



EVIL I. IN ANCIENT IRANIAN RELIGIONS

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In the eminently dualistic Zoroastrian religion the need to defeat evil was emphasized, and it was not by chance that Ahriman (q.v.) was one of the prototypes of the enemy (see DUALISM). In the ancient Iranian religious world evil was a fact, a condition of existence, as is apparent not only in so-called “orthodox Zoroastrianism” but also in Zurvanism and the various mystery religions and gnostic tendencies connected with it, notably Mithraism and Manicheism. The problem of evil was thus omnipresent, and the solutions to it took as many forms as the conceptions of dualism developed throughout ancient Iranian history. The earliest was apparently that of Zoroaster, which served as the basis for all subsequent elaborations.

The most characteristic and original trait of Zoroaster’s thought was his specific conception of dualism, in which evil was omnipresent (Henning, pp. 45 ff.). In the seventeen chapters of the *Yasna* that constitute the five Gathas there is continual reference to the evil that must be combated and destroyed. Gathic language is particularly rich in expressions for the various manifestations of moral, physical, and ritual evil. The adjective *aka-* “wicked” is most commonly used, in opposition to *vohu-* “good,” sometimes in an absolute sense (e.g., *Y.* 30.3: *vahiiō akəmcā* “the best and the wickedest,” *vahiiāh-* “better” being the comparative of *vohu-*, though an elliptical use of



the adjective to modify an implicit noun cannot be ruled out; cf. Kellens, 1987, p. 258 n. 6; Kellens and Pirart, I, p. 27, where, however, the conclusions are unconvincing). For *aka-* and *vohu-* the respective comparatives and superlatives *aš'iih-*, *acišta-* and *vahiiah-*, *vahišta-* were also used. By analogy *aṅgra-* “maleficent” is opposed to *spənta-* “beneficent” and its comparative *spāniih-* (Y. 45.2). *Aṅgra-*, referring to *mainiiu-* “spirit,” is also found in the Avestan version of the name Ahriman: *Aṅgra/Aṅra Mainyu*. It is significant that *aka-* and *aṅgra-* are almost synonymous in the Gathas (e.g., Y. 32.5: *akamainiiu-*). A neuter noun *aṅgriia-* “malevolence” was derived from the adjective *aṅgra-* (Y. 48.10; Kellens and Pirart, III, p. 225).

A great variety of nouns are also used to express a wide range of moral, physical, and ritual evils: the masculine *aēšəma-* “fury,” *qsta-* “misfortune,” *duuafša-* “torment,” *marəka-* “destruction,” *mərəiθiiu-* “deadly nature”; the feminine *ajiiāiti-* “nonlife,” *asrušti-* “disobedience,” *āθri-* “disaster,” *əñāxšti-* “rivalry,” *tarəməiti-* “scorn,” *dušiti-* “bad dwelling,” *dužjiāiti-* “bad life,” *pairimaiti-* “negligence”; and the neuter *aēnah-* “violence,” *ā.dəbaoman-* “illusion,” *təuuiš-* “brutality,” *iđiiejah-* “danger,” *duuaēšah-* “hostility,” *rašah-* “decay.”

The feminine *druj* (q.v.) “falsehood” is unique in its opposition to the neuter *aša-* (q.v.) “truth.” The corresponding Old Persian word is the masculine *drauga-*, which recurs in Darius’ inscriptions at Bisotūn (q.v.; DB I l. 34, IV ll. 34, 37, 43) and Persepolis (DPd ll. 17, 20), together with the verb *draug-* “to lie” (Av. *draog-*), with connotations similar to those of the Gathic forms, though loaded with political significance (“lie” as rebellion against the authority of the legitimate sovereign). In the Gathas *druj-* also engendered the adjective *drəguuaṅt-* “owner of falsehood,” designating all beings who choose *druj-* over *aša-*. As *druj-* was opposed to *aša-*, so *drəguuaṅt-* (Younger Av. *druuaṅt-*, Pahl. *druwand*) was opposed to *ašā/āuuan-*, and it is significant that *drəguuaṅt-* appears to have been an Iranian invention, whereas Avestan *ašauuan-* and Old Persian *artāvan-* were derived from Indo-Iranian **rtāvan-* (cf. Vedic *ṛtāvan-*). In fact, *drəguuaṅt-* probably was an innovation by Zoroaster himself: The term came to mean every “lying, false, morally wrong” creature and even influenced the meaning of *ašauuan-*, which became an adjective “generally denoting what is morally right” (Gershevitch, p. 156). The opposition between *aša-* and *druj-* and between *ašauuan-* and *drəguuaṅt-/druuaṅt-* was therefore of Indo-Iranian origin but reflected a typically Iranian development that can certainly be attributed to Zoroaster’s teaching. This development was



determined by the pervasive dualistic conception of the conflict between good and evil. The Iranian opposition of *aša-* and *druj-*, notions correlated with the daytime and night skies respectively (Kellens, 1989, p. 77; idem, 1991, pp. 44 ff.), was more fundamental and systematic than the Vedic opposition of *ṛtá-* and *drúh-*, which did not form the basis of an ethical dualism (for a different conclusion by Kellens, who does not acknowledge an ethical dualism in the Gathas, see Kellens and Pirart, I, pp. 26 f.). Its specific significance in Iran was in fact owing to the conception of the two *mainiiu-*, who make their respective choices between good and evil (Y. 30.3; see, e.g., Boyce, pp. 73 ff.).

The idea of the choice between good and evil (for a masterly study, see Lommel, pp. 156 ff.) was at the heart of Zoroastrianism throughout its entire historical development. More or less emphasis and different theoretical foundations were attributed to it, depending upon the historical period and the influences absorbed through contact with foreign cultures and other religious and philosophical doctrines. It has been less vital and less emphasized among the Parsis, owing mainly to the antidualistic polemics of Muslims and Christians (cf. Dhalla, pp. 46 ff., 155 ff., 247 ff., 337 ff.), but the fact that it is present in the Gathas (Y. 30.5,6; 31.10; 32.2, 12; 43.16; 46.3; 51.18) is evidence that Zoroaster's thought represented an original and coherent development. The lament of the Soul of the Cow (*gəuš uruuan-*; Y. 29), which probably also had metaphorical significance and has been interpreted in various ways (Cameron; Insler, pp. 134 ff.; Schmidt), seems to be an allegory in which a living creature asks to be spared pain and the fury of the wicked through the care of a kindly shepherd who is truly able to protect it.

Zoroaster's solution to the problem of evil was profoundly original. While, on one hand, he promised the owners of Ašáa the final triumph of good over evil in an eschatological expectation consistent with a doctrine requiring rigor and commitment from the faithful (Henning, p. 48; see ESCHATOLOGY i), on the other, he provided a logical explanation for the existence of evil, whether through the idea of choice (for a paradigm, see Y. 30.3-5) or through the specific conception of two existences or states of being. The Zoroastrian conception is based on the idea of the two *mainiiu-* as two principles of equal power, defined as "twins" (Y. 30.3: *yəmə*) and conceived as "two eternal abstract Powers, Good and Evil, both of which manifested themselves not only in mental and spiritual phenomena, but also in the material things of this world" (Henning, p. 45). Evil, like good, is a spiritual or mental power, a *mainiiu-* that is wicked because of the choice made. Like good, evil manifests



itself in material existence, but, whereas the good *mainiiu-* is manifest in its very creation, the wicked *mainiiu-* is present through foul and violent aggression. In spiritual existence the powers of good and evil are equal, for each is author of its own creation, but in material existence evil can only insinuate itself, contaminating and violating it.

This doctrine of the two existences is of Gathic origin. Zoroaster distinguished between a spiritual existence of thought or mind (*ahu-mananhō* or *ahu-manahiia-*; in the Younger Avesta *mainiauuu-*, referring to *sti-* “existence”) and a material, corporeal existence (*astuuant-* “bony,” in the Younger Avesta also *gaēθiia-* or *gaēθiia-* “vital, material”). By its very nature the good *mainiiu-* is a promoter of life, whereas the wicked *mainiiu-* is destructive and intrinsically alien to creation of life in material existence. The good *mainiiu-* is thus the source of *gaiia-* “life,” the wicked *mainiiu-* of *ajiiāiti-* “nonlife.” In *Yasna* 30.4 *ajiiāiti-* must be interpreted as “impossibility of living” (Kellens and Pirart, I, p. 111) or “lack of vitality” (Humbach, I, p. 124), in accordance with the doctrine that evil is by its very nature sterile and incapable of transforming its creation into living or material existence. In the 9th-century Pahlavi texts Ahriman, unlike the creator Ohrmazd, is said to have no *gētīg* existence (Pahl.; Av. *gaēθiia-*; cf. Shaked), not because he is not also a creator but because he is the author of an exclusively *mēnōg* (Pahl.; Av. *mainiauuu-*) creation. For Zoroastrianism, then, evil creation is ontologically confined to spiritual existence, from which, however, it can attack the material creation of Ohrmazd. Evil is not matter; rather, it insinuates itself into matter, contaminating it, perverting it, violating it. It is in this doctrinal connection that the *daēuuas*, manifestations of wicked thought favoring violence (*aēnah-*), incapable of choosing the good *mainiiu-* (*Y.* 32.3-4, 32.6; in the Younger Avesta demonic beings, counterparts of the beneficent entities), are defined in the Avesta as *mainiauuu-* but never like the *yazatas* as *gaēθiia-* (Gnoli, pp. 182 ff. n. 61).

According to the doctrine of the “mixing” (Pahl. *gumēzišn*) of the two spirits, variously attested in Pahlavi literature, evil mixes with good in spiritual existence and erupts into material existence through an “assault” (*ēbgat*), moving from the abyss (*zofr-pāyag*) and from the infinite obscurity (*asar tāriḡih*) in which it dwells, animated by destructive lust for (*zadār kāmih*) and envy (*arešk*) of Ohrmazd’s creation (*Bd.*, chap. I). Nevertheless, even in Ohrmazd’s creation there are genuine maleficent creatures like the *xrafstra-* (possibly “wild, monstrous,” though the etymology is uncertain; Pahl. *xrafstar*)



that are harmful to living beings. They belong to the ranks of those who choose Druj, and they include the priests and specialists in sacred matters connected with the cults of the *daēuuas*: in the Gathas *usij-*, *karapan-*, and *kəuui-* (cf. *Yt.* 10.34). Herodotus (1.140) reported that the magi customarily killed ants, snakes, and other creeping and flying things. A doctrinal development apparent in the Pahlavi texts provided a logical explanation for the presence of these creatures of Ahriman in creation, recognizing their material existence (*gētīg*) only in a form (*kālbod*) that would be shattered and destroyed, as would the forms of sorcerers (*ǰādūgān*; Av. *yātu-*) and witches (*parīgān*; Av. *pairikā-*; *Mēnōg ī xrad* 57.15, 27; cf. *Dēnkard* 7.4, 63). The *xrafstars* were thus also part of a creation that was not truly *gētīg* in nature and owed its origin to a maleficent spiritual power. In the evolution of this doctrine elements of a vast imaginary world of demons, which pervaded the folklore and survived after the Islamization of Persia (cf. Christensen, pp. 60 ff.), may have been harmonized with the philosophical premises of Zoroastrian teaching.

The universe of evil includes the *daēuuas* and Anra Mainyu, the *daēuua-* par excellence (*daēuuanqm daēuuō*: Vd. XIX, 1, 43; *daēuuanqm draojištō*: *Yt.* 3, 13), in the Younger Avesta said to be creator of everything opposed to Ahura Mazdā's creation. Like Anra Mainyu, these *daēuuas* live in the north and thrive in darkness. They are true male demons, and the *drujes* are their female companions. The Zoroastrian pandemonium is extremely rich: L. H. Gray (*Foundations*, pp. 175-219) was able to count sixty-four demonic beings, and Arthur Christensen (1941) attempted to reconstruct the various levels of tradition. One almost constant characteristic of these male and female demons is their symmetrical contraposition to beings of good creation, in a pandemonium corresponding to a no less meticulously ordered pantheon. The ancient divinities repudiated by Zoroaster, the equivalents of such Indian gods as Indra, Saurva, and Nāṅhaiṭhya (opposed respectively to the Ameša Spəntas Ašáa, Xšaθra, and Ārmaiti), seem partly to personify negative forces in relation to morality, the cult, and the prescriptions dictated by the norms of purity of the natural elements. Thus Aēšma, who appeared already in the Gathas, is presented as a violent and cruel force in animal sacrifices, Apaoša as a *daēuua-* of drought and the rival of Tištrya (the star Sirius), Astō.viḍātu– as a *daēuua-* of death, Bušyastā as a *druj-* who induces morning indolence, Nasu as a *druj-* who corrupts corpses, and so on.

On the whole the Pahlavi texts reflect the demonology of the Avesta,



sometimes enriched with new figures or figures endowed with new powers, like Āz (Av. *āzi-*) “greed, lust,” who also had cosmic significance in Manicheism (cf. Zaehner, 1955b, pp. 113 ff.), or Jēh (Av. *jahī-*), the prostitute (cf. Widengren, 1967). Other maleficent beings include dragons and snakes (Av. *aži-*) like Aži Dahāka in the Avesta and monsters like Gandarəwa and Snāviδka. *Dēws* and *parīgs* mate with human beings, producing harmful animals or inferior races like the blacks (*Bd.*, p. 108 ll. 8-15), born of the union between a woman and a *dēw* and of a man and a *parīg*, or else they assume attractive forms, like the Avestan *pairikā- Xnaθaiti*, who seduced the hero Kərəsāspa (cf. Christensen, pp. 17 ff., 33, 53).

Evil in its various manifestations was an almost constant obsession in Zoroastrianism and ancient Iranian religions in general, exercising an influence even beyond the natural boundaries of the Iranian world. The idea of evil as a spiritual power that preceded and transcended creation was probably present in the Mithraic mysteries, in which a *deus Arimanius* was known (Duchesne-Guillemain; Zaehner, 1955a, pp. 237-43; cf. Turcan, p. 62), and was certainly vital in Zurvanism (Nyberg, 1929; idem, 1931; Zaehner, 1955b; idem, 1961; Widengren 1968, pp. 244 ff., 314 ff.) and even in Manicheism, which, as has been shrewdly observed (Puech, p. 142), remained faithful to this fundamental Zoroastrian doctrine because evil appeared as a principle preceding and transcending the drama of earthly existence. This doctrine also conditioned the Zoroastrian incorporation of astrology, in which an “Ahrimanic” character was attributed to the planets (Zaehner, 1955b, pp. 158 ff.; Panaino, pp. 64-79).

At times when dualism was of minor importance in Zoroastrianism, attention to the concept of evil was equally perfunctory, but, when, as in the 9th century C.E., it was understood as the distinctive and original nature of the good religion, evil was also recognized in all its power. Both the idea that evil must represent an autonomous power, rather than a good creator, and the idea that its nature is outside material creation were clearly and coherently reformulated. In the *Škand-gumānīg wizār* it is repeatedly maintained, in refutation of the arguments of atheists, materialists, Muslims, Christians, and Manicheans, that evil cannot come from good or good from evil, that the enemy preceded material creation and that his “assault” came after it, and that truth and falsehood are derived from two distinct principles (Menasce, pp. 98 f., 108 f., 154 f.); in other Pahlavi texts the fact that Ahriman has no material creation is repeated several times.



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