

Ameša Spənta

AMƏŠA SPƏNTA, an Avestan term for beneficent divinity, meaning literally “Holy/Bounteous Immortal” (Pahl. Amešāspand, [A]mahraspand). Although the expression does not occur in the Gāthās, it was probably coined by Zoroaster himself. *Spənta* is a characteristic word of his revelation, meaning “furthering, strengthening, bounteous, holy.” Vedic usage suggests that the Indo-Iranians had been accustomed to worship “All the Immortals” (Vedic *Viśve Amṛtās*), a term which included those beings known to Zoroaster as the *daēvas*. When he rejected this group of divinities as evil, the prophet commanded his followers, it seems, to venerate only those beings whom he held to be *spənta*, i.e., those who exert their powers to further the good creation. The term thus applies to Ahura Mazdā himself, and to all the divine beings whom he has brought into existence to aid him in overcoming evil. In this sense it can be used as a synonym of *yazata* (cf. *Visperad* 8.1); in fact the two words occur a number of times in hendiadys in the Pahlavi books (e.g., *Mēnōg ī xrad* 12.11, 21.35).

The first recorded occurrence of the expression, with the elements inverted, is in the ancient *Yasna Haptañhāiti* (Y. 39.3): “So then we worship the good beings, male and female, the Spənta Aməšas, ever-living, ever-benefiting, who hold by good purpose.” In the Zoroastrian creed, the *Fravarānē*, the believer declares: “I profess myself a Mazdā-worshiper, a Zoroastrian, rejecting the *daēvas* . . . one who praises the Aməša Spəntas, who worships the Aməša Spəntas” (Y. 12.1); and in a later Avestan text (Y. 1.2) the *yazata* Ātar is hailed as being “the most active of the Aməša Spəntas.”

In its Middle Iranian forms Amešāspand (A)mahraspand (the latter belonging to the so-called “Zoroastrian Pahlavi” dialect), the term occurs not infrequently in this general sense. Thus in *Mēnōg ī xrad* 43.2-3 Ahriman and the *dēvs* are set in opposition to Ohrmazd and the Amešāspands. Among Zoroastrian priests today the term is frequently applied to the “calendrical” divinities, that is, to all those who have received dedications of the days of the month, together with extra three, Burz Yazad, Hōm, and Dahmān Āfrīn.

The term is, however, more often used in a restricted sense for the greatest of the *spənta* beings, that is, for the great Heptad who belong especially to Zoroaster’s own revelation, namely Ahura Mazdā himself (sometimes together with, or represented by, his Holy Spirit, Spənta Mainyu) and the six whom he first evoked among the *yazatas*; or it is further restricted to just these six. The two meanings—the general and the particular—coexist not only in the Younger Avesta and the Pahlavi books but also in living Zoroastrian usage. Occasionally they even occur side by side in the same sentence, e.g., *Bundahišn* 3.1: “The names of thirty Amahraspands were given to the thirty days, thus: first Ohrmazd, then the six Amahraspands . . .” Usually in Western scholarly writings if “Aməša Spənta” is used without qualification it refers specifically to the great six.

The Avestan/Pahlavi names of these six, with their approximate English renderings, are as follows: Vohu Manah/Vahman “Good Purpose;” Aša Vahištā Ardvahišt “Best Righteousness;” Xšaθra Vairya/Šahrēvar “Desirable Dominion;” Spənta Ārmaiti/Spendārmad “Holy Devotion;” Haurvatāt/Hordād “Wholeness;” and Amərətāt/Amurdād “Immortality.” The names of all six occur repeatedly in the Gāthās, though seldom with the epithets which became the fixed attributes of the first four in the tradition. Grammatically the names of the first three are neuter, the last three feminine. There is naturally no systematic exposition of doctrine concerning them in the Gāthās, but the names of all the Heptad are brought together in Y 47.1; and in the Zand of lost Younger Avestan texts it is stated that Ohrmazd first brought the six into being, and then through them the other beneficent divinities (see *Bundahišn* 1.53; 26.38, 125). The process by which he did so is variously indicated. Thus in the Gāthās Zoroaster speaks of Ahura Mazdā as being the “Creator” of Vohu Manah (Y. 44.4) and of Aša (Y. 31.8) and the “father” of Vohu

Manah (Y. 31.8, 45.4), Aša (Y. 44.3; 47.2), and Ārmaiti (Y. 45.4). The latter term is clearly figurative. It is repeated in the Younger Avesta; cf. Yt. 19.16-18, in which the six great Aməša Spəntas, together with Spənta Mainyu, are venerated as those who are “of one mind, one voice, one act, . . . whose father and ruler is one, the Creator, Ahura Mazdā.” Elsewhere in the Younger Avesta (Yt. 13.81) the Aməša Spəntas are revered as forms in which the Creator “mingles himself” (*raēthwaya-*). In *Bundahišn* 1.44 it is said that Ohrmazd created them “from his own selfhood” (*az hān ī xwēš xwadīh*), and in *Mēnōg ī xrad* 8.2 that he did so “from his own light” (*az hān ī xwēš rōšnīh*), while in the *Ayādgār ī Jāmāspīg* 3.3-7 his creation of them is compared to the lighting of a torch from a torch.

The Aməša Spəntas are thus of one essence with their Creator. Yet they have been given separate existences by him, so that they may aid him in diverse ways to overcome evil; united in substance, they are divided in person. Each is accordingly a *yazata*, that is, a being to be worshiped in his own right, with prayers, sacrifices, and hymns of praise; and they should be duly invoked, each by his own name, for the special help which they have been created to give, as Zoroaster himself invokes them in the Gāthās. Nevertheless, though independent *yazatas*, the six Aməša Spəntas also hypostatize aspects of God’s own nature, and are so close to him that Zoroaster addresses Ahura Mazdā sometimes as “Thou,” sometimes (when he apprehends Him together with one or more of these Beings) with the plural “You.” Further, the prophet often uses the terms *aša*, *xšaθra*, etc., as common nouns when speaking of the powers or qualities which these six great Beings represent, and which every just (*ašavan*) person can hope, godlike, himself to possess. The two concepts, of divinity and of humanly possessed power, seem frequently to blend, through the thought of the power proceeding from the divinity, who is felt actually to enter into the person. The doctrine of the Heptad is thus central to Zoroastrian moral theology: Through worship, meditation, and action each individual should strive to bring the seven into his own being, thus becoming himself ever more worthy to attain heaven.

The doctrine has also a physical dimension, in that each of the seven is linked with one of the seven “creations” (Pahl. *dahišnān*), which the ancient Iranian thinkers held made up the world. These links are systematically listed in the Zand and later Pahlavi texts: Ohrmazd is the especial guardian of the just man, Vahman of cattle, Ardvahišt of fire, Šahrevar of metals, Spendārmad of earth, Hordād of water, and Amurdād of plants. All but one of these links can be found subtly adumbrated in the Gāthās, where Zoroaster sometimes names the creation in order to represent the divinity, and vice versa. (The first to realize this, among Western scholars, was H. Lommel; for a detailed analysis of the prophet’s allusive technique, illustrated in reference to Vohu Manah and cattle, see G. G. Cameron, “Zoroaster the Herdsman,” *IJ* 10/4, 1968, pp. 261-81.) For the link between Ahura Mazdā/the (Holy) Spirit and the just man (represented by the priest) see Y. 33.6; for Vohu Manah and cattle, e.g., Y. 28.1, 31.10; for Aša and fire, e.g., Y. 34.4, 43.4, 9; for Ārmaiti and earth, e.g., Y. 30.7, 47.3; for Haurvatāt and Amərətāt and water and plants, e.g., Y. 33.8, 34.11, 51.7. The associations are usually so subtly indicated that it is extremely difficult to bring them out in translation, and in some renderings they are lost entirely.

The only member of the Heptad who is not in any way associated in the Gāthās with his creation, as this is named in the Zand, is Xšaθra, who is there said to be the guardian of metals. Conversely, in the Old Iranian cosmogony, as described in the Zand, metals have no place among the seven creations, while the sky (conceived as a hard enclosing shell) is listed as the first of these creations, but has no named guardian among the Aməša Spəntas. These anomalies, and the veiled manner of the Gathic allusions to the other associations, led some Western scholars to suppose that the complete scheme, as set out in the Zand, must be a post-Gathic development. No convincing suggestions were made, however, as to when or why such a development should have taken place; and a solution to the crux of Xšaθra, metals, and the sky was eventually offered by R. C. Zaehner (*The Teachings of the Magi*, pp. 32-33).

He pointed out that there are both Avestan and Pahlavi texts in which the sky itself is said to be of metal (e.g., *Yt.* 13.2; *Bundahišn* 1a.16). Hence Xšaθra, as lord of metals, was also lord of the sky. This was despite the fact that in the Gāthās Zoroaster refers to the sky as being “of hardest stone” (*Y.* 30.5), while there are other Pahlavi texts which define its substance as “the hardest and most beautiful stone,” i.e., crystal. The apparent contradiction had earlier been explained, however, by H. W. Bailey (*Zoroastrian Problems*, pp. 125f.), who showed that Zoroastrian scholar-priests actually defined crystal as being both a stone and a metal. This piece of apparent sophistry enabled them to reconcile the Gathic concept (which was part of revealed truth) with later developments, and so to retain the essential Gathic teaching concerning Xšaθra and his creation. At the remote time when Zoroaster himself lived, the lord of a sky of stone could be thought of as lord of stone everywhere, including stone weapons in the hands of warriors as they exercised rightful power (*xšaθra*). When stone weapons yielded to bronze ones, scholar-priests found a way evidently to keep the original doctrine by redefining the substance of the sky as a type of stone, i.e., crystal, which, because it is mined like ores, could at a stretch also be classified as a metal. Thereafter Xšaθra’s association with metals on earth became more prominent than his lordship of the sky, because of the ethical aspect of the doctrine of the Heptad and the creations. Man is seen as the highest of the seven creations, being capable of awareness and deliberate moral choice; he has a responsibility therefore to care, not only for his fellowmen (as the especial creation of Ahura Mazdā), but also for the other six creations, keeping them as far as possible pure, vigorous, and active, for the better defeat of evil. Nothing can aid the sky, but metals can be cherished in diverse ways in this world below: They can be forged into weapons to defend the right, used in judicial ordeals, minted in coins to give to the needy, and made into useful vessels or beautiful ornaments, to be kept always burnished (see, e.g., F. Kotwal, ed., *Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest nē-šāyest*, Copenhagen, 1969, 15.14-19). This, evidently, was why Xšaθra came to be regularly thought of as lord of metals in general, rather than in particular of the remote metallic sky.

The doctrine of the great Aməša Spəntas thus links spiritual, ethical, and material in a unique manner, and, together with radical dualism, gives its especial character to Zoroastrianism. As Lommel penetratingly showed, the doctrine represents an ancient, mystical way of looking at reality, at a time when, it seems, “abstract and concrete . . . appeared to the human spirit as of unified being, the abstract as the inner reality of the concrete, so that, for instance, pious Devotion and the earth were the spiritual and material aspects of the same thing” (B. Schlerath, ed., *Zarathustra*, pp. 31-32). This manner of thought is wholly remote from the apprehensions of modern urban man, which accounts for the difficulty which some aspects of the doctrine of the Heptad have presented for Western scholars; but this doctrine has been kept accessible for Zoroastrians themselves through a strong tradition of belief, worship, and behavior. Respect and care for the six creations have been inculcated from generation to generation; and link between the creations and the guardian Aməša Spəntas is reaffirmed by every act of priestly worship, at which all the members of the Heptad are held to be visibly represented: Ārmaiti by the earth of the sacred precinct, Haurvatāt by the water for the libation, Amərətāt by the plants and herbs, Vohu Manah by the milk or meat offerings, Xšaθra by the metal vessels and implements, Aša by the ritual fire, and Spənta Mainyu, the Holy Spirit of Ahura Mazdā, by the officiating priest. This interpretation of the ritual which, on the testimony of the Gāthās, is to be attributed to Zoroaster himself, has been transmitted down the generations into modern times (see Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 51), and this has clearly been important for keeping the doctrine of the Heptad a reality for the community. Further, the Zoroastrian devotional year has for its framework seven great holy days in honor of the Heptad and the creations (see Nowrūz; Gāhāmbār), which are the faith’s only feasts of obligation; these have also helped to inculcate the doctrine.

The importance of the doctrine of the immanence of the great Aməša Spəntas is further attested through Manichean works of the third century A.D.; for when Mani's scriptures were translated into Middle Persian (in the hope of converting Zoroastrians), the plural (*a*)*mahraspandān* was used, interpretatively, as a common noun to describe the five "light elements" of his own cosmology, i.e., ether, wind, light, water, and fire (see *Mir. Man.* pp. 206, 214, s.v.). When Zoroastrian scholar-priests themselves came to study Greek philosophy (see Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems*, pp. 87f.), some sought to assimilate to their own doctrine of the seven creations the Empedoclean theory of the four elements of earth, air, fire, and water; i.e., they identified these with their four inanimate creations, equating air with the sky. Christian polemicists in the Sasanian period repeatedly accused Zoroastrians of worshiping the elements, while in modern times the Parsi custom of praying in the open, especially at sunrise and sunset, has impressed European travelers (see, e.g., S. Laing, *A Modern Zoroastrian*, London, 1890, pp. 219-20; J. B. Pratt, *India and its Faiths*, London, 1916, pp. 335-36).

The veneration of the Aməša Spəntas through their creations meant that Zoroastrians had no need of man-made icons in worship; but it is thought that the Heptad is visually alluded to in carvings over the tombs of Darius the Great and his successors (see *Achaemenid Religion*, supra, p. 428). The Zoroastrian calendar, in which each of the thirty days of the month is devoted to a *yazata*, appears to have been created in the late Achaemenid period (see Boyce, *Zoroastrianism* II, pp. 243f.), and in it the first seven days are dedicated to the Heptad, in the order given above. Ahura Mazdā was honored above the rest by the dedication to him of four days; each of the seven also received the dedication of a month. Every coincidence of a day and a month name came to be celebrated as a feast-day of the divinity concerned, so each of the six was now honored by a name-day feast, and Ahura Mazdā by four such feasts. These were in addition to the seven ancient feasts of obligation in their honor. The Heptad being central to Zoroastrian belief, the other "calendar" divinities were thereafter grouped by theologians around the great six, as their helpers. (It is notable that the four assigned to aid Xšaθra are all in some way connected with the sky.) These associations are celebrated through liturgical invocations (see the *Sīrōza*), and are set out in detail in *Bundahišn* 26. (For details see under the individual Aməša Spəntas.) This then became yet another way in which the preeminence of the great Aməša Spəntas was acknowledged.

The doctrine and veneration of the Heptad can be traced down to modern times among Zoroastrian communities in Iran; but in the 19th century Western academic theories made a powerful impact on Parsis in Bombay. In the 1860s M. Haug introduced to them the idea that Zoroaster had preached a continuing rather than an originating monotheism, the great Aməša Spəntas being (he held) for the prophet himself no more than abstract qualities. This interpretation was warmly welcomed by Parsi reformists, who had been suffering under attacks by Christian missionaries, accusing them of polytheism (see, e.g., J. Wilson, *The Pārsī Religion*, Bombay, 1843, pp. 180f., who also made a particular onslaught on the concept of the immanence of the Aməša Spəntas). These reformists thereafter vigorously propagated Haug's ideas, and their writings were then taken by Western scholars as proof that Haug's interpretation had a genuine echo in Zoroastrian tradition itself. The anachronistic interpretation of the Gathic Aməša Spəntas as no more than philosophical and ethical abstractions became accordingly for a time the prevailing opinion in the West, and it is still upheld by individual Western scholars, as well as by many Parsis. There is thus considerable diversity in modern studies on this subject.

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