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T&T Clark Handbook of
**SUFFERING AND
THE PROBLEM OF EVIL**

Edited by Matthias Grebe & Johannes Grössl



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Zoroastrian Views on Suffering and Death

ALMUT HINTZE

The presence of Evil in the world in the face of a wholly good God constitutes a major theme in Zoroastrianism, as it does in many other religions. The problem of theodicy is here resolved by the view that Evil is eternal and uncreated and exists separately from God, and that it has come into the world created by God from outside as an intruder and destructive enemy. It is the ultimate source of all destructive actions, suffering, and death in the world. At the end of time, however, Evil will be forced out of the world and compelled to retreat powerless to the place where it had initially come from. Evil is thus a major player in the Zoroastrian cosmic drama.

SOURCES

The main literary sources for Zoroastrian teachings are the Avesta and the Middle Persian (or: Pahlavi) literature.¹ The Avesta comprises the sacred texts of the Zoroastrians, the oldest of which presumably date from around the mid-second millennium BCE. Transmitted in the oral tradition, and from c. 600 CE onwards alongside a written one, these texts include seventeen hymns (grouped into five Gathas “songs”) attributed to Zarathushtra, the eponymous instigator of the Mazdā-worshipping religion. These and the “Worship in Seven Sections” (Yasna Haptanghāiti) form the Old Avesta, the oldest linguistic witness of any Iranian language. The cultural setting of the Old Avesta points to the Andronovo pastoralist civilization of present-day Kazakhstan in the Bronze Age period, prior to the southward migration of Iranian tribes into Southern Central Asia.²

Although the Old Avestan texts became fixed in the mid-second millennium BCE and were from then on learned by rote from generation to generation to be recited in the rituals verbatim as petrified texts, the priestly practice of oral composition in performance

¹See also Almut Hintze, “Avestan Literature”, in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran. Companion Volume 1 to A History of Persian Literature*, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick, Maria Macuch, and Ehsan Yarshater (London: Tauris, 2008); Maria Macuch, “Pahlavi Literature”, in *The Literature of Pre-Islamic Iran. Companion Volume 1 to A History of Persian Literature*, ed. Ronald E. Emmerick, Maria Macuch, and Ehsan Yarshater (London: Tauris, 2008), 116–96.

²See Frantz Grenet, “Zarathustra’s Time and Homeland: Geographical Perspectives”, in *The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism*, ed. Michael Stausberg and Yuhana S. D. Vevaina with the assistance of Anna Tessmann (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 22.

also continued in the following centuries up to *c.* 400 BCE, in the more recent forms of the Middle and Young Avestan language.³ The surviving texts produced during that long period of time include praises of Ahura Mazda's creations (Yasna, Visperad), purity laws (Vidēvdād), and hymns to individual divine beings (Yašts). The various divine beings, including the god Mithra, are all presented as Ahura Mazda's creations, while the purity laws, as well as the entire religion, are prescribed by Ahura Mazda himself and communicated by him to Zarathushtra. Rooted in the pre-historic Indo-Iranian tradition, a complex system of Avestan language rituals was further developed during the first-half of the first millennium BCE. One of them is the Yasna (abbr.: Y), or "worship, sacrifice". Consisting of seventy-two chapters, the Old Avestan texts form its middle part, and these are embedded in Middle and Young Avestan recitations. The Yasna in turn forms the basis of a festive, and longer version, called Visperad (abbr.: Vr) "all masters", and the latter is the base text of an even longer ritual, the Vidēvdād ceremony, in which all twenty-two chapters of the Vidēvdād (abbr.: V), "the law to keep away the demons", are intercalated into the Visperad at specific points. Many of the Pahlavi texts are based on Avestan traditions. These include the *Būndahišn* "Primal Creation", a Middle Persian text derived from earlier Avestan traditions and particularly important for Zoroastrian cosmology. Much of the surviving Pahlavi literature was developed into the form in which it has come down to us today in the ninth and tenth centuries CE at a time when Iran was already under Arab Muslim rule.

CREATION

The Avestan name of the principal deity of the Zoroastrians is Ahura Mazda, "Wise Lord", Ohrmazd in Middle Persian. He is the source of all good, beneficent beings. The Avestan name of Evil is Angra Mainyu, "Destructive Force", Ahriman in Middle Persian. All suffering and death in the world ultimately come from that Destructive Force. In the Avesta, Evil is not directly opposed to Ahura Mazda but is the symmetrical opposite of Spenta Mainyu, which is Ahura Mazda's creative, life-giving force. In the Younger Avesta, Spenta Mainyu is at times an epithet of Ahura Mazda, and the conceptual merger of the two names results in a direct opposition between Ohrmazd and Ahriman in the Pahlavi texts.⁴ But Angra Mainyu/Ahriman, although uncreated and eternal, is not perceived as a god but as the dark Destructive Force which counteracts the works of the one god, Ahura Mazda/ Ohrmazd. Ahura Mazda himself is visible in light, especially in the ritual fire during a ceremony, where light is said to be the most beautiful of his forms.⁵

Spenta Mainyu represents Ahura Mazda's creative ability by which the god brings forth creation in two forms: spiritual (Av. *mainiiauuu-*, Pahl. *mēnōy*), which is invisible and intangible, and material (Av. *gaēθiia-*, Pahl. *gētīy*), which is visible and tangible. These

³See Prods Oktor Skjærvø, "Old Iranian", in *The Iranian Languages*, ed. Gernot Windfuhr (London: Routledge, 2009), 44f.

⁴See Shaul Shaked, "Some notes on Ahreman, the Evil Spirit, and His Creation", in *Studies in Mysticism and Religion presented to Gershom G. Scholem on His Seventieth Birthday by Pupils, Colleagues and Friends*, ed. Ephraim E. Urbach, R. J. Zwi Werblowsky, and Chaim Wirszubski (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, 1967), 233f.

⁵See Almut Hintze, *A Zoroastrian Liturgy. The Worship in Seven Chapters (Yasna 35–41)* (Iranica 12; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 2007), 147–54.

two types of existence are referred to in Avestan as *uba- ahu-* (both existences).⁶ The *Būndahišn* states that Ohrmazd brought forth the spiritual creations out of the essence of his own light.⁷ The beneficent spiritual world descends directly from Ahura Mazda, and it is wholly good and perfect like himself. Thus, in the Gathas Ahura Mazda is described as the “father” not only of the “Life-giving Force” (Spenta Mainyu Y 47.3) but also of other spiritual qualities, such as “Order, Truth” (*aša-* Y 44.3, 47.2), “Good Thought” (*vohu- manah-* Y 31.8, 45.4), and “Right-mindedness” (*ārmaiti-* Y 45.4). All of them are seen as his spiritual offspring, and the relationship between them is described in kinship terms. Likewise, in Young Avestan texts Ahura Mazda is the “father” of the “Life-giving Immortals” (*aməša- spənta-*) in Yašt (abbr.: Yt) 19.16; “Reward” (*aši-*) is the “sister” (*xʷanhar-*) of the “Mazdā-worshipping Vision” (*daēnā- mādaiiasni-*); and “Hearkening” (*sraōša-*), “Justice” (*rašnu-*), and “Contract” (*miθra-*) are her “brothers” (*brātar-*, Yt 17.16).

Collectively referred to as “Life-giving Immortals” (*aməša- spənta-*), the spiritual creations carry within them the potential to become manifest in material form.⁸ It is out of his spiritual creations that Ahura Mazda brings forth the material world. He does so in two stages. First, he produces the material world in spiritual form, and out of this he then fashions the material world in material form.⁹ The spiritual creations come first, and they form the root and base of the material ones. As John Hinnells put it, the material creation is not “the opposite of the spiritual, as in many religions, but rather the embodiment of the spiritual”.¹⁰ Together the spiritual and the material creations form Ahura Mazda’s creation. The close link between the two creations emerges, for example, from the following Avestan passage:

(The Life-Giving Immortals), who are the creators and formers, the fashioners and guardians, the protectors and watchers of these creatures of Ahura Mazda. (Yt 19.18)¹¹

The relationship between the spiritual and material creations is so close that in the Pahlavi literature they are systematically allocated to each other, each spiritual creation being closely associated with a material one, a system which is also traceable, although less systematically, in the Avesta.¹² For example, “Good Thought” (*vohu- manah-*) is the guardian of the animal, “Right-mindedness” (*ārmaiti-*) is associated with the earth, “Truth” (*aša-*) with the fire, and Ahura Mazda and Spenta Mainyu with the righteous human being.

⁶See also Johanna Narten, *Der Yasna Haptanbāiti* (Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1986), 290–5; Hintze, *A Zoroastrian Liturgy*, 73.

⁷See Almut Hintze, “Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way”, *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* (Third Series) 24, no. 2 (2014): 225–49, 231f.

⁸*Ibid.*, 243f.

⁹See also Shaul Shaked, “The Notions of *mēnōg* and *gētīg* in the Pahlavi Texts and Their Relation to Eschatology”, *Acta Orientalia* 33 (1971): 59–107, 65f.; Almut Hintze, “The Cow that Came from the Moon. The Avestan expression *māh- gaociθra-*”, in *Iranian and Zoroastrian Studies in Honor of Profs Oktor Skjærvø* (BAI 19; 2005; 2009), ed. Carol Altman Bromberg, Nicholas Sims-Williams, and Ursula Sims-Williams, 59–61; Hintze, “Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way”, 234–9.

¹⁰See John R. Hinnells, “Health and Suffering in Zoroastrianism”, in *Religion, Health and Suffering*, ed. John R. Hinnells and Roy Porter (London: Kegan Paul International, 1999), 2.

¹¹Almut Hintze, *Zamyād Yašt. Introduction, Avestan Text, Translation, Glossary* (Iranische Texte 7; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1994), 17.

¹²See also Johanna Narten, *Die Aməša Spəntas im Avesta* (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1982), 103–47; Mary Boyce, “Aməša Spənta”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, vol. I, fasc. 9 (1989): 933–6.

In contrast to Ahura Mazdā, the Destructive Force (Angra Mainyu) has darkness as his own essence, and from this darkness, he produced his Evil spiritual creation.¹³ This includes symmetrical opposites of Ahura Mazdā's good spiritual creation, in particular the "lie" (Av. *druj-*), "bad thought" (Av. *aka-manah-*), and "arrogance" (Av. *tarēmaiti-*). In contrast with Ahura Mazdā's spiritual creations, however, those of Angra Mainyu are incapable of generating a material world because they can only be destructive.¹⁴ Thus, Evil *per se* exists only on the spiritual plane, but not on the material one. There is thus an imbalance in the religious system of Good and Evil of Zoroastrianism both with regard to the concept of God and of Evil and with regard to their respective creations. God, that is Ahura Mazdā, is the supreme deity, and he has no negative counterpart. His creative force, Spenta Mainyu, however, does have one, since it is opposed by the Destructive Force, Angra Mainyu. Ahura Mazdā produces two types of creation, spiritual and material, but Angra Mainyu has only one, which is a spiritual output.¹⁵

A distinctive characteristic of the material world created by Ahura Mazdā is that it was made wholly good and perfect, just like the spiritual world. The pro-cosmic view of the world has been rightly described as almost a unique feature of Zoroastrianism, one which sets it apart from many other religious and philosophical traditions. Zoroastrianism is characterized by a pro-cosmic duality of the spiritual and the material, combined with a dualism of Good and Evil and a monotheism which differs from that of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam¹⁶ in so far as Evil is not immanent in God's creation but comes into it from outside.

THE INTRUSION OF EVIL INTO THE MATERIAL WORLD CREATED BY GOD

In Zoroastrianism, suffering and death are not seen as natural, integral parts of life because Ahura Mazdā had created the world without them. The existence of suffering and death in the world is the direct result of the presence of Evil in the material world created by Ahura Mazdā. Bodily ailments and diseases, decay and death are products of Evil. They are seen as unnatural and in need of being resisted, fought against, and removed.

Zoroastrian cosmology ascribes the presence of Evil in the world to a particular event. This was the "Attack" (Pahl. *ēbgat*) of Evil on the material world following the creation of the material world by Ahura Mazdā.¹⁷ Evil intruded into the cosmos from outside, bringing death and destruction. It polluted the water and the earth, and killed the one exemplar of plant, animal, and human being that Ahura Mazdā had created. However, since Ahura Mazdā had made the material creation first in a spiritual state and then in a material state, he was able to take the immortal blueprint (Pahl. *ēwēnag*) of each of his material creations which Evil had polluted or killed, purify it in the heavenly spheres

¹³See Domenico Agostini and Samuel Thrope, *The Bundahišn. The Zoroastrian Book of Creation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2020), 9.

¹⁴See Antonio Panaino, "The 'Mental' Dimension of Evil in the Mazdean Perspective", *Lumina. Rivista di Linguistica storica e di Letteratura comparata* 4, no. 1–2 (2020): 45–78, 58–60.

¹⁵See Shaked, "Some notes on Ahreman", 228.

¹⁶See Alan V. Williams, "The Continuum of 'Sacred Language' From High to Low Speech in the Middle Iranian (Pahlavi) Zoroastrian Tradition", in *Religion, Language, and Power*, ed. Nile Green and Mary Searle-Chatterjee (New York: Routledge, 2008): 123–42, 132–4, and 141 n. 28.

¹⁷See Agostini and Thrope, *The Zoroastrian Book of Creation*, 27–31.

inaccessible to Evil, and then reinsert them all into the world as new creations, but this time in multiplicity: 1 human couple, male and female, and 282 species of animals.¹⁸ The products of this second round of material creation have been living ever since in a world afflicted by Evil, and all suffering and death in the world are attributed to the presence of Evil in it.

In addition, however, Evil also operates on the spiritual plane, and here it is most powerful because it has its own spiritual products at its disposal. One of the major agents of Evil is the lie (Av. *druj*, Pahl. *druž*). On the spiritual plane, the one creation most under attack by Evil is the human being. Evil constantly tries to enter a person's mind with spiritual forces such as the lie, bad thought, arrogance, greed, and debauchery. As soon as a person admits these negative forces into his or her mind, the good forces become eclipsed by the negative ones, and the person becomes an agent of Angra Mainyu. He or she promotes Angra Mainyu's agenda of destroying Ahura Mazda's material world by practicing the lie, bad thought, arrogance, greed, or any other destructive spiritual activity. It is worth noting here that this process applies to both men and women. The Avesta is very explicit about the equality of both men and women as moral agents; members of both genders are equally called to practice the Mazda-worshipping religion and to reject Evil.¹⁹

EVIL AS THE SOURCE OF SUFFERING AND DEATH

In Zoroastrianism, suffering is by no means seen as being confined to human beings. The whole of the material world is affected by Evil's actions whenever the earth, water, and air are polluted, whenever plants dry up and wither, and whenever animals and human beings suffer from old age and diseases and die. The theme of the suffering of the animal creation at the hand of deceitful human beings, who subject it to "violence" (Avestan *aēšma-*), dominates one of the first hymns of the Gathas, Yasna 29. Here the cow laments to the divine beings, that is, Ahura Mazda and his spiritual offspring, and appeals for a herdsman to look after her (all translations of texts quoted in this chapter are by the author unless otherwise indicated):

To you the soul of the cow lamented: "For whom did you shape me? Who fashioned me?

Wrath and force, cruelty, bondage and might hold me fettered.

I have no herdsman other than you. Now appear to me with good pasturage!" (Yasna 29.1)

She is then joined in her plight by Zarathushtra (most probably the "I" of the Gathas), who lines up with the animal, and both of them implore the deity:

With hands outstretched (and) with intensity, my soul and that of the milch cow were endearing ourselves to the Lord, as the two of us expose the Wise One to our questions:

¹⁸See Hintze, "The Cow that Came from the Moon", 61.

¹⁹See Leon Goldman, "Women ii. In the Avesta", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, December 14, 2012, <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/women-ii-avesta>.

“Neither for the right-living one nor for the cattle-breeder (is there) any survival among the deceitful ones!” (Yasna 29.5)

The reference to the “deceitful ones” entails a life of the righteous among people who have embraced the destructive spiritual forces of Angra Mainyu in their minds. Both the animal and the human being are in need of support. The cow’s request is met when Zarathushtra is appointed as her caretaker. However, being aware that Zarathushtra is just as needy as herself, the cow is unhappy with this appointment:

But then the soul of the cow lamented: “I, who end up with a weak one to endure, the voice of an unheroic man, whom I wish were one who could rule through strength!”
When will there ever be the one who will give her hands-on help? (Yasna 29.9)

But then Zarathushtra has the prospect of being strengthened when he receives the help of the Wise Lord, Ahura Mazdā, and as a result, he will be able to provide “good dwellings and peace” to the animal:

To these ones here you, O Lord, give strength through righteousness and, through good thought, (grant) that rule by which he can provide good dwellings and peace! Of this I, indeed, have recognized you, O Wise One, as the first provider. (Yasna 29.10)

The theme of providing “peace and pasture” to the animal is the main commitment of the worshipers in the Yasna Haptanghāiti, alongside the worship of Ahura Mazdā.²⁰ It is the direct answer to the crude violence (*aēšma-*), which destroys the dwellings and homesteads of the Mazdā-worshippers. In the hymn to Mithra, the divine being who personifies “contract” and who punishes those who break it, the plight of truthful people and of the animal is described as follows:

The settlements, blood-stained, are ravaged,
the dwellings (are) uninhabitable
where the contract-breakers
and the deceitful ones dwell, who slay the truly truthful ones.
The cow, following the lead, is driven
on the bloody path of captivity,
(she) who is dragged into the fortresses of contract-breaking mortals
as their draught-animals.
They (i.e. the cows) stand shedding tears,
slobbering at their mouths. (Yt 10.38)

Wherever deceit prevails, the animals suffer just as much as righteous people. Being aware of the mutual dependence between domestic animals and human beings, the Mazdā-worshippers are committed to providing care for them:²¹

Now we worship our own souls
as well as those of the domestic animals
which desire to gain our support,
(the animals) for which people here indeed (shall be available)
and which indeed shall be available for people here. (Yasna 39.1)

²⁰See Hintze, *A Zoroastrian Liturgy*, 87–90.

²¹*Ibid.*, 266–7.

FIGHTING EVIL THROUGH WORDS

From a Zoroastrian point of view, the fight against Evil means, on the spiritual plane, the rejection of lying and deceiving, of gluttony and sloth, of ignorance, of excessive mourning, and of any other negative mental activities. On the material level, it entails the fight against suffering, diseases, and poverty; against pollution of the body and of the elements of earth, water, and fire; and against any other activity which impairs the proper functioning of any of Ahura Mazda's material creations. While in principle Evil only exists on the spiritual plane, in the material world it acts on both spiritual and material levels. Evil attacks any of Ahura Mazda's creatures and undermines their physical well-being by pollution, old age, diseases, and death, all of which affect the bodily, material existence. That diseases are the work of Angra Mainyu is explicitly stated, for example, in the following Young Avestan passage:

Ahura Mazda said to Spitama Zarathustra:
 I, Ahura Mazda,
 I, the giver of good (things),
 I who have made this house, the beautiful, light, sightly one,
 I will go out, I will go across. Then the villain looked at me,
 then he, the villain, Angra Mainyu full of death, wrought against me 99,999 diseases.
 Now may you, the most glorious Life-giving Mantra, heal me! (Vidēvdād 22.1-2)

Angra Mainyu looks with the "Evil eye" at Ahura Mazda and produces diseases designed to afflict and destroy the god's work.²² The many manifestations of Evil in the world, in the form of a mental activity or as it afflicts a material creation, are named individually and recorded in long lists of demons in Avestan and Pahlavi texts. Ailments, diseases, and other unwanted things are addressed by name and asked to "go away" as Ahura Mazda's worshipers recite certain Avestan verses, for example:

Illnesses go away!
 Death, go away!
 Demons, go away!
 Adversities, go away!
 Heretics opposed to truth, go away!
 Human tyrant, go away! (Yt 3.7)

Apotropaic verses like these are very common in Zoroastrian texts, both in Avestan and in later texts. They express resistance against, and disdain of, Angra Mainyu and his minions. Magic exercised through spells, curses, and amulets was one way of keeping the demons at bay.²³

²²See also Hinnells, "Health and Suffering in Zoroastrianism", 8f.; S. Kori Pekala, "Evil and How to Combat Evil: Magic, Spells, and Curses in the Avesta" (PhD diss., Harvard University, 2000), 105; S. K. Mendoza Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers: The Concept of Evil in Early Iran* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011), 83-9.

²³See also Pekala, "Evil and How to Combat Evil: Magic, Spells, and Curses in the Avesta"; Antonio Panaino, "Magic i. Magical elements in the Avesta and Nērang literature", *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, July 20, 2008, <https://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/magic-i-magical-elements-in-the-avesta-and-nerang-literature>; Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers*, 113-36.

The fight against Evil also forms an integral part of Zoroastrian ritual. For example, during the threefold preparation of the sacrificial Haōma drink in the Yasna ceremony, the priest recites the Avestan words:

Therefore one is to appoint him, the greatest of all,
as lord and judge, (namely) Ahura Mazdā,
to smite the deceitful Destructive Force,
to smite Wrath of bloody club,
to smite the Māzanian demons,
to smite all demons and deceitful Varəniāns. (Yasna 27.1)

While reciting these words, the priest takes the pestle from the water container, circles it around the inner rim of the water container, and touches the surface of the ritual table with its upper and lower ends. He then strikes the mortar three times each in all four directions against its outer walls, making a loud ringing sound, in each direction smiting a different type of demon, starting with Angra Mainyu, the “Destructive Force”. The loud, ringing noise that the priest makes with the pestle is meant to scare away Angra Mainyu. This is followed by words in Middle Persian: “Broken (be) the Foul Spirit, a hundred thousand times curses on Ahreman!” (*šikašta ganā.mainiiō bar āhrēman laqnat sad.hazār. bār*). He speaks these words in a subdued voice because they are not in Avestan.²⁴

The concept of smiting Angra Mainyu is also present in the performance of the Kusti prayers, which Zoroastrians perform in their daily lives. As part of their initiation into the religion, in India usually at the age of seven, in Iran a little later, Zoroastrians are invested with a white cotton shirt (called *sudre*) and a girdle (called *kusti*) made of lambswool, which they tie above the shirt three times and close with a reef knot. The shirt and the Kusti are the insignia of the Zoroastrian religion. They symbolize the “armor” of Zoroastrians that protects them against the constant attacks of Evil. At their daily prayer time, Zoroastrians untie and retie the girdle during the recitation of set prayers in Avestan and Middle Persian. While retying the Kusti and reciting the Ahuna Vairya prayer, which is the most sacred prayer of the Zoroastrian religion, Zoroastrians flick one end of the Kusti.²⁵ This action symbolizes the rejection of Angra Mainyu and is meant to chase him away, just like the loud ringing sound of the mortar during the Yasna ceremony. Small pockets in the shirt at the front and back of the neck opening symbolize the idea of collecting good deeds, the ones of the future in the pocket at the back, and the past ones in the front, with the wearer of the shirt between them, symbolizing the present.

In the Avesta, the most healing agent, and thus the most powerful weapon against any of the manifestations of Evil, is the “life-giving mantra” (*mąθra-spənta-*). One of these is the Ahuna Vairya prayer. Ahura Mazdā was the first to recite it after he had created the spiritual creation and before he made the material one:

Zarathushtra asked Ahura Mazdā: “O Ahura Mazdā, most life-giving force, creator of the corporeal living beings, righteous one, what was that utterance, O Ahura Mazdā, which you proclaimed for me,

²⁴See Firoze M. Kotwal and James W. Boyd, *A Persian Offering. The Yasna: A Zoroastrian High Liturgy* (Paris: Association pour l'avancement des études iraniennes, 1991), 81f., 107.

²⁵See Patricia L. Baker, “Clothed in the Faith. The Zoroastrian Sudrah and Kusti”, *Studia Iranica* 27 (1998): 259–75, 265; Michael Stausberg, “The Significance of the *kusti*: A History of Its Zoroastrian Interpretations”, *East and West* 54 (2004): 9–29.

before the sky (existed), before the water, before the earth, before the cow, before the plant, before the fire, the son of Ahura Mazdā, before the righteous man, before (= Y 34.5:) ‘the evil beasts, both false gods and mortals’, before all corporeal life, before all that is good, created by Mazdā, (and which is) of the species of righteousness?”

Then spoke Ahura Mazdā: “This was the piece of the Ahura Vairya, O Spitama Zarathushtra, which I proclaimed for you,

before the sky (existed), before the water, before the earth, before the cow, before the plant, before the fire, the son of Ahura Mazdā, before the righteous man, before (= Y 34.5:) ‘the evil beasts, both false gods and mortals’, before all corporeal life, before all that is good, created by Mazdā, (and which is) of the species of righteousness.” (Yasna 19.1-4)

The twenty-one words of this prayer are believed to encapsulate all the revelation and knowledge of the Avesta, and so, according to the cosmological myth of the Būndahišn 1.28-29, Ahriman fell prostrate back into his endless darkness when he heard Ohrmazd reciting it.²⁶

The Younger Avesta relates that before Zarathushtra was born, human beings had no means of defending themselves against the attacks of Angra Mainyu and all his demons. Zarathushtra brought the Mazdā-worshiping religion to humankind, and he was the first human being to recite the Ahuna Vairya prayer, which immediately caused Angra Mainyu and the demons to run away and hide underground:

Before his (i.e. Zarathushtra’s) time the demons used to rush about visibly,
 their pleasures of lust used to take place visibly,
 visibly they used to drag away
 the women from their men,
 and the demons used to subject to violence
 those crying and lamenting (women).
 But a single Ahuna Vairya Prayer
 which truthful Zarathushtra recited,
 divided four times into sections,
 the last (section) with louder recitation,
 drove underground all demons,
 which are unworthy of worship, unworthy to be prayed to. (Yt 19.80-81)²⁷

Zarathushtra is the one who takes on Angra Mainyu and slays his demons:

Zarathustra threatened Angra Mainyu:
 “O evil-producing Angra Mainyu,
 I shall slay your demon-created creation;
 I shall slay the demon-created corpse-demon;
 I shall slay the witch Xnaθaiti,
 until there will be born
 the victorious perfecter
 from the Lake Kāsaōiia,

²⁶See Agostini and Thrope, *The Zoroastrian Book of Creation*, 4, 8.

²⁷Hintze, *Zamyād Yašt*, 35f.

(coming) from the eastern side,
 (coming) from the eastern sides.” (Vidēvdād 19.5)

This passage mentions the end point of the battle against Evil, when the “victorious perfecter” (*saōšiiant-*) will step forth from Lake Kašaōiia, which is the Avestan name of Lake Hāmūn in the Hilmand basin in present-day Afghanistan, and complete the battle against Evil by defeating it completely and forcing Angra Mainyu to withdraw powerless from the material world.²⁸ Until that expected event in the future, human beings, men and women alike, are called to fight all kinds of Evil and to delimit its presence in the world as much as possible.

FIGHTING EVIL AND HEALING LIFE

In addition to mantras like the Ahuna Vairya prayer, the presence of Evil in the world is reduced through “good deeds”, which form the third component of the Zoroastrian motto “good thoughts, good words, good deeds” denoting a fundamental concept of the Zoroastrian religion. The maxim is first attested in one of the earliest texts, the Yasna Haptanghāiti:

Of good thoughts, good words, good deeds
 both here and elsewhere,
 being done and having been done,
 we are welcomers,
 not revilers of such good (things) are we. (Yasna 35.2)²⁹

Being a world-affirming religion, Zoroastrian teachings require that followers involve themselves in the world and contribute to the struggle against Evil by following this maxim. While much emphasis is placed on fighting Evil, just as much is also placed on healing the world afflicted by it. The prayers not only “smite” Evil, but they also heal life. Thus, the prayer of “best righteousness” (*aša- vahišta-*) is the most resistance-smashing among the mantras, “the most healing remedy among the mantras” (Yt 3.5).

Among the names of Ahura Mazdā are “Healing” and “Most healing” (Yt 1.12),³⁰ and Zarathushtra is described as “a healer of life” (*ahūm.biš-* Yasna 31.19, 44.2):

Listen (to the one) who conceives righteousness, a healer of life, knowing through the Lord,
 who controls his tongue at will for the right solemn utterance of the words
 through your flaming fire at (what is) good, at the distribution to the two parties!
 (Yasna 31.19)

In principle, all of Ahura Mazdā’s spiritual and material creations have the capacity to heal existence, including the moon (Yt 7.5), the waters (Yt 8.47), the star Tištrya (Yt 8.2), the plants (Vidēvdād 20.4), and, especially, the sacrificial plant Haōma:

²⁸See also Almut Hintze, *Der Zamyād-Yašt. Edition, Übersetzung, Kommentar* (Beiträge zur Iranistik 15; Wiesbaden: Reichert, 1994), 365–99; “Frašō.kərəti”, *Encyclopaedia Iranica* 10 (2000): 190–2.

²⁹Hintze, *A Zoroastrian Liturgy*, 61.

³⁰Antonio Panaino, *The List of Names of Ahura Mazdā (Yašt I) and Vayu (Yašt XV)* (Serie Orientale Roma 94; Roma: Istituto Italiano per l’Africa e l’Oriente, 2002), 45, 52.

O Haōma, give me (those) of the healing remedies
through which you are the giver of healing remedies! (Yasna 10.9)

Driving away all kinds of diseases and healing the damage they have done to the body is the answer to the afflictions of the material world caused by constant attacks from Angra Mainyu and his minions. The “life-giving mantras” of the Avesta are words by which diseases are driven away, and they are combined with medicinal knowledge and practices of healing with plants and of operating on a person using a knife.³¹ Of all these healing methods, the healing method which uses the mantra is deemed to be the most effective one:

When those who have many healing remedies will come together,
O Spitama Zarathustra,
(namely) the one who heals with the knife, the one who heals with the plant, and the
one who heals with the mantra,
they shall here come together to this,
which (is) the life-giving, healing mantra.
For this is the most healing of the healing remedies,
namely the life-giving mantra, the healing one,
which will heal the viscera of the righteous man. (Vidēvdād 7.44)

Owing to the central role played by the mantra in healing diseases, throughout the ages Zoroastrian priests have traditionally also practiced as medical doctors as they are seen as being in command of the mantra and of the other healing techniques. Zoroastrian medicine is not only attested to in the Avesta but also in Middle Persian texts, in particular in chapters 29–31 of the *Selections of Zādspram*. This work testifies to the engagement of the Zoroastrian priesthood with analyzing, and speculating about, the composition and functioning of the human body.³² The ancient link between priesthood and medicine is occasionally found even in more recent years and in the context of modern medicine. As John Hinnells³³ notes, Dastur Dr. Sohrab H. Kutar, the Zoroastrian High Priest in Britain in the 1980s, was both a highly respected medical doctor and a priest, and so is Jamasp Kaikhusroo Dastur, surgeon and present High Priest of the Anjuman Atesh Behram in Mumbai, where he succeeded his late father Dastur Dr. Kaikhusroo M. JamaspAsa.

The Zoroastrian approach to health entails avoidance of anything that weakens the body and makes it susceptible to diseases. For example, when a woman in her menses is required to self-isolate, as she is deemed impure during that period according to Zoroastrian teachings, the family has the duty to provide a sufficient amount of food and drink for her so that her physical health is not compromised:

How much food shall one bring? How much barley(-drink)?
Two units of dry bread, one unit of liquid, lest the woman becomes weak. (Vidēvdād 16.7)

³¹See Forrest, *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers*, 113f.; Paolo Delaini, *La medicina nell’Avesta. Vidēvdād 7, 20, 21, 22. Studio filologico, traduzione e commento dei testi avestici e medio-persiani. Con un saggio sugli studi sulla medicina zoroastriana dal Settecento ad oggi* (Indo-Iranica et Orientalia volume 15; Bologna: Mimesis 2016).

³²See also Peter Sohn, *Die Medizin des Zādsparam. Anatomie, Physiologie und Psychologie in den Wizidagitha i Zadsparam, einer zoroastrisch-mittelpersischen Anthologie aus dem frühislamischen Iran des neunten Jahrhunderts* (Iranica 3; Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz, 1996); Philippe Gignoux and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Anthologie de Zādspram* (Paris: Association pour l’avancement des études iraniennes, 1993), 94–113.

³³See Hinnells, “Health and Suffering in Zoroastrianism”, 8.

Good, healthy food and drink are ways of keeping diseases away from the body, and they should be enjoyed in measure like all other good things of life. Joy is an important part of a healthy life, and material wealth is a good thing as long as it has been acquired with honesty and in an honorable way. It enables a good person to be generous, to dispense it with charitable generosity. This attitude provides the foundation of Zoroastrian charities, as they are a way of promoting good and fighting life-weakening situations such as ignorance, poverty, and ill health. Zoroastrians have a longstanding tradition of charities, which provide housing for the poor, education, and medical institutions.³⁴ Benevolence is seen as a religious duty, and liberality as a virtue. They serve the purpose of alleviating suffering, and thus diminish the power of Evil in the world.

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³⁴See John R. Hinnells, "The Flowering of Zoroastrian Benevolence: Parsi Charities in the 19th and 20th Centuries", in *Papers in Honour of Professor Mary Boyce*, vol.10, ed. Adrian David H. Bivar and John R. Hinnells (Acta Iranica 24; Leiden: Brill, 1985), 261–326.