

AVESTA AND ZOROASTRISM

M.T. Turgunov Candidate of law.

Abstract: The article provides a brief description of the religion of Zoroastrianism through the description of the sacred book of this religion - the Avesta. Particular attention is paid to Videvdad as a collection of primary legal norms that are the basis for the genesis of human rights. At the same time, these norms at that time were closely interconnected with the prevailing religion in society, which also established moral norms.

Keywords: Uzbekistan, Khorezm, Avesta, Videvdad, Zoroastrianism.

Introduction. Uzbekistan pays close attention to historical monuments of law. One of these monuments is the Avesta. The Avesta Museum is located in the city of Khiva as a confirmation of the fact that the Avesta originated in Khorezm. The Avesta as the sacred book of Zoroastrianism has in its content and norms of law, therefore, its study from the standpoint of genesis in ancient sources of human rights is important from the standpoint of legal anthropology.

Crime and criminal punishment as social phenomena were well covered in the Avesta and Zoroastrianism. When forming his religion, Zoroaster pays special attention to tort - legal relations. These were mainly those acts that, based on the world outlook and world consciousness of ancient people, infringed on the values on which order and stability in society were based.

Zoroastrianism is a religion founded in ancient times by the prophet Zarathushtra, known to the Greeks as Zoroaster.

Zoroastrianism was the dominant world religion during the Persian empires (559 BC to 651 AC), and was thus the most powerful world religion at the time of Jesus. It had a major influence on other religions. It is still practiced world-wide, especially in Iran and India.

To quote Mary Boyce, "The prophet Zarathushtra, son of Pourushaspa, of the Spitaman family, is known to us primarily from the Gathas, seventeen great hymns which he composed and which have been faithfully preserved by his community. These are not works of instruction, but inspired, passionate utterances, many of them addressed directly to God; and their poetic form is a very ancient one, which has been traced back (through Norse parallels) to Indo-European times. It seems to have been linked with a mantic tradition, that is, to have been cultivated by priestly seers who sought to express in lofty words their personal apprehension of the divine; and it is marked by subtleties of allusion, and great richness and complexity of style. Such poetry can only have been fully understood by the learned; and since Zoroaster believed that he had been entrusted by God with a message for all mankind, he must also have preached again and again in plain words to ordinary people. His teachings were handed down orally in his community from generation to generation, and were at last committed to writing under the Sasanians, rulers of the third Iranian empire.

The language then spoken was Middle Persian, also called Pahlavi; and the Pahlavi books provide invaluable keys for interpreting the magnificent obscurities of the Gathas themselves." - Zoroastrians, Their religious beliefs and practices, London, 1979, pg 17.

Some of the major tenets of Zoroastrianism include:

God: Ahura Mazda

The supreme being is called Ahura Mazda (Phl. Ohrmazd), meaning "Wise Lord." Ahura Mazda is all good, and created the world and all good things, including people. He is opposed by Anghra Mainyu (Phl. Ahriman), meaning "Destructive Spirit," the embodiment of evil and creator of all evil things. The cosmic battle between good and evil will ultimately lead to the destruction of all evil.

Prophet: Zarathushtra

The religion was founded by Zarathushtra. His date is uncertain, but is probably somewhere around 1200 BC. He lived and preached in the Inner Asian steppes. Zarathushtra received his revelations directly from Ahura Mazda, and from his Archangels (Amesha Spentas).

Scripture: Avesta

The central scripture is the Avesta. The most sacred sections of the Avesta are the Gathas or Hymns of Zarathushtra; they are also the most enigmatic. Later sacred literature includes the Pahlavi Texts, which contain extensive quotations and paraphrases from lost Avesta texts.

Creed

The creed is summarized in Yasna 12. It is likely to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself, and to have been used as an avowal of faith by early converts (Cf. Boyce, Zoroastrianism, Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour, p. 102-4).

Observances

Two sacred garments, the sudreh (shirt) and kusti (cord) are the emblems of the religion. Zoroastrians perform a short cleansing ritual (Padyab), and retie the kusti several times a day with another short ritual (Nirang-i Kusti) as a sign of their faith. Other prayers are recited daily from the Khorda Avesta. Prayer is largely done in the Avestan language. The faithful should also participate in seasonal communal festivals ("Gahambar") during the year.

Fire and "Asha"

Fire, as a symbol of "Asha" and the "original light of God," holds a special place of esteem in the religion. Prayer is often done in front of a fire, and consecrated fires are kept perpetually burning in the major temples.

How many Zoroastrians are there currently?

I believe the last figure I saw was around 140,000. The largest populations are in India and Iran. J Hinnells' booklet Zoroastrianism and the Parsis (p.8) has 17,000 in Iran and 92,000 in India. North American Zoroastrians are reported to be around 5,000.

What scriptures are sacred to Zoroastrianism?

The oldest Zoroastrian scripture is the Avesta. It is about a thousand pages long. Some portions, including the Gathas, are in an older dialect called 'Old Avestan' or

'Gathic Avestan'. The major surviving divisions are:

Yasna

Sacred Liturgy and Gathas/Hymns of Zarathushtra

Khorda Avesta

(Book of Common Prayer) including Yashts (hymns to the sacred beings), Niyayeshes (litanies to the sun, Mithra, Water, Fire, and the Moon), Gahs (prayers for the five periods of the day), Afrinagans (ceremonies of blessing), and other prayers

Visperad

Extensions to the Liturgy

Vidēvdād

Primarily purity laws, myths, and some medical texts

Fragments

Zoroastrian law and the Avesta (Vidēvdād) also recognize crimes as a socially dangerous act that infringes on the life of a person, animal, angels, religion and the environment, prohibited by the Avesta and other sources of Zoroastrian law under the threat of punishment. The main focus of the Avesta is on the categories of guilt.

The Vidēvdād (V.) "law of breaking off with the demons" (see Benveniste, "Que signifie Vidēvdāt?" pp. 71f.) comprises twenty-two chapters, the first two explaining the origin of the book, the rest containing diverse rules and regulations, with the exception of chap. 19 which contains the temptation of Zaratūštra.

The original Avesta canon comprised twenty-two books, (liturgical, historical, medical, legal). Its existence into the 9th century CE is well documented. Since then much of the non-liturgical texts have been lost.

In addition to the Avesta, Zoroastrians have numerous scriptures from the Sassanian period which are written in a middle-Persian dialect called Pahlavi. Many are exegetical commentaries (called Zand) which translate, summarize and explain the Avesta. The Pahlavi texts also preserve large summaries and translations of lost Avestan texts. They are considered of lesser authority than the Avesta.

When did Zarathushtra live?

According to Bruce Lincoln, "At present, the majority opinion among scholars probably inclines toward the end of the second millennium or the beginning of the first, although there are still those who hold for a date in the seventh century." (Death, War, and Sacrifice, 1991, pg 150)

Humbach and Ichaporia seem to favor the Xanthos date of 1080 BC but mention the 630 date also. (Heritage, 1994, pg 11).

A commonly given date is the seventh century B.C.E. I think Boyce has convincingly shown the seventh century date to be an error. Humbach also discounts the basis of this calculation in his Gathas 1991 (pg 30). Boyce has wavered on an actual date: between 1400 and 1000 BC (1975), between 1700 and 1500 (1979), around 1400 BC (1988), between 1500 BC & 1200 BC "with the latter more likely" (1992).

What is "Asha"?

Like 'Dao' in Daoism, Asha is a key concept in the Gathas and throughout scripture. Also like 'Dao', it is too complex to be translatable by a single term. I

prefer to leave it untranslated, but give a definition somewhere. The more common translations: truth, righteousness, world-order, eternal law, fitness. See also discussion in Dhalla, History of Zoroastrianism (1938, chap. 7.)

WHAT DOES ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURE SAY ABOUT ...?

Abortion

A child is said to be formed, and a soul added to its body, after a woman has been pregnant for four months and ten days (Anquetil II, 563). In ancient times, according to the Vendidad (Vd15.9-16), abortion was known to be effected by means of certain plants. It was considered murder.

Action

"A thousand people cannot convince one by words to the extent that one person can convince a thousand by action." (Dk6.e15)

Charity

"This also is revealed in the religion, that Ohrmazd said to Zartosht, 'He who performs charity knowingly and discriminately is like me, I who am Ohrmazd. And he who performs charity ignorantly and without understanding and indiscriminately is like Ahriman'. ... 'Charity is something so worthy, there are 33 ways from Garothman [Paradise] to the Chinwad Bridge, and everyone who is blessed on account of meritorious action is then able to go on one way, and he who is blessed on account of charity is able to go on all those ways'. ... 'Whatever charitable men give, I give them twofold in return, and I store it up'. " (PhlRiv10, tr. based on A.V. Williams 1990.)

Education

"It is the desire of Ahura Mazda from people is this: 'Know me', for he knows: 'If they know me, everyone will follow me'. The desire of Angra Mainyu is this: 'Do not know me', for he knows: 'If they know me no one will follow me'." (Dk6.31, tr. Shaked)

Evolution

"How is existence brought about? Just as one substance is evolved out of another according to its own laws and in the finite time (fixed for it)." (Dk4.46)

Hell

Hell is a temporary place of suffering for sinners after death. When evil is finally defeated (at Frashgird), the souls of sinners will be released from hell, and will be purified by the ordeal of molten metal. They will then join the congregation of God and the saints.

Hope

"There is a remedy for everything but death, a hope for everything but wickedness, and everything will lapse except righteousness." (SLS20.17, tr. West)

Joy

Angra Mainyu is best fought by joy; despondency is a symptom of his victory.

Paying attention

"As the soul is thus not all, but is in the world for a period for maintaining the body, it is necessary to walk with such circumspection as if one were without shoes, and the whole of this world were full of snakes, scorpions, noxious reptiles, and

thorns, and one's fear were: 'Let not the reptiles bite me, or the thorns penetrate me.'" (Dk6.b47, tr. Shaked) In Zoroastrian theology, paying attention is personified as Sraosha ('Hearkening').

Prophets

"The creator Ahura Mazda spoke to Zarathushtra thus: 'O Zarathushtra! I have created no one better than you in the world, and I shall likewise not create one better after you are gone. You are my chosen one, and I have made this world apparent on account of you. And all these people and monarchs whom I have created have always maintained the hope that I should create you in their days, so that they should accept the religion, and their souls should attain to the supreme heaven.'" (SD81.3)

The religion of pre-Islamic Iran, Zoroastrianism, is rightly regarded as one of the oldest, or indeed the oldest religion inaugurated by a prophet. Like other religions, it emphasizes the importance of the prophet's words, which are believed to be preserved in the Zoroastrian sacred scriptures, the Avesta. Owing to their age, these texts not only constitute the oldest documents in any Iranian language, but they also number among the oldest literature in any Indo-European language. These texts have survived to the present day thanks to the efforts of Zoroastrian priests, who transmitted them from generation to generation first in a purely oral tradition and then, probably from the late Sasanian period onwards, in written form as well. Indeed, to this day, memorizing and reciting the texts forms part of the daily devotional practice even of Zoroastrian lay people. Substantial parts of the Kusti prayers, for instance, are passages from the Avesta.

Reincarnation

The concept of reincarnation is foreign to Zoroastrianism. According to Dastur Firoze M. Kotwal, the current head priest of the Wadia fire temple, "No reincarnation as far as our religion is concerned, because if there is reincarnation, then there cannot be the idea of resurrection, you see. So these doctrines go counter to one another. Of course, there is a tendency for bringing in reincarnation from Hindu philosophies or something, because we are living among the Hindus. But no, this is all a recent development, just to placate the Hindus or something like that. But you must be faithful to our religion, because when you wish to introduce something in our religion that is foreign, then there is danger of all other doctrines going topsy-turvey."

Also, according to J. W. Sanjana, "Faith in this dogma [i.e. reincarnation] is so incompatible with the letter and spirit of traditional Zoroastrianism that it can be said without exaggeration, and with the most perfect reason and justice, that a man who believes in reincarnation is no true Zoroastrian." (Cited in Boyce, 1984, pg 157.)

Responsibility

"When Ahura Mazda the Lord first created humanity, He gave the following order: "Be diligent to save your souls; I shall then provide for your bodily matters. For it is impossible to save your souls without you." People are deluded in the following manner: they themselves strive after material things, and as regards the things of the soul, they put their trust in the Yazads." (Dk6.291, tr. Shaked)

Suffering

"When a person stands in the religion of the Yazads, the Yazads notice the pain

endured by him in the world -- even the fact that he came to pain by foot and that he lives lawfully on the work of his hands; and they carry and keep for him in the Reckoning of the Spirits (Armageddon) the discomfort, hunger, thirst, worry, and disease which affect him." (Dk6.106, tr. Shaked)

Truthfulness

Zoroastrians regard lying as a great sin, and have had the reputation since ancient times for scrupulous honesty. Perjury cannot be atoned for in this life.

"Zartosht asked Ohrmazd, 'Which is the one virtue that is best for mankind?' Ohrmazd said, 'Truthful speech is best, because in truthful speech there is good repute in the world and good life and salvation in Paradise; as regards your descendants and progeny, by doing good deeds it will be better for their families, and your soul will indeed be blessed'. For him who is condemned as regards (material) wealth for the sake of truth, it is better for him than for one who is condemned as regards the soul for falsehood, because it is possible to amass wealth again, but when people have died, their souls pass on. Then there is no remedy for it." (PhlRiv10 tr. based on A.V. Williams 1990.)

Word of God

Religion and the Sacred Word are like flesh and skin (Dk6.324, tr. Shaked)

Thus, in the Zoroastrian denaming itself, a certain gender equality between men and women is preserved, which should be welcomed from the point of view of ensuring human rights, however, marriages of Zoroastrian women with other representatives of a foreign religion are not encouraged, which is not a standard for ensuring human rights. Harm to nature is also considered a crime, anticipating human environmental rights to a normal environment. From the point of view of psychology, the positive attitude of the Zoroastrian to the desire to bring benefit to society through good deeds is perhaps the most important element of the axiological value of the Avesta and Zoroastrianism.

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