



COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY IV. IN THE MAZDAKITE RELIGION

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The most important source for modern knowledge of Mazdakite cosmogony is the description of the Mazdakite religion in *Ketāb al-melal wa'l-neḥal*, written by Abu'l-Faḥ Moḥammad b. 'Abd-al-Karīm Šahrestānī (pp. 192-94; tr. pp. 663-66), in 624/1227, several hundred years after the period in which the sect flourished. Ehsan Yarshater (pp. 1006-12) has gleaned a few additional details from other Arabic sources (Maqdesī, Nawbakṭī, Ebn al-Nadīm).

Šahrestānī's description can be summarized as follows: Light and darkness are the two "modes of being and principles" (*al-kawnān wa'l-aṣlān*) that existed before the world. Light acts intentionally and voluntarily and is endowed with knowledge and perception, whereas darkness acts blindly (*be'l-ḳabṭ*) and at random (*be'l-ettefāq*); darkness is ignorant (*jāhel*) and blind (*a'mā*). The mixture of light and darkness came about by chance and at random (*'ala'l-ettefāq wa'l-ḳabṭ*); at the end of the world the separation of these principles will also come about by chance and not through free will (*be'l-eḳtīār*). After some comments on Mazdakite ethics Šahrestānī's discussion of cosmogony



continues: The three primal elements are water, earth, and fire. The mixture of these elements has resulted in a guiding force of good (*modabber al-ḵayr*) and a guiding force of evil (*modabber al-šarr*). These forces are not to be equated with the two principles, however. Because they effect the good and the evil in the elements, they can be regarded rather as demiurges that have formed the world.

Šahrestānī then turned to description of the Mazdakite “object of veneration” (*maʿbūdohū*) and hierarchy. This aspect of Mazdakite cosmology has been distorted to a greater degree than any other by errors in transmission and has therefore been the subject of repeated controversy (see, e.g., Christensen, p. 249 n. 3; Altheim and Stiehl, pp. 360-76; Klíma, 1957, pp. 183-92; idem, 1977, pp. 32-39; Shaki, 1985, pp. 527-43; Yarshater, pp. 997-98, 1006-08). The most recent annotated translation, by Daniel Gimaret and Guy Monnot, represents significant progress over earlier versions in that the problem of the “twelve spiritual beings” has been convincingly solved (p. 664 n. 58). In the text the “object of veneration” is compared with the *ḵosrow*, or king, of the Sasanians. Arrayed before him are the four powers: discernment (*al-tamyīz*), understanding (*al-fahm*), memory (*al-ḥefz*), and joy (*al-sorūr*). They are comparable to the four highest dignitaries at the Sasanian court, the high priest (*mōbedān mōbed*), the great teacher (*hērbed al-akbar*), the commander of the army (*esbahbed*), and the (court) musician (*rāmešgar*).

The four powers govern the world through seven ministers (*wozarā*); the Middle Persian titles for these beings have not yet been fully explained. The seven are the commander (*sālār*), the provost (*pēškār*, var. *pēšgāh*), the unidentified *bʿlwn*, the messenger(?; *brvʿn*, i.e., *parwān(ag)*), the expert (*kārdān*), the statesman (*dastūr*), and the page (*kōdag*, lit. “little one”). These ministers are said to “revolve” within the twelve “spiritual” beings (*rūḥānīyūn*), whose names are all Middle Persian present participles (e.g., *ḵʿānanda* “the announcer”). They have been identified with the twelve signs of the zodiac by all interpreters. The most convincing readings appear to be those of Gimaret and Monnot (Šahrestānī, tr., pp. 664-65), though perhaps instead of **āb-deh* as the name for Aquarius the reading should be **āb-baranda* “water carrier.” Finally, Šahrestānī reported that the ruler of the upper world governs by means of those letters that represent the sum of his name, probably a reference to alphabetic numerals, though which alphabet is not clear (for a different interpretation, see Altheim and Stiehl, pp. 374-76).

Šahrestānī’s recital of the divine powers begins with a comparison of the



upper levels of the hierarchy to the court of the Sasanian kings, a type of presentation that has parallels in other teachings (see Tardieu). It then shifts to astrological theology, in which the twelve signs of the zodiac constitute the lowest level of the divine world. It is reasonable to assume that the seven powers “revolving within them” are the planets, but this conclusion cannot be confirmed on the basis of their names (pace Shaki, 1985, pp. 535-36). Despite the imbalance in this system, the series four-seven-twelve probably forms a unified whole.

There are two salient characteristics of Mazdakite cosmogony. The first is a sharply dualistic frame of reference similar to that in Mazdaism or Manicheism: light and darkness as original principles, two demiurges that result from the mixture of the elements and effect the good and evil in the elements. The second is a theology of the created world in which the divine entity acts through four, seven, and twelve beings respectively. This scheme was probably derived from the ideas of Mazdean astronomy: the four “generals” of the heavens (de Saussure; Henning, p. 230; see [astrology and astronomy ii](#), p. 866), the seven planets, and the twelve signs of the zodiac. The identity of the supreme being in this hierarchy (corresponding to the polar star, the grand commander, in astronomy) remains unclear. It can hardly be a personification of the supreme light, because it acts itself directly on the earthly world. The fact that the supreme being rules through the power of the stars and is not limited by a “guiding force of evil” speaks against identifying it with the good demiurge. Could Mazdak’s “object of veneration” have been a third order of divine beings, or did Šahrestānī or his sources combine heterogeneous traditions? The matter is still open to debate.

Nor is it certain how precisely Šahrestānī’s description reflects actual Mazdakite doctrine, which came into existence around the year 500, and to what degree it incorporated later traditions. The image of a divine hierarchy on the model of the Sasanian court suggests a Sasanian or somewhat later source. The reference to the king by a proper name, *Ḳosrow*, that had come to be used as a title in the Islamic period suggests a date no earlier than the end of the reign of *Ḳosrow II* (500-628; Altheim and Stiehl’s explanation, pp. 199-200, of *Ḳosrow* as an old Choresmian name is not convincing). Šahrestānī’s comparison of the Mazdakite principle of common possession of women and property to that of common ownership of water, fire, and fodder was formerly interpreted as drawn from the agrarian sphere of Mazdak’s followers in the 5th-6th centuries, an interpretation with significant implications



(Sundermann, 1977). Gimaret and Monnot (Šahrestānī, tr., p. 663 n. 48) point out, however, that the comparison was in fact probably taken from a well-known Islamic Hadith. At best Šahrestānī transmitted traditions preserved in the persecuted Mazdakite community in Islamic times, which Yarshater has called “neo-Mazdakite” teachings (p. 1011). Any attempt to determine the sources and origins of early Mazdakite teachings is complicated by this fact.

The argument that Mazdakite teachings were derived from a Manichean heresy (Christensen, pp. 100-01; Klíma, 1957, p. 183) finds some support in Šahrestānī’s own comparison of the dualism of the two religions (tr., p. 663). The same comparison might also be made with Mazdean cosmogony, however; Mansour Shaki has several times drawn attention to the essentially Mazdean nature of Mazdakite teachings (1978, pp. 298-300; 1985, pp. 529-30). Yarshater characterizes Mazdakism as agnostic religious movement (p. 991), and in this context the relationship between Mazdean social ethics and those of the Carpocratians can be mentioned (Klíma, 1957, pp. 209-11; Pugliese Carratelli, p. 288). One of the peculiarities of Mazdak’s teachings, the assumption that the three basic elements are water, earth, and fire, has a parallel, according to Šahrestānī, in the cosmogony of the *Canteans, a southern Mesopotamian baptist sect (tr., pp. 82, 671).

These parallels are sufficient evidence of the syncretistic nature of Mazdakite teachings, which were certainly not derived from a single source, but they are not sufficient to explain the particular nature of Mazdakism. Above all, Mazdakism differs from both Manicheism and Mazdaism in its assertion that the final resolution of the mixture of principles will come about by chance and at random (without the offices of man), that is, in the same way in which the mixture came about in the first place. In this context Otto Klíma’s interpretation (1977, pp. 34-35) of *kabṭ* in the social-revolutionary sense, as a reestablishment of the ideal state by force, is not convincing. Mazdakism differs from gnostic teachings and especially Manicheism in its fundamentally positive, nonascetic attitude toward the world and the powers that govern it, especially in its positive interpretation of the planets, in which it differs also from Zoroastrianism. The possible influence of philosophical ideas cannot be excluded, but a dependence on the thought of the neo-Platonist Porphyry cannot be demonstrated. It is worth noting, too, that Christian ideas are totally absent from Mazdakism.



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