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# *Monotheism the Zoroastrian Way*

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In memory of Gherardo Gnoli (6 December 1937 – 7 March 2012)

## **Abstract**

*This article examines seemingly monotheistic, polytheistic and dualistic features of Zoroastrianism from the point of view of the Zoroastrian creation myth. Exploring the personality of the principal deity, Ahura Mazdā, the origin of the spiritual and material worlds and the worship of the Yazatas, it is argued that Zoroastrianism has its own particular form of monotheism.*

## **I Preliminaries**

To the contemporary observer, Zoroastrianism offers the perplexing picture of a religion whose followers worship one god, Ahura Mazdā, or, in the Middle Persian form of his name, Ohrmazd, and alongside him a host of other sacred beings, or *yazatas*.<sup>1</sup> The latter include not only individual deities, such as Anāhitā (a water and fertility deity), Mithra (the personification of ‘contract’), Ārmaiti (‘right-mindedness’), Aši (‘reward’), Sraoša (‘attentiveness’) and Rašnu (‘justice’), but also natural phenomena, such as the earth, water, wind, sun, moon and stars. Moreover, the sacred texts, ritual plants (such as *haoma*) and ritual implements (such as pestle and mortar) are also worshipped. In addition, the good, divine creation of Ahura Mazdā has an enemy, Angra Mainyu in Avestan and Ahreman in Middle Persian, the embodiment of Evil, whose sole desire is to bring disorder and destruction to Ahura Mazdā’s perfect world. The religion thus seems to involve monotheistic, polytheistic and dualistic features simultaneously.

In the ongoing scholarly debate on the classification of Zoroastrianism according to the terms just mentioned views differ according to which of these features is given most prominence, and usually the labels attached to Zoroastrianism combine two features out of a possible three (or four).<sup>2</sup> For instance, Boyd and Crosby’s answer to the question posed in the title of their article “Is Zoroastrianism Dualistic or Monotheistic?”, is that the religion starts from a cosmogonic dualism, but over time moves towards an eschatological

<sup>1</sup>An earlier version of this article was presented as a paper at Drittes Lindauer Symposium für Religionsforschung and published in German in: *Echnaton und Zarathustra, Zur Genese und Dynamik des Monotheismus*, edited by Jan Assmann und Harald Strohm, München 2012.

<sup>2</sup>The fourth feature which is occasionally adduced by scholars is that of henotheism.

monotheism.<sup>3</sup> Schwartz, with regard to the oldest texts of the Zoroastrian tradition, the Gathas, defines the religion as a “monotheistic dualism”<sup>4</sup> and Gnoli, who considers dualism to be incompatible with polytheism, as a “dualistic monotheism”<sup>5</sup> while Panaino considers Mazdaism to be synonymous with monotheism because of Ahura Mazda’s sovereign role in the religious system.<sup>6</sup> By contrast, Skjærvø admits both dualism and polytheism but excludes monotheism.<sup>7</sup> As far as the Gathas are concerned, Kellens accepts cosmic dualism for the opposition between *aša-* ‘order’ and *druj-* ‘deceit’, but not for that between the two *mainyus* or ‘spirits’ which in his view denote right and wrong human mental forces.<sup>8</sup> Regarding the terms polytheism and monotheism, Kellens, while emphasizing the pre-eminent role of Ahura Mazda, comments that the two alternatives are “just as absurd as that of the half-full or half-empty bottle”, and rightly notes the inadequacy of any of these terms on its own.<sup>9</sup>

One of the difficulties arises from the fact that the notions of monotheism, polytheism and dualism are defined not on the basis of Zoroastrianism but on that of other religions, in particular the Judeo-Christian tradition. Denoting the worship of ‘false’ gods in contrast to that of the one God of the Jews and Christians, the term ‘polytheism’ has had negative connotations from its earliest attestations onwards. The Greek word *πολυθεΐα*, from which the term derives, first occurs in the works of Philo of Alexandria (ca. 15 BCE–ca. 50 CE) who uses it polemically in the sense of the ‘idolatry’ practised by non-Jewish people, and Jean Bodin borrowed it in his *Démonomanie des sorciers*, published in 1580. The expression ‘monotheism’ was subsequently coined as its antonym to denote belief in one single god, and is first attested in 1660 in the writings of the English philosopher Henry More in relation to his own religion, Christianity.<sup>10</sup>

Having been defined from the scholarly perspective of the Judeo-Christian tradition since the period of the Enlightenment, the two terms came to constitute a dichotomy of mutually exclusive opposites. Consequently “monotheism” was claimed as the label of the Judeo-Christian tradition and endowed with greater prestige than the “polytheism” attributed to some non-Judeo-Christian religions and perceived as both challenging to and in opposition to monotheism.<sup>11</sup> In other words, the emic self-perception of the Judeo-Christian tradition has provided value-laden parameters for the etic scholarly discourse on monotheism and polytheism.<sup>12</sup> In recent decades the suitability of such a monotheism – polytheism dichotomy

<sup>3</sup>Boyd and Crosby 1979, where earlier views are also discussed. Stausberg 2002, p. 94 rightly draws attention to Pettazzoni’s observation that dualism and monotheism are not mutually exclusive categories. Cf. also below, fn. 40.

<sup>4</sup>Schwartz 2000, p. 13.

<sup>5</sup>Gnoli 1994, p. 480.

<sup>6</sup>Panaino 2004, p. 32.

<sup>7</sup>Skjærvø 2011, pp. 58f., 70–75; 2011a, p. 350.

<sup>8</sup>Kellens and Pirart 1988, p.26 and 1997 (on Y 30.3); Kellens 1991, pp.51f. (= 2000, pp.75f.).

<sup>9</sup>Kellens 1991, p. 53 (= 2000, p.77) and Kellens and Pirart 1988, p. 31.

<sup>10</sup>See Schmidt 1985; Ahn 1993, pp. 5–6 and 2003, p. 1 with references.

<sup>11</sup>Gladigow 1998, pp. 321–323.

<sup>12</sup>Stausberg 2002, p. 92; Ahn 2003. The terms “emic” and “etic” were coined by the linguistic anthropologist Kenneth Pike on the basis of the linguistic terms phonemic and phonetic to denote two different perspectives in the study of a society’s cultural system. The emic perspective arises from studying a religion as from inside the system, the etic perspective as from outside, see Pike 1967, p.37; Gladigow 1988; Headland, Pike and Harris 1990; McCutcheon 1999; Knott 2010. While the emic/etic dichotomy refers to the standpoint, that of insider/outsider focuses on the person who takes a standpoint.

has been rightly questioned on the grounds that it entails categories which are unsuitable for describing religions which the dichotomy classifies as “polytheistic”.<sup>13</sup> In this period the term “polytheism” has gradually come to be freed from some of its pejorative connotations,<sup>14</sup> to the extent that a new definition of “polytheism” has been proposed, namely “polysymbolic religiosity”.<sup>15</sup> The notion of monotheism, however, continues to be widely circumscribed by the perception of the god of the Jews, Christians and Muslims, one of whose distinctive features is omnipotence. As Alan Williams rightly notes,

it remains questionable how far Western scholars have been able to overcome their own Christian, Jewish, Muslim and other ideological backgrounds in deciding what and how they write about Zoroastrianism

and postulates that it is necessary to understand Zoroastrianism, as any other religion, on its own terms and in its own context.<sup>16</sup> The problem of classification is compounded by that of translation, since many standard renderings of Zoroastrian technical terms in modern European languages conjure up images derived from the Judeo-Christian tradition.<sup>17</sup>

An adequate characterization of Zoroastrianism is obviously not possible by imposing terms the contents of which have been defined on the basis of other religions. Rather than asking whether Zoroastrianism is monotheistic or polytheistic – a question the legitimacy of which has rightly been doubted – in what follows I hope to throw light on and suggest an explanation for the mixture of seemingly monotheistic, polytheistic and dualistic features mentioned above, which Zoroastrianism presents to the observer. I shall do so by examining one particular aspect of the Zoroastrian creation myth, namely the well-known concept of Ahura Mazdā as the maker both of the good spiritual creations and of the material world, and I shall argue that Zoroastrianism has its own particular form of monotheism – which is the Zoroastrian way.

## 2 The omniscience of Ahura Mazdā

There is general agreement among scholars that there is one supreme god in Zoroastrianism, Ahura Mazdā. From the oldest sources, the Gathas and Yasna Haptanghaiti, to present day religious practice, all worship, both ritual and devotional, is focused on him, albeit on occasion indirectly, as we shall see. The hymn dedicated to Ahura Mazdā, Yašt 1, offers lists of his names which conceptualize different aspects of his personality. These

<sup>13</sup>Ahn 1993; Gladigow 2002, p. 8.

<sup>14</sup>Stausberg 2002, pp. 92f. with references.

<sup>15</sup>Kliever 1979, p.178.

<sup>16</sup>Williams 2008, p.130. Cf. also the pertinent comment by Clarisse Herrenschmidt 1987, p.134 n.15: “I do not want to prevent anybody from thinking that Zoroastrianism is a monotheism: but I really wish that Zoroastrian monotheism could be conceived without the explicit or implicit comparison with or assimilation to the Mosaic one”.

<sup>17</sup>To quote Alan Williams again: “. . . neither the common noun ‘god’ nor the proper name ‘God’ is adequate as a translation of the Pahlavi (Middle Persian) proper noun *Ohrmazd* (Avestan *Ahura Mazda*) ‘Wise Lord’; the reason is that the theological character of Ohrmazd/Ahura Mazda does not correspond to that of the God described in Jewish or Christian biblical scriptures, nor indeed to that of the Qur’anic Allah. . . . for very similar reasons the Pahlavi common noun *yazad* is not adequately translated as ‘god’ or ‘God’, nor angel, sprite, daemon, peri, or any other exotic concoction of the thesaurus.” (Williams 2008, p.129).

names describe him as the truthful creator and organizer of the world, beneficent, healing and protecting, providing prosperity and fertility. He has authority, rules at will, is glorious, powerful and unassailable, but above all, is intelligent, wise, all-seeing, all-knowing and generous. In his edition of this text, Antonio Panaino has shown that the qualities attributed to Ahura Mazda cover the semantic fields of creation and order, protection and benevolence, happiness, wisdom and insight, majesty, glory and splendour. Panaino rightly emphasizes omniscience as his most prominent feature.<sup>18</sup>

The notion of omniscience is also lexicalized in the name of the god, Ahura Mazda, or Wise Lord. The first of this two-part name, *ahura-*, is an ordinary substantive meaning 'lord'. The noun functions as an honorific title and is used of both divine and human beings, just like English 'lord' or German 'Herr'.<sup>19</sup> The second part, the noun *mazdā-*, seems to be equivalent to *medhā-* 'wisdom' in the closely related Vedic language of Ancient India. Such correspondence, however, is only apparent, because in the syllable-counting metre of the Gathas, the Avestan acc.sg. *mazdaqm*, which occurs four times there, represents trisyllabic *mazdām*. By contrast, the Rigvedic acc.sg. *medhām* is disyllabic. While incorporating the same lexical constituents, namely the IE noun \**m̥ns-* (the double zero grade of the *s*-stem \**menos-* 'thought') and the verb \**dʰeh₁*, 'to set', such a metrical distinction indicates that the Av. and Ved. nouns are morphologically different. The Av. divine name *mazdā-* is a masculine agent noun, a root noun which literally means 'the one who sets his thought'. By contrast, in Ved. *medhā-* the same root noun has been extended with the suffix *-ā-* to form a feminine abstract substantive which as a *nomen actionis* denotes the action of 'setting one's thought', and as a *nomen rei actae* what is produced by such an action, that is 'wisdom'. Incidentally, the feminine abstract noun also occurs once in the Avesta, in the form of the acc.sg. *mazdaqm*. At first sight it is indistinguishable from the deity's name. However, in the context of the Yasna Haptanghaiti (Y 40.1), in which it occurs, the noun cannot be part of the deity's name, but only the abstract noun 'wisdom'.<sup>20</sup>

The meaning of the name of the Zoroastrian god, Ahura Mazda, may therefore be posited as 'Wise Lord'. The name incorporates the idea of him as an agent who actively 'sets his thought', *manah-*, on something and notices everything. Such a meaning fully agrees with the description of the deity's personality in the texts. In the Avesta, for example, one of his epithets is 'all knowing' (*višpō.viḍuuā* Yt 12.1),<sup>21</sup> and the Pahlavi sources give 'omniscience and goodness' as Ohrmazd's chief characteristics:

- (1) IrBd TD2 2.12–13 *Ohrmazd bālistīg pad harwišp-āgāhīh ud wehīh*  
Ohrmazd (was) on high in omniscience and goodness.<sup>22</sup>

While Ahura Mazda's personality is primarily circumscribed by the notions of omniscience and goodness, omnipotence, which may be considered to be one of, or even *the* most salient feature of the Abrahamic god, is not prominent, although it does occur on occasion. Epithets such as 'ruling at will', *vasāxšaiiaš* Y 43.1, indicate that Ahura Mazda is seen as being in

<sup>18</sup>Panaino 2002, pp.107–109, 112; cf. Pettazzoni 1956, pp.132–134.

<sup>19</sup>Hale 1986; Narten 1996. Etymologically *ahura-* belongs with the Hittite noun *hassu-* 'king', cf. below, fn. 26.

<sup>20</sup>For further details, see Hintze 2007, pp.284f. with references.

<sup>21</sup>Cf. also Boyd and Crosby 1979, p.578.

<sup>22</sup>T.D. Anklesaria 1908, p.2; B.T. Anklesaria 1956, p. 4f., Chap. 1.1.

control. Such an attribute, however, may be associated with him not because he is seen as encompassing everything, including evil, as is the case with the Abrahamic god, but for two other reasons. One is his intelligence which surpasses all and by virtue of which he is able to understand everything, including evil. He *de facto* rules over evil by virtue not of his power but of his intelligence. The second reason is that in the theological system of the Avesta Ahura Mazda is alone and above all, without either equal or negative counterpart. It is against this background that one needs to see occasional references to the ‘omnipotence (*wisp tawānīh*) of the creator Ohrmazd’ in the Middle Persian texts, where Ohrmazd *does* have a direct opponent, Ahreman.<sup>23</sup>

### 3 The origin of the spiritual creation

In addition to omniscience and goodness, creativity is the third most salient characteristic of Ahura Mazda. His creative, life-giving force has the name *spənta-mainiiu-*, and it is this energy which has a symmetrical opposite, *agra-mainiiu-*, or ‘destructive force’, the Ahreman of the just mentioned Middle Persian texts. The Gathas present the two forces as mutually exclusive opponents that have nothing in common (Y 45.2) and produce ‘life’ and its negation, ‘un-life’, i.e. bad life or death (*gaēmca ājiiāitīmca* Y 30.4) respectively.

In the Gathas Ahura Mazda is said to be the ‘father’ (*ptā*) of Truth (*aša-* Y 44.3, 47.2), of Good Thought (*vohu-manah-* Y 31.8, 45.4), of the Life-giving Force (*spənta-mainiiu-* Y 47.3),<sup>24</sup> and of Right-mindedness (*ārmaiti-* Y 45.4), which is described as his ‘daughter’ (*dugadā*). Ahura Mazda thus generates them out of himself as his children.<sup>25</sup> In the Gathas their relationship is described in biological terms not only by means of kinship nomenclature, but also by the expression ‘birth, begetting, procreation’, Avestan *zaθa-*, a noun derived from the root *zan* ‘to give birth, beget’:

(2) Y 44.3 *kasnā zaθā + ptā ašahiia paouruiiō*

Who is the primordial father of Truth by begetting?

<sup>23</sup>For instance Škand-Gumānīg Wizār 3.6, cf. Boyd and Crosby 1979, p.579 for an interpretation of the passage.

<sup>24</sup>In Y 47.3 line a, all text-critically relevant mss. have the reading *tā*. Since at three other Gathic attestations the nom.sg. of *p(i)tar-* ‘father’ is *p(a)tā* (monosyllabic), Kellens and Pirart 1988–1991, III p. 215 and II pp.7, 245 interpret the form *tā* in Y 47.3 at face value as the instr.sg. of the demonstrative pronoun and translate it as ‘comme celui’: *ahiiā maniiāiū tuiāim ahī tā spəntō yō . . .* ‘Tu appartiens à cet état d’esprit et tu es bénéfique comme celui qui . . .’. However, they also admit that the assumption of a rare “instrumental libre” results from “une analyse embarrassée” (II p.6). Although the Pahlavi version of Y 47.3 has no word for ‘father’, Bartholomae’s 1888, pp.54f. and 1904, cols.905, 906 n.4 view is preferable, according to which the form *tā* is the nom.sg. of *p(i)tar-* ‘father’. He addresses the preceding Y 47.2c, where Ahura Mazda is addressed as the father of *aša-*, as contextual support. Humbach 1959, II p.74 and 1991, II p.192, who also interprets Y 47.3 *tā* as the nom.sg. of *p(i)tar-* ‘father’, considers that *tā spəntō* has arisen in this particular collocation from *\*ptā spəntō* by dissimilation. Other scholars regard the loss of word initial *p-* before *-t-*, which Bartholomae’s explanation entails, as regular. Since it is also found in YA. *tūirīa-* ‘brother of the father, paternal uncle’, < *\*ptōrūia-* (Hoffmann and Forssman 2004, p.94, §60.f; Mayrhofer 1986, p.138 fn.172), Beekes 1981, p.284 and Tremblay 2003, pp.17f. regard the form *tā* as reflecting the Young Avestan pronunciation while Tichy 1985, pp.232, 243 n. 17 and 25 suggests that in the OAv. form *p(a)tā* the initial *p-* was restored, possibly motivated by the vocative *\*pitar*.

<sup>25</sup>Kellens 1994, p.81 fn.27 comments that “Ahura Mazda ne se débrouille pas mal sexuellement”. Describing this process as “mariage avec soi-même”, he suggests that it prefigures the concept of next-of-kin marriage (1995, p.42f.). In the opinion of Skjærvø 2011a, p.344, in the Old Avesta Ahura Mazda generated the Life-Giving Immortals as part of “his primordial sacrifice”. In addition to the birth scenario, the Avesta also attests the concept of creation by fashioning (Av. *taš*, *θβars*, etc.) and thinking (Av. *man*), see Skjærvø 2011, pp.50f.

The answer is, of course, Ahura Mazdā. In Y 43.5, the speaker ('I') mentions his vision of Ahura Mazdā in the begetting of existence:

- (3) Y 43.5 *spəntəm at θβā mazdā mānghi ahurā*  
*hīiat θβā aghāuš zaθōi darəsəm paouruuīm*  
 Life-giving indeed I think that you are, O Wise Lord,  
 when I see you as the primeval one in the begetting of life.<sup>26</sup>

Kinship terminology with regard to his spiritual offspring is also found in the Younger Avesta, where Ahura Mazdā is said to be the 'father and master' of the Amesha Spentas:

- (4) Yt 19.16 (= Yt 13.83)  
*yaēšaym asti haməm manō*  
*haməm vacō haməm śīiaoθnəm*  
*hamō pataca frasāstaca*  
*yō dādūuā ahurō mazdā*  
 (The Life-giving Immortals) who have the same thought,  
 the same word, the same action,  
 the same father and master,  
 the creator Ahura Mazdā.

A 'second generation' of spiritual creations appears when in the Younger Avesta Ahura Mazdā is presented as the 'father' (*pitar-*) and *ārmaiti*-<sup>27</sup> (whom the Gathas describe as his 'daughter') as the 'mother' (*mātar-*) of Reward (*aši-*, Yt 17.16). Reward has Attentiveness (*sraoša-*), Justice (*rašnu-*) and Contract (*miθra-*) as 'brothers' (*brātar-*) and she is the 'sister' (*x' aghar-*) of the Mazdā-worshipping Belief (*dāēnā- māzdaiiasni-* Yt 17.16) and of the Amesha Spentas (Yt 17.2).

A variation of the metaphor that the spiritual creations are the offspring of Ahura Mazdā is the description of the Amesha Spentas as the 'beautiful forms' or 'bodies' (*kəhrpasca . . . sīrā*) which Ahura Mazdā adopts:

- (5) Yt 13.81 *yeñhe uruua maθrō spəntō*  
*aurušō raoxšnō frādərərō*  
*kəhrpasca yā rāēθβaiieiti*  
*sīrā aməšanaqm spəntanaqm*  
*vərəzdā aməšanaqm spəntanaqm*  
 (Ahura Mazdā), whose soul (is) the Life-giving Formula,  
 white, shining, seen afar;

<sup>26</sup>The combination of *zaθa-* with *ahu-* 'life' in Y 43.5 and 48.6 has phraseological parallels in Vedic. Eichner 2002, pp.136–140, who connects Av. *ahu-*, Ved. *ásu-* with Hittite *hassu-* 'king' (rather than with the verb *ah* 'to be' as in Mayrhofer 1986–2001 vol. 1, p.147), argues that Ir. \**asu-* specifically means 'engendered life' ("das gezeugte Leben und die durch die Zeugung übermittelte Zeugungsfähigkeit", p.138) and that the Ir. phrase \**ásu- jān*\* results from lexical substitution of an IE figura etymologica involving the verb IE \**h<sub>2</sub>ens*, which only survives in Anatolian, in particular in Hittite *hass* 'to beget'.

<sup>27</sup>On *ārmaiti-* in the wider Indo-European, especially Indo-Iranian, context, see Skjærvø 2002. Schwartz 2000, p.15 suggests that the form *ārmaiti-*, which replaced \**aramati-* at an early stage in the tradition of the Avesta, shows remodelling analogical on the word \**ār-* 'land' found in Buddhist Sogdian \**r* 'plot of land'.

and the forms which he adopts<sup>28</sup>  
 (are) the beautiful (forms) of the Life-giving Immortals,  
 the mature<sup>29</sup> (forms) of the Life-giving Immortals.

Ahura Mazda is here seen as comprising like a human being, a spiritual part consisting of a soul (*uruuan-*), which in his case is the Life-giving Formula, and a material part, a visible form (*kəhrp-*), the Life-giving Immortals.<sup>30</sup> The noun *kəhrp-* denotes Ahura Mazda's visible form in the Yasna Haptanghaiti, where 'this light here', which includes the ritual fire inhabited by Ahura Mazda's heavenly fire, is declared to be the god's most beautiful 'body', or 'form':

- (6) Y 36.6 *sraēštəm at tōi kəhrpəm kəhrpəm*  
*āuuāēdaiiamahī mazdā ahurā*  
*imā raocā*  
*barəzištəm + barəzəmanəm auuat*  
*yāt huuarē auuācī*  
 We now declare, O Wise Lord,  
 that this light here  
 has been the most beautiful form of your forms,  
 ever since yonder highest of heights  
 was called the sun.

Moreover, that all his forms are worshipped is summarized in

- (7) Y 71.4 *vīspəma kərəšš ahurahe mazdā yazamaide*  
 And we worship each form of the Wise Lord.

Against this Avestan background one may interpret the following passage from the Middle Persian Bundahišn:

- (8) IrBd TD2 11.2–3 *Ohrmazd az ān ī xwēš xwadīh + kē gētīy rōšnīh kirb ī dāmān ī xwēš frāz brēhēnīd.*  
 From his own essence, which is material light, Ohrmazd brought forth the form of his own creatures.<sup>31</sup>

<sup>28</sup>The literal meaning of the verb *raēθəaiia-* being 'to mix', the underlying syntactic structure of the sentence seems to be: 'and the bodies with which he mixes (his own) are the beautiful bodies of the Life-giving Immortals'. It is then parallel to that of Yt 8.13, 16 and 18, where *raēθəaiia-* governs the acc. *kəhrpəm* which is complemented by the instrumental *kəhrpa*, the latter denoting the body with which the star Tištrya 'mixes' his own. The Yt 8 passages describe how for three times ten nights the star Tištrya takes on the body first of a 15 year old man, then of a bull and finally of a horse in order to receive and reward ritual worship.

<sup>29</sup>Literally: 'grown', past perfect participle of the verb *vərd* 'to grow' (Bartholomae 1904, col.1369). The expression could be interpreted as implying the birth scenario in so far as Ahura Mazda's spiritual creation have 'matured' during a period of gestation. For a possible link between this detail and an account in the Pahlavi Rivāyat of the Dādestān ī Dēnīg 46.3, according to which Ohrmazd created the material world out of his 'body', see below.

<sup>30</sup>On the description of Ahura Mazda in anthropomorphic terms, see below.

<sup>31</sup>B.T. Anklesaria 1956, pp. 14f., chap. 1.44. Cf. Skjærø 1995, p.272 with fn.25 who connects this Pahlavi myth with various OAv. passages. For the transcription *gētīy* and *mēnōy* (rather than *gētīg* and *mēnōg*), see Skjærø 1995, p.269 fn.15, 2002a, p.30 fn.7; 2009, pp.480 fn.8 and 481 fn.12; 2011, p.63 fn.33.

When seen in the light of the Avestan idea that Ahura Mazdā takes on a ‘body’ (*kəhrp-*) in the form of the Amesha Spentas, the Pahlavi *kīrb ī dāmān ī xwēš* ‘the form of his own creatures’ in the above passage refers to Ohrmazd’s spiritual creation,<sup>32</sup> which elsewhere in the Middle Persian creation myth is described as one occurring in the ‘spiritual’, *mēnōyīhā* state:

(9) IrBd TD2 4.4–5 *u-š mēnōyīhā ān dām ī pad ān abzār andar abāyēd frāz brēhēnīd*

And in a spiritual state he brought forth that creation which is necessary as an instrument.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, in both the Avestan and Middle Persian creation myths all good spiritual or *mainīiauuu*-beings descend directly from Ahura Mazdā. The notion that they are made of the same substance as the god is expressed in the Avesta by the noun ‘birth, begetting’ (*zəθa-*) and by kinship terms (‘father’, ‘daughter’) and in the Middle Persian texts by Ohrmazd’s ‘own essence’ (*xwēš xwadīh*) from which the spiritual creatures are made.

The idea that Ahura Mazdā produced the spiritual world out of himself is found in the later tradition as well as in the Avesta and Pahlavi literature. One instance occurs in the manuscripts Pt4 and Mf4, which contain the Avestan text of the Yasna with its Pahlavi translation and commentary. Both manuscripts were presumably written around 1780 and descend from one which was copied by the scribe Hōšang ī Syāwaxš ī Šahryār ī Baxtafrīd ī Šahryār in Isfahan in 1495 CE (864 Anno Yazdegerd). The introduction on the first folios not only includes two colophons, one of which is by Hōšang, but also a summary of Zoroastrian doctrine:

(10) Pt4 fol.2v20–3r6; Mf4 fol.2r1–9<sup>34</sup>

*ud ēyōn ohrmazd ī xwadāy ī mēnōyān mahist ud abzōnīgtom*

*pad bun dahišn ud pad dād ud rawāg būdan ī dām ī xwēš  
ud abāz dāštan ī ēbgat ud petyārag az dām ī xwēš  
ud abaydāg kardan ahreman ud dēwān ud har družīh ud watarīh  
ud kardan ī rist-āxēz ud tan ī pasēn rāy*

*amahraspand ud hamāg yazad ud dēn ī weh ī mazdēsān  
az tan ī xwēš tāšīd ud āfrīd ud pad abēzagīh frāz brēhēnīd*

And inasmuch as Ohrmazd, the lord, the greatest and most bountiful of the spiritual beings

— in the primal creation and in his own creation becoming created and current,  
and in order to keep the enemy and adversary away from his own creation,

<sup>32</sup>This is also how Skjærvø 1995, p.269 interprets this particular passage. The noun *kīrb* (the Middle Persian etymological equivalent of Av. *kəhrp-*) also denotes the ‘form’ of the material creation in its spiritual state, see below.

<sup>33</sup>B.T. Anklesaria 1956, pp. 6f., chap. 1.13.

<sup>34</sup>Facsimiles of Pt4 have been published by Arash Zeini 2012 on the website of the Avestan Digital Archive. For those of Mf4 (= D90), see JamaspAsa and Nawabi 1976. The introduction is also found in other mss. belonging to this family, in particular G14, T6, E7, and T54 of the Meherji Rānā Library, Navsari.



and to annihilate Ahreman and the demons and every deceitfulness and wickedness, and to bring about the resurrection of the dead and the future body —

from his own body shaped, created and in purity brought forth  
the Amahraspands and all sacred beings and the good religion of the Mazdā-worshippers.<sup>35</sup>

#### 4 Ahreman and his evil creation

In the Gathas and Old Persian inscriptions the cultic competitors of Ahura Mazdā are the *daēuuas*, the Iranian equivalent of the Vedic ‘gods’ (*devá-*), rather than Angra Mainyu.<sup>36</sup> From a systematic point of view, the latter is the opponent not of Ahura Mazdā, but of Spenta Mainyu. Since the Daivas and their cult are both vehemently rejected and associated with the lie, the Mazdayasnian religion exhibits features belonging to what Jan Assmann has described as ‘the Mosaic distinction’.<sup>37</sup> The development in the Younger Avesta and subsequent tradition is that the *daēuuas* are ‘downgraded’ and become Angra Mainyu’s evil products and handiwork, the *dēus* of the Pahlavi texts,<sup>38</sup> while Spenta Mainyu is ‘upgraded’ to the extent that he merges with Ahura Mazdā.<sup>39</sup> This progression eventually results in the direct opposition of Ahura Mazdā and Angra Mainyu in the Younger Avesta and Ohrmazd and Ahreman in the Pahlavi texts. Such antagonism has at times been misinterpreted by outside observers to mean that the two are on equal footing, and even that Zoroastrianism entails two gods, one good and the other evil. However, such a concept, which would need to be described as ‘ditheism’, does not apply to the Zoroastrian tradition.<sup>40</sup>

Angra Mainyu’s fashioning of his own, evil creation is described in the Avesta by the verb *fraca kərət-* (e.g. Y 9.8 *fraca kərəntat*), literally ‘to cut forth’. The fact that this Avestan verb is the etymological antecedent of the Middle Persian *frāz kirrēnīdan*, which is used in this context in the Pahlavi texts, is a further indication of the extent to which Pahlavi accounts are based on Avestan traditions.<sup>41</sup> In the Pahlavi texts, Ahreman’s creative activity is described in parallel though negative terms to that of Ohrmazd. While Ohrmazd created ‘the form of his own creatures’ (i.e. his spiritual creations, which include the spiritual forms of the material creations) ‘from his own self’ (*az ān ī xwēš xwadīh*), from his ‘material light’ (*gētīy rōšnīh*), ‘from his own body’ (*az tan ī xwēš*),<sup>42</sup> Ahreman produced his creation (*dām frāz kirrēnīd*) from ‘material darkness’ (*az gētīy tāngīh*), eg. in TD2 11.10 and

(11) TD2 12.1–2 *az gētīy tāngīh ān ī asar tāngīh dād*  
*az asar tāngīh drō-gōwišnīh frāz būd*

<sup>35</sup>On the form *mazdēsnan*, see Skjærvø 2007, pp.30–33.

<sup>36</sup>See Hintze 2013.

<sup>37</sup>Assmann 2003.

<sup>38</sup>Herrenschmidt and Kellens 1993.

<sup>39</sup>See Narten 1982, pp.39–41; Kreyenbroek 1993a.

<sup>40</sup>Pettazzoni 1920, p.96; Panaino 2001, pp.102 and 2004, p.21f. with fn.19; Stausberg 2002, p.94 with references.

<sup>41</sup>On the semantic development of this verb from ‘cut’ to daēvic ‘create’, see Lincoln 1997. On the Av. verb *fraca kərət-* cf. Skjærvø 2011, p.61.

<sup>42</sup>TD2 11.2–6, B.T. Anklesaria 1956, p.14, chap. 1.44, and above, text passage no. 10.

From material darkness he created endless darkness;  
from endless darkness false speech came forth.<sup>43</sup>

From the ‘endless darkness’, Ahreman produced the ‘form’ (*kirb*) of his own spiritual creation:

(12) TD2 12.5–6 *az asar ī tāwīgīh ān tan frāz kirrēnād*  
*u-š xwēš tan dām andar ān kirb bē dād*

From the endless darkness he brought forth that body  
and he created his own creation in that form.<sup>44</sup>

In the Pahlavi sources the view is stated that Ahreman has no material creation that would correspond to his spiritual one.<sup>45</sup> The Avesta, by contrast, lists the ‘reddish snake’ (Vd 1.2), ‘dragon Dahāka’ (Y 9.8) and ‘corn-bearing ants’ (Vd 1.6) amongst Angra Mainyu’s material products alongside a host of evils of less material nature, such as undesirable natural phenomena (winter Vd 1.2 and 19, heat Vd 1.18, death and disease Vd 20.3, 22.2) and those involving human action (doubt Vd 1.7 and 15, excessive lamentation Vd 1.8 and burying or boiling corpses Vd 1.12, 16).<sup>46</sup> However, although some of Angra Mainyu’s products have a material form, they all are nothing but negative counter-creations which Angra Mainyu produces in order to harm Ahura Mazda’s creatures.<sup>47</sup>

## 5 The origin of the material world

The worship of Ahura Mazda as the creator of both the spiritual and material worlds is found in the Gathas (e.g. Y 44.3–5) and the Yasna Haptanghaiti, from which the beginning of Y 37 also forms part of the Khorde Avesta as a grace to be said before meals<sup>48</sup> and is often quoted within the Zoroastrian tradition:

(13) Y 37.1 *iθā āt yazamaidē ahurəm mazdān*  
*γō gaṃcā ašəmācā dāt*  
*apascā dāt uruuarāscā varṇ<sup>v</sup> hīš*  
*raocāscā dāt būmīmācā*  
*vīspācā vohū*

Y 37.2 *ahiiā xšaθrācā mazēnācā hauuapaṇhāišcā*

In this way we now worship the Wise Lord,  
who has created<sup>49</sup> the cow and truth,  
(who) has created the waters and the good plants,  
(who) has created light and the earth

<sup>43</sup>B.T. Anklesaria 1956, pp.14f., chap. 1.49.

<sup>44</sup>The text here follows the ms. TD1 12.3–4 ‘P-š NPŠH d’m BŸN ZK klp BR’ YHBWN-t, as does B.T. Anklesaria 1956, p.16, chap. 1.49. The ms. TD2 has ‘P-š NPŠH tn’ d’m W MN klp BR’ YHBWN-t’.

<sup>45</sup>Shaked 1967.

<sup>46</sup>Cf. the table in Grenet 2005, p.31.

<sup>47</sup>Gnoli 1995, pp. 219f.; Shaked 1994, p.23.

<sup>48</sup>Kotwal and Hintze 2008, pp. 28–29.

<sup>49</sup>On the translation of the verb *dā* and the disputed question whether Ahura Mazda ‘arranged’ or ‘created’ the world, see Hintze 2007, pp.162–167 with references.

and all that is good  
 Y 37.2 by his rule, greatness and skill.

In one of the oldest Younger Avestan, or rather Middle Avestan (see fn.50 and 51), texts the worshippers refer to the ‘cattle breeder’ as the ‘father’ of the ‘cow’, of ‘truth’ and of the ‘existence’ of the truthful person:

(14) Y 58.4 *fšūmā<sup>o</sup> astī ašauuā vərəθraja<sup>o</sup> vahištō*  
*fšūšō carəkərəmahī*  
*hā pīā gəušcā ašaḥhācā*  
*ašaonascā ašāuuairiīscā stōiš*  
*haiθiīō vaḥhudā*

The cattle breeder is truthful, resistance breaking, best.

We celebrate the cattle owner.

This one (is) the father of the cow and of truth.<sup>50</sup>

(He is) the real provider of good (things)

for the existence of the truthful male and truthful female one.<sup>51</sup>

Bartholomae’s 1904, 1029 interpretation that Y 58.4–5 are spoken by the cow is difficult to reconcile with the 1pl. form of the verb. It is more probable that the words are uttered by the worshippers, and that *fšūman-* ‘possessing cattle, cattle breeding’ refers metaphorically to Ahura Mazda. Such a view is supported by Yt 1.13, where the adj. is one of Ahura Mazda’s names, alongside the name of the text:

(15) Yt 1.13 *fšūmā<sup>o</sup> naḡna ahmi*  
*fšūšō.maθra naḡna ahmi*

I am ‘Cattle Breeder’ by name.

I am ‘Formula of the Cattle-Owner’ by name.

Y 58.4, as well as the Gathas (Y 44.3, 47.2), then presents Ahura Mazda as the ‘father’ of Truth. The collocation of ‘truth’ and ‘cow’ as Ahura Mazda’s ‘children’ recalls the expression

<sup>50</sup>The word *ašaḥhācā*, found in the mss. Pt4 and Mf4, is the gen.sg. of the noun *aša-* ‘truth, order’ and represents a form peculiar to this text. It contrasts with Old Avestan *ašaxiiācā* and Young Avestan *ašahecā* and its presence provides one of the arguments justifying the positing of a distinct language stage, which has been described as ‘Middle Avestan’, see Tremblay 2006, p. 247 and the discussion by Kellens 2007, pp. 104–110.

<sup>51</sup>The mss. Pt4 Mf4 of the Iranian Pahlavi Yasna and K5 M1 and F2 of the Indian Pahlavi Yasna have the reading *ašāuuairiīscā stōiš*, which is the form edited by Geldner 1889–1896 I p.206. Other mss., by contrast, read *ašā vairiīscā stōiš*. The latter reading is supported by the OAv. genitive expression *vairiīā stōiš* ‘of desirable existence’ in Y 43.13. Moreover, the Pahlavi translation *ahlāyīh kāmagān-iz stī* ‘also of the existence of the desires for righteousness’, indicates that the Pahlavi translators interpreted Y 58.4 in the light of the Gathic passage. With reference to the Pahlavi version and since elsewhere in the Avesta the fem. form of *ašāuuan-* is *ašaonī-*, Pirart 1992, p.235 with fn.39 prefers the reading *ašā vairiīscā stōiš*. He translates the last three lines of Y 58.4 ‘C’est le père de la Vache et du Rta, du Rtavan qui est avec le Rta et de la Sti de choix’. The rendering of Tremblay 2006, p.257 and 2007, pp.689f. is similar: ‘c’est lui le père du bœuf, de l’Ordre, du fidèle de l’Ordre selon l’Ordre et de la possession désirable’. Pirart supports the combination of *ašāuuan-* with the instrumental *ašā* ‘truthful through truth’, which his interpretation entails, with a parallel in RV 4.42.4.

The reading *ašāuuairiīscā*, the gen.sg. of the fem. stem *ašāuuairī-*, represents the only Av. attestation of the equivalent of Ved. *ṛtāvairī-* (Bartholomae 1904, col.257). Such an interpretation is supported by the common YAv. combination of *ašāuuan-* with *sti-* ‘existence’, although only the masculine form is attested (Bartholomae 1904, cols.251, 1592f.). The usual OAv. and YAv. form *ašaonī-* being an innovation, *ašāuuairī-* is then an archaism which has survived in what Hoffmann calls a dialect (Tichy 1986, pp.100, 104 with references) and Tremblay Middle Avestan, of which Y 58.4 is the chief witness, cf. the previous footnote.

γῶ γαῃῃῃ ἄῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃ of Y 37.1, quoted above no.13, which presents the pair as the god's creations.<sup>52</sup> In the ensuing invocations the worshippers address the Life-giving Immortals as their own creators, quoting passages from the Gathas to corroborate their requests:

- (16) Y 58.5 γῃῃῃ ῃῃ ῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃ  
 ῃῃῃ ῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ( = Y 34.7c)  
 ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ  
 ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ  
 ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ  
 ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃ ῃῃῃ ῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ ( = Y 34.7c)  
 As you have created us, O Life-giving Immortals,  
 “Therefore protect us!” ( = Y 34.7c)  
 Protect us, O good (male) ones,  
 Protect us, O good (female) ones,  
 Protect us, O Life-giving Immortals of good rule, of good gifts,  
 “Through Truth I do not know anyone else than you: therefore protect us!” ( = Y 34.7c)

Also in the Younger Avesta, both Ahura Mazdā and the Life-giving Immortals are presented as creators of the material world. In particular, the idea that Ahura Mazdā is such a ‘creator’ (*dātar-*, his standing epithet) is formalized in his standard address, which is usually abbreviated but occurs in its full form, for instance, in Vd 2.1 and in Yt 1.1:

- (17) Yt 1.1 ῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ  
 ῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ  
 O Wise Lord, most Life-giving Force,  
 creator of the material world, truthful one!

Ahura Mazdā is here identified with the ‘most Life-giving Force’. Elsewhere, the texts refer to the ‘creations of the Life-giving Force’, *ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ* (Yt 10.142), and Spenta Mainyu has the same epithet as Ahura Mazdā, *ῃῃῃῃῃῃ*, meaning ‘the one who has created’, for instance:

- (18) Yt 10.143 γῶ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃ ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ  
 the creator, the Life-giving Force.

It has already been mentioned above, that while Ahura Mazdā is without negative counterpart in the Avesta, *ῃῃῃῃῃῃ- ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ-* has an opponent in *ῃῃῃῃῃ- ῃῃῃῃῃῃῃ-*. Both of them create, the good force producing a good creation, the bad force a bad one, as stated, for example, in

<sup>52</sup>This and other OAv. parallels to Y 58.4 were noted by Tremblay 2007, p.691.

- (19) Y 57.17<sup>53</sup> *γō nōiṭ pascaēta hušxʷ afa*  
*yaṭ mainiiū dāmaṇ daiḍītəm*  
*yasca spəntō mainiiuš yasca aṇrō*  
*hišārō ašahe gāēθā*<sup>2</sup>  
*γō vīspāiš aiiaṇca xšafnasca*  
*γūiḍiieiti māzaniaēibiū haḍa daēuuaiēibiū*  
 (Sraoša), who afterwards has not slept  
 ever since the two spirits used to create<sup>54</sup> the creations  
 – he, the Bounteous Spirit and he, the Evil One –,  
 watching over the living beings of Truth;  
 (Sraoša,) who, every day and night  
 fights with the Māzanyan demons.

The passage could be seen as further developing the Gathic idea that each of the two spirits or ‘forces’ (*mainiiū*) generates handiwork corresponding to its own nature:

- (20) Y 30.4 *aṭcā hiiat tā hē m mainiiū jasaētəm paouruuīm dazdē*  
*gaēmca ājiiāitīmca γaθācā aṇhaṭ apəntəm aṇhuš*  
*acištō drəguuatam aṭ ašaumē vahištəm manō*  
 And when these two spirits initially come together, they create  
 life and unlife respectively and that ultimately the life  
 of the deceitful ones will be very bad, but for the truthful one (it will be) the best  
 thought.

Not only Ahura Mazdā and *spənta-mainiiu-*, but all the Life-giving Immortals are presented as creating and protecting the material world. In addition to Y 58.5, quoted above no.16, for instance in

- (21) Yt 19.18 *γōi hənti āṇhaṇ dāmanaṇ*  
*yaṭ ahurahe mazdā*  
*dātarasca marəxštarasca*  
*θβarəxštarasca aiβiiāxštarasca*  
*nipātarasca nišharətarasca*  
 (The Amesha Spentas,) who are the creators and formers,  
 the fashioners and guardians,  
 the protectors and watchers  
 of these creatures  
 of Ahura Mazdā.

While the Avesta provides little further insight into exactly how the material world is thought to have come about, it is clear that it is presented as coming from Ahura Mazdā via

<sup>53</sup>Similarly Yt 13.76 and Yt 15.43. Cf. Kreyenbroek 1993a, p.99 on these and similar passages.

<sup>54</sup>On form *daiḍītəm*, 3pl.dual opt.pres.act. of the root *dā* ‘to give; to set’, denoting a repeated action in the past, see Hoffmann 1975, p.610. In the present context the form could emphasize the idea that the two antagonistic forces created their respective creations one by one. Differently Skjærvø 2011, p.61 fn. 24, according to whom the optative implies “a recurrent regeneration of the world, rather than an exclusively primordial act.”

the Amesha Spentas. In this connection one may view the occasional, although, as Narten has shown, in the Avesta not yet systematic, correlation between the material and spiritual creations, in so far as, for example, the earth corresponds to ‘right-mindedness’ (*ārmaiti-*), the cow to ‘good thought’ (*vohu manah-*), metal to ‘desirable rule’ (*xšaθra- vairiia-*), water to ‘wholeness’ (*hauruuaatāt-*) and plants to ‘immortality’ (*amərətātāt-*).<sup>55</sup> The later full and systematic development of such a correlation, as found in the Pahlavi texts, can be seen as corresponding to the idea, amply attested in the Avesta, that Ahura Mazdā made the material world out of the Amesha Spentas, following their generation out of himself.

The notion that the material creation is secondary to and derives from the spiritual one also occurs in the Middle Persian sources. Thus, the Bundahišn states that the spiritual creation is first, and the material one emerges from the Amahraspands:

(22) TD2 14.1–2 *mēnōy nazdist gētīy az amahraspandān*

The spiritual (is) first, the material from the Life-giving Immortals.<sup>56</sup>

The way in which the material world derives from the spiritual one is described in different ways in the various Pahlavi sources, but all agree that there are two phases, one before and one after the Assault of Evil. According to the Bundahišn, in the phase before such an attack, Ohrmazd made one archetype of each material creation first in spiritual and then in material form.<sup>57</sup>

According to an account preserved in chapter 46 of the Pahlavi Rivāyat of the Dādestān ī Dēnīg, Ohrmazd made components of the material creation one by one out of ‘his own body’ (*u-š pas ēk ēk az tan ī xwēš hamē brēhēnīd* 46.3), the sky from the head and the earth from the feet,<sup>58</sup> just as he had produced those of the spiritual creation out of himself. In preparation for the material creation, he ‘kept them in his body for 3,000 years’ and ‘caused them ever to increase and made (them) ever more beautiful’. Like the spiritual one, which in the Avesta (Yt 13.81, see above no.5) is said to have ‘matured’, the material creation in the spiritual phase of its production is here also seen as having undergone a period of ‘gestation’ before being made in material form. In other words, Ohrmazd was, so to speak, ‘pregnant’, first with the spiritual, and then with the material creation in its spiritual state.<sup>59</sup> In this connection one may also see the statement of the Bundahišn, that Ohrmazd has the

<sup>55</sup>Narten 1982, p.147f.

<sup>56</sup>B.T. Anklesaria 1956, pp.16–17, chap. 1.53. For a Dēnkard passage (DkM 43.11–14) which describes the Amahraspands as the spiritual (*mēnōy*) counterpart and ‘selfness’ (*xwādīh*) of the material creations, see Shaked 1971, p.77.

<sup>57</sup>On the stages of creation see Shaked 1971, p.65f.

<sup>58</sup>Williams 1990 I pp.160f., II pp.72f. and 1985, pp.686, 691. Translating *az tan ī xwēš* as ‘from the body of his own (making)’, Williams 1985, 684f. interprets the ‘body’ (*tan*) as that of Gayōmard rather than of Ohrmazd as proposed here. For a passage in the Bundahišn, according to which each part of the human body corresponds to one of the Amahraspands, the soul, perception and other mental faculties belonging to Ohrmazd, the flesh to Wahman etc., see Shaked 1971, p.82 with fn.75. An Avestan predecessor could be seen in Y 58.5, quoted above no.16, in which the worshippers state that the Amesha Spentas have ‘created us’.

<sup>59</sup>The Avestan parallel supports Williams’s conclusion that this account, which he characterizes as “*étrange* without necessarily being *étranger*”, is rooted in the Zoroastrian tradition, rather than due to foreign influence, as suggested by earlier scholars (Williams 1985, 683–686). Parallels for the concept of a ‘cosmic body’ in accounts of the world’s origin in other Indo-European traditions are then better explained as being common inheritance, rather than borrowings.

‘motherhood’ (*mādarīh*) of his spiritual creation and the ‘fatherhood’ (*pidarīh*) of the material one.<sup>60</sup>

The one representative of each creation, which Ohrmazd had produced, was subsequently polluted and killed by Ahreman. According to one version of the creation myth, related in Bundahišn, chapter 7 (TD2 71.12–73.5), Ohrmazd, in his omniscience, had made one exemplar of each of the seven material creations in the spiritual as well as the material state. Then, following Ahreman’s Assault, he took the (indestructible) spiritual version of each material creation, referred to as its ‘mirror-image’ (*ēwēnag*) and ‘form’ (*kirb*), and purified each of them respectively in the sun, moon and stars, that is to say in those celestial spaces which were inaccessible to Ahreman. From the purified ‘blueprint’ he subsequently recreated the material creation in material form, but this time in multiplicity.<sup>61</sup> It is this ‘post-Assault’ phase of the material creation that the texts offer the greatest variety in the way the creation myth is formulated.<sup>62</sup>

### 6 The Worship of the Yazatas

The correlation between the material and spiritual worlds, which, as we have seen, is fundamental to Zoroastrian thought, is based on the idea that the material world derives from the spiritual one, and the latter from Ahura Mazda. Everything that belongs to Ahura Mazda’s spiritual and material worlds is potentially capable of being worshipped (*yaz*) and is therefore *yazata*- ‘worthy of worship’.<sup>63</sup> By contrast, anything connected with Angra Mainyu is *a-iiēsniia*- ‘unworthy of worship’. The Avesta describes Ahura Mazda as the greatest and best of all the *yazatas* (Yt 17.16, Y 16.1). There is in fact a host of unnamed spiritual and material Yazatas, of which the spiritual ones are in their hundreds and thousands, as stated in Yt 6.1:

(23) Yt 6.1 *huuarəxšaētəm aməšəm raēm*

*auruuat.aspəm yazamaide*

*āat yaṭ huuarə raoxšnō tāpaiieiti*

*āat yaṭ huuarə raocō tāpaiieiti*

*hištənti mainīiauuāhō yazatāhō*

*satəmca hazəhrəmca*

We worship the splendid sun, the immortal splendour  
who has swift horses.

When the shining sun waxes warm  
when the sun, the light, waxes warm,

(then) the spiritual venerable ones are standing up  
in their hundreds and thousands.

<sup>60</sup>For this passage, see Williams 1985, p.685; Skjærvø, 2011, p.65; 2011a, p.341; Filippone 2003, p.93f.

<sup>61</sup>Anklesaria 1956, pp.86–89; for further details, see Hintze 2009.

<sup>62</sup>For different versions of the creation myth, see Kreyenbroek 1993.

<sup>63</sup>Cf. Shaked 1971, p.75.

In addition, named spiritual Yazatas include the Amesha Spentas (Vr 8.1, 9.4), Contract (*miθra-* Yt 10.6, 98 etc.), Harkening (*sraoša-* Y 3.20), Breaking of Resistance (*vərəθraγna-* Yt 14.1), Dāmōiš Upamana (Y 2.15 etc.), Nairyō.sarha (Ny 5.6 etc.), the Scion of the Waters (*apaṃ napāt-* Yt 19.52) and Uprightness (*aršti-* Y 57.33). Material Yazatas mentioned by name include the Wind (*vaiiu-* Yt 15.1), Fire (*atar-* Y 3.21), the Mountain *uši.darəna-* (Y 2.14), the Earth (*zam-* S 1.28, 2.28) and Zarathustra (Y 3.12).<sup>64</sup> A Yazata may be praised ‘with a ritual in which his or her name is uttered’ (*aoxtō.nāmana yasna*),<sup>65</sup> but they are all seen as being in relation to Ahura Mazdā. This connection is expressed in the formula *āhūriiēhe aoxtō.nāmanō yazatahe* ‘of the sacred being belonging to the Lord, invoked by its own name’ (Y 3.20 of Sraoša, Y 3.21 of Ātar).

The view that anything that comes from Ahura Mazdā is ‘worthy of worship’ enables the Mazdayasnian tradition to absorb other deities, old (such as Mithra) and new, and incorporate them into its own world and pantheon provided they are subordinate to Ahura Mazdā. Thus, for instance, Ahura Mazdā enjoins the worship of deities such as *Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā* (Yt 5.1 = Yt 13.4, Y 65.1) and in this way legitimizes the cult of a major goddess alongside himself, without threatening his own primacy:

(24) Yt 5.1 (= Yt 13.4, Y 65.1)  
*mraoϑ ahurō mazdā spitamāi zaraθuštrāi*  
*yazaeša mē hīm spitama zaraθuštra*  
*γaṃ arəduuīm sūraṃ anāhitāṃ*  
*pərəθū.fīrākāṃ baēšaziiāṃ*  
*vīdaēuuāṃ ahurō.tkaēšāṃ*  
*yesmiiāṃ aṃ<sup>v</sup>he astuuaitē*  
*vahmiiāṃ aṃ<sup>v</sup>he astuuaitē*

Ahura Mazdā said to Spitāma Zarathustra:

“You may worship on my behalf, O Spitāma Zarathustra,  
*Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā*  
 who is far-reaching, provides healing  
 who is opposed to the demons and follows the teachings of the Lord,  
 who is to be worshipped by the bodily life,  
 who is to be prayed to by the bodily life.”

Rather than being cultic competitors, the Yazatas thus strengthen and support Ahura Mazdā.

In the Gathas, Ahura Mazdā is described as possessing a body just like human beings: he has ears (Y 51.3 *gəušā-*), eyes (Y 31.13 *cašman-*), hands (Y 43.4 *zasta-*), a tongue (*hizū-* Y 31.3) and a mouth (*āh-* Y 28.11, 31.3) and he sees, hears, speaks and teaches. His description in anthropomorphic terms is also found in the later Pahlavi texts. Šāyast nē Šāyast 15.1–4, for example, describes the deity as a person, but nevertheless as an entirely spiritual being,

<sup>64</sup>Bartholomae 1904, col.1279; Jackson 1896–1904, pp.640–646. The masc. *yazata-* is used as an apposition to both masculine and feminine nouns. Skjærvø 2011a, p.346 fn.82 rightly notes that there is no feminine form \**yazatā-*.

<sup>65</sup>On this expression, see Panaino 1994, p.172f.



and therefore intangible.<sup>66</sup> The text relates that as he was sitting before Ohrmazd to consult him, Zardušt perceived the deity as having ‘a head, hands and feet, hair, face and tongue’ and even as wearing clothes just like human beings. Zardušt then asked to take the deity’s hand, but the god answered that this was not possible because of his nature as an intangible spiritual being (*mēnōy ī agriftār hom das̄t ī man griftan nē tuwān* ŠnŠ 15.2). Zardušt confirmed that he was aware of this and of the fact that *wahman*, *ardwahišt*, *šahrewar*, *spandarmad*, *hordād* and *amurdād* are equally intangible and would become invisible the moment he departed from Ohrmazd’s presence. He therefore asked the god whether after his return to the material world in addition to Ohrmazd and the ‘seven Amahraspands’ he should also worship the ‘person’ (*kas*) whom he could see and of whom there was ‘something’ (*tis*) in the material world. Ohrmazd replied:

(25) ŠnŠ 15.4 *Ohrmazd guft kū šnawē ō tō gōwam spitāmān zarduxšt kū amā har tan-ē dāyag-ē xwēš ō gētīy dād ēstēd kē rāy ān xwēškārīh ī pad mēnōy kunēd pad gētīy andar tan ī ōy rawāg kunēd.*

Ohrmazd said: “Listen, I tell you, Spitāmān Zarduxšt, that each of us individuals has given his own wet-nurse to the material world, whereby in its body it manifests in the material world that proper function which it performs in the spiritual world.”

The term *dāyag* ‘wet-nurse’ is a further instance of the use of the vocabulary of biological procreation in expressing the way the world is imagined to have come about. In the present passage it could be another metaphor for the material creation in its spiritual form, which elsewhere is denoted by the term *ēwēnağ* ‘mirror-image’ or *kirb* ‘form’ (see above). Ohrmazd then states that each of the spiritual beings has its material counterpart:

(26) ŠnŠ 15.5 *gētīy ān ī man kē ohrmazd hom mard ī ahlaw ud wahman gōspand ud ardwahišt ātaxš ud šahrewar ayōšust ud spandarmad zamīg ud nānīg ī nēk hordād āb ud amurdād urwar.*

“My, namely Ohrmazd’s, material form is the righteous man, and Wahman (is) cattle, and Ardwhišt (is) fire, and Šahrewar (is) metal, and Spandarmad (is) earth and the virtuous woman, and Hordād (is) water and Amurdād (is) the vegetation.”

He further explains that by caring for the material creations, their spiritual counterparts are also being looked after and that everyone should learn and practise such care:

(27) ŠnŠ 15.6 *kē pahrēz ī ēn har haft hammōxtēd xūb kunēd ud šnāyēnēd ā-š hağriz ruwān ō xwēšīh ī ahreman ud dēwān nē rasēd*  
*ka-š pahrēz ī awēšān kard ā-š pahrēz ī ēn har haft amahraspandān kard bawēd ud pad gētīy hamāg mardōm hammōxtan abāyēd.*

“The one who learns the care for these seven behaves and pleases well. Then his soul will never be possessed by Ahreman and the dēws.

When he practises care for them, then the care of these Amahraspands is practised. And in the world all mankind must learn (it).”

<sup>66</sup>For an edition of the text see Kotwal 1969, pp.56–67.

The rest of this chapter, ŠnŠ 15.7–31, sets out in detail the various ways in which each of the seven spiritual beings is pleased and promoted when its respective material (*gētīy*) counterpart (*hangōšīdag*) is well treated. By practising such care, people accumulate good deeds on their individual accounts in preparation for the judgement after death.

The idea that by worshipping the material world one worships the spiritual is also found in the Avesta,<sup>67</sup> for instance in

(28) Yt 6.4 *yō yazaitē huuarə yaṭ aməšəm*

*raēm auruuaṭ.aspəm . . .*

*yazaitē ahurəm mazdān*

*yazaitē aməšə spəntə*

*yazaitē haom uruuānəm*

*xšnāuuaiieiti vīspe mainīuuaca yazata gāēθiīāca*

*yō yazaitē huuarə yaṭ aməšəm*

*raēm auruuaṭ.aspəm*

The one who worships the sun, the immortal,  
swift-horsed splendour, . . .

he worships Ahura Mazdā,

he worships the Life-giving Immortals,

he worships his own soul.

The one who worships the sun, the immortal,

swift-horsed splendour,

he gratifies all spiritual and material venerable ones.

This attitude of respect and care for the material world is also incorporated in prayers of the Khorde Avesta which are to be recited at the sight of a mountain (*namāz kūh*, Y 6.13), cattle (*namāz gōspandān*, Vd 21.1–2) and running water (*namāz āb*, in praise of Ardvīsūr Anāhitā).<sup>68</sup> Seeing the sun, the moon, rivers and mountains, having food and drink to sustain the body and medicine against illness, all these are perceived as religious actions in praise of Ahura Mazdā's presence in the material world.<sup>69</sup> Gherardo Gnoli summarized this concept as follows:

Il pensiero religioso dell'Iran zoroastriano presenta un' indiscutibile originalità: mentre non si può prescindere dall'idea di un dio creatore onnisciente, l'universo intero si svolge, si sviluppa e s'accresce come una manifestazione della stessa divinità. Da qui il valore sacrale degli elementi del cosmo, la santità del fuoco, della terra, della luce, dell' acqua.<sup>70</sup>

Homage paid to the material world was perhaps one of the most distinctive markers of the Mazdā-worshippers. In their persecution of Zoroastrians who had converted to Christianity, the mobeds of the Sasanian period demanded from the apostates that they should revert to

<sup>67</sup>Cf. Hintze 2007, p.184.

<sup>68</sup>Kotwal and Hintze 2008, pp.32–34. Furthermore, prayers are to be recited when seeing a site for exposing the dead (*namāz dādgāh*, Y 26.7) and also when entering a village, city or country (*namāz šahrhā*, Y 1.16).

<sup>69</sup>Cf., for instance, the story from Dēnkard, Book 6 D5 in Shaked 1979, pp. 180–183 and summarised by Shaked 1971, p.74.

<sup>70</sup>Gnoli 1963, p.191.

their old faith and prove that they had done so by worshipping the elements, especially fire, water and the sun. Thus, in the Sogdian history of Persian martyrs under Šāpūr II, the great mobed demands from the Christian men:

- (29) C2 68R.22–23 n(m)[']c brt' qw xwr s' 't žwṭiq'  
 Offer homage to the sun and you will live.<sup>71</sup>

From the mobed's point of view such veneration was the ultimate proof of the veneration of Ahura Mazdā as the maker of a perfect spiritual and material world, but for the Christian martyrologists such an action was to be rejected as pure idolatry. Ranging from disputations with apostates of the Sasanian period to John Wilson in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the worship of the Yazatas, especially of the material ones, was one of the areas in which Mazdā-worshippers were particularly targeted by polemical attacks<sup>72</sup> and described as 'fire worshippers'.

## 7 Conclusion

In two fundamental studies of the notions of *mēnōy* and *gētīy* in the Pahlavi Texts, Gherardo Gnoli and Shaul Shaked have shown independently that in Middle Persian cosmology *gētīy* does not exist on its own but derives from a spiritual, *mēnōy*, prototype.<sup>73</sup> Gnoli also rightly argues that Zoroastrian cosmology provides neither room nor evidence for the concept of *creatio ex nihilo*, which many scholars, including Zaehner, Moulton and Casartelli, had previously advocated. On the basis of Y 31.11, which states that Ahura Mazdā creates through his thought,<sup>74</sup> Zaehner 1961, pp.54–55, maintained that "since he (i.e. Ahura Mazdā) thinks all things into existence, his creation is *ex nihilo*". Casartelli argued that the concept of *creatio ex nihilo* emerges from a passage in the Bundahišn (IndBd 30.5–6), in which Ohrmazd states that it is more difficult to create something that had not existed before than to resurrect from the dead something that had previously done so. Gnoli objects that, according to the Pahlavi texts, Ohrmazd does not make the material creations out of nothing, but out of their respective spiritual prototypes. The spiritual world, the *mēnōy*, is like the root, and the material one, the *gētīy*, the fruit. Just as a fruit cannot exist without the root, so the material, *gētīy*, world cannot exist without its spiritual, *mēnōy*, source. From this point of view, therefore, the question of *creatio ex nihilo*, does not in fact arise.<sup>75</sup>

While Gnoli's arguments are convincing, we may even go one step further. For, as we have seen, not only does the material world derive from the spiritual one, but the latter itself in turn derives from Ahura Mazdā/Ohrmazd, who is the origin of all that is good (Y 37.1, quoted above no. 13). The idea that the spiritual creations descend from Ahura Mazdā and thus consist of the very stuff from which the god is made, is of the utmost importance for Zoroastrian cosmology. For it is these spiritual beings, collectively referred to in the

<sup>71</sup>Sims-Williams 1985, p.143. On similar episodes in the Syriac Acts of Persian martyrs, see Stausberg 2002, p.107f.

<sup>72</sup>Cf. de Jong 2003, p. 25 and 2004.

<sup>73</sup>Gnoli 1963 and 1995; Shaked 1971. For the Avesta, cf. Panaino 2002a, pp. 58f. with references.

<sup>74</sup>On the concept of creation by thought, see Skjærvø 2011, p.59 with two more Gathic passages. On other concepts of creation in the Gathas, see above fn.25.

<sup>75</sup>Gnoli 1963, pp. 170–174 and 1962, pp.117–118 note 99, where he surveys various scholarly views on this question. Cf. also Hintze 2007, p. 165–167.

Avesta as *aməša- spənta-*, that ultimately give rise to the material world. It is in the light of such life-giving, creative function that their epithet *spənta-*, literally ‘life-producing’, makes sense.<sup>76</sup> Via the spiritual beings, the material thus also derives from Ahura Mazda. Although derived from and secondary to the spiritual world, the material one is therefore as good and perfect as its spiritual counterpart. The positive, or, to use Ugo Bianchi’s terminology, “pro-cosmic”, view of the material world is another characteristic which sets Zoroastrianism apart from most, if not all, other religious and many philosophical traditions.<sup>77</sup> Rather than *creatio ex nihilo*, Zoroastrianism therefore entails the concept of *creatio ex deo*.

The idea that the material world derives from the spiritual corresponds to two features characteristic of Zoroastrian religious practice. The first is the worship of the spiritual and material Yazatas. Since the material world derives from Ahura Mazda, it is in principle as good as the spiritual one and therefore worthy of worship, *yazata-*, just like the spiritual world and Ahura Mazda himself. Hence it is perfectly legitimate to worship any of Ahura Mazda’s spiritual and material creations because ultimately they derive from him and comprise his substance. One worships Ahura Mazda by worshipping his creations. The second feature is the prominence of purity laws. Because the material world ultimately derives from Ahura Mazda, it is of the utmost importance to keep it pure. Looking after and maintaining its purity is one way of worshipping its maker. Such care is enacted in daily practice by observing the rules for keeping the creation clean and pure as prescribed in the *Vīdēvdād* and taught in the religious tradition.

In the emic perspective from within the religion’s own textual tradition, Mazdayasians thus perceive of themselves as worshippers of one god, Ahura Mazda. They affirm themselves as supporters of his cosmic plan especially by worshipping his creations, both spiritual and material and by rejecting the force that destroys them, Angra Mainyu. In the etic perspective, polytheism is absorbed by monotheism within the framework of the Zoroastrian concept of creation. Certain old and new deities are presented as creations of Ahura Mazda and incorporated into the pantheon as *yazata-*.<sup>78</sup> Their cultic worship is not only tolerated and legitimized but even requested by Ahura Mazda. Rather than competitors, the Yazatas are Ahura Mazda’s supporters, and the more there are, the better. Dualism deals both with the problem of Evil and with Ahura Mazda’s real cultic competitors, the old, Indo-Iranian gods (*daēuua-*), who are declared to be the products of Evil (Y 32.3) and are rejected as ‘deceitful’ (*druuañt-*) together with their worshippers, the *daēuua-iiasna-*. Each of the monotheistic, dualistic and polytheistic features, mentioned at the beginning of this article and which Zoroastrianism presents to the observer, thus represents an essential constituent of the whole system. Taken together, their sum makes a self-contained theology with a remarkable degree of coherence and consistency. Notions of monotheism, dualism and polytheism are so closely intertwined in the Zoroastrian religion that it is difficult, if not impossible to separate them from each other without causing the whole system to collapse.

<sup>76</sup>On the meaning and etymology of *spənta-*, see Skjærvø 2002a, p. 32 fn.11 and 2011, p.61, fn.25, and Hintze 2007, p.353 (references).

<sup>77</sup>Bianchi 1980, p.16; Williams 2008, pp. 132–133.

<sup>78</sup>This conclusion comes close to Kellens’ 2012a, p.23 statement: “Mon avis présent est que le processus de monothéisation est réel, mais va de pair avec un processus de théogénèse qui peuple le panthéon de divinités nouvelles et subalternes”. Kellens 2012 elaborates on his views of “théogénèse”.

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