

Avesta, the Bible of Zoroaster

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Source: *The Biblical World*, Jun., 1893, Vol. 1, No. 6 (Jun., 1893), pp. 420-431

Published by: The University of Chicago Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3135079>

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AVESTA, THE BIBLE OF ZOROASTER.

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It is hardly more than a century ago that the western world, already often enriched by the treasures of the East, received another gift, a contribution from Persia, and a new text deciphered was added to our list of sacred books of ancient nations — this was the Avesta, or Zend-Avesta, the bible and prayer-book of Zoroaster, the prophet of ancient Iran. This work of antiquity, dating back some centuries before the Christian era, still forms, with the supplementary writings in the Pahlavi or Middle Persian language, the scriptures of the modern Parsis in India, and of some scattered bands in Yezd and Kirman, the surviving remnants of the faith of Ormazd.

For our first direct knowledge, or rather practically for the discovery of the Avesta, we have to thank the spirited zeal of that enthusiastic young Frenchman, Anquetil du Perron. The somewhat romantic story of his enterprise and its success is too familiar to relate; suffice to say, that in 1771 with his translation of the Zoroastrian scriptures, the first in any European tongue (*Le Zend-Avesta, Ouvrage de Zoroastre*, 3 vols., Paris, 1771), he opened to scholars a new field for research, the rich harvest of which we are really only just beginning to reap, and which stands ready to offer more full and abundant sheaves, especially to the student of our own Bible.

To the biblical student, the Avesta and the religion of Zoroaster have more than one distinct point of interest. It may fairly be said that the sacred books of no other people, outside the light of the great revelation, contain a clearer grasp of the ideas, of right and wrong, or a firmer faith in the importance of the purity alike of body and soul, a more ethical conception of duty (considering the early times), or a truer, nobler, more ideal

belief in the resurrection of the body, the coming of a Saviour, and of the rewards and punishments hereafter for the immortal soul, than are to be found in the scriptures of ancient Iran, illuminated by the spirit of the great teacher himself, Zoroaster.

All that is good in these early books becomes doubly interesting in the light of biblical allusion. The law of the Medes and Persians 'which altereth not' (Dan. 6: 8-12) has passed into a proverb. The Medes themselves are several times specially mentioned in the Scriptures. In 2 Kings we are told that on the destruction of Samaria (B. C. 722) 'the king of Assyria placed captive Israelites in certain cities of the Medes' (2 Kings 17: 6; 18:11). In Ezra 6: 2-5, it is at Acmetha (Ecbatana) 'the palace in the province of the Medes', that the famous decree of Cyrus was found. In Isaiah, Daniel and Esther (*e. g.*, Esther 1: 9 *seq.*, 10: 2; 6:1), there are several marked allusions to the Medes and Persians. The scene of the apocryphal book of Tobit is laid in Media; as is also a portion of Judith with its allusions to Rhages (Av. *Ragha*), the important Median town which plays no insignificant part in connection with Zoroaster. The very name Asmodeus, in the book of Tobit just referred to, was first understood when it was discovered to be none other than the name of the awful fiend Aeshma Daeva ('Demon of Fury') in the Avesta.

It may likewise well be remembered that it was Cyrus, the ancient Persian king, a follower of the faith of Zoroaster, whom God called his 'anointed' (Isa. 45: 1-3), his 'shepherd' (Isa. 44: 28), and the 'righteous' one (Isa. 41: 2); and who gave command that the temple at Jerusalem should be rebuilt, and that the Jews be returned from captivity to their own city (2 Chr. 36: 22-23; Ezra 1: 1-7; 3: 7; 4: 3): 'thus saith the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus whose right hand I have holden', etc. It was Darius, likewise, the worshipper of Ormazd, that favored the rebuilding of the temple, and who ordered the decree of Cyrus to be carried into effect (Ezra 5: 15-17; 6: 1-12). Lastly, but most important to us, it was the Magi—true followers of the ancient faith of Persia, those wise men from the East—that

came bearing gold, frankincense, and myrrh to the babe at Bethlehem (Matt. 2: 1-2).¹ And it was perhaps in symbolic acknowledgment of the dawn of a new and blessed era, that those worshippers of light itself bowed before the glorious majesty of the new born light of the world.

This faith of Zoroaster, founded centuries before our Saviour's time, became the creed of the great Achæmenian kings, Cyrus, Darius, and Xerxes. Under the power of these mighty monarchs, the belief in Ormazd might have spread into Europe, who knows how far, had it not been for the battle of Marathon. The victorious Alexander, moreover, in his invasion of Persia, dealt the Zoroastrian religion an almost fatal blow, from which, however, it was destined to recover. Its sacred books he destroyed, but the faith struggled on for five hundred years; and in the second century of our era it arose again under the patronage of Sassanian dynasts. Zoroastrianism was once more restored to its ancient glory; church and state became one, and commands were given for collecting all that could be found of the ancient scriptures. The religion then flourished for four hundred years; but early in the seventh century came the Mohammedan invasion. The fanatic followers of the new prophet of Islam bore in one hand the sword, and in the other the Koran. A final destructive blow was now dealt to Zoroastrianism. Its old adherents, in order to avoid persecution, were forced to adopt the religion of Islam. Some, however, preferred exile and found among the Hindus a place of safety, of peace, and of freedom to worship Ormazd. Their descendants are the modern Parsis of India, who form a thrifty, prosperous community, far better, in fact, than their persecuted brethren, the Guebers who remained in Persia. It is these two scanty peoples, numbering less than 100,000 souls, that have preserved for us the fragmentary remnants of the ancient Avesta.

What has survived to-day of the Avesta, might possibly equal in extent one-tenth of our Bible, and may be regarded as divided into the following books:

¹ In the Apocryphal N. T., *The Infancy* 3: 7, it is actually said that they came in accordance with the prophecy of 'Zoroadescht' (Zoroaster).

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| 1. Yasna (including Gāthās) | 4. Minor Texts |
| 2. Visperad | 5. Vendidad |
| 3. Yashts | 6. Fragments. |

No single existing manuscript contains all these complete ; but the Yasna, Visperad, and Vendidad are usually found grouped together as a sort of prayer book, and are called Vendidad Sādah or 'Vendidad pure,' *i. e.* text without commentary ; because when they are thus grouped for liturgical purposes the Avesta text is not accompanied by the rendering and comments in the Pahlavi language.

Tradition claims that the original Zoroastrian Avesta was in itself a literature of vast dimensions. The Latin writer, Pliny, in his Natural History, speaks of 2,000,000 verses of Zoroaster. Semitic authors add testimony about the works of the prophet being translated into seven or even twelve different tongues. A statement may also be quoted to the effect that the original Avesta was written on 1,200 parchments, with gold illuminated letters, and deposited in the library at Persepolis. It was this copy that Alexander the Great—'the accursed Iskander,' as Parsi tradition calls him—allowed to be destroyed, when at the request of Thais, as the story goes, he permitted the burning of the palace. It is also implied that there was another copy of the original Avesta which somehow perished at the hands of the Greeks. More blame, doubtless, than is just, is put upon Alexander ; but his shoulders are broad enough to bear the burden ; and his invasion, it is true, was ultimately the cause of much of the scriptures being forgotten, or falling into disuse, in consequence of the ruin he brought upon the religion. The tradition, at all events, that the original Avesta consisted of twenty-one 'Nasks' or books, rests, it seems, on good foundation. There is no special reason to doubt it.

The Sassanian rulers (A. D. 229–379), who gathered and codified all they could collect of the texts, were able to give a detailed outline of the contents and extent of each of these Nasks. From their description the original Avesta must have been a sort of encyclopædia, not alone of religion, but of many matters relating to the arts, sciences, and professions, closely

connected with daily life. Judging from the table of contents of the Nasks, it would seem that not more than a quarter, perhaps less, of the ancient monument of the Avesta could be restored even at the time of the Sassanian council. The Vendidad, for example, according to tradition, is one of the surviving Nasks; but even a superficial examination of this book shows that in its present form it can not be complete; the frame-work is all there, but the material is in a more or less disjointed and fragmentary condition. The Mohammedan invasion also, it must be added, has done much toward destroying a great deal that would otherwise have survived in spite of 'the accursed Iskander's' conquest. Fragmentary as the remnants are, let us rejoice in them. The following sketch will give some idea of their character.

1. The *Yasna*, 'sacrifice worship,' is the chief liturgical work of the sacred canon. It consists chiefly of ascriptions of praise and of prayer. It answers, in fact, partly to what we might call a book of common prayer. It comprises seventy-two chapters; these fall into three nearly equal parts. The middle or oldest part is the section of *Gāthās*, 'the hymns' or psalms of Zoroaster himself; they are seventeen in number, and, they, like the Psalms of David, are divided into five groups. A treatment of these sacred and interesting remnants of the prophet's direct words and teachings must be reserved for elsewhere.

The opening chapters of the *Yasna* contain passages for recitation at the sacrifice—a sacrifice consisting chiefly of praise and thanksgiving, accompanied by ritual ceremonies. The priest invokes Ahura Mazda (Ormazd) and the heavenly hierarchy; he consecrates the holy water, *zaothra*, the *myazda*, or obligation, and the *baresma*, or bundle of sacred twigs, and then with due solemnity he and his assistant prepare the *haoma* (the *sōma* of the Hindus), or juice of a sacred plant which was drunk as part of the religious service. The sacredness and solemnity attached to this rite in the Zoroastrian religion may possibly be better comprehended, if compared—with all reverence, be it understood—with our communion service; in the Zoroastrian rite, however, there is no idea of a sacrifice, the

suggested resemblance is therefore merely an external one, based on form and ceremony. In the Yasna ceremony, the priest begins at chapter 9, to chant the direct praise of Haoma. The latter is personified as having appeared to Zoroaster in a vision, and as telling him what blessings the haoma-worship brings. The lines are metrical and somewhat resemble the Kalevala verse of Longfellow's Hiawatha.

*havanīm ā ratūm ā
Haomō upāit Zarathushtrēm
ātrēm pairi-yaozhdathəntəm
Gāthāosca srāvayantəm.*

*ā dim pərəsat Zarathushtrō:
'Kō narə ahi
yim āzəm vīspakē ankhēush
astvātā sraēshtə dādarəsa
hvahe gayehe hvanvātō [aməshahe]?'*

Which may be rendered thus :

At the time of morning worship
'Haoma came to Zoroaster,
Who was serving at the Fire
And the holy Psalms intoning.

'What man art thou ?' asked the Prophet,

'Who of all the world material,
Fairest art that ever I saw
In my blessed life immortal.'

Haoma gives answer and explains his presence.

Zoroaster again enquires, asking questions about the pious persons who in the past have worshipped Haoma, and prepared the sacred draught. The divinity names several holy men ; among them is Yima, in whose reign was the Golden Age. His blessed rule is thus described :

In the reign of gallant Yima,
Heat there was not, cold there was not,
Neither age nor death existed,
Nor disease the work of Demons ;

But the son walked with the father,
 Fifteen years' old each in figure,
 Long as Vivanghvats' son, Yima,
 The good Shepherd, ruled as sovereign.

The chanting of the praises of Haoma continues for three chapters, concluding at Ys. 11. Then follows an interesting chapter (Ys. 12), the Avestan Creed, recited by those who adopted the Zoroastrian faith, renounced their primitive marauding and nomadic habits, and peacefully cultivated the fields. Other divisions of a catechetical or a devotional nature are inserted; and then come the Gāthās or Psalms, the most interesting and valuable part of all the Avesta, comprising chapters 28–53. The closing sections of the Yasna (Ys. 55–72) conclude the ritual worship.

2. The *Visperad* 'all the masters' forms in 24 sections a supplement to the Yasna. Invocations and offerings of praise are addressed to all holy beings and sacred things. In ceremonial recitation the sections of the Visperad are inserted between the Yasna chapters, somewhat as the verses of the litany in church service.

3. The *Yashts* 'praises' form a book of some 21 hymns of adoration and praise of the divinities or angels, *Yazatas* (*Izads*) 'worshipful ones' of the religion. The most important of the Yashts are those in praise of Ardvi Sura Anahita 'the high, exalted, undefiled,' the goddess of waters (Yt. 5), and of the star Tishtrya (Yt. 8); of Mithra the divinity of truth and light (Yt. 10), of the Fravashis, or glorified souls of the righteous (Yt. 13), of the Genius of Victory, Verethraghna (Yt. 14), and of the Kingly Glory (Yt. 19), together with the exaltation of some abstract qualities that receive personification and religious adoration.

The Yashts for the most part are written in meter, and they have poetic merit. Their material in general is old. It is evident that we have in them certain ancient Iranian legends. A conjecture might be made, not without reason or probability, that the Yashts represent the pre-Zoroastrian sagas and hymns of

[¹The Iranian idea of the bloom of youth, 'sweet sixteen.']

praise, and that in the new religion or Zoroastrian reformation of the old faith, concessions were made, and the Yashts were allowed to remain as a form of worship, and were given a scriptural or orthodox tone. Or possibly they may be later restorations of old myths and forms of worship, introduced after the Prophet's time, when the religion had sunk to a somewhat lower level than the high spiritual plane on which it had been placed by its founder. The mythological matter they contain is interesting from the comparative standpoint; and their legends and historical allusions receive a flood of light from Firdausi's later Persian epic, the *Shāh Nāmāh*. The Yashts are not regularly incorporated into the *Vendidad-Sādah* used in everyday worship; they are rather the popular legends, the apocryphal books, scriptural tales, a sort of collection of 'St. George-and-the-dragon' pious stories.

Some idea of the Yashts, for example, may be gained from the following selections: In Yt. 19:40-41, the praises of the ancient and noble hero Keresaspa, and of his deeds, are sung in pious strains. The meter is the same as above.

*Yō janat azhīm Sruvarēm
Yim aspō-garēm nərə-garēm
Yim vishavañtēm zairitēm
Yim upairi vish raodhat
Khshvaēpaya vaēnaya barəshna;
Yim upairi vish raodhat
Arshtyō-barəza zairitēm.*

Or, as this may be rendered:

'He who slew the dragon Srvara,
Which devoured men and horses,
Yellow serpent, rank with poison,
Over which poison was streaming—
Snake with darting, watchful head,
Over whom the yellow poison
Thumb-deep in a stream was flowing.'

The story continues, relating how Keresaspa, Sinbad-like, mistaking the monster for some island, begins to cook his meal

upon the dragon's back. His final slaying of the creature forms the burden of the devout song of praise.

The same Keresaspa also kills a monstrous demon, who is just growing to man's estate. This fiend presumptuous utters vaunts worthy of some early romance, if not of Milton's rebel angels. This is his proud boast :

I am yet only a stripling,
But if ever I come to manhood
I shall make the heaven my chariot
And the earth to be its wheel.
I shall force the Holy Spirit
Down from out the shining Heaven ;
I shall rout the Evil Spirit
Up from out the dark Abyss ;
They, as steeds, shall draw my chariot,
God and Devil yoked together.

(4) Under the designation, *Minor Texts* of the Avesta, may be understood a series of shorter prayers, praises, and blessings, the Nyaishes, Gahs, Sorozahs, and Afringans, answering somewhat to our little manuals of daily devotion, or to the prayers, thanksgivings, and orders for special occasions in the Book of Common Prayer.

(5) The *Vendidad*, 'law against the daevas, or demons,' is a book of much interest. It is written chiefly in prose ; and in its present form many portions may be several centuries younger than Zoroaster ; but much of the material is certainly old, perhaps in part even pre-Zoroastrian. The Vendidad is a priestly code, and its character will best be understood if the book be paralleled with the Mosaic code, and the Vendidad be called the Iranian Pentateuch. Its chapters number twenty-two. The first chapter ('Fargard 1') is a sort of Avestan Genesis, a dualistic account of the creation of good things and places by Ormazd, and of the Devil Ahriman's offsetting these by producing evils. Chapter 2 sketches the legend of Yima and the golden age, and describes the coming of a destructive winter, an Iranian flood, against which Yima is commanded to make a *Vara* 'enclosure, paradise,' and to bring therein the seeds of all good things, two of every

kind, to be preserved. Chapter 3 is filled with the praises of agriculture; while chapter 4 is legal in its tone and several of its passages would find parallels in Leviticus and Numbers. From Vd. 5 to Vd. 12, the treatment of the dead is the main subject considered; it is in these chapters that we see the sources of many of the peculiar customs to-day followed by the Parsis, especially the origin of the 'Towers of Silence.' The three following chapters (Vd. 13-15) devoted to dogs and their treatment are of such character as to call forth the ridicule of Sir William Jones when the Avesta was first discovered and he disbelieved its authenticity. Happily to-day, criticism has led us to a better understanding of such material, and has enabled us to place it in its proper light, when forming judgment on the customs and beliefs of antiquity. Chapters 15-17, and partly 18, are devoted to purifications of several sorts of uncleanness. Parallels to Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy, are again not far to seek. In Fargard 19 is found a fragment relating to the temptation of Zoroaster by Ahriman, and an announcement of the revelation. The closing sections (chapters 20-22) are chiefly medical.

(6) Besides the above books there are a number of fragments from lost portions of the Nasks or 'books' of the original Avesta. Some of them are full of interest as they relate to the fate of the soul after death. Here, for example, from the missing Varshtmansar Nask (cf. Dinkart 46. 1) is preserved an old metrical fragment (Frag. 4. 1-3) in praise of the Airyama Ishya Prayer (Ys. 51. 4). The words of the Airyama Prayer shall be intoned by the Saoshyant 'Saviour,' and his glorious attendants at the great day of judgment as a sort of last trump whose notes shall raise the dead again to life; shall banish the Devil, Ahriman, from the earth; and shall restore the world. Ormazd himself says to Zoroaster (Frag. 4. 1-3):

- 1 The Airyama Ishya, I tell thee
Upright, holy Zoroaster,
Is the greatest of all prayers.
Verily among all prayers
It is this one which I gifted
With revivifying powers.

- 2 This prayer shall the Saoshyants, Saviours,
Chant; and by the chanting of it
I shall rule over my creatures.
I who am Ahura Mazda.
Not shall Ahriman have power,
Anra Mainyu, o'er my creatures,
He (the fiend) of foul religion.

- 3 In the earth shall Ahriman hide,
In the earth, the demons hide.
Up, the dead again shall rise
And within their lifeless bodies
Incorporate life shall be restored.

Other interesting fragments might be quoted which have escaped the ravages of 'the accursed Iskander' (Alexander), the fanaticism of Islam, and the devouring maw of time. These fragments give us some idea of certain lost parts of the original Avesta the outlines of whose contents are preserved in the account found in the Pahlavi Dinkart, of the Zoroastrian 21 Nasks. We are fortunate, however, in possessing so much of the old Avestan scriptures as we do. What is missing of the original is in a measure made up for, or supplemented by the sacred writings of Sassanian times, the Pahlavi Books. These are in part translations of old Avesta texts now lost; in part they are original productions. The works in the Pahlavi language are of great value to the student of Zoroastrianism; they fill up many a lacuna; they supplement our knowledge; or, again, they present the later development of the religion. All this a separate paper on Pahlavi literature might well show.

From the above description of the Zoroastrian sacred books, however, some idea of their interest and importance may be formed. The Avesta, as we now possess it, is perhaps rather a Prayer-Book than a Bible. The Vendidad, Visperad and Yasna are always recited together, and with their chapters intermingled in the ritual, they might remind one, in fact, of the forms of prayer to-day used in church. The Vendidad might be compared with portions of the Old or New Testament lessons; the solemn preparation of the holy water, the *barsom* or consecrated twigs, and of the *haoma* juice, is a sort of communion service; the Gatha

would be psalms, or even collects and gospel; the metrical parts of the Yasna might supply hymns. The epic and narrative parts of the great metrical Yashts might perhaps find a parallel in the apocryphal books, or in the legends of the saints which were not wanting in the old Anglo-Saxon church.

Let us remember that the faith of Zoroaster lingers even until to-day; the Avesta is yet chanted in solemn tones by the white-robed priest in the temples at Bombay; the spark of the sacred fire is still cherished; most of the old rites, ceremonies and customs are preserved as of yore; and the followers of the Prophet of Ancient Iran, though they now number hardly 90,000 brethren, still form a united community, upright, honest, thrifty, prosperous, and faithful to the teachings of their Master. What the nature of those teachings is, must be reserved for discussion elsewhere.