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Revisiting the Ancient Persian Religion of Zoroastrianism: Its Founder and Sacred Scripture

Fatmir Shehu^{*}

Abstracts

This research paper seeks to study the founder and sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, which is the religion of the ancient Persia and the Parsees arising out of the polytheistic traditions of Iran and India. Although today its adherents are few in number, yet the study of this religion is very crucial. The objective of this paper is to revisit the ancient Persian religion in order to provide for young scholars and students of comparative religion appropriate historical facts and evidences about the founder and sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism. This study investigates: *firstly*, the ancient Persian beliefs before the advent of Zoroastrianism; *secondly*, Prophet Zarathushtra or Zoroaster, the founder of this religion, who preached monotheism – the worship of only one God, called *Ahura Mazda* – the Wise Lord; and *lastly*, the sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, which is considered by Zoroastrians as a revelation revealed by God to their Prophet, Zoroaster. This paper focuses on the founder and sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, and therefore, a study can be done on the main doctrines and festivals of Zoroastrianism. Descriptive and analytical methods are used in the entire study. The findings of this research paper add important information to the existing literature on Zoroastrianism.

Keywords: *Ahura Mazda, Avesta, Zoroaster, Zoroastrianism, Gathas.*

Introduction

Zoroastrianism as a religion was introduced to the ancient Persians by Zoroaster the Prophet. Its growth goes back to the early times of the ancient Persians (today's Iranians), who had their own religion, which was considered by them as a very strong driving force in all aspects of their life. As a matter of fact, all the Iranian religions were not documented in written form during the ancient period. Rather, their religious "literature" was oral, in both composition and transmission.¹ A vast literature has been presented by various scholars of comparative

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¹ See, Encyclopædia Britannica Online. "Ancient Iranian Religion."

<https://www.britannica.com/topic/ancient-Iranian-religion> (accessed August 23, 2019)

religion, who have attempted through their writings to study in depth the religion of Iranians, Zoroastrianism, its founder, sacred scripture as well as its main tenets.

Muslim scholars have mentioned in their writings directly or indirectly Zoroastrianism, its founder, teachings and followers. For instance, *al-Bīrūnī* in his *Kitāb al-Athār al-Bāqīyyah* views *al-Majūs* as the adherents of Zarathustra and his sacred book, as Zend Avesta. He observes that their laws and religious rituals are not organized. Rather, they follow confusing religious rituals, i.e., fasting is forbidden and regarded as a sinful act. Also, they marry their own daughters.¹

Ibn Ḥazm, in his *Kitāb al-Faṣḥ wa al-Milal wa al-Ahwā'i wa al-Niḥal* classifies *al-Majūs* into two groups: in the *first group* are the Zoroastrians themselves, and in the *second group* are the followers of a major sub-sect called the Manicheans – *al-Mānawīyyah* that derived from the first group. Ibn Ḥazm considers them as *Ahl Kitāb*. He supports his stand by informing us that among companions of the Prophet (p.b.u.h.), like 'Alī Ibn Abi Ṭālib, Sa'id Ibn al-Musayyab, Abu Qatada Ibn Da'āmah, who reported *al-Majūs* as belonging to the People of the Book.²

Al-Shahristānī, another Muslim theologian, maintains in his *Milal wa al-Niḥal*, that Zoroastrians are the holders of sacred scrolls. However, these scrolls, under certain circumstances were lifted from their hands making them to lose them forever. He does not consider them as *Ahl al-Kitāb* at the same level as the Jews and Christians. Rather, he considers them as the People of Dubious Book.³

In the west, the scholarship on the study of religion in general, and the study of Zoroastrianism in particular, developed later on compared to the Muslim world. Martin Haug, a western scholar, has produced a very important work on “Essays on the Sacred language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis,” which discusses issues pertaining to the historical development of the sacred scripture of the Zoroastrians. The

¹ See, Al-Bīrūnī, Abū Raiḥān Muḥammad bin 'Aḥmad, *The Chronology of Ancient Nations: An English Version of the Arabic Text of al-Athār al-Bāqīyyah or Vestiges of the Past*. Edward C. Sachau (trans. & ed.), (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1879), pp. 17, 318.

² See, Ibn Ḥazm al-Dhāhirī, Abū Muḥammad 'Alī Ibn Aḥmad, *al-Faṣḥ wa al-Milal wa al-Ahwā' wa al-Niḥal*, revised by Muḥammad Ibrāhīm Naṣr and 'Abd al-Raḥmān 'Umayrah (Beirut: Dār al-Jīl. vol. 1, 2001), pp. 115-118

³ See, Al-Shahristānī, Abi Faṭḥ Muḥammad bin 'Abdul Karīm, *al-Milal wa al-Niḥal*, Aḥmad Fahmi Muḥammad (ed.) (Lebanon: Dār al-Kutub al-'Ilmiyyah, 8th ed., vol. 1, 2009), pp. 256-274.

content of Avesta or Zend Avesta has been discussed in depth.¹ Haug did take the initiative to write about Zoroastrianism and its sacred texts in order to present all materials available “for judging impartially of the scriptures and religion of the Parsis.”²

Mary Boyce, another important scholar, presented to the students of comparative religion a comprehensive work on Zoroastrianism. In the completion of her work, Boyce has made use of archeological discoveries as well as historical materials that were related directly to theme of her research on the “Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices.” A particular section discussed the establishment of Mazda worship, focusing on the practices of the major tenets of Zoroastrianism. Boyce, then, dedicated the rest of her work on the development and management of Zoroastrianism and its teachings by its followers during the Achaemenians, Seleucids and Arsacids, Sasanians, Muslim rulers, the Qajars and the British up to twentieth century.³

The abovementioned works on the Persian religion of Zoroastrianism have dealt with the subject in a very general manner. This research will benefit from all these literatures and will attempt to present the subject matter in a very limited scope, dealing only with its founder and sacred scriptures. This will help the reader to deal with and understand the subject easily and better. Besides, this topic will provide helpful information for young intellectuals, scholars, and students of comparative religion as well as for those who would like to know about Zoroastrianism vis-a-vi its founder and sacred scripture. To have a better understanding of Zoroastrianism, its founder and sacred scripture, it is very crucial to start with a discussion on the pre-Zoroastrian era or the antiquity era, where the Persians had different system of beliefs.

The Ancient Persian Beliefs in the Pre-Zoroastrian Era

The people of ancient Persia belonged to the Aryan race, and therefore, the Persian people used to call their own country, Iran, as the “Land of the Aryans.” The writings of Greek historians, like Herodotus, mentioned that for centuries Europeans and others referred to Iran as *Persia*. The term or name “Persia” was derived from the southern province of Iran or Pars, where the centres of the ancient Persian civilization (Persepolis and

¹ See, Martin Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis* (London: Routledge – Taylor and Francis Group, 2nd Reprint, 2002), pp. 1-427.

² Ibid., p. xi.

³ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their religious Beliefs and Practices* (London-New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 2001), pp. 1-252.

Pasargadae) were located. However, the change of name from Persia to Iran was done in 1935 by the first Pahlavi King Reza. The name “*Iran*” reveals the glories of the Aryan race in pre-Islamic Iran.¹

Aryans, known as “the noble ones,” travelled south east and in the 2nd and the 1st centuries, B.C., invaded both, Persia and India, and formed tribal settlements until they dominated their lands and were considered the ancient inhabitants of these lands. They migrated and settled on the Indus valley and formed identity basis for the Indians and their religion. Other Aryans, who continued to live in the region east of Mesopotamia, founded the Medo-Persian Empire. As a result, the Aryans of both, the Indus valley and Mesopotamia, worshipped the same deities.²

The studies of ancient Persian beliefs were conducted based on archeological discoveries made in the last two hundred years. The scientific interpretation of some archeological sites related to the Persians and their beliefs revealed that the ancestors of the ancient Iranians and Indians belonged to the proto-Indo-Iranians. They are considered as a branch of the Indo-European family of nations dwelling as “the pastoralists on the south Russian steppes, to the east of the Volga.”³

The proto-Indo-Iranians, whose society was made of priests, warriors, and herdsmen, formed a strong religious tradition from the fourth to the third B.C. It was during this period that they were divided into two nations, the Iranians and the Indians, who spoke different languages and established different religious identities.⁴

The ancient Indo-Iranian tribes developed a complex system of religious rules regulating their day-to-day activities in general. For instance, the ritual purity was considered by them as a very important means in their service to gods and as a safeguard against evil.⁵

The polytheistic nature of their religion, where ritualism, ceremonialism, priesthood and all other vices were prevalent everywhere, made their life very complex. This has been mentioned in the Zoroastrian Scripture, Avesta – in the very opening verse of the first Gatha. It is described in Gatha that the ancient Persians, in such situation, approached

¹ See, Sofia A. Koutlaki, *Among the Iranians: A Guide to Iran's Culture and Customs* (USA: Intercultural Press, 2010), pp. 2-3.

² See, John R. Hinnells, *Persian Mythology* (England: Newness Books, 1985), p. 8.

³ Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their religious Beliefs and Practices*, p. 2.

⁴ See, *Ibid.*, pp. 2-3.

⁵ See, Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism: Triumph over Evil* (USA: University of Texas Press, 1989), p. 1.

god with the complaint that evil had dominated the world, and therefore, god had to send to them a saviour.¹

Furthermore, the ancient Persian beliefs have been preserved in the ancient Persian hymns – the *Yashts*, where the beauty of the dawn and the terror of the drought have been described.² They believed in many gods, which were perceived by them as the personifications of certain ideals as truth, like the “beauty of the dawn and the terror of the drought,” or as the natural phenomenon or great heroes who fought the evil gods that harmed man.³

The common people among the ancient Iranians worshipped supernatural powers known to them as *Daevas* (*devas*) or the shining ones associated by them with the powers of nature: sun, moon, stars, earth, fire, water and wind.⁴ All these were taken by them as their original deities. The priest acknowledged the existence of *Ahuras* (lords) among gods, who were dwelling high in heaven taking care of the cosmic order. Among the most known gods worshipped by ancient Persians was *Intar*, or *Indara* – known to them as the war god. However, god – *Intar* – was overshadowed by another god known as – *Mithra* (Vedic Mitra), or *Miindra*, which was taken by a group of Aryans then dwelling in the mountains near by Mesopotamian plain on the north as their chief god. The Iranians themselves praised Mithra and considered him as the giver of cattle and sons as well as the god of light.⁵

They were offering sacrifices to their Gods with the belief that their gods were strengthened by doing so, and their problems were solved, when their Gods got their share.⁶ Herodotus described in his book the way the ancient Persians offered their sacrifices to their Gods:

...to whomsoever of the gods a man will sacrifice, he leads the beast to an open space and then calls on the god, himself wearing a wreath on his cap, of myrtle for choice. To pray for blessings for himself alone is not lawful for the sacrificer; rather he prays that it may be well with the king and all the Persians; for he reckons himself among them. He then cuts the victim limb from limb into portions, and having boiled the flesh spreads the softest grass,

¹ Kedar Nath Tiwari, *Comparative Religion* (India-Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1st ed., 1983), p. 90.

² See, Hinnells, *Persian Mythology*, p. 8.

³ See, *Ibid.*

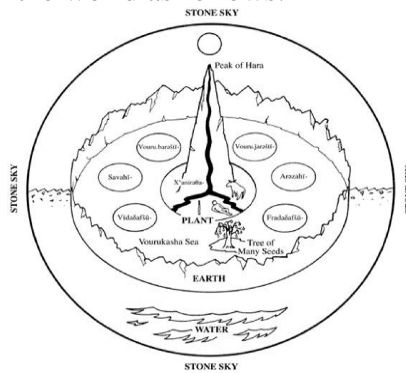
⁴ John B. Noss, *Man's Religions* (New York: Macmillan Publishing Co., Inc., 5th ed., 1974), p. 337.

⁵ David S. Noss and Blake R. Grangaard, *A History of the World's Religions* (New Jersey: Pearson Education Ltd., 12th ed. 2008), p. 360.

⁶ See, *Ibid.*, pp. 8, 26.

trefoil by choice, and places all of it on this. When he has so disposed it a Magian comes near and chants over it the song of the birth of the gods, as the Persian tradition relates it; for no sacrifice can be offered without a Magian. Then after a little while the sacrificer carries away the flesh and uses it as he pleases.¹

The ancient Persian priests, who dwelled in the open areas of the steppes, a mountain region near Russia, perceived the world from a mythological perspective, as round and flat resembling a plate, where according to them it was made by gods from formless matter in seven stages.² *Firstly*, they imagined the sky not like an infinite and open space, but as a rock crystal made of hard substance that encompassed the world like a firm enclosing shell. *Secondly*, at the bottom of this shell there was water. Where, *thirdly*, the earth was created as a flat dish floating on the water. *Fourthly*, the creation of the first plant took place, which was located at the centre of the earth. *Fifthly*, the first bull was created. *Sixthly*, the first man – *Gayo-maretan* (Mortal life) was created. *Lastly*, the sun was created, which according to the ancient Persian belief, represent the fire, which stood above all that was created. The Zoroastrianian sacred scripture - *Zenda Avesta* visualizes the story on the creation of the world as follows:



(This figure is taken from Google)

After the seven stages of the creation were completed, the gods made sacrifice by plucking and pounding the *first plant* and scattering its

¹ A.D. Godlay, (trans.) *Herodotus: Books I* (London: Harvard University Press-William Heinemann, 1st ed., 1920), pp. 132-133.

² Mary Boyce, "Zoroastrianism," in *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, edited by John R. Hinnells (USA: Blackwell Publishers Inc., 1997), p. 241; see also, Hinnells, *Persian Mythology*, p. 22.

essence over the earth, from where other plants grew. The *first bull* and the *first man* were slew by the gods, and from their seeds came into existence other animals and humans. Then, the earth was surrounded by a line of great mountains, and at its centre (the earth) rose the Peak of Hara, around which the sun started to circle creating the day and night. There was heavy rain, which made the earth to break into seven regions. Humans live in the central region which is cut off by seas and the forests from the other six regions. *Vourukasha* (having many bays) is one of the great seas fed by a huge river pouring down from the Peak of Hara¹

Zoroaster: The Founder/ Prophet of Zoroastrianism and His Mission

Zoroaster or as he is called in the Iranian language Zarathustra or Zardusht, is the founder and the Prophet of a great ancient Persian religion-Zoroastrianism. There is little information about Zoroaster's day of birth and his childhood, as the ancient Persians did not make records of their religion and other stories. Rather, they transmitted them orally from one generation to another. Thus, the only references to refer to about the life and the mission of this great Prophet are the stories in the Zoroastrian scripture itself, *Avesta*, as well as other few ancient Iranian writings.²

In a variety of Iranian, Mesopotamian, Greek, and later Arab sources it is mentioned that the place and birthdate of Zoroaster is in Iran, 258 years before Alexander the Great's conquest of Persepolis (the capital of the Achaemenids dynasty that governed Persia from 559 to 330 B.C.), and the death of the last Achaemenian king, Darius III (in 330 B.C.), which is 588 B.C. Besides, it is mentioned in some Greek sources that Zoroaster lived 6000 years before the death of Plato (in 348 or 347 B.C.E.), or 5000 years before the Trojan Battle.³ According to some other sources, when Zoroaster converted Vishtāspa (a king of Chorasmia-an area south of the Aral Sea in Central Asia) to his new religion, in 588 B.C., he was only 40 years old. In this sense, this shows that Zoroaster's birthdate was 628 B.C.⁴

Other sources have proposed that Zoroaster lived as early as the time of Abraham (1800 BC) or as late as the time of Buddha (600-500 BC). Some

¹ See, Boyce, "Zoroastrianism," in *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, edited by John R. Hinnells, p. 241; see also, Hinnells, *Persian Mythology*, p. 22.

² See, Jeff Hay, *The Greenhaven Encyclopedia of World Religions* (USA: Greenhaven Press – Thomson Gale, 2007), p. 339.

³ Jamsheed K. Choksy, "Zoroastrianism," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones (USA: Thomson Gale, 2nd ed., vol. 14, 2005), p. 9988.

⁴ Encyclopædia Britannica Online, "Zoroaster,"

<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/658060/Zoroaster> (accessed August 23, 2019).

of the ancient Greek sources estimate him living 6000 years before their own existence. As far as the location where Zoroaster lived, some sources have suggested that he dwelled in what is today Kazakhstan, while some other sources place him in what is now Azerbaijan.¹

The Zoroastrian sacred book, *Avesta*, mentions the names of Zarathustra's mother, Dughdōvā, and his father, Pourushaspa, of the Spitama clan (Hartz, 2009, 26). Before the birth of Zoroaster, his mother Dughdōvā was forced to leave her own hometown to another village, where she met Zoroaster's father Pourushaspa, who was a pious man, with whom she gave birth to Zoroaster. Based on the Zoroastrian tradition, it is narrated that when Zoroaster's mother, Dughdōvā, was pregnant with him, a light shone from her womb resulting in attempts by evildoers to harm her and the fetus. When Zoroaster was born, his first breath sounded like a lough rather than a cry. His birth brought a great joy to the nature, like the trees, rivers and flowers expressed their joy and delight. On the other hand, the demons were frightened.²

There is no sufficient information about Zoroaster's childhood. It is mentioned in some sources, that Zoroaster at the age of fifteen put on his Kusti, the sacred string belt symbolizing his passage of manhood and becoming a member by religious right to his religious community. Later on, he became a priest and based on some sources, he was married to three wives and he was the father of six children.³

It is very obvious in the Gathas that Zoroaster lived during the Bronze Age, where some of the neighbors of the Persians became well developed. They developed better defensive system by being well equipped with effective weapons and the war chariot, which helped them to continue their wars among themselves. Zoroaster's people were not strong enough to protect themselves, and therefore, their rights were violated by their neighbors who invaded, oppressed, and even killed them. This situation led Zoroaster to mediate deeply on the causes that made his people suffer a lot. His main focus was on good and evil and their origins.⁴

Being a priest by profession, Zoroaster did not stay idle. Rather, he went "in a search for a nobler doctrine to deliver the world from the

¹ See, Richard C. Foltz, *Spirituality in the Land of the Noble* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 2004), p. 19.

² See, Jamsheed, "Zoroastrianism," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, p. 9988.

³ See, Lewis M. Hopfe, *Religions of the World*, edited by Lavinia R. Hopfe and Lewis M. Hopfe (New York: Macmillan College Publishing Company, 1994), p. 219.

⁴ See, See, Boyce, "Zoroastrianism," in *A New Handbook of Living Religions*, edited by John R. Hinnells, p. 243.

tyranny of oppressors.”¹ Thus, while mediating, Zoroaster went through a religious experience, where he perceived a series of divine revelations. He was in his thirties, when he received “a stunning vision of a great shining being, Vohu Manah, the embodiment of the loving mind. Vohu Manah led him into the presence of Ahura Mazda, the creator God.”²

Based on his vision, Zoroaster believed that Ahura Mazda-the All-Wise Lord, had chosen him as a Prophet to convey to his people that Ahura Mazda was the true and eternal God, wholly wise, good and just. All those who seek righteous life should worship Ahura Mazda alone and promote the word of his goodness.³ In this sense, the mission of Zoroaster was to promote to his people the monotheistic worldview about the Ultimate Creator, Ahura Mazda, Who alone deserves to be worshipped and obeyed. If his people followed Zoroaster’s new faith, which focused on the belief in One Single God, Ahura Mazda, they could be saved from the oppression and destruction caused to them by others.

The Zoroastrian tradition informs that the visions received by Zoroaster, continued for a period of ten years, during which Zoroaster preached what he had received from Vohu Manah – the Angel. He found it very hard to convince his people to believe in this new faith. Few of them followed him and many opposed him especially the priests. However, at the age of forty-two, Zoroaster came to the court of King *Vishtaspa* of Bactria, to preach his new religion. Although, the king embraced the religion of Zoroaster at the beginning, yet his cruel ministers that surrounded him threw Zoroaster into prison. Zoroaster was released from prison, when the preferred horse of the king was healed by him. Thus, the king, his household, and his subjects embraced the teachings of Zoroaster.⁴ This was the real triumph of the new faith preached by Zoroaster.

Zoroaster preached his religion and served as a priest in the altar of the fire temple until he died at the age of seventy-seven. The causes of his death are not clear. Some sources maintain that Zoroaster died at the age of seventy-seven, when the Persian kingdom entered into war twice

¹ Edward Craig, (ed.) *Routledge Encyclopedia of Philosophy* (London and New York: Routledge Press, vol. 9, 1998), p. 873, subject: “Zoroastrianism.”

² Mary Pat Fisher, *Living Religions* (New Jersey: Pearson Prentice-Hall, 6th ed., 2005), p. 222, subject: “Zoroastrianism.”

³ See, Hay, *The Greenhaven Encyclopedia of World Religions*, p. 339.

⁴ See, Warren Mathews, *World Religions* (USA: Wadsworth/Thomson Learning, Inc., 4th ed., 2004), p. 261.

with Turanians,¹ another nation. He died in the second war, either serving at the fire temple or defending it from its enemies.² Other sources are of the opinion that Zoroaster preached for almost fifty years and at the age of seventy-seven he was assassinated at the fire temple³ by a priest.⁴ Zoroaster left behind a legacy, which according to the Zoroastrian tradition, has been compiled after his death in a form of a book named-*Zend Avesta*.

Avesta or Zend Avesta: Sacred Scripture of Zoroastrianism

The European scholars have called the sacred book of Zoroastrianism *Avesta* “The Injunction of (Zarathustra),” and is considered as the chief source for Zoroaster’s teachings.⁵ There is the term “Zend,” which has been added as a prefix to the original term “Avesta,” and thus, the name for the Zoroastrian’s scripture, is “**Zend-Avesta**.” In the Pahlavi Books it is presented as – *Avesta Zend*, which literally signifies “Text and Comment.” The term *Avesta* has been used in its original form to denote the “sacred texts ascribed to Zarathushtra and his disciples; but in later times this term has been gradually extended to include all later explanations of those texts written in the same language.”⁶ This term comprehends all writings in that language regardless of their time and age.

¹ They represented a nation belonging to the same family with the Iranians -Aryan race-and were neighbouring Persia. Turanians were in constant conflict with the Iranians, and according to the Persian sources, the ancient Turanian people corresponded roughly to the Russian Turkestan of to-day. Based on the studies undertaken during the 19th century C.E., Turanians inhabited in the following countries: Siberia, Mongolia, Manchuria, Chinese and Russian Turkestan, Asia Minor, parts of Persia and Afghanistan, the Caucasus, the Crimea, the Volga and Pechora regions of eastern Russia, Lapland, Finland, Hungary, and portions of the Balkans. (See, Arthur Anthony Macdonell, “Pan-Turanianism,” *Encyclopædia Britannica* (12th Ed.), 1922.) They have been mentioned in the Gathas: 12: “When among the laudable descendants and posterity of the **Turanian** Fryana the Right ariseth, through activity of Piety that blesseth substance; then shall Good Thought admit them, and Mazda Ahura gives them protection at the Fulfillment.” Yasna: 46/Gathas: 12. *English Translation of Holy Zend Avesta – Yasna*, translated by James Darmesteter, Dhalla, B. N. Dhabhar, L. Mills, J. H. Peterson, C. Bartholomae. pp. 92-93.

² See, Mathews, *World Religions*, p. 261.

³ See, Fisher, *Living Religions*, p. 223, subject: “Zoroastrianism.”

⁴ See, Ninian Smart, *The World’s Religions: Old Traditions and Modern Transformations* (London: Cambridge University Press., 1989), p. 217.

⁵ Mary Boyce, (Ed. &Trans.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (USA: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), p. 1.

⁶ See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, p. 121.

The term *Zend* has been employed by the successors of Zoroaster as the commentaries of the sacred text of the Prophet and his disciples written in the same language with the sacred text-*Avesta*. However, the term *Zend* denoting translation was introduced by the most learned priest during the Sasanian Period, where Pahlavi language was made the vernacular language of Persia¹ and it has remained as such until present-day.² The Zoroastrian tradition states that the starting point for the scribes to collect and write Zoroaster's hymns and songs is unknown.

According to Zoroastrian tradition, *Avesta* existed in its original form and was written in gold on 12,000 goatskins.³ The only copy, which was preserved in the palace of the capital city Persepolis during the rule of Darius III, was destroyed, when Alexander the Great overthrew Darius III by burning the city in 330 B.C.E.⁴ Also, the rest of the *Avestan* writings were destroyed and many a great number of the Zoroastrian priest who memorized *Avesta* were slaughtered by Alexander's army.⁵ Everything was destroyed except one part of the *Avesta* – *Videvdad*, and what survived in the oral form was compiled, written and distributed during the Sassanid rule.⁶

¹ There is a clear distinction between the old *Avestan* language and the young *Pahlavi* language. This can be seen in the names of deities in the language of *Avesta* (See, Harts, 2009, Chapter 5, p. 72.):

Avestan Language		Pahlavi Language
Ahura Mazda	=	Ohrmazd (Hormazd)
Spenta Mainyu	=	Spenag Menog
Angra Mainyu	=	Ahriman
Asha	=	Ardvahist
Vohu Mana	=	Vahman
Spenta Armaity	=	Aspandarmad
Khshathra Vairya	=	Shehrevan
Haurvatat	=	Khordad
Ameratat	=	Amardad
Mithra	=	Meher, Mehr

² See, *Ibid.*, pp. 119-121.

³ See, Paula R. Harts, *World Religions: Zoroastrianism* (New York: Chelsea House Publishers, 3rd ed., 2009), p. 72.

⁴ See, Victoria Kennick Urubshurow, *Introducing World Religions* (New York: Routledge – Tayler and Francis Group, 1st ed., 2008), p. 54.

⁵ See, Harts, *World Religions: Zoroastrianism*, p. 72.

⁶ See, Urubshurow, *Introducing World Religions*, p. 54.

Other Zoroastrian traditions mention that the entire *Avesta* was revealed to Zoroaster by *Ahura Mazda*. On the other hand, the Western scholars are of the opinion that *Avesta* is not the entire word of *Ahura Mazda*. Rather, there are texts in the content of *Avesta*, which are not of the same origin. The Zoroastrian teachings were transmitted orally from one generation to another until they were written down and compiled in a form of a sacred book – The *Zend Avesta* - during the Sasanian Period (224-651 C.E.),¹ when Zoroastrianism became the official and organized religion in Persia.²

The Frenchman Anquetil Duperron, who arrived at Bombay in 1754, introduced for the first time the Zoroastrian sacred scripture – *Zend Avesta*, to the Europeans or the West. He translated it into French.³ The *Avesta*, which is a compilation and collection of holy texts regarded by the adherents of Zoroaster as sacred, central and the chief source to their beliefs and practices, is divided into two categories based on linguistic differences:

First category consists of **the Old or Gathic Avestan texts** composed orally during the 18th and 20th centuries B.C.E. and transmitted orally for several centuries until it was established as the main part of the oral canon between 10th and 6th centuries B.C.E.⁴ This part is considered to be the oldest part of *Avesta* as it was written in the language of Zoroaster. It consists of 17 hymns or songs composed by Zoroaster himself.⁵

The language of the *Gathic Avestan*, in its present form, is close to the language of the Indian Rigveda. The name given to it is the Old *Avesta* because of the survival of the chief texts in this dialect. The seventeen Gathas composed by Zoroaster himself is the only portion of the *Avesta* attributable directly to him. However, the followers of Zoroaster believe that traditionally the whole text of *Avesta* is inspired by Zoroaster's teachings.⁶

Second category consists of **the Young or Standard Avestan texts** that were composed orally between the 9th and 5th centuries B.C.E., and then, transmitted and established in the form of oral scripture canon in

¹ See, Philip G. Kreyenbroek and Shehnaz Neville Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis speak about their Religion* (Great Britain: Curzon Press, 2001), p. 6.

² See, Robert S. Ellwood and Barbara A. McGraw, *Many Peoples, Many Faiths: Women and Men in the World Religions* (New Jersey: Pearson Education, Prentice Hall, 9th ed., 2009), p. 249.

³ R. Brown, *The Religion of Zoroaster: Considered in Connection with Archaic Monotheism* (Paris: Calignani and CO, 1879), p. 7.

⁴ See, Choksy, "Zoroastrianism," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, vol. 14, p. 9992.

⁵ See, Harts, *World Religions: Zoroastrianism*, p. 70.

⁶ See, Boyce, (Ed. & Trans.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, p. 1.

the 3rd century B.C.E.¹ This part is called Young Avesta by the scholars in order to distinguish it from the Old Avesta-Gathic Avesta. Even though it was written slightly later compared to Gathic Avesta, yet it is considered very ancient.²

The content of the sacred scripture- *Avesta* or *Zend Avesta*, according to the existing literature on Zoroastrianism, has been divided into the following principal groups of writings:³

The Yasna (Book of Sacrifice with Prayers - Worship)

The word “*Yasna*” denotes exactly “sacrifice” with prayers referring to sacrificial rites. *Yasna*’s recitation before or in the presence of fire is always connected with ceremonies, where ritual prayers have to be mentioned.⁴ *Yasna* contains seventy-two chapters related to religious sacrifices and worship. Besides, it includes the most important texts, the *Gathas*, a group of hymns, written in an older form of the language, believed to have been written by Zoroaster himself. *Gathas*, which comprises of seventeen songs or hymns of Zoroaster, have been mentioned in *Yasna* 28-34, 43-46, 47-50, 51 and 53,⁵ in five parts:

The first part of *Gathas*, known as *GATHA AHUNAVAITI* (28-34), has been divided into seven chapters containing 101 verses. It is a collection of scattered verses, rather than one continuous whole, where Zoroaster’s sayings have been mixed with those of his disciples *Jamaspa*, *Vishtaspa*, and *Frashaoshtra*.⁶

The second part of *Gathas*, known as *GATHA USHTAVAITI* (43-46), has been divided into four chapters containing 66 verses. It is considered as the most important text of the whole *Zend Avesta* for providing accurate knowledge about Zoroaster’s mission, activity, and teachings.⁷

¹ See, Choksy, “Zoroastrianism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, vol. 14, p. 9992.

² See, Harts, *World Religions: Zoroastrianism*, p. 70.

³ See, Ninian Smart, *The Religious Experience* (New Jersey: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1996), p. 186.

⁴ In such ceremonies, it is required to have prepared the following: (1) consecrated water; (2) a kind of bread as food; (3) butter; (4) fresh mild; (5) meat - flesh; (6) braches of *Haoma* together with pomegranate; (7) the juice of *Haoma* plant; (8) hair of an ox; and (9) a bundle of twigs tied together by means of reed. See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, pp. 139-140.

⁵ See, Choksy, “Zoroastrianism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, vol. 14, p. 9992.

⁶ See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, p. 146.

⁷ See, *Ibid.*, p. 154.

The third part of *Gathas*, known as *Gatha Spenta-Mainyu* (47-50), the fourth part of *Gathas*, known as *Gatha Vohu-Khshathrem* (50), and the fifth part of *Gathas*, known as *Gatha Vahishtoisti* (53), are all together a collection of Zoroaster's ancient hymns. However, they are smaller in size compared to the first two parts. It seems, according to the content of the last three parts of *Gathas*, most of its verses appear to be the work of Zoroaster's disciples and their students.¹ It can be said that the abovementioned Five *Gathas* representing the works of Zoroaster and his disciples, must be considered as the most important portion or text of the Zoroastrian sacred scripture, *Avesta* or *Zend Avesta*.

The Visparad (Prayers to All [spiritual] Masters or Chiefs, or Heads)

It is a liturgical text composed in honor of and as an invocation to the Zoroastrian heavenly beings lords, used on Zoroastrian holy days. It is compiled in the young Avestan dialect and is dedicated to *Ahura Mazda* as the Chief and master of all creation.² It is written in a form of twenty-two chapters in the usual Avestan language. Its content resembles the first part of the later *Yasna* (Chap. i.-xxvii.).³ The long liturgy mentioned in *Visparad* consists of the extensions being mainly additional invocations of *Yasna* with *Vendidad*. It was solemnised especially on the seven great holy days of the faith.⁴

Yashts (devotional worship by prayers and sacrifices):

They are hymns of praise to the divine entities, or deities, such as God(s), angel(s), etc., dating from different periods and especially from Iranian pagan religion before Zarathustra's reform⁵ In other words, it can be said that *Yashts* are certain collections of prayers and praise "devoted to the praise and worship of one divine being only, or of a certain limited class of divine beings,"⁶ such as God (*Ahura Mazda*), the archangels (*Amsha Spends*), the heavenly water (*Ardivi Sura Anahita*), the sun (*Mithra*), the star (*Tishtrya*), the essence spirit (*Fravashis*), and so on.

¹ See, Ibid., p. 167.

² See, Choksy, "Zoroastrianism," in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, vol. 14, p. 9992.

³ See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, p. 190.

⁴ See, Boyce, (Ed. & Trans.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, p. 3.

⁵ See, Gherardo Gnoli, "Zoroastrianism," in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*, edited by Mircea Eliade (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, Vol. 15, 1987), p. 579.

⁶ See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, p. 194.

Yashts continued to be presented in an oral transmission, partly learnt by heart, where some of its oldest portions came down from pagan times of the Persians, and were reinterpreted and transmitted in the light of Zoroaster's teachings. Thus, obviously, in *Yashts*, there has been a mixture between the revelation of the Prophet and the beliefs of ancient Persians, which are incongruous or inappropriate to Zoroaster's message as are the parts of the Old Testament to Christianity.¹

The Vendidad (Code or what is given Against the Demons)

Vendidad deals with texts discussing various topics, which “originally appear to belong to a scholarly priestly tradition rather than a liturgical one.”² It is considered to be a “compendium of Zoroastrian religious and civil law that also provides the religion’s creation story.”³ Thus, *Vendidad* comprehends in its content priestly code or a body of writings primarily concerned with rituals, regulations, and purification, and it has often been described as the book of the laws of the Parsis, or exactly the code of purification, which can be justified by the largest part of the book.⁴

Vendidad, thus, being the code of religious, civil, and criminal laws of the ancient Iranians, is considered to be the joint work of the followers of Zoroaster, or high-priests, of the ancient Iranians within a period of several centuries.⁵ The content of *Vendidad* consists twenty-two chapters,⁶ which have been divided into three main parts (*Fargards*): *The first part* (Fargard i-iii) gives an introduction, which is the ancient historical or legendary work dealing with sixteen Aryan countries, over which Zoroastrian teachings were spread (Farg. i),⁷ the legend of King Yima or Jamshed (the King of the Golden Age) (Farg. ii),⁸ and the strong recommendations of agriculture (*farg. iii*).⁹

¹ Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their religious Beliefs and Practices*, p. 38.

² Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis speak about their Religion*, p. 7.

³ Hay, *The Greenhaven Encyclopedia of World Religions*, p. 48.

⁴ *English Translation of Holy Zend Avesta – Yasna*, translated by James Darmesteter, Dhalla, B. N. Dhabhar, L. Mills, J. H. Peterson, and C. Bartholomae, 1880, vol. 4, p. lxxxiii.

⁵ See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, pp. 225-226.

⁶ See, Choksy, “Zoroastrianism,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion*, edited by Lindsay Jones, vol. 14, p. 9992; see also, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, p. 225.

⁷ See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, pp. 227-230.

⁸ See, *Ibid.*, pp. 230-235, see also, *English Translation of Holy Zend Avesta – Yasna*, translated by James Darmesteter et al, vol. 4, p. lxxxiv.

⁹ See, *Ibid.*, pp. 235-237, and *Ibid.*

The second part (*Fargard* iv-xvii), which is considered to be the gist of Vendidad, deals with laws – civil and criminal (*Farg.* iv),¹ ceremonies, and observances, without following any strict order (*Farg.* v-xvii).² The third part (*Fargard* xviii-xxii), it is an appendix that deals with various issues pertaining to impurity as well as spells or mantras for curing diseases.³

The Khordeh Avesta (Concise or shorter Avesta)

It is a book of daily prayers including the *Yashts*, a collection of texts⁴ or hymns addressed to individual deities and epic narrations concerning kings and heroes.⁵ In every *Khordeh Avesta* is mentioned the same body of essential prayers for day-to-day use. However, there is some variation based on their arrangement as well as in the selections from the *Yashts*. For instance, some of the *Khordeh Avesta*, have at the end a few prayers in a modern language (Persian or Gujarati). Zoroastrians used to learn those prayers by heart from priests or their parents until the 19th century A.C., when the holy texts were first printed.⁶

This book contains daily prayers of the Zoroastrians, and can be found in every devoted Zoroastrian household. There are prayers selected from other major works of extant *Avesta* literature such as *Yasna*, *Vispered*, *Vendidad*, and the *Yasht* Literature. It contains the hymns, such as *Ashem* (Righteousness), *Yatha* (Just), the five *Nyayishes*⁷ (praises), the five *Gahs* (times for prayers or watches), *Vispa Humata* (short prayer focusing on good thoughts and deeds), *Nam Setayeshne* (invocation of praise to the names of *Ahura Mazda*, one hundred and one name), *Patet Pashemane*, (penance and repentance) all the *Nirangs* (incantations or spells), *Bajs* (recitations), and *Namaskars* (salutations), and sixteen *Yashts* (devotional prayers). Most of the prayers are used by

¹ See, Ibid., pp. 237-240, and Ibid.

² See, Ibid., pp. 240-243, and Ibid.

³ See, Ibid., pp. 243-257, and Ibid., p. lxxxv.

⁴ Kreyenbroek and Munshi, *Living Zoroastrianism: Urban Parsis speak about their Religion*, p. 7.

⁵ S.A. Nigosian, *World Faiths*, (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1990), p. 81.

⁶ Boyce, (Ed. & Trans.), *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, p. 3.

⁷ They are praises devoted to the Sun (*Khurshed*), the Angel of the sun (*Mithra*, *Mihir*), the Moon (*mah*), Waters (*aban*), and Fire (*atash*). The prayers addressed to the Sun and Mithra, have to be repeated thrice every day by every pious Parsi. If this is not done properly, the soul will be prevented to pass the bridge *Chinvad* after death. The prayer to the Moon is necessary to take place thrice every month. On the other hand, the repetition of the prayers for the waters and fire is meritorious. See, Haug, *Essays on the Sacred Language, Writings, and Religion of the Parsis*, p. 224.

the Zoroastrian devotees at various seasons as well as in various circumstances of their lives.¹

Conclusion

This paper has reached at the conclusion that the study on Zoroastrianism, its founder and sacred scripture is very important. The discussion on the ancient Persian belief system and practices has been very significant as it reveals the very nature and the religious beliefs of the ancient Persians before the Prophet, Zoroaster, introduced Zoroastrianism as a new religion to them. The promotion and the establishment of Zoroastrianism as a new religion played a very crucial role in reforming the ancient Persian beliefs by introducing Monotheism versus polytheism - the worship of one God versus the worship of many gods. The sacred scripture is considered by Zoroastrians as a revelation revealed by God to their Prophet, Zoroaster. It serves as the source of knowledge for the followers of Zoroastrianism.

The tenets or teachings of Zoroastrianism have contributed a lot to the development of Persian civilization that lasted for centuries up to the Muslim conquest. The focus of this paper was limited on the founder and sacred scripture of Zoroastrianism, and therefore, a study can be done on the main doctrines and festivals of Zoroastrianism.

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¹ See, Ervad Maneck Furdoonji Kanga, (trans.) *Khorde Avesta* (Bombay: The Trustees of the Parsi Panchayat Funds and Properties, 2013), p. iii.

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