

On the Structural and Conceptual Contradictions in The Texts of The Avesta

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the structural and conceptual contradictions within the Avesta and their implications for understanding the development of Zoroastrian theology, cosmology, and religious doctrine. Drawing upon a comparative textual and historiographical analysis of the Gathas, Yasna, Yashts, and Videvdad, the study investigates inconsistencies concerning the creative role of Ahura Mazda, the functions of the Amesha Spentas and the yazatas, the concepts of cosmology and cosmogony, the doctrine of fravashi, and the evolving portrayal of Yima and Zarathustra. The article also critically evaluates the interpretations advanced by leading Avestan scholars, including Mary Boyce, L. A. Lelekov, H. Lommel, R. C. Zaehner, É. Benveniste, and others. It argues that the Avesta should not be understood as a single, internally homogeneous theological system but rather as a multilayered corpus that reflects different chronological stages of composition, successive priestly redactions, and changing social, political, and religious contexts. The identified contradictions do not diminish the historical value of the Avesta; instead, they provide important evidence for reconstructing the evolution of Zoroastrian thought and the transformation of its religious tradition. The study concludes that a comprehensive analysis of these internal inconsistencies offers new perspectives for Avestan studies and contributes to a deeper understanding of the intellectual and spiritual heritage of ancient Turan and Iran.

Keywords: - Avesta; Zoroastrianism; Avestan studies; Ahura Mazda; Amesha Spentas; Yazatas; cosmology; cosmogony; Gathas; Yasna; Yashts; Videvdad; Fravashi; Yima; Zarathustra; Turan; Iran; comparative religion; textual criticism; religious history.

INTRODUCTION

The Avesta, as a universal monument to the creative intellect of humankind, continues to attract increasing and deeper attention from scholars around the world. It possesses enduring

significance for the study of the origins of the history, spiritual culture, and philosophical thought of the peoples of Turan and Iran.[1]

The President of Uzbekistan, Shavkat Mirziyoyev,

has consistently attached particular importance to the study of the sacred book Avesta as one of the greatest spiritual, historical, and legal monuments, regarding it as the common heritage of the peoples of Central Asia and an inseparable component of the national cultural legacy.

The principal aspects of Sh. M. Mirziyoyev's view of the Avesta are reflected in his characterization of it as "an invaluable historical and cultural heritage that laid the foundations of statehood, law, morality, and the principles of interethnic relations based on mutual respect and trust, while rejecting all forms of violence and injustice." [2]

The study of the Avesta is actively pursued by historians, source critics, philologists, philosophers, ethnologists, scholars of religion, physicians, biologists, and specialists from many other disciplines. Nevertheless, despite centuries of accumulated knowledge and scholarly experience, Avestan studies remain far from resolving all of their fundamental problems. Numerous mutually exclusive approaches continue to exist regarding many issues, producing contradictory conclusions and inaccurate interpretations that often fail to consider the deeper meanings embedded within the text. At times, researchers also encounter deliberately distorted interpretations of particular aspects of the Avesta advanced by individual scholars.

Today, Avestan studies encompass hundreds of monographs and many thousands of scholarly articles published in various languages around the world. [3] Yet no scholar can confidently claim that the Avesta, with its numerous textual conventions and symbolic expressions, has become fully comprehensible to the modern reader. In practice, the Avesta is often interpreted superficially, without sufficient consideration of its subtext, allegorical language, and conventional literary forms—elements that required no detailed explanation among early adherents of Zoroastrianism because they were grounded in the social and cultural realities of Zarathustra's era, realities that later generations gradually transformed and ultimately forgot. [4]

Among the many unresolved problems in Avestan studies, the historical realities reflected in the Avesta, together with its internal structural and conceptual contradictions, have long been the subject of vigorous scholarly debate. The present

paper addresses several aspects of this issue.

Avestan scholars generally distinguish four doctrinal models within the Avesta concerning cosmology and cosmogony. These doctrines define the typological characteristics of Zoroastrianism on the one hand while simultaneously shaping its theological system on the other. This question has occupied scholars for more than two centuries, beginning with Anquetil-Duperron, the founder of modern European Avestan studies, and continuing through contemporary specialists. Nevertheless, the problem identified here remains unresolved.

Questions concerning Zoroastrian cosmology and cosmogony were already raised by Plato, Empedocles, [5] Theopompus, Hermippus, and other ancient Greek thinkers, who recognized logical inconsistencies among the various dogmas and doctrines of Zoroastrianism. For example, in his *Lives*, Plutarch, relying upon the now-lost works of Theopompus and Hermippus, maintained that the god of Zarathustra, Ahura Mazda, was eternal, without beginning, and created by no one. [6]

Following Plutarch, Mary Boyce reconstructed Avestan cosmogony into a unified system based primarily on Middle Persian (Pahlavi) sources, thereby effectively minimizing differences in the interpretation of Zoroastrian creationist doctrines. In her *History of Zoroastrianism*, [7] following the approach of H. Lommel, Boyce likewise portrayed, first, Zarathustra's deity as eternal and uncreated, and second, attributed this theological innovation exclusively to the Prophet himself as an unprecedented concept unknown before his time.

As the late L. A. Lelekov observed, [8] Boyce correctly emphasized Zoroastrianism's departure from the common Indo-European cosmological model according to which "everything, including all the gods, was created, fashioned, or born by someone else." Consequently, within the world of the gods—as represented, for example, in the *Rigveda* and other Indo-European religious traditions—the divine realm necessarily possessed a temporal beginning. Ancient Greek mythology vividly illustrates this model, where gods frequently appear as members of genealogical lineages, each born from preceding deities.

Opposing this limitation, Boyce advanced the concept of the universal creative function of Ahura

Mazda. However, she did not adequately address the limitations of Ahura Mazda's creative power when compared with the absolute boundlessness, beginninglessness, and infinity of Time itself, represented in Zurvanism by Zurvan, corresponding conceptually to the ancient Greek notion of Chronos, the supreme embodiment of time.

Within Zoroastrian thought, it was believed that Zurvan—endless and beginningless Time—could potentially overshadow the absolute status of Ahura Mazda. Consequently, the compilers of the Avesta sought to avoid emphasizing Zurvan's essential nature within the canonical system. Furthermore, some scholars have argued that Zurvanism constituted an independent religious tradition. For example, V. A. Livshits proposed that Zurvanism represented either a distinctive pre-Zoroastrian religious current that influenced the formation of Zoroastrianism or a regional variant of Zoroastrianism that developed in Central Asia.[9]

According to Mary Boyce, the Zoroastrian god Ahura Mazda created his own emanations—the six archangels collectively known as the Amesha Spentas ("the Holy Immortals"). Together with them, while simultaneously leading them, Ahura Mazda forms the sacred heptad, or divine group of seven. Closely associated with the ancient symbolism of the sacred number seven, this heptad represents the outcome of the creative establishment of the supreme celestial order.

Each archangel was entrusted with responsibility for a particular sphere of existence. Consequently, these archangels functioned as manifestations of Ahura Mazda himself. In other words, they were regarded as executors of the supreme deity's will and, more precisely, as expressions of the Creator's own attributes and functions.

Within this framework, Ahura Mazda appears as a self-creative deity existing under the sovereignty of Zurvan Akarana ("Infinite Time"). As for Zurvan itself, it does not assume the function of creating God. Rather, within the concept of Zurvan, infinity and beginninglessness are objective realities. These two inseparable qualities were understood as independent cosmic potentials encompassing everything both celestial and terrestrial.

According to Mary Boyce, the third stage of

creation begins with the heptad—the sacred group of seven holy beings (the archangels) – from which the lower divine beings known in the Avesta as yazatas are brought forth. The term yazata literally denotes "those worthy of worship," that is, deities to whom prayers are offered, sacrifices presented, alms dedicated, and religious rituals performed. The Zoroastrian pantheon includes dozens of yazatas, among them Mithra, Ardivi Sura Anahita, Ashi, Verethragna, Drvaspa, Vayu, Hvar Khshaeta (the Sun), Khvarenah (Divine Glory), and even Haoma, the sacred invigorating ritual drink consumed during religious ceremonies to ensure the sincerity and spiritual efficacy of prayer.[10]

At the same time, Ahura Mazda entrusted the members of the heptad—particularly six of the archangels—with serving as the spiritual principles governing the six fundamental elements of earthly existence. Within this system, Vohu Manah, the archangel of Good Mind, became the spiritual protector of the primordial sacred Bull, the beneficent spirit of existence, and all other useful animals. Spenta Armaiti, the feminine divine principle, protects the earth and righteous devotion. Asha Vahishta is associated with fire, Haurvatat with the plant kingdom, health, and the wholeness of creation, while Ameretat protects humanity by granting the power of immortality. According to L. A. Lelekov, however, this harmonious structure of the sacred heptad is insufficiently substantiated in the sources and appears rather as an interpretative reconstruction than as an explicitly formulated doctrinal system.[11]

The structure and content of the Avesta itself, however, present substantial arguments against such an interpretation. The Amesha Spentas, the six emanations of Ahura Mazda, are not portrayed as creators. Moreover, the Gathas contain virtually no developed system of subordinate deities, namely the yazatas. Instead, the Gathas employ abstract theological concepts such as Good Mind, the Divine Spirit, and Armaiti, at times even omitting specific names—for example, referring to Good Mind without explicitly mentioning Vohu Manah. Likewise, when the name Khshathra Vairya (the "Desirable Dominion" or the "Just Ruler of the World") appears, its specific emanational function disappears, becoming instead a direct allusion to Ahura Mazda himself.

It appears that during the composition of the

Gathic sermons, Zarathustra deliberately relied upon the familiar spiritual concepts of his contemporaries. Rather than aggressively imposing the comprehensive doctrine of the one supreme Ahura Mazda, he sought to preserve conceptual continuity with prevailing religious beliefs, thereby retaining greater flexibility for the gradual transformation of public religious consciousness.

Another important consideration further supports this interpretation. The creative function cannot be attributed to the Amesha Spentas, since the yazatas themselves are consistently presented as creations of Ahura Mazda, demonstrating His unlimited creative power. Consequently, Ahura Mazda is the creator of the entire beneficent universe—both the material and the immaterial, the physical and the spiritual—including all celestial beings.

The Yashts contain explicit statements illustrating this doctrine:

"I created Mithra

As worthy of worship

As I Myself am.

I created mighty Verethragna,

The merciless fighter against the offspring of Hell." [12]

Similar declarations occur elsewhere in the text. On the basis of meticulous analyses of the Avestan corpus, scholars such as O. Vendryes, É. Benveniste, R. C. Zaehner, J. Asmussen, and others have recognized creation as the central dogma of Zoroastrian cosmology. [13]

As L. A. Lelekov ultimately concluded, this doctrine rests upon the indivisible cosmogonic sovereignty of Ahura Mazda. According to the Gathas, creative power belongs exclusively to the supreme deity, Mazda. Researchers have frequently reached erroneous conclusions regarding the distribution of divine functions because they became entangled in the complex terminology of the Gathas. In reality, many of the expressions found in the Gathas function as different epithets of the supreme deity rather than as references to distinct divine beings, while simultaneously leaving open the possibility for the later functional differentiation represented by the heptad.

Further support for this position is found in another important observation: the yazatas of the Yashts are not systematically associated with the Amesha Spentas—namely Vohu Manah, Asha Vahishta, Spenta Armaiti, Khshathra Vairya, Haurvatat, and Ameretat. Conversely, the Gathas do not mention by name the yazatas of the Yashts, whose origins clearly extend back into the earlier mythological traditions.

Unlike the Amesha Spentas, who safeguard the highest spiritual spheres, the yazatas function as independent divine agents responsible for protecting and supervising specific natural and social phenomena. Mithra, "the thousand-eared and thousand-eyed," safeguards the righteous world, watches over the sun, and combats the forces of evil. Verethragna appears as a militant champion and fearless warrior against falsehood and its various manifestations. Tishtrya (Tir) battles the demon of drought, Apaosha. Alongside their martial functions, Ardvi Sura Anahita and Ashi bestow desired blessings, though not indiscriminately; such gifts are granted only in response to sincere devotion, sacrificial offerings, and genuine faith. The function of Hvar Khshaeta (the Sun) is even more autonomous: his appearance brings prosperity and universal well-being to all creation—to the earth, the waters, vegetation, humanity, and every living being.

At this point, it is necessary to consider one aspect of the interpretation of the Khurshed Yasht. The text of this hymn is divided into two parts. The first praises the Sun, whose rays are likened to swift horses and golden arrows that instantly reach the boundaries of all the worlds. In this context, "the whole world" refers to Xvaniratha (Khvaniratha), the beneficent world created at dawn by the spirit of the omnipotent Ahura Mazda, before it had been corrupted by the intervention of Ahriman and his various manifestations—falsehood, demons (daevas), pairikas, harmful creatures (khrafstras), and other forces of evil.

This clearly demonstrates that the yazatas are not creations of the Amesha Spentas. As L. A. Lelekov aptly remarked with irony, the yazatas do not possess separate "departments" within the natural world, since these domains were already entrusted to the Amesha Spentas (Lelekov, *The Avesta in Modern Scholarship*, pp. 238–239).

At the broader Indo-European level, the issue of

creationism may be examined through comparison with the Rigveda. A comparison between the Rigveda and the Avesta reveals the considerably more developed and systematic character of Zoroastrian thought in contrast to the communal religious worldview reflected in ancient India. As the Rigveda indicates, its cosmological system contains no single supreme creator endowed with exclusive creative authority. Cosmogonic functions are distributed among various figures, some of whom are not even gods, while the number of divine beings at different hierarchical levels is virtually unlimited.

Unlike the Avesta, which reflects an early class-based society with emerging elements of statehood, the Rigveda represents a comparatively primitive stage of communal religious consciousness. The Avesta, by contrast, served a far more highly organized social order characterized by social stratification and certain elements of political organization, although it does not precisely define the territorial boundaries of entities such as the *dahyu* or the *zantu*.

In this respect, the Avesta presents a structured social hierarchy consisting of the *nmana* (household), *vis* (clan), *zantu* (tribe), and *dahyu* (country or territorial community), each governed by its legitimate authority: the *nmanapati*, *vispati*, *zantupati*, and *dahyupati*, respectively.

Within this social system, however, the decisive factor in the triumph of Truth (*Asha*) over Falsehood (*Druj*) is the individual human being (*marti*). Through sincere faith and unwavering devotion to the teachings of Zarathustra, each individual becomes an active participant in the destruction of falsehood and all its manifestations.

Yasna 31.7 (the fourth stanza of the *Ahunavaiti* Gatha) expresses the idea of God's omnipotence and the boundlessness of His authority—an idea absent from the archaic religious traditions of both Greece and India. In short, nothing could have preceded the creative act of Ahura Mazda.[14] Whereas in the Rigveda the act of creation proceeds from pre-existing "raw material," as described by L. A. Lelekov, the Avesta presents the material world as the product of an immaterial spiritual source.

In this context, the *fravashis* constitute the immaterial prototypes of all elements of the

material universe. Moreover, the *fravashis* permeate the entirety of existence while belonging to the realm of light and simultaneously possessing the potential for material embodiment. There are *fravashis* corresponding to human beings, animals, plants, waters, the earth, stars, and every other component of creation. Thus, the number of *fravashis* corresponds to the number of material entities in existence.

Consequently, Ahura Mazda, as the creator of both the corporeal and the material world, begins the act of creation in the spiritual realm before transforming it into material existence. Created originally in *Garōdmān* by the will of Ahura Mazda, the *fravashis* unite with their material embodiments, accompany them throughout their earthly lives, and, after the death of their corporeal "hosts," return to *Garōdmān*, where they remain until the eschatological end of existence. This doctrine, later familiar in various forms across many world religions, thus finds one of its earliest expressions in Zoroastrianism.

In Yasna 32.8 (the fifth stanza of the *Ahunavaiti* Gatha), Zarathustra condemns Yima, one of the great cultural heroes of pre-Zoroastrian mythology, who constructed the *Vara*, supplied it with water, expanded the earth threefold, and was ultimately denounced for his pride and lack of faith. Yet, in the *Haoma Yasht*, Zarathustra unexpectedly appears as Yima's successor. Likewise, in the second *Fargard* of the *Videvdad*, Yima's *Vara*, after his downfall caused by arrogance, is entrusted to Zarathustra.

In the *Yasht* 19, the mythologized royal insignia are transferred from Yima, the warrior-king (*kshatriya*), to Zarathustra, who embodies the spiritual leadership of society. At least this is the interpretation proposed by A. Sornow in his article "Zoroastrianism," published in the twelfth volume of the *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics* in 1921.

The forty-sixth stanza of the *Yasna* (the fourth stanza of the *Ushtavaiti* Gatha) presents yet another apparent inconsistency with the general portrayal of Zarathustra's opposition to the pre-Zoroastrian hero Yima, whose widespread popularity represented an obstacle to the Prophet's mission. Here, Zarathustra inherits not only Yima's *Vara*, but also authority over the *Chinvat Bridge*, the bridge leading to the world

beyond. This interpretation was proposed by Bruce Lincoln in his article "The Ferryman of the Dead," published in the *Journal of Indo-European Studies* (Vol. 8, 1980, pp. 41–59).

Thus, the inconsistencies discussed above—particularly those concerning the relationship between Yima and Zarathustra—indicate deliberate priestly reinterpretations of significant elements of the Avestan tradition. These revisions appear to have been undertaken in order to reconcile inherited religious narratives with the changing social, political, and spiritual demands of successive historical periods.

The evidence discussed above, illustrating the internal inconsistencies among certain narratives, doctrinal propositions, and ideas within the Avesta, precludes the possibility of constructing a fully unified reconstruction of the religious foundations, mythological traditions, theological system, and other aspects of Zoroastrianism. The examples presented clearly demonstrate that, once Zoroastrianism attained the status of a state religion, its priesthood consciously sought to reconcile contradictions among different parts of the Avesta, smoothing over inconsistencies and minimizing tensions that were readily apparent within the tradition. This tendency is particularly evident in the divergences between the Yasna and the Videvdad on the one hand, and the Gathas and the Yashts on the other. The Gathas appear to make virtually no reference to the yazatas, who occupy a central position in the Yashts. Likewise, the Videvdad, shaped through priestly redaction and characterized by its detailed and prescriptive regulations governing Zoroastrian ritual practice, affords comparatively little attention to the underlying spiritual principles that form the theological basis of the religion.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, although the Avesta is commonly regarded as a unified exposition of the fundamental doctrines of Zoroastrianism, it is, in reality, a multilayered monument to the intellectual achievements of humanity. Despite its structural, conceptual, and ideological inconsistencies, and notwithstanding the loss of the greater part of the original corpus (only 4 of the original 21 books have survived), the Avesta has remained—and continues to remain—an exceptional source for the study of the spiritual history and

cultural heritage of Turan and Iran. The examples of conceptual inconsistencies discussed above demonstrate that the internal diversity of the Avestan tradition constitutes an important and independent field of inquiry deserving dedicated scholarly investigation.

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