

INDO-EUROPEAN ELEMENTS IN THE ZOROASTRIAN APOCALYPTIC TRADITION*

Introduction

A large body of scholarly literature has emerged regarding the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition. One perspective is that it pre-dates similar Abrahamic traditions, and was an influence on them, while others have argued against such an influence. This genre of Zoroastrian literature is rich in detail and interesting in the manner in which it attempts to describe how the world becomes “perfect” (Avestan) *fraša-*¹ at the end of time. The events leading to this perfection and renovation of the world are foretold or heard from Ohrmazd (Avestan) Ahurā Mazdā by various Zoroastrian personages, including the prophet Zarathuštra, who are only the most righteous people, i.e., (Avestan) *ašuuān*.² It is they who are given this power to know of the events to come in the future.

¹ It is difficult to provide a single word for the idea of *fraša-* as it appears in various contexts, for example in the Old Persian inscriptions for the buildings it appears as such (DSe) *θātiy Dārayavauš Xš vašnā AMha adam ava akunavam tya akunavam vaisahyā frašam θadayātaiy* “Darius the king proclaims, by the grace of Ahuramazda I have done what I have done, to everyone it may seem *fraša*” (Kent 1953:141). In the Old Avestan texts (Yasna 30.9) *ahu-* “world, existence” appears in a cluster around *fəraša-* giving it eschatological connotations *yōi im fərašəm kərənaon ahūm* “(those) who will make the world / existence *fəraša-*,” see Humbach 1991:55. The same idea is enumerated in an eschatological context in the Younger Avesta (Yašt 19.10–11): *yat asti ahurahe mazdā yaθa dānab daθat ahurō mazdā pouruca vohuca pouruca srīraca pouruca abdaca pouruca frašaca pouruca bāmīāca yat kərənauuān frašəm ahūm* “(the Kavyan Glory) which is of Ahura Mazdā, since Ahura Mazdā has created his creatures, the good ones in large numbers, the beautiful ones in large numbers, the marvelous ones in large numbers, the *fraša-* ones in large numbers, the bright ones in large numbers, in order for (His creatures and creations) to make the existence *fraša-*,” see Humbach and Ichaporia 1998:30. As the world / existence is suppose to revert back to its original form, “perfection” would be a suitable suggestion; see Schmidt 1979:98–99.

² For the importance of the concept of *ašuuān* see Gnoli 1979:387–452; and the introduction to Gignoux 1984.

From the start of the calamities to the coming of the savior, Sōšāns,³ there are many episodic distresses⁴ that can point to historical events,

³ On the role of Sōšāns in the Zoroastrian tradition see Cereti 1995a:33–81.

⁴ The following events are mainly according to the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn; The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*; and the *Bundahišn*; Cereti 1995b; Williams 1990; M. Bahār, *Bundhiš*, Tūs Publishers, Tehran, 1367: Demons (dēws) with parted hair of the seed of Wrath (Demon Xēšm) will attack Ērānšahr from the East (probably referring to the Turkic invasions); sorcery will become common in Ērān; the social order is subverted and Zoroastrianism is thrown into chaos; the land of Ērān deteriorates and its people suffer; the sun will stand still and become smaller and the year and the month and day shorten; fruits, seeds and yields decrease and there is deforestation; men become smaller in stature, they will be less skilled and weak in strength; there is disrespect, lack of hospitality and love disappears among people; people bury, wash, and burn dead matter (perhaps referring to the Muslim funerary practices), and the pollution of water and fire; the Demon of Wrath (Xēšm) and other demons (dēws) with parted hair will attack Ērān; the Zoroastrians will be polluted and there will be loss of religious beliefs, proper ritual and the sacred fires; the loss of wealth among the believers; Zoroastrians will go about without wearing their sacred girdle (kustīg); again the social order is subverted, where the lower class intermarry with the upper class; consequently there will be the loss of piety, proper judgment and righteousness; false oath and testimonies will be given; Zoroastrian priests will wish evil on one another and commit sin; men begin to worship the demon of Envy (Āz); clouds and winds do not produce rain anymore and only produce haze; hot and cold winds will destroy the food supply; noxious creators will fall onto the earth like the rain and there will be drought; the number of livestock decreases, they become weaker, give less milk and have less fat; Zoroastrians will think of suicide as things are so unbearable; happiness; festivals and foundations for the ancestors and religious rites will decrease; there will be sectarianism; the nobility will emigrate and the landowners (dehgāns) become poor; the earth opens up and gems and metals pour out (gold, silver, copper, tin and lead); sovereignty falls into the hands of the foreigners (Hephthalites, Turkic tribes, Indians, Chinese, and Romans are mentioned); consequently the prosperity of Ērān goes to foreigners; sexual perversions such as sodomy and sex with menstruating women becomes prevalent; the night will become brighter, the year, month and day will become shorter; there will be earth quakes; The Evil Spirit (Gannāg Mēnōg) becomes most powerful at this time which coincides with the coming of the Romans who are Christian; The sun again changes color and haze invades the earth; the attack of Christians with red banners, Turks with red banners become manifest; from the east (Xwarāsān) Demons with parted hair, of the seed of Wrath (Xēšm) appear (perhaps referring to Abu Muslim); Ušēdar will be born on lake Frazdān and someone from the race of the Kayanids will be born and travel to India to gather help for Ušēdar; then Wahrām (who is probably the son of Yazdgerd III, the last Sasanian king) is born; the signs of his birth is that a star will fall from the sky and reveal a sign; there will be three great battles and the enemies and evil will be destroyed; Ērān will be saved and rear-ranged; the Evil Spirit (Gannāg Mēnōg) will take his troops to battle while Ohrmazd will send Nērōsang, Srōš to Kangdiz to awaken Pišotan; Pišotan with 150 men with black sabres will destroy 1/3 of the enemy, destroy idol-temples; other deities will come forth to help Pišotan (Mihr, Srōš, Rašn, Wahrām, Aštād, and Xwarrah); since Gannāg Mēnōg has broken the treaty, Mihr comes forth and strikes him, causing him to run to hell; Mihr commands Pišotan to break the idol-temples; Wistaxm will become the religious authority; greed, need, hate, wrath, envy will disappear from the world; the three sacred fire-temples will be restored; when Ušēdar is 30 the sun will stand for 10 days and nights and men will be Zoroastrian; Ušēdar will be ordered by Mihr to go and light up the continents (kišwars) and will lead the world to its proper existence; when Ušēdarmāh is born the creation will be more active and powerful; Keresāsp will strike Azdahāg and

such as Alexander the Great and the Arab Muslim conquest, the sectarian revolts of Bābak Khorramdēn and the Abbasid Revolution.⁵ Hence, historical material is imbued with apocalyptic visions, which no doubt was the synchronizing task by the Zoroastrian priests, to make the tradition much more understandable for the believers. For this reason disagreement in regard to the antiquity of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition has arisen. Among the opponents of the antiquity of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition is Ph. Gignoux,⁶ while M. Boyce⁷ and G. Widengren⁸ have been among the proponents of the originality and antiquity of Zoroastrian apocalypticism. Indeed, both sides have valid points and evidence to make their cases.⁹ There are historical events inserted in the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition which can be attributed to the late antique and the early medieval times. The language of these texts is Middle Persian, composed in the late Sasanian or early Islamic period which cast doubt on its antiquity.

On the other hand, however meager the evidence is, from the Avestan hymns, there seems to be a notion of the “end” where people would be “judged,” and given punishment or reward for their actions. If, as M. Boyce believes, Zarathuštra lived in the second millennium BCE, before the Jewish apocalyptic tradition was formed, and the influence came from the Iranian side, as is apparent from the Biblical texts (e.g., *Book of Daniel*), the Zoroastrian tradition could be genuine. If the chronology proposed by Boyce is not unequivocal, then how can we settle the issue? Chronology is one of the biggest problems in Zoroastrian studies, from the date of the prophet of the religion, Zarathuštra, to the date of the composition of the various parts of the *Avesta*.¹⁰

The question that must be raised in relation to these events is that what makes this apocalyptic tradition old? In fact the natural disasters are topoi which can be found in the other apocalyptic traditions as well. The mention of specific peoples and events point to the late compilation

misfortune will disappear from the world; Sōšāns who is the final savior with the aid of the deities will resurrect the humans in their bodily form; the deity Šahrewar (in the *Bundahišn* it is Ērmān / Airyaman who accomplishes this task) will cause the mountains to melt and all men will have to walk through molten metal and the pious will walk as through passing through warm milk and the sinner will pass as if he is walking through molten metal; in this manner sins of the sinners will be absolved and thus all will reach heaven; at this time all of the creation will belong to Ohrmazd and go back to its good and original form; people will not age and become immortal and the earth becomes flat as it was in the beginning of the creation of the world.

⁵ For a review of the historical events see Daryaei 1998 and 2004.

⁶ Gignoux 1985–1988.

⁷ Boyce 1984.

⁸ Widengren 1983.

⁹ For different opinions in regard to Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition see Cereti 1995b:11–27.

¹⁰ For these matters see Gnoli 1980 and 2000.

of these texts, where the Romans, Turks and Arabs bring about the end of time. Thus, we are left with very little in terms of antiquity of the Middle Persian apocalyptic texts. Only if we can go back to older texts / hymns and find correlation with Middle Persian texts, then we can make a claim for the antiquity of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition.

This essay intends to review the evidence for the antiquity of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition in another manner. By reviewing the structure of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition it is intended to demonstrate the existence of elements that are related to the Indo-European apocalyptic pattern. If the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition has similarities to the Indo-European tradition, then the Zoroastrian tradition is old indeed, but Zoroaster himself may have made additions to the tradition which can be gleaned from the *Gāthās*. In time other elements (historical) were added to the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition to clarify matters for the believers, but made it confusing in identifying its antiquity for the scholars.

As mentioned the language of the Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts is Middle Persian, which was used from the Sasanian period to the eleventh century CE in composing books. The scenario of the coming of an end and the perfection of the world is relatively uniform, but there are a few details which differ from text to text. The first noticeable fact which is common to all apocalyptic traditions is that they are given in the form of a foretelling by a righteous person. This knowledge is given solely by Ohrmazd in various ways, such as water being poured on the hands, flowers being smelled, etc. The foretelling is given with the Middle Persian formula: *en pēš gōwom* “this I foretell” to the *ašuuans*.

The Four Ages

In the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, Ohrmazd provides a chronology of the world which has become famous. This is because in this text an interesting division of the world is given that is familiar and similar to both Greek and Judaic tradition. This division is similar to that of the *Book of Daniel*, which has been shown to have been influenced by a cultural milieu which was outside of Palestine. Daniel very much acts in the same manner as the *ašuuans* of the Zoroastrian tradition, hence, having the ability of foretelling the future. It is important to not forget that foretelling was not common in the Judaic tradition.¹¹ Here just as in the Zoroastrian tradition, Alexander the Great is seen as wicked.¹² In fact the *Book of Daniel* is an extraneous element to the *Old Testament*, and the language in *Daniel* 2–6 is Aramaic, which had been the language of the administration of the Achaemenid Persian Empire.¹³ The division of

¹¹ Eddy 1961:24.

¹² Lebram 1983:179.

¹³ Olsson 1983:26–28.

the world into four ages in the *Book of Daniel* also resembles that of the Zoroastrian tradition. In the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* the epoch is divided into four periods as well (ZWYI.3):

*u-š wan-ēw bun padiš be dīd kē čahār azg padiš būd
ēk zarrēn ud ēk asēmēn ud ēk pōlāwadēn ud ēk āhan
abar gumēx ēstād*

and he saw the trunk of a tree which had four branches, one golden, and one silver, and one steel and one of mixed iron

These four branches depicts the four ages in the Zoroastrian tradition: I) The time Zoroaster conversed with Ohrmazd, and king Wištāsp accepted the Zoroastrian religion and made it current in the world; II) The rule of Ardaxšīr the Kayanid; III) Rule of King Xusrō I in the Sasanian period; and IV) The time when evil rules and the ushering in of the end begins.

This division is not only Iranian in origin, but it is Indo-Iranian in nature. In India the four periods, i.e., *caturyuga*, are found in the *Mahābhārata* which are as follows: I) *kritayuga*; II) *tretayuga*; III) *dvāparayuga*; and IV) *kali*.¹⁴ In fact, the similarities in apocalyptic theme between the *Mahābhārata* and the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* are quite striking, where there is a foretelling or vision by a prophet / ascetic, and where world history is divided into four ages.¹⁵ Thus, there appears to be an Indo-Iranian tradition of four ages, which in the Iranian material (*Zand ī Wahman Yasn*) is portrayed as the branches of a tree. Among the Balts the *saules koks* “tree of the sun,” in the Nordic tradition, in *Völuspá* and *Grimnismál* the tree also plays an important part, where in the former tradition (the tree called *læraðr*) provides a structure for the poem.¹⁶

The Final Battle

In the Zoroastrian apocalyptic tradition, natural disasters, wars and invasions follow one another. Some of these events are a-historical (natural disasters), while others are clearly noticeable as historical events. Some of the historical episodes, however, also go back to an archetypal battle that is common in the Indo-European world. S. O’Brien has provided the basic outlines of Indo-European eschatology. In his view there are ten basic criteria which the Indo-European eschatological tradition

¹⁴ Widengren 1995:24.

¹⁵ Widengren 1995:29; there is also a mention of four ages in the second century BCE by Appian which may have been taken from the older Near Eastern tradition, see Swain 1940:1–21.

¹⁶ Hultgård 1995:125–126.

can be tested against.¹⁷ This essay will look at the most important aspect and that is criteria X “The Final Battle.” While not all other criteria are found among all the cases studied by O’Brien (excluding I and X), criteria X is common amongst all. According to the Indo-European tradition the “Final Battle” occurs on a famous field; a number of notable figures are involved; and the battle leads to the death of a large number of people and a general cataclysm.¹⁸ Let us see if these elements can be found in the Zoroastrian tradition (*ZWY* VII.11–15):

*pad dēn paydāg kū pad ham-ayārīh ud ham-drafs
ō ēn ērān dehān rasēnd ud was marag be ōzanēnd
awēšān xēšm-tōhmagān ī šēdāsp ud hēn ī frāx-anīg
ud dām gurg ī dō zang ud dēw ī dawāl-kustīg pad
arang bār sē kārezār . . . ud amar ul spāh nixwārēnd
tā ō gilistag ī dēwān ēdōn be ōzanēnd kū hazār zan
pas mard-ēw wēnēnd be xwāhēnd*

According to the religion (i.e., the *Avesta*) it is revealed that in cooperation and a common banner, they will arrive in Ērānian lands and will kill many, those of the seed of Xēšm of Šēdāsp,¹⁹ the army of broad front, the two legged wolf creatures and the Demons with leather girdle, on the banks of Arang they will battle three times...and many armies will rush up to the dwelling of the Demons, they will kill so (much) that when one thousand women see one man (they) want him.

In the Norse legend of Ragnarök the final battle takes place on the field of Vigridr;²⁰ in the Swede-Danish tradition at the battle-field of Bravellir,²¹ in the Irish legend of the battles of Mag Tured the battle takes place on the plain of Tured; and in the *Mahābhārata* the battle takes place on the field of Kurukṣtra. The tradition in which we find a much closer similarity to that of the Zoroastrian tradition is the Roman tradition of the Battle of Lake Regilius.²² Three battles are fought, where Tarquin, the Etruscan ruler attempts to defeat the Roman forces. These battles are fought at Arsian Woods (forest); Rome (major center); and finally on the banks of Lake Regillus.²³

¹⁷ O’Brien 1976:299–300.

¹⁸ O’Brien 1976:300.

¹⁹ For the identification of Šēdāsp see Cereti 1995b:198–199.

²⁰ Puhvel 1988:115.

²¹ Puhvel 1988:88–89.

²² Puhvel 1988:144.

²³ O’Brien 1976:314–315.

It is noteworthy that in the Zoroastrian tradition three battles are also fought, just like in the Roman tradition. What is more interesting is that before the mention of the three battles, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* gives alternative locations for the other two battles, meaning not all battles are fought in the same location. These locations are at Spēd Razūr and in Pārs. According to the *Avesta*, Spēd Razūr is the mythical “White Forest” which is mentioned Yašt XV.31, where Anāhitā sacrifices to Vayū. The other location mentioned is Pārs which is the province of Persis / Fārs, the center of the Persian world. This is the location where the Achaemenid and the Sasanian dynasties rose from and hence the epicenter of the Persian culture. In the imperial inscriptions of the Sasanian kings and in the inscriptions of the famous Kerdīr (third century Zoroastrian priest), Pārs is mentioned first before any other region, attesting to its importance. The last battle takes place on the banks of Arang River. Thus, here we have a correspondence between the Roman and the Zoroastrian tradition of the final battle; three battles; one in a forest; one at an important center, and finally one along a lake. This correspondence hints at the Indo-European root of this tradition.

Frašgird and Resurrection

The following material does not mean that the prophecies of Zoroaster did not alter the Iranian apocalyptic tradition. Indeed the concept of *fraša-* and the cosmic perfection at the end of time are vividly portrayed, where the mountains will erupt and molten metal will cleanse the earth and humanity of evil. In *Yasna 30.7 ayaṅhā ādānāiš* standing for “during the time of retribution with the iron,”²⁴ is predicted by Zarathuštra, where the cleansing episode through *ayōxšust ī widāxtag* “molten metal” is elaborated in Middle Persian text of *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*.²⁵ This is the final cataclysmic event which shakes the earth, changes it and prepares it for its perfection. But first men and women have to be resurrected in their bodily form to be judged, where molten metal will burn the bodies of those who were sinners and for those who have been righteous, it will be as if walking through warm milk.²⁶

The process of resurrection is indeed interesting, where men and women are slowly put back together. *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* provides a detailed scenario which has been noticed by Bruce Lincoln and which points to another Indo-European pattern.²⁷ The savior, Sōšāns, and the Lord, Ohrmazd, proceed to do the following (PRADD 48.54–55):

²⁴ Insler 1975:170.

²⁵ Williams 1990:chapter 48.70–72, 185.

²⁶ Williams 1990:chapter 48.71–72.

²⁷ Lincoln 1977.

*ān ī murd sōšāns abāg awēšān frašgird kardār kē-š
ayār hēnd ō ristag tan ēstēnd ohrmazd ast az zamīg
ud xōn az āb ud mōy az urwar ud gyān az wād xwāhēd
ēk ō did gumēzēd ud ēwēnag ī xwad dārēd dahēd*

Those who are dead, Sōšyāns along with those who are the makers of perfection (*frašgird*), who are his helpers, will raise them to their bodies, Ohrmazd will call (their) bones from the earth and blood from the water and hair from the plant and spirit from the wind, he will mix one with the other and he will create the form which each has.

This idea finds a correspondence Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (3.2.13), where Yājñavalkya is questioned in the following manner about the fate of man:

*yājñavalkyēti hovāca yatrāsyā puruṣasya mṛtasyāg-
niṃ vāg apyēti vātaṃ prāṅsaś cakṣur ādityaṃ
manaś candraṃ diśaḥ śrotraṃ pṛthivīm śarīraṃ
ākāśam ātmā auśadhīr lomāni vanaspatīn keśā apsu
lohitam ca retas ca nidhīyate kvāyam tadā puruṣo
bhavatīti*

Yājñavalkya, he said, when the speech of a dead man enters the fire, his breath the wind, his eye the sun, his mind the moon, his ear the quarters, his flesh the earth, his *ātman* (soul) the atmosphere, his bodily hair the herbs, the hair of his head the trees, and his blood and semen are deposited in the waters, what then does this man become?

There are of course interesting correspondences between the Iranian and Indian texts, namely the breath becoming the wind, flesh the earth, hair the trees (i.e., plants), and blood the waters.²⁸ What makes this Indo-Iranian correspondence interesting is that this knowledge is not understood by all and is an esoteric knowledge. *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* describes the matter in following manner (PRADD 48.102):

²⁸ For the Roman correspondence found in Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, see Lincoln 1977:257–261.

*nēkīh ī tan ī pasēn jud az ān ī azabar nibišt ēdōn ast ī-
š pad dānišn ud xrad ī mardōmān ī sāmānag be dānist
ud guft nē šāyēd*

The goodness of the Future Body apart from what it is written (here), it is such that it can not be known through reason, nor (through) the limited knowledge of humans, nor described.

In the Brhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad it is only the sage and the questioner that are said to know these matters and other people should remain in the dark (3.2.13):

*āhara saumya hastam ārtabhāga // āvām evaitasya
vedisyāvaḥ // na nāv etat sajana iti*

Take my hand, dear Ārtabhāga, only we two will know of this, it is not for us (to talk of) here in the presence of people.

Indeed these are secrets that apocalyptic texts foretell so that the believers in the time of distress remember. In this way the believer will bare the calamities till the world becomes *fraša-*, referring to the perfection of the world / cosmos. It is quite difficult to give a precise meaning for *fraša-* as it is a state of being which the Middle Persian texts themselves elaborate on in some detail. At the time of *fraša-* the world is luminous (*rōšn*), and without darkness (*a-tār*) because the stars (*stāragān*) and the moon (*māh*) and the sun (*xwar*) will come down on earth, making the world immortal (*anōšag*), perfect (*hangirdīg*) and flat (*hāmōn*). This last event that is the leveling of the earth (*hāmōn*) is an imagery which is also found in the Judeo-Christian and the Muslim apocalyptic tradition. This is certainly an influence from Zoroastrianism on the Abrahamic traditions.²⁹

As has been mentioned by Lincoln, resurrection in effect is the reversal of death, that is, the putting back of parts along with the soul.³⁰ I would like to suggest that the same happens to the earth. It was flat in the beginning of creation, but after the assault of evil, mountains grew and so in the end with the destruction of evil, then the earth must revert back to its perfect, flat form. These are, however, matters of Zoroastrian theology which have been very influential among the Abrahamic tradition. What is important for this study is that not only the content, but also the structure of the apocalypse can shed light on the continuity of a tradition which in this case goes back to the Indo-European

²⁹ Lincoln 1983.

³⁰ Lincoln 1983:254.

world-view. Thus, what we have here is an Indo-European apocalyptic structure, where the Zoroastrian religious tradition gave its theological details, where the calamities were made historical by the priests in late antiquity to become better understood and remembered by the people of the good religion.

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