

THE DAEVAS
IN
ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURE

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THE DAEVAS IN ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURE

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A Note on the Translations Used

For the English translation of the *Gathas* I cited for my thesis, I used M.L. West's *The Hymns of Zarathustra*. For the rest of the *Yasna*, I used L. H. Mills' translation, and for the *Vendidad* and *Khordah Avesta* I used James Darmesteter's. For the three major Pahlavi texts – the *Denkard*, *Bundahishn*, and *Menog-i-Khrad* – I used E. W. West's translations. For the *Shahnameh*, I used Ahmed Sadri's translation. For the *Rig Veda* I used Wendy Doniger.

Introduction

Zoroastrianism, sometimes referred to by its adherents as “the Good Religion” is one of the world’s oldest living religious traditions, already well-established by the time of the Achaemenid dynasty of the Persian Empire (Boyce 1). It is also one of the most innovative faiths in human history, pioneering concepts of monotheism and moral dualism which would influence the development of the Abrahamic faiths, in particular Christianity and Islam. In its heyday, it was the dominant religion of imperial Persia and was practiced throughout central Asia and the Middle-east until it was supplanted by Islam. Nonetheless, small Zoroastrian communities in Iran, India and elsewhere endure, preserving the ancient traditions that stretch back to ancient Iran and the prophet Zarathustra. Though it no longer holds the numbers and influence it once did, the Zoroastrian faith remains an important object of study because of its antiquity, the strength of its tradition, and its unique cultural position, drawing on the same root Indo-Iranian traditions as Vedic Hinduism in its origins, and influencing the Abrahamic faiths in its development.

Zoroaster is the Greek form of the name of the founder of this religious tradition; his name in his own language, Avestan, was Zarathustra. Zoroastrianism is also known as Mazdaism, after the being who is most revered by its adherents – Ahura Mazda (the Wise or Mindful Lord), the eternal uncreated God and maker of humanity and all that is good in the world. Under Mazda’s authority are a number of lesser divinities, including the six

Amesha Spentas (Benevolent Immortals), who each embody a moral principle as well as an aspect of the material world, and an uncounted number of yazatas, beings worthy of reverence; in English, these titles are often translated as “archangels” and “angels”, though such terms do not convey the full range of nuance as “yazata”. Collectively, Ahura Mazda, the Amesha Spentas, and the yazatas embody *asha*, the fundamental cosmic principle of truth and order that governs the universe. *Asha* is opposed by *druj*, the Lie, a principle of falsehood and chaos which is embodied by a being known as Angra Mainyu or Ahriman, the Hostile Spirit. The struggle between these two principals within the human soul, and the importance of choosing *asha* over *druj* forms the cornerstone of the Zoroastrian moral outlook – one of the world’s oldest and most developed articulations of the opposition of good and evil, both within and without.

Cultural Origins of Zoroastrianism

Zarathustra is traditionally held to have been founded in what is today eastern Iran or western Afghanistan, sometime between 1700 BCE and 600 BCE¹. Though little can be known for certain of the specifics of the time in which he lived beyond that which is revealed in those writings attributed to him, he can be placed in the context of broader cultural trends. The ancient Iranian culture of the time was a branch of the Indo-Europeans, who were the ancestors of diverse cultural groups from Scandinavia to India, most closely related to the latter. Scholarship points to the ancestral Indo-Iranian people, the Aryans, as having lived in ancient central Asia; though they eventually become linguistically and religiously distinct, a number of ideas which would remain central to

¹ “As to when he lived, scholars are divided between those who put him in the seventh or sixth century BCE and those who uphold a much higher dating, around 1000 BCE or even higher.” (ML West 4-5)

both groups can be traced back to this shared beginning. According to William Malandra, it has been theorized that the proto-Indo-Iranians lived in central Asia, prior to a split a roughly 3000 BCE which lead to one group settling what is now India, and the other what is now Iran (Malandra 6) The Iranian *Avesta* and Indian Vedas both point towards a pastoral society in which the cow served as a centerpiece of wealth and social structure – it is therefore unsurprising that this animal would come to play a significant role in the religious systems which developed in both societies. Fire –personified in the Avesta as Atar and in the Vedas as Agni – was greatly revered as a central object of ritual in both traditions. In a more purely social sense, both texts point towards a three-fold division of human society into priestly, warrior, and agricultural classes, which would continue to be a motif in Iranian literature, and would develop into the more codified and complex caste system in India².

During Zarathustra’s lifetime, Iran was in a militant age, one dominated by warriors who engaged in raids and battles in search of glory³. The *Gathas*, those oldest Avestan texts which are attributed to Zarathustra himself, are written from the perspective of a priest associated with pastoral society and speak often of adversaries who seek to do violence against the people and their livestock. This backdrop of conflict sheds light on Zarathustra’s emphasis on rule according to moral order rather than mere strength, as well as the stark division he drew between good and evil powers of the world. The *Gathas* depict their author often as a powerless man, a lone voice speaking for Ahura

² This idea, sometimes referred to as the “Trifunctional Hypothesis” was most strongly elaborated on in the works of Georges Dumézil, such as *Flamen-Brahman*, which theorized it as having originated from the Proto-Indo-Europeans and formed the basis of Indo-European societies in general.

³ “It was during this turbulent and restless age, it seems, when might ruled rather than law, that Zoroaster lived and sought a revelation of the purpose of man’s troubled days on earth.” (Boyce 3)

Mazda and *asha* in a world dominated by the followers of the Lie, but ultimately Zarathustra found his royal patron, Vishtaspa, and the two of them brought to power a religious tradition which would endure for millennia. This background of conflict against a martial society and its relationship to the broader warrior ethos of the Indo-Iranian peoples and their gods, however, would create a legacy which would endure within the faith throughout its history.

***Daevas* and Why They are Important**

The *daevas* are a class of beings mentioned repeatedly throughout the Avesta and the later Zoroastrian texts. The word *daeua* and its derivatives – including the Old Iranian *daiva*, Pahlavi *dew*, and later Persian *div* – always carries a negative connotation, meaning false god or, in later texts especially, demon (Encyclopedia Iranica, “Daiva” 4). Such beings are always cast in the adversarial role, as the opposition to human heroes and kings and, in Zoroastrian depictions, where they are the minions and in some cases creations of the Evil Spirit, adversaries of the faithful and of Ahura Mazda himself. However, the word *daeua* also bears linguistic relationship to the Sanskrit word *deva*, referring to one of the principal classes of gods, as well as other related words throughout the Indo-European traditions. (Encyclopedia Iranica, “Daiva” 1) Indeed, Indra, the greatest of the *devas* from Vedic literature, is often listed in Zoroastrian texts as one of the greatest of the evil forces, sometimes second only to Angra Mainyu himself. In the traditional Zoroastrian confession of faith as recorded in the Avesta, the rejection of the *daevas* is one of the most significant qualifiers of a follower of the tradition, alongside worshipping Ahura Mazda and following the teachings of Zarathustra. The question that is then raised is, why did a term associated with gods who were revered in most Indo-

European contexts become associated solely with evil forces in the Zoroastrian religion? What does this reversal tell us about the origins of the world's oldest monotheistic tradition and the development of the ethical dualism that would define it? First, one must turn to the Indo-European traditions in general and Indo-Iranian traditions in particular, to understand the broader uses of the terms and concepts from which the Iranian *daevas* originated. From there, we must turn to the *Gathas* themselves in order to understand how the earliest traditions depict them and their mortal servants, and then trace their history throughout the most significant texts as the Zoroastrian tradition changed and developed. Finally, we must examine the *daevas* and their role as a whole, in order to better understand the nature of the beings which the Good Religion set itself in opposition to, the means by which they can be fought, and the ways in which their portrayal changed to suit the needs of a changing people.

So far as I am aware, though the *daevas* are mentioned frequently in Zoroastrian scholarship, they are rarely the direct object of study themselves. As the conflict between embodied forces of good and evil is central to Zoroastrian theology and worldview, and the *daevas* are chief among evil's minions in the traditional cosmology as laid out in the ancient texts, and the theorized role of the *daeva* religion as a predecessor to Zoroastrianism, this is an area which is worthy of being focused on in greater detail. Charting the evolving role of the *daevas* through the Avestan and Pahlavi texts in roughly chronological order provides a means of studying when and how, and a grounding for theorizing why, the shifts in portrayals of these personified antagonists occurred and what it means in the broader scope of the Zoroastrian tradition.

A Brief Note on the Avestan Canon

The Avesta represents the core Zoroastrian scriptural tradition, composed in an ancient Iranian language, Avestan, which shares its name, for it exists primarily within these texts. The Avesta is comparable in age to the Vedas of India, and several portions of it, in particular the *Yashts*, bear strong stylistic resemblance to Vedic hymns. The oldest portion of the Avesta is the *Gathas*, a series of seventeen hymns which are written in an older dialect than the rest of the collection; they are written from the perspective of Zarathustra, and have traditionally been considered to have been composed by the prophet himself. The *Gathas* exist as part of a larger book, or nask, called the *Yasna*, a lengthy collection of hymns which form the basis of the Zoroastrian liturgy. The *Vendidad*, the “Law Against the *Daevas*” is a manual of prayers and rituals designed to aid the faithful in battle against evil forces; it is chiefly concerned with ritual purity, but contains some mythological accounts as well. The *Visperad* is another collection of hymns and prayers which are used in the liturgy in supplement to the *Yasna*. The *Khordeh Avesta* is a shorter book of prayers intended for the lay worshipper rather than for priests, and the lengthiest section within it are the *Yashts*, a series of hymns depicted to Ahura Mazda and individual *yazatas*, the lesser divinities who embody particular aspects of Mazda and his creation. Later texts, such as the *Denkard*, indicate that the Avesta was once a much lengthier collection, but that much of it – perhaps as much as three quarters – was lost over the course of several invasions of Iran by outside forces, culminating in the Arab conquest.

I. Parallel Traditions: Gods and Demons of the Ancient World

Though the *daevas* as depicted in the later texts represent a distinctly Zoroastrian take on the demonic, they are nonetheless also reflective of broader trends within Indo-European cultures. The idea of two groups of gods – often, one of them associated with violence and the other with more peaceful ideals – who are in conflict with each other is a common one across Indo-European mythologies, reflecting, though not perfectly, the Zoroastrian conflict between good and evil forces. The most striking parallels, however, may be found within the Vedas of ancient India, whose origins lie closest in time and geography to the earliest Avestan texts. The *Devas* of the Vedic texts strongly resemble the Zoroastrian *daevas* not only in their similar names, but also in certain similar associations.

***Daevas* and *Devas*: The Warrior Gods of India and the Dark Gods of Iran**

The Vedic *Devas* (“Celestial Ones”) are one of the two primary subgroupings of gods within the ancient Indian texts, in contrast to the *Asuras* (“Lords”). These divisions echo the conflicts among Zoroastrian divinities, whose titles (“*Ahuras*” and “*Daevas*”) are linguistically closely akin. The parallels between the Vedic *Asuras* and Zoroastrian *Ahuras* are particularly obvious and striking. Varuna, the most powerful of the *Asuras*, does not directly correspond to Ahura Mazda but has several traits in common with him,

particularly in terms of his role as king among the lesser gods and arbiter of law and morality among mortals. Even as Ahura Mazda rules by and upholds *asha*, the cosmic moral order, in the *Avesta*, so too do Varuna and the Asuras uphold the analogous concept of *rta* in the Vedas⁴. Varuna's close companion and supporter is Mitra, whose Zoroastrian counterpart, Mithra, is one of the most prominent *yazatas* in the *Khordeh Avesta* and a great champion of Ahura Mazda. Though no clear counterpart to Mazda exists in Indian sources beyond vague allusions to an *Asura* greater than Varuna or Mitra (RV 5.63.7), like the Zoroastrian *Ahuras*, the Vedic *Asuras* are gods strongly concerned with morality, virtue, and law, both in their own interactions and in the values they foster among mortals.

The *Devas*, in contrast, are associated with war and conflict, none more clearly than the greatest among them, Indra. God of storms, wielder of lightning and king of the *Devas*, Indra is the most prominent individual Vedic deity, and the one who most embodies the values of the *Devas*. He is a heroic figure, most famed for his defeat of the serpent Vrtra, who had imprisoned the waters of the world (RV 1.32). However, he is also amoral and quick to temper, embodying the principles of the warrior chief who reigns by the strength of his arm and acts according to his own will, drawn in direct contrast to the *rta*-upholding Varuna. As he boasts in the *Rg Veda*, contrasting himself with Varuna "I provoke strife, I the bountiful Indra. I whirl up the dust, my strength is overwhelming. All things have I done. No godlike power can check me, the unassailable. When draughts of *soma*... have made me drunk, then both the bounded and unbounded regions grow afraid." (RV 4.42) Thus the association of the king of the *Devas* with

⁴ "Both (Varuna and Mazda) are the masters and the highest representatives of the world order... they have set the world order, marked out the course of life for all beings." (Oldenberg 98)

conflict and violence is made apparent even in a positive portrayal, and this affinity for strife and violence carries over and is magnified in the Iranian counterparts, where it is cast in a far more negative light. Indeed, in the *Vendidad* and *Bundahishn*, Indra's name remains listed alongside the greatest of the *daevas*, second after Angra Mainyu in the former, and third after the Evil Spirit and Akoman in the latter. Rather than one being of the greatest of the gods, to him are assigned the qualities of tempting humans away from proper religious observances. (Encyclopedia Iranica, "Indra") His qualities as a heroic warrior are assigned instead to Mithra (who is much more martial in his Zoroastrian context than in the Vedas) and to the *yazata* Verathraghna, whose name resembles one of the Vedic Indra's epithets, Vrtrahan and shares a common meaning with it ("Slayer of Vrtra/Verethra"), leaving only the negative qualities remaining to the *daevas*. Indra too was associated with the drug *soma* by the Vedas, whose counterpart *haoma* may have been the "liquor-piss" referred to in the *Gathas* (Yasna 48.10) as having been used in the rituals of the *daevas* (though if so, its rejection by the Zoroastrians failed to take root, as it is spoken of positively in later Avestan texts). Zarathustra embraced the authority of the ethical Ahura Mazda, and in so doing placed the gods of war and conflict in the entirely antagonistic role; even as the *daevas* became increasingly relegated in later texts to demonic forces, their ancient kinship to the Vedic Devas can be seen through the prominence of Indra's name among their leaders⁵.

Though Indra is the most prominent Vedic *Deva* to also appear as an Avestan *daevas*, there are two others who share this position. Saurwa and Nanghaithya also appear

⁵ It has also been theorized that Indra was a minor deity in earlier Indo-Iranian traditions who absorbed the traits of several other deities in the process of becoming the chief Vedic deva, while he never achieved this sort of prominence in Iran; for despite his prominence in the lists of *daevas* no Iranian mythology concerning him survives. (Malandra, "Indra").

among the *Vendidad's* list of *daevas*, and are counterparts to the Vedic gods Sarva and the Nasatya, who are an associate of Rudra (later Shiva) and a title of the benevolent twin Ashvins, respectively. The *Vendidad* does not specify what evils these *daevas* are responsible for, but in the *Bundahishn* Saurva (Saurwa) embodies misrule and Naikiyas (Nanghathya) embodies discontent; they remain linked with Andar (Indra) as those who incite the faithful to abandon religious practices; hearkening back, perhaps, to their origins as gods of a pantheon which Zarathustra rejected (*Bundahishn* 28.8-10).

Perhaps most intriguingly, however, is that ultimately the reduction of one group of gods to demonic forces which occurred in Iran eventually occurred in India as well, but in reverse. Whereas in Zoroastrianism the role of the *Ahuras* was exalted in the personage of Ahura Mazda while the *daevas* were made into forces of evil, in Hinduism it is the *Asuras* who would ultimately become doers of evil and foes of the gods. Whether this represents a definitive breach between the Indian and Iranian branches of the ancient Indo-Iranian peoples is difficult to say, but it stands as a striking testament to how traditions which share a common heritage can ultimately develop in radically different ways. (Puhvel 98)

Droughts and Serpent-Slayers: Heroic Motifs in the Vedas and the Avesta

A trait which both the *Avesta* and *Vedas* hold in common is the antagonistic role of serpents, which is common across many Indo-European traditions. In the *Rg Veda*, Vrtra is the serpent who is depicted as holding the waters of the world captive, thereby causing a terrible drought. In response, the god Indra is born to challenge him;

immediately growing to a great size, wielding weapons forged by the artisan Tvastar and accompanied by the god Vishnu, Indra vanquishes the serpent and sets the waters free. “Unable to withstand the onslaught of his weapons, (Vrtra) found Indra an enemy to conquer him and was shattered...”(RV 1.32.6) Thus was the world saved and Indra’s dominance assured. Elements of this narrative can be seen paralleled in Avestan tales of heroes and *daevas*, but take on a distinct context and meaning.

Though Vrtra is the only serpent of consequence in the Vedas, such creatures appear often in the Avesta, chiefly as antagonists. None are worse than Azi Dehaka, the three-headed serpent of the *daevas* who is defeated by the hero Thraotona. Here, however, the serpent-slayer is not a Deva but a righteous mortal man, and it is the serpent himself who is a *daevas*. (Yasna 9.8) Thus the victory that is won over the monster is not the victory of an amoral warrior god, but a sign of the kind of victory over evil that a mortal human being who lives according to *asha* and properly performs the rituals to honor Ahura Mazda and the *yazatas* can achieve. Too, while Vrtra’s threat came from his capture of the waters, Azi Dehaka himself is presented as poisonous and predatory. (Yasna 9.11) Ultimately, therefore, while the Vedic account of Indra and Vrtra is a battle of elemental forces for control of the natural world, the Avesta depicts its serpent-slaying as a starker struggle of good against evil. Indeed, though serpents are commonly represented as agents of evil in Zoroastrian accounts, with Dehaka himself being the worst, no divine being is ever depicted in the Avesta as a serpent-slayer; this is a role that falls solely to heroic humans. Whether this is an explicit rejection of Indra’s famous deed from the *Rg Veda* or merely a result of the distinct development of the diverging traditions is impossible to say.

The role of a divine conflict dealing with drought and control of the waters is assigned to the battle between the *daeva* Apaosha (drought personified) and the *yazata* Tishtrya, as told in the *Khordeh Avesta*'s "Hymn to Tishtrya". Neither takes the form of a serpent or a human for this conflict; rather, they take the form of horses, with Tishtrya proud and noble and Apaosha diseased and corrupt. Though Tishtrya is at first defeated, he is revived when Ahura Mazda himself performs a sacrifice in his honor, thereby granting him the strength to return to the battle and vanquish Apaosha. This story, in addition to its explanation for how the rains are set free, also showcases specifically Zoroastrian values. It emphasizes the need to properly honor the *yazatas*, because it is only when his sacrifice is properly performed that Tishtrya is able to achieve victory, and also represents the power of Ahura Mazda to give victory. Thus Tishtrya's triumph is ultimately a moral and spiritual one, made possible by the supreme god and the proper performance of religion, not merely a feat of martial strength.

Beyond India and Iran: Indo-European and Other Parallels to the *Daevas*

The motif of opposed divisions of gods can be found in both the Vedas' *Devas* and *Asuras* as well as the Avesta's *Daevas* and *Ahuras*, but it is ultimately a representation of a broader trend across many traditions which trace their roots to the Indo-Europeans. In Greco-Roman mythology, the Olympians are opposed to their predecessors, the Titans; as described in Hesiod's *Theogony*, this conflict leads to a war wherein the Titans are overthrown and imprisoned in the underworld, while Zeus and the Olympians take the throne of the dominant powers in the universe (Hesiod ll. 453-492).

In the Norse tradition as well there is the conflict between the Aesir, gods of war, and the Vanir, who are associated chiefly with wisdom, agriculture and fertility; this conflict is ultimately resolved as described in the *Heimskringla* of Snorri Sturluson through the transfer of the Vanir siblings Freyr and Freyja to the Aesir, and of the Aesir Hoenir and the giant Mimir to the Vanir. Afterwards, the Vanir are sometimes considered a sub group of the more powerful Aesir.

Which of these gods can be most closely said to map onto the *daevas* is uncertain, if such an attempt is even feasible. The Titans, like the *daevas*, are often presented as antagonistic forces, though they are not demonic and the Titan Prometheus is depicted as a benefactor of mankind (Hesiod ll. 561-562). The Olympians have *daeva*-like qualities as well, for their leader Zeus is a storm-god analogous to Indra, and the Olympian god of war, Ares, is a bringer of strife and destruction whose actions show a distinctly *daeva* nature. Nonetheless, when the ancient Greeks encountered the Persians and attempted to map the Zoroastrian religion onto their own beliefs, they identified Ahura Mazda with Zeus, and Ahriman with his brother Hades (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, “Ahura Mazda”). The comparisons with the Norse gods are, in certain respects, easier to draw; the martial Aesir, though portrayed far more positively than the *daevas*, are nonetheless associated with the same warrior’s values they embody (though, perhaps ironically, their name is more closely related to *Asura/Ahura*), and the Aesir Thor is, like Indra, a thunder god and serpent-slayer. Also of note is Tyr or Tiw, a war-god most prominent for his role in trapping the great wolf Fenrir, though it has been theorized that he was more significant in earlier eras; his name, like the title *daeva*, is held to be a derivative of the Proto-Indo-European *Dyeus* or *deiwos* (Malandra 5). The Vanir, in contrast, with their associations

with wisdom, peace, and fertility, appear closer to the values which Ahura Mazda and the *yazatas* uphold. However, the conflict between Aesir and Vanir is far less absolute than that between *Ahuras* and *Daevas*, for while the former was ultimately resolved through an exchange of hostages, while the latter will not end until Ahriman is banished and the world is remade. Too, the division between the two groups is less absolute, for Odin, the greatest of the Aesir, has associations with wisdom, while the very fact that the Vanir waged war with the Aesir points to their also partaking of martial values.

The antagonistic role of serpents is another common one that the Avesta shares with other Indo-European traditions. The role of the monster Azi Dehaka, a *daeva* who is sometimes described as a serpent and sometimes as a human with serpentine features – but always multi-headed – is somewhat similar to that of Typhon in Greco-Roman traditions, and both are, according to some sources, ultimately imprisoned beneath mountains where they shall remain until the end of time. The earlier depictions of Azi Dehaka as a multi-headed serpent which spews poison also resemble that of Typhon's offspring, the Lernean Hydra, which is defeated by the hero Heracles. The binding of Dehaka also recalls the capture of the serpent Jormungandr and the wolf Fenrir in Norse mythology, and just as the *Denkard* establishes that Zohak (Dehaka) will be set free at the end of the world, so too will the Norse monsters. However, while Dehaka will merely be freed to go to his final destruction, Jormungandr and Fenrir are prophesied to slay two of the greatest of the Aesir, Thor and Odin, before they are slain themselves.

It is not only the Indo-European traditions which show signs of kinship to the Zoroastrian *daevas*, however. Aeshma, the demon of wrath, is one of the most prominent *daevas* in the earlier texts, a doer of violence and evil second only to Angra Mainyu

himself. In addition to his role in the Avesta, however, it has been theorized that Aeshma was a figure who was adopted into Jewish demonology when the ancient Jews were exposed to Zoroastrian beliefs following the Persian conquest of Babylon. There he would develop into the demon king depicted in sources such as the Book of Tobit, under a name conflating his personal name and demonic title – Aeshma Daeva, which became Asmodeus (Haupt 175). In the Book of Tobit, Asmodeus is depicted as a demon who slew each of the seven husbands of Sarah, before at last being defeated by the angel Raphael. In his acts of cruelty and destruction, as well as the opposition by a benevolent divine counterpart, this depiction of Asmodeus carries strikingly similar themes to the depictions of *daevas* in Zoroastrian sources⁶.

Conclusion

The Zoroastrian tradition stands in many respects at a cultural crossroads of the world, partaking of both eastern and western Indo-European traditions while also producing distinct ideas of its own, which would go on to influence the development of the Abrahamic traditions. The characters of the *daevas* in their role as the enemies of Ahura Mazda and those who follow his religion represent this connection as well, paralleling both martial gods of the traditions from which Zoroastrianism descended as well as the monsters embodied within those traditions. From them also were derived a striking depiction of evil which would influence the development of good-evil duality in the rising Abrahamic faiths, represented by the theorized derivation of the Judeo-Christian demon lord Asmodeus from the Avestan Aeshma. Thus even through its

⁶ “This account does not contradict Aeshman’s Iranian role as representative of destructive activity; and other indications of Iranian influence in the Book of Tobit support the etymology.” (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, “Aeshma”)

depiction of its spiritual enemies, the Zoroastrian faith presents a striking representation of its role both deriving from ancient shared ideas and forging its own distinct path.

II. Ancient Gods of Iran: *Ahuras* and *Daevas*

The date of the prophet Zarathustra remains uncertain- some sources put him as late as 600 BCE, while others dating back to the ancient Greeks, including such philosophers as Xanthus and Aristotle,(West 8) place him as early as 4000 BCE. Many modern estimates, including that of Mary Boyce and Paul Kriwaczek (Kriwaczek 209), place him somewhere between 1000 and 1500 BCE, while others, including Willaim Malandra, place him at the later time (Malandra 17). With even his era uncertain, little can be known of his society, save for that which can be gleaned from the *Gathas*, the series of hymns contained within the longer *Yasna* (itself a single book, or *nask*, of the *Avesta*) which have traditionally been held to have been the only surviving compositions of Zarathustra himself⁷. The *Gathas* reflect many of the concerns which would continue to dominate later Zoroastrian thought, including the veneration of Ahura Mazda as the supreme deity, the opposition of good against evil, and the importance of living according to *asha*. However, they also depict a world in sharp conflict between good and evil forces, which is reflected in the polarization of divine beings into two categories- *daevas* and *ahuras*- and the traits reflected in these beings.

Of the *ahuras* (“lords”), the chief representative was Ahura Mazda, the Wise or Mindful Lord, who was extolled by Zarathustra above all other deities as the creator and

⁷ “A single, distinct personality speaks to us out of the poems, and in several places the poet names himself... as Zarathustra... his existence is as well authenticated as that of most people in antiquity (ML West 3-4)

ultimate ruler of heaven and earth and the arbiter of morality. It is to him which the *Gathas* are primarily addressed, and it is to him that Zarathustra dedicated his worship.⁸ At times, “the other Ahuras” are also addressed, a category which appears to have included Spenta Mainyu (the Benevolent Spirit or Will) and *asha* itself when personified, and possibly also such figures as Mithra or the Amesha Spentas who are not identified in the *Gathas* by name but are prominent in later sections of the *Avesta* as *yazatas*. However, the common trait among the entities Zarathustra held in veneration was their concern with the proper moral ordering of the universe, which mirrored the prophet’s own concerns about how his people should interact with their world.⁹ While Mazda has been theorized to have been worshipped since ancient times as a great deity of wisdom, it was Zarathustra’s revelation which elevated him from one among many to the role of ultimate creator of the universe, and father and lord over all benevolent divinities. (Boyce 9)

In opposition to the *ahuras* stand the *daevas*. Unlike the *ahuras*, the *daevas* are not characterized as distinct beings within Zarathustra’s personal revelation (they are always portrayed as a group), and no hymns are addressed to them. To the *daevas* (and by extension, their worshippers) were attributed acts of violence and destruction.¹⁰ The *daevas* were said to be unable to discern good from evil and to have fallen under the sway of Angra Mainyu (Evil Thought) and *druj* (the Lie, opposite of *asha*). “But ye *Daevas* are all spawned from Evil Thought/ as is the grandee who worships you, and

⁸ “He is a lofty being... nor is he connected with any physical phenomenon, but hypostatizes the power of wisdom, which should compel all actions of gods and men alike”. (Boyce 9)

⁹ “The ‘lords’ are all highly ethical beings, who uphold *asha* and themselves submit to it.” (Boyce 9-10)

¹⁰ “Zoroaster himself restricted the use of the ancient title *daeva* to Indra and other martial gods whom he saw as destructive forces, opposed to the ethical Ahuras.” (Boyce 11)

from Wrong and Contempt... ever since you have been enjoining those worst of things that mortals are to do/ to wax in the *Daevas*' favor, retreating from Good Thought/ losing the way from the Mindful Lord's wisdom and from Right." (Yasna 32.3-4) The religion of the *daevas* was accused of bringing suffering and oppression to both humans and animals. "Between these two (*asha* and *druj*) the very *Daevas* fail to discriminate rightly, because delusion/ comes over them as they deliberate, when they choose worst thought/ they scurry together to the violence with which mortals blight the world." (Yasna 30.6)

Though the *daevas* themselves have little direct characterization in the *Gathas*, Zarathustra's opposition to them and to their followers shines through clearly whenever they are mentioned. By examining his words closely, it is possible to draw forth some more concrete ideas about the forces the *daevas* represented, the crimes of which the poet-prophet accused their worship, and the rhetorical role of the dualist system which placed the *daevas* in opposition to Ahura Mazda and other *ahuras* worthy of worship.

Zarathustra's Demonology: Attributes of the *Daevas* in the *Gathas*

The *daevas* are first mentioned in the second hymn of the first *Gatha*, Yasna 29, which is sometimes known as "The Cow's Lament", because it is told from the point-of-view of a cow who suffers under the dominion of evil and violent forces. This hymn is not concerned with the *daevas* directly, being primarily an indictment of an unjust world which causes the cow to suffer as well as an affirmation that Ahura Mazda has sent his prophet Zarathustra to restore a proper moral order, but they are referred to in one stanza. "(Ahura Mazda), the most heedful of initiatives, both those taken in the past/ by *daevas* and mortals, and those that may be taken hereafter./ He is the lord that judges; it will be

as he wills.” (Yasna 29.4) This passage is particularly noteworthy in that though the *daevas* are acknowledged as divine beings (they are distinct from the category of “mortals”), they are placed on the same ethical plane as human beings, and are subject to the authority and judgment of Ahura Mazda. In this hymn, Zarathustra has acknowledged the existence of these gods in the same breath as establishing his own god, Ahura Mazda, as their superior, who knows what they have done and will do, and will judge them as he sees fit.

Yasna 32 is the first hymn to be deeply concerned with the opposition between Ahura Mazda and the *daevas*, and it sketches out further details of these beings, their character, and the nature of their worship. The hymn begins with Zarathustra fantasizing that the *daevas* might repent of their wickedness and become true servants of Ahura Mazda: “for his the *daevas*, in my fancy, for the Mindful Lord’s gladdening, saying/ “We will be Thy messengers, to demolish those who hate you.” (Yasna 32.1) This idealized vision appears to show the role which Zarathustra would hope the *daevas* would fulfill; not that of tyrannical gods, but of willing servants and messengers of the true God, Ahura Mazda, who is once again placed as superior over them. However, the prophet must admit that the true *daevas* fall far short of this reality. “So ye lure the mortal from good living and security from death/ as the Evil Will does you who are *daevas*, by evil thought/ and that evil speech with which he assigns the deed to the wrongful one’s control.” (Yasna 32.5) Here, the *daevas* are clearly assigned the role of the tempters and misleaders of humans. It is they who are seen as responsible for both enticing mortals into evil, as well as inflicting evil upon them. However, they are not the absolute evil power, but are instead placed as subordinate to that which corrupted them; the Evil Will, that being

known in classical Zoroastrian thought as Angra Mainyu, the enemy of Ahura Mazda. Thus the *daevas* are presented as perpetrators of evil, but also as victims of a greater evil power which has lured them into evil even as they lure humans, and in Zarathustra's ideal world, even they would be redeemed along with humanity.

The *daevas* are not explicitly mentioned again in the first *Gatha*; their next appearance is in a hymn in the second *Gatha*. Yasna 44 is the longest of the hymns of Zarathustra, set in the center of the Yasna, and is considered by some scholars (West 102) to be his finest work. This hymn is primarily framed as a dialogue between the prophet and his god, in which Zarathustra questions Ahura Mazda on several topics of worship and morality; the *daevas* do not appear until the final stanza, and there they are harshly condemned. "What, Mindful Lord, has the *daevas*' dominion been good-/ that is what I ask- they that blaspheme for the sake of those/ with whom the Karpan and Usij subjects the cow to violence." (Yasna 44.20) This brief reference clearly establishes the *daevas* as having been a dominant power in ancient Iran, for they have held dominion, but their dominion has been abusive and even blasphemous, and they have driven their priests (the Karpan) to evil acts, such as committing violence against cattle. This harsh condemnation serves as a definitive rejection of these ancient gods and their worship on the part of the prophet, who has spent the preceding stanzas discussing the proper worship and aims of his new religion and its god, who is a god not of violence but of proper moral conduct.

In Yasna 45, the *daevas* are discussed only briefly, and here they are placed on the same moral plane as wicked mortals who reject Ahura Mazda, and who therefore themselves must be rejected by Zarathustra and his followers (Yasna 45.11), but little can be gleaned of the prophet's understanding of these beings from this brief reference which

had not been stated elsewhere. Yasna 48 opens with a condemnation of the *daevas* on a more religious ground: “Now if thereby Right will vanquish Wrong,/ when it catches up with the deceitful assertions/ by *daevas* and mortals in the matter of avoiding death/ then it will increase Thy praise together with Thy strength, Lord.” (Yasna 48.1) Once again, the recurring theme of the *daevas* sharing the same moral plane as evil humans appears, but at the same time this concept is paired with the idea of “deceitful assertions... in the matter of avoiding death”, which seems to be a condemnation of the old religion as false not only for promoting violence but also on theological grounds. Furthermore, the vanquishing of this religion by Zarathustra’s new religion of Ahura Mazda is presented as both inevitable and desirable. The *daevas* and their false teachings, it would appear, belong to the past, and shall soon be supplanted by the truth which Zarathustra preaches. The final explicit reference to the *daevas* in the *Gathas* is of much the same tone. “Those who in ill wisdom increase violence and cruelty... through whose failure to do good deeds the ill deeds prevail/ they establish the *daevas*, which is the wrongful one’s religion.” (Yasna 49.4) Here, however, the usual perspective is flipped somewhat; condemnation is placed not on the *daevas* for inspiring humans to do evil, but on human evil-doers for worshipping such beings. And it is clear that *daevas*-worship itself is to be seen as an evil act, the natural culmination of violence, cruelty, and failure to live according to *asha*; it is a wrongful religion.

Karpans, Cattle-sacrifice and *Haoma*: The Worship of the *Daevas* as Presented in the *Gathas*

Zarathustra was not, however, concerned only with depictions of the *daevas* themselves as evil beings; he was also concerned with depicting those humans who were associated with their worship, whether as priests or simple followers. Frequently condemned are a group referred to as the *karpans*, a group linked with the *daevas* in Yasna 44 and apparently an order of priests of the *daeva* religion; sometimes they are linked with another group, the *kavis*¹¹, who appear to have been a ruling class (though while *karpans* are universally condemned in the *Gathas*, not all *kavis* were considered evil- Zarathustra's royal ally and patron Vishtaaspa was himself a *kavi*). A third group, the *usij*, are mentioned once in connection with the *karpans*, but without sufficient context to speculate as to their specific role. Regardless of which group they are considered to belong to, Zarathustra's discussion of *daeva*-worshippers sheds light on both the *daeva* religion itself and also on those aspects of human behavior which were most associated with these beings, and by extension which the prophet sought to condemn.

Yasna 32 is the first hymn to contain explicit references to the *karpans*. After a lengthy discussion of the evil deeds committed by both *daevas* and wicked humans, the priesthood and its actions are brought into a tighter focus and condemned. "(Ahura Mazda) answers them with ill, who pervert the cow's life by shouting 'move along!'/ and with whom the Karpan chooses gluttony instead of right, and the dominion of those who

¹¹ The use of the word "kavi" is distinct in the Avesta compared to Sanskrit; in the latter, it refers to a poet, but in the former to someone who holds a position of great influence, traditionally translated as "king" or "lord", but possibly a high-ranking priest.

promote wrong.” (Yasna 32.12) This passage clearly links the karpan priesthood with the actions of other evildoers, including the abuse (and possible sacrifice) of cattle, gluttony, and the dominion of those who would do evil (suggesting a link between the priesthood and a corrupt ruling class). A stanza later, the similar abuses of the Kavis are also linked together. “Into its bonds the glutton, the very Kavis surrender their reason and dignity daily, when they stand ready to assist the wrongful one/and when the cow is spoken for killing, (the wrongful one) who makes the resistant juice flare up. / By these activities the Karpanhood and Kavihood have lost their way. / Those whom they implicate in them, not being in free control of their lives, / will be born away from them both into the house of Good Thought.” (Yasna 32 14-15). Again, gluttony is mentioned as a vice, associated this time with the Kavis, and the practice of cattle-sacrifice is both confirmed and condemned. The reference to “juice” in connection to these accusations is particularly intriguing, suggesting a connection to *haoma*, a drug referenced in other ancient Zoroastrian texts, in the practices of the priesthood. Most striking, however, is the idea that the Karpans and Kavis are closely linked together by these shared practices and that the people are oppressed against their will by the corrupt priestly orders, apparently confirming the power that the *daeva*-worshippers held in pre-Zoroastrian society. However, it also includes a promise that the people will be delivered from these oppressors.

The Karpans and Kavis are again discussed in Yasna 46, and once again they are linked. “The Kavis and the Karpans yoke the mortal to bad deeds for the ruination of life./ Their own soul and their own morality will torment them when they come to where the Arbiter’s Crossing is/ to lodge for all time in the abode of wrong.” (Yasna 46.11)

Though this passage offers little further insight into the practices of these groups, it confirms again that they have power and have used it wrongly, while also assuring the reader that their own wickedness will torment them once they enter the afterlife. The next mention refers to the Karpans alone, and illuminates much more strongly a specific practice of their religion. “When does one strike out at this liquor piss/ with which the Karpans cruelly give one the gripes/ they and the intent misrulers of the regions?” (Yasna 48.10). In addition to confirming once more the connection between the priesthood and the corrupt ruling classes, this stanza presents a striking condemnation of a sickening “liquor” drunk by the priests and their followers, referring perhaps again to the *haoma* drug, and wondering when the time will come to strike it away.

The final reference to the Karpans comes in Yasna 51. “The Karpans are not fit allies from the standpoint of your ordinances and the pasture, / manifesters of harm to the cow by their actions and proclamations- / proclamations which will consign them at the last to the House of Wrong.” (Yasna 51.14) This stanza specifically notes that the Karpans are not fit allies for the followers of Ahura Mazda and makes plain that this is because of their harmful actions towards cattle as well as unspecified proclamations against Ahura Mazda’s teachings. It also assures, however, that the Karpans will ultimately come to their final punishment as a direct consequence of their evil actions.

Ultimately, the picture painted of the Karpan priests is an extremely negative one, showing them to be oppressors of the people, allied with corrupt rulers, and enemies of Zarathustra’s message. Though these passages are scanty on references to the practices of the *daeva* religion- practices which, presumably, would have been well-known to Zarathustra’s original audience- several key ideas can be extracted from them. First, the

Karpan are associated with the powerful; they are repeatedly described as being associated with the Kavis and other corrupt rulers and having the authority to enforce their wrongful beliefs on the innocent populace. Second, they are doers of violence against cattle, suggesting a sacrificial element to their practices, though the specifics of such sacrifices are not elaborated on. Finally, they are associated with a noxious drink that makes people ill and which Zarathustra wishes he could strike from their hands; perhaps a reference to a form of *haoma*, and a parallel to the *soma* rituals described in the Vedas (though if so, this is one reform which failed to take root, as *haoma* is depicted positively in the later Avesta, particularly the *Hom Yasht*). Though there is little direct detail to be found here, and what is presented is done so negatively, this handful of descriptions provide a degree of insight into a religion long-since vanished from the Earth, and also the reasons why Zarathustra opposed it.

The Old Religion and the New: What Did the *Daevas* Signify in Zarathustra's Hymns?

Though the *Daevas* are not ubiquitous beings in the *Gathas* the way Ahura Mazda is, the collection of hymns repeatedly returns to this group of divine beings and their followers. The question becomes, then, what did they signify to the prophet's understanding of his world and its moral order?

The chief observation that can be made is that the *Daevas* are not some abstract metaphysical concern- rather, they are closely linked to the world of humans, both in their own nature but more prominently in the actions of their worshippers. They are said to have held dominion, but their dominion has been cruel and unjust, an idea which is

backed by the depiction of the Karpan priests as wielding power over the common people and performing violent rites, particularly against cattle. The concept of violence, whether against humans or animals, is one which is returned to again and again in the depiction of the *Daevas*. This is in sharp contrast to Zarathustra's pantheon of preferred deities, Ahura Mazda and his attendants, who are characterized primarily by their wisdom and moral stature.

Ultimately, the clearest attitude towards the *daevas* that shines through the *Gathas* whenever they are mentioned is one of definitive rejection. It is to these beings that Zarathustra assigns all those things which he rejects as evil, in contrast to the strong moral center embodied in Ahura Mazda. Neither *daevas* nor Karpans ever have any individuals singled out among them; rather, they are faceless embodiments of all that is wrong and chaotic in the world and in human society. However, the *Gathas* also contain clear reminders that those who do evil- *daevas* and human alike- are, for all their worldly power, under Ahura Mazda's power, and will ultimately face judgment for their sins. This is the ultimate promise of the ancient hymns; evil, personified by violent, chaotic gods and their followers, may have power, but in the end good, embodied by Ahura Mazda and Zarathustra himself, will prevail, weak though it may seem at the time. In at least one sense, this promise has been born out, for the *daevas* and Karpans are today known only from scattered references in the texts of their adversary, while the teachings of Zarathustra live on.

III. The Evolution of the Daevas in the Later Avesta

In the *Gathas*, the *daevas* are depicted primarily in their function as a group of deities worshipped by the older religion which Zarathustra's teachings sought to supplant, their evil and destructive ways manifesting primarily through their relationship with their mortal followers. As the later portions of the *Avesta* developed, however, the *daevas* began to fade as a matter of direct import in the material world. This does not mean that they lost their role as the defined spiritual opposition to Ahura Mazda and his teachings, but that their role shifted from that of the beings worshipped by the enemies of the Good Religion and into personifications of abstract concepts of evil and destruction. In the process, they gained greater individuality, as the monolithic *daevas* of the *Gathas* became separated into a group of distinct demonic personalities.

The later Avesta is divided into several books (*nasks*) which differ in terms of their content and purpose; for discussion of the *daevas*, the chief sources are the *Yasna* (liturgy) and *Vendidad* (law of ritual purity), both of which offer distinct depictions of these beings and their broader antagonistic role within the Zoroastrian cosmology.

The Three-headed Serpent and the Bloody Spear: The Daevas as Portrayed in the Yasna

The *Yasna* is the oldest surviving *nask* (book) of the *Avesta*, serving primarily to provide a corpus of prayers and hymns which are recited as a key component of the Zoroastrian liturgy (Malandra 27). Though the *Yasna* contains the *Gathas* at its heart, its other contents are considered to be younger, attributed to later poets than Zarathustra himself, as they are composed in a later form of the Avestan language. Though much of the *Yasna*'s content concerning the *daevas* is similar to that contained in the *Gathas*, it focuses less on the worship of such beings in the mortal world in it can be seen the beginnings of the individual differentiation which will come to characterize these beings in the later *Vendidad*.

The first reference to *daevas* in the *Yasna* can be found in the first line of the book, as part of the Zoroastrian confession of faith. "I profess myself a Mazda-worshipper and a Zoroastrian, opposing the *daevas*, accepting the Ahuric doctrine." (Yasna 1.1) The central importance placed on opposition to *daevas* as an aspect of being Zoroastrian, alongside following the teachings of Ahura Mazda, is deep and multilayered. Most obviously, it reinforces the duality of good and evil and the need to choose the former over the latter, which is an oft-repeated cornerstone of Zoroastrian scriptural thought. However, in light of the (chronologically) earlier passages from the *Gathas* which deal with *daevas* and *daeva*-worship, it is clear that these were not vague, distant entities but the object of worship of an older religion which Zarathustra sought for his teachings to supplant. In this light, the confession of faith takes on a new dimension,

showing that from some of the earliest texts of the faith, opposition to the *daeva* religion was seen as being as key to being Zoroastrian as following Ahura Mazda. Near the end of the third chapter of the *Yasna*, this concept is stated once again, in a rephrased version of the confession of faith. (Yasna 3:24)

This central role of *daeva*-opposition in the defining of the early Zoroastrian community is powerfully reinforced by the twelfth chapter of the *Yasna*, the so-called “Zoroastrian Creed”, which has been theorized as a formal statement intended to be read aloud before an assembly of the faithful (Boyce 35-36) . The very first statement of the Creed is “I curse the *daevas*” and the verse continues to note that the speaker is “a Mazda-worshipper, a follower of Zarathustra’s teachings, hostile to the *daevas*.” (Yasna 12.1) The Creed mentions the *daevas* twice more, several verses later:

“I reject the authority of the Daevas, the wicked, no-good, lawless, evil-knowing, the most druj-like of beings, the foulest of beings, the most damaging of beings. I reject the Daevas and their comrades, I reject the demons (yatu) and their comrades; I reject any who harm beings. I reject them with my thoughts, words, and deeds. I reject them publicly.” (Yasna 12.4) and “even as Zarathushtra rejected the authority of the Daevas, so I also reject, as Mazda-worshipper and supporter of Zarathushtra, the authority of the Daevas, even as he, the Asha-endowed Zarathushtra, has rejected them.” (Yasna 12.6)

When a brief account of Zarathustra’s birth is given, (Yasna 9.14), the first epithet which is assigned to him is “*daeva*’s foe”. Taken collectively, these passages associate the *daevas* with evil far more strongly than even the condemnations of them in the *Gathas* did. The *daevas* are not only evil, they are the most evil of all beings, directly associated with the cosmic oppositional principle of druj (the Lie) and the Zoroastrian is expected to reject them publicly and in all walks of life, even as Zarathustra himself did. By ascribing to the *daevas* all that is evil, the Creed presents perhaps the clearest break imaginable

between the new religion of Ahura Mazda and the old religion of the *daevas*, while simultaneously reinforcing the dichotomy of good and evil and the need to choose to follow Ahura Mazda, whose religion, in contrast to that of the old demon-gods, is “the best, the greatest, and the most beautiful.” (Yasna 12.9)

For this handful of references, the *daevas* are treated much as they were in the *Gathas* – as a group of beings without individual differentiation, unified by their chaotic and destructive character and opposition to Ahura Mazda. In the ninth chapter of the *Yasna*, the “Hom Yasht”, this portrayal changes dramatically, and one particular *daevas* is singled out and given a striking physical description and brief mythological account. “Who smote Azi Dahaka, three-jawed and triple-headed, six-eyed, with thousand perceptions, and of mighty strength, a lie-demon of the *daevas*, evil for our settlements, and wicked, whom the evil spirit Angra Mainyu made as the most mighty Druj, and for the murder of our settlements, and to slay the homes of Asha!” (Yasna 9.8) Here we see the depiction of the *daevas* Dehaka, described as an *azi* (serpent or dragon) with three heads and tremendous powers of destruction, which is explicitly identified as a creation of the evil principle. Dehaka represents an evolution of the concept of *daevas*, for no worshippers are associated with him, and indeed, there is no indication that he is a power who might be worshipped. Rather than a god, he is a monster who destroys the settlements of those who would follow the principles of *asha*. Several verses later, in the description of his slaying by the hands of the hero Keresaspa, the serpent is described as “swallowing men and swallowing horses, poisonous and green of color, over which, as thick as thumbs are, poison flowed...” (Yasna 9.11) This further elaboration of Dehaka’s nature places him even more strongly in opposition to the proper order of life, as his very

nature is poisonous. This being is not depicted as a god, even a god in opposition to Ahura Mazda, but as a monster which is a threat to the world and to the practice of *asha* by its very existence, and its slaying by a human hero is cast as a heroic deed, worthy of praise.

As the *Yasna* proceeds, it discusses the *daevas* a handful of more times, most of them being extremely similar in character to the earlier references in the *Gathas*, placing them in opposition to the speaker and Ahura Mazda, but not elaborating in detail upon their nature. The final chapter before the beginning of the *Gathas*, placed in the heart of the book, includes a curious passage identifying another *daevas* by name, as well as introducing two categories of these beings. “This is to render Him who is of all the greatest, our lord and master (even) Ahura Mazda. And this to smite the wicked Angra Mainyu, and to smite Aeshma of the bloody spear, and the Mazainya Daevas, and to smite all the wicked Varenya Daevas.” (Yasna 27.1) The depiction of the *daevas* called Aeshma is brief, but serves to reinforce the characteristics of *daevas* elsewhere in the Avesta. The name “Aeshma” means “wrath” and he carries a bloody spear, thereby emphasizing the strong connection between *daevas* in general and this one in particular with violence and destruction. The categories of “Mazainya” and “Varenya” *daevas* are not elaborated on in this passage, however, they are listed together with Aeshma and the ultimate evil, Angra Mainyu, as forces opposed to Ahura Mazda and whom the speaker is invoking his ritual against.

The final chapter of the *Yasna* to be strongly concerned with the *daevas* is Chapter 57, the “Srosh Yasht”, which is dedicated to the *yazata* Sraosha, the incarnation of obedience, who is presented as a warrior in the battle against of cosmic forces of evil,

said to battle “all the days long and all the nights with the *daevas*.” (Yasna 57.16) His chief foe is Aeshma (Wrath) presented in the “Srosh Yasht” as a power who stirs up mortal armies with bloodlust and sets them against the righteous (Yasna 57.25). However, for all Aeshma’s power and malevolence, he cannot overcome Sraosha, who “poizes his knife-like battle-ax, which flies as of itself, and to cleave the Daevas' skulls, to hew down Angra Mainyu, the wicked, and to hew down Rapine (Aeshma) of the bloody spear, to hew down the Daevas of Mazendran, and every Demon-god.” (Yasna 57.31-32) Thus depicted, the mythological battle between Wrath and Obedience serves to introduce the opposition of the *daevas* and *yazatas* through Aeshma and Sraosha, while maintaining the connection between the *daevas* and violence. It also makes plain that the demonic forces are no match for the followers of Ahura Mazda, for Sraosha overcomes Aeshma and the *daevas*, and even Angra Mainyu himself, with ease.

Further references to the *daevas* in the *Yasna* are brief, and serve primarily to state that the ritual being performed will be effective against them. Taken as a whole, the portrayal of the “demon-gods” in this *nask* serves a number of functions. It reinforces the role of the *daevas* as the enemies of the faith which is established in the *Gathas* (though there is less sense here of the *daevas*-worshippers as an active force, perhaps implying that the religion as a practice had lost much of its influence by the time the non-Gathic sections of the *Yasna* were composed) and urges the pious Zoroastrian to reject them in all aspects of life. However, it also begins to characterize the *daevas* as individual beings – particularly Azi Dahaka and Aeshma- and provide more detailed mythology dealing with their interaction with humans and other divine beings. The *daevas* as presented in the *Yasna* have begun to evolve away from their roots as deities worshipped by

Zarathustra's enemies; instead, they are presented as active antagonists of *asha* in their own right, albeit antagonists which the faithful and the *Yazatas* are fully capable of defeating.

The Law Against the *Daevas*: The *Vendidad*

The second major *nask* of the *Avesta* is the *Vendidad* (or *Videvdat*), a title which translates roughly as “The Law Against the *Daevas*”, and it is the section of Zoroastrian scripture which is most strongly concerned with these beings and their roles as the champions of evil. Chiefly, the *Vendidad* concerns itself with ritual and purity laws (Malandra 162-164), giving insight into how mortal human beings can take part in the struggle against *daevas* and other evil forces, but it also further fleshes out the identities, powers, and nature of individual *daevas* much more strongly than any other *nask* of the *Avesta*, showing thereby how perception of such creatures has evolved from the earliest times. No longer the gods of an older, rejected religion – though remnants of this depiction remain – they have instead become embodiments of different types of corruption or destruction, the chief agents of Angra Mainyu and the Lie within the world.

The first chapter of the *Vendidad* has little involvement with the *daevas* directly, being chiefly concerned with the struggle between Ahura Mazda and Angra Mainyu, with the former engaging in acts of creation which are countered by the latter's acts of evil. One of Angra Mainyu's counter-creations, however, is Winter, which is identified as being “of the *daevas*”, reinforcing the link between *daevas* and destructive natural forces. The link extends even to human bodily functions, as abnormalities in a woman's menstrual cycle are also connected to them. (*Vendidad* 16:11) The relationship between

the evil spiritual beings and disorder in nature is further corroborated, but from a reversed perspective, in Vendidad 3.32, which explicitly states that the *daevas* cannot abide well-ordered and properly tended agriculture.

“When barley was created, the Daevas started up; when it grew, then fainted the Daevas' hearts; when the knots came, the Daevas groaned; when the ear came, the Daevas flew away. In that house the Daevas stay, wherein wheat perishes. It is as though red hot iron were turned about in their throats, when there is plenty of corn.”

The simple act of growing barley, perhaps due to its productive nature and expression of the ordering of nature in contrast to their destruction and chaos, is sufficient to drive the evil gods away, and even to inflict pain upon them.

In addition to being associated with chaotic forces in the living world, the *Vendidad* also establishes the *daevas* as being closely associated with death. Zarathustra is portrayed as asking Ahura Mazda where the *daevas* gather in the material world, and is told that they do so at *dakhmas*, or towers of silence, the traditional sites for the ritual exposing of the dead. It is also there that they are said to produce many of the diseases which afflict the human world. (Vendidad 7:55-58) Interestingly, this passage also presents the existence of an infinite, or nearly so, number of *daevas*, for the *dakhmas* are “the place where there are Daevas, that is the place whereon troops of Daevas rush together; whereon troops of Daevas come rushing along; whereon they rush together to kill their fifties and their hundreds, their hundreds and their thousands, their thousands and their tens of thousands, their tens of thousands and their myriads of myriads.” (Vendidad 7:56) This further suggests the devolution of the *daevas* from a pantheon of gods to a vast array of demons, and their description has a decidedly military bent, befitting their violent natures.

The *Vendidad* also introduces a new and distinctive feature of the *daevas* that is not present in the earlier scriptures – it is possible for a human (or at least, a dead mortal’s restless spirit) to become one. While the *Gathas* make a clear distinction between *daevas* and wicked mortals, the *Vendidad* presents Zarathustra as inquiring of Ahura Mazda what evil a man must perform in order to become a *daevas*, and the response contains two categories – one who commits sexual immoralities, and one who worships the *daevas* (it is unclear if either of these acts is sufficient, or if both must be performed). By performing these acts, it is possible for a “paramour of the *daevas*” to be considered equivalent to them in life, and become one in truth after death. (*Vendidad* 8:) In addition to drawing the forces of evil more closely together under one broad category, this depiction also presents a sense of the ultimate culmination of wrong thought and action – to not only serve the spiritual embodiments of evil, but to become such an embodiment oneself. There is also the possibility that *daevas* can be strengthened by human activity even if the ones who perform such actions do not become evil spirits themselves; *Vendidad* 17 discusses in detail how any act which offends Ahura Mazda can be considered a sacrifice to the *daevas*, and that the worst of these is to cut one’s hair or nails and leave the clippings on the ground, for “If those nails have not been consecrated (to the bird), they shall be in the hands of the Mazainya Daevas so many spears and knives so many bows and falcon-winged arrows, and so many sling-stone.” (*Vendidad* 17:10) It is also seemingly possible for an animal to become a *daevas*; Zairyamunga is the name of a *daevas* who is considered the most evil of Angra Mainyu’s wicked creations, and is identified with the tortoise (*Vendidad* 12).

While the *daevas* may be strengthened by human wickedness, however, they are also weakened by human goodness, in particular the proper performance of mantras and invocations to Ahura Mazda. According to Vendidad 18, the *ashem yad vahistem* mantra will smite the *daevas* (Vendidad 18:16), as will the confession of faith (Vendidad 18:24). In Vendidad 19, during the temptation narrative of Zarathustra, the prophet uses the Ashem Vohu mantra to repel the *daevas* Buiti, and subsequently Angra Mainyu himself (Vendidad 19:1-10) At the end of that chapter, it is shown that the *daevas* were dismayed by the very birth of Zarathustra, for they understood that he had been born into the world to be their enemy; indeed, he will be to them as they are to humans. (Vendidad 19: 44-47)

Much of the *Vendidad* is comprised of laws and rituals concerning purity, and although many of these are intended to ward off the Nasu (an embodiment of the Lie in its form for spiritual and physical decay, particularly associated with corpses), a number also deal directly with the personified *daevas*. The tenth chapter of the text, which is a series of prayers to be recited during ritual cleansing, contains reference to many of the most powerful arch-demons – Indra, Sauru, Naunghaithya, Zauri, and Tauru are called out specifically as the chief of the *daevas* to be banished, along with the Nasu and Angra Mainyu himself (Vendidad 10:9-10). Several verses later, Aeshma (again identified with his bloody spear) is also banished, alongside a previously un-referenced *daevas* called Akatasha (Vendidad 10:13), as are broad categories of *daevas* without personified representatives who are associated with the lands of Mazana and Varena (Vendidad 10:14-16). These lands are traditionally associated with evil supernatural forces in the *Shahnameh* and other Iranian folklore. In the following chapter, Aeshma is referenced once more, alongside a number of more minor *daevas*, as being the chief force which

must be banished during the ritual cleansing of tainted humans or animals (Vendidad 11).

Later, a specific list of the most important *daevas* is provided:

“Angra Mainyu the deadly, the Daeva of the Daevas; Indra the Daeva, Sauru the Daeva, Naunghaithya the Daeva, Taurvi and Zairi; Aeshma of the murderous spear; Akatasha the Daeva; Winter, made by the Daevas; the deceiving, unseen Death; Zaurva, baneful to the fathers; Buiti the Daeva; Driwi the Daeva; Daiwi the Daeva; Kasvi the Daeva; Paitisha the most Daeva-like amongst the Daevas.” (Vendidad 19: 43).

Many of these creatures are specifically embodiments of sins humans can commit or destructive forces that plague the world, as told in their very names; among these are Zaurva (old age), Driwi (malice), Daiwi (lying), and Paitisha (opposition).

Ultimately, the role of the *daevas* in the *Vendidad* is a striking and varied one, covering both human vice and natural destructive powers, counting among their number personifications of evil forces and the spirits of wicked humans. Though the old *daevas* religion gets the occasional nod – during the temptation narrative in Vendidad 19, Angra Mainyu reminds Zarathustra that he was worshipped by the prophet’s ancestors – for the most part, their role is no longer that of gods, or of forces which humans could revere or call upon (though “worshippers of the *daevas* remains as a shorthand for those outside the faith in one instance). Instead, their role is perhaps summed up most clearly by the very name of the being who is considered the most *daevas*-like of *daevas*: Paitisha, Opposition. All things which oppose Zarathustra, Ahura Mazda, and the Good Religion now fall under the category of *daevas*, and by teaching about them, the antithesis of morality, the *Vendidad* also teaches the Zoroastrian audience how to live a proper life. The *daevas* are associated with impurity, immorality, and chaos; these things attract them and strengthen them. However, by keeping to the purity laws, by living according to morality and proper

order, and through the recitation of prayers and mantras which the evil spirits cannot abide, it is shown how a Zoroastrian may play an important role in holding evil at bay. The *daevas*, therefore, define what the Zoroastrian faith is not – and in so doing, they also define what it *is*. Therefore the *Vendidad*, by using the rhetorical device of the *daevas* to symbolize opposition, brings context and meaning to the practices it outlines.

Enemies of the Yazatas: The *Daevas* in the Other *Nasks*

The *daevas* play no role in the *Visperad*, the third major *nask* of the *Avesta*. Being chiefly a series of hymns and praises designed to supplement worship and the *Yasna*, this book is concerned chiefly with honoring the supernatural forces of good, rather than opposing those of evil. The *Khorda Avesta*, the prayer book intended primarily for lay worshippers rather than priests (Rose 76), however, contains numerous depictions of *daevas*, and while much of this merely restates that which was previously established in the *Yasna* and *Vendidad*, several of the prayers and hymns serve to shine further light on the mythological context of the *daevas* and their interaction with the servants of Ahura Mazda.

The most obvious role which the *daevas* play in the various prayers of the *Khorda Avesta* is in the constant repetition of the declaration of faith first presented in the *Yasna* (*Yasna* 1.1). As this declaration explicitly requires the speaker to condemn the *daevas*, its continued prominence reinforces the rejection of these beings as a central element of the faith expected of the Zoroastrian, alongside accepting the authority of Zarathustra and following the laws of Ahura Mazda. Elsewhere in the text, they are chiefly given only cursory references as evil beings to be rejected by mortals or defeated by Ahura Mazda

and the yazatas, with occasional references to *daevas* worshippers in the *Afrinagan* (blessing) prayers, which go largely unelaborated upon. However, it is in the *Yashts* – the series of hymns dedicated to Ahura Mazda and the yazatas – that most closely see the nature and mythology of the *daevas* elaborated upon.

The *daevas* are first referenced in the *Ohrmazd Yasht*, the hymn to Ahura Mazda. When Zarathustra asks his god what the most effective weapon against evil is, he is told:

“Our Name, O Spitama Zarathushtra! who are the Amesha-Spentas, that is the strongest part of the Holy Word; that is the most victorious; that is the most glorious; that is the most effective; That is the most fiend-smiting; that is the best-healing; that destroyeth best the malice of Daevas and Men: that maketh the material world best come to the fulfillment of its wishes; that freeth the material World best from the anxieties of the heart.” (Ohrmazd Yasht 3-4)

This passage places the nature of the opposition of the *daevas* to Ahura Mazda in stark relief, for he is so antithetical to them that his very name – and the names of his chief subordinate divinities – can destroy them. And yet, it is also noteworthy that the destruction of *daevas* is not presented as an act of violence alone but also of healing, associated with the power that restores the world to its ideal state. This relates to some of the ideas presented in the *Vendidad* regarding the efficiency of prayers and rituals as weapons against evils, and is reinforced in the *Ardwahasht Yasht*, which depicts the *daevas* as fleeing from a properly performed prayer to Airyaman along with their affiliated concepts (including sickness, pride, wrath, snakes, wolves, and death itself). (Ardwahasht Yasht 7). The connection of the *daevas* to both harmful natural forces and human evils continues to be emphasized. The sixth *Yasht*, the Hymn to the Sun, continues this theme, depicting *daevas* as creatures of darkness who cannot abide the sun’s rays

(Hymn to the Sun 3-4), as does the “Zamyad Yasht”, which depicts them as fleeing from the very presence of Zarathustra as well as his prayers (Zamyad Yasht 80-81).

The “Hymn to the Waters” is the fifth *Yasht* and includes more detailed references to the mythology surrounding the divine beings of the Zoroastrian tradition. This hymn is chiefly addressed to Ardivi Sura Anahita, a yazata associated with the waters, and includes a number of accounts of mythical figures who had previously petitioned her for aid in their endeavors. Haoshyangha and Yima, two legendary kings, both sacrifice to this yazata for, among other conquest, the power to defeat *daevas* and she is said to have granted them this boon (Hymn to the Waters 6-7), but when the *daeva* Azi Dehaka himself petitions her for the power to destroy the human race, she refuses him (Hymn to the Waters 8), and instead answers the prayer of the hero Thraetaona, who seeks to destroy him (Hymn to the Waters 9). In addition to reinforcing the enmity of the *daevas* for the positive divinities (in this case, Anahita), the passage includes the interesting element of depicting Azi Dehaka, himself a *daeva*, as being willing to pray to a yazata for her blessing, perhaps a reflection of the gradually shifting role of this *daeva* in particular, who evolved over the course of retellings from a demonic dragon to a human tyrant. This account is repeated, though featuring different yazatas, in later *Yashts*, including Drvaspa in the “Gosh Yasht”, Vayu in the “Ram Yasht”, Chista in the Den Yasht, Ashi Vanghui in the “Ard Yasht”.

The eighty *Yasht* is the “Hymn to Tishtrya”, honoring the yazata associated with the star known to the West as Sirius, and it includes a depiction of a battle between this yazata and the *daeva* Apaosha, in which both take the shape of horses. The opening portion of the battle goes to the *daeva*, because Tishtrya has not been properly

worshipped and lacks strength, and as a result he is driven away. However, when Ahura Mazda himself performs a ritual to honor Tishtrya his strength is restored, and he faces Apaosha once more and defeats him (Hymn to Tishtrya 20-29). Because this passage is chiefly concerned with Tishtrya and his struggles, it provides little exploration of the character of his enemy, save that the named “Apaosha” means “drought”; however, it does establish that *daevas* can overcome good deities if those deities are not properly worshipped, therefore restating the key role of the human worshipper in the battle against evil. The key yazata Mithra, whose analogues appear in many Indo-European traditions (Malandra 55-56), is also depicted throughout the “Mihr Yasht”, which is dedicated to him, as a warrior against the *daevas*, though this Yasht does not include accounts of personal battles against individual *daevas*, focusing rather on the yazata’s power to defeat *daevas* in general. Sraosha, in the following Srosh Yasht, is portrayed as a similar warrior.

The “Zamyad Yasht” is also called the “Hymn to the Earth” and much of it is concerned with the histories of mythical kings and their conflicts with the *daevas*. The myth of Yima as a king who was given the power to defeat the *daevas* is restated (Zamyad Yasht 31-33), however it is later mythological elements which are most distinctive. A listing of chief *daevas* is provided, but it differs from that of the Vendidad; here they are said to be Akoman, Aeshma, Azi Dahaka, and Spityura, and are said to have been created by Angra Mainyu as a response to Ahura Mazda and the yazatas Vohu Manah, Asha Vahishta, and Atar, the personification of fire (Zamyad Yasht 46). The text then proceeds to describe the interactions of Atar and Azi Dehaka:

“Then forward came Atar, the son of Ahura Mazda, thinking thus in his heart: 'I want to seize that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized.'

But Azhi Dahaka, the three-mouthed, he of the evil law, rushed on his back, thinking of extinguishing it: 'Here give it up to me; O Atar, son of Ahura Mazda: if thou seizest that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized, I shall rush upon thee, so that thou mayest never more blaze on the earth made by Ahura and protect the world of the good principle.'

And Atar took back his hands, as the instinct of life prevailed, so much had Azhi affrighted him. Then Azhi, the three-mouthed, he of the evil law, rushed forward, thinking thus in his heart: 'I want to seize that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized.'

But Atar, the son of Ahura Mazda, advanced behind him, speaking in these words:

'There give it up to me, thou three-mouthed Azhi Dahaka. If thou seizest that Glory that cannot be forcibly seized, then I will enter thy hinder part, I will blaze up in thy jaws, so that thou mayest never more rush upon the earth made by Mazda and destroy the world of the good principle.'

Then Azhi took back his hands, as the instinct of life prevailed, so much had Atar affrighted him.” (Zamyad Yasht 47-50).

In the interplay between these beings, the prevailing nature of the power of the Yazatas is established; even if Azi Dahaka succeeds to swallowing Atar, still will the yazata of fire consume him from within. Too, the yazata's superior moral character is clearly established, for Atar will not allow his fear of Dahaka prevent him from defying the *daevas*, while Dahaka's fear of Atar ends the episode.

Ultimately, the role of the *daevas* in the *Yashts*, and the *Khordeh Avesta* in general, remains a fundamentally adversarial one, and the continuity of prayer and ritual as an effective weapon against them remains, but the *Yashts* in particular adds a more personal dimension to these beings by pitting them not against humans or impersonal rituals, but against their counterparts, the yazatas. Consequently, these texts provide illumination into the adversarial role of good and evil divine beings, the battles between *daevas* and yazatas, and the superior moral character of the latter and how it leads to victory. For the yazatas, strengthened by virtue, the proper worship of mortals, and Ahura

Mazda himself, are doubtlessly superior to the *daevas*, who though monstrous are also vaguely pathetic, fleeing from their enemies and the power of the Good Religion. Thus is the central idea of the *daevas*' presence reinforced – good and evil may be at war in the universe, and evil may triumph for a time, but in the end, the triumph of Ahura Mazda and his yazatas, assisted by the followers of the Good Religion, is inevitable, and when the world is healed of the *daevas* and their evil, then will it be made the best that it can possibly be.

Conclusion

Though the role of the *daevas* throughout the later Avestan texts is a varied one, it remains distinct from their portrayal in the *Gathas*. There, as much attention is paid to the practices of their worshippers as to the *daevas* themselves, and both are seen as a concern directly afflicting the lives of human beings within the physical world. In the later texts, however, the role of the *daevas*' worshippers diminishes, while that of the evil beings themselves is embellished. No longer a faceless, undifferentiated mass, the *daevas* have developed their own distinct personalities, of whom the chief are Aeshma, Akoman, and Azi Dahaka, and their roles as embodiments of different kinds of evil, subordinate to the ultimate evil, Angra Mainyu, who is said to be the “*daeva of daevas*” (a title which echoes that of the Persian King of Kings). Too, a more detailed mythology has developed around them, detailing their interactions with humans, yazatas, and sometimes each other, as well as providing outlines for the rituals by which humans can contest them. This shift also, however, presents them as being somewhat more removed from the world than they were in earlier accounts; rather than doers of direct violence on their own account, they have come to embody all the harmful forces of the universe. This is reflective, perhaps, of

a time in which the Zoroastrian faith no longer had to contend with direct opposition from *daevas* worshippers, but retained the key role of the *daevas* as the opposition, thereby leading to them taking a place not as physical opposition, but metaphysical. As the role of Zoroastrianism and its place in the world developed, therefore, its perception of its spiritual enemies developed as well.

IV. Codifying the Demonic: Portrayal of *Daevas* in Post-Avestan Literature

Though the *Avesta* represents the core Zoroastrian canon, it is not the only authoritative set of texts which the Zoroastrian faith has produced. Out of the classical post-Avestan sources, composed primarily in Pahlavi during the latter half of the first millennium CE in an effort to preserve the Zoroastrian tradition against Islamic conquest and proselytization, the most prominent are the *Denkard*, the *Bundahisn*, and the *Menog-i-Khrad* – a compendium of knowledge, a cosmological text, and a wisdom text, respectively. All of them contain further elaboration on the *daevas* (often referred to as *divs*, *devs*, *dews*, or simply demons in these non-Avestan language sources), and elaborate both on their role as distinct beings within the cosmology and use them to metaphorically stand for human evil. Also worthy of note is a curious set of earlier inscriptions from the reign of the Achaemenid king Xerxes, which places the *daevas* once again in a direct, worldly context.

The *Daeva*-Inscription of Xerxes

This inscription, uncovered at Persepolis by a University of Chicago expedition (Kent 292), identifies itself directly as a proclamation of Xerxes, son of Darius I, King of Kings and ruler of the Achaemenid Empire. Written in Old Persian, it concerns itself primarily with the conquests of Xerxes, for which the king thanks Ahura Mazda, but it also contains reference to an uprising within the empire which he put down, and of that uprising states “And within these lands was (a place) where formerly the *daivas* were

worshipped. Afterwards, by the favor of Ahura Mazda I destroyed that establishment of the daivas and proclaimed “The daivas shalt thou not worship!” Where formerly the daivas were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahura Mazda...” (Kent 297) The Old Persian word *daiva* is a cognate of the Avestan *daeua*.

Does this inscription, then, indicate that the ancient religion of the *daevas* had survived into the Achaemenid era (the inscription has been roughly dated to between 486 and 480 BCE), if even a powerful Zoroastrian (or at least Mazda-worshipping) monarch like Xerxes had to contend with them? Beyond the inscription itself, evidence for the events it describes is scanty, but it has been theorized that, rather than a conflict with an old religion resurgent, the events described referred either to the destruction of the temple of Bel-Marduk in Babylon, or to an uprising of Median Magi (Kent 305). Mary Boyce, alternatively, proposed that this was indeed a struggle against worshippers of the same ancient gods whose religion was supplanted by Zarathustra’s teachings (Boyce 145). In any event, the existence of such an inscription indicates that the concept of *daeua*-worshippers as enemies of the Zoroastrian faith and of the stability of the Persian Empire still held sufficient influence under the Achaemenids for Xerxes himself to invoke it to reinforce the righteousness of his own actions. The destruction of the place of *daeua*-worship is linked with the king’s own worship of Ahura Mazda, lending an air of religious significance to the entire proceedings.

Demons in the Rhetorical: *Daevas* in the *Denkard*

The *Denkard*, or “Acts of Religion”, is the longest of the Pahlavi Zoroastrian texts, and one of the most complete sources for medieval Zoroastrian lore, wisdom, and

philosophy. It was composed across the ninth century by a series of sages; the earlier sections are attributed to Adurfarnbag Farrokhzadan and later additions to his descendant, Adurbad Emedan, and the work overall was likely intended to help preserve the tradition at a time when much of the Avestan literature had been lost. Drawing chiefly on Avestan sources, and either expanding on them or, in the case of the later books, providing a summary of lost texts, it provides a key corpus of knowledge on a variety of topics, though it is not itself considered scripture. (Boyce 155) Though not chiefly concerned with *daevas* or evil forces, they frequently appear in it, and reflect an interpretation of evil that, though it derives from the Avesta, also contains some distinct elements.

Because the *Denkard* draws primarily on Avestan texts, many of its ideas about the *daevas* parallel those of the earlier sources closely, though in many cases with further elaboration. The *daevas* are presented in opposition to the *yazatas*, and are associated with bad religion, it is possible for the dead souls of those who committed certain evil acts including apostasy and sexual immorality to join them as *daevas* themselves, (Den. Bk. 3 Ch.26, 95), and they are depicted as the chief instigators of human evil. (Den 3.27) Later, they are also said to oppose all those who would aid other human beings. (Den 3. 47) They are described as coming into the world to deceive mortals and place them under their dominion, at which point they will become incapable of doing good; however, the same passage emphasizes that they are opposed by *yazatas* who come into the world in order to help humans resist the teachings of evil (Den 3. 66). They are described in unflattering terms which draw comparisons to unclean or violent animals, including reptiles (Den. 3.82) and wolves (3.95), and are also associated with the two chief vices, animosity and miserliness. (Den 3.141) Ultimately, their corruption is said to be so great

that, in the end, they – along with those humans who have become so evil as to have joined them, such as the legendary Turanian king and sorcerer Afrasiab – will be the only beings to never be redeemed from hell. (Den 3.110)

Several of the specific *daevas* who appeared in the Avesta, particularly the *Vendidad* and *Yashts*, remain important in the *Denkard*. A list of the greatest of these beings is provided in the fifth book, many of their names variations of familiar *daevas* from the *Vendidad* - Akoman, Andar, Soro, Naogas, Tarich, Zarich, Akhdehash, Az, Hesham. (Den. 5.8.2) Among these, Akoman is described as the most prominent, and it is said that he dwells within human minds and inspires wrath and evil in those he dominates (Den 3.33). Together with Hesham (Aeshma) who blunts sense as he himself blunts reason, he can take possession of a man and drive him to the *daevas*' service. (Den 3.116) Akoman is later identified by name as the root cause of evil intentions (Den 3.255), and other afflictions including "illness, mortality, infamy, putrefaction, evil odors, and mortification" are also attributed to him (Den. 3.263). He is said to do battle with his opposite, the Amesha Spenta Vohuman, for control over human perceptions (Den 3.266), and while the human body is a natural abode for the good spirit (Den. 5.10.3) it is later established that no sooner does Vohuman abandon a body than Akoman takes up residence within it and twists it to evil purposes. (Den. 6.87) Azi Dahaka also remains prominent in the *Denkard*, but both his name and nature have shifted radically. Referred to as Zohak, he is no longer a three-headed serpent but a tyrant with serpent-like features, and his legendary thousand-year reign, during which he instituted worship of the *daevas* and turned the people against the good king Jamshid (Den. 3.288) is used as the archetype for misrule. (Den. 3.273) As befitting the theme of the *daevas* as representing

external foes of the Zoroastrians, Zohak is said to be “of the Hebrew religion”, though as described in the text, this appears to consist of direct *daevas*-worship. Though he was imprisoned by the hero Faridun, the *Denkard* notes that Zohak still lives and will be set free once again at the end of time; then, he shall be defeated for good, followed thereafter by the defeat of Ahriman and all evil forces. (Den. 7.10.10)

The idea of worshippers of the *daevas* as being a term for those whose religion sets them against the Zoroastrian faith is also present; though alive, they are said to be as spiritually impure as corpses (making the connection again between *daevas* and death) (Den.). Too, it is established that worshipping the *daevas* is as much a function of one’s actions and attitudes as of faith, for any king who commits violence against his subjects is said to be their servant (Den. 3.48), and it is said that a *daevas* worshipping ruler does more harm to the world than any other evil. Here again the connection between the *daevas* and violence is drawn, and this particular instance also represents a corruption of the natural order as ordained by Ahura Mazda, for elsewhere in the *Denkard* just kingship is extolled as one of the highest and most admirable ideals in the world. The religion of the *daevas* is later discussed at some length, and condemned as being rotten to its core, owing to its roots stemming from the *daevas* and ultimately Ahriman (Angra Mainyu) himself. (Den. 3.126) On those occasions when it is depicted as a discrete force, the *daevas* religion is closely linked with the reign and teachings of Zohak (Azi Dehaka), and is linked with the Hebrew religion.

The *Denkard* is also notable for containing in its seventh book a far more detailed account of the life and ministry of Zarathustra than appears in any of the *nasks* of the Avesta. Though the Iran of the time is depicted as following the teachings of the *daevas*

religion and its priests, the karaps (karpans), little detail is given as to the specific practices of either the worshippers or the beings they revered. Rather, the chief role of the *daevas* in this account lies in their unrelenting opposition to Zarathustra, which commonly takes the form of attempted violence against him, as well as one instance of a *daeva*, upon taking the form of a beautiful woman, attempting to seduce him. (Den 7.4.54). It is also said that:

“By the Ahunwar, which the righteous Zartosht chanted aloud to them, all the demons are seized and buried in the earth, where the complete shattering of their bodies is manifest.' 46. So that, after the shattering of their bodies, it became evident to those in the world that they were not able to do mischief in the bodily form of a demon, and they have been declared of the nature of sacred beings to mankind, but mankind fully understood that they are not sacred beings, but demons.” (Den 7.4.45-46)

Here we see that, by the proper performance of ritual, Zartosht (Zarathustra) was able to not only break the physical power of the *daevas*, but also cause the people to perceive them for what they truly were – not gods, but incarnations of evil. The passage, therefore, becomes a microcosm for the triumph of Zarathustra’s Mazdean religion over the old religion of the *daevas*.

Ultimately, the *Denkard*’s use of the *daevas* can be said to fall into three categories; rhetorical, philosophical, and mythological. The first deals chiefly with the idea of “worshippers of the *daevas*” as a repeated shorthand for those who stand outside the Zoroastrian faith and oppose it. The second deals primarily with the role of the *daevas* in relationship to human evil, particularly in how they both seek it out and instill it. Here we see most clearly the roles of the *Denkard*’s two most prominent *daevas*, for each embodies a different form of human evil – Akoman, evil thought, is a tempter figure who enters those who have evil intentions and twists them into his tools, while Zohak

embodies the principal of tyrannical rule, one of the worst offenses against Ahura Mazda. Finally, mythologically the *daevas* continue in their role as enemies of Ahura Mazda and the Zoroastrian religion, whether they are attempting to murder Zarathustra or opposing the yazatas on a cosmic level. The common thread between all three of these categories lies in the role of opposition, as in the Avesta, for the *daevas* are and remain the adversaries of the Zoroastrian universe and the servants of the great adversary, Ahriman.

Children of Ahriman: *Daevas* in the *Bundahishn*

The *Bundahishn* (“creation”) is another of the great Pahlavi Zoroastrian works, which dates from roughly the same period and is attributed to Farnbag Ashavahisht; it retells and expands on material from the *Vendidad* and *Zand* (traditional commentary on the Avesta) concerning the creation and nature of the universe and the eternal conflict between Ahura Mazda and Ahriman. It exists in two forms, a longer, but fragmented, Iranian version and a shorter, more complete Indian one. (Boyce 136) The *Daevas* again are not a chief concern of this text as a whole, but certain sections describe the mythology surrounding them, their origins, and their relationship to the Evil Principle in details unparalleled in other classical Zoroastrian sources. It also contains a brief recounting of myths presented in earlier sources, including the clash of the *yazata* Tishtriya and the *daeva* Apaosha, though its chief concern remains solidly with creation and cosmology.

The *Bundahishn* begins with a description of Ahura Mazda (Pahlavi “Ohrmazd”) and Ahriman as they existed before the creation of the material world; eternal and separate, the former in an abode of light and beauty, the other in an endless abyss of darkness. Ahura Mazda, who was omniscient, was aware of his adversary, but Ahriman,

who was profoundly ignorant, was not; upon discovering the existence of Ahura Mazda, he attacked. Mazda agreed to bring into being a world where their powers might be mixed so that they could do battle, knowing thereby that Ahriman could be defeated, and used the Ahunwar mantra to render his adversary quiescent while he brought forth the world and its inhabitants, and first he created the Amesha Spentas. Ahriman then responded by bringing forth their counterparts: “From the dark world of Ahriman were Akoman and Andar, and then Sovar, and then Nakahed, and then Tairev and Zairik.” (Bund 1.27) Thus several ideas which were implicit in the earlier texts are made explicit in the *Bundahishn*; the six chief *daevas* not only oppose the six Amesha Spentas, but this is the entire purpose of their creation; and they are explicitly the creations of Ahriman. The origins of the *daevas* as told in the *Bundahishn* makes it plain that they are the spawn of evil and its agents, and because the purpose of the world is to be a battleground against evil, they are among its greatest adversaries. Indeed, when Ahura Mazda creates the first humans, his commands to them are these: “perform devotedly the duty of the law, think good thoughts, speak good words, do good deeds, and worship no demons!” (Bund. 15.6)

During this time of creation, however, Ahriman himself remained unresponsive, and the third chapter of the *Bundahishn* opens with his *daevas* attempting to revive him, shouting: ‘Rise up, thou father of us! for we will cause a conflict in the world, the distress and injury from which will become those of Ohrmazd and the archangels.’ (Bun 3.1)

This brief passages illustrates that the *daevas* retain their association with violence that has been one of their defining traits across the history of Zoroastrian writings, and also shows that they regard Ahriman, the creator of evil, as their father. Though they are then said to recount their evil deeds to him, it is only Jeh, a female *daevas* who is not among

the chief six, who manages to reach his attention. When Ahriman is roused, he kisses Jeh on the forehead, thereby through her inflicting menstruation upon women. (Bund. 3.3-8) He then leads his *daevas* in their first assault upon the newly-created world.

Later, the *Bundahishn* provides an exhaustive list of *daevas* and their specific attributes, linking each directly to a different form of evil, corruption, or destruction. The roles of the six chief *daevas* are these:

“The business of Akoman is this, that he gave vile thoughts and discord to the creatures. 8. The business of the demon Andar is this, that he constrains the thoughts of the creatures from deeds of virtue, just like a leader who has well-constrained (*sardar-i khup afsardo*); and he casts this into the thoughts of men, that it is not necessary to have the sacred shirt [*sudre*] and thread-girdle [*kusti*]. 9. The business of the demon Savar, that is a leader of the demons, is this, that is, misgovernment, oppressive anarchy, and drunkenness. 10. The business of the demon Naikiyas is this, that he gives discontent to the creatures; as it says, that should this one give anything to those men whose opinion (*dad*) is this, that it is not necessary to have the sacred shirt and thread-girdle, then Andar, Savar, and Naikiyas are propitiated by him. 11. The demon Taprev is he who mingles poison with plants and creatures, as it says thus: 'Taprev the frustrater, and Zairich the maker of poison.' 12. All those six, it is said, are arch-fiends of the demons; the rest are cooperating and confederate with them. 13. This, too, it says, that] should one give [anything to] a man who says [that it is proper to have one boot], and in his law walking with one boot [is established, then] the fiend Taprev is propitiated [by him].” (Bund 28.7-13)

These roles place them in direct opposition to their respective counterparts among the Amesha Spentas. The account continues, providing dozens of *daevas* and the evils for which each is responsible, which usually reflect chaotic and destructive tendencies and an opposition to virtue; Eshm who destroys the creatures of the earth, Az who causes greed, Akatash who causes perversion, and Apaosh who contests with the *yazatas* for control of the rains being among the most prominent of these. Only one among them is identified as being the god of another religion; But, who is described as he worshipped by the Hindus, but if this speaks to a memory of the shared Indo-Iranian origins of the Hindu and

Zoroastrian traditions and the relationship of the Hindu devas and Zoroastrian *daevas*, But is not described in sufficient detail to say, for he is given no distinct qualities beyond being an idol. Too it is established that *daevas* not only cause evil but are caused by it, and that more *daevas* will be produced when evil is committed by living creatures. (Bund 28.43)

However, the ultimate message of the Zoroastrian tradition remains an optimistic one, and the *Bundahishn* reflects this. In the end, it says, the world will be made anew, and when that happens, Ahriman will be captured by Ahura Mazda and each *daevas* will be seized by his or her corresponding Amesha Spenta, and they will be hurled back into the abyss from which they came and sealed away from the world with molten metal, and “the world is immortal forever and everlasting.” (Bund. 30. 29-33) Thus the world may be a battleground against evil, and the *daevas* in their many and varied forms the chief agents of that evil, but the forces of good and of those mortals who choose rightly will ultimately have the power to prevail over them.

The Demon in the Human Condition: The *Daevas* in the *Menog-i-Khrad*

The *Menog-i-khrad* is the third of the great Pahlavi texts. Composed by an unknown author in roughly the sixth century CE and aimed at the laity, it presents itself as a conversation between a Zoroastrian sage and the embodied spirit of wisdom and is primarily concerned with explaining Zoroastrian wisdom and philosophy in a popularly accessible manner (Boyce 136-137). Being less concerned with mythology than the *Bundahishn*, it deals with the *daevas* when they appear less as discrete beings and more in the abstract philosophical sense, as representations of human capacity for evil.

This more abstract portrayal of the *daevas* becomes obvious from the earliest chapters of the *Menog-i-khrad*, as the spirit of wisdom discusses the need to hold to virtues in order to avoid the traps of the demons of various vices (Men 2. 14,40); as embodiments of human corruption, these beings will have no hold on the righteous man. Shortly thereafter, a number of *daevas*, including Eshm, are depicted as attacking a soul travelling across the Chinwad bridge which leads to the afterlife, but while they may seize a wicked soul, they have no power to deter a righteous one from entering heaven. (Men 2. 110-195) Later, they are depicted as mocking and punishing the souls of the wicked in hell. (Men 7.23-26) The *daevas* are also associated with the deeds of nations as well as individuals; in the sixth chapter they are said to work on behalf of an unhappy land, which is also a land that will build temples to them. (Men 6.6-7) Demon-worship is also listed among an accounting of the most heinous sins. (Men 36.19)

The *Menog-i-khrad* does, however, contain some mythology, though that mythology is given an explicitly moralistic message. In a brief passage, it restates the creation story found in the *Bundahishn*, including the opposition of the *daevas* and Amesha Spentas, and also contains an account of the reign of Zohak (Azi Dehaka). However, this version of the story is presented to make a specific point, that Ahura Mazda controls destiny and would not have allowed things to come to pass which did not serve good, for though Zohak was a tyrant, had he not reigned, Eshm would have reigned in his place, and he would have destroyed the world. (Men 27.34-37) An account is also provided of the temptation of Zarathustra by Ahriman, in which the evil spirit promises the same domination of the world which he gave to Zohak to the prophet if he will serve him, but which Zarathustra shows wisdom and rejects. (Men 57.22-29)

The *Menog-i-Khrad* ultimately presents a distinct perspective on the *daevas* because, though it acknowledges them as cosmic beings, it chiefly presents them through their interactions with humans, rather than in contest with *yazatas*. Here the *daevas* reflect universal evil less than they do the temptation to do evil with which all humans are faced, or else, as in the portrayal of Zohak, as parables which show the triumph of the design and will of Ahura Mazda. However, while the *daevas* are presented as embodying evil impulses with which all people must wrestle, they are also beings which can be overcome, for as the example of Zarathustra shows, one who is wise cannot be deceived by evil forces, and one who does good deeds in life will be able to pass freely over the bridge in the afterlife, safe from the *daevas*, and enter into paradise.

Conclusion

The later Zoroastrian texts, including the *Daeva*-Inscription of Xerxes and the Pahlavi writings, represent a wide array of different ideas and opinions, all deriving from the same underlying traditions but expressing them in different ways. This is illustrated strikingly in their treatment of the *daevas*, for the adversarial beings means very different things to the writers of these distinct texts. To Xerxes, the *daevas* were the gods of those who opposed his rule and the rise of the Achaemenid Empire; to the author of the *Bundahishn*, they are the spawn of Ahriman and enemies of Ahura Mazda and his Amesha Spentas; to the author of the *Menog-i-khrad*, they represent a darkness within the soul that all people must privately wrestle with. In the *Denkard*, elements of all three depictions – *daevas* as foreign gods, *daevas* as literal demons, and *daevas* as metaphors for evil deeds – may be found. Ultimately, these texts display both a codification of ideas about the *daevas* in the development of a strong, coherent mythology surrounding them,

while at the same time striking distinctions in terms of how and why they are invoked. Into the Achaemenid and Sassanid eras in which these texts were produced, the *daevas* remained the enemies of the Zoroastrian faith as they had been in the time of Zarathustra himself, but increasingly these enemies came to be fitted to better suit their usage within the texts and the needs of the Zoroastrian community.

V. Legacy of the Old Gods: The Influence of the *Daevas* in Later Religion and Culture

Though the specifics of their roles are subject to change, throughout both Avestan and Pahlavi texts, the *daevas* maintain their role as the most visible adversaries of the Zoroastrian religion and its followers. This adversarial role would have a lasting impact beyond the ancient texts; it would influence the culture of central Asia in many ways. Evidence of this influence can be seen in the great epic of Iran, the *Shahnameh*, as well as in the presence of monstrous creatures in later folklore whose name, *div*, is a derivative of the Avestan *daeva*. Ultimately, even within Zoroastrian religious sources, the role of the *daevas* continues into modern sources, though often reevaluated in the context of changing social pressures.

Tyrants and Demons: The *Daevas* in the *Shahnameh*

Considered to be the national epic of Iran, the *Shahnameh* (Book of Kings) was composed by the poet Ferdowsi from approximately 977-1010 CE in an attempt to preserve Iranian language and culture during a time of Arabic dominance. (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, Ferdowsi, life) Drawing on pre-existing folklore, the epic presents a mythologized account of Iran's history from the reign of the legendary first king, Kayumars, until the collapse of the Sassanid dynasty and the Arab conquest. Though not a religious text in the same sense as the Avesta, or even the *Denkard* or *Bundahishn*, it is

nonetheless rich in Zoroastrian heritage and values, and presents several depictions of demons (“divs”) which draw on the older traditions of the *daevas*.

The first demon to appear in the *Shahnameh* does so in its first episode, chronicling the reign of Kayumars. Khazarun is depicted as the son of Ahriman and takes the form of a great black wolf; he is tasked by his father with murdering Siamak, the son of Kayumars. Though Siamak is killed, he is ultimately avenged by his own son, Hushang. (Ferdowsi 9-13) Though Khazarun’s role is brief, it nonetheless reflects several themes associated with the *daevas* from earlier sources, including his opposition to the rule of goodness (in the form of Kayumars), his kinship to the ultimate force of evil, and his association with savagery and violence.

A more elaborate episode appears shortly thereafter, concerning Zahhak, the later form of the Avesta’s Azi Dehaka (Ferdowsi 24-52). Here, as in the *Denkard*, Zahhak is depicted not as a demon, but as a tyrant of human origin, an Arab prince manipulated by Ahriman into murdering his father and later usurping the throne of Iran. His origins as the three-headed serpent remain alluded to, however, for Ahriman caused a pair of snakes to sprout from Zahhak’s shoulders, which could only be satiated by being fed the brains of young men. Thereafter follows the account of the tyrant’s thousand-year reign and his eventual defeat by the hero Feraydun, after which he is imprisoned beneath Mount Damavand, as the *Denkard* also attests. Feraydun is explicitly stated to be aided by the *yazata* Soroush (Sraosha), even as Zahhak is granted his power by Ahriman, thereby explicitly framing the story as a conflict of good against evil, even if its central antagonist is a man, albeit a monstrous man, rather than the terrible serpent-demon of the oldest sources. The story of Zahhak as presented in the *Shahnameh* is thus more detailed than

accounts in older sources, but carries through many of the same ideas as were present in the Pahlavi texts, though this Zahhak is never stated to be released at the end of the world, and rather than being Hebrew, he is explicitly an Arab (though his capital is said to be Jerusalem, perhaps in reference to the *Denkard's* account). That the archetypal tyrant shares his nationality with the same conquerors who had subjugated the Iran of Ferdowsi's time is striking, and the political subtext is reinforced at the end of the chapter, which calls out for a new Feraydun to come to the rescue of an embattled world.

Another significant episode of the *Shahnameh* concerning demons comes when Kay Kavous – then king of Iran – invades Mazandaran, a land to the north which is inhabited by demons. Though “Mazanya *Daevas*” or “demons of Mazandaran” are mentioned at several points in the *Avesta* and *Denkard*, it is here that they take on their most concrete form, sending their champion, the White Demon or Div-e-Sapid¹², to entrap Kavous's armies. The king is ultimately rescued by his own champion, the great hero Rostem, who defeats and slays the White Demon and forces the demons of Mazandaran to bend their knees to Iran. Though not explicitly linked to Ahriman, the White Demon nonetheless represents many of the traits associated with *daevas*; he is associated with violence, both personally (he is a mighty warrior) and in terms of the magic he wields (he is said to have controlled the weather and turned great storms against Kay Kavous and his armies). Also like some depictions of *daevas* in the Avestan and Pahlavi texts, and Zahhak from the *Shahnameh*, the Div-e-Sapid is associated with foreign enemies of Iran, in this case the Mazandarans, who have been theorized to have been a people who dwelled near the Caspian Sea and warred with Persia (Encyclopedia

¹² It has been theorized that the White Demon was based on a deity worshipped by the Mazandarans, though there is no concrete information supporting this interpretation. (Encyclopedia Iranica, “Daiva”)

Iranica, “Div”). Thus, what may have begun as a historical war became through the lens of mythology, a struggle against a personified demon in the tradition of more ancient writings. This is reinforced by the fact that Ferdowsi at times uses the word “div” to refer to particularly evil humans, not only literal demons.

Broadly speaking, the *Shahnameh* depicts divs in a variety of ways, often harkening back to the earlier Avestan traditions. They are monstrous and violent creatures, and extend opposition to all aspects of their being, to the point of always doing the opposite of what is asked of them. Though not gods, they are possessed of supernatural powers, including the magical abilities by which the White Demon overcame Kay Kavous’s armies. However, they are also depicted as inferior to humans, being willing to serve any mortal who defeats them. The great king Jamshid, who also appears in the Avesta, is said to have ruled over both humans and divs, and the tyrant Zahhak as well is said to have had divs in his service, though they were driven from his palace by Feraydun. Too, the *Shahnameh* provides a list of ten arch-demons which resembles that of the *Avesta* and *Denkard*: *āz* (greed), *nīāz* (need), *kòāšm* (wrath), *rašk* (envy), *nang* (dishonor), *kīn* (vengeance), *nammām* (tell-tale), *do-rūy* (two-faced), *nāpāk-dīn* (heretic), and a nameless demon of ungratefulness (*Shahnameh* Moscow VIII, 195-196). Several of these demons- Az, Koashm, and Nang – are direct counterparts to those named in the earlier texts, though others are unique. Like the demons of the *Bundahishn*, however, each is clearly associated with a particular vice or sin.

Ogres of Central Asia: *Divs* in Later Folklore

The role of the *divs* as demonic monsters carries through other Central Asian folklore in a similar manner. They remain hostile, though they may be summoned and compelled by magic to aid heroes. Recalling the three-headed Azi Dehaka, they may be multi-headed, though some accounts depict them as having only a head and no body. Male *divs* are traditionally depicted as being lustful towards human women, whom they are prone to abducting, though they may seduce them into willing marriage as well. They are associated with madness; the Persian word for insanity, *divanagi*, derives from *div*. Folk heroes are often depicted as defeating them in battle, usually killing them, or possibly forcing them into servitude. (Encyclopedia Iranica, “Div”)

This wide variety of depictions indicates a significant shift as the demons derived from the traditions regarding the ancient *daevas* became detached from the purely Zoroastrian context and entered into the broader realm of folklore. No longer embodiments of specific forms of evil, instead they become a much broader category of magical monsters, presenting a wide range of potential opponents for legendary heroes. Elements of their Zoroastrian origins remain; *divs* are said to flee from dogs, which are sacred animals in the Avesta, and their magical powers recall their ultimate origins as divine figures. Nonetheless, even shorn of their religious context, they retain their oppositional role, and many myths and folktales are concerned with heroes who must overcome *divs* in battle, the tale of Rostem and the White Demon recorded in the *Shahnameh* and elsewhere being the most famous of these.

Depersonalizing the Demonic: The *Daevas* in Contemporary

Zoroastrianism

The Zoroastrian faith has endured for millennia, but in the nineteenth century it faced great challenges from British missionaries, who attempted to convert the Zoroastrian Parsis of India to Christianity. Most troubling to many pious Zoroastrians were the accusations of that their religion was not truly monotheistic, for though it worshipped only Ahura Mazda and those lesser divinities who were Mazda's creations and emissaries, it incorporated a view of demonic forces which existed separate from Ahura Mazda's dominion. To the missionaries, this was unacceptable in a monotheistic tradition, for they saw it as taking away from a creator god's unique position in the cosmos. (Rose, *Zoroastrianism* 205) Though many Zoroastrians, in response to these accusations, held more strongly to traditional positions, others sought reform in order to make their faith more prestigious and dignified to the eyes of outsiders, and the treatment of evil forces was a necessary issue for such reformers to address.

Temuhrasp Rustamji Sethna was such a reformer; the translator of various Avestan texts (including the *Gathas*, *Vendidad*, and *Khordeh Avesta*), he sought to emphasize the monotheistic elements and personal spirituality of the Zoroastrian religion. In his introduction to his translation of the *Vendidad*, Sethna indicates that he was motivated to do so on account of his belief that previous translators had failed to accurately represent Zarathustra's teachings, particularly concerning the nature of evil and the rituals effective against it. (Sethna *Vendidad* ii) Most clearly, this is obvious in Sethna's reluctance to personify the forces of evil; Angra Mainyu is removed as a distinct

actor from the creation story presented at the beginning of the text, and his role as the opponent of Ahura Mazda is instead assigned to humanity. (Sethna 1-4) The *daevas* too are removed as discrete entities from this translation; the word *daevas* is commonly rendered as “evil” and individual *daevas* are simply depicted by their corresponding vice or sin. The title of the text is therefore translated as “the law to turn away from evil”. Thus, while Sethna maintains the traditional Zoroastrian emphasis on the struggle between good and evil and the effectiveness of proper religious practice against the latter, the nature of the struggle is cast in a different light; rather than being a battle against external demonic forces, Sethna casts it as a conflict within the human spirit between good and bad natures. His interpretation of the traditional confession of faith, in this vein, also makes no explicit reference to *daevas*; the speaker instead confesses themselves as being “opposed to evil”. In his work *The Teachings of Zarathustra*, Sethna makes this depiction of the *daevas* explicit when he defines the term: “The Avesta word *Daeva* meaning evil to be abhorred is not to be confused with the Sanskrit word *Deva*... the word *Daeva* as time passed was applied to all diseases, all immoral qualities, and all qualities inimical to the progress of a nation...” (Sethna ToZ 134)

Sethna’s depiction of the *Daevas* represents a broader trend away from personified evil forces in contemporary Zoroastrian thought, for Ahriman as well has become represented more commonly as a philosophical abstraction rather than a literal being, and therefore more removed from theology and practice. A Parsi catechism from the early twentieth century, for example, makes no direct mention of him or his servants. However, the importance of the struggle with evil as a concept remained central to the later Zoroastrian texts, including Sethna’s and the reformer Dastur (High Priest) Dhalla.

Therefore, in being stripped of their personified role as literal external beings, the *daevas* were fully placed into the allegorical and rhetorical role in which they had been used in the *Menog-i-Khrad* and sections of the *Denkard* – not as literal doers of evil deeds in themselves, but as representations of the potential for evil that exists- and must be fought – in all people.

Conclusion

The depiction of the *daevas* in later works, whether religious or folkloric, reflect a tremendous amount of variety. The *Shahnameh* and other legendary sources depict *divs* as strikingly literal beings, whether as mighty demonic warriors or vicious magical beasts, and in the case of Zahhak, a being who originated as a demonic serpent-monster becomes an all-too-human tyrant. Contemporary Zoroastrian depictions, however, shy away from literal incarnations of evil, instead focusing on the capacity for evil within humans and how that capacity may be fought. Ultimately, these many and varied depictions collectively represent an evolving demonology that changes to fit the needs of the people who interact with it. Whether as literal monsters to be faced by legendary heroes like Rostem or the philosophical abstractions of evil with which T. R. Sethna was concerned, the *daevas* of ancient texts may take on new forms, but the principals of opposition and evil which they had come to embody remain strong across Central Asian culture and the Zoroastrian faith.

VI. What do the *Daevas* Mean to Zoroastrianism?

Across the myriad Zoroastrian texts, the *daevas* appear in many and varied forms – false gods, spawn of the Evil Spirit, opposites of positive divinities, and folktale demons. Always presented as the opponents of the Good Religion, nonetheless there is a great deal of diversity among their depictions. Ultimately, therefore, can the *daevas* even be said to represent a unified concept at all, or are they merely the faces placed upon a constantly changing perception of evil? Ultimately, there are a number of distinct ideas which are articulated across the various portrayals of the ancient gods and their later descendants.

The *Daevas* as Impurity

The book of the Avesta most directly concerned with the *daevas* is the *Vendidad*, as its very name attests. It is less concerned with mythology surrounding evil forces, however (though some of this is indeed present) as it is with providing instructions for how they may be fought and defeated. This is not a literal battle – though the *Yashts* provide accounts of the direct struggles between *daevas* and *yazatas*, most notably the duel between Tishtrya and Apaosha, this is not the arena in which humans must contend with them. Rather, the battle is framed in terms of the proper observance of religious

rites, particularly in the form of the Nasu, the personification of pollution, and the numerous purity rituals which must be observed to hold it at bay.

The Zoroastrian religion is strongly concerned with pollution and purity, a concern which is illustrated most strikingly in the form of its primary funerary rite. Dead bodies are profoundly unclean, being afflicted by the Nasu almost immediately after death, and so therefore should not be buried or burned, which might taint the purity of earth or fire, both of which are sacred. Instead, the body is ritually purified and then placed atop a structure in the wilderness which is traditionally referred to as a *dakhma* (in English, commonly termed a “Tower of Silence”) and left exposed to the elements until it has been reduced to bone by scavengers and natural conditions. Only then may the remains be buried. (Vendidad 8) This ritual is far from the only example of its kind discussed in the *Vendidad*, but it is one of the most striking and presents a powerful depiction of the importance of proper purity in the Zoroastrian tradition and the lengths to which its adherents can be expected to go to ensure correct observance. As the *Vendidad* itself states, “purity is for man, next to life, the greatest good”. (Vendidad 5.5.21)

Why would purity be such a concern for a text that concerns itself primarily with defeating evil forces such as the *daevas*? The answer may present itself in terms of the way in which the *daevas*, consistently, are presented as embodiments of violent and chaotic forces. They are associated with the Evil Spirit and the Lie, in opposition to *asha*, the proper moral order of the universe. In her book *Purity and Danger*, Mary Douglas discusses the role of ordered structures as being necessary for concepts of pollution to exist. “Uncleanness or dirt is that which must not be included if a pattern is to be maintained, To recognize this is the first step of insight into pollution.” (Douglas, 60) The

daevas, the gods Zarathustra rejected and those who followed him must also reject, who later traditions established as the offspring of the Adversary and who came with him to attack Ahura Mazda's good creations, are the ultimate example of "that which must not be included." In bringing chaos and the power of the Lie, they disrupt the *asha* upon which the creation of Ahura Mazda depends. It is, therefore, not at all surprising that when pollution occurs and the natural order begins to break down, the *daevas* are there. Their very nature is of pollution.

West's work also focuses on the particular nature of spiritual power as vested in society's structures, and in this way the rituals of the *Vendidad* also clearly represent a Zoroastrian understanding of power. On a fundamental level, they are grounded in ethical dualism. Zarathustra the prophet, his god Ahura Mazda, and the priests who will perform the rituals are linked together as representing the forces of good in the world; in contrast Angra Mainyu, the *daevas*, and the Nasu represent destructive powers. The rituals of the *Vendidad* are based on the conflict between these forces, drawing on a heritage tracing back to the time when the historical Zarathustra clashed with the actual *daevic* worshippers. Thus the ritual itself becomes a battleground pitting good against evil, and by properly cleansing impurity, from a corpse, a location, or a living person, the *daevas* and the evil powers they represent may be vanquished¹³. Therefore, the purity rituals represent a restatement of what is, in many ways, the fundamental thesis of the Zoroastrian tradition – evil forces exist in the world, but good forces also exist and are stronger, and it is possible for the human being, through proper observance of religion, to

¹³ "It is because evil has a primordial, metaphysically real presence in the world that such rituals are understood as major weapons in the on-going cosmic battle against the dark spirit of the Lie" (Boyd and Williams 82)

take part in this battle and for the evil forces to be defeated. (Rose, *Guide for the Perplexed* 38) As personifications of evil and the antagonists of *asha*, the *daevas* play a central role in the nature of Zoroastrian purity rituals, but their role is of the adversary to be destroyed.

***Daevas* as Incarnations of Evil**

The *Gathas* elaborate little on the personalities of individual *daevas*; rather, they are simply treated as a collective of false gods who follow the Lie and drive their followers to deeds of evil and violence. Later texts, however, went for a more complex and detailed demonology, naming many *daevas* and describing their attributes and the evil forces they embody in great detail. Ultimately this represents a shift in terms of how the *daevas* were conceptualized; with their religion supplanted by the worship of Mazda as the dominant faith of Iran, they were forced to move from being literal opponents of Zarathustra into being metaphysical opponents of the religion he founded. This shift led to the creation of one of the more detailed demonologies of human history.

In his book *Gods and Demons, Priests and Scholars*, Bruce Lincoln defines demonology as “an unflinching attempt to name, comprehend, and defend against all that threatens, frightens, and harms us”. (Lincoln 31) This process can clearly be observed in the depiction of *daevas* in the *Vendidad* and the Pahlavi texts, which place metaphysical ideas like Akoman (Evil Thought), physical disasters like Apaosha (Drought), and personified enemies of the Good Religion like Andar (Indra) into a classification system that links them together as minions of the Evil Spirit and foes of all that is good in the world. The theory which is proposed in the *Bundahishn* as an elaboration of ideas present

in earlier sources such as the *Vendidad* shows the world being created by Ahura Mazda as inherently good, before the arrival of Ahriman and the *daevas* casting afflictions upon it and introducing evil and destruction. The fundamental moral conflict of the Zoroastrian tradition required a powerful portrait of evil forces in order to function, and if Ahriman is the ultimate source of evil, it is the *daevas* who embody evil in all its many and varied forms. They are the invading and destructive forces, but they are also twisted reflections of the virtues embodied by Ahura Mazda and the *yazatas*. For all of evil's power, it is an interloper and a perversion; good was present first and is more powerful, and evil does not belong in this world. This ties back once more into the role of the purification rituals of the *Vendidad*, which rendered evil forces as something which directly existed in the world as a perversion of the natural order and could, therefore, be fought.

The role of the *daevas* in the later texts, then, is to provide a context in a direct and approachable form for the conflict between good and evil forces. By personifying evil forces, they take abstract ideas and establish them as direct, tangible, and frightening adversaries which, as Lincoln notes, make an assault upon the world in a very real and terrible way. By the same token, however, they are presented as adversaries which can be overcome, whether by *yazatas* in direct battle or by humans by rejecting the evils which the *daevas* personify. And, as the *Bundahishn* lays out at its ending, when these beings have been at last overcome for all time, then the world can finally become the paradise which it was meant to be.

Zahhak: A Case Study in the Evolution of the *Daevas*

Azi Dehaka, appearing in the *Yasna*, is one of the first *daevas* to be directly personified, and is also one of the most enduring, surviving into the era of Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* as the tyrant Zahhak and maintaining this role into the modern era. However, the character of this being changes dramatically across the various texts in which he appears, and as such represents a microcosm of how the role of the *daevas* in general could shift to reflect the enemies by whom the community felt threatened.

In his earliest appearance in the *Yasna*, Azi Dehaka is a true monster; a tremendous serpent with three heads, said to be “of the *daevas*”, he poisons the land around him and is described as a dire threat to the communities of the faithful. Later, he is depicted as accompanying Angra Mainyu in an assault on Ahura Mazda and Atar, the embodiment of fire, which is repulsed. The *Yasna* provides a mythic context, and the Dehaka it describes is an inhuman monster fit to it. Later, he appears briefly in the *Yashts*, praying to the *yazatas* to be given the power to destroy humanity; this prayer is rejected. This interesting passage places the god-monster as subordinate to the good divinities who embody aspects of Ahura Mazda, but it also foreshadows the increasing humanization of Dehaka across the later texts.

In the *Denkard*, Dehaka has changed considerably. Now he is Zohak, a presumably-human tyrant who embodies the principles of bad kingship. Here more concrete details about him emerge, including his thousand-year reign, his overthrow and binding by Faridun, and the prophecy that he will be freed at the end of the world only to be destroyed for good. He is also said to be a follower of the Hebrew god, whose religion

is condemned elsewhere in the *Denkard*, but this association with a foreign god is clearly a distinct development from the Avestan Dehaka, who worshipped the *yazatas* and accompanied Angra Mainyu, figures from Zarathustra's revelation. In the *Menog-i-khrad*, he is also accounted as the archetypical evil king, given his powers by Ahriman, though it is also noted that if he had not reigned then Ahriman would have given that power to Eshm (Aeshma) who would have destroyed the world.

It is in the *Shahnameh* where Zahhak reaches his final form, as the explicitly human Arab prince who was granted immortality and rulership over Iran and the world by Ahriman, for the price of perpetually ravenous snakes sprouting from his shoulders. This Zahhak explicitly shares his nationality with the Arabic conquerors who ruled over Iran in Ferdowsi's time, and thus the archetypical tyrant comes explicitly in the form of a foreign invader. Ferdowsi thus places a strong political charge into his account which speaks strongly to that which he perceived as the true evil of his age – not a mythological serpent-beast, but a foreign usurper (albeit one associated with serpents) having taken the throne of his country and oppressed his people, a subtext which is reinforced by his call at the end of the episode for a new Feraydun to come to the rescue of the world.

Thus the character of Azi Dehaka, or Zohak, or Zahhak represents a changing face of evil that maintains consistent traits while also fitting itself to the context of the story being told. In the *Yasna*, concerned with the mythical doings of gods and prophets, he is himself a semi-divine monstrosity; to the *Denkard* he is a legendary tyrant and devotee of the foreign god of a rival religion; to the *Menog-i-khrad* he is a philosophical abstraction of the concept of tyranny, as well as a reminder that Ahura Mazda allows nothing to happen if there is not some purpose to it; to the *Shahnameh* he is the

embodiment of oppressive foreign misrule. The legacy of Zahhak endures into the modern era, for during World War II British cartoonists published political cartoons in Iran to sway public opinion against the Axis Powers, and used the striking image of Hitler as Zahhak to convey the dictator's tyranny in a form embedded in Iranian culture ("Shahnameh as Propaganda for World War II"). As a result this character stands as a representation of the role of the *daevas* themselves; always the enemy, from the *Gathas* to the works of T. R. Sethna, but ever taking on new forms to better represent the people's understanding of themselves and the forces which stand against them.

Conclusion

Zarathustra lived millennia ago in a world so removed from our own that it is difficult to reconstruct it in any but the broadest strokes. However, he and the religion he created have presented a powerful image of good and evil which has endured, though its form has often changed, into the modern world. The *daevas* are central to that vision, for they and their worshippers were the original opponents of Zarathustra, and in later traditions they became the opponents of the entire universe through their role personifying abstract evil forces. Angra Mainyu may be the originator of evil in Zoroastrian theology, but the *daevas*, once warlike gods associated with a rival religion turned demons, represent a more active force of evil as it exists in the world. They are, however, as is repeatedly made clear, an evil force which can be fought and, in time, vanquished. This is the function of the purity rituals of the *Vendidad*, but it is also the battle that every pious Zoroastrian must face in their own choice between right and wrong, *asha* and *druj*. "I reject the *daevas*", the traditional confession of faith begins, placing this duty squarely upon the shoulders of the Mazda-worshipper. The *daevas*

therefore have, from the beginning, represented the opposition to the Zoroastrian religion, a shadow that has followed the faith from its origins down the centuries. However, in the Zoroastrian model, evil exists as a perversion of what is good, and therefore by studying the *daevas* who are to be rejected, one can also gain a clear picture of Zoroastrianism itself, and of the ideals which drove Zarathustra to seek to create a better world at a time when doing so seemed impossible, ideals which continue to motivate Zoroastrians to this day.

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