



IRAN IV. MYTHS AND LEGENDS

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Introduction. In popular usage “myth” is equated with something being false or illusory. In the study of religion, in contrast, myths are seen as narratives which encapsulate fundamental truths about the nature of existence, God(s), the universe. They explain the origin of the world or of a tribe or of a ritual. They concern life after death, embody an understanding of right and wrong, convey messages of salvation or damnation. Myths are commonly thought to make past events or forces “really” present, especially when acted out in ritual. They are therefore sources of spiritual power. The origin, function, and legitimation of rites are commonly contained in myths. Various scholars have sought to establish broad patterns and types of myths (Eliade, 1963 and 1965, Sharpe, Whaling; for an overview of debate, see Bolle, pp. 261-73). Typologies have value, but commonly myths are conditioned by the culture in which they emerged, and to whose formation and development they have often contributed. Legends are stories which are seen to have a basis, however remote, with people who are thought to have lived on earth in historical time, though they often portray abstract ideas about valor, good heroes, and wicked tyrants. The distinction between myth and legend can in practice be difficult to identify.



Iranian myths and legends incorporate a variety of traditions. The many precise parallels between Iranian mythology and much early Indian imagery clearly reflect their common heritage—for example, the respective myths concerning the first human being and parallels between Ir. Yima and Ind. Yama, the god of death in Vedic thought. The remarkable parallels between Iranian eschatology and Norse myths are so striking that some scholars have suggested they reflect fossilized versions of Indo-European mythology (Puhvel). Some Achaemenid inscriptions on royal reliefs suggest that the Persian empire not only incorporated the Babylonian kingdom, but also some of its myths about kingship (Hinnells, 1985, pp. 98-109). Eastern Iran appears to have had especially rich traditions of myths and legends. This article cannot cover all the many bodies of material which flourished in Iran, such as the Ossetic tradition or Manicheism. It focuses on the diverse body of material preserved in Zoroastrian literature, the great Iranian epic, the *Šāh-nāma* (Levy), and the romance of *Vis and Ramin* (Morrison). It also includes some references to Greek traditions about the great Zoroastrian monarchs. Much of the material was transmitted by priests in the religious setting, for myths were part of Zoroastrian teaching. Legendary material, and some myths, were transmitted by minstrels at court or in numerous public events for musicians and singers (Boyce, 1954 and 1957).

In any religion or culture one often finds more than one myth or legend on the same subject. Just as Biblical scholars detect two creation myths in the book of Genesis, so in Iran there are various accounts of the first human being or first king (Christensen). These poetic narratives do not necessarily indicate various ‘sects’ but may be alternative perspectives on ‘ultimate truth’. This is evident in ancient Indian traditions concerning creation. One should not expect coherent logic, although it is remarkable how coherent much Iranian mythology is.

This article will first look at various types of Iranian myths, cross-referring where possible to other entries in *EIr.*, and will relate some myths briefly in order to highlight the understanding they contain of the cosmos, of good and evil, the physical world, and human nature. The categories used here, such as Hero Myths and Nature Myths, are widely used in the study of religions. Typologies of myths are useful, but there are few clearly demarcated types, so myths are not necessarily either one type or the other. Myths are complex interpretations of existence, on which members of the appropriate religion base much of their belief and practice. That complexity will be illustrated in



the course of this article, as will be the difficulty in drawing a clear line between myth and legend.

Myth and the cosmos. The major account of the ancient Iranian image of the cosmos is in the *Bundahišn* (q.v.). The earth is thought of as round and originally flat, lying on the cosmic waters as a yolk floats in an egg, encased by the sky (*āsmān*, q.v.) as in a bag, originally thought to be made of stone, later of shining metal (see [COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY](#)). Originally the sun stood still at the noonday position; all was perfect and still. The original material creations were the sky, water, earth, tree, beneficent animal, the first human, and fire. Between earth and sky were the luminaries: moon, sun, and the constellations. Mount Alborz (q.v.) ringed the earth. When later the rains came (see below on creation myths), two rivers flowed from the north, one towards the east, one towards the west. They flowed over the earth's edge and back into the cosmic ocean below. In the ocean grew the tree of many seeds, and from that came 130,000 species of plants. Next to it is the *Haoma* (q.v.) or *Gōkarn* tree, from which the elixir of immortality will be produced at the renovation (*Frašō.kərəti*, q.v.). Evil produced alizard to destroy the *Haoma*, but two "Kar fish" protect it: "those fish are so sensitive that they comprehend sensation as minute as a sharp needle in the deep water ..." (*Greater Bundahišn* 24.A5; Anklesaria, 1956, p. 193). The mountains all grew from the roots of Alborz, the mountain of divine destiny, which grew to the sky. From its peak is the Bridge of Judgement. The earth was divided into the seven *kešvars* (*Haft-kešvar*, q.v.); half of the land mass forms the central block of land, *Xwanirah*, with the other six around it. It is in *Xwanirah* that heroes of the Mazdayasnian religion are produced, as the savior, Saošyant, will be at the renovation. It was possible to pass from one region to another on the back of the bull *Hadhyaš* or *Srisōk*.

The *Bundahišn* repeatedly asserts that it quotes Scripture in its account of the cosmos. The account is embedded within a complex astrology, so the twelve con-stellations of the zodiac are said to side with Ohrmazd (Avestan: Ahura Mazdā, q.v.), and the seven planets are said to be on the side of Ahriman (q.v.). The *Bundahišn* displays traditional theological fascination with classifications, for example, of types of beneficial animals, of noxious creatures, mountains, rivers, seas, animals, and fish.

Mythic creatures and legendary heroes. Mythology in any culture commonly includes stories of fabulous creatures, and these are found in Iran also, particularly in the *Bundahišn*. The most vivid such figure is the ass with three



legs, six eyes, nine mouths, two ears, and one horn. It is so large that just one of its feet covers an area of land on which a thousand sheep could be assembled. With its huge horn it destroys the worst pests among noxious creatures. When it moves in the cosmic ocean, *Vouru-kaša*, it shakes the entire ocean whose waters it purifies (*G.Bd.* 24.10-21).

A mythological creature which stimulated much interest was the *Simorǧ* (*Saēna*) bird, which sits on the tree of healing in the middle of *Vourukaša* and shakes the branches so seeds are scattered and fertilize the earth. The *Simorǧ* appears in much Sasanian art, particularly bowls and ewers. It also features in the *Šāh-nāma*. The warrior *Sām* cursed his child (later named *Zāl*) for having white hair and commanded him to be left to die in a remote spot. Seeing him from her eyrie, the *Simorǧ* planned to feed him to her brood, but she was inspired to protect the child. When he grew to magnificent manly stature, *Sām* heard of the famed youth and came searching for him. The *Simorǧ* took him to his father saying: “take with you a single feather from my wing and with it you will continue to be under the protection of my influence. If ever a difficulty overtakes you or any dispute arises over your actions, good or ill, then cast this feather of mine into the flames” and she would “come as a black cloud, with speed, to help” (Levy, p. 38). *Zāl* became a noble prince and fell in love with *Rudāba* “dark eyed and with blushing cheeks, as beautiful as the moon,” and their union resulted in the birth of the famed Persian hero, *Rostam*. But the birth proved dangerous. *Zāl*, recalling the *Simorǧ*’s promise, burned one of the feather’s barbs. The great bird came instantly, eager to serve. She called for a wizard “versed in incantation” and extracted the baby from her side; the wound was healed by a herbal potion devised by the *Simorǧ*—and so the legendary hero, *Rostam*, was born. When he grew up, few could withstand him in battle, until one day he fought with the equally mighty *Esfandiār* (q.v.). Wounded, *Rostam* retreated and confided to his friends he thought he faced defeat. *Zāl* again called upon the *Simorǧ*, and she rubbed her feathers over his wounds. *Rostam* was immediately restored to strength. She counseled him not to fight such a valorous prince, bearing the divine *Farr* (see *FARR[AH]*). If *Rostam* submitted, she would save him. But his offer of peace was rejected, and with the *Simorǧ*’s aid *Rostam* shot *Esfandiār* in the eye, and so “the world for that nobleman turned to darkness” and he died (Levy, pp. 206-11).

The story of the *Simorǧ* illustrates the problem of distinguishing between myth and legend. The bird in the cosmic ocean is evidently part of myth; her rescue of *Zāl* and saving of *Rostam* are legendary, with the typical epic interest in fate



and magic. Stories can grow and change in retelling.

The ‘story’ of Yima (later Jamšēd) is difficult to reconstruct (see Christensen, part 2). The key Iranian text is *Vendidād* [*Vidēvdād*] 2 (see Lommel, 1927, pp. 196-206). There are at least three strands to the Yima story. In one he is depicted as the ideal king. Thus in *Vd.* 2, after (strangely) refusing Ahura Mazda’s suggestion that Yima be the preacher and bearer of Mazda’s Law (referred to also in *Dēnkard* [q.v.] VIII.44.3, although he is listed as one who accepted the religion completely [*Dk.* V.1.8]), he is given rulership of the world. While he was king there was neither cold nor hot wind, neither disease nor death. Humans, creatures, and fires multiplied, so the world doubled in size. He was, therefore referred to as “shining Yima of good herds” as he ruled over seven parts the earth, over demons and mortals, over wizards and witches (*Yašt* 19.30-33; Hintze, 1994b, pp. 172-90). (See also *Yasna* 9.4-5; *Yt.* 5.25-26; *Yt.* 9. 8-9; *Yt.* 15.15-16; *Yt.* 17.28-30. In the Pahlavi literature, see *Dk.* VII.1.20-24, VIII.13.7, IX.21.2-3.) In *Dk.* IX.5.4 he is said to have driven away four major vices from existence. Thus Yima is seen as the ideal king, and Persepolis became known as Taḳt-e Jamšēd, the throne of Jamšēd. A second theme (*Vd.* 2.21-43) is the story of the terrible winter (caused by the evil Malkūs) which threatened all living creatures. Yima constructed a Vara or enclosure, in which the seeds of the best of people, cattle, and trees were kept (see also *Dk.* VII.1.24, VIII.44.4). It is said in *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī xrad* (q.v., hereafter *DMx*) 62.15 to be in *Ērānwēz* (q.v.) and below the earth. In the *Bundahišn* (33.30) the winter is an eschatological assault of evil in its death throes (see also *Dk.* VII.9.3-4; *Dādestān ī denīg* [q.v., hereafter *DD*; the only Eng. tr. remains West, 1882]) 37.94-95; *DMx* 27.27-31). A third theme is Yima’s sin of lying, which results in him losing the divine glory (*xwarrah*, *Yt.* 19.34-36); as it flew away three times in the shape of a bird of prey, it was seized successively by Mithra, Thraētaona, and Kərəsāspa/Keresāsp (Hintze, 1994b, pp. 191-202). His sin is alluded to in the *Gāthās* (q.v.) in *Y.* 32.8 (although the translation is much debated; see Boyce, 1975, pp. 92-98, at p. 93, n. 55). Noreference is made to this sin in the *Vendidād*, even though it is the longest passage on Yima. In the Pahlavi literature his sin was his claim to be the creator (*Pahlavi Rivāyat* 31; Williams, II, pp. 57-59). *DD* 39.16-17 states he was deceived by the fiend into wanting supreme sovereignty instead of serving Ohrmazd. *Yt.* 19.46 refers to Aži Dāhaka cutting Yima to pieces (referred to also in *Dk.* IX.21.2). (See below on Yima in the *Šāh-nāma*.) The fragmentary picture yields no clear ‘story line’.

Myths and legends of monsters and fiends. Hero myths and legends are a major



dimension of any culture, inspiring followers to emulate the good and oppose—and fear—the evil. They abound in Iran also. The story of Thraētaona/Ferēdun is a good example. Generally Zoroastrian literature describes beneficial forces in more detail than it does evil powers (Boyce, 1975, pp. 85-108). But one demonic monster is graphically depicted, although the myth is somewhat fragmentary. It is another example of the difficulty of distinguishing between myth and legend. Aži Dahāka (Azdaha, q.v.) is described as a dragon “who had three mouths, three heads, six eyes, a thousand skills, the very mighty, devilish Falsehood, evil for the world, the deceitful one” (*Yt.* 19.37; Hintze, 1994b, p. 22). The same *Yašt* relates the story of Aži Dahāka in conflict with the Fire of Ahura Mazdā for the possession of the xwarrah (46-50). The dragon was said to have a thousand powers, and to be “of mighty strength ... whom the evil spirit Angra Mainyu made as the most mighty Drug [see DRUJ-] who threatened the corporeal world, Iranian settlements, and the homes of Aša” (*Y.* 9.8; see also *Yt.* 5.34, *Yt.* 15.24). Aži Dahāka succeeded Yima when the glory left him, and he was jointly responsible for sawing the fallen king in half (*G.Bd.* 35.5). He took Yima’s daughters as his wives. The dragon’s evil reign lasted for a thousand years (*G.Bd.* 33.2, 36.5-6). Dahāka is said to have had his mansion in Babylon (a symbol of the hated Assyrian empire) (*G.Bd.* 32.4, *Dk.* VII.4.72). He is said to have been one of the last to rule all seven regions; his desire was to rid them of people, but Anāhitā (Anāhid, q.v.) rejected his plea (*Yt.* 5.29-31, 34-35), as did Vayu (*Yt.* 15.19-21). His reign was brought to an end by the heroic Ferēdun (q.v.) beating him with his club. Ahura Mazdā warned him not to cut the dragon’s body, because serpents, toads, scorpions, lizards, tortoises, and frogs would fill the earth. So Ferēdun bound the dragon in a cave in Mt. Damāvand (q.v., *Dk.* IX.21.8-12, relating the contents of the lost *Sūtkar Nask*), where he remains bound until the renovation, when he will break free. But Keresāsp will be raised again to crush the dragon with his club (*DD* 37.97). Like all demons he will be done away with at the renovation (*DD* 37.121). The texts give a mixture of pictures of Aži Dahāka as mythical dragon and legendary wicked monarch, Žaḥḥāk. It is the latter picture which is set forward in the *Šāh-nāma*.

According to the *Šāh-nāma* (Levy, pp. 17-25), Žaḥḥāk was born a courageous youth, the son of the honorable prince, Merdas. One day the devil, Eblis, arrived disguised as a visitor come to honor him, and Žaḥḥāk fell under his influence. He asked the visitor to instruct him and agreed to swear an oath before being taught. Eblis urged Žaḥḥāk to kill Merdas, because he lingered



inoffice, so delaying the time when Žaḥḥāk could accede to the throne. Žaḥḥāk pleaded that some other plan be devised, rather than killing his father, but Eblis retorted: “if you fail in carrying out my advice, you will dishonor your pledge and the oath you swore to me.” Žaḥḥāk dug a pit and camouflaged it with straw, so when his father went out to purify himself before worship, he fell into the pit and died.

Eblis hatched further plots and presented himself as a renowned cook. There were few animals then, because humanity was vegetarian, until Ahriman taught people to kill animals. Eblis provided food from the bodies of birds and animals, which delighted Žaḥḥāk, who promised him whatever he desired. The cook asked for permission to kiss his shoulders as though he was his dearest friend. But where Eblis kissed him two black serpents grew. Whenever Žaḥḥāk tried to cut them off, more grew in their place. Eblis reappeared in the guise of a physician and said cutting them off was impossible; instead they should be fed only with human brains.

Meanwhile in Iran King Jamšēd became increasingly unpopular with his subjects, for the royal glory had left him. As turmoil erupted “Iranian knights in search of a new king turned their attention to Žaḥḥāk and proclaimed him king of Iran.” The dragon-king raised an army, including Arabs, attacking Iran as Jamšēd surrendered. When at last Jamšēd was found, Žaḥḥāk had his body sawn in two. Žaḥḥāk ruled for a thousand years, when “virtue was humiliated and wizardry esteemed.” The end finally came through the gallantry of the hero Ferēdun, on whom the royal glory had settled. Žaḥḥāk had a dream about his defeat by Ferēdun and searched everywhere for the youth, killing the hero’s father, but Ferēdun’s mother hid him in the Alborz mountains. Žaḥḥāk raised an army including demons and peris (“fairies”) with men. As Žaḥḥāk was consulting his counselors, Kāva, a blacksmith who had been grievously wronged, entered the royal presence to protest that Žaḥḥāk had executed seventeen of his children to feed their brains to the snakes on his shoulders, and he sought the life of his last son. He thundered: “although you have a dragon’s form, you are the king and it’s your duty to let me have justice in this thing.” His son was restored to him; but, when Žaḥḥāk commanded him to sign a document proclaiming that Žaḥḥāk was a just king, Kāva refused and raged at the councilors who had done so. He stormed away to seek Ferēdun and raise an army. Together they marched on Žaḥḥāk’s palace in Jerusalem. Žaḥḥāk was away, so Ferēdun feasted and dallied with Žaḥḥāk’s wives. Learning of this, Žaḥḥāk attacked the hero with fury, but Ferēdun “advanced



upon him with the speed of the storm-wind and dealt him a blow from his bull-headed mace that shattered his helmet.” An angel quickly warned him “do not strike him down; his time has not yet come, bind him firmly as a rock and conceal him in the mountains.” So the dragon king was bound in fetters in Mount Damā-vand until the end of history. This ancient Iranian myth clearly lies behind a passage in the Biblical book of Revelation (Hinnells, 2000, p. 83)

Again, the difference between myth and legend is blurred. In the early sources Aži Dahāka is a mythical figure and yet also appears as a king of a physical place. In the legend of the *Šāh-nāma* the one-thousand year rule, the role of Eblis, the angel guiding Ferēdun make it, in parts, a myth. Fundamental Iranian and religious values are evident throughout. Even the evil Žaḥḥāk recognizes that a king’s duty is to give justice. Details like the bull-headed mace and the belief in Farr, the royal glory, reflect the Zoroastrian elements of the narratives. These are modified in the light of history; whereas Aži Dahāka ruled in Babylon, Žaḥḥāk recruits Arabs—an indication of who is the key enemy changes over time. The mythical/legendary geography of Mount Damāvand is an example of an enduring motif.

Nature myths. Most ancient cultures have nature myths. These can be of two types: myths about nature or myths deploying key images from nature. The former are prominent in the creation myths below, and they occur in the cosmological myth discussed above. They explain how the cycle of nature functions.

It is inevitable that a pre-industrial society will utilize nature as the major source of imagery. An example of this is in the *Mithra Yašt* (Yt. 10), which has a striking blend of nature and warrior imagery. Mithra is the first god to travel across Harā, in front of the immortal, swift-horsed sun, who is the first to seize the beautiful, gold-painted mountain tops; from there the most mighty surveys the land inhabited by Iranians ... where high, sheltering mountains provide ample pasture ... for the cattle, where deep lakes stand with surging waves” (st. 13-14; all quotations are from Gershevitch). Similarly Mithra is described as “the very great god who in the morning brings into evidence the many shapes, the creatures of the Incremental spirit, as he lights up his body, being endowed with [his] own light like the moon” (st. 142). As in the morning so in the evening “[Mithra] goes along the whole width of the earth after the setting of the glow of the sun” (st. 95). He is described as the replenisher of waters “thanks to whom water [= rain] falls and plants grow” (st. 103). Another example of nature symbolism is the use of animal imagery to depict powerful



force of divine entities—Vərəθragna (Victory) “in the shape of a wild, aggressive, male boar with sharp fangs and sharp tusks, a boar that kills at one blow, is un-approachable ... and strong, has iron hind feet, iron fore-feet, iron tendons, and iron tail and iron jaws” (st. 70).

A stronger theme in the *Mithra Yašt*, however, is that of the warrior. Mithra it is whom “the warriors worship at the manes of their horses, requesting strength for their teams, health for themselves, much watchfulness against antagonists, ability to strike back at enemies, ability to rout lawless, hostile opponents” (st. 10-11); he is “the skilful warrior who has white horses and pointed spears with long shafts, who shoots afar with swift arrows” (st. 102); he “sets the battle in motion, who takes his stand in the battle, who smashes the regiments; the centre of the blood-thirsty army is quaking” (st. 36). He drives in a “supernaturally fashioned, high wheeled chariot ...” (st. 67) “holding his mace in his hand; with its hundred bosses and hundred blades” (st. 96); “whose pike is of silver, whose armor is of gold” (st. 112), “when the whips are tossing, the bow-strings twanging, the sharp arrows darting ...” (st. 113); and he protects his worshippers “from the evil armies of the owners of Falsehood” (st. 93). He is also the judge (st. 79, 81, 92), who watches to see that people observe their contracts/agreements and does so with “a thousand ears and ten thousand eyes” (st. 91). Other sources indicate that he was particularly associated with the priesthood, for the symbol of priesthood is the *gurz*, the mace of Mithra, and temples are known as *dar-e Mehrs*, courts of Mithra. Categorizing, or producing typologies of, myths can be helpful, but there is a danger in assuming that there are watertight divisions, as though a myth belongs to either one type or another. One myth can have diversity of features and levels of meaning, as the *Mithra Yašt* illustrates. Mithra exemplifies another feature of Iranian mythology, namely, that in comparison with Greek, Roman, Egyptian, and Indian mythology there are few stories about the lives and deeds of the gods. In Iranian tradition mythological imagery is used to highlight details or express abstract ideas, but there is little in the way of narrative, a theme discussed below.

An interesting nature myth with important theological implications concerns Tištrya and the demon of drought, Apaoša (Mid. Pers. Apōš, q.v.). The main text is *Yt.* 8, but also important is *G.Bd.*, where Tištrya is identified as Sirius (both being producers of the waters) in V.A.2, 3, V.B.12, VI.B.1-21, VI.D.1, VIII. 2. The texts (particularly VI.B) integrate the myth of the former with astrology. There Tištrya is said to have produced the waters at creation. Each raindrop



he produced was as big as a bowl, so the earth was covered with water to the height of a man, washing noxious creatures off the face of the earth. The fourth month of the year is dedicated to Tiš-trya; in the first ten days he takes the form of a fifteen-year-old male—the perfect age in ancient Iranian thought. In the second period of ten days he takes the form of a bull, and in the last ten days the form of a horse. It is in the last that the main myth is related, the conflict with Apaoša (*Yt.* 8.20-34; Lommel, 1927, pp. 46-57). Tištrya charged to the cosmic ocean as a beautiful white horse with golden ears and trappings, whereas Apaoša was in the form of a black horse, with black ears, back, and tail. The two fought, hoof against hoof, for three days and nights until Apaoša overcame Tištrya, who cried to the creator that he was weak because he had not received the proper prayers and sacrifices duly offered in his name by humanity. The creator himself then sacrificed and offered the proper prayers, so that Tištrya gained the strength of ten horses, camels, and bulls—as well as of ten mountains and rivers. When Tištrya returned thus fortified to the fray, he triumphed over the demon of drought, so the rains fell and fertilized the seven regions of the earth. The myth is important for its understanding of the function of ritual sacrifice: it is what maintains the natural order. Secondly, sacrifice is a holy activity, something appropriate for Ohrmazd himself to perform, a theme discussed below concerning the renovation and Zurvanism. In Iranian thought sacrifice is not, as is in so many religions, something offered only by humans in their petitions to, or devotion for, the divine. It is a powerful, holy act, appropriate for any good power to perform, and by it world order is sustained and spiritual power is activated.

Another figure associated with water and the source of life is the female divine power, Arədvī Surā Anāhitā (Anāhid). The key text is *Yt.* 5, *Ābān Yašt* (Lommel, 1927, pp. 26-44). She is said to drive a chariot pulled by four white horses: wind, rain, cloud, and sleet (*Yt.* 5.11, 120). She nurtures crops and cattle and is the source of fertility, purifying male sperm and a woman's womb as well as a mother's milk; she sends down the waters by day and night (*Yt.* 5.2, 5). Major religious figures offer her sacrifice—Ahura Mazdā in Ērānwēz (*Yt.* 5.17), Yima (*Yt.* 5.25-7) and Zoroaster—also in Ērānwēz (*Yt.* 5.104-6), and Vištāsp (Goštāsp, q.v., *Yt.* 5.108-10). But she refused the requests of others, for example Aži Dāhaka (*Yt.* 5.34) and enemies of Iran (*Yt.* 5.58, 117-18). She will not accept libations from the deformed or wicked (*Yt.* 5.93-95). She is strong, bright, tall, beautiful, pure, and nobly born. She wears a golden crown with eight rays and a hundred stars, and a gold mantle and necklace (*Yt.* 5.64, 78, 123, 126-29). Such details have led scholars to suggest that statues of her were erected, as



the ancient Greek historian Berossus reports regarding western parts of the Iranian empire. Other scholars have suggested that she was incorporated into Iranian mythology from external (Babylonian?) sources, for there is no obvious Indian parallel to indicate an Indo-Iranian origin. That is plausible and may be part of the introduction of statues, which were not part of ancient Iranian tradition (Boyce, 1982, pp. 201-4). It is possible that a tradition had more than one fertility figure. Mythologies are commonly complex and evocative, rather than coldly logical. Two figures associated with one phenomenon are not necessarily indicative of two 'sects'. *Yašt* 5 reinforces the point made above; in Iranian thought sacrifice is a holy and powerful act in itself, one appropriate for gods as well as humans.

The myth of creation is the most important Zoroastrian nature myth. The key text is *Greater Bundahišn* (Anklesaria, 1956, pp. 5-53) but also important are: *DMx* 8 and *DD* 37 (see *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 46 in Williams, II, pp. 72-74). The *Bd.* passages are paraphrased in *Zādspram. Dk.* VIII states that myth was in the now lost Avestan *Čihrdād Nask* (q.v.). The Creation myth is based on the ancient Iranian concept of the universe outlined above (see Boyce, 1975, pp. 130-46). The theological understanding of why and how the cosmos was made is distinctly Zoroastrian. Ahura Mazdā on high in goodness and omniscience knew Ahriman existed in deepest darkness, whereas the ignorant Ahriman was unaware of the creator's existence; between them was the void. Immediately Ahriman became aware of Ohrmazd's existence, true to his malicious nature, he attacked, seeking to destroy. Failing, he fell back into darkness and miscreated many *dēvs* (*Daēva*, q.v.). Ohrmazd offered peace if Ahriman would praise the Good Creation; Ahriman, mistakenly suspecting weakness, refused. Ohrmazd knew it was necessary to fix a time limit of 9,000 years to the conflict; otherwise evil could triumph. This condition was accepted by Ahriman in his stupidity. As Ohrmazd proceeded with his Good Creation from his essence of light, so Ahriman produced his counter-creation out of his "essence of darkness in the form of a toad, ashen, worthy of hell, sinful as is the most sinful noxious beast" (*G.Bd.* I.47). Each fashioned the non-material (*mēnōg*), then the material (*gētīg*; see [GĒTĪG AND MĒNŌG](#)) forms. First among the Good Creation were the sacred prayers, specifically the *Ahunwar* (q.v., an excellent example of a myth legitimating a ritual), the Beneficent Immortals (*Ameša Speñtas*, q.v.) and the material creations of sky, water, earth, beneficent plant, the uniquely created bull, and the first person, Gayōmard (see Boyce, 1975, pp. 192-246). He also created Fire, which permeated all creation. The *fravašis* were given the choice of assuming



material form in order to fight evil, so they may then again become perfect and deathless—the ultimate expression of the Zoroastrian doctrine of free will. Ahriman fashioned the chief demons and attacked the good creation. He pierced and entered the middle of the earth from the waters beneath. “And the Sky feared him as the sheep the wolf ... like a fly; he rushed upon all creation” (*G.Bd.* IV.10). He made the midday dark, as if it were night, and set free noxious creatures with greed, need, and disease upon the Earth, on the bull and on Gayōmard. On the Fire he inflicted smoke.

The Daēvas and the Yazatas paired off in combat. The whole of the two creations were in conflict: Falsehood against Truth, the sorcerer’s spell against the holy *manthra*, the Evil eye against spiritual sight, excess and deficiency against right measure, pollution against purity (see [DUALISM](#)). The forces of good and evil are so different that two vocabularies are used: the good have heads and hands, they speak, go, and die, whereas the evil have skulls and claws, they howl, hurtle, and perish. When Ahriman sought to leave the polluted world, his exit was blocked by the fravašis. He was trapped in a world characterized by life the opposite of his evil, destructiveness, in stark contrast to much Indian and Western mythology, where spiritual good is imprisoned in an alien material universe. As the bull and Gayōmard died, each emitted sperm; from the bull came cattle and plants; from Gayōmard’s sperm grew a plant, whose leaves took the form of the first human couple, Mašye and Mašyāne. Despite being admonished by Ohrmazd to do good and not worship the demons, they succumbed to evil’s seductions and declared the Evil Spirit the creator—the archetypal Zoroastrian sin. At first they refrained from food, then drank milk, then ate meat. For fifty years they refrained from sex; but, when they did copulate, having been led astray by evil, they devoured their children, until Ohrmazd took away the sweetness of children so the population could grow. The theological implications of this creation myth will be discussed below. (For the succeeding legendary history concerning the Pešdadians and Kayanians, see above, [IRAN iii.](#))

Eschatological myths. These are of two aspects of Zoroastrian eschatology (q.v.; see also [APOCALYPTIC](#)): myths associated with the end of an individual’s life and what in the Judeo-Christian world is called “the end of the world.” In Zoroastrianism the latter is termed the renovation, for the end of the world would be the defeat of Ohrmazd. (Boyce, 1984 includes a compendium of translations of key texts on both.)

The individual judgement after death is found in the *Gāthās*. where the



prophet states that “the end the Worst Existence shall be for the wicked, but (the House of) Best purpose for the just man” (Y. 30.4; Y. 45.8 refers to the House of Song). Y. 31.20 refers to “[a] long life of darkness, foul food, the crying of woe—to that existence, O wicked ones, your Inner Self shall lead you by her actions.” In Y. 46.10-11 he explicitly refers to the Činwad bridge (*Činwad puhl*, q.v.; see also Y. 51.13), when his opponents will be led by their Inner Selves (*daēna*, *dēn*, q.v.) to the House of the Lie.

This judgement is expounded in greater detail in later literature. (See Boyce, 1975, pp. 109-29; Hinnells, 1971, pp. 64-67; Lommel, 1930, pp. 185-204; Pavry, *passim*. The key texts are *G. Bd.* 30; *DMx* 2; *DD* 20; *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 23.4; Williams, II, pp. 47-51.) At the first judgement, individuals’ good thoughts, words, and deeds are weighed in the balance against their evil thoughts, words, and deeds under the just gaze of Mithra, Sraoša, and Rašnu. Such an idea is not unique in world mythologies; it is found, for example, in Egypt. The distinctively Zoroastrian element is the consistent emphasis on individual responsibility based on freedom of choice between the forces of good and evil. This developed from Zoroaster’s conviction of his personal encounter with Ahura Mazdā; of his personal calling, for which he was set apart from the beginning. After death and before the judgement at the balances, the soul meditates on its thoughts, words, and deeds. After judgement it is led by the personification of its own conscience or Inner Self to the Činwad bridge, where the righteous are led to the House of Song, while the wicked fall from the bridge into the House of Darkness. Zoroastrian theology has no room for a doctrine of one person dying to save others, or of an inscrutable divine will determining the fate of individuals. Each individual is judged on the balance of one’s own good and evil thoughts, words, and deeds. Even in the afterlife the emphasis on individual experience continues. When the Righteous Virāz (*Ardā Virāz*, q.v.) experienced his soul journey to heaven and hell, he saw the rewards or punishments matched to each soul’s thoughts, words, and deeds (Gignoux). Zoroastrian funeral rites are ordered so that certain prayers are offered at each stage of the soul’s post-mortem progress. For example, the corpse is laid out so its head does not point to the north, the abode of demons whence Nasu came. Prayers are recited to the *yazata* Sraoša for the protection of the soul for the first three days after death, while it meditates on its life. Additional prayers are said on the morning after the third night, when the soul proceeds to its judgement. Again, liturgical practice is legitimated by mythology (*DD* 13-34; Boyce, 1977, pp. 139-63; Modi, pp. 49-81; more generally: Lommel, 1930, chap. 7; Zaehner, 1961, pp. 302-8).



The final judgement. The first judgement was in the immaterial (*mēnōg*) state, for the material (*gētīg*) body remains on earth (see [GĒTĪG AND MĒNŌG](#)). As the body is part of the Good Creation, death represents the (temporary) triumph of evil; hence in Zoroastrianism the theological necessity of the resurrection, so that individuals may be judged in body as well as in spirit and so that Ohrmazd's creation is not destroyed.

Some Gāthic passages appear to refer to the renovation (Lommel, 1930, chap. 8). Certain details are clearly present—for example, the judgement by the fire and the molten metal which all pass through before entering the restored world (Y. 51.9): “that requital which Thou wilt assign to the two parties, O Mazda, by Thy bright blazing fire and molten metal to destroy the wicked man, and to save the just.” Y. 31.19 refers to “the requital promised by fire”; Y. 34.4 refers to the fire which shall be “of manifest help to Thy supporter, but of visible harm to Thy enemy”; Y. 43.4 also refers to “the recompenses that Thou wilt give, through the heat of the truth-strong fire to the wicked man and the just when retribution comes for these sinners.” There are also references to the savior or *saošyant* (named *Astvat.ərətā*, q.v.): Y. 30.8-9 refers to those “who shall deliver the Lie into the hands of Truth. And then may we be those who shall transfigure this world (*fraša*).” Elsewhere Zoroaster refers to the *saošyants* who “have been appointed opponents of Fury” (*Aēšma*, q.v.; Y. 48.12). Whether these allusions indicate the prophetic origin of the whole schema—for example, a belief in the resurrection—has been doubted by some. The oldest extant text to make explicit reference to details of *frašō.kərəti* is Yt. 19, where veneration is paid to the *xwarrah* which will accompany the “Victorious one among the Saviors, and also his other companions, so that he will make life excellent (*fraša*), ageless, without decay, not rotting, not putrefying, living forever, thriving forever, ruling as it wishes. When the dead will rise, (then) will come the one without decay reviving the dead and life will create excellent things according to its own wish. The world of Truth will be undecaying, from generation to generation. Falsehood will be returned to the place where it had come from” (st. 88-90, tr. Hintze, 1994b, p. 38; see also st. 10-12, 19-20, 22-24; st. 92 and 95 refer to the final *Saošyant* by name (see further Hintze, 1994a, pp. 103-28, 371-72).

A ‘traditional’ Zoroastrian account of the renovation is in *DD* 35-38. The two texts with the most details and utilized ancient materials are *G.Bd.* 33-34, with the most details on *Saošyant* and the resurrection, and the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* (hereafter *ZWY*; Anklesaria, 1957, pp. 279-93), which is most detailed on



signs of the first saoš-yant's coming. (*Dk.* VII, chaps. 8-11, has a full account but is available only in West, 1895. See also *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 48; Williams, II, pp. 79-88. For details, see Boyce, 1975, pp. 242-46, 281-93; Hinnells, 1971, pp. 68-70; Lommel, 1930, pp. 205-36; Zaehner, 1961, pp. 308-21.)

There are several divisions of the final three thousand years of world history. One divided the era into four ages—each symbolized by a metal, respectively gold, silver, steel, and iron; the last represents the post-Sasanian age, when religion was declining (*ZWY* 1-3). The period of iron is divided into three ages, each of a thousand years. Each millennium follows a similar pattern: an initial period in which evil forces assault the good creation with renewed vigor is followed by their repulse prior to the coming of the next saošyant, when a portion of the evil creation disappears. The victory over evil is not, therefore, a sudden event in Zoroastrianism but a protracted war, in which each side surges and falls back. Three- or seven-fold numerical patterns are common in Zoroastrian mythology.

In the first of these eras demons of the race of Aēšma, Fury, will assault Iran from the east, destroying homes, villages, and sacred fires; social life will be disrupted; affection between fathers and sons or between mothers and daughters will depart, and respect for truth will decline, so that a bird will have more reverence than a religious Iranian person. The chaos will also be cosmic; the sun and moon will not give their proper light; rain will not come at the due times; earthquakes, droughts, and famine will afflict creation. Rule will pass from Iranians to Arabs. Life will appear so horrible that, when all was revealed to Zoroaster, he prayed he might not live at this time. But a shower of stars will appear in the sky, and a righteous prince, Vahrām Varzāvand, also “the illustrious Pešōtan” (son of Zoroaster’s patron, Vištāsp), accompanied by the three great fires, will come; they will overthrow the forces of evil and restore Iran and its throne for the Good Religion; then Ōšēdar will appear.

The first saošyant, like his two successors, will be born of a virgin who has been impregnated by Zoroaster’s seed preserved in a lake in which she will bathe. When he reaches the age of thirty, the sun will stand still at the noonday position, as it had at the initial creation, for ten days and nights. He will confer with the Aməša Spəntas and bring afresh the revelation first brought by Zoroaster. The Good Creation will return to a condition nearer the ideal state; people will live more harmoniously, and part of the evil creation, the wolf species, will disappear. But although the end of evil is approaching, in



its death throes it will again hurl its forces against the divine creation. Some texts say enemies of Iran will attack and suppress the good religion, but this is probably a historicizing of the prophecy, for others say that a terrible winter, the winter of Malkūs, will afflict the world and destroy much of mankind. But good will again triumph, for the world will be repopled from Yima's Vara, and on this repopulated earth disease will not prove fatal, death will only happen through old age or murder; so Evil's greatest weapon, death, will begin to lose its power.

Then the second savior, Ōšēdarmah, will be born, at whose arrival the sun will stand still at the noonday position for twenty days, not just ten as before, and creation will flourish for six years, not just three. More evil creatures such as the snake will disappear. The ideal state of the original creation will begin to return, so people will cease eating meat and consume only vegetables and water. But there will again be an evil onslaught, as Aži Dahāka escapes from his mountain prison, perpetrating sin, devouring one third of humanity and animals, and smiting the sacred elements of fire, water, and vegetation. But the hero Keresāsp will be resurrected, and he will rid the world of this evil force, so that again good will be in the ascendancy before the birth of the third and final saōšyant—once more from the prophet's seed preserved in a lake.

With the birth of the saōšyant, more of the paradisaical state will return: disease, death, and persecution will disappear; vegetation will flourish perpetually, and people will eat only spiritual food. He will raise the dead from where they died; everyone will proceed to their final judgement, this time in the body. Following this second judgement people will proceed to heaven or hell for three days and nights to be rewarded or punished in the body, so the whole person is corrected; thus all can dwell in perfection with Ohrmazd. (Some texts imply some sinners will not be thus purged.) First, all will pass through a stream of molten metal, which will already have leveled the earth as it had been before evil's assault. It will seem like warm milk to the righteous but painful to the wicked; thus refined and purified people will receive the gift of immortality from Saošyant's priestly sacrifice of the final animal to die in the service of humanity. From the fat of the ox and the mythical White Haoma in the cosmic ocean will come the elixir of immortality. The heavenly beings and evil forces will pair off in conflict until all evil beings are eradicated. The molten metal will flow into hell, destroying it and its stench. The world will exist for eternity in the perfect state which Ohrmazd had desired from the beginning. Accounts differ concerning Ahriman's fate, some say he will be



slain, others that he will be eternally imprisoned and impotent.

Many scholars believe that Zoroastrian myths regarding angels, demons, heaven, hell, resurrection, and judgement of the dead and apocalyptic eschatology had significant influence on Jewish and Christian thought (Hinnells, 2000, pp. 29-92).

Myth and ritual. In the early twentieth century, scholars of religion formed the “Myth and Ritual School.” A notable proponent was S. H. Hooke, who wrote on Babylonian religion. One part of their theory was that myth represented the written part of ritual, or ritual was the acting out of the myth. Neither this, nor other parts of their theories, is implied by this heading. Although they pressed some theories too far, there is nevertheless an intimate link between myth and ritual. Myths commonly legitimate traditional social, cultural, and religious practices, as noted above. Another important aspect of ritual is that it activates spiritual power. There are several examples of this interplay between myth and ritual in Iranian sources. This section will look at three to illustrate a general point: Haoma; Nasu, the corpse demon; and Ātar, fire.

Haoma (q.v.; Pahl. Hōm, see Boyce, 1970 and 1975, pp. 156-62) is the Iranian form, while Soma was the corresponding Indian preservation of ancient Indo-Iranian tradition. Scholars have used Vedic material to understand the Iranian figure, because the latter is less clear. This may be mistaken, because scholars later argued that, contrary to earlier assumptions, it is often the Iranian material which preserves the more ancient picture (Benveniste and Renou). Haoma is at once a divine power, a heavenly high priest, and a plant which is pressed in the earthly ritual, the *Yasna*. Some have argued that Zoroaster repudiated Haoma (Y. 48.10), but others, e.g., Boyce, have argued that Haoma is represented in the *Gāthās* by Amərətāt (Pahl. Amurdād, q.v.). Others have suggested the prophet did not condemn Haoma, but its abuse. It is implausible that the prophet’s immediate followers would have perpetuated a tradition that the prophet had roundly condemned. Solutions two and three, therefore, are more plausible.

The main text on Haoma is Y. 9-11 (see [HŌM YAŠT](#)). It forms part of the *Yasna* ceremony, which is why it is not included among the *Yašts*. Y. 9-11 describes the plant as having a yellow stalk and growing in the high mountains. The first four men to press Haoma were given the boon of a noble son—including the fathers of Yima and Zoroaster (Y. 9.2-15). Haoma is described as the one who keeps death away, is curative, beneficent, and victorious, so Zoroaster is



depicted calling down his “intoxicating power, strength, victoriousness so that he overcomes the hostilities of all of those who are hostile” (Y. 9.16-19; Malandra, p. 153). Haoma aids women in childbirth, grants knowledge to those reading the *nasks*, and is asked to carry away enemies’ violence, “the jaundiced, dreadful, poison-spitting snake, the bloodthirsty bandit and the whore enchantress” (Y. 9.28-32). Haoma intoxicates, not with Wrath like other intoxicants, but “is accompanied by gladdening Truth” (Y. 10.8). Haoma, as heavenly priest, should be offered portions of the jaw, tongue, and left eye of each sacrificial animal so he might care for its soul. The earthly consecrated Haoma represents the mythical White Hom in the cosmic ocean which will be offered at the renovation (see above). It was the heavenly Haoma who performed as *zaotar* for Ahura Mazdā and the Aməša Spəntas. He is the yazata of plants (hence the suggested link with Amərətāt). Here is a stark contrast with much Western mythology: an earthly plant representing a profoundly abstract concept of a priestly heavenly being. Zaehner’s use of the Christian term “sacrament” to describe the rite is entirely inappropriate (1961, p. 90). The Yasna continues to be a major ritual (Modi, pp. 246-310).

Purity and impurity. There is a complex web of myths associated with purity and impurity (Boyce, 1977, pp. 92-138; 1975, pp. 294-330, and see under [CLEANSING i](#)). As at creation, Ahriman attacks the world “like a fly” spreading darkness and noxious creatures. The corpse demon, Nasu, is also depicted as a fly and descends on a corpse from the north soon after death (*Vd* 7.2-4). Nasu is destroyed by the gaze of a dog (*Šāyast nē šāyast* 2.1-4), by the recitation of the names of the Aməša Spəntas (*Yt.* 4.2-3, 8), or by the *barašnom* (q.v., and see *Vd.* 7). There is also a strong doctrine concerning animals. The beneficial creatures, especially cattle (q.v.) and the dog (q.v.), are fellow workers (*hamkārs*) with humanity in the fight against evil. The cow is respected, because it provides food, milk, clothing, and fuel (its dung). Cattle are vegetarian, giving of themselves for others. The dog embodies the Zoroastrian virtues of obedience, loyalty, and affection; it also protects people—both in ancient times on the Asian steppes and at death—for a dog is brought to see the corpse partly to protect people from the surrounding evil forces and because it detects any life. All beneficent creatures were created by Ohrmazd for a purpose—for example, the vulture to devour dead matter (*G.Bd.* 24.36).

Opposed to the beneficent creatures are the *xrafstras*, vile and venomous creatures who cause death. There are three categories: watery, earthy, and winged; but they are similar in their deadly, polluting work. They include



snakes and scorpions, the lion and the wolf species, the ant, locusts, and the ugly frog. Ahriman intended to produce these forces clandestinely, but Ohrmazd made them visible, so that people could avoid, indeed kill, them (*G. Bd.* 22-23).

Because death involves the powerful presence of evil, detailed prescriptions determine funerals and contacts with a corpse (q.v.; see also [DEATH](#); Modi, pp. 49-82). During the funeral the corpse's head should not point northwards, the home of Nasu; special prayers are offered by the bereaved to Sraoša, the soul's guardian, during its three-day meditation on its life; and after the third night, when it proceeds to judgement, other prayers are offered to the yazatas of judgement, namely Mithra, Sraoša, and Rašnu.

The sacred fire. Fire (*ātar*) is the focus of all Zoroastrian ritual. Naturally there is a web of mythology surrounding offerings to the fire (*ātaš zōhr*, q.v.). Fire protected nomads at night from attack by wolves and other animals; it cooked food; it provided warmth in the fiercely cold nights on the Iranian plateau; the ordeal by fire took various forms in ancient Iran (molten metal on the chest of the person being tested, or the accused passed between walls of fire to prove divine protection for the righteous) and is part of the judgement at the renovation, as noted above. The idea of the inner fire of the life force, and cold associated with death, was also a feature of ancient thought. Fire was an important part of Indo-Iranian thought as evidenced by *ātar*, also by Vedic Agni; indeed Greek and Roman thought suggest it was part of Indo-European mythology. There are two characteristic Zoroastrian elements. The first is the ritual fire; all rites are performed in the presence of fire, either in a temple or before the sun. The second is the connection with the Ameša Spenta, Aša (q.v.). As early as the *Yasna Hap-tanhāiti* fire is spoken of as the son of Ahura Mazda (*Y.* 36.2). There are many texts concerning fire, notably *Y.* 62.1-10 and the ancient Litany to the Fire, the *Ātaš Niyāyišn* (q.v., and see Dhalla, 1965, pp. 134-87), recited before the ritual fire from ancient to modern times. There “the son of Ahura Mazda” (st. 4 and 14) is described as “the holy, bold, good warrior,” as “full of glory, full of healing” (st. 6). Stanzas 6 and 7 depict the ritual offering to fire: “In the dwellings of men Happiness may there be unto that man, Who shall sacrifice unto Thee, With fuel, with the Barsom, With milk, with the mortar in his hand. (7) Mayest thou be provided with proper fuel! incense! [and] with proper nourishment! ... with proper up-keep! Mayest thou be maintained by one full of age! by one wise [in Religion], O Fire, son of Ahura Mazda.” Later the petitioner prays “Give unto me, O Fire, son of Ahura



Mazdā! ... well-being ... Sustenance, life in abundance, knowledge, holiness, a ready tongue, understanding for [my] soul; and afterwards wisdom” (st. 10). The fire gives blessings of cattle, an active spirit, and a joyous life (st. 16). With Vohumanah, Ātar protected the creation from the assault of Angra Mainyu (Yt. 13.77; Dk. III, 112:5). Ātār also fought with Aži Dahāka to protect the xwarrah (Yt. 19.46-50).

There are three grades of ritual fire: the *ātaš Bahrām* involves the purification and unification of sixteen fires, the total consecration taking a year; the *ātaš Adorān* unites the fires associated with the four social classes— priests, warriors, farmers, and artisans—and is the grade which burns in most modern temples. These two grades can only be tended by a priest. The third grade, the *dādgāh*, involves a simple consecration and can be burned in the home and tended by lay people (Boyce, 1977, pp. 68-91; Modi, pp. 199-230).

The mythical imagery is mostly associated with *ātaš Bahrāms*, the victorious, kingly fires which battle against the powers of darkness and are “enthroned” in a temple (of which there are only twelve in the world), with the wood being laid in the shape of a throne. When installed, it is said to be so powerful it can kill a thousand demons (*Pahlavi Vd.* 8.80). There were three great historical *ātaš Bahrāms* in ancient Iran; each was projected into the realm of mythology (related in *G.Bd.* 18.8-14). All are said to have existed from creation, and each moved freely, protecting the world (st. 8). They aided Yima during his glorious reign and will aid mighty Pešotan, who will come at the renovation to destroy evil. The best known is *ādur Gušnasp* (q.v.), a focus of royal pilgrimage and gifts in Sasanian times, when it was moved to Taḳt-e Solaymān in Azarbaijan. The second major fire in Sasanian times, *ādur Farnbāg* (q.v.) in Pārs, was associated with the priests. When Yima was sawn in two, *ādur Farnbāg* saved his xwarrah from Aži Dahāka (st. 10). The third great fire, *ādur Burzēn-Mihr* (q.v.), was associated with the lowest of the three social classes, husbandmen. It was probably a focus of particular veneration; for it, along with Vohumanah and Aša, is believed to have accompanied king Vištāspa’s spirit on its journey to see his place in heaven when he accepted the religion of Zoroaster (st. 14; see [GOŠTĀSP](#)). These myths determine much Zoroastrian devotion. In prayers fire is addressed as a being; standing before the consecrated fire, one stands in the presence of the divine, necessitating personal purity. Specific ritual sites, even the pattern for laying sandalwood in a fire, is legitimated by myth.

Myth and the prophet. Most religions which believe in a prophetic or founder figure have a complex web of myths about that figure, be that Gautama the



Buddha or Jesus the Christ. These are different from hero myths, because in relating the founding of the religion they indicate how the religion itself is understood—for example as a means of overcoming the ultimate bonds which ensnare people, such as ignorance, rebirth, or sin. What matters is not whether the myths are literally true, but their role as charters directing their followers' lives. To describe something as a myth about the prophet does not imply the prophet was a myth; it indicates a web of interpretation of the prophet's person and work. There is therefore no suggestion that the prophet did not live a historical life, be that Jesus or Zoroaster.

The myths associated with Zoroaster/Zarathuštra are fundamentally about how in the divine plan good triumphs in its battle with evil (Jackson; Mole, 1963; Boyce, 1975, pp. 277-93; Hinnells, 1971, pp. 92-97). Zoroaster believed he was part of part of Ahura Mazdā's plan, asserting he had been called and set apart "from the beginning" (Y. 44.11). He was convinced Ahura Mazdā had appeared and spoken to him in visions (Y. 45.5-6), that he had chosen and aided him (Y. 46.3; 50.5). He described himself as a savior (saošyant) who suppressed Aēšma (Y. 48. 9 and 12), as a physician of the soul (Y. 31.19), and the soul-healing judge (Y. 31:2, 44.16). He accompanies the righteous over the bridge of judgement (Y. 46.10).

The major Pahlavi texts were collected in West, 1897 and Molé, 1967 (see also Molé, 1963, pp. 271-386, 469-525, and Boyce, 1975, pp. 277-81). The main texts are: *Dk. VII*, *Dk. V*; *Pahlavi Rivāyat* 47 and *Vičirkay-i-dēnīk* (the latter two only in Molé, 1967), and in parts of *Zādsparam* (only in West, 1897). There is also the 13th-century *Zartušt-nāma*, based on the earlier texts (Rosenberg). Zoroaster and his patron also appear in the *Šāh-nāma*. Further, Zoroaster aroused interest among ancient Western writers (Bidez-Cumont, I chaps. 1-3 and II, part 1; de Jong, pp. 317-23). His fame is reflected in the considerable body of material attributed to him pseudonymously by ancient Western writers (Beck, 1991). It was asserted by many in the Roman empire that the cult of Mithras was created by Zoroaster, though some modern commentators question this (Beck, 1984; Hinnells, 1994, pp. 11-17).

In the following, emphasis is on the theological implications of the myths. Later mythology related that Zoroaster's coming had been foretold to the first created ox and to Yima. For Zoroastrians, Zoroaster was not a historical accident; he was part of the divine plan for the conquest of evil. By his teaching humanity the true nature of good and evil, it was (and is) believed, people will eventually reject evil and fight for good. His birth marked the



introduction of the last of four great eras of history—the time when evil will be defeated. Zoroaster’s *xwarrah*, his *fravaši*, and body (*tan-gohr*) passed from the heavens into the body of a young girl, Dughdov, while she was in her mother’s womb. At her birth she radiated light, and the demons spread the idea she was a sorceress, so her father sent her away. But she met, and married, Pou-rušasp. The glory, the spirit, and the body of the prophet were thus conveyed from heaven to earth through his mother. Zoroaster was not divine, but he was divinely sent. The Good Creation rejoiced at his birth, and the demons trembled, for they knew that Zoroaster could smite them. He was the only person ever to laugh at birth—appropriately in a religion which considers misery an affliction from evil—and a light shone around his home. Recognizing his threat to them, evil forces repeatedly sought to kill him; they deluded his father into thinking that the light signified he was evil. First he laid his son on firewood and tried to light it, but could not. Then he placed the baby in front of stampeding oxen, but the leading ox stood protectively over him; a similar episode followed with horses. The infant was put in the lair of a she-wolf with the thought that she would attack him; instead she protected him. Evil always seeks to destroy good, but even the most deadly assaults fail with Ohrmazd’s protection. There are stories illustrating the compassion and wisdom of the young prophet and his resolve in his battle with evil. On one occasion a priest entered his home who worshipped false gods, for which the child admonished him. The priest condemned him, but was struck dead as he left the house. Evil should be opposed wherever it is found, and good will triumph over evil.

Zoroaster was a priest and spent time meditating, until one day a transcendent figure came and led him into the presence of angels, where he was instructed in the Good Religion—the first of his eight visions. He revealed the divine Truth to people on earth because of his experience of heavenly forces. When the revelation was complete, the demons again sought to lead him astray, but in vain. He continued firm in his prayers and worship, thus being the true guide for his followers in the trials that beset them. At first his teaching was rejected, but after convincing a few people he went to king Vištāsp’s palace. The court’s learned men disputed with him for three days; but, seeing Zoroaster beginning to convince the monarch and fearing for their established position, they plotted against him. He was thrown into prison for necromancy. Then a miracle occurred: the king’s favorite horse grew ill, and its legs drew into its body so it could not move. Zoroaster offered to heal the horse on four conditions: the king should accept Zoroaster’s religion; the warrior prince



should fight for the religion; the queen should accept the religion, and, finally, the plotters' identities should be revealed. As each condition was agreed one of the horse's legs was restored until it was fully healthy again. Resolute commitment to the religion overcomes any problem. As Vištāsp accepted the religion, three archangels appeared at court, promising that the protective presence of Ahura Mazdā would ensure victory over their enemies. With the conversion of the court, the march of the religion through history began. Zoroaster went forth and made the demons, who formerly had roamed about in human form, go into underground concealment (Y. 9.15). The Good Religion overcomes the powers of evil.

The myths associated with Zoroaster circulated beyond the boundaries of Iran, and were repeated, mostly in garbled form, sometimes (e.g., Clementine's *Recognitions*) gravely misrepresenting him to bring the religion into disrepute. He was, for example, identified with Ham, the son of Noah, and was said to conjure up the stars until a presiding genie, angry at his control, destroyed "the arch magician" with fire from heaven. The first part of his name, "Zoro" was interpreted as Greek for "living," and the "aster" with the word for star, thus portraying him as "the living star," i.e., an astrologer (de Jong, 1997). But for Zoroastrians through the millenia, the example set, the revelation brought, by the divinely guided and protected prophet inspires devotion, provides the ultimate role model, reassures them in their fight against evil, and supports them in their woes. Most Zoroastrian homes proudly display an image of their glorious prophet in traditional priestly dress; he is a real presence in their daily lives.

Myth and sacred geography. It is natural that in a religion which emphasizes that the physical world is the creation of God there should be the idea of sacred geography. The land of Iran (Ērānwēz, q.v.), the land of the Aryans, is central to much mythology from creation to the renovation. The Old Persian Ahuramazdā is "god of the Aryans." Mithra surveys the whole land inhabited by Iranians (Yt. 10.13) and bestows peaceful and comfortable dwellings in Iranian countries (Yt. 10.4). It is where the first human and ox dwelt; Yima built his Vara there, and Persepolis is known as Taḵt-e Jamšid, Jamšid's throne; it is where the mythic Mt. Harā and the start of the Činvat bridge are located, where the prophet lived, and where Aži Dakāka is imprisoned (Gnoli, 1989, esp. pp. 29-70; G.Bd. 32-33). In the Vd. Ahura Mazdā tells the prophet he created it "the first and best of places." Yt. 19 refers to the "xwarrah which belongs to Iran" (st. 57, 60, 62, 63, 64). In modern Iran there are myths and



legends associated with holy places, shrines, and fires (Boyce, 1967). It is the abode of the secret race of Zoroastrian giants in the Parsi movement Ilm-i Khshnoom, started by Behramshah Shroff (q.v.) in the early twentieth century. So the land of Iran is seen as a unique, sacralized space, where some of the great mythological and theological moments of history have been enacted.

Myth and society. It is natural that myths reflect the structure of the society in which they evolved. G. Dumézil propounded a theory which has ardent supporters, and virulent opponents. Fundamentally, he argued that Indo-European mythology distinguished three strata of society representing three ‘functions’: religious and juridical sovereignty, warriors concerned with physical prowess, and the productive workers (herder-cultivators). He argued that the deities of Indo-Europeans were ordered in this tripartite manner (Duchesne-Guillemin, Littleton). Many scholars have disputed this theory, especially in explaining details of the gods and their activities—for example, Mit(h)ra (Dumézil, 1976; Thieme and Gonda in Hinnells, 1975). Many thought he saw parallels where none existed. But his broad point that patterns of mythology reflect social patterns has much to commend it. It is inevitable that myths reflect the society which generates them; for example, the warrior imagery associated with Mithra reflects the martial practices of ancient Iran, as the mythical symbolism of the ox reflects their life as herdsmen. The Zoroastrian practice of praying before the divine creations, especially fire and water, rather than in temples similarly reflects their nomadic life. The various roles of fire in Zoroastrian mythology reflect its diverse functions in ancient society—from life-protecting warmth to the judicial process. Myths are powerful precisely because they reflect the society and its values in which they are embedded. It follows that the study of mythology is important for the understanding of a society, especially its ideals, fears, and motives.

Theology and Iranian mythology. A characteristic feature of Iranian mythology is the lack of narrative. Compared with Greek, Roman, or Indian myths there are few stories about divine or demonic beings. The figure of Mithra is a good example. He rides in his chariot before the sun, he is depicted in warrior form, but his theological role is fundamentally abstract, as Contract or covenant (Gershevitch, 1970). The imagery illustrates key beliefs, but it does not involve a narrative. This is true of many figures considered in this article e.g., Haoma and xwarrah. There is a narrative concerning the conflict of good and evil, but little concerning the ‘players’ in that drama. The Aməša Spəntas are described in terms of their functions. Even in Pahlavi literature, where they are said to



sit on thrones, they remain facets of the divinenature, and their abstract ‘names’ (Good Mind, Truth, Devotion, etc.) are different from the Judeo-Christian concept of the archangels, who have personal names. Although abstract conceptions, they are also powerful spiritual forces ‘really’ present in the ritual as the priest, offering his prayers with mindful devotion in a pure setting, gazes at the physical creations which each protects and in which they are represented (milk, fire, earth, water, etc.), so they become powerfully present (Kotwal, pp. 35-44). Their abstract nature does not mean they are remote forces.

Herodotus commented on the abstract nature of Iranian mythology based on his own experience:

The erection of statues, temples, and altars is not an accepted practice among them, and anyone who does such a thing is considered a fool, because, presumably the Persian religion is not anthropomorphic like the Greek. Zeus, in their system, is the whole circle of the heavens, and they sacrifice to him from the tops of mountains. They also worship the sun, moon, and earth, fire water and winds, which are their only deities. (*Histories* I, pp. 130-31)

The myths are clearly structured. The events depicted at creation and at frašō.kərəti follow a pattern. As the earth shook at Ahriman’s initial assault, causing mountains to be thrown up, valleys opened, dislodging the sun and moon from their fixed, midday position, so these events are mirrored at the renovation. The signs of the approach of frašō.kərəti include earthquakes, the sun and moon standing still for a fixed period as each of the three saōšyants is born, and at the renovation the molten metal reduces the hills and fills the valleys, returning the earth to its original level condition. Just as humans originally neither ate nor drank but gradually began to do so, similarly at the renovation people will progressively stop eating meat, drinking milk, and eating vegetables. As chaos assaulted existence at creation, so among evil’s final assaults there will be both cosmic and social chaos. The climax will be the restoration of order as in Ohrmazd’s original creation. Unlike many branches of Indian thought, Iranian mythology has a linear concept of time—a beginning, middle, and end; nevertheless there is an element of a cyclical pattern as events at the renovation mirror events at creation.

There is also much logic in the theology of the mythology. The first judgement is in the *mēnōg* realm, for the physical body visibly remains on earth, hence the theological necessity of the resurrection so that people can be judged in the



gētīg body, for both are the creations of Ohrmazd (Shaked, chap. II). It provides a rational answer to the problem “why do the innocent (e.g., babies) suffer while evil flourishes?” For Zoroastrians, it is illogical to suggest that God can be both all-loving and all-powerful.

It is necessary to define what constitutes Good and Evil in Zoroastrianism. The Good is that which is conducive to life, order, and peace; whatever is in a pure state and not subject to the pollution of evil, i.e., which is in the state in which Ohrmazd created it. It is where *mēnōg* and *gētīg* are held in balance. Good thoughts, words, and deeds are those which are true and consistent with the divine plan for creation, embodying valor, fortitude, benevolence; it is moderation, or the Mean—the midpoint between opposing vices. The good life is one of obedience and devotion towards Ohrmazd and care for his creations.

In contrast, evil is that which is destructive of harmony and order; that which is polluted (i.e., anything associated with death and decay); the chaotic—it is anything to excess or in a state of deficiency. Evil is expressed through violence and anger. Evil actions are those which harm or pollute the divine creation; spreading falsehood rather than truth, idleness, greed, fury, and arrogance.

The myths embody basic Zoroastrian understandings of human nature and duty. The good person will expel the demons from within themselves and make their bodies the dwelling place of the divine beings. “It is possible to put Ahriman out of this world in such a way that every person, for his own part, should chase him out of his body, for Ahriman’s habitation in the world is in the bodies of men. Therefore when there is no habitation for him in the bodies of men, he is annihilated from the whole world. For as long as in this world (even) a small demon has his dwelling in a single person of men, Ahriman is in the world” (Shaked, chap. III, p. 230, on *Dk.* VI.264). Ohrmazd created humans to be his fellow workers (*hamkārs*) in the fight against evil.

There are several analyses of human nature. The most traditional one divides humans into five constituent parts (Bailey, pp. 78-119): the body which dies at death but is resurrected; the soul which is judged after death; vital spirit (the principle of life); consciousness (which dissolves at death); and the *fravaši* which forever dwells with Ohrmazd on high. The good person keeps the different parts of their being in their natural balance, but Ahriman constantly seeks to disrupt them.



The first human couple, as noted above, grew out of two leaves of a plant, which itself had grown from Gayōmard's sperm. Two major theological themes devolve from this myth. (1) In Judaism and Christianity the first woman, Eve, was carved from the rib of Adam, and consequently women were seen as theologically derivative or secondary in gender relations. In Zoroastrianism the genders emerged simultaneously and independently from the same plant. Here, as in Zoroastrianism generally, there is gender equality, e.g., regarding initiation, prayer, funerals. The sole difference relates to purity laws and menstruation. Anything leaving the body is dead matter—spittle, breath, urine, or blood. Blood while in the body is living; when it leaves the body it is dead matter and therefore polluting, be that a cut from a hand (man's or woman's) or menstruation. Dead matter is the presence of evil, hence a locus of pollution, which must not be brought into the presence of the holy, e.g., fire. The religious and social role of women during menstruation is therefore strictly regulated. She is not sinful, rather the hapless victim of evil. As Ahriman sought to destroy life at creation, so he attacks the place where life is generated—the woman's body. Precisely because she plays a major role in the generation of life, a woman is a target for evil. It would be sinful to bring pollution into the presence of the sacred, but she is not sinful because of the pollution. (2) Because humans emerged from a plant, there is a natural unity between humanity and the plant world. As fire, water, and other creations are the work of Ohrmazd, humans have a religious duty to protect and respect them; to abuse them is sinful. In his vision of heaven the Righteous Virāz saw shepherds and agriculturalists stationed in one of the highest heavens. Modern Zoroastrians commonly assert theirs is the first environmentally aware religion. Humans have a religious duty to procreate in order to increase Ohrmazd's army, though impotence is an affliction of evil, not a sin; choosing not to have children is sinful, as are celibacy and misery, because all fail to value the Good Creation. The material world is not opposed to the spiritual world, as it is in Hellenism; the physical is the manifestation, almost the fulfillment, of the spiritual, with which it should be in harmony. When Mani taught that the material world was corrupt and evil, he was in conflict with a basic Zoroastrian ideal (Shaked, chaps. II and III).

Political myths and legends. Myths and legends are commonly associated with political authority. Three main Iranian sources relate to this topic: (1) Achaemenid (q.v.) and Sasanian reliefs, inscriptions, and artifacts; (2) royal legends, mostly Sasanian, some preserved in Greek sources; (3) the epic literature, notably the *Šāh-nāma* and *Vis and Ramin*.



On royal reliefs kings were consistently portrayed as of greater size (and thereby power and status) than other humans. Ancient Iranian artifacts such as cylinder seals (q.v.) depict the kings in combat with mythical malign forces, as do reliefs on the door jambs of the throne room at Persepolis, probably reflecting adaptations of the sacral kingship common in the ancient Near East, especially Mesopotamia (Hinnells, 1971, pp. 98-109 at p. 105; Eddy). We do not know whether the tribute processions depicted at Persepolis reflect an ideology similar to those of the annual Babylonian New Year Festival, wherein the monarch re-enacted the myth of creation to revive his supernatural powers as the adopted son of God, but it seems likely that the Achaemenids took something from both the iconography and ideology of sacred kingship in the ancient Near East. Clear iconographic evidence for the Achaemenid deployment of sacral kingship is the relief of Darius at Bisotun (q.v.), which closely follows a nearby royal relief of Anubanani from the third millennium B.C.E., in the overall design of the relief, the gestures of monarch and captives. Several Sasanian reliefs continued the theme. For example, at Naqš-e Rostam Ardašir I is depicted receiving the kingship from Ohrmazd. As Ohrmazd tramples Ahriman underfoot, so the monarch—yet taller than Ohrmazd—tramples on the last Parthian monarch, Ardavān, an explicit iconographic statement that the king carries out the work of Ohrmazd on earth. The conquests and policies of Iranian monarchs were therefore legitimated by relating them in myths.

Some royal inscriptions support this hypothesis. The monarchs set their regal authority in a mythological context, stressing they were chosen, protected, and supported by Ahuramazdā (see the OPers. texts, Kent, pp. 116-57). Rebellions are mythologically explained by saying it was “the lie that made them [his opponents] rebellious” (DB 4.54). Darius proclaimed: “For this reason Ahuramazdā bore me aid, and the other gods who are, because I was not hostile, I was not a lie follower, I was not a doer of wrong. According to righteousness I conducted myself “ (DB 4.63). Other inscriptions, by emphasizing Ahuramazdā as creator, suggest he was a Zoroastrian: “A great god is Ahuramazdā, who created this earth, who created yonder sky, who created man, who created happiness for man, who made Darius king” (DNa 7). His conception of wrath as an evil spirit similarly appears Zoroastrian: “What is right, that is my desire. I am not a friend to the man who is a Lie-follower. I am not hot-tempered. What things develop in my anger, I hold firmly under control by my thinking power. I am firmly ruling over my own (impulses)” (DNb 8b). At Susa he asserted “A great god is Ahuramazdā, who makes



excellence (*frašam*) in this earth, who makes man in this earth, who makes happiness for man” (DSs 6). Xerxes similarly located his rule within mythology: “The man who has respect for that law which Ahuramazdā has established, and worships Ahuramazdā and Arta reverently, he both becomes happy while living and becomes blessed when dead” (XPh 4d). In short, the themes of Ahuramazdā as the creator of the world and happiness for humanity, making the world *fraša* (the term used for one of the duties of Saošyant), the demand for righteousness, and perception of evil as wrath and “the lie” seem Zoroastrian. Scholarly opinion is divided on whether the Achaemenid monarchs were Zoroastrians. But Zoroastrians or not, the monarchs clearly contextualized their earthly rule in the mythical cosmic battle between Truth and the lie and believed they were chosen by Ahuramazdā.

There are various legends associated with the rise to power of the Achaemenids and the Sasanians. There was significant Greek interest in Cyrus (q.v.) and his establishment of the Persian empire. The most widely quoted text is Herodotus’s *Histories* (Book 1.108-41; de Selincourt, 1954, pp. 57-71), others include Xenophon’s *Cyropaedia* (q.v.), and Ctesias’s (q.v.) *Persika*, especially books 7-11. Herodotus (q.v.) was born in the early fifth century B.C.E. in Asia Minor, so technically he lived under Persian rule, and presumably heard the legend of Cyrus’s birth from Persians (Frye, 1984 and 1976). Herodotus’s story is complex. The basic theme is that Cyrus was born of royal Median lineage; his mother Mandane was the daughter of the monarch Astyages. But the king had a dream that a vine grew from her genitals and spread over Asia, which the magi interpreted to mean that her son would take over the throne. So Astyages gave the baby to his trusted steward Harpagus with orders to kill it, to the latter’s distress. He passed the task to the king’s shepherd, Mithradates, instructing him to expose the infant in a wild place. When Mithradates’ wife heard of the order she suggested keeping the baby but exposing their child born dead that day, and so the babies were exchanged. The boy grew in strength, and while playing “Kings” one day with others, he was chosen to be king. He gave his subjects various tasks, but one refused and Cyrus ordered his arrest. The others seized him, and Cyrus whipped him savagely. When Astyages heard of this, he guessed the child was really his grandson and questioned Harpagus about the implementation of his orders. Hearing the truth he suppressed his anger and announced a feast to celebrate his grandchild’s survival, to which Harpagus and his son were invited. Prior to the banquet Astyages had Harpagus’s son killed and part of his flesh was



roasted, the rest boiled and served to Harpagus. Only when he had eaten did a servant bring a platter bearing the remains of his head, hands, and feet, and Harpagus realized his punishment. Astyages related events to the magi; they advised him that, as Cyrus had now been king, his own throne was safe. Cyrus was returned to his parents, who received their apparently lost son joyfully. When the child grew up, he was joined by the disenchanting Harpagus, and they raised an army and defeated the Medes, though Cyrus spared the life of Astyages. The important themes to note are the royal ancestry but his being raised by peasants, specifically a shepherd; the significance of dreams, indicating divine guidance or the power of fate; the eventual recognition of his royal ancestry and assumption of power. The structure of the legend has been seen as a part of Indo-European tradition (Frye, 1976, pp. 117-21).

Another important legend to illustrate the Iranian concept of kingship is the *Kār-nāmag ī Ardāsīr ī Pāpakān*, “the book of the deeds” of the first Sasanian monarch, Ardašīr I (q.v.). Ardašīr claimed divine support for his rebellion against his Parthian overlords iconographically in the Naqš-e Rostam relief as discussed above, also through political legend (Sanjana). Ardašīr was born into the family of a shepherd, Sāsān, but he descended from Darius III, the last Achaemenid monarch. In a dream the governor of Pārs, Pāpak, saw the sun shining from Sāsān’s head, lighting the world. Another night he saw Sāsān on a richly adorned white elephant with people making obeisance before him. On a third night he saw the three great fires Farnbāg, Gušnasp, and Burzēn-mihr (see above) burning in the home of Sāsān. He sought guidance from those able to interpret dreams, who advised him that either Sāsān or his offspring would take the throne. Pāpak summoned Sāsān and enquired of his descent. He elevated Sāsān and gave him his own daughter in marriage. From this union Ardašīr was born; and Pāpak, regarding him as his own son, gave him a royal education. News of his prowess reached the great king Ardavān, who summoned the youth to his palace that he might associate with the royal princes. But, as he outshone them with his skills, he aroused their jealousy, and they turned their father against him. One of the king’s favorite maidens fell in love with Ardašīr and visited him each night when the king was asleep. The monarch, yet unsuspecting, summoned astrologers to advise him on the current political situation. They foretold the rise of a new king who would kill many potentates and bring the world once more under the sway of one sovereign (Sanjana, p. 11). One astrologer declared that any male servant who left the court in the next few days would ascend to the throne. The maiden heard what was said and told Ar-dašīr. The following night, taking jewels and



weapons, she and Ardašir rode to Pārs. On learning of their disappearance, Ardavān, directed by the astrologers, led his army in pursuit. Nearing Pārs he asked passers by if they had seen the riders and was told “At the dawn of the day ... they passed like a violent wind, and a very powerful eagle was running after them” (Sanjana, p. 16). The high priest said the eagle was “the Majesty of the Kayanian sovereignty” so Ardavān soon gave up the chase. He assembled a fresh army to capture them, but Ardašir also raised an army and took his stand against Ardavān. But “as the glory of the Kayanians was with Ardašir,” he triumphed (Sanjana, p. 21). The text continues with stories of his exploits, victories, and the birth of his descendents. The significance of the legend is the claim that the Sasanians, unlike the Parthians, were true descendents of the Achaemenids and were therefore the legitimate rulers; the Sasanian rise to power was a matter of fate, and followed directives given by the religious authorities; it was written in the stars and revealed in dreams. The legend is fundamentally political propaganda, just as the relief at Naqš-e Rostam is. The location of the heavenly directed events is the area of Pārs, and the southwest of Iran, where the Achaemenids also came to power.

From these myths and legends a clear concept of kingship emerges. Yima was the role model of the ideal king and prior to his fall doubled the size of his kingdom. Even the wicked Zaḥḥāk accepted that the king was bound to give justice to his subjects. The king might rank alongside Ahuramazdā, but still he could lose the royal glory if he lied by claiming to be creator. The king’s duty was to make the world *fraša* as Ahuramazdā did cosmically. Kings were not divine by nature, unlike in Egypt, nor were they the adopted son of God as in Babylon. Iranian kings ruled at the behest of Ahuramazdā; their fate could be revealed in dreams and was written in the stars. The image of the king was of a warrior and a man of righteousness. Myths and legends were powerful political propaganda, holding up before monarch and people the ideals to which all should aspire. The fame of the Iranian monarch, especially of Cyrus, was such that it spread far and wide.

Zurvanite mythology. Thus far attention has been focused on ‘orthodox’ Zoroastrian sources and myths. However, external accounts of Zoroastrianism present a different picture. Greek and Christian accounts refer to the ultimate not as Ohrmazd but as Zurwān. Similarly the Manicheans referred to the First Man as Ahura Mazdā, whereas the Father of Greatness was Zurwān (Time). Buddhists in Sogdia used Zurwān, not Ahura Mazdā, for the equivalent of Brahma. The key texts have been collected and translated by Zaehner (1955,



pp. 419-51, with a revised account in Zaehner, 1961). There are four main sources for the central myth of Zurvanism: two Armenians, Eznik of Kolb and Elise Vardapet, and two Syrians, Theodore bar Konai and Yohannan bar Penkaye. Two central themes in Zurvanism were speculation on Time and a quest for the ultimate One behind the twins of the Gāthās. Zurwān, Infinite Time, was seen as the father of the twin spirits of good and evil. The myth is reconstructed as follows: Zurwān sacrificed for a thousand years hoping for a son, Ohrmazd, who would create the cosmos, but after so long doubts entered his mind, at which moment twins were conceived within his hermaphrodite self. He vowed the first to enter his presence would be ruler of the world. Ahriman immediately leapt from the womb and presented his detestable self to his Father, who then had to make him ruler of the world for the remaining 9,000 years of history. The second born, Ohrmazd, he made high priest, the ultimate victor in the battle and ruler of the spiritual world. The mythology, elaborated in the light of Indian and Greek philosophy, resulted in a strong sense of fatalism—Time bounded all and determined all actions.

Zaehner identified a number of ‘Zoroastrian’ texts and themes differing from orthodoxy which he put together, assuming they together constituted a single phenomenon, Zurvanite theology (1955, pp. 275-418). Key texts were parts of the *G.Bd.* (not the *Indian*), *Zādspram*, *DMx*, parts of the *Dd.*, and passages from the *Pahlavi Rivāyat*. However, only a few passages identified Zur-wān as a divinity, notably *Vd.* 19.29, referring to routes followed by the soul after judgement as “the paths created by Zurwān.” Infinite Zurwān is mentioned in *Y.* 72.10; *Vd.* 19.13 and 16, and two Zurwāns are mentioned in *Niyayišn* 1.8 (Zaehner, 1955, p. 276). Scholars have debated the history of this ‘movement’. For Boyce, the Sasanian era was mainly Zurvanite, whereas for Zaehner that was an era of conflict between Zurvanism and Zoroastrianism. For Frye (1976, pp. 47-54), Zurvanism was a school of thought within Sasanian orthopraxy. Others have argued that Zurvanism represents the ancient religion of Iran, witnessed for example in some of the Luristan bronzes (Ghirshman, pp. 51-52) against which Zoroaster rebelled. I share Shaked’s doubts whether Zurvanism was ever a single doctrinal entity reflected in all ‘unorthodox’ Iranian texts (Shaked, chap. V). External accounts of any religion must be treated with caution. Do all variants of Zoroastrian teaching originate in a single movement (an ‘ism’)? It is not clear, for example, why misogyny should be associated with a figure of Time.

Folk legends. Zoroastrian theology may have identified wizards and spells as



opposites from the holy word (see above on creation), but it is clear that in popular legend they and associated ideas of magic, charms, spells, and incantations, especially against the evil eye, were widespread. This is illustrated in the narrative of *Vis and Ramin*. It was probably the world's first romantic novel, written probably in the Parthian period. It tells of the love of the queen, Vis, for the monarch's younger brother Ramin, of their passionate affair, and unfaithfulness. The king's reactions range from fury to forgiveness as the lovers repeatedly repent. At one stage Ramin moves away and marries another, but duly leaves her and returns to his true love. The king eventually died while preparing for battle with his brother, when a boar charged through the camp, killing him. Ramin and Vis became husband and wife for eighty-three years. In this story Vis' faithful and forgiving nurse repeatedly prepares potions, utters spells against the evil eye, and makes and deploys charms to aid her mistress in her far from smooth love life. It is precisely the sort of narrative prominent in minstrel ballads sung at court and public events; it is the material of popular folklore.

Conclusion. Myths and legends are not mere fantasy, but rather stories which reflect a culture's deepest values and ideals; they emerge from, yet shape, society; they are the foundations of ritual and ideologies. It is sometimes convenient to distinguish between myth and legends and to identify types of each, but both are complex, and the function of either can change in usage. Iranian myths and legends share features found in other cultures, but they are also distinctive both in the value system they reflect and in the level of abstraction. They are not mere stories but are sources of power, both in liturgies and politics.

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