

FREE WILL VERSUS FATALISM

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There are indications of belief in fate in Sasanian times. Morony (p. 289) attributes it to Zurvanism: "Zurvan was a fourfold god of the starry firmament." The sixth century Pahlavi text, *Menoï Khrat* identifies Zurvan as the foreordained, inexorable destiny, and as Time which determines what happens in the world. Consequently, Zurvan allotted fortune (Pahlavi Bakht) to each person. The twelve signs of the Zodiac belonged to Ohrmazd and represented good fortune and the seven planets acted as agents of Ahriman and led to evil fortune. As stars were supposed to govern man's fate, it was possible to predict it through astrology which became very popular in Sasanian Iran. Greek and Sanskrit texts on casting horoscopes were translated into Pahlavi in the third century and casting of continual horoscopes throughout the lifetime of wealthy nobles became a fashion. Nonetheless the emphasis on Free Will did not allow Zurvanite beliefs and Babylonian astrology prevail over it. The concept of Bagobakht, divinely allotted fate, avoided fatalism, as one could pray to God to change one's fate. The later Zoroastrian literature such as Emet I Ashavahishtan (Jamasp-Asa, pp.174,176) developed the idea that the fate could be averted by Ohrmazd, apparently on the basis of the basic belief in good actions inherently leading to good results. The Vendidad emphasized that spiritual well-being was the result of good deeds but evil deeds could negativate it, even though the fortune may determine material existence. A person may die when he is fated to die, but if any one took his life he was nevertheless guilty of murder. "In later Mazdean literature," concedes Morony, "it becomes increasingly explicit that human action is responsible for both good deeds and sins, for which people are rewarded or punished, that otherwise reward and punishment would be unjust, and that a person to whom material wealth or happiness has been allotted will hasten its arrival by good deeds and postpone it by sin. Although the choice between good and evil is originally a Zoroastrian idea that occurs in the Gathas, it is possible to regard Mazdaean assertions of human freedom (Middle Persian), to choose and to act as well as the Mazdaean treatment of the triangle of divine power, divine justice, and human responsibility as reactions to the ethical problems raised by astral fatalism on one side and by the challenge of monotheism on the other." But these reactions were not possible if there were not embedded in their psyche from the ancient Gathic times as deep seated arche-typal concepts that would withstand such a rush of fatalism that surrounded them quite later on.

"In opposition to them" (Zurvanite fatalists), Morony notes,

“Mazdeans stressed the goodness of Ohrmazd and the responsibility of individuals to choose between good and evil, as well as the appropriate reward or punishment. They could admit only that fate determined the necessities of material existence and insisted that a person's spiritual fate was in his or her own hands. (p. 426). Morony explains the Qur'anic concepts of guidance and misguidance as the consequences of human choice: divine guidance or misguidance follows human acts of belief or unbelief, “But, in fact,” comments Morony, “the concepts of guidance and misguidance tend to circumscribe the ability of a person to act as a free moral agent and to reduce personal responsibility to the choice between good and evil. These concepts were well developed among Magians and Christians in the form of conflict between Yazdan and devas or angels and demons in the world who concentrated on protecting or misleading individual people.” (p. 428). Per Morony, “The ability of a person to act and, therefore, to be responsible for his actions in a way that would preserve the justice of God in rewarding or punishing him for his actions was really confronted and *compromised* (my italics) by two different systems. One was the monotheistic, impersonal, mechanistic fatalism associated with the Chaldaeans, Zurvanites and pre-Islamic Dahr. The other was an array of personified forces – angels, devils and ultimately the divine power (*qadar*) of god to determine events.” (p. 429). However, the latter was not compromised for at least a millennium since at the very dawn of history, Zarathushtra declared in Yasna 31.11 that from the very beginning of creation (even “before” that if we translate the word Pourvim in the sene of Pur-va, as preceding), Ahura Mazda granted us free will to express our preferences. And even the Bundahishn as I have already explained confirm it in its own mediaeval way of explaining such things. And the Sixth Book of Dinkard makes it explicit that combating the forces of Divs (demons) in the world means fighting our own demons that reside in our own inner being rather than fighting actual physical beings.

The concept of Free Will is so well ingrained into Zoroastrain texts that you can find its echo even in the Vendidad (2:11): when King Jamshid expanded the earth one-third, “there the cattle and oxen and men walk according to their own will and pleasure.” Even though this cannot be interpreted as an obvious endowment of Free Will of men and cattle, it is interesting to note they are granted freedom to go around as they like and are not controlled creatures who are restricted in their battle for survival.

Pahlavi Vendidad (5.9) represents the Sasanian attitude on fate as “The material world is (governed) by fate, the spiritual world by action”. The word “action” suggests free will which only human action can bring about.

According to Madon's *Dinkard* (416. 22-417.4: B 325.7-10), “Fate,

according to them (applies to that which has been decreed for doing, and action (applies) to that which those who act (do). Even that which is decreed among the spirits, an earthly being should choose by himself.” Even though it differs from what the premises the Pahlavi Vendidad (5.9) postulates upon, both emphasize the importance of free will . Thus Gathic emphasis on Free Will was too embellished in the Zoroastrian psyche to be able to withstand any assaults on it in later times.

After reviewing this subject at length in *The Wisdom of the Sasanian Sages* (Westview Press Boulder, Colorado, p. xiiv), Shaul Shaked opines: “Both fate and action are necessary, rather complementary, according to the Pahlavi texts.” “It has been necessary to discuss the problem of fate at some length, since it has often been adduced in the argument in favour of extensive Zurvanism in Pahlavi, which can allegedly be recognized by its far-reaching fatalism. It has been claimed that some passages concerning fate in Pahlavi are unorthodox. Therefore, the argument says, they are vestiges reflecting an attitude suppressed elsewhere in the Zoroastrian books. It can however, be shown I believe, that the Pahlavi books contain no trace of unorthodox fatalism, and that the utterances concerning fate fall quite harmoniously together. The ghost of this heresy can be safely removed. It is clear of course that some Pahlavi books are much more interested in fate than others, and this trend is so reflected in some compositions of the Islamic period, such as the *Shah-Nama*. There is however no solid reason to label these works as heterodox.” Few scholars have studied this subject as thoroughly as Shaked and fewer still can surpass his expertise for the Pahlavi texts. His remarks therefore are very convincing. However, even though the Pahlavi texts do reflect the Gathic emphasis (Yasna 30.2, 45.2, 31.11, etc.) on individual choice (action), fate has assumed considerable importance evidently more so as a consequence of the Arab conquest of Iran since the Parsis hardly engaged in serious reflections about fate like the Iranian Zoroastrians did at time probably because the Pahlavi texts were most probably compiled AFTER the Parsis left Iran for the western coast of India even though that may have exposed them to some of the Indian concepts about fate.