



DOMENICO AGOSTINI  
& SAMUEL THROPE

THE  
BUNDAHIŠŃ  
THE ZOROASTRIAN  
BOOK OF CREATION

A NEW TRANSLATION

*With a Foreword by Shaul Shaked  
& an Afterword by Guy G. Stroumsa*

# The *Bundahišn*



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*The Zoroastrian Book of Creation*

*Edited and translated by*

DOMENICO AGOSTINI AND SAMUEL THROPE

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*In memory of Saul Friedman and Gherardo Gnoli*



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# Middle Persian and Avestan Pronunciation Table

č is like the *ch*-sound in “church”

γ (Greek gamma) is the sound of the Spanish *g* between vowels, as in *haga*

ə (schwa) is like the *e* in “fed”

ŋ (agma) is like the *ng*-sound in “sing”

š and ṣ are like the *sh*-sound in “short”

θ (Greek theta) is like the *th*-sound in “think”

*x* is like the *ch*-sound in “loch”

ž is the voiced sound of English “measure”



# Foreword

## The *Bundahišn* Account of Creation: Myth, Speculation, and Paradox

*Shaul Shaked*

Undertaking a translation of the *Bundahišn*, one of the essential books of Zoroastrianism, requires some courage. Several renowned scholars have worked on this text over the past century and have not managed to bring their work to fruition. It seems almost a miracle that the present translation is now completed. Access to the *Bundahišn* in contemporary English translation based on the latest scholarly literature will certainly benefit those who are interested in the Zoroastrian religion, one of the oldest and still living religions in the world, and perhaps to its contacts with other religions.

This treatise got its written shape more than a millennium ago, perhaps after a period of oral transmission. It presents the Zoroastrian view of the world, beginning with an outline of its history, from creation to its transformation into the new world of eschatology. The world “of the mixture,” the actual universe in which we live, receives a detailed description, including an enumeration of minerals, vegetation, the animal kingdom, the types of human beings, and much more. It opens up for us in a compact scope the complex and intricate reflection of a religion that has its roots in the Indo-European tradition. Understanding and translating it is far from a simple matter, for it uses a language and script that are not always easy to interpret due to an adaptation of a variety of Aramaic scripts for rendering the Middle Persian language.

An earlier phase of Zoroastrian literature has partly survived. We still have access to portions of the ancient canon of scriptures, the *Avesta*, which has a long history of oral transmission. The Zoroastrian religion and its scripture suffered also from a tumultuous political history that ended with the Islamic conquest of Iran. How far back was the emergence of the sacred scripture, which was composed in more than one variety of Old Iranian, is not entirely clear. Most scholars nowadays would place the earliest parts of the *Avesta* more than three thousand years ago.

The *Bundahišn* was created in the second major phase of Zoroastrian religious literature, where it occupies a very prominent position. It presents a mature and sophisticated formulation of the original tradition. Zoroastrianism, like other great religious traditions, went through phases of change and adaptation. It is not always easy to follow in detail the transformations that this tradition underwent because so much of its early existence has been lost in the rise and fall of dynasties and the loss of literary and material artifacts. While preserving and promoting several key themes that are part of the ancient scriptures, the *Bundahišn*'s version of the Zoroastrian religion reflects to some extent the intellectual currents prevalent at the time of its composition in the ninth century CE. This includes some elements of Greek thinking and science as well as ideas that became popular in the Islamic period. It deals with the structure of the material world and provides an understanding of how and why the creation of this world was necessary, indeed almost inevitable. Knowledge of the material world is as much a fundamental part of the faith as an understanding of the divine world and of the world to come, the eschatological world.

There is a marked element of dualism in all phases of Zoroastrianism. Dualism is naturally the central theme in the *Bundahišn*'s treatment of the myth of creation. Two types of dualism are clearly present in this account. One is ethical: it distinguishes between good and evil entities. The other is ontological, referring to the distinction between that which is visible and tangible—we may call it “material” (*gētīg* in Middle Persian)—and that which is invisible and intangible, or “spiritual” (*mēnōg* in the language of the Zoroastrian texts). In contrast to the more familiar types of dualism in Judaism, Christianity, Islam, and the Gnostic schools, these two types of dualism operate in Zoroastrianism independently of each other. In other words, the invisible (or spiritual) form of existence is not necessarily good, and the material world is not necessarily evil. Good and evil entities can each be spiritual or material.

Contrary to what we may expect, it is good, and not evil, that is more closely associated with material existence. While both good and evil have a spiritual form of existence, they do not function in the same manner in the material world. The visible world is exclusively a creation of Ohrmazd, while the evil entity, Ahriman, has no real share in the material mode of existence. He is nothing but a destructive spirit; his activity is aimed at creating havoc and bringing about destruction.

The Hellenistic world exercised a strong influence on the formation of late Judaism and on the religions that emerged from it, in particular Christianity

and Islam. The association of evil with the material world is derived from the trends of thought that were developed in the schools of Neoplatonism and Gnosticism. Zoroastrianism, in contrast, rejected the claim that the Evil Spirit is a product of the material world. He is regarded in Zoroastrianism as a spirit who invaded the material world in order to destroy it. It may be noted that the sect of the Dead Sea Scrolls is the only form of ancient Judaism that is close in structure to this Iranian point of view.

There are still further examples of binary thinking in the *Bundahišn*. One of them consists of the opposites “limited” and “unlimited,” and the other posits the two complementary notions of “time” and “space” next to each other. These two pairs of terms are important for understanding the theology that lies at the base of the myths recounted in the *Bundahišn*.

The first set of terms is used to describe a noun like “time.” The term appears in the first phrase of the first chapter: “Ohrmazd was on high in omniscience and goodness, (he) was in light for an unlimited time” (1:2, translation somewhat modified to emphasize the use of the terminology). The author’s aim is to highlight Ohrmazd’s unlimited existence in time. This is followed by another phrase: “Light is the throne and place of Ohrmazd. Some call it ‘Endless Light’” (1:2). “Endless Light,” as we learn from the context, is the unlimited space of Ohrmazd. It imitates “Endless Time,” which is also an attribute of Ohrmazd. The Evil Spirit resides symmetrically in what is called “Endless Darkness.” But it may be pointed out that he does not have the attribute of “Unlimited Time.”

As an element of surprise, we encounter here a third abode, one that is allotted to neither of the two contending powers, Ohrmazd and Ahriman. It is a “void” that serves as a no man’s land. The need for this separation, this space that is *located* in no-space, is understandable: there can be no zone shared by the two antagonistic spirits in primordial times. There can be no point of contact between them. We know from the *Bundahišn* narrative that the Evil Spirit was initially unaware of the existence of Ohrmazd.

Another interesting point to note is that the two uncreated spirits are described as both limited and unlimited. This statement appears to go against common sense, but it is required by the logic of the theological narrative. The text gives us a somewhat lame explanation as to how this apparent contradiction is possible (see 1:6–11). When we are dealing with cosmic powers it is impossible to avoid such paradoxes. The upper powers evidently operate on a level that is beyond human comprehension. To justify attributing a duality of finite and infinite to the two powers, the author adduces a range of arguments.

The two spirits are finite in space by the fact that they are limited by the area of space held by their antagonist, and yet they are infinite in the other directions. Both spirits are “finite in their own bodies,” although we may observe that as spirits they are not bodies.<sup>1</sup> The omniscience of Ohrmazd implies that all the objects are contained within the all-encompassing knowledge of Ohrmazd, making it necessarily finite. (But does it? We may wonder.) The final paradox of finitude against infinitude establishes that the idea of eschatology implies infinity to the creatures of Ohrmazd in the world to come, while the creatures of Ahriman must be judged as lacking infinity because they are to be destroyed in the world of eschatology. This statement is different from the preceding ones. It distinguishes the creatures of Ohrmazd from those of Ahriman. Does the author forget that the creatures of Ohrmazd are created, hence they lack infinity in time past? The author’s position may be valid if it is accepted that the creation of Ohrmazd’s creatures is not a creation *ex nihilo* but consists of transference from the spiritual to the material form of being.

These observations may strike us as highly scholastic, but the *Bundahišn* consists of an enormous intellectual endeavor to articulate the deeper significance of Zoroastrian dualism and its implications.

The narrative of the world’s creation is interesting not only because it explains the structure of the material world and how it reflects so perfectly the aim of the battle of good against evil. It tells us not only how Ohrmazd created the world, but also how this creation was, in a sense, an act of creating the deity, who with this act became the Creator (see 1:33). Certain contemporary scholars have denied that Ohrmazd was a creator god. The Zoroastrian tradition celebrates Ohrmazd as a creator. He is present in this capacity in the Zoroastrian calendar.

The *Bundahišn* presents time as a concept without which movement and life cannot fulfill their function and the world cannot really fulfill its destiny (1:35–36). Unlimited time was there before creation, one of the unchanging elements in the immaterial world. But in its function as enabler of change and motion, time had to be re-created as an entity that enables change, as a Time of Long Dominion (1:38). There follow further observations concerning different attributes that were created as a chain of events from the Time of Long Dominion, but we cannot go into this here.

The *Bundahišn* (and other exegetical and speculative works of the second phase of Zoroastrian literature) contains several cases of midrashic-type explanations of words and expressions, pretending that they are based on etymology. An example of this is the explanation of the word *kārezār* (battle,

battlefield), a compound word that can be rendered as “the field of the troops.” The author of the *Bundahišn* supplies a pseudo-etymological explanation of this expression: “an action conducted by stratagems” (1:37).<sup>2</sup>

Among the paradoxes encountered in the narrative of creation of the *Bundahišn* are two rare cases of a single deity split into two. Way, a deity of wind and air and also a deity of the void in between, serves as a barrier between the good and evil spirits. Neutrality in the battle is not recognized in Zoroastrian theology, and would hardly be appreciated there. But the function of a barrier is required in the plot of creation. The barrier consists of air and is represented by Way. There is, however, a difficulty in having a good spirit acting as an arbiter between the two antagonistic powers. Can he be an evil entity? Not if he is a deity. The only way to reconcile the double function of Way as a middle entity is by tearing his essence apart. We therefore have in Zoroastrianism two separate entities: one is the “Good Way” and the other is called the “Evil Way.” Way is in a sense similar to Zurwān, the deity of Time, who is the source of both good and evil according to the “Zurvanite” story of creation. However, Zurwān is placed *above* the two entities of good and evil, not between them. He can be aloof to some degree. He favors Ohrmazd, but according to the myth of Zurwān, he comes to accept Ahriman as a product of his own seed. He is betrayed and cheated by his evil son but is unable to interfere in the combat that ensues between his sons. Thus we end up having two deities in the narrative who act outside the dualistic pattern. One of them (Zurwān) stands above the dualistic split of the spiritual world, while the other (Way) occupies a place between the two. The conclusion of this primordial ontology is that we have a dualism that is mitigated to a certain extent by a third entity. It may strike us as a paradox that a dualism has to have recourse to a triangular structure, but this is in fact not a very rare phenomenon.

If we wish to create a table of religions arranged typologically according to the worship of deities, and if we make a sequence consisting of monotheism-dualism-polytheism, we shall stumble into an error. Dualism does not refer just to a number between one and many. If dualism is different from monotheism, they are still much closer to each other than the distance that separates both of them from polytheism. All forms of monotheism have within them a certain element of dualism. In a dualistic system based on good and evil fighting each other, the two powers cannot be equal. Worshipers of the deity representing the attribute “good” are urged to loathe the evil power (who is never viewed as a deity).

Monotheism would become a dualism if the evil power is placed at a level that is high enough in the hierarchy. If evil is almost as powerful as the deity, we are dealing with dualism even if the position of these two powers is not entirely symmetrical; in fact, as we have seen, it cannot be. If evil is viewed as low down compared to the deity, the ensuing religion is definitely monotheistic. There is, however, no monotheism that has no dualistic element in it, sometimes called Satan, an angel of God; otherwise the blame of promoting evil would be ascribed to God. On the other hand, every dualism of the ethical type is articulated as a conception of two unequal or asymmetrical powers. It comprises faith in one power who has to deal with a mighty rival. The different polytheistic religions are not easily grouped together under one heading, but in general they are based on a different religious structure, marked by a diffusion of divine sources of power, even if they recognize one divinity as the chief power in the universe. Zoroastrianism, as it emerges from a reading of the *Bundahišn* and other Zoroastrian treatises, may well be viewed historically as a dualistic faith that emerged from an earlier polytheistic religious system, such as is familiar from ancient Indian and other Indo-European literary works.

The book presented in this volume not only offers insights on the structure of Zoroastrianism as a dualistic religion, but can also throw light on other aspects of religion in general.

# Introduction

## ***Bundahišn*: The Search for Lost Time**

Creation, the *Bundahišn* tells us, begins with time. Before the physical world came to be, there was a vast realm of the spirit, infinite in all directions but divided in two: on one side, the dominion of good and light; on the other, darkness and evil—the primordial, opposing forces of the cosmos. Light was the realm of the benevolent deity Ohrmazd, while in the dark resided the vile and ignorant Evil Spirit Ahriman. When Ahriman noticed the light above, he rose to attack it; he was beaten back, but undeterred.

Ohrmazd in his omniscience knew that only by limiting their battle to a fixed amount of time could good ultimately triumph, so he proposed that the two agree to fight for nine thousand years. Ahriman acceded. But when Ohrmazd revealed to him evil's ultimate destruction at the end of the battle, which would be fought within the bounds of the space of the earth, Ahriman collapsed in shock. Then, out of eternity, the wise creator started to fashion time. "From eternity he created Time of Long Dominion; some call it 'finite time.' From Time of Long Dominion he created imperishability; that is, the things of Ohrmazd do not perish. Blisslessness was revealed from imperishability, so that the demons will have no bliss" (1:38). But why time first? Why not the heavens and the earth and "Let there be light," or "In the beginning was the word"? What could this temporal fixation mean?

A central source for our knowledge of Zoroastrianism, the ancient Iranian religion, the *Bundahišn* has been studied by western scholars ever since the first manuscript was brought to Europe in the late eighteenth century, its language parsed by philologists, its geographies and genealogies mined by historians, and its theology dissected by scholars of religion. For though the book's name means "primal creation," the *Bundahišn* discusses not only Zoroastrian cosmogony but cosmology and eschatology as well. Despite having been composed some two millennia after the prophet Zoroaster's revelation, it is nonetheless a concise compendium of ancient

Zoroastrian knowledge, drawing on and reshaping earlier layers of the tradition.

For the most part, scholars' efforts have focused on what the *Bundahišn* reveals about Zoroastrian theology and anthropology, especially in light of the ethical dualism that is one of its distinguishing features. All of creation is the field for a battle between good and evil: good stars opposed to evil planets, good animals opposed to evil vermin, heroes opposed to witches and sorcerers. In addition to Ohrmazd and Ahriman, the *Bundahišn* tells us that the universe is populated by a host of deities who face off against hordes of demons (*dēw*) and fiends (*druz*). Does that make Zoroastrianism polytheistic or dualistic or perhaps monotheistic? This has been a matter of intense disagreement; the likely answer is that none of these concepts quite fits.

The universe is also split by a second, separate division between the spiritual (*mēnōg*) and material (*gētīg*) realms. Good and evil exist both in the intangible *mēnōg* and in the tangible *gētīg*; Ahriman's first assault on the good occurs only in the realm of the spirit. Considerable energy has been devoted to the question of how the *Bundahišn*'s various chapters portray this double division and to a comparison between it and other Zoroastrian books: the much more ancient sacred scriptures, the *Avesta*, and commentaries and treatises, like the *Bundahišn*, written in the Zoroastrian form of Middle Persian, better known as Pahlavi (one of the precursors of the language of Iran today) in the ninth and tenth centuries CE.

Generally these studies have not touched on the question of time, apart from one important and interesting exception. Non-Iranian sources in Greek, Syriac, Armenian, and Arabic relate an alternative version of the Iranian creation myth. The myth features a primordial god of time, Zurwān, who is the father of both Ohrmazd and Ahriman; Ahriman, the myth says, came into being from his father's moment of doubt during a sacrifice, and then Ohrmazd was born. Puzzlingly, however, this story is not mentioned in extant Zoroastrian literature. Confronted with this incongruity, scholars imagined Zurvanism to be a "heresy" that was originally present in Zoroastrian works but had later been "repressed" and all reference to it "expunged." Passages that were seen as hinting at Zurvanite ideas were collected and analyzed. The most prominent example of this trend is Robert C. Zaehner's 1955 *Zurvan: A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, which includes a number of *Bundahišn* passages with an alleged Zurvanite coloring, including the portion of chapter 1 quoted earlier.

In recent decades the Zurvanite hypothesis has been effectively debunked. (A witty and cogent summary of the debate can be found in Albert de Jong's entry on the subject in *Encyclopædia Iranica*.) As a consequence, any consideration of time's role in creation might seem tainted with revanchist Zurvanism. This is unfortunate not only because of what the *Bundahišn* tells us about time's prominent place in the order of creation but also because time seems central to the order of the work itself. Time—in the guise of calendars, histories, horoscopes, solar and lunar cycles, genealogies, chronologies, and apocalyptic visions—is a recurring theme of the book's thirty-six chapters. And in a wider frame, the overarching structure of the *Bundahišn* mirrors the nine-thousand-year history of the world, proceeding from creation in chapter 1 to the vanquishing of evil at the end of days in chapter 36.

It seems right, then, to introduce the *Bundahišn* through the lens of time. For new readers, the theme of time can mark a trail through what may appear at first like an unfamiliar forest of religious terminology and obscure allusions, though, perhaps, as Seamus Heaney wrote concerning *Beowulf*, those coming to the book for the first time are likely to be as delighted as they are discomfited by the immediate lack of known reference points. For those already familiar with the *Bundahišn*, we offer this temporal reading as an example of how this text might be considered differently: not only as theology, but also as a complex and intentional literary whole.

The *Bundahišn* is conventionally dated to the ninth century CE, when the Abbasid caliphate ruled a domain stretching from Egypt to Central Asia, including all the former territories of the Sasanian Persian Empire, which had been conquered in the first waves of Islamic expansion two hundred years earlier. While Abbasid rule in the capital, Baghdad, remained strong, by the end of the ninth century control was starting to fray around the edges; in Khorasan, in today's southeastern Iran and Afghanistan, and on the shores of the Caspian Sea, former vassals were asserting their independence and modeling their courts and their cultures on those of the long-vanquished Sasanian king of kings. This was the period of the first flowering of classical Persian literature and also of new ways of writing and thinking by Muslim, Christian, and Jewish authors, some of whom were familiar with each other's work. The ongoing transition from mostly oral to mostly written culture—evidenced, for instance, by the writing down of the rabbinic debates in the Babylonian Talmud and the compilations of the *hadith* of the Prophet Muhammad—played an outsized role in this innovation.

The *Bundahišn* is clearly at home in this time. Several chapters refer explicitly to the seventh-century Muslim conquest of Iran. These sections, at least, must postdate that cataclysmic and transformative event, the most important turning point in Iranian history. But beyond these explicit textual markers, the book's philosophical, scientific, and literary features reflect its early Islamic environment. In its scope, eclecticism, and focus on natural history at the expense of discussions of ritual or religious law, the *Bundahišn* resembles Islamic encyclopedias, in particular the contemporary *Epistles of the Brethren of Purity*. The references to creation by emanation in chapter 1 recall Neoplatonic creation theories widely adopted in the Islamic world. As commentary, the *Bundahišn* resembles the style of some late Jewish midrash. The *Bundahišn* is manifestly in conversation with the same amalgam of Hellenistic, Indian, Babylonian, and Iranian medical, scientific, and other intellectual traditions that were available to thinkers at the time.

The *Bundahišn* is not alone. It is one of a group of Zoroastrian works dated to this period that share similar content and concerns. Some of these “Ninth Century Books,” as they have been called, like the massive, eclectic *Dēnkard* (Acts of the Dēn) or the wisdom dialogue *Mēnōg ī Xrad* (Spirit of Wisdom), are anonymous or pseudepigraphic. Others, such as the *Dādēstān ī Dēnīg* (Religious Judgments), a series of responsa written by the high priest Manušcihr, or the *Wizīdagihā* (Anthology) by Manušcihr's brother Zādspram, do name their authors and can be more reliably dated. A close analysis of the priestly genealogy given in chapter 35 of the *Bundahišn* shows that one of the priests named there, Farrōbag son of Ašwahišt, who speaks in the first person and may be a late redactor of the work as a whole, was a contemporary and perhaps relative of Zādspram, who lived in the last quarter of the ninth century.

However, as much as the *Bundahišn* seems to be an Islamic-era work, it is equally clear that it looks back to a much more ancient time. The roots of the Zoroastrian religion lie in the Bronze Age, around the year 1000 BCE. It was at this time that some scholars claim that the priest and poet Zoroaster, perhaps a member of one of the Iranian tribes living in the Central Asian steppes, began promulgating his revelation of the supreme deity Ahura Mazdā (the source of the Middle Persian name Ohrmazd). Expressed in a series of seventeen intricate, elaborate hymns called the *Gāthās*, Zoroaster's revelation attracted followers and patrons until, some scholars contend, it became—through processes and developments that remain unclear—the state religion of the Achaemenid Persian Empire of Xerxes and Darius. The *Gāthās*

served as the core of the Zoroastrian sacred scripture, the *Avesta*, written in two dialects of an otherwise unattested eastern Iranian language scholars call Avestan. The *Gāthās* and the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti* (Worship of the Seven Chapters) in Old Avestan, a language almost identical to Vedic Sanskrit, make up the more ancient portion of the *Avesta*. The Young Avestan portion includes other hymns, prayers, purity regulations, and more; the *Avesta* as a whole still serves as the ritual text for Zoroastrian worship, the *yasna*. However, a list of the contents of the Sasanian-era *Avesta* preserved in the *Dēnkard* indicates that the sacred scripture originally contained four times as much material. Almost everything that did not bear directly on the ritual ceremony, it seems, was lost.

Early Zoroastrianism remains a subject of fierce debate. Scholars disagree about when and where Zoroaster lived: opinions have ranged from 1500 BCE Kazakhstan to sixth-century BCE Persia. Some scholars doubt if he even lived at all. Some say that Zoroaster (Zaraθuštra in Avestan), whose name appears in the *Gāthās*, is only one of a number of poet-priests mentioned in the hymns, and not their author in the modern sense. Others contend that Zoroaster is a collective author, like the Homeric poet, and not an individual. Part of the problem lies in the fact that the poetic and self-referential language of the *Gāthās* is particularly elusive. Even if this were not the case, scholars simply lack enough material to properly understand Old Avestan grammar and vocabulary; the four major contemporary scholars and translators of the *Gāthās*, Helmut Humbach, Stanley Insler, Jean Kellens, and Martin Schwartz, have produced such radically dissimilar versions that they seem like different poems to the untrained eye.

Just as contentious as the life of the prophet and his work is the issue of Zoroastrianism's innovation and development. Did Zoroaster's dualistic revelation come to reject and supersede an earlier Indo-Iranian polytheistic faith like Vedic Hinduism, or was he continuing an already existing tradition? How and when did Zoroastrianism come from its place of origin to the plains of contemporary Iran, and how much did it change on the way? Was the religion of the Achaemenids, some of whose ceremonial inscriptions refer to Zoroastrian deities like Anāhitā and Mithra, identical to the religion of the *Avesta*? Were they—or, for that matter, the later Parthian dynasty (third century BCE to third century CE)—Zoroastrian in the way that the *Bundahišn* understands it at all? And the biggest question by far is whether and to what degree Middle Persian works can reliably fill in the missing pieces of the *Avesta*, dated to thousands of years before.

As far as the *Bundahišn* goes, it is clear that it is unbreakably linked to the Avestan tradition. Much like Jewish or Christian commentaries on the Bible or Muslim works on the Quran and *hadith*, every page of the *Bundahišn* alludes to or cites a passage from the sacred scriptures. These quotations and references are the bricks of the book, and sometimes only the thinnest layer of narrative mortar binds them together. They include references to lost portions of the *Avesta*, and the *Bundahišn* as a whole seems to be based on the *Avesta*'s now-missing *Dāmdād Nask* (the “bundle” or “book” of creation), one of the twenty-one sections of the Sasanian *Avesta*.

Turning the pages of the *Bundahišn*, however, one will notice that the word *Avesta* (*abestāg*) hardly appears. Instead the *Bundahišn*'s author ascribes his sources to the *dēn*. But what is the *dēn*? It is a central concept of Zoroastrianism that is notoriously difficult to translate. Etymologically, *dēn* (Avestan *daēnā*-) comes from the ancient Iranian word for sight or seeing, and one of its meanings is directly related to vision and envisionment. The *dēn*, as chapter 30 tells us, is a part of the soul, one's own inner consciousness, that appears to the individual after death: the righteous see their *dēn* as a beautiful girl, and the wicked as an ugly hag.

But *dēn* is also used in a way that overlaps somewhat with the modern concept of religion. In this sense, the *dēn* is the good religion (*hu-dēn*), the Mazdā-worshiping religion, Zoroastrianism, in its widest sense: not just the *Avesta* but its commentaries and translations, the *Zand*; not just Zoroastrian works proper, but all wisdom and truth. After Alexander the Great conquered Iran and burned the *Avesta*, a story mentioned briefly in chapter 33 of the *Bundahišn*, the *Dēnkard* tells us that generations of Sasanian kings gathered the scattered fragments of the *dēn* wherever they could be found, even preserved in foreign philosophies and sacred books. That is how wide the *dēn* can be. There are also evil *dēns*, for instance, the *dēn* of the sorcerers (21E:7) and those of rival religions like Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.

While reading the *Bundahišn*, one can feel torn in time: at once pulled backward to the distant past of revelation and drawn firmly down into the narrator's continuous present as he attempts to map the width and breadth of his living world. Scholars have found it difficult to provide a definitive date for the book's composition: is it essentially a Sasanian—or earlier—book with some later additions, or essentially an Islamic-era composition that reworks more ancient sources? The answer has as much to do with how one sees the Zoroastrian tradition as a whole: conservative and unchanging, innovative and flexible, or somewhere in between.

The reader's sense of temporal displacement, though, seems linked to a basic structural feature of the book. The *Bundahišn* is ordered along temporal lines, proceeding, with some exceptions, from the beginning to the end, and in space from the outermost spiritual realm to the domain of human affairs.

The *Bundahišn* opens with the myth of creation, which also serves as the foundational narrative of Zoroastrian theology. The book's first six chapters depict the cosmogonic process beginning with the first confrontation in the spiritual realm between Ohrmazd and Ahriman. The *Bundahišn* describes Ohrmazd's creation of the world in a perfect state of rest and Ahriman's assault on the created world through a breach in the firmament. The first section describes the damage that the Evil Spirit causes to the primal elements, polluting them with evil. The sky, the earth, water, the stars, and the sole primordial plant, cow, and man, called Gayōmard, fight back against Ahriman and the demons. This first section also includes two chapters on the movement of the stars, planets, and other astral bodies located in the celestial sphere.

The long middle section of the text contains a description of the world as it stands after creation and Ahriman's corrupting assault. As opposed to the first section's concern with *bundahišn*—creation as such—the text now turns to the age of *gumēzišn*: the Mixture. While good and evil continue to exist separately in the spiritual, *mēnōg* realm, Ahriman's attack on the material, *gētīg* world mixes polluting evil into the originally good creation.

Each of the twenty-four diverse chapters that make up this part of the *Bundahišn* is devoted to a different aspect of the world and describes its attributes. These include both natural features, such as rivers, mountains, and the different good and evil species of birds and animals, and mythical beings. Many of these chapters include detailed lists of creatures, plants, spirits, deities, and demons; accounts of their names and functions; and explanations of natural phenomena.

The final section of the *Bundahišn* turns to eschatological and genealogical topics. Included among these chapters are discussions of individual eschatology, including one of the most important depictions of the judgment of the soul after death. This section also addresses the stages of the eschaton. At the end of days, the prophet Zoroaster's sons will bring about the final confrontation between good and evil in which Ahriman and the demons are vanquished and the world restored to its former state of equilibrium and stability. Just as the previous sections of the book are focused on the first two stages of the history of the cosmos, that is, creation and the Mixture, the final

section is concerned with *wizīrišn*, the separation of good from evil and the purification of the created world.

The *Bundahišn* refers to this eschatological process and the final state of the world as the Restoration, *frašgird* (Avestan *frašō.kərəti*), literally the “making brilliant” of the world after its defilement by evil. The dead, both sinners and the righteous, will be resurrected (*ristāxēz*) and undergo a final purification in a river of molten metal, at which point they will assume their ultimate, perfect physical form, the Final Body (*tan ī pasēn*), on the renovated earth.

Myth is central to the *Bundahišn*, from chapter 4’s story of the first human couple, the twins Mašyā and Mašyāne, to chapter 32’s fantastical description of the palace of the sorcerer Frāsyāb. It is in the final section of the book, however, that the *Bundahišn* most closely echoes the classical formation of Iranian myth as it appears in Abu al-Qasim Ferdowsi’s tenth-century epic, the *Shahnameh*, or *Book of Kings*. Readers of Ferdowsi will find the poet’s familiar villains and heroes here, though with somewhat different names—Jam, Dahāg, and Rōdstahm, instead of Jamšēd, Zahhak, and Rustam—and only allusions to their adventures rather than fully fleshed-out tales.

It should be expected that the *Bundahišn* engages with Iranian myth. These stories are more ancient even than Zoroaster’s revelation, some dating back to the time in prehistory before the separation of the tribes that eventually became Indians and Iranians. The themes of heroism, sacrifice, and tragedy that reach their fruition in the *Shahnameh* are already present in the *Avesta* and later appear in Middle Persian accounts.

One of these themes is the importance of *xwarrah*, Glory, a term that appears in the *Avesta* as *xʷarənah-* and in classical Persian as *farr*. *Xwarrah* is at once the charisma of the leader and the mantle of kings, a royal glory bestowed by grace that can also be taken away as punishment for transgression. *Xwarrah* may be envisioned as a shining corona or halo—that is how it appears in the depictions of Sasanian kings on their coins—as a bird as it flies away from Jam as punishment for his sin, or as the ram who follows Ardašīr, the founder of the Sasanian dynasty (*Kār-nāmag ī Ardašīr ī Pābagān* 4:11–24).

In the *Bundahišn*, Glory is associated especially with the prophet Zoroaster. Interestingly, while the book does not contain a biography of the prophet, or even an account of his revelation, it does refer to certain aspects of Zoroaster’s life and mission. Zoroaster is named as the chief of the central continent of Xwanirah (chapter 29); his conversion of King Wištāsp to the new religion and his role in the eschatological drama are described in

detail in chapter 33, a history of the world from creation to apocalypse. The chapter describes how, after his death, Zoroaster's Glory will be deposited in the Kayānsē Sea for safekeeping. Three times, three virgins bathing in the lake will be impregnated with the prophet's Glory and each will give birth to a son, three saviors who will herald the end times and lead people through the apocalyptic age.

Chapter 33's millennial history, which, like the book as a whole, proceeds through the three eras of created time, is not the *Bundahišn's* only time-keeping text. Like the sound of ticking in a clockmaker's shop, the *Bundahišn* is filled with discussions of how to measure time's flow. Explicit references to the length of the year and the thirty days of the month—there are no weeks in the Zoroastrian scheme—are scattered throughout the text. Chapter 1 includes just such a passage as an addendum to creation, and chapter 25 is wholly devoted to calendars and chronography. But the theme of marking time, in the present, the past, and the future, appears in other ways as well. Chapters 5 and 6 turn to reckoning by the stars and include retrospective horoscopes for creation and the first human being, Gayōmard. Chapters 13, 14, 16, 22, and 23 deal with the genealogies and taxonomies of animals, human beings, plants, and evil vermin, retracing their family trees from the beginning to the multitude of species and races we see today. Chapter 15 deals with birth and lists the length of each stage in the reproductive cycle for different animals. Chapter 19, on sleep, prescribes the length of time a person should sleep each day. Chapters 29, 31, 32, and 35 delve into the mythic past, and chapters 30 and 33 chart the eschatological future. Chapter 36, "On the Chronology of the Arabs," combines astrological reckoning, myth, and millennial history to present a world chronicle up to the narrator's present day, 1178 CE: "Now it is the year five hundred and twenty-seven of the Parsīg era" (36:10).

The *Bundahišn* does not focus on time to the exclusion of other subjects. The book's significant and lengthy discussions of geography, meteorology, and the microcosm do not seem to have any temporal connection. However, the recurrence of the theme of time is striking, especially when one considers what is missing from the *Bundahišn*. Purity and pollution, ritual, and religious law—all of which are such central concerns of the *Avesta* and other Middle Persian works that it is difficult to imagine Zoroastrianism without them—are mentioned, at best, only in passing. Philosophy, in the sense of ontology, a major concern of the *Dēnkard* and of Abbasid-era Muslim thinkers like Averroes and Avicenna, only really finds its place in the first

few chapters. And while we know that some Zoroastrians at the time were engaged in fierce polemics against Judaism, Christianity, and Manichaeism, as well as Islam, the *Bundahišn* does not seem very interested in heresiology. Arabs come up for scorn, it is true, and sorcerers are denounced, but this is a far cry from, for instance, the *Škand Gumānīg Wizār*'s casuistic arguments, which quote chapter and verse against the major tenets of rival religions.

Already in the *Gāthās* in *Yasna* 30, the history of the world from creation to apocalypse was compared to a race between two chariots, one good and the other evil, around the circular track of time. The poet foresees good's triumph and evil's fatal crash in the last turn, but, as in any contest, the true winner cannot be known until the race has been run. It is here that the believing Zoroastrian has the power and duty to influence the cosmic outcome: his or her good thoughts, good words, and good deeds help ensure Ohrmazd's victory in the contest.

What is certain, however, is the shape of the course, that is, how time has and will flow from beginning to end. Or, one imagines, so ninth-century Zoroastrians hoped. The Muslim conquest of Iran and the downfall of the Sasanian dynasty was an event of unprecedented destructiveness and disruption in Iranian history, far surpassing Alexander the Great's triumph over the Achaemenids. This destruction reverberated throughout Sasanian society (though, it should be said, there was much continuity as well) but particularly affected Zoroastrian religious institutions. As scholars continue in their efforts to reconstruct Sasanian Zoroastrianism, the central role of the royal court in sponsoring and promoting the Zoroastrian priesthood becomes increasingly clear. When the court disappeared, so did those priests' patrons as well as centuries of knowledge, much of it passed down orally. In this light, the conquest must have seemed an enormous derailment of time itself, as fundamental an aberration as a sudden abrogation of the law of gravity. If we found ourselves floating, but still breathing and alive, between the clouds above and the grass below, would we not question everything that we thought we knew?

The *Bundahišn* is a literary machine for setting right this disrupted time. In the *Bundahišn*, time proceeds reliably, regularly, unwaveringly, marching through the cosmic ages of the world as through the five divisions of the day and the months and years. Readers can go back to the origins of everything and to the roots of an animal's family tree, and forward to the fate of the soul after death and the final melting of the mountains that will plug the hole