



Full Length Research Paper

Cosmic contradiction between goodness and evil as a basic mythology in platform of Iranian culture, religion and literature

Mohammad KhosraviShakib

Department of Persian Language and Literature, Human Science Faculty, Lorestan University, I. R. Iran.
E- Mail: Khosravi_shakib@yahoo.com

Accepted 28 May, 2012

The solution of the problem of Evil has been attempted by every Great Prophet, and though the ways of looking at it have been different in different lands and at different epochs, still there is a fundamental similarity of treatment. Persian mythology developed in what is now Iran after about 1500 B.C. About a thousand years later, a religion known as Zoroastrianism emerged in the region. It held on to many of the earlier beliefs but added new themes, deities, and myths. The result was a mythology based on a dualistic vision: a cosmic conflict between good and evil. In the eminently dualistic Zoroastrian religion the need to defeat evil was emphasized, and it was not by chance that Ahriman was one of the prototypes of the enemy. This theme always has occupied the mind of Iranian from past time until now so that effect deeply the religion and literary masterpieces like Shahnameh and other contemporary works. Crystallizing of this theme in culture and literature of Iranian will be the main key of this paper.

Keywords: Iran, zoroastrianism, goodness and evil, Shahnameh.

INTRODUCTION

Persian mythologies are traditional tales and stories of ancient origin, some involving extraordinary or supernatural beings. Drawn from the legendary past of the Iranian cultural continent which especially consists of the state of Iran, Afghanistan, Tajikistan and Central Asia, they reflect the attitudes of the society to which they first belonged - attitudes towards the confrontation of good and evil, the actions of the gods, lesser gods, and the exploits of heroes and fabulous creatures. Myths play a crucial part in Iranian culture and our understanding of them is increased when we consider them within the context of Iranian history and literature and culture. The characters of Persian mythology almost always fall into one of two camps. They are either good, or they are evil. The subsequent discord mirrors the ancient conflict, which in Persian mythology is based on the Zoroastrian concept of the dual emanation of *Ahura Mazda* (Avestan, or *Ormuzd* in later Persian). *Spenta Mainyu* is the source

of constructive energy, while *Angra Mainyu* is the source of darkness, destruction, sterility, and death. In the ancient Iranian religious world evil was a fact, a condition of existence, as is apparent not only in so-called "Zoroastrianism" but also in Zurvanism and the various mystery religions and gnostic tendencies connected with it, notably Mithraism. The problem of evil was thus omnipresent, and the solutions to it took as many forms as the conceptions of dualism developed throughout ancient Iranian history (Royce; 2007: p. 42). The earliest was apparently that of Zoroaster, which served as the basis for all subsequent elaborations. Found in abundance in Persian mythology are the *daēva* (*div*), meaning 'celestial' or 'bright'. These divinities were worshipped in pre-Zoroastrian Mazdaism, and as in Vedic religions, the adherents of the pre-Zoroastrian form of Mazdaism considered the *daēva* holy and sacred beings. It is only after the religious reforms of Zarathustra

(Zoroaster) that the term *daēva* became associated with demons. Even then the Persians living south of the Caspian Sea continued to worship the *daeva* and resisted pressure to accept Zoroastrianism, and legends that involve *daēva* survive to this day. For instance, that of the legend of the *Div-e Sepid* (white *daēva*) of Mazandaran which mentioned in *Shanameh* of Firdausi who accepted as eminent epic poet in Persian literature. Moreover, *AngraMainyu* or *Ahriman* in Persian, once the Zoroastrian epitome of evil, lost its original Zoroastrian/Mazdaist identity in later Persian literature, and was ultimately depicted as a *div*. Religious depiction of *Ahriman* made in the era following the Islamic invasion show *Ahriman* as a giant of a man with spotted body and two horns. The idea of the choice between good and evil was at the heart of Zoroastrianism throughout its entire historical development (Malandra; 1983: p. 61). More or less emphasis and different theoretical foundations were attributed to it, depending upon the historical period and the influences absorbed through contact with foreign cultures and other religious and philosophical doctrines. It has been less vital and less emphasized among the Parsis, owing mainly to the anti-dualistic polemics of Muslims and Christians but the fact that it is present in the *Gathas* is evidence that Zoroaster's thought represented an original and coherent development. The lament of the Soul of the Cow which probably also had metaphorical significance and has been interpreted in various ways seems to be an allegory in which a living creature asks to be spared pain and the fury of the wicked through the care of a kindly shepherd who is truly able to protect it. In great epic of Persian literature, *Shahnameh*, the legend of Rostum shows the part human heroes play in the great drama of good and evil (Ferdowsi; 1960: p. 567). Rostum was so strong and brave that the king made him head of the army. Then the White Demon seized the king, and Rostum set out to rescue him. In the course of his travels, Rostum encountered a lion, a desert, a dragon, a demoness, and a demon army. He overcame all these obstacles with the help of his faithful horse Rakhsh and a warrior named Aulad, whom he defeated in combat and who then became an ally. Rostum's adventure ended in a cave, the lair of the White Demon, where Rostum tore out the demon's heart.

Contextual and cradles

First taught amongst nomads on the Asian steppes around 3500 years ago, Zoroastrianism is one of the earliest revealed religions and is of enormous importance in the history of religions. It has links with the ancient Vedic beliefs of India and even possibly to a remote Indo-European past. It has influenced northern Buddhism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam and was the state religion

in Iran from the 6th century BC to 7th century AD (Bulliet; 1979: p. 66). Most information about Prophet Zoroaster, son of Pourushaspa, of the Spitaman family comes from the *Gathas*, 17 hymns which were composed by the prophet and were preserved over the centuries by the Zoroastrian community. *Gathas* are inspired passionate utterances many addressed directly to God and their poetic form is the most ancient in Iranian literary works. The language is traced back to Indo-European times through Norse parallels. His teachings were handed down orally from generation to generation. They might have been written down since the Parthian period (3rd century BC – 3rd century AD) but all that is left is from the Sasanian times (7th century), in Middle Persian, also called Pahlavi. In the *Gathas* he calls himself a "zaotar" a fully qualified priest, one able to compose "manthra" (Sanskrit mantra), inspired utterances of power. Training for the priesthood started around age seven and maturity was reached at fifteen and he was probably made a priest at this age. He also calls himself a "vaedemna" or "one who knows" and spent years in a wandering quest for truth. The language of *Gathas* is archaic and is related to the Indian *Rigveda* (about 1700 BC). The best educated guess for Zoroaster's date, based on linguistic evidence is between 1700 - 1500 BC. In *Gathas* and in later Pahlavi works it is mentioned that he was thirty when revelation came to him. "He went down to a river to fetch water. There he encountered a radiant figure introducing himself as VohuManah "Good Purpose". The light led him to "Ahura Mazda" the Lord of Wisdom and five other radiant figures, before which he did not see his own shadow upon the earth, and it was then that he received his revelation". The roots of Persian mythology lie in the steppes of southern Russia and Central Asia. Between 1500 and 1000 b.c., Indo-European peoples migrated south from the steppes into the regions now known as Turkey, Iran, and northern India (Robinson; 2010: P.23). Those who settled in Iran became the Persians. Their mythology had much in common with that of the early Hindus and probably developed from a common Indo-European source. In time, the Persians also absorbed influences from Mesopotamia on their western border. The religious reformer and Prophet Zoroaster founded the faith that dominated Persia until the arrival of Islam in the 600s A.D. Apart from somewhat unreliable accounts by ancient Greek historians, the earliest information about Persian mythology comes from Zoroastrianism's sacred book, the *Zend-Avesta* or *Avesta*. Much of the original *Zend-Avesta* was lost after Alexander the Great conquered Persia in 334 B.C. What survives is a set of writings gathered and arranged between A.D 200 and 600. One section, the *Gathas*, consists of songs believed to have been composed by Zoroaster. Much mythological material can be found in another section containing *Yashts*, hymns addressed to angels and heroes.

Dominant Divinities and goddesses

The driving forces of Persian mythology were two powerful gods, sometimes presented as twin brothers. Ahura Mazda was the creator, a god of light, truth, and goodness. His enemy Ahriman, the spirit of darkness, lies, and evil, created only destructive things such as vermin, disease, and demons. This myth says the world is their battlefield. Although they were equally matched during this period of history, Ahura Mazda was fated to win the fight. For this reason, Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord, was the supreme deity of Persian mythology. The Zoroastrians identified him with purifying fire and tended fires on towers as part of their worship. Zoroaster's solution to the problem of evil was profoundly original. While, on one hand, he promised the owners of Aša the final triumph of good over evil in an eschatological expectation consistent with a doctrine requiring rigor and commitment from the faithful, on the other, he provided a logical explanation for the existence of evil, whether through the idea of choice or through the specific conception of two existences or states of being (Moulton; 1917: p. 71). The Zoroastrian conception is based on "two eternal abstract Powers, Good and Evil, both of which manifested themselves not only in mental and spiritual phenomena, but also in the material things of this world". Evil, like good, is a spiritual or mental power that is wicked because of the choice made. Like good, evil manifests itself in material existence, but, whereas the good is manifest in its very creation, the wicked is present through foul and violent aggression. In spiritual existence the powers of good and evil are equal, for each is author of its own creation, but in material existence evil can only insinuate itself, contaminating and violating it.

The ancient Persian pantheon also included Mithras, a god associated with war, the sun, and law and order, who became the object of a widespread cult in the Roman Empire. Anahita was a goddess of water and fertility. Verethraghna, a god of war and victory, appeared on earth in ten forms: as wind, a bull, a horse, a camel, a boar, a youth, a raven, a ram, a buck, and a man (Zaehner; 1961: p. 55). Zoroaster reduced the role of these and other traditional deities and emphasized Ahura Mazda as supreme god. Religious scholars see this move as an early step toward monotheism. However, Ahura Mazda was said to have created seven archangels, called the Ameshaspand, who represented truth, power, immortality, and other aspects of his being. These archangels may have taken over some features of the pre-Zoroastrian gods. The legendary king Bahram Gur appeared often in poems of past and contemporary poet such as Ferdousi and also tales as the inventor of poetry and a mighty hunter. The greatest hero was the warrior Rostum, whose adventures appear in the greatest epic *Shah Namah* (Book of Kings), written by the poet Ferdousi around 1010 A.D.

Themes and Myths

An ancient Persian Prophet Zoroaster (550 BC) predicted a battle between good and evil. He said that he had received a heavenly mission from Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord and the God of Light to preach the truth. He foretold that the whole world would be involved in the battle between good and evil because a group of dark forces were against the forces of light. Mankind would be given the power to choose between good and evil (Dhalla; 1938: p. 38). The end of the world would come when the forces of light triumphed and the saved souls would rejoice in its victory. They divided the progress of the world into four stages, with every three thousand years as one stage. During the first three thousand years, this material world was created. At the end of the second three thousand years, Ahriman, the principle of evil, would try to destroy the world. By the end of the third three thousand years, Ahriman would have succeeded. But he would bring self-destruction onto himself. At the beginning of the fourth three thousand years, Zoroaster will reincarnate and bring a new belief into the human world. During this, mankind will go through a final test, abandon all immoral characteristics, and become pioneers and leaders in the new world (Boyce; 1987: p. 22). According to the prophecy of Zoroaster, human nature was bright and moral, yet Ahriman wanted to destroy everything. Therefore, a world of good and evil came to exist and mankind had to choose between the two. After physical death, souls would go through a bridge. Good souls would go to the heaven; dark souls would go to the hell. During the battle, a cleaned soul would dissolve into the new world so that humans took part in the conflict as well (Black; 1982: p. 24). Each person had to choose whether to follow the truth or the lie. Plants, animals, and other things could be good or evil, depending on whether Ahura Mazda or Ahriman created and controlled them. Ahura Mazda made the world. Creation began when he cast a beam of his pure light into the empty void between him and Ahriman, who had attacked him. Ahura Mazda uttered a prayer that silenced Ahriman for 3,000 years, while Ahriman created the Ameshaspandan and the Yazatas. Regarding to the text of *Shahnameh*, Ahura Mazda's final creation was Gayomart the first man. Ahriman then awoke and began his evil work, sending a female demon to make Gayomart sick and die. Gayomart's body became the silver and gold in the earth, and in death he fertilized the ground so that a plant grew and became a man and a woman (Ferdowsi; 1967: p. 99). These two people, Masha and Mashyoi, were the parents of the human race. Ahriman deceived them into thinking that he was their creator, and when they repeated this lie, evil and suffering entered the world. Zoroastrians believed that after 3,000 years, Zoroaster came into the world to break Ahriman's hold, leaving the two powers to fight into the

future. Death in Persian mythology involved a journey into the afterlife. The soul of the dead person had to cross a bridge called Chinvat. Good souls found the bridge to be a wide and comfortable beam leading to heaven. For the wicked, it was a razor-sharp blade from which they fell headlong into hell. Influenced by stargazing Babylonian astronomers, the ancient Iranians associated some of their deities with the stars. The star Sirius represented the rain god Tishtrya, whose main role was to battle Apausha, an evil star of drought. Tishtrya, in the form of a white stallion, and Apausha, a hideous black horse, fought for three days. Then with Ahura Mazda's help, Tishtrya defeated Apausha. Tishtrya and other star gods who protected agriculture also took charge of battling meteors, or shooting stars, which the Persians believed to be witches. Zoroastrianism was one of the first belief systems to include a vision of the end of the world. It would be signaled by the appearance of three saviors, sons of Zoroaster. Upon the arrival of Hushedar, the first savior, the sun would stand still for 10 days, and people would stop eating meat. When Hushedar-mar, the second savior, appeared, the sun would halt for 20 days and people would stop drinking milk. Just as the world neared a state of purity, however, the evil demon Azhi Dahaka would break free from his mountain prison. Only after he had been killed would Soshyant, the third savior, arrive (Malandra; 2005: p. 33). People would stop eating plants and live only on water, and each soldier of good would fight and defeat a particular evil enemy.

CONCLUSION

Zarathustra has worked out a very satisfactory solution of the problem of the existence and the origin of Evil. He has taught that Evil is but a negative aspect of the Divine Life, only the Shadow of the Eternal, for it has created 'Not-Life'. Evil by itself does not, cannot exist; but it is relative, depending upon the distance from God at which the individual stands upon the Path of Asha. Angromainyu is terrible indeed as long as he has power to tempt people with material and temporary happiness, or to confound their intellects and souls. He has tempted Sages always, and often quite successfully. He tempted

Yima and led him to his fall. He tried to tempt the Master Himself (as Buddha and Christ were also tempted later) but failed. When this last temptation was overcome, the Master stood up in his full glory as Teacher of the World, as Zarathushtra (He of the Golden Light). Then He explained to mankind what Evil was in reality the Shadow of the Light Eternal, of God Himself. Zoroastrianism was one of the first belief systems to include a vision of the end of the world. It would be signaled by the appearance of three saviors, sons of Zoroaster. Then the world would be enveloped in fire and molten metal for three days. Everyone who has ever lived would return to life to cross the fire, but only the wicked would suffer from the heat. This final judgment would purge sin and evil from the world, leaving an innocent human race in a cleansed world to worship Ahura Mazda.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Ferdowsi (1966). *The Shahnama*, edited by E. Bertels et al. 9 volumes. Moscow press.
- Ferdowsi (1967). *The Epic of the Kings (Shah-Nama)*. Trans. Reuben Levy, University of Chicago Press.
- Black M (1982). *Peake's Commentary on the Bible*, New York: Nelson.
- Boyce M (1984). *Textual sources for the study of Zoroastrianism*, Manchester: Manchester UP.
- Boyce, M (1987). *Zoroastrianism: A Shadowy but Powerful Presence in the Judaeo Christian World*, London: William's Trust.
- Boyce M (2007). *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul pages.
- Bulliet RW (1979). *Conversion to Islam in the Medieval Period: An Essay in Quantitative History*, Cambridge: Harvard UP.
- Dhalla MN (1938). *History of Zoroastrianism*, New York: OUP
- Foltz R (2004). *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble: How Iran Shaped the World's Religions*, Oxford: Oneworld publications.
- Charles W (1887). *Gnostics and their Remains Ancient and Mediaeval*, London: Bell and Daldy.
- Malandra W (1983). *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion. Readings from the Avesta and Achaemenid Inscriptions*, Minneapolis: U. Minnesota Press, ISBN0-8166-1114-9
- Malandra W (2005) "Zoroastrianism: Historical Review", New York press.
- Moulton J (1917). *The Treasure of the Magi: A Study of Modern Zoroastrianism*, London press.
- Zaehner R (1961) *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London: Phoenix Press.
- Robinson BA (2010). *Zoroastrianism: Holy text, beliefs and practices*, United States: Konecky and Konecky.