



ELEMENTS

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i. In Zoroastrianism.

ii. In Manicheism.

iii. In Persian.

i. IN ZOROASTRIANISM

In Mazdean cosmogony two diverse accounts are presented regarding the elements of the material world, the traditional and the syncretic. Both proclaim creation to be an emanation from the divine essence, the Endless Light (*asar rōšnīh*), through the omnipresent fire. The traditional accounts are set out mainly in the first and third chapters of the *Bundahišn* (q.v.). The first chapter is a general description of the creation of the material world in seven chronological stages: the sky (*āsmān*), water (*āb*), the earth (*zamīg*), plants (*urwar*), the lone-created bull (*gōspand*, i.e., cattle), man (*mardōm*), and a flame (*xwarrag*) of fire (*Bundahišn* 1.35). The missing air (*wād*), an indispensable element to life (*gyān*), is provided through a supplementary creation “to foster and keep the water, the plants, and the kine, and the Blessed man and all things that are” (ibid.; tr. Zaehner, p. 318). In another version of the myth, which is comparable to the sequence of the Amahrspands (See [AMĒŠA SPĒNTA](#)), the seventh creation is Ohrmazd himself (*Bundahišn* 1.42). The



missing *wāy* (air, space, and atmosphere and the *dagrand xwadāy* “long self-existing divinity”), not reckoned among the sacred heptad, is created through the essence of the spirit of “the form of Fire” (*ātaxš kerb*, < Av. *āθrō. kəhrp*, Mid. Pers. translit. *āsrō-kerpa*; *Dēnkard*, ed. Madan, I, p. 349; Duchesne-Guillemin, p. 14) to be used as an aide in the act of creation (*Bundahišn* 1.26). According to yet another myth, only six creations are fashioned in the six *gāhānbārs* (q.v.), ending with Gayōmart, representing man (*ibid.*, 1.43-58). In a curiously inconsistent account, the *Bundahišn* mentions six creations, and omits fire. These creations are derived from the essence of the sky, perhaps to emphasize the preeminently creative power of the firmament (*ibid.*, 1.53-58; tr. Zaehner, pp. 283-84). The *Pahlavī Rivayat*, in what seems to be an arbitrary revision of the myth by the clergy, with a view to stressing the emanative nature of the creation from the divine essence, states that Ohrmazd, after fashioning the creations from a flame of fire (*xwarrag ī ātaxš*) which had been derived from the Endless Light, placed them in his body; he emanated them therefrom after 3,000 years: the sky from his head, the earth from his feet, water from his tears, plants from his hair, the bull from his right hand, fire from his mind, and man, emitted as a seed into Spandārmad, the goddess of the earth (see [AMEŠA SPĒNTA](#)), from the clay of which Gayōmart was made (*Pahlavī Rivayat*, ed. Dhabar, pp. 126-37; Nyberg, *Manual* I, pp. 92-95; Zaehner, pp. 361-63).

The *Yašt* 19.16-18 considers the Amahrspands to be the creators, fashioners, and guardians of the creations of Ahura Mazdā (q.v.). This text divulges the great antiquity of the doctrine of the six/seven creations, perhaps established before Zoroaster’s day and later altered and revised in the form handed down in Middle Persian books (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 146). Therefore, the *Bundahišn* evidently evokes an ancient tradition when it proclaims that each creation was patronized by one of the Amahrspands: man by Ohrmazd, cattle by Wahman, fire by Ardwahišt, metals by Šahrewar, earth by Spandārmad, water by Hordād, and plants by Amurdād (*Bundahišn* 3.12-19; tr. Zaehner, pp. 334-36; *Zādspram* 35.1; Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* I, p. 204).

The first conscious attempt to blend the Greek cosmogonical doctrine with various traditional Iranian myths seems to be the following, rather misplaced, account included among the traditional teachings of the *Bundahišn*. It states that Ohrmazd fashioned from the Endless Light fire, from fire air, from air water, and from water earth (*Bundahišn* 1.41). The four Empedoclean elements replacing the traditional heptad are, nevertheless, considered emanations



from the Endless Light through fire, the embodiment of Being. The passage continues with a wholly new theory, reminiscent of Thales, that “the primal principle of all things is a drop of water (*āb srišk-ē*), except the primal seed (*tōhm*) of man and cattle, for that seed is from the essence of fire” (ibid., 1.41).

The four elements attributed to Empedocles were from ancient times deified by the Iranians, who offered them sacrifice and prayers. Herodotus (1.131) observes that “the Persians offer sacrifice to the whole circle of heaven and to the sun and moon and earth and fire and water and winds. These are the only gods to whom they have ever sacrificed from the beginning.” The nature-worship cults of the Magi known to Herodotus would not have escaped the keen attention of his contemporary Empedocles, whose conception of the four elements may have been inspired by the widely known veneration the Persians paid them. Be that as it may, later, either during the Parthian period, when the Persians commonly were acquainted with Greek culture, or early under the Sasanians, it was the Persians who adopted part of the Greek philosophical and cosmogonical principles, including the four elements: fire, water, earth, and air, which they called *zahag* (lit., embryo, offspring, generated), and *tōhmag* (lit., seed), and their forms (*dēsag* “qualities, or quiddities”), propounded by Aristotle (pp. xxii-xxiii, 28; Filosoḥskii institut, I, chap. 6, sec. 7), thereby lending to the ancient myth of creation a presumably enlightened foundation (*Dēnkard*, ed. Madan, I, p. 412; Shaki, 1970, p. 289). Although the four elements are viewed in Middle Persian philosophical texts as natural phenomena acting by fate, i.e., necessity, they are treated as objects of veneration when regarded as parts of creation (Boyce, 1979, p. 119). According to an anonymous Syriac text, fire, water, earth, and atmosphere (*wāy* “air”) were revered by the Persians as gods (ed. H. S. Nyberg, *JA* 214, 1929, pp. 238-41). However, in the subsequent incongruous syncretism the Magi faced the dilemma of reconciling the ahuric qualities of the hot (fire) and the moist (water) with the profane or daevic cold and dry, although Aristotle (Filosoḥskii institut, ibid.) identifies the latter as the qualities of the earth revered by Zoroastrians. The Mazdean sages had to resolve this vexing problem by modifying the Aristotelian theory by ignoring the presence of the cold and the dry (the nature of Ahriman) in the first phase of the becoming, Being (*bawišn*). Thus, they identified Being, the primal becoming, with the hot-moist (the very essence of Ohrmazd), whose first matter is the four elements fire, water, earth, and air, considered to be the last pure substances (*abdom mādag pālūdag*; *Dēnkard*, ed. Madan, I, p. 203; see [BŪDAG](#)) in the genesis of the material world. For Aristotle (p. 28) the hot-moist (*garm-xwēd*) is the



substantial form only of the element air (*wādōmand*). The mixture (*gumēzišn*), which is the material world (*gētīg*), develops subsequently through the admixture of pure elements with the daevic cold and dry. The *Škand-Gumānīg* (2.11-14) clearly states that “all corruption (*wišōbišn*) originates from the complexions, composed of the hot, cold, dry, and moist, which oppose and destroy each other, since the corruption of bodies originates from the perpetual fight of the hot with the cold and the dry with the moist.”

The ideal (*mēnōg*) as well as the material (*gētīg*) aspects of the three centers of purity, i.e., fire, water, and earth, are considered to be “maintainers of the nature” (*dārāg xēm*) of the heavenly glory (*xawarrah*; *Dēnkard* I, p. 347). This Mazdean postulate may be compared with the Mazdakite teaching that the agents of good and evil (*modabber al-ḳayr* and *modabber al-šarr*) proceed, respectively, from the pure (light) and impure (dark) constituents of these three elements. The bibliographer Abū ʿĪsā Moḥammad Warrāq, (*Šahrestānī*, p. 193) unaware of this theory, unwarrantedly concluded that Mazdak had recognized only three elements, namely, fire, water and earth (Shaki, 1985, pp. 528-31).

Although *wāy* (atmosphere, space, air) and *wād* (air, wind, breath) are quite distinct, they merge in their capacity as the *gyān* (breath-soul). The *Dēnkard* (ed. Madan, pt. I, p. 278) on the worldly function of *Wāy* the Good (*Wāy ī weh*), which has a counterpart in *Wāy* the Evil (*Wāy ī wattar*), states: “That which quickens the world and is the breath-soul of the living things is the divine (**abargar*, lit. ‘supreme being’), . . . fiery-wind which vivifies the body of man—” a concept evidently induced by the Greek *psyche* “breath.”

A unique syncretic text of the *Dēnkard* dealing with the creation of the world presents in corrupt forms two Middle Persian terms for primal principles adapted from the corresponding terms in Greek. Blending traditional tenets with Neo-Platonic doctrine, the passage recounts that the creator first fashions from the Endless Light the all-embracing form of fire (*āsrō-kerp*), which emanates two instruments of equal creative powers: the Spirit of the Power of the Soul (*mēnōg ī waxš nērōg*) and the Spirit of the Power of Nature (*mēnōg ī čīhr nērōg*). The two hypostases conjointly fashion the essence of the cosmic substance, the most subtle very self of matter (*dāramagtōm gētīg grīw*), whose name in Avestan is dust (**gard*) and in the language of the world (i.e., Greek), “*chaos.” From this amorphous dust (chaos) then develops *stwwkwn*, which seems to be a corrupt Greek, *stoicheion* (element), analogous with the Arabic term *osṭoqos*. After the stages of formation and expansion, with the



participation of the Spirit of the Power of the Soul, the firmament (*spīhr*) develops. From the firmament arises Being par excellence, the hot-moist, the form and essence of air (*garm-xwēd wādōmand*). With the assistance of the Spirit of the Power of the Soul, the firmament emanates the substratum of the elements (*tōhmagān tōhmag*, lit. “seed of seeds,” corresponding to the Greek *húlē*), from which derive the elements (*zahagān*), as the first substance of Being (*bawīšn*; *Dēnkard* I, pp. 349-50; Shaki, 1970, pp. 283-86; idem, 1984, pp. 100-102).

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ii. IN MANICHAEISM

Elements reflect the creed's strictly dualistic and incoherently eclectic doctrines. The elements are divided in two sets of antagonistic pentads, whimsically contrived; they are those of the universe of light (*al-kawn al-nayyer*) and those of the kingdom of darkness (*al-kawn al-moẓlam*). The realm or paradise of light (*janān al-nūr*), uncreated and eternal, is composed of five light elements: ether (or zephyr, Mid. Pers. *frāwahr*, Parth. *ardāw frawardīn*, Ar. *nasīm*wād, Ar. *rīhā*); light (Mid. Pers. and Parth. *rōšn*, Ar. *nūrāb*, Ar. *mā'ādur*, Ar. *nār*). These elements are the dwellings of the Good God, the Father of Greatness (Zurwān) and the five Manichaean Amahraspands (Parth. *panj rošn*). The sons or armor of the primordial Man, Ohrmazd, also dwell in the elements. Ohrmazd uses the sons to engage the prince of darkness, Ahriman (q.v.), and to fight his fateful, losing battle.

The hell of darkness ruled by the demon (see *[DAIVA](#), [DĒW](#), [DĪV](#)) is also composed of five kingdoms. Each is made of one of the dark elements. They are identified as either the dark counterparts of the light elements, e.g., dark ether, wind, etc. or as foul elements such as, in descending order: smoke (or mist, Ar. *ẓabāb*), conflagration (Ar. *ḥarīq*), simoom (Ar. *samūm*), poison (Ar. *samm*), darkness (Ar. *ẓolma*) (Ebn al-Nadīm, 393; Afšār, p. 151).

The paradise of light is surrounded by an ether of light (Ar. *jaww*) constituting the five powers of the mind: reason (Gr. *nous*, Syr. *haunā*, Parth. *bām*), mind (Gr. *énnoia*, Syr. *madde'ā*, Parth. *manohmēd*), intelligence (Gr. *phrónēsis*, Syr. *re'yānā*, Parth. *uš*), thought (Gr. *enthúmēsis*, Syr. *maḥšabtā*, Parth. *andēšišn*), cognition (Gr. *logismós*, Syr. *tar'ītā*, Parth. *parmānag*). These powers also constitute the very being of the Father of Greatness, the substance of the soul, and the limbs of the divinity Great Nous. As the designations of these terms in different languages do not quite tally with one another, scholars are divided in their interpretations of them.

According to the Manichaean myth of creation, the Living Spirit (Mihr Yazd) rescued the First Man, Ohrmizdbay, from the abyss of darkness. The Living Spirit then attacks and defeats the powers of darkness, fashioning the material world from the corpses of the demons he has killed and making eight earths



from their bodies and ten skies from their skins. He makes the Sun and Moon from the undefiled light, and the stars from the partially polluted light. Thus Matter (*húlē*), which is equivalent to darkness and evil, and forms the essence of the material world, is absurdly enough used by a divinity of the realm of Light (Living Spirit, Mihr Yazd) to create the evil material world. The mundane spheres are material in this cosmogonical concept, yet water and air are immaterial. Contrary to Zoroastrianism, the elements in Manichaeism are not emanations of the divine essence. Rather, they are uncreated and eternal principles of light and darkness. They do not conform to the cosmogonical principles of the religions which inspired Manichaeism.

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iii. IN PERSIAN

As reflected in Islamic philosophy, they are earth (*kāk*), water (*āb*), air (*ḥawā*),



and fire (*ātaš*). Their respective qualities are the cold-dry (*sard o košk*), cold-moist (*sard o tar*), hot-moist (*garm o tar*), and hot-dry (*garm o košk*). These qualities are taken over from Greek philosophers, especially Empedocles (Anbādoqlīs) and Aristotle, as the prime principles of the sublunary sphere, i.e., the world of becoming and decay (*ālam-e kawn o fasād*). In Arabo-Persian philosophy individual elements of the material world are referred to as *osṭoqos*, adopted from the Platonic *stoicheîon* rokhn'onsorajsām-e basīṭajsām-e arba'aommahāt-e arba'a, i.e., generators). The substratum of the elements or formless primal matter of the sublunary world is termed *hayūlā*, from the Aristotelian *hūlē*. In Persian the element is called *ākšij*, *māya*, and in literary texts *čahār mādar* (the four mothers), which is inspired by the Middle Persian *zahagān* (mothers, embryos, generators). The elements in Islamic philosophy are classified as light (*'anāšer-e kaftīfa*, i.e., air and fire) or heavy (*'anašer-e taqīla*, i.e., earth and water). Air is sometimes referred to as a defective (*nāqesá*) or imperfect (*nā-tamām*) element because its qualities, hot and moist, were thought to be derived respectively from ether and water.

Philosophical and pathological aspects of the elements are comprehensively dealt with in Esmā'īl Jorjānī, *Daḳīra-ye k'vārazmšāhī*, facs. edition by 'A.-A. Sa'īdī Sīrjānī, Tehran, 1355 Š./1976, pp. 5-6.