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FRAVAŠI

FRAVAŠI (OP **fravarti*, Pahl. *fraward*, *frawahr*, *frōhar*, *frawaš*, *frawaxš*), the Avestan word for a powerful supernatural being whose concept at an early stage in Zoroastrianism became blended with that of the *urvan*. The *urvan* is the human soul, which in pre-Zoroastrian times was believed after death to pass a shadowy existence in the underworld, from where it returned once a year to its former home at the feast of Hamaspaθmaēdaya (see FRAWARDAGĀN). It then received prayers and offerings from its descendants, whom it rewarded with blessings (see DEATH among Zoroastrians). Close parallels with the Indian *pitaras* establish that belief and cult go back to proto-Indo-Iranian times. The concept of the *fravašis* appears in contrast unique to the Iranians. The principal source for knowledge of them is *Yašt* 13 (see FRAWARDĪN YAŠT). In this they appear as beings who inhabit the upper air and are powerful to aid and protect those who worship them. Yet they too are associated with the cult of the dead and are sometimes directly identified as *urvan*s. References to the *fravaši*s occur in the text of the *Yasna* and in the Pahlavi books. Abū Rayḥān Bīrūnī describes their annual worship (*Āṯār*, p. 224), and there are abundant materials for their veneration in living Zoroastrianism.

The *fravaši*s were conceived as a vast host of “many hundreds, many thousands, many tens of thousands” (*Yt*. 13.65). They are presented in their *yašt* as aiding Ahura Mazdā in the beginning to order the world, and as powerful now in maintaining it, in particular in nurturing waters and plants, and protecting sons in the womb (vv. 1-11 and passim). Every year when rain

comes, they strive among themselves to obtain water for their own “family, settlement, tribe, and country” (vv. 65-68); but though many verses celebrate their prowess and power to help in battle, in two sections of the *Yašt (*vv. 49-52, 96-144) they are fully identified with the relatively helpless *urvan*, although the term *fravaši* is used throughout.

Much thought has been given by Western academics to trying to explain these perplexing anomalies and arrive at the original concept of the *fravaši*. There is a wealth of Indo-European and Indo-Iranian verbal roots from which to derive their name (Gray, *Foundations*, pp. 75-79); and in choosing from among these, scholars have divided into two groups: Those who consider the concept to be pre-Zoroastrian and assimilated into the faith, and those who think that it originated with Zoroastrianism and subsequently absorbed more archaic elements. Of the first group Nathan Söderblom defined the *fravašis* as essentially spirits of the dead. He derived their name (pp. 389-90) from √*vart*– “turn” with preverb *fra*- and abstract suffix –*i*, meaning “turning away, departing, death”; but this explanation offered little distinction between the original *fravaši* and the *urvan*, and could not readily be reconciled with the cosmic functions assigned to the *fravašis* in their *yašt*. James Moulton (1913a, pp. 270-72) derived “*fravaši*” from √*var*– “make/be pregnant,” with abstract suffix –*ti*. He considered the *fravašis* to be ancestor-spirits, whose essential concern was the conceiving of sons (*Yt*. 13.11, 15) so that their line might continue—a concern which he saw then extended to the fertility of the whole natural world, and hence to cosmic activities. He rendered their name accordingly as “birth-promotion; promoter of birth, birth-spirit.” Harold Bailey (*Zoroastrian Problems*, p. 109) saw the basic element in the concept to be the *fravašis*’ warlike activities, and suggested that the term was originally used in a hero-cult, “*fravaši*” meaning “protective valor (*vərəti*),” from √*var*– “cover, protect,” with *fra*- “ward off.” The *fravaši* would thus be the spirit of a valiant warrior, greater than the ordinary *urvan*, with a different fate after death, and invoked for help by his family and tribe. This interpretation gained wide support (although against an etymological link with NPers. *gord* “hero,” see Narten, 1985, p. 86). It was enlarged on by Georges Dumézil (against whose theory of the *fravašis* being the Iranian counterparts of the Indian Mārūts, see Malandra, 1971), while Gherardo Gnoli argued for a double origin in a hero- and an ancestor-cult. Bernfried Schlerath accepted the hero-cult as basic, but suggested deriving “*fravaši*” from √*var*– “choose,” with **fravarti* being the public acclamation—a “choosing forth—”in this life of an outstanding warrior whose spirit was venerated thereafter.

The Iranian Heroic Age probably developed from about 1500 B.C.E.; so, if the *fravaši*s were originally the objects of a hero-cult, this could explain why their concept cannot be traced back to proto-Indo-Iranian times. This fact is no problem for scholars of the second group, who see the concept as original to Zoroastrianism. At the beginning of this century (Moulton, 1913a, p. 268), the prevailing opinion was, like Schlerath's, that the term *fravaši* came from √*var*– "choose," but stress was laid on the fact that in Avestan *fravar*– means "choose/profess a faith." Hence the *fravaši* was seen as the spirit of confessional faith. This interpretation was put forward again decades later by Karl Hoffmann (p. 91). Meantime the same derivation had been used by Herman Lommel (pp. 102-5) to yield the meaning "decisive choice." He saw the spirit of decisive choice as a typical Gathic "abstraction," and hence a part of Zoroaster's own doctrinal system. Certain similarities between the *daēnā* (q.v.) and *fravaši* had been commented on by previous scholars, and Lommel now suggested that the two were identical, and that the prophet had simply preferred the former term in his *Gāthās*. This part of his analysis proved unacceptable, but otherwise his interpretation was adopted by several scholars.

Johanna Narten, however (1985, 1986), comparing (as Schlerath had done) Vedic *pravara-*, translated OAv. "*fravaši*" simply as "choice." The focus of her study was the word's unique occurrence in the liturgical text *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti*, which she produced strong reasons for attributing to Zoroaster himself (Narten, 1986; cf. Gershevitch, p. 18; Boyce, 1992, pp. 87-94). In this *Yasna* 37.3 ends with the words: "Him (Ahura Mazdā) we worship, the *fravaši*s of the righteous, of men and women" (*təm ašāunąm fravašīš narąmcā nāirinąmcā yazamaidē*). There are two awkwardnesses in this. One is that verses 1-3 are otherwise devoted to Mazdā, so that naming the *fravaši*s here appears out of place. The other is the "formidable grammatical difficulty" (Kellens, 1989, p. 101) of *yaz*– governing two accusatives, both apparently its direct objects, without a conjunction. Previously scholars in translating had simply supplied an "and," but Narten, confronting both awkwardnesses, argued (1985, p. 35; idem, 1986, pp. 180-81) that *fravašīš* here was a rare instance of the accusative used in an instrumental sense, allowing one to translate: "Him we worship through the choices of the righteous." This was strongly endorsed by Jean Kellens (1989, pp. 101-4). Yet not only does the linguistic argument require special pleading, but interpreting Old Avestan "*fravaši*" as a common noun meaning "choice" appears highly dubious, because of the huge gulf between such a rendering and the well-attested

Young Avestan use of the word. Nor has any scholar upholding Lommel's subtler rendering been able to suggest why thereafter the *fravašis* should have become associated with the *urvan* and absorbed into the cult of the dead.

In this vital respect interpreting the *fravaši*s as by origin spirits of the heroic dead appears to offer the most satisfactory solution. The cult of the dead was of great importance to the Indo-Iranians; and it is not difficult to imagine why during the dangerous Iranian Heroic Age a special cult of dead heroes, able to fight invisibly beside the living, should have become popular. There is no reason to suppose that Zoroaster, conservative in a number of ways, frowned on offering due respect to the souls of the departed; but his thoughts as a prophet were with the living (cf. *Y*. 39.1-2) and the future, and the actual cult of *urvan*s, with offerings of gifts to ease their lot, had clearly no place in his doctrinal system; for he taught that the soul's fate, in bliss or torment, was fixed immutably at death according to the individual's conduct here on earth. No human intercession thereafter could enhance the one or mitigate the other. It is likely, moreover, that he would have looked still more coldly on the cult of the *fravaši*s, if these beings were indeed warrior-spirits, linked with the destructiveness of battle. The strong probability is, therefore, that he required his first followers to abandon both cults; but that as generations passed and the faith spread, more and more converts were reluctant to do so, and that debate over this matter grew intense. The results show that those seeking to maintain them within Zoroastrianism triumphed, despite the doctrinal difficulties, but because of these difficulties, the contest cannot have been easily won. This almost certainly explains the awkward reference to the *fravaši*s in *Yasna* 37.3, which in all likelihood is a clumsy and audacious interpolation, made so as to gain for their controversial cult the ultimate sanction of endorsement by the prophet himself (Boyce, 1992, pp. 91-2). The earnestness of the endeavors of the cult's supporters to assimilate it to the faith is demonstrated in *Yašt* 13, which contains more Zoroastrian doctrine than any other *yašt*, but with this doctrine modified, sometimes dramatically, to serve this overriding aim.

Moreover, since the cult of the *urvan* was also probably initially proscribed, it would have been practical to identify it with that of the *fravaši* and make a single issue of the two, and this may well have helped the cause of the *fravaši* cult, since that of the *urvan*, maintained in every home, would have had even more supporters, and was probably a little less controversial. Hence, presumably, the annexation of Hamaspaθmaēdaya for the *fravaši*s; and hence

too recurrent declarations, such as the following, that *fravaši* and *urvan* are one: “We worship the sunny abodes of Aša, in which dwell the souls [*urvan-*] of the dead, which are the *fravaši*s of the righteous” (*xᵛanuuaitīš ašahe vərəzō yazamaide, yāhu iristinąm urvąnō šāyente yå ašaonąm fravašayō*, *Y.* 16.7). The regular qualification of the *fravaši*s as “of the righteous” (*ašavan-*, q.v.), was presumably part of their reconciliation with Zoroastrianism; and being of the righteous, they and the righteous *urvan*, identified as one, have both abandoned the places where they dwelt in pre-Zoroastrian thought, one under ground, the other in the air, and are conceived of as being on high in the paradise of the blessed. Nevertheless, the *urvan* retains some chthonic associations, and this may be why in their *yašt* the *fravaši*s are so much concerned with the growth of plants and flowing of springs (*Yt.* 13.10, 14, 29, passim; so Söderblom). Further, the souls of the dead are numberless, and this is probably why the *fravaši*s came to be thought of in vast throngs.

If the original concept of the *fravaši* was indeed that of the soul of a famed warrior, then there was some justification for stating that *fravaši* and *urvan* are one; and some ancient heroes whose souls are venerated in *Yašt* 13 (131-38) may earlier have been honored in a pre-Zoroastrian *fravaši* cult. But fusing this cult with that of the *urvan*, while at the same time aggrandizing the *fravaši*s and weaving belief in them into the fabric of the faith’s mythology, led to insoluble contradictions. These are more likely, however, to have troubled theologians and schoolmen than the mass of believers. Because of them it often seems possible to distinguish in texts between *fravaši*s as *urvan*s and *fravaši*s as heroic protectors. Thus in the story of Zoroaster’s miraculous conception (*Dēnkard*, 7.2.15-47; Molé, pp. 16-23; Boyce, 1984, pp. 72-73) the prophet’s *frawahr*, i.e., *urvan*, is sent down from Paradise within a unique *hōm*-plant to be united on earth with his bodily substance (*tan-gōhr*) and *xwarrah*; and in a work on creation (*Bundahišn* 3.23-24) the collectivity of *fravaši*s is drawn deep into Zoroastrian myth with the story that in the beginning Ahura Mazdā gave them the choice either to remain in his presence, protected, or to go down into the world to be born into men, there to suffer and help defeat Aŋra Mainyu (see AHRIMAN). But in another work on creation (Zādspram, 3.2-3) the *fravaši*s appear in the role of divine warriors, for there it is told that after Aŋra Mainyu had broken into the world they drew together in close-packed ranks along the sky’s rim, mounted with spear in hand, to imprison him. Giving the *fravaši*s parts to play in the story of creation (as here and in their *yašt*) meant supposing them to have pre-existed the material world; but whereas the lesser *yazata*s, of whom also this is true, are said to

have been brought then into being by Ahura Mazdā to help him in the struggle against evil, no such theological statement is known about the *fravaši*s. As far as the existing texts go, they are simply there, assimilated into Zoroaster's dualistic system as beneficent spirits but not, it seems, fundamentally part of it.

To make matters still more complex, already in *Yašt* 13 (149, 155) *urvan* and *fravaši* are recognized as separate components (along with *ahu*, *daēna* and *baoḏah*) of man's immaterial being; and similar analyses are found in the Pahlavi books (Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems*, pp. 97-118). One explanation offered there of the relation of *urvan* to *fravaši* on this plane is that during this life the *urvan* dwells in the body, the *fravaši* in the presence of Ohrmazd (which does not accord with the story of Zoroaster's conception), but that at death they are united (*Bundahišn* 3.13). Elsewhere it is said that the *fravaši* is united only with the blessed soul and cannot go to hell (*Dēnkard*, ed. Madan, p. 123, ll. 10-13; Zaehner, p. 270); but popular belief (which appears the main force in the persistence of the *urvan–fravaši* cult, among priests as well as laity) maintained that at Hamaspaθmaēdaya all "*fravaši*s" return to their former homes, some from the joys of heaven, others from the torments of hell (Bīrūnī, *Āṯār*, p. 224; Boyce, *Stronghold*, pp. 213-14).

The persistence of irreconcilable ideas about the *fravaši* is shown by uses to which the term was put by Manichean and Christian proselytizers in the Sasanian period. The Manicheans used Middle Persian *frāwahr* (*prʾwhr*), Parthian *ardāw frawardīn* (*ʾrdʾw frwrdyn*, in Sogd. *ʾrtʾw frwrṯyy*) as a term for air or ether, the purest of the five Manichean light-elements (Andreas and Henning, p. 185, a I R I 5; Sundermann, pp. 147, 155, svv.). This was plainly because the *frawahr* was regarded by Zoroastrian schoolmen as the highest of the five immaterial components (in Manichean thought, light-elements) of the microcosm, man. But Christian missionaries in Sogdia, working perhaps among humbler groups of Zoroastrians, adopted *frwrt* for "corpse," *frwrṯqty* for "corpse-house, tomb" (Sims-Williams, p. 211, svv.); and this appears to reflect a local usage parallel to the common Zoroastrian one of today of speaking at funerals of the corpse as "*rovān*," a euphemism deprecated by some but partly justified by the belief that the soul, lingering on earth, accompanies the body to the place of disposal (see corpse).

Despite the confusions which it produced, the postulated struggle in the Young Avestan period to have the *fravaši-urvan* cult accepted was overwhelmingly successful. Every liturgical text contains their veneration of these beings with

the words of *Sīrōza* 1 or 2 (see FRAWARDĪN YAŠT) and they are regularly invoked in the Middle Persian dedications of religious services, in which Av. *ašāonąm fravašayō* is rendered by "*artā*" (from OPers. **artāvanąm*) *frawahr* or *frawaš*. No act of worship takes place, therefore, without their invocation, which is understood to be that of the souls of the departed (cf. Boyce, 1968, pp. 270-71 with no. 4). Further, the fourth watch (*gāh*) of the twenty-four hours, from sunset to midnight, is believed to be under their protection, and in the Zoroastrian calendar a day and a month are dedicated to them (see calendars i). This means that they have an annual name-day feast on the day Farvardīn ("of the *fravaršīs*") of the month Farvardīn; and still today on Farvardīn Jašan the devout, and especially those who have lost a relative during the year, go to the *daḵma*s (q.v.) and have religious ceremonies performed for the souls of departed family members (Seervai and Patel, p. 216). Nevertheless, despite the predominant association in living Zoroastrianism of *fravaši*s with souls of the dead, there is still a sense of their power as protective spirits, who are invoked among the *yazata*s.

There is no certain plastic representation of the *fravaši*s. The Avestan term, an abstract, is grammatically feminine, but there is no indication that the spirits themselves were conceived as Valkyrie-like beings. In *Yašt* 13 (v. 70) they are said to "swoop down like an eagle," and wings are still popularly attributed to them, locally at least, among Zoroastrians (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 161, n. 47). Moulton accordingly (p. 260), rejecting the then prevailing Western interpretation of the Achaemenid winged symbol as that of Ahura Mazdā, identified it as the king's *fravaši*, and it is still generally regarded as a *fravaši* symbol by Zoroastrians. Strong arguments, however, have by now been put forward by Western scholars for its representing *xᵛarənah* (for references see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, p. 103 n. 82; Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism* III, p. 104 and nn. 197-98).

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