

# POST-SASANIAN PAHLAVI TEXTS AS REFLECTING SASANIAN AND PRE-SASANIAN COSMOLOGICAL AND ESCHATOLOGICAL BELIEFS

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Since the Greek, Arab, and Mongolian invasions destroyed most of the Zoroastrian scriptures, scholars often experience difficulty in ascertaining Zoroastrian “influence” on Jewish and Christian cosmological, cosmogonical and eschatological ideas. However, most scholars have resolved this dilemma by regarding post-Sasanian Pahlavi texts as an attempt by the Magi to preserve the surviving ancient scriptures by penning them down for the benefit of posterity. Even Firdausi’s *Shah-nama* is essentially derived from the *Khwaday-nameh* (“Epic-books of Lords”), a semi-official text on pre-Islamic Iranian history compiled and recorded towards the end of the Sasanian rule. It was probably still extant in his times. *Shah-nama* is about nothing but the struggle between the good and evil rulers and persons, and how it shapes after-life. Many verses in the *Shah-nama* leave little doubt that he also relied upon the Sasanian *Andarz* (Wisdom) literature. See my paper on Firdausi for more details.

*Ayadgar-i-Zariran*, which preserves and celebrated the memory of Zarir’s great battle for spreading Zoroastrianism, is the only Kayanian epic that has survived, though only in mutilated fragments. The heroism of Zaris could only have been initially preserved in the Avestan language of the time and then later translated into the Parthian language before writing down its oral version in the Pahlavi script for posterity, which is attested by its Parthian phraseology as the two languages are so analogous. Even though this process must have spread over 2-3000 years, it does not fail to reflect Zoroastrian ideals and beliefs.

The Parthian romance epic of *Vis-u-Ramin* survives only in its secondary and not in its original form but it faithfully represents the basic Zoroastrian principles and beliefs. Even the *Vendidad* and *Nirangistan* seem to have been composed during the Parthian period as they employ Greco-Roman system of measures introduced by the Seleucid rulers which was in vogue during the Parthian times also.

The *Madigan-i-Yavisht-i-Fryan*, a riddle contest between the righteous Fryan and the wicked sorcerer Axt, must have come down from the times of the Avestan texts (Yasht V and XIII) which mention their names. It mentions Axt’s wife, Hupars, who was Yavisht’s sister,

going to heaven for refusing to lie for Axt who killed her for it in revenge. For the most part Pahlavi texts represent a last-minute attempt by the Zoroastrian clergy to save as much extant Avestan literature, both oral and written, as possible by translating it into Pahlavi and saving it for the use of the oppressed co-religionists who continued adhering to the faith. Only one quarter (or less) of the original Avesta has survived as one could assume from the detailed description of the Avestan Nasks (text; scriptures) provided in the *Denkard's* Book VIII. These translations, known as the Zand, are often not accurate since Avesta had long become a dead church language. Unfortunately, only the liturgical Avestan texts have survived now. The first of the *Denkard's* nine books too are now lost to us. The *Denkard* is an encyclopedia of religious knowledge imparted to the ecclesiastical students and others in Sasanian times and covers, among other things, Mazdean cosmology and eschatology. For example, Book VII, which narrates the most extensive legend of Zoroaster ever written in Pahlavi, refers to the different ages of the world, heralded by the coming of the three Saoshyants, the last one heralding the final victory of the good over evil and Frashigard (Resurrection).

*Arda Viraf Namaq*, a precursor of Dante's *Divina Commedia*, provides an abundant account of life in hell and seems to have been patterned on the well known ordeal of withstanding metal in the reign of Shapur II.

*Andarz* (Wisdom) literature has a long history in the East. The Jews in Elephantine, Egypt kept an Aramic version of the Bahistun inscription of Darisu I. In Book VIII, chapter six, of the *Denkard*, an attempt at systematizing *Andarz* literature under the influence of Greek thought in the tradition of the Nicomachean ethical system is quite apparent. Thus *Andarz* literature too at times stems from Sasanian and even pre-Sasanian times, even though they were committed to writing only in post-Sasanian times. Thus, what the *Andarz-i-Poryokeshan* expounds about the opposition between the two cosmic principles, and good and evil ways, and how certainly they affect our after-life, etc., seem to pertain to a much earlier period, possibly even to the Achaemenian period, particularly as Xerxes warns in his inscription at Persepolis (4.46-56) that those not following Asha in this life "do not participate in the Best Existence (i.e. "Paradise") when dead.

*The Pahlavi Rivayat accompanying the Dadestan-i-Dini* alludes to an ancient incident regarding Keresasp that could have only come from earlier, presumably Avestan texts. It comments about eschatology in chapter 48-50, 52 and 54, and further indicates its antiquity.

The *Madigan-i-Hazar Dadastan*, ("the book of thousand laws"), because of its content, unquestionably belongs to the Sasanian times. It informs us about forty-four different legal matters and is the only

source of information available to us regarding the civil and family laws as well as the laws of contractual obligation prevailing in the Sasanian times.

*Bundahishn* and *Selections of Zadspram*, both unquestionably drawing from very ancient texts and both apparently derived from the same sources, deal with the Zoroastrian myth of Ahriman's struggle against Ohrmazd and his creation. *Zadspram* deals with cosmology and cosmogony, coming of the Religion of Zarathushtra in the middle period of the cosmic history, it contains two long chapters on eschatology and on the human condition. He details the history of the cosmos from the beginning until the Transfiguration, and from Ahriman's first assault on Ohrmazd and his creatures, which initiated the creation of the cosmic machinations that will inevitable and assuredly defeat Ahriman. It not only cites (Gatha 31 and two Nasks, etc., but also indirectly refers to various Avestan texts by providing their translations in Pahlavi though without naming the Avestan texts.

*Bundahishn* ("Origin of Creation" or "Original Creation") starts with the opposition of the two first principles, the nature of the *Getig* creatures from the beginning of the creation until the formation of the Eschatological Body. Its plan and content are quite identical with those of *Zadspram* except for the conspicuous and unexplained absence in it of the Legend of Zoroaster. A. Goetze who translated it in 1923 opined that it had a decisive influence on the ideas of Pseudo-Hippocrates in Greece. Perhaps the Greek physicians serving the Achaemenian kings introduced this doctrine into Greece where indeed it was conceived as an anomaly in its time. In chapters 30 and 34 it contains the doctrines about individual and universal eschatology. The *Bundahishn* contains myths that provide authentic geography and cosmography which is unparalleled in any of the later works which deal mostly with religious philosophy. In addition to the above works, *Zand-i-Vohuman-Yasht* (*Bahman Yasht*) and *Ayatka-i-Zamaspik* (popularly known as *Jamaspi*) also deal with apocalyptic eschatology. They describe the victories of Yazatas and Zoroastrian heroes like Peshotan, Kai Khushrav, and Keresasp, and the three Saoshyants and *Frashegird* (*Frashokereti*).

All the above facts are explained in more or less detail in chapters 33 and 24 of *Zadspram*, chapter 48 of the *Pahlavi Rivayat*, chapter 62 of the *Menog-i-Khrad*, questions 35 and 98 in *Dadestan-i-Dini*, and chapters 34 and 35 of the *Bundahishn*. All these, in turn, stem from the *Zand-i-Vohuman-Yasht*, *Spand Nask*, and *Sudgar Nask* described in the *Denkard* VIII.14 and IX.14, 20 and 22. All those abundant details about the cosmology and eschatology were spread by the Magi far into Anatolia (modern Turkey), Thrace, Albania, Georgia, Armenia, and outskirts of Greece. As noted by the author of the *Cambridge History of Iran*, Volume 3(2), (from which I have culled most of this information):

“traces (of it) recur in the “Oracles of Hystaspes” quoted on several occasions in the *Divinae Institutiones*, a writing by the Christian Lactantius, and even in certain earlier authors such as Justinian and Clement.” (Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1983, p. 1194). He even draws a parallel between these Zoroastrian ideas and a much later Indian book of *Puranas* in as much as they outline the future as divided into long periods, each ushered in by a renewal and reordering of the world, though not in the Zoroastrian fashion. (Ibid., 1195).

All this evidence should suffice to prove that the post-Sasanian Pahlavi texts contain much earlier and often enough even Avestan evidence regarding cosmology, eschatology, etc., which may be as old, if not older, than the Old Testament, thereby justifying their use for researching and tracing Zoroastrian “influence” on similar concepts in Judaism and Christianity. Such a justification is also reinforced by what further evidence is presented in my various papers.