



IRAN IX. RELIGIONS IN IRAN (1) PRE-ISLAMIC (1.1) OVERVIEW

IRAN

ix. RELIGIONS IN IRAN

Religions in Iran will be divided into the following two sub-entries:

1. Iranian religions of the pre-Islamic period.

(1.1) An overview.

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1. Iranian Religions of the Pre-Islamic Period



(1.1) An Overview

Introduction. From the 2nd millennium B.C.E., when the Iranian tribes are thought to have arrived in the lands where they eventually settled, until Islam became dominant there, a remarkable number of religious traditions existed in that region. Cogent arguments have been advanced for the theory that, in the first half of the 2nd millennium B.C.E., the proto-Indo-Aryan culture, perhaps comprising an early stage of the Vedic tradition, flourished in Margiana and Bactria (the Bactria and Margiana Archeological Complex or BMAC; see Sarianidi, 1998; Parpola, 2002). Around the 15th century B.C.E., it seems, Iranian tribes appeared in that same region. These brought their own religious tradition, which probably shared its origins with that of the proto-Indo-Aryans: both go back to the common Indo-Iranian religion. It has been suggested that the origin of Zoroastrianism was the result of a clash between these two closely cognate religious traditions, which had diverged enough to lead to conflicts between the two groups (see below). Zoroastrianism was probably the first Indo-Iranian tradition that was based on worldview and belief, rather than on ethnic allegiance.

In the western regions of the Iranian lands, the Elamites still followed their own ancient religion when the Achaemenids came to power in the mid-sixth century B.C.E., while the tradition of the Urartians flourished in the northwest. It is now widely accepted that the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians, but many of their Median and Persian subjects presumably still adhered to a western Iranian descendant of the Indo-Iranian religion, whose priests were known as *magu(š)* “Magian.” In the course of time Zoroastrianism spread to many parts of western Iran. The debates and insights engendered by the introduction of a non-local tradition as the religion of the court, as well as the attitudes of the Achaemenids towards other faiths, seems profoundly to have influenced their Jewish subjects, whose tradition absorbed many elements of obviously Iranian origin. The coming of Alexander the Great (q.v.), who overthrew the Achaemenid empire in the 4th century B.C.E., and the division of the Iranian realms under the Seleucids gave rise to novel elements in Zoroastrianism in the west, and led to the emergence of various syncretistic traditions in regions farther to the east (Bactria, Sogdia, Khotan). There, Iranian traditions (including Zoroastrianism) came into close contact with the religions of the Greeks and Buddhists (Hindu influences are possible but less certain). The early Kushan rulers of the Bactrian lands (2nd century C.E.) issued coins with the names of Iranian divinities, written in Greek script. Later



the Kushans (q.v. at *iranica.com*) became indianized and promoted Buddhism (q.v.; Kreyenbroek and Wendtland, 2004). A Buddhist community existed in Khotan as early as the 2nd century C.E. Important Buddhist literatures exist in Khotanese and Sogdian.

In the early centuries of the first millennium C.E., Christianity (q.v.) and Manicheism (q.v. at *iranica.com*) reached western Iran and then spread further eastwards, giving rise to Manichean literatures in Middle Persian, Parthian, and Sogdian, and Christian texts in Middle Persian and Sogdian.

A narrower definition of “Iranian religions before Islam” includes the Indo-Iranian tradition, Zoroastrianism (including the movement of Mazdak), and the pre-Zoroastrian religion of western Iran; in what follows this article will concentrate on these traditions. (For Manicheism, which, although not an originally ‘Iranian’ religion, still played an important role in Iranian history, see below, RELIGION 1.2.) The religions of the Sogdians and the early Kushans have been too little researched to admit of a fuller discussion.

THE INDO-IRANIAN TRADITION

After the Indo-Iranians separated from the main group of Indo-Europeans, it is thought that they lived as a single people for a long time, possibly from the 4th until the 3rd millennium B.C.E., and developed a shared cultural and religious tradition; the many points of similarity between the religion of the Indian Veda and Zoroastrianism strongly suggest a long joint development before the groups separated. The Indo-Iranians worshipped the fundamental principle of Cosmic Order (OInd. *rta*, Av. *aša*, OP. *arta*, q.v.). *Aša* represents the proper way for things to happen, both in nature and in society. The tribe’s laws were based upon *Aša*, and on earth priests saw to it that these were obeyed. It seems possible that the function of one group of Indo-Iranian divinities was mainly that of guarding *Aša*.

The Indo-Iranians distinguished between two groups of divine beings. On the one hand there were the (Av.) *daēvas* (see DĒV; Ind. *devas*, a term meaning “shining one,” which was apparently used for a ‘god’ in Indo-European times; cf. Latin *deus*, Greek *theos*). These gods did not have close links with *Aša*, and acted as they pleased irrespective of the results of their behavior. Another group of divine Beings were called (Av.) *ahura* (q.v.; OInd. *asura*). It seems typical of these Beings that their names defined their essence; in other words, they incorporated what we might call abstract concepts. Thus Mithra (q.v. at



iranica.com), whose name meant “contract,” was in charge of contracts and mutual obligations. Over time the ahuras became more ‘personalized’, but their original, more or less abstract character can still be clearly discerned.

It seems likely that sessions held to welcome and befriend the gods had developed into regular rituals in Indo-Iranian times (Av. *yasna*, OInd. *yajña*). While daēvas mainly demanded offerings, it seems that the ahuras had a more reciprocal relationship with humans. Mithra helped those who honored their obligations, but in turn his power presumably increased when people obeyed him by honoring their contracts. However, the ahuras also needed offerings of food, drink and praise.

The evidence from both India and Iran suggests that the Indo-Iranian priesthood was hereditary, which ensured that children could learn to recite the sacred texts from their fathers or other relatives. Some priests only learned to recite the liturgy to the rituals, while others went on to learn the techniques of composing sacred poetry and other advanced priestly skills such as exegesis.

It is thought that the Indo-Iranians formed part of the population of the Sintashta-Arkaim culture to the east of the Ural mountains (ca. 2200–ca.1600 B.C.E.). From the Greater Ural region they moved eastwards, and at some stage the two groups drifted apart. It is assumed that both groups moved eastwards, and that the proto-Indo-Aryans moved to Margiana (the region of Mary, previously Merv, in modern Turkmenistan) and then further eastward to Bactria in the early 2nd millennium B.C.E. It has been argued that the proto-Indo-Aryans helped develop a prosperous and partly urban culture in this region (Sarianidi, 1998; Parpola, 2002). This culture probably represents the first attempt by an Indo-Iranian people at urban living, and these social development evidently led to changes in religious outlook. A new god became prominent in proto-Indo-Aryan culture: the *deva* Indra, by whom “all things have been made unstable” (*Rigveda* 2.12.4), who was not bound by the laws of Aša/Rta, demanded huge sacrifices of animals and (OInd.) *soma* (Av. *haoma*, q.v., the drink offered during the ritual), and generally represented a “might is right” mentality, rather than one honoring social harmony and tradition.

Both archeological and philological evidence has been adduced to suggest that the proto-Indo-Aryan civilization flourished until, around 1500 B.C.E., a new wave of tribes appeared in the area (Parpola, 2002, pp. 68 ff., esp. 69). It is likely that these tribes were Iranians. If this was so, two closely cognate, but in



some ways profoundly dissimilar religious traditions—one of which had developed under the influence of a newly urban civilization, while the other had served a non-sedentary group of tribes—came into renewed contact.

ZOROASTRIANISM

Zarathustra. The state of affairs that would have obtained if the above-mentioned hypotheses are correct corresponds strikingly with the conditions we find reflected in the *Gāthās* (see GATHAS), the oldest sacred texts of Zoroastrianism. The *Gāthās* are thought to have been composed by Zarathustra (Av. *Zarathuštra*, Gk. *Zoroaster*), whom Zoroastrians recognize as the founder of their religion. Zarathustra is widely held to have lived in pre-history, although some scholars (e.g., Gnoli, 2000) place him in the 6th century B.C.E. In view of such uncertainties, any claims about Zarathustra must remain speculative, but the *Gāthās* offer some information. Zarathustra calls himself a *mąθran* (Y. 32.13; 50.5, 6; 51.8), a priest who had been trained to compose sacred utterances. He evidently stood in the Indo-Iranian traditions of the (OInd.) *ṛṣi* (Av. *ərəši*, Y. 31.5). Essentially, *ṛṣi*s had visions or auditive experiences, which helped them understand and formulate reality in a more profound way. In India, over the centuries a corpus of religious insights accumulated, with each generation of *ṛṣi*s building on the insights of previous generations.

Zarathustra's utterances, however, were obviously regarded as unique, and went far beyond the early religious-scientific insights that characterize the Indian (and perhaps early Iranian) *ṛṣi* tradition. His message had clear social implications. The *Gāthās* invoke the help of Ahura Mazdā ("Lord Wisdom," MPers. Ohrmazd), because the world order has been upset by the wicked daēva-worshippers. These had no respect for animals, on which the survival of tribes depended, killing large numbers of animals as offerings to the God Indra. As Zarathustra put it: "No proper life is possible among the wicked for those who live rightly, nor for those who milk the Cow" (Y. 29.5). Zarathustra claims that existence had been destroyed by the activities of the Evil Spirit (Av. Angra Mainyu, MPers. Ahriman, q.v.) at an early stage in the world's history, and he insisted that this should not be allowed to happen again at the hands of the daēva-worshippers of his own time: "May not the deceitful one of evil doctrine destroy the world a second time" (Y. 45.1). The trained priest Zarathustra claimed the help of the forces of Good, so that he might seek to restore the world to order, making it "wonderful" (*fraša*) once more.



Possibly mirroring the social conditions of his time, Zarathustra postulated that the antithesis between the forces of Good and Evil was a central factor in the existence of the world. Evil was directly associated with the daēvas and their leader, the Evil Spirit; all that is good with Ahura Mazdā and other ahuras. In other words, an actual conflict was perceived in terms of a struggle between the forces of Good and Evil. It is expected to end with the victory of the Good through the agency of Zarathustra and his followers (Av. *saošyant* “those who will save”), aided by Ahura Mazdā and other ahurian beings. The victory of Ahura Mazdā and the forces of Good is confidently expected, because the world was created by Ahura Mazdā and therefore belongs intrinsically to him.

Perhaps continuing an existing trend of invoking abstract concepts as ahurian forces (cf. above), Zarathustra called on a number of such beings, such as Good Thought (Vohu Manah), Best Right Order (Aša Vahišta). “the Power That is to be Chosen” (Xšaθra Varya), Holy Devotion (Spəntā Ārmaiti), Harkening (Sraoša), and Recompense (Aši). In the *Gāθās* and the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti*, a prose text that must have been regarded as sacred by Zarathustra’s followers, these beings do not appear to constitute a well-defined group (Narten, 1982).

It is not clear how soon Zarathustra expected the defeat of the powers of Evil to occur, i.e., whether he expected to see the realization of this ideal in his lifetime, or expected the End of Time to come later. Possibly his views developed over time. There are clear references in the *Gāθās* to a Final Battle: Y. 44.15 speaks of a time “when the two armies that have nothing in common will clash,” and in Y. 30.9, Zarathustra prays: “Therefore, may we be the ones who shall make the world *fraša*.” At the same time, however, there are references to suggest that Zarathustra expected his contemporaries to be recompensed for their actions after death, in the Best Existence (i.e., Paradise; Av. *vahištəm ahū*; cf. NPers. *behešt*), or in a place of punishment, where there will be “weeping, a long life in darkness, foul food, (and) the word ‘woe’” (Y. 31.20).

In a world that was intrinsically good but had been tainted by evil, man’s role was key. Only if man chose the side of the Good could the will of Mazdā and the proper order of Aša prevail. The full justice of Aša, however, could not be expected while the world was still imperfect, and until the final defeat of Evil divine justice would take effect after death, offering the soul recompense for its earthly life.



Significant elements of Zoroastrian teaching that are attested in the *Gāθās* are: (1) the emphasis on Ahura Mazdā's role as the Creator of the world; (2) the notion that the present state of the world is not determined by Ahura Mazdā alone; the forces of Evil also play a role; (3) this world, therefore, is not as Mazdā wants it to be, and must be brought to a state where the powers of Good will reign unopposed; (4) the world as we know it will have an end; (5) although there is no doubt about the final outcome, the time of "Making Wonderful" (Av. *frašō.kərəti*, q.v.) depends on man's readiness to listen to God's commands; (6) the purpose of the world's existence is a moral one: to free the universe from Evil; (7) man's choice plays a key role in these events, and the individual soul will be recompensed after death, until the End of Time.

If this account of the events of Zarathustra's life—and thus of the origin of Zoroastrianism—is correct, this was the first time in the history of Indo-Iranian religions that an individual's worldview (*daēnā*; see DĒN) became the basis of a religious and social identity.

The Young Avesta. How Zarathustra's message was understood in the following centuries cannot be known with certainty. Presumably the interaction between priests and laity led to processes of simplification and systematization. The result of such processes can be found in the texts of the Young Avesta, which were transmitted freely for several centuries, and probably came to be transmitted in fixed form in Achaemenid times (559-331 B.C.E.), when the center of the religion shifted to western Iran and most priests were no longer native speakers of Avestan (Kreyenbroek, 1996).

As the new religion spread, presumably one of its most striking new teachings was that time would have an end, when cosmic justice will be unopposed in the material world, and complete perfection will obtain. As time went by since Zarathustra lived, his life and times came to be seen as ideal. Therefore, if the End of Time was to bring perfection, Zarathustra or a figure representing him could be expected to play a more dynamic role there than that of being resurrected (see below). Zoroastrianism does not teach reincarnation, however, so the legend developed that the Prophet's seed was preserved in a lake, where in the fullness of time a virgin would bathe and give birth to Zarathustra's posthumous son. This figure was known as the *Saošyant* "Savior," while in Gathic usage all believers were expected to be *saošyants* (see above).

Another iniquity which the forces of Evil inflicted upon men is death; and faith



in the complete eradication of evil apparently led to the belief that all those who had died would be physically resurrected at the End of Time. The Savior, the Resurrection, the final battle between the forces of Good and Evil, and the resulting perfect existence are all referred to in *Yt.19* (10, 89-96).

Further developments in the Zoroastrian tradition after Zarathustra's time include the classification of some of the Beings invoked in the *Gāθās* as a fixed Heptad, the *Aməša Spəntas* (q.v.) "Holy Immortals." Each member of this group had a special link with elements of Creation: (1) Spənta Mainyu/Ahura Mazdā (Holy Spirit/Lord Wisdom; linked with Man); (2) Vohu Manah (MPers. Wahman; Good Thought; cattle and beneficent animals); (3) Aša Vahišta (Ardwahišt; Best Order; fire); (4) Xšaθra Vairya (Šahrewar; The Power to be chosen; sky, metals); (5) Spəntā Ārmaiti (Spandarmad; Holy Devotion; earth); (6) Hauruuatāt (Xordād [see HORDĀD]; Wholeness; water); (7) Amərətāt (Amurdād, q.v.; Immortality; plants). Originally the Heptad included Spənta Mainyu (Holy Spirit, or Life-promoting Mentality), the active spirit representing Ahura Mazdā on earth and the beneficent counterpart to Angra Mainyu. Later the distinction between Ahura Mazdā and his Holy Spirit was no longer understood, and the two came to be regarded as identical. Thus Ahura Mazdā could be represented both as the overlord of the Heptad and as one of its members. Furthermore, pre-Zoroastrian, non-daēvic divinities who were not mentioned in the *Gāθās* but may have been worshipped by Zoroastrians even at the time of the Prophet can be seen in the Young Avesta to be worshipped within a Zoroastrian framework.

The early Iranian tradition of western Iran. We have no sources about the religion of the western Iranians which predate the Achaemenid inscriptions. However, an account of the Creation which is different from, but cognate with, the Zoroastrian cosmogony (q.v.), seems to have informed Roman Mithraism, where it is attributed to (western) Iran. It also appears to have been preserved in the cosmogonies of the Yezidis and Ahl-e Ḥaqq (q.v.) of the Kurdish regions. This strongly suggests that a deeply rooted religious tradition of Iranian but non-Zoroastrian origin existed in the western Iranian regions, and survived in some places long after most of western Iran had been Zoroastrianized.

Zoroastrianism under the Achaemenids. How and when the Zoroastrian tradition reached western Iran remains a matter of speculation. Key questions are (1) whether Mazdā is to be regarded as a specifically Zoroastrian or a common Iranian god, and (2) whether the spread of Zoroastrianism was characterized by a process of confrontation, as is often assumed, or rather one



of a gradual acceptance, possibly because its teachings offered a worldview that was more in harmony with the intellectual development of the times.

The use of abstract nouns like *mazdā* “wisdom” as names of divinities is typical of the *Gāthās*, but the practice evidently continues an older tradition of giving abstract-sounding names to ahuras (see above). The theory that a divinity **medhā* was worshipped in Indo-Iranian times is not supported by evidence. Nor can the occurrence of nouns deriving from the name Ahura Mazda in later Iranian cultures be taken as evidence for the existence of a common Iranian Mazda cult in pre-Zoroastrian times.

If the concept of Ahura Mazda “Lord Wisdom” was of Zoroastrian origin, the occurrence of *mazdā* names in Akkadian sources from the 8th or 7th century B.C.E. onwards indicates that the Zoroastrian tradition was present in western Iran well before the Achaemenid period. It was under the Achaemenids, however, that the faith established itself as a major element in the western Iranian religious landscape. The Achaemenid period was a crucial one in the history of Zoroastrianism: this religion, which until then had presumably served villages and small communities, came to be cast in the role of an imperial faith in a land far from its country of origin. Many of the new demands on this tradition must have been unknown and given rise to new beliefs, traditions, and institutions. These evidently came to be accepted as fully Zoroastrian. In other words, Zoroastrianism acquired a new form at this time, which later informed the religion we know from the Pahlavi Books.

As Zoroastrianism is a credal faith, it has been assumed that its relations with other religions must have been as confrontational as those of early Christianity and Islam. However, the Achaemenids are famous for their tolerance towards ‘foreign’ religions. Interactions between Achaemenid authorities and the Jews indicate that the state typically sought common ground—referring to “the God of Heaven” (e.g., Ezra 1:2) a term acceptable to both religions—rather than confrontation. We have no evidence of conflicts between Zoroastrians and other inhabitants of the Achaemenid heartlands; the well-known reference to the destruction of a place where daēvas were worshipped, in XPh 35-41, is strangely unspecific and may merely aim to show that Xerxes was an observant Zoroastrian. It seems likely, therefore, that the Zoroastrian tradition—the first Iranian religion that was based on belief and could thus accept followers of diverse ethnic origins—had co-existed with local traditions for some time when it was accepted by the Achaemenids. As far as ritual and observance was concerned, Zoroastrianism and the local western



Iranian tradition(s) probably had much in common, a notable difference being that the Zoroastrian liturgy was recited in Avestan while the traditional local priesthood presumably recited in a western Iranian tongue.

A striking feature of the Achaemenid inscriptions is that Zoroastrian terms and concepts are present there, but some of these were understood in a way that does not fully correspond to that found in the Avesta. The use of the word *artāvan* “righteous” for the blessed dead (XPh 48, 55) is a case in point; in the Avesta the term refers primarily to one’s behavior in this life. Another instance is the use of OPers. *drauga* with a strong connotation of “lying, speaking untruth,” which is not a prominent aspect of the Avestan concept *drug*. In the inscriptions of Darius, the *topos* of the rebel who betrays his wicked nature by lying about his name or status occurs too frequently to be fortuitous, or to be based on historical truth (DB, *passim*, esp. DB 4.2-31). All this suggests that key Avestan concepts formed part of Achaemenid discourse on religion, but that the Avestan tradition had not yet been fully assimilated by the western Iranians. This impression is strengthened by an imprecation in DB 4.78, 80, where it is said: “If thou shalt behold these inscriptions and these sculptures and shalt destroy them . . . may Ahuramazdā be a smiter (*jata*) to the . . . and what thou shalt do, that for thee may Ahuramazdā utterly destroy.” A direct association of Ahura Mazda with destructive acts appears to be unheard of either in the Avesta or in the Pahlavi Books.

An essential consideration for understanding the spread of Zoroastrianism is the key role of orthopraxy in determining religious identity. Although the novel and original worldview of Zoroastrianism may have been what attracted people to this tradition, being a Zoroastrian consisted largely in taking part in the rituals and observances of that community. The Zoroastrian and other Iranian ritual traditions probably had several elements in common, e.g., a Haoma cult, animal sacrifice, and food offerings.

These points may help us explain the Achaemenid use of the priestly title **ātravaxš* (written *d.ha-tar-ma-ak-šá* in the Elamite tablets of Persepolis), which is probably of Avestan origin. While Av. *ātrəvaxš* denotes one of the priests who officiate at the ritual, however, the term **ātravaxš* was used in western Iran for a priest who had both ritual and administrative duties (as priests often did under the Sasanians). In a number of regions the **ātravaxš* plays a role in the organization of rituals that were sponsored by the state; elsewhere the same tasks devolved on Magians (*maguš*), and in some cases on priests called *šatin*. (The latter title generally denotes priests of the Elamite



religion, but some šatin have Zoroastrian names, suggesting that such distinctions were not always clear-cut in Achaemenid times.) In a religious landscape with three traditions we thus have references to three main priestly titles: the šatin, originally representing the Elamite religion; the western Iranian maguš; and the *ātravaxš. Possibly, what distinguished the *ātravaxš from the traditional maguš was his ability to perform proper Zoroastrian rituals, with an Avestan liturgy. The term *ātravaxš may then originally have denoted a Zoroastrian priest of eastern Iranian origin who could serve the nascent Zoroastrian communities because of his competence in Avestan. However, given the royal patronage of presumably Zoroastrian ceremonies and the resulting increasing need for priests who could pray in Avestan, some Magi evidently began to memorize Avestan texts, so that the original distinction between the two groups eventually disappeared. The continued use of the title *hērbed* (from Av. *aēθrapaiti* “priestly teacher”), while all other later priestly titles are of western Iranian origin, suggests that the task of teaching Avestan texts continued in the hands of families with an eastern Iranian connection for some time (Kreyenbroek, 1996).

In this non-literate tradition, religious teaching was presumably more profoundly influenced by questions asked by the laity than in scriptural religions. New elements could therefore be accepted more easily. One such element may have been the reverence for Time (Zurvān) as a first principle. In some circles the belief arose that the original divine Entity was Zurvān, who sacrificed to have a son. Because of one moment of doubt, the wicked Ahriman came into existence, while the good Ohrmazd originated from the sacrifice. Zurvān divided the history of the world up into successive periods, during which the Spirits would alternately rule the world. The implication of this, viz. that the world’s history had essentially been pre-ordained rather than left to Man to determine, may not have had an immediate impact on the Zoroastrian worldview, but eventually made itself felt.

The Achaemenid inscriptions suggest that state ideology claimed that the Persians were victorious because of the Achaemenids’ righteousness and worship of Ahuramazdā. When the Achaemenids were defeated by Alexander the Great, different explanations for the course of world history needed to be found. This need was apparently fulfilled by the concept that, in essence, the history of the world had been predestined by a higher power. These teachings probably became very popular, and led to the development of an apocalyptic tradition that was to influence surrounding cultures.



Zoroastrianism under the Sasanians. We know remarkably little about the history of Zoroastrianism during the period beginning with Alexander and ending with the rise of the Sasanians in 226 C.E. The early Sasanians clearly depended on the support and propaganda of the Zoroastrian priesthood. They presented themselves as pious kings who would restore Zoroastrianism to its former status and purity. This dependency helped the priesthood acquire an unusually high status in the Sasanian empire. A powerful, organized ‘Church’ developed, based upon the idea of a single version of Zoroastrianism, which was promoted by the High Priest Kirdēr. It was supported by a network of fire temples, and led by a hierarchy of administrative priests. The latter ranged from the *Mōbedān Mōbed* and *Mōyān Handarzbed*, both of whom resided at court, via the *Rad* and *Mōbed* (titles that were to become almost synonymous, denoting the leader of the Church organization of a province or district), to the *dādwar* “arbiter,” who was in charge of religious decisions at the local level (*Zādsparam* 23.5; Gignoux, 1980). Furthermore, there were the *mōy* or parish priests. The tasks of administrative priests included the supervision of the considerable possessions of the Church and various judicial functions, ranging from penal law to conveyancing property and approving wills.

Besides this administrative hierarchy, there was a hierarchy of priests based upon religious knowledge and wisdom. This was headed by the *hērbed* “teacher,” who had studied the Middle Persian *Zand* (see below), and could therefore interpret the religion. Those who could only recite the Avestan liturgy and perform ritual (as well as genuine priestly students) were called *hāwišt* “student.” All Zoroastrians needed to recognize a high-ranking religious authority as their ‘spiritual director’ (*dastwar*, comparable to the Shi‘ite *marja’ al-taqlid*).

In the early Sasanian period the religious tradition was still largely oral. Priests no longer had an adequate active or passive knowledge of Avestan, and a system of word-for-word translation had been devised, which was simple enough to be memorized along with the Avestan original. In time, this translation (known as *Zand*) came to include explanatory comments by great teachers, and texts which were felt to be authoritative even if no Avestan original was known to exist (see EXEGESIS). In this way, knowledge of non-Iranian origin could be incorporated into the religious tradition.

In the course of the Sasanian period, however, the need was felt to find a Zoroastrian counterpart to Manichean and Christian scriptures, and a script was developed which could render all sounds of Avestan. The process of



committing the extant Avestan text to writing must have been an enormous task, not least because of differences in pronunciation between the various regional priesthoods. That the concept of a ‘holy book’ was a novel one for Sasanian Zoroastrians is suggested by the fact that the term *abestāg* “Avesta” has been shown to mean “testament, last will” (Sundermann, 2001). It was evidently borrowed from the Christian tradition, because no indigenous title for a holy book (nor a corresponding concept) had existed until then. According to the *Epistles of Manūšcihr* 1.4.15-16 (see Kreyenbroek, 1994, p. 10), at a Council of Kōsrow I (r. 531-78 C.E.), the Mōbedān Mōbed Wehšāhbuhr made public the 21 books (*nask*) of the Avesta.

Even when a sacred book existed, however, religious knowledge continued to be handed down orally in priestly lineages. Until post-Sasanian times students of one such lineage therefore had no means of comparing teachings or exchanging information with others. A variety of teachings must therefore have been in circulation, each of which could be developed by *hērbeds* in response to external factors.

Mazdakism. This state of affairs probably played a role in the origin of the Mazdakite movement, which flourished under Kawād I (ruled intermittently 488-531). Our extant sources on the subject represent attempts by the victorious anti-Mazdakites to demonize Mazdak, so that little is known with certainty. Mazdak, son of Bāmdād, had an Iranian name, and was welcomed at Kawād’s court, an honor unlikely to be accorded to non-Zoroastrian Iranians. According to al-Mas‘udi, Mazdak was an “interpreter of the Book of Zoroaster, the Avesta.” His followers were regarded as the quintessential *zendiq*, i.e., those who rely on the *Zand* or interpretation rather than on traditional priestly authority (see Yarshater, 1983, p. 997). It seems likely, moreover, that he transmitted, and elaborated on the views of an earlier religious teacher, possibly named Zardušt Khorragān (Yarshater, 1983, p. 1018), whom even the extant sources do not call a heretic or infidel. Mazdak appears to have used light symbolism to illustrate a message of brotherly love, social justice, and perhaps a form of emancipation of women. The image we gain from all this is consistent with that of a Zoroastrian *herbed* interpreting the religion on the basis of the *Zand*, whom circumstances caused to emphasize the importance of righteousness (Aša) in the form of social justice. With the exception of the (improbable) charges of advocating the common possession of goods and women—which is unlikely to have been met with the widespread positive response that was accorded to Mazdak—these ideals are found in mainstream



Zoroastrian teaching, although surviving Manichean ideas may also have been influential (see below). There are indications that this movement came at a time of economic hardship and quickly became popular both at court and among the people. A social revolution ensued, which was initially supported by Kawād I but provoked hostility among certain parts of the establishment, led by his son and future successor Kōsrow I. In spite of this, the movement could not be suppressed for at least forty years, which seems to illustrate its widespread acceptance. Mazdak and his followers were eventually killed in 528 C.E.

As a result of Mazdak's movement, Kōsrow I promoted the power of the priesthood at the cost of certain freedoms of the laity. He called a council of priests and demanded that the laity should be taught Avestan prayers only, and not be admitted to courses on exegesis (*Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 2.1-4). In other words, he forbade lay participation in discussions on the interpretation of religious teaching (*zand*). This is said to be a result of Mazdak's revolution, which would have been pointless unless Mazdak was perceived as a Zoroastrian *hērbēd* rather than a heretic. It also suggests that such teachings were traditionally attended by many laymen and that religious messages could spread rapidly throughout Iran.

In the later tradition, strands of different discourses about Mazdak can be distinguished. Ferdowsi's account appears to be based at least partly on popular tradition. He begins by describing Mazdak's mission against a background of social misery and hunger, stressing his aim of achieving social justice. However, Kōsrow's hostility to Mazdak prompts him to seek the advice of other priests, who condemn Mazdak's teachings as contrary to Zoroastrianism. This leads to Mazdak's downfall—the voice of reason and reform, it seems, having lost to that of authority and tradition. The positive description of Mazdak in this account cannot go back to an official Sasanian version of events and is probably based on popular tradition.

Another important account of Mazdakism is found in Shahrestāni's *Ketāb al-melal wa'l-nehāl*. This work claims authority from Abu 'Isā ebn al-Warrāq, who was "originally a Magian and was familiar with the teachings of (these) people" (Haarbrücker, 1969, p. 285). Shahrestāni relies heavily on the same informant for his account of Manicheism. Shahrestāni states, on the authority of Ebn-al-Warrāq, that Mazdakism had much in common with Manicheism, that it was a dualistic faith asserting the antagonism between Light and Darkness. The former acts wisely and has free choice, while Darkness merely



“blunders.” The world of Mixture came into being by coincidence, and so will the End of Time. Mazdak forbade hate and strife, and taught that these were mostly caused by women and possessions. These he therefore allowed to be freely enjoyed by all, like water and pasture. He taught that there are three elements: Water, Fire, and Earth. From their intermingling arose the Manager of Good and the Manager of Evil. The Supreme Being (who is above the Managers) is seated on this throne above, as Kōsrow is on his throne on earth. Four Powers stand before him: Discernment, Understanding, Preservation, and Joy, just as four officials stand before the King. These four powers direct the world, with the help of seven Viziers, who “act within” twelve spiritual forces. When the four, seven, and twelve come together in a person, he becomes ‘divine’ and is exempt from religious duties. The Supreme Being rules by means of the letters which form the Highest Name. Those who understand some of this have found the key to the Great Secret, while others remain in blindness and ignorance.

A central question here is how much Ebn-al-Warrāq’s mental map was colored by Manicheism or gnosticism generally, and to what extent his account reflects original Mazdakism rather than developments in later movements. The “blundering” of evil is reminiscent of the Zoroastrian Ahriman’s characteristic *pas-dānišnih* (after-knowledge). The seven (planets) and twelve (constellations) occur frequently in later Zoroastrian sources, which occasionally mention only four of the seven Aməša Spəntas. The reference to letters is neither characteristic of Manicheism nor Zoroastrianism, whereas Joy seems very un-Manichean. To what extent Mazdakism can be identified with later movements such as the Khurramdiniyya (see Yarshater, 1983) remains a matter of debate.

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