



ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURES

Presentation at North American Mobed Council
July 30, 2005 – New York

Introduction

Zoroastrianism, like other religions is a "religion with a book" or rather a religion possessing written texts. From the beginning, Zarathushtra's prophetic teachings were embodied in words, though they were not written down until more than a millennium later.

The Avesta is the analogue of the Bible for Zoroastrians. Like the Bible, it is a collection of many texts from many eras, in different languages. The texts come from times that may be as early as 1700 BC and as late as 400 A.D.

Avesta

The Zoroastrian scriptures as a whole are known as Avesta. The language in which these scriptures are written is also known as Avesta. These scriptures were translated, commentaries (explanatory notes) were added thereto, and expository texts were written in later languages. Over a period of time the language of the Iranians changed. Avesta was a dead language by the Parthian period i.e. 2nd century BCE and Pahalavi became the religious language of Persia.

Zend Avesta

The Pahalavi language was further developed during the Sassanian times in the 3rd century CE and had an alphabet of only 14 letters. The priests of that time started to write the Avestan prayers for the very first time in the Pahalavi script. The priests also did a word-to-word translation of the Avestan prayers into Pahalavi as best as they could. However, they were not fully conversant with the Avestan language and unfortunately most of their translations are not accurate or reliable though not without some spiritual significance. You will agree that a word-to-word translation cannot clearly express the meaning of the original texts. So the priests also wrote down explanations and commentaries of all the Avestan text. This interpretation of the Avesta is called the Zend.

Zend is a Middle Persian (Pahlavi) word and means "commentary" and refers to the Pahlavi translations of Avesta with Pahlavi commentaries thereon. Quite often many amongst us erroneously refer our scriptures, the Avesta, as the "Zend-Avesta." This is a misnomer and is caused by the misinterpretation of the word "Zend."

Avesta in the West



In the West little was known about the religion and customs of ancient Persia before the knowledge of Avesta was brought to Europe in the eighteenth century.

Anquetil du Perron, a Frenchman, traveled and lived in India (Surat) from 1755-1761 and extensively interacted with the local Parsee priests and high priest. Perron, in 1771, on his return from India, gave the world, the first translation of the Avesta which he erroneously called the Zend-Avesta. His translations included the surviving texts with ritual instructions and many valuable personal observations on the customs and rituals of the Parsis, as well as a translation of the Pahlavi Bundahishn. These translations were not well received by scholars at first but ultimately opened the way for more than a century of scholarly research on the ancient religion.

The western study of the Avesta stems from Anquetil du Perron's works, which in turn were based on the Sanskrit transliteration and translation handed down by Neiryosang Dhaval and whatever meager understanding (or misunderstanding) the Parsi priests possessed at that time.

Brief Historical Account

It is reasonable to conclude that the Avesta was composed in what is known as prehistoric times – during the time when writing was unknown and the art of writing was not invented. The Avesta was committed to writing at a later stage, much later than other nations invented their own scripts.

The foundation of the Sassanian dynasty marked the beginning of the Zoroastrian revival. Avesta texts, particularly the Yashts, provide important glimpses into history of the Peshdadian and Kayanian dynasties; but the Avesta terminates with the reign of Kayanian Vishtasp and goes no further. The Achaemenians and the Arsacides (Parthians) were entirely forgotten in Iranian tradition. This is very noticeable in the Dabache of the Afringan where we recite the names of rulers of Persian Dynasties. The rulers of Achaemenians and the Parthian Dynasties are conspicuous by their absence.

Great Avesta

After the invention of the current Avestan script in the Sassanian Era, the priests recorded every surviving Avestan text and formed the Great Avesta. This was compiled into 21 Nasks to correspond to the 21 words of the Ahunavar (Yatha Ahu Vairyo) prayer. Copies of these books were placed in fire temples, libraries and treasuries but during the Islamic reign were destroyed through successive conquests by Arabs, Turks and Mongols and not a single copy survived. We only know of its existence from the later book, called the Denkard written in the ninth century.

Journey (Compilation) of Avesta

A linguistic and historical scrutiny of the Avesta, however, will reveal several layers of literature which could not but have taken almost a thousand years to materialize into an oral literature -- oral because it was precisely and meticulously memorized and passed on by word of mouth through many generations until its final reduction in writing possibly during the Achaemenian period (550-330 BCE).



The Avesta suffered a disaster when Alexander of Macedonia invaded Iran in 321 BCE, put an end to the Achaemenian empire, and devastated the royal treasuries in which the Avesta was reportedly kept. For almost five hundred years after the Macedonian invasion the Zoroastrian scriptures remained in a scattered condition, much being preserved only by memory. At the same time the understanding of the older Avesta texts began to fade away and the need for a translation and interpretation became evident.

During the Parthian era (250 BC-226 AD), King Valkhash [Greek-Vologases (I) 51-77 AD], sponsored an attempt to re-construct the Avesta from the scattered manuscripts.

Thereafter the founder and the first of the Sassanian kings, Ardashir Papakan (226-240 AD), commanded his high priest Tansar, to bring together the dispersed portions of the holy book, and to compile from these a new Avesta, which, as far as possible, should be a faithful reproduction of the original.

Artakhshir's son Shapur I (241-272 AD) enlarged this re-edited Avesta by collecting and incorporating with it the non-religious treatises on medicine, astronomy, geography and philosophy.

During the reign of Shapur II (309-380 AD), the Avesta was translated into Pahlavi. It is believed that the high priest Adarbad Mahraspand, brought the new redaction of the Avesta to its definitive conclusion. Thereafter, the commentaries were added thereto during the reign of Khusro I (531-579 AC). As can be seen it was under the Sassanian dynasty, in about 560 CE, that the Zoroastrian texts were collected, collated, screened, augmented, codified, canonized translated into Pahlavi and interpreted.

[Dastur Tansar – Ardeshir Papakan (226-240 AD)
Dastur Kirder – Shapur I (241-272 AD)
Dastur Adarbad Maraspand – Shapur II (309-380 AD)
- Chosroes I (Khusro Anoshirwan) (531-579 AD)]

The Avesta-Pahlavi scriptures suffered disruption once again when the Arabs invaded and conquered Iran. This conquest (637-651) was fatal to the Zoroastrian religion. Out of 21 Avesta Nasks and their Pahlavi translations, 20 Avesta Nasks and Pahlavi translations of 19 Nasks were in existence in the 9th Century. A summary of the contents of these 19 Nasks, based on Pahlavi translation was prepared, and this summary-account of the Nasks form the subject matter of the VIII and IX books of the Pahlavi Denkart. Most of the Pahlavi texts now extant were compiled or composed in the 9th Century. Thereafter most of the Avesta Nasks, their Pahlavi translations, and other Pahlavi works have been irretrievably lost.

Contents of 21 Nasks

The 21 Avesta volumes contained writings not only on religious matters but on mythology, epic, history, geography, astronomy, hygiene, healing, medicine, agriculture, judicial law, government and development. The Sassanian canon of the Avesta was divided into 21 volumes called nasks in the Pahlavi language. The nasks were put into three categories of seven volumes each.

The first category called Gathic had the first nask named after two Gathic terms called Stoata Yesnya (Pahlavi Stot yasn) meaning "Reverential Praises". This category is recognized as the "spiritual" in Pahlavi books.

The second category is Datic, meaning the "legislative" part of the collection. It has rules and regulations



for socio-religion matters. It is called "material" by the Pahlavi writings.

The third, Hadha-manthra, meaning the "Thought provoking (words)" was a mixture of both, a kind of miscellany.

The Rivayats state that, when after the calamity of Alexander they sought to find the books again, they found a portion of each nask, but found no nask in its entirety except the Vendidad (the 19th Nask). Out of the original twenty-one nasks, the nineteenth alone (the Vendidad) has survived. Portions of other nasks are preserved, interspersed here and there among the Yasna and Vispered, or have come down to us as fragments in Pahlavi works, or have been rendered into Pahlavi, like the Bundahishn (Book of Creation) and the Shayast-la-Shayast (Treatise on the Lawful and Unlawful).

Dichotomy – About existence of Nasks prior to Sassanian Era.

Age of Avesta

The Avesta is like a great pearl, in which layers and layers of material were added around a central core. The central core of Avesta, is the Gathas, the five hymns of Zarathushtra and the layers are the Yashts, Yasna, Vispered and Vandidad. It would be correct to say that the Avesta was worked at from the time of Zarathushtra down to the Sassanian period. In its present form, therefore, the Avesta is a compilation from various sources, and its different parts date from different periods and vary widely in character. The collapse of the theocratic Sassanian Empire in 651 CE, left the Zoroastrian clergy without its dominating royal support, and the whole system, including the Avestan and Pahlavi scriptures, began to fall apart. Nevertheless much of the collection survived as late as the 9th century CE, a period during which many of the Pahlavi scriptures were written --also revised to suit the times -- in a sort of salvage operation. It is estimated that between one fourth to one third of the entire collection of the Avesta has been salvaged.

Yasna Haptanghaiti

The oldest text, after the Gathas, is called the Yasna Haptanghaiti – Worship in Seven Chapters – and has been given the second highest position (after the Gathas) in the Avesta. This text was probably composed by some of Zarathushtra's contemporaries, a generation or so after the Prophet. These are prayers for good rule, peace, health, and statements of devotion to truth and the Prophet's teachings. The Seven Chapters are devotional, not prophetic; liturgical, rather than didactic.

Yasna

The next major layer of text added onto the core is the liturgical and hymnic collection called the Yasna (worship). Yasna is what the Parsees call Yazashne – Ijasni. It is a compilation extracted for liturgical purposes from various nasks. The Yasna includes the Gathas and the Seven Chapters.

The whole Yasna has 72 chapters (haiti, ha). The arrangement of the chapters is purely liturgical. This number, in time, became a holy number with the Kusti having 72 interwoven strands to remind the



wearer of the holy writing and service. The Yasna is composed in a dialect of Avestan called "Younger Avestan", in which many of the ancient Gathic words and usages have changed.

Of the 72 chapters, chapters 1 to 27 and 55 to 72 are in Avestan language. These are not in poetic but in prose form and were not composed by Zarathushtra but hundreds of years later by others, most likely by priests of that era. The Gathas are composed in the Old Avesta, often called Gathic language.

Visparad

In the next layer, also in Younger Avesta, is a set of priestly texts called the Visparad, of 23 chapters. This is a prayer in praise of all spiritual leaders (vispa-Ratu) and is recited during thanksgiving ceremonies and feasts during the Gahambars. In the ceremonial recitation, the Visparad is not an independent text, but is supplement to the Yasna, and its chapters are recited in addition to the chapters of Yasna.

Yashts

The next major Younger Avestan text is a series of praise-hymns called the Yashts. The word Yasht means worship. The Yashts form a part of the ancient Bagan Yasht, ancient pre-Zarathushtrian hymns. They are composed in honour and worship of Ahura Mazda, Amesha Spentas and Yazatas. Each of the Yashts is individually dedicated to one of the divinities. At present there are 22/23/24 Yashts and fragments of some more. The Avesta texts of some of the Yashts are identical with the texts of some of the chapters of the Yasna; for instance Yasna 9 and 10 form Hom Yasht; Yasna 35 to 42, Haftan Yasht; Yasna 57 is Sarosh Yasht. Each Yasht contains introductory prayers in Pazand (Middle Persian), added at a later date.

Zoroastrian scholar Mary Boyce has pointed out that much of the texts of the epic and mythological hymns to the Yazatas come from the old Indo-Iranian religion and are thus older than the Gathas. Important historical materials of the kings and heroes of the Pishdadian and Kayanian times and epic narrations and heroic descriptions of those times have been preserved in the Yashts.

The Yashts are hard to place in Zoroastrian history. Scholars disagree greatly as to when these poems were created, or re-created. It would be prudent to say that they were composed during or even prior to the Achaemenid period, from 600-330 BC.

Vandidad

The latest book of the Avesta is a book of mythological material, priestly instructions, and purity laws called the Vandidad. It is the religious law-book, and contains religious laws against visible and invisible impurities and evil forces. Besides other matters, it contains religious laws of sanitation, hygiene and ritual purity. It is the code of ceremonial ablutions, penances and purification. There are civil laws, which deal with violence and sexual transgressions to abuse of animals and people. There are also elaborate rituals of priestly purification and instructions on making and keeping sacred fires. The composition of the Vandidad dates back to 4th or 3rd Century BCE though the material contained in it is far older.



It is one of the 21 nasks of the Sassanian times; and in the present condition it has 22 chapters. In the ceremony, Vandidad is not an independent text. In the ceremonial recital, the chapters of the Vandidad are intermingled with the chapters and cantos of the Yasna and the Visparad.

Khordeh Avesta

Much later in the Zoroastrian history, volumes of excerpts from Avesta were compiled and adapted for the various occurrences of ordinary life, into a hymn book and has come to be known as Khordeh Avesta or Parts of Avesta and has become the main prayer book among Zoroastrians. It is believed to have been put together by the Head Priest Adarbad Maharaspand of the Sassanian Era. The contents of each Khordeh Avesta edition vary, but the book usually contains the basic Avesta prayers such as Kusti prayers, Gahs, Nyaeshes, and some of the Yashts. There are also Pazand prayers like Doa Nam Setayashne, Patet Pashemani, nirangs at the end of the Yashts. In few editions, there may also be explanations of the prayers.

Therefore, Khordeh Avesta (Smaller Avesta), the popular book of daily prayers is neither an independent book, nor a salvage of wrecked nasks, nor a standard scripture of specific chapters and length. It has not been mentioned in any of the Pahlavi writings, which supply us with the names and contents of the Avestan scriptures. It has many of its Avestan prayers supplemented by late Middle Persian pieces especially at the beginning and the end of each Nyaesh and Yasht. It is, therefore, a bi-lingual prayer book and a recent compilation.

Pahlavi and Extant Pahlavi Literature

Pahlavi is also called Middle-Persian because it stands midway between the Old Persian and the Modern Persian. Old Persian is the language of the rock inscriptions of the Achaemenian sovereigns and it bears relation to Avesta.

The extant Pahlavi literature can be divided into three classes:

(a) Pahlavi translations of Avesta texts. We have to-day the Pahlavi translations of Yasna, Visperad, Vendidad, fragments of Hadokht Nask, some Yashts and Nyaishes and some Afringans. The translations may not have been carried out by the same individual. They must have been done by different translators.

(b) Pahlavi texts on religious subjects. There are three most important viz. Denkart, Bundahishn and Dadastan-I-Denik.

Denkart is a voluminous work in Pahlavi dealing with traditions, morals, precepts and history of the religion of Mazda-worship. The compilation of Denkart was undertaken by Adur Farnbag, son of Farokhzat, during the reign of Caliph Al Mamun who ruled from 813 to 833 AD. He was the high priest. The work was completed by Adurbad I Emed I Ashvahisht in about 931 AD. A manuscript of Denkart was brought from Iran to Surat in 1783 by Mulla Bahman, the son of Mulla Behram.



Khwady Namag was composed in the 4th century CE and gives an account of the life and times of the legendary Peshdadian and Kayanian dynasties. This book was transcribed by four Zoroastrian priests into Arabic in the 10th century and became the source of Firdausi's epic the Shahname (975 to 1010 CE).

Bundahishn, the book on Creation was compiled by one Franbag I Datakih I Ashvahisht who must have edited the text by about 1008 AD. It was first brought to Europe by Anquetil du Person who first published its French translation in 1771.

Dadastan-I-Denik contains 92 questions and answers. The queries were put to Manushchih, son of Yoshnjam, the high priest of Pars and Kerman in the 9th Century AD. Some of the important subjects covered are meritorious deeds and sins, fate of the soul, resurrection, qualifications and functions of priests.

Of the other Pahlavi works relating to religious subjects is Arda Viraf Nameh which contains descriptions of the fate of souls in heaven, hell and purgatory.

(c) Pahlavi texts on other subjects not directly connected with religion are those on historical matters as Yatkar I Zariran which gives an account of the war between King Gushtasp of Kayanian Dynasty and Arjasp, the King of the Khyons.

Pazand and Extant Pazand Literature

During the Sassanian Era the ancient Avesta language was hardly understood, as a result, religious texts were translated into Pahlavi and commentaries were also written in that language. Under the Semetic influence many words of Non-Iranian origin were introduced in the Pahlavi language. Hence Pahlavi became a curious admixture of Iranian and Semetic elements, and common people found it difficult to understand. It was, therefore, necessary to simplify the language. Consequently, all the Semetic words were banished from Pahlavi and were substituted by their Iranian equivalents. Also, it was thought worthwhile not to compose prayers in a language that contained so many Semetic words. Hence a new and simplified literary development came into being, and that was Pazand. To-day Pazand is written in Avesta characters and is composed of words which are purely Iranian, just as was the Dari language spoken by the Iranian Zoroastrians to the day.

Adarbad Mahraspand, the high priest, during the reign of Shapur II composed some Pazand prayers. These are prayers of repentance (Patet), Dibache of Afringans, blessings (Afrins), and adoration (Doa Nam Setayeshne). There are also short laudatory passages (Nirangs) composed in Pazand to be recited at the end of certain Avesta Yashts. There is also the nuptial blessing in Pazand (Ashirwad).

Conclusion

A very extensive Zoroastrian literature must have been in existence in ancient times. The Avesta that has come down to the modern Zoroastrian world is but a collection of fragments and texts preserved from a far greater whole. What we have is what was meticulously memorized and passed on by word of mouth through generations until its final reduction to writing. From what we know of the scripts, it could have been done during the Achaemenian period (550-330 BC) when the Iranians saw the need to have a script which its subject nations already possessed.

As a rule Avestan text, had a Pahlavi translation, commentary and supplementary following. It was the Pahlavi rendering on which the latter priests relied to expound the religion, because Avesta as a language



had become unknown and was no more understood by the people. After the Arab conquests, only the writings on religion containing much of the current Avesta, and one law-book survived. Though the actual texts may have been lost, perhaps the knowledge and information in them survived in various ways.

The truth is that we possess but a trifling portion of a much larger Avesta consisting of 21 books called nasks. From the Pahlavi Dinkard (9th century AD) we learn that this larger Avesta was only a part of a yet more extensive original Avesta, which is said to have existed before Alexander. We are told that of a number of nasks only a small portion was found to be extant after Alexander.

The Avesta has been preserved through millennia of hardship by the devotion of priests and people who kept it alive in memory, sacred words preserved in linguistic amber until the modern era when their code was cracked. This preservation of the original words of Zarathushtra, and the words of those who came after him, is perhaps the foremost miracle of the entire Zoroastrian tradition. It is up to the present generation of Zoroastrians to keep this miracle alive and keep its divine flames burning.