (30.1), where the human body is likened to the firmament.

Various speculative teachings about the cosmogony have generally been ascribed to the Zurvanite sect. Some of them, however, occur in works deriving from the “orthodox” Zand (notably the *Great Bundahišn* and *Selections of Zādspram*), which suggests that they had come to be widely accepted by a majority of Zoroastrian scholars. The Zurvanites held that Zurwān, the god of time, was the first divine being and that it was his primordial sacrifice, accompanied by doubt, that caused Ahriman and Ohrmazd to be born. According to one Zurvanite source (the second *‘Olamā’-e Eslām*, p. 9, cited in Zaehner, p. 410). Time first created fire and water, and when he brought them together Ohrmazd came into being. The Zurvanite cosmogony appears to have contained more speculative elements than the original “orthodox” cosmogony. Prominent features included the creation of “time of long dominion” (*zamān ī dagrand-xwadāy*) from “unlimited time” (*zamān ī akenārag*) and teachings about space (*wāy, gyāg*) and the firmament (*spīhr*; cf. *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 1.39-49; *Zādspram* 1.9.28; Zaehner, pp. 88-89, 112-13). The concepts of gestation and emanation appear to have played as prominent a role as did creation in these speculations (e.g. *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 1.39, 1.50; *Dēnkard* 349.1-2; cf. Zaehner, pp. 371-72). Zurvanite teaching was profoundly influenced by astronomy and astrology; a preoccupation with the zodiac may have inspired the belief in a 12,000-year period of limited time. In *Zādspram* (34.20), moreover, a sequence of twelve creations is mentioned (see Gignoux, p. 63).

Some western Iranians evidently held the belief that Ohrmazd had originally been incapable of creating light. The demon Mahmī, who had learned the secret from Ahriman, taught him how to beget the sun and moon by intercourse with his mother and sister (for references, see Zaehner, pp. 438ff.).

Furthermore, according to a number of sources, a mediating figure watched over the treaty between the two spirits. Plutarch attributed this function to Mithra, Eznik of Kolb to the sun, and Šahrestānī to the “angels” (cited in



Zaehner, pp. 448, 443, 433 respectively). The accounts of Eznik and Šahrestānī are essentially Zurvanite, but in the Avesta a similar function is attributed to Srōš (Av. Sraoša), some of whose features were borrowed from Mithra (*Yt.* 11.14; cf. *Y.* 57.17). The concept of a treaty between Ohrmazd and Ahriman (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 1.25-7) may itself have originated in Mithra's more prominent role as lord of the covenant in a pre-Zoroastrian cosmogony (see below). Mithra, moreover, is to be identified with the "protector" (Av. *pāiiu-*, Mid. Pers. *pānag*), who, together with the "fashioner" (Av. *θβōrāštar-*, Mid. Pers. *brīngar*), "fashions all creatures" (*Y.* 57.2; cf. *Y.* 42.2; Kreyenbroek, p. 78).

The Avestan hymn to the Frauuašis (*Yt.* 13), though heavily "zoroastrianized," contains traces of a fundamentally different account of the origin of the world. Because of the Frauuašis, it is said, the waters flow, plants grow, the wind blows, children are born to man, and the moon and stars move in their appointed courses (vv. 14-16). The Frauuašis help Ahura Mazdā to "hold asunder" (*vī. 'āraiiia-*) heaven and earth (v. 2). In verses 55-56 it is stated that after the creation the plants had long been motionless; the Frauuašis are praised for having delivered them from this unhappy state. Elsewhere (vv. 77-78) Vohu Manah and Ātar are said to have prevented Angra Mainiiu from attacking the world, "so that he could not stop the waters from flowing, the plants from growing; at once, the very strong waters . . . flowed forth, the plants grew." The latter passage appears to indicate that, in an earlier cosmogony, plants and waters had in fact been motionless and without growth until an act of deliverance took place.

The combined evidence from *Yašt* 13 therefore strongly suggests that, in a pre-Zoroastrian version of the cosmogony, a primordial state in which plants could not grow, men (and presumably animals) did not procreate, and the luminaries stood motionless in a sky (which perhaps pressed upon the earth) was postulated. This static condition was plainly regarded as inferior to the state of growth and motion that was subsequently brought about. The legend of Yima's triple extension of the earth (*Vd.* 2.10ff.) also suggests an older myth in which the original creations were freed from their confinement by a positive act at the beginning of time. The implications of such a myth, however, are, strikingly different from those of the "orthodox" Zoroastrian myth, in which the original, motionless state was described as ideal, and motion, procreation, and diversity were indirectly attributed to the incursion of Ahriman.

The origin of the Iranian cosmogonies. Both the drying and pounding of the



original plant and the slaying of the bull suggest that a link may have existed between the cosmogony and the *yasna* ceremony (Boyce, 1970; idem, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 141; cf. Ohrmazd's "spiritual *yasna*," *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 3.23).

The *yasna* ceremony, which originated in the Indo-Iranian period, was essentially intended to create a link between heaven and earth through ritual offerings of the juice of the *haoma* plant, and initially also through animal sacrifice, in the presence of the life-giving elements water and fire, which also received offerings. The proper time for this rite may have been the early morning, just after sunrise, as it still is in Persia (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 170). Whether or not human sacrifice was ever associated with the *yasna* ceremony is unknown (cf. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 141); the myth of the killing of the first man may have developed on analogy with that of the slaying of the bull.

If this ritual served as a model for an ancient Indo-Iranian cosmogony, it may be supposed that the latter encompassed an initial stage in which the prototypes of the creations were motionless and possibly dark (the *yasna* being performed at sunrise), and that a primordial sacrifice caused vegetable, animal, and human life to grow and multiply, the waters to flow, the earth to be extended, and the luminaries to move in a (perhaps raised) sky, giving light to the world. Although no coherent myth of a primordial sacrifice is attested in the ancient Indian texts, many elements of Vedic cosmogony may have been derived from such a myth: Before the second stage of the cosmogony the world was dark (cf. *Ṛgveda* 10.129.3); the sun and the cows were hidden in "stone" (*ásman*; cf. Ir. *asman*– "stone, sky"; Kuiper, pp. 110-11); and the earth floated on the waters (Kirfel, p. 9), but the waters were also confined. The "second act of creation" liberated the cows and the waters, and brought forth the sun, fire, and soma; soma then generated all plants (MacDonnell, pp. 43, 154). This act was most often ascribed to Indra, who also "made firm" the earth (*Ṛgveda* 2.12.2), extended it, and supported the sky on high (Oldenberg, p. 148). When Indra "found the light" he was apparently accompanied by the "seven seers" or by the "fathers" (Oldenberg, p. 285), which may point to an original priestly act and to a link with the Iranian Frauuašis.

Indra is, however, held by scholars to be a comparatively "young" god (Benveniste and Renou; Thieme, pp. 311-12). It is widely recognized that his creative functions were borrowed from the Asuras Varuṇa and Mithra, the lords of water and fire respectively (cf. *Ṛgveda* 7.61.4). Varuṇa's creative



functions are still clearly recognizable in the *Rigveda* (MacDonnell, p. 134). It seems likely, therefore, that the rise of the cult of Indra led to far-reaching distortions of the original myths, causing the link between cosmogony and sacrifice to be forgotten in India, while most of the original features of the myth were retained there and placed in a different setting.

A number of traits of the Vedic Indra were borrowed from Mithra (Thieme, pp. 311-12), and he may have eclipsed the latter in India. In the Zoroastrian tradition it was Mithra's original element, fire, that caused motion and growth, and he had special links with the sun and with the *yasna* (Boyce, 1969, pp. 26-27). In Mithraism, which may have been derived at least partly from a non-Zoroastrian western Iranian cult, Mithra played the role of a primordial sacrificer (Hinnells, pp. 310-11). Taken together, these facts suggest that Mithra played a prominent part in the original myth of the primordial sacrifice, possibly setting in motion the creations fashioned by Varuṇa, which would explain his role as "protector" (see above) and perhaps as a mediator, who, by setting the world in motion, became particularly responsible for it.

The role of the original sacrificer in the postulated original myth was mirrored in many ways by that of the Zoroastrian Ahriman. In the Zoroastrian tradition, however, it was Indra, rather than Mithra, who was vehemently rejected, implying that Indra was a prominent divinity in the pre-Zoroastrian pantheon. This rejection also suggests that Zoroaster's teaching that the second stage of the cosmogony was brought about by the evil spirit may have been inspired by the increasing prominence of myths ascribing creative functions to Indra. In contrast to the "flawed" second stage, Zoroaster stressed the ideal nature of Ahura Mazdā's original creation. This novel interpretation of the cosmogony not only implied a different understanding of the links between the origin of the world and ritual, but also required fundamental reinterpretation of some elements of the cosmogony.

The origin of light is a case in point. The ancient belief (echoed in the western Iranian legend that Ohrmazd had not created light initially and in the "orthodox" myth of Ahriman's first victory), that the primordial cosmos was dark and the sun hidden in the dark, stone sky, was incompatible with the Zoroastrian dogma of an ideal first creation. In Zoroastrianism it was therefore taught that Ahura Mazdā created light, that the sun had shone in the middle of heaven before the onslaught of evil, and that the sky was made of rock crystal or shining metal.



The explanation of death as a result of the onslaught of evil largely superseded and rendered meaningless older myths about the origin of death, in which Yima played a central part. Later such a myth apparently became interwoven with a legend similar to that of the Indian Vala (from which the cows were liberated when the world was made habitable). In the Iranian legend (*Vd.* 2.20ff.) Yima preserved the best men, animals, and plants from the hazards of the world of mixture, in a confined subterranean space (*var-*). At the end of time, when the world would be restored to its pristine state, Yima's *var-* would be opened and would yield up its inhabitants (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 33.30).

Cosmology

Sky, lights, and fire. The ancient Iranians believed that the sun, moon, and stars were set within a stone sky (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 132). The theory of a transparent crystal sky, through which the light of the luminaries could pass, presumably led later scholars to identify the created sky with the "firmament" (*spīhr*; *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 2.2), which was located *below* the spheres of moon, sun, and endless lights. The firmament was set above the "cloud sphere" and was itself divided into two levels: the sphere of the constellations and above it that of the "unmixed stars," which had the task of warding off Ahriman's attacks on the higher reaches of the cosmos (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 2.2-9, 3.7, 6.J). Above the firmament (or "star sphere"; Haug and West, 7.5) came the spheres of the moon, the sun, the Amahraspandān, and the endless lights (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 3.7, 2.13; for minor variations, see Haug and West 8-9; cf. *Yt.* 12.35-37). Beginning with the star sphere, the upper levels also served as abodes for the souls of the righteous dead (Haug and West, 7-12; cf., e.g., *Y.* 19.6). Light filtered down from the pure light of Ohrmazd, losing brilliance as it descended through the spheres. The prototypes of the creations were said to have been preserved in the various spheres, and their light reached their terrestrial counterparts (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 7.9; cf. *Yt.* 8.38, 12.28-29), a theory that may reflect older ideas.

Fire was connected with the endless lights. The link between light, which passed from the prototypes to the creations, and fire, which permeates them, was alluded to. There were thought to be five kinds of fire: fire dwelling with Ohrmazd on high, fire in men and animals, fire in plants, fire in clouds, and earthly fires (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 3.7, 7.9; cf. 18; see [ātaš](#)).



The sun, moon, and stars were said to revolve around the peak (*tērag*) of Harā, which had 180 windows in the east and as many in the west, thus accounting for the 360 days of the ancient Iranian year (*Yt.* 12.25; *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, V.b.2-3; see below).

Oceans, rain, and rivers. After the onslaught of Ahriman, Tištriia (Mid. Pers. Teštar) swept all the waters together to form the mythical ocean of sweet waters, Vourukaša. After an initial defeat by Apaoša, the demon of drought, Tištriia caused the first rain to fall (*Zādspram* 3.115-16). The ocean Vourukaša, which remained in existence, was then “divided” into three salt seas: Pūdīg (Av. Pūitika, lit. “cleansing”), Siyāwbūm, and Kamrōd (*Zādspram* 3.17ff.; *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 10.7-8). In Sasanian times Pūdīg was identified with the Persian Gulf, Siyāwbūm with the Black Sea, and Kamrōd with the Caspian (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 145). A number of lesser seas and lakes were mentioned in the tradition, notably Kašaoiia (Mid. Pers. Kayānsih) and Sadwēs. In the latter Ahrimanic salt water was said to have been separated from sweet water by the wind, so that only sweet water would flow into Vourukaša (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 10.9).

In the middle of Vourukaša stood Mount Us.həṇdauua (Mid. Pers. Usind; *Yt.* 8.32; *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 9.8; cf. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 136 and n. 51). Around it vapors gathered into rain clouds, which were then distributed over the earth. Part of their water came to the peak of Harā and fed the mythical great river Arəduuī Sūrā (Mid. Pers. Ardwīsūr), which supposedly flowed from the peak of Harā back into Vourukaša (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 11.6, 18.8; *Zādspram* 3.2; cf. Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, pp. 71-74; see [anāhid](#)). Two more great rivers played a prominent role in Zoroastrian cosmology: the Raṅhā (Mid. Pers. [Arang](#)) and the Vaṅhvī Dāitiā (Mid. Pers. Wehrōd), which flowed from north to south and formed respectively the western and eastern boundaries of the inhabited world. When the water of these rivers had passed round the earth, it had been cleansed and returned to Vourukaša (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 11.1, 11a.1, 11.c.2).

Earth, mountains, and plants. Like the Vedic Indians, the Iranians believed that the earth had been stabilized during the second stage of the creation. In the Zoroastrian tradition mountains were said to have grown up after the onslaught; their roots anchored the earth (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 6.c.1-2). The first mountain range to develop was that of Harā, which encircled the world. According to the *Bundahišn* (tr. Anklesaria, 9.2), it grew to reach the “highest part of the sky.” There may have been a confusion here with the peak



of Harā (Av. Hukairiia, lit. “of good activity,” Mid. Pers. Tērag ī Harburz or Čigād ī Dāidīg; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 137), the axis around which the luminaries revolved (see [alborz ii](#)). The peak grew from the roots of the Harā range in the middle of the earth. The Činwad bridge (Av. Činvatō Pərətu, Mid. Pers. Činwad Puhl; lit. “bridge of the separator”) rested on it (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 5.b.1, 9.9).

The first rain caused the original solid landmass to be divided into seven “continents” (Av. *karšuuar-*, Mid. Pers. *kišwar*). Xvaniraθa (Mid. Pers. Xwanirah), the central continent, which was inhabited by humanity, was as large as the other six put together. They were scattered around Xvaniraθa but cut off from it by seas and mountains (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 8.1, 8.3-5).

The myth of Mount Us.həṇdauua, standing in the middle of the mythical ocean Vourukaša, may reflect a belief that prototypes of natural phenomena existed beyond the known world (on prototypes of the creations and Yima’s *var-*, see above). The same is true of the mythical “tree of all seeds,” or “tree of Saēna,” which also grew in the middle of Vourukaša. It had sprung from the seeds of all the plants brought forth by the pounding of the first plant (*Yt.* 12.17; *Vd.* 5.19; *Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 6.d.1-5, 16.4, 24.8). Each year the bird Saēna (Mid. Pers. Sēn) mixed its seeds with water, and Tištriia distributed them over the earth.

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