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Zoroastrian exegesis consists basically of the interpretation of the Avesta (q.v.). However, the closest equivalent Iranian concept, *zand*, generally includes Pahlavi texts which were believed to derive from commentaries upon Avestan scripture, but whose extant form contains no Avestan passages. Zoroastrian exegesis differs from similar phenomena in many other religions in that it developed as part of a religious tradition which made little or no use of writing until well into the Sasanian era. This lengthy period of oral transmission has clearly helped to give the Middle Persian Zand its characteristic shape and has, in a sense, limited its scope. Although the later tradition makes a formal distinction between "Gathic" (*gāhānīg*), "legal" (*dādīg*), and perhaps "ritual" (*hādag-mānsrīg*) Avestan texts, there appear to be no significant differences in approach between the Pahlavi commentary on the Gathas (q.v.) and those on *dādīg* texts, such as the *Vendīdād*, the *Hērbedestān* and the *Nērangestān*. For the purpose of this article, therefore, all such texts will be regarded as parts of Zoroastrian exegesis. Since many 19th and 20th century works by Zoroastrians contain an element of exegesis, while on the other hand no exegetical literature in the strict sense of the word can be said to exist, the phenomenon of modern Zoroastrian exegesis as such will be discussed here, without

detailed reference to individual texts.

Several facts suggest that a form of exegesis was known at a period when Avestan was still spoken. In *Y*. 57.8 Zarathustra is said to have recited the Gathas "together with explanations, together with answers" (*maṯ.āzaiṇtīš maṯ.paiti.fraså*), which points to an oral transmission of the fruits of Gathic exegesis, presumably as part of the process of priestly teaching. This type of instruction is the subject of the *Hērbedestān*, which consists of an Avestan text with Pahlavi translation and commentary. The Avestan part of the text indicates that, at a time when Avestan was still well understood, the chief aim of religious studies was to teach disciples to recite correctly. The learning process is described in *Y*. 19.6, as follows: *yasca . . . baγąm ahunahe vairiiehe marāṯ frā.vā marō drəṇjaiiāṯ frā.vā drəṇjaiiō srāuuaiiāṯ frā.vā srāuuaiiō yazāite . . .* "and whoever. . .shall study the *Ahuna Vairiia* section, and (after) studying it shall recite it (quietly), and (after) reciting it (quietly) shall recite it formally, and (after) reciting it formally shall celebrate it as part of the liturgy." It seems likely that the acquisition of an adequate understanding of both literal meaning and deeper significance of a text formed part of the initial stage of this process. Zoroastrian exegesis, in fact, probably arose out of the need for priestly teachers to answer the questions of their students.

The difficult and hallowed Old Avestan texts naturally required more explanation than texts which evolved for a time along with the contemporary language, and three commentaries on such texts are extant: *Y*. 19, 20, 21 contain an Avestan exegesis on the *yaθā ahū vairiiō*, *aŝəm vohū* and *yeŋhē hātąm* prayers, respectively. They are said to have been part of the *Bag Nask* (q.v.), which, it seems, contained similar commentaries on all Gathic texts. The most striking feature of this type of exegesis is that it explains the deeper meaning of the original text by linking it to well-known and fundamental tenets, such as those concerning the creation (cf. *Y*. 19.1, 2, 4, 8, 9, etc.), and to aspects of the social order approved by Zoroastrianism (*Y*. 19.17,18). Occasionally, the literal meaning of the text concerned is clarified (*Y*. 21.1, 2), and a comprehensive knowledge of the Gathas and other Old Avestan texts is taken for granted (*Y*. 19.2 refers to 34.5; 19.14 to 53.9 and 51.11; 19.15 to 45.2; 19.17 to 43.6, etc. *Y*. 35.8 is referred to in 21.2 and 39.5 in 20.1).

The fact that such exegetical texts were preserved in Avestan, rather than in the contemporary languages of later Zoroastrian communities, shows that they had become fixed parts of priestly studies and were memorized *verbatim* by the time Zoroastrians lost their active command of Avestan. In the course of

time, these texts themselves became objects of exegesis.

Further exegetical activity of the pre-Sasanian period can only be guessed at. It has been suggested that a novel exegesis of the Gathic verse *Y*. 30.3, which refers to “two Spirits, twins..,” played a role in the development of Zurvanism (e.g., Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 232). Association and identification probably played a prominent part in early Zoroastrian exegesis. The western Iranian divinity *Anāhiti (see ANAHID) was identified with a minor Zoroastrian divinity, Arədvī Sūrā *Harahvaitī (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 202-4), and in this way came to be included in the Zoroastrian pantheon. Similarly, the gradual identification of Spənta Mainyu with Ahura Mazdā (q.v.) himself had implications for the interpretation of traditional teachings. A few Avestan texts (*Yt*. 13.28, 76; 11.14; 15.43; *Y*. 57.17; 19.9) reflect an early stage in the development of the Zoroastrian myth of the creation, where the primeval antagonism, the clash and a subsequent pact between Spənta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu (see AHRIMAN) were held to have brought about the present state of the world, as opposed to the ideal creation of Ahura Mazdā. Later, Spənta Mainyu’s identification with Ahura Mazdā seemed to imply that the latter performed a creative act twice. This apparent anomaly was eventually explained by introducing the distinction between a non-material (*mēnōg*) and a material (*gētīg*) creation (see GĒTĪG AND MĒNŌG). Also, at one stage, attempts were probably made to identify various divinities of pre-Zoroastrian origin with purely Zoroastrian ones by alluding to the former as the “likeness” (*upamana*) of the latter. Čistā (q.v.) is referred to in *Yt.* 10.126, 16.1 as the *upamana* of the Mazdayasnian religion, in whose honor Čistā’s hymn came to be recited; in some older texts the words “Likeness of the Creator” (*dāmōiš upamana*) almost certainly denote Verethraghna (cf. *Yt*. 10.70 and 127). It is clear that, at a later stage, such identifications were no longer understood; the concepts of Čistā and Daēnā (see DĒN) coalesced, while *Dāmōiš Upamana* came to be regarded as a separate divinity (Kreyenbroek, 1991, pp. 139-40).

Inevitably, exegesis came to play a more prominent role in the Zoroastrian tradition of later times, when the community had lost its active knowledge of the Avestan language. The evidence suggests that an understanding of the sacred texts was acquired by memorizing a fixed translation of the Avestan original, rather than by mastering the grammar of that language. As a result, the finer shades of meaning of the original must have been lost quite early—a situation which paved the way for the adoption of a system of translation, only conceivable in a non-written tradition, whereby each Avestan word (and often

its homonyms and words sounding more or less alike) was rendered by one Middle Persian term. The original Avestan word-order was usually preserved in spite of the wide differences between the two natural languages in this respect.

It seems that doctrinal considerations did play a part in the development of the Middle Persian Zand. For example Av. *daxma-* (“place of disposal of corpses”; see CORPSE) is seldom rendered by Phl. *daxmag*, presumably because the word is sometimes used in a negative sense in the Avesta (*Vendidād* 3.9, 13; 7.54, etc.), whereas it had wholly positive connotations in later Zoroastrianism. Similarly, the Pahlavi version of most Young Avestan texts differentiates between the Avestan common noun *aŝi-* “reward” and the name of the divinity Ašái (q.v.), the former being normally rendered by Phl. *tarsāgāhīh* “reverence, respect,” the latter as *Ard* or *Ahrišwang*. The Pahlavi version of the Gathas, however, fails to mention Ašái’s proper name where this would be appropriate, and the same is true of other texts in Old Avestan (e.g., *Y.* 38.2) and pseudo Old Avestan (*Y.* 56.3,4). On the other hand Phl. *Y.* 52, a Young Avestan text set between two Gathas, does mention the name of the *Yazata*. It seems likely that this represents the result of exegesis: it was evidently held that the moral Gathic concept could not be related to the originally pre-Zoroastrian divinity.

In Sasanian times, Zoroastrian exegesis probably continued to develop in the context of priestly teaching. We know that until well into the post-Sasanian period, the title *hērbed* was used to refer to a priest who had studied the Zand, and who was thus a qualified priestly teacher (Kreyenbroek, 1987). The fact that a coherent version of the Zand has come down to us which still shows many of the characteristics of an orally transmitted text strongly suggests that the training of *hērbed*s consisted in part of memorizing texts belonging to the Zand. Many of these texts comprise commentaries on the actual translations. It can be inferred that, as part of the teaching process, it was usual for teachers to explain and comment upon the texts to be memorized, and that some of their comments became part of the text as it was memorized. There is evidence to show that, besides aspirant *hērbed*s, courses taught by priestly teachers were also attended by those who sought no such qualifications, but listened to the *hērbed*’s teaching in order to gain religious merit (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek, 1992, intro.). One text (*Zand ī Wahman yasn* 2.1-4) shows that, after the revolt of Mazdak, Ḵosrow I restricted lay religious studies to Avestan texts, forbidding the teaching of Zand to non-priests. (The Mazdakites had

presumably presented their doctrines as the true exegesis of Zarathushtra's teachings, and both Mazdakites and Manicheans could be referred to as *zandīk*, i.e., "people whose heresies are based on Zand.") Independent exegesis by individual *hērbed*s was thus clearly perceived as a potential threat to the stability of the Sasanian empire. This not only shows that such teachings could reach large sections of the laity, but also illustrates the difficulty of controlling the exegetical activities of individual *hērbed*s. In a chain of orally transmitted religious teachings, minor deviations would inevitably creep in; in some cases these could in turn lead to more serious divergences from the dominant tradition as time went on, Mazdakism being an extreme example. In the absence of an extensive body of written sources, it was plainly impossible to make a detailed comparison between the teachings of a *hērbed* and those of his predecessors or contemporaries. As a result, discrepancies between the various teachings were regarded as inevitable (Manuščihr, 1.10.7), and the teachings of all qualified teachers were accepted as valid (Manuščihr, 1.4.15-16, see Kreyenbroek, "Spiritual Authority"). In the Zand the "judgments" of various teachers are often given side by side. In the *Pahlavi Vendīdād* and the *Hērbedestān*, the names of individual teachers are regularly mentioned. Later texts stress the authority of the views of earlier teachers (e.g. Manuščihr, 1.4.7, 10 ff.), and there are regular references to "the three Teachings" (*čāštag*, see e.g., *Šāyest nē šāyest* 2.3-4, *Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašawahištān* 21.2), suggesting that in the course of time the idea of a body of canonical teachings gained some ground.

Until well into the post-Sasanian period, no sophisticated criteria seem to have existed for establishing the relative validity of different expert opinions on questions of interpretation. At the time of the high priest Manuščihr—i.e., the late 9th century, when writing already played a prominent role in the tradition and comparisons between teachings could easily be made—the traditional practice of accepting different interpretations as equally valid was seriously challenged. In the conflict between Manuščihr and his brother Zādsparam, both parties based their arguments on valid but conflicting judgments by leading teachers. Manuščihr then looked to an elementary form of legalistic reasoning to demonstrate the superiority of his case. Breaking with the traditional practice that the judgments of one chosen *dastwar* were followed in all matters, he advocated eclecticism, stating that the most "redeeming" (*bōzišnōmand*) judgment was to be applied in each individual case (Manuščihr, 1.9.10). His *Epistles* show, however, that he could not draw upon an existing body of sophisticated rules and principles for determining

the validity of a judgment, and that he was forced to fall back on personal authority and on the principle of *vīkaiiehe*, i.e., that, if two *dastwar*s favored one decision and only one authority preferred another, the two won their case (Manuščihr, 1.6.6; 2.2.7, and Kreyenbroek, 1994). It seems likely that this state of affairs, where no means had been found to transform a fundamentally oral type of scholarship into a discipline more in accord with a written culture, was typical of all branches of Zoroastrian religious learning at this time, including that of exegesis in the narrower, Western sense. In the centuries that followed, the community was plainly too poor to reform and develop Zoroastrian exegesis, and it is unlikely that further advances were made in this field.

The resulting break in the exegetical tradition implied that no further significant theoretical efforts were made to link the fundamental teachings of the faith with the developments and everyday experiences of the community. The lack of such a discipline was probably hardly felt as long as the personal prestige of the priesthood was sufficient to provide the communities with adequate leadership and guidance, and Zoroastrian theology did not meet with major challenges from the outside. The absence of an exegetical tradition, however, played a crucial role in the events which were to shape modern Zoroastrianism, especially in India. In the first half of the 19th century a Christian missionary, John Wilson, publicly attacked the Zoroastrian faith in the Indian press, condemning it as non-monotheist. His arguments were based on his knowledge of Anquetil's translation of the Avesta, at a time when few, if any, Parsis thought of Avestan as a language that could be understood and translated, and tradition and orthopraxis formed the only basis of their religion. The ensuing confrontation between Wilson and learned priests representing the outraged Parsi community showed that the Parsis were no longer capable of defending, or indeed defining, their religion in terms adequate for meeting theological challenges of this kind (Boyce, 1979, pp. 196-99). The years that followed saw a reawakening in the community's interest in the spiritual and intellectual content of Zoroastrianism, and thus, in a sense, in questions of exegesis. Different schools of thought developed and most of these made use of a form of exegesis, usually concentrating on the interpretation of a limited number of Avestan terms in a sense that corresponded with the teachings of the groups. So far, however, modern Zoroastrian exegesis has not established itself as a recognizable discipline.

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