

# ‘Forgiveness is Goodness’: Mercy as an Enduring Virtue in Zoroastrianism

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## ABSTRACT

This article traces the concept of forgiveness and related displays of mercy as enjoined by Zoroastrian scripture and exegesis and as displayed through the writings and actions of rulers and clerics. It connects those Zoroastrian themes to similar ones among ancient Greeks and medieval Manichaeans. Forgiveness emerges through this investigation as a central aspect of Zoroastrian piety and praxis, which the faith's followers attributed back to Ahura Mazdā in his ascribed role as their creator deity. Therefore, as this analysis elucidates, Zoroastrians consistently held, exercised, and extolled forgiveness and mercy from ancient through medieval and even modern times, in their communities of Central Asia, Iran, and the Indian subcontinent.<sup>1</sup>

## KEYWORDS

Zoroastrianism, forgiveness, mercy, goodness, Avestan scriptures, Old and Middle Persian inscriptions, Pahlavi exegeses, Persian and Gujarati commentaries

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<sup>1</sup> An abridged version of this article was read at the University of Toronto, Zoroastrian Studies Symposium in Honour of Ervad Dr. Jehan Bagli, on 9 September 2023 (<https://www.nmc.utoronto.ca/events/zoroastrian-studies-symposium-honour-ervad-dr-jehan-bagli>). The present article is a much enlarged, scholarly version—with transliteration of texts/primary sources, inclusion of additional texts/primary sources and academic scholarship/publications—of a more general article published by me in Persian (Fārsi) as ‘Bakhshāyesh niki ast,’ in *Ozr va afv: negāhi tatbighi*, ed. J. Mahallati, Tehran: Negah Moser Press, 2019, 23–31. Translations of quotations are mine unless noted otherwise and are based on the standard manuscripts and editions which have been supplemented and informed by transliterations and translations of other scholars who are cited. I am grateful to the journal's reviewers whose suggestions much improved this article.

## WHY EXTEND FORGIVENESS AND MERCY?

Herodotus (lived ca. 484–425 BCE) observed of the ancient Iranians: ‘It is their custom to deliberate upon the gravest matters when they are drunk; and what they approve in their counsels is proposed to them the next day...when they are now sober and if being sober they still approve it, they act thereon, but if not, they cast it aside. When they have taken counsel about a matter when sober, they decide upon it when drunk’ (*History* 1.133).<sup>2</sup> Strabo (lived ca. 64 BCE–21 CE) commented upon this practice too: ‘They carry on their most important deliberations when drinking wine; and they regard decisions then made as more lasting than those made when they are sober’ (*Geography* 15.3.20).<sup>3</sup>

The image of making important decisions while under the influence of alcohol may sound strange, suggesting negative stereotyping by Greeks of their perennial Persian opponents.<sup>4</sup> The ancient Iranians’ intent, however, may have been, as will be explored in this article, to be able to act with balance, to consider and reconsider weighty decisions in multiple states of mind.<sup>5</sup> Such an approach, it seems to have been believed by ancient Iranians, could lead to forgiveness or the showing of mercy through ‘moderation’—linguistically based on verbal root *mā-*, ‘to measure’ (Old Persian), later *paymān* (Middle Persian or Pahlavi, probably from Old Persian prefix *pati-* + *mā*), also representing the concept of the ‘mean’—of harsh judgments by avoiding both *frehbūd ud abēbūd*, ‘excess and deficiency’ (*Dēnkard* 3.57, 3.297).<sup>6</sup> Indeed, according to the Middle Persian catechism known as the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad*, ‘Judgements of the Spirit of Wisdom,’ composed during the ninth or tenth century CE under Muslim rule from older Zoroastrian themes and narrated as a discussion between the Spirit of Wisdom and a wise man, *pad paymān xwardan ī may...wehīh pad menišn gāh gīrēd*, ‘through moderate consumption of wine... goodness takes hold in the mind’ (16.37, 16.44).<sup>7</sup>

The Pahlavi *Dēnkard*, ‘Acts of the Religion,’ codification of which is attributed by tradition to the high magus Ādurbād ī Ēmēdān in the ninth century CE, and like many other Pahlavi writings of medieval Zoroastrians was expanded from theology of the Sasanian Empire which lasted from the third to seventh centuries CE, completed that notion of moderation and goodness being interlinked, essential, and valuable, with the words *abaxšāyišn wehīh*, ‘forgiveness is goodness’ (6.B14.17).<sup>8</sup> So, this article examines the concepts and applications of forgiveness and mercy

<sup>2</sup> Following the translation of Godley 1926: 172–175.

<sup>3</sup> Following the translation of Jones 1930: 182–183.

<sup>4</sup> Daryae 2012b: ‘This is, to put it mildly, a highly unlikely image of a group of people who were able to carve out one of the largest empires in antiquity and sustain it for two centuries. Are we to think that they just got lucky over and over again when they were drunk out of their minds? This is certainly the view that the Greeks promoted.’ See also Daryae 2006 and 2012a: 38–41. On Greek and Latin authors’ views of Zoroastrians see also de Jong 1997.

<sup>5</sup> Compare observations by Modi 1888: 13–14.

<sup>6</sup> For the terms see Kent 1953: 194, 201, Nyberg 1974: 158, MacKenzie 1986: 67. On the mean, excess, and deficiency see Madan 1911: 46, 306, and Dresden 1966: bottom center 343 [34], 237 [234], where the quotation occurs. More recently see de Menasce 1973: 64, 292. Also consult Zaehner 1956: 83–84, 91–92, Shaked 1987, and Gignoux 2000.

<sup>7</sup> Sanjana 1895: 34–35, Tafazzoli 1975: 33 (listed as chapter 15). The Sanskrit version, likely produced by Parsi priest Neryosangh Dhaval during the late eleventh or early twelfth century CE, can be found in Bharucha 1912. The theme of moderation is noted as well by Daryae 2012a: 42–43.

<sup>8</sup> Madan 1911: 550, and Dresden 1966: bottom center p. 137 [434], omit this line. It is provided in Christensen 1936: fol. 225r. More recently see Shaked 1979: 138–139, who includes it. For current academic discussions of the extent of Sasanian and post-Sasanian materials in the Pahlavi books see for instance Rezaia 2017 and König 2018.



among ancient Iranian peoples and among their descendants living as minorities under Muslim and Hindu rule in medieval times and even in colonial and modern nations of West Asia and South Asia, specifically the Zoroastrians. It determines that the importance of forgiveness and mercy remained consistently central to the beliefs, ideals, and practices of Mazda-worshippers irrespective of dynasties, locations, societies, and sociopolitical situations.

The chronological scope of this inquiry crosses three broad periods, textually and historically. The first period covers the Gathic and Standard Avestan textual corpuses—which became canonical for followers of the Zoroastrian faith—and the Old Persian inscriptions of Achaemenian kings, so from the Bronze Age in Central Asia and Iran of the second millennium BCE into the fourth century BCE. The second period extends through the completion of major redactions of Middle Iranian writings—both exegeses of Avestan materials and other compilations based on ancient and medieval theology, lore, and practices—particularly during the Sasanian Empire and the Islamic Caliphates down to the thirteenth century CE. The third period runs from late medieval through premodern and contemporary times—and includes Zoroastrian communities in Iran and India and their religious predilections—particularly examining documents in Persian (Fārsi), Sanskrit, and Gujarati.

Additionally, this investigation focuses on moral (Middle Persian *ahlaw*) rather than ritual (Middle Persian *nērang*) forgiveness. Forgiveness and mercy for *tanāpuhl*, ‘body-harming or venial,’ and *margarzān*, ‘death-deserving or mortal,’ sins could be obtained through rites of penitence—from the atonement practices for transgressions of purity detailed in the Avestan *Vidēvdāt*, ‘Code Abjuring Demonic Spirits,’ dating to approximately the fourth century BCE, to the reversal of apostasy discussed in the Pahlavi *Revāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašawahištān*, ‘Treatise of Ēmēd the son of Ašawahišt,’ dating to the late ninth or early tenth century CE. Such ritual penances were regarded as *kirbagān*, ‘good deeds,’ directed at absolving failings that had moral impacts.

## DOCTRINAL IDEAS

The Gathic or Old Avestan language of the second millennium BCE has the term *mərəždika-*, as does Standard or Young Avestan *marždika-*, ‘mercy.’<sup>9</sup> The word would be employed in the west Iranian Middle Persian or Pahlavi language of late antique and early medieval times as *āmurzišn*—a different derivative from the same root—and used to denote ‘forgiveness’ as well, suggesting that ‘forgiveness’ was intrinsic to extending ‘mercy’ even in the original usage of *mərəždika-*.<sup>10</sup> Attested in the east Iranian Parthian language as *āmužd* (*mwjd*, *mwjd*) and as a loan word from Middle Persian and Parthian into the Sogdian language as *āmurz-* (*mwrz-*, *mwrz-*), the term also conveyed the additional senses of ‘compassion’ and ‘pity.’<sup>11</sup> The term continues in Classical and Modern Persian as *āmorzesh*, covering ‘forgiveness, mercy, pardoning.’ A second Middle Persian term, already mentioned, *abaxšāyišn*, present in Parthian as *abaxšāhišn*, covered a range of meanings from ‘forgiveness’ and ‘mercy’ to ‘pity.’<sup>12</sup> It is now rendered into Persian as forms of *bakhshidan*. A third, less frequently utilized, Middle Persian term *wixšāyišn* was employed not

<sup>9</sup> Bartholomae 1904: col. 1175.

<sup>10</sup> Nyberg 1974: 16, MacKenzie 1986: 8.

<sup>11</sup> Boyce 1954: 182, Sims-Williams and Durkin-Meisterernst 2022: 10.

<sup>12</sup> Nyberg 1974: 25, MacKenzie 1986: 2, Boyce 1977: 6, 11, Boyce 154: 180, Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 15.



only for ‘forgiveness’ but also for the related concept of ‘forbearance.’<sup>13</sup> The act of remitting or pardoning, especially of a sin or crime, was known as *hištan* and a pardon was called a *hilišn*, attested as *hirzišn* (*hyrz-*) in Parthian—an extension from the original Middle Persian meaning of *hil-* ‘let go, relinquish, remit’—particularly among Manichaeans in the expression *āstār hil-/āstār hīrz-*, ‘remit sin.’<sup>14</sup> The act of ‘asking or begging forgiveness’ was known as *bōzišn guftan* and used also as the phrase *pad bōzišn guftan*, ‘to say in apology, to ask for forgiveness, to say as an excuse’ for a sin or crime, in Zoroastrian and Manichaean texts.<sup>15</sup> These terms would be attested subsequently in the Classical Persian vocabulary of Iranian Muslims too due to the religious, social, and personal importance of the idea and practice of forgiveness. Usage of these terms, as will be seen from passages cited, covered both personal forgiveness in a moral sense and also the subcategory of absolution for ritual and legal breaches.

Aggrandizing ancient Iranian practices, Herodotus had written: ‘It is a praiseworthy law too which does not allow [even] the king himself to slay any person for one offense, nor any other Persian to do incurable harm to a subordinate for one offense. Not until reckoning shows that the offender’s wrongful acts are more and greater than his services may a person give vent to anger’ (*History* 1.137).<sup>16</sup> A balance in judgment, tempering *dād*, ‘justice,’ with *āmurzišn*, ‘mercy,’ and showing *wixšayišn*, ‘forbearance,’ emerges as at least an idealized trait of ancient Iranian society through the Greek historian’s words. These practices of measuring good and bad against each other can be traced back to Zoroastrian belief in the individual judgment of each mortal soul after death.

According to Zoroastrian tradition, perhaps as early as the Standard Avestan scriptures and certainly in the Pahlavi exegeses, Rašnu (Middle Persian Rašn) the *yazata*, ‘worship-worthy spirit or angel,’ of justice weighs each soul’s good and bad deeds in the pans of a scale. If the soul’s good deeds outweigh its misdeeds, the soul is escorted to heaven. If the soul’s misdeeds outweigh its good ones, it falls into hell. If a soul’s good and evil actions are equal, it is consigned to limbo (or stasis) until the end of time.<sup>17</sup> Yet even the worst sinner is eventually forgiven. As will be discussed in more detail later, at the end of time after the final apocalypse and eschaton, every soul—even those who have suffered in hell after death—will be shown mercy by Ahura Mazda, it was written, to be resurrected in an earthly paradise, and cleansed and forgiven of all sins.<sup>18</sup>

In the *Gāthās*, ‘Devotional Songs,’ Zoroaster (Zoroaster) asked of his chosen divinity Ahura Mazda (Middle Persian Ohrmazd), the ‘Wise Lord’: *kuθrā ārōiš ā fsəratuš, kuθrā mərəždikā axštat*, ‘Where will there be recompense instead of sorrow, where will there be mercy [i.e., for-

<sup>13</sup> MacKenzie 1986: 92.

<sup>14</sup> Nyberg 1974: 100, MacKenzie 1986: 43, Boyce 1977: 50, Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 196. *Hištan* and *hilišn* did also have judicial usages in Middle Persian as attested by Zoroastrian law of the Sasanian period recorded in the *Mādayān ī Hazār Dādestān*, ‘Book of a Thousand Judgments,’ on which consult Perikhanian 1997: esp. glossary 367–368 for those passages, and Macuch 1981, 1993.

<sup>15</sup> Nyberg 1974: 48, MacKenzie 1986: 19, Boyce 1977: 29, Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 119.

<sup>16</sup> Generally following the translation by Godley 1926: 176–177.

<sup>17</sup> The Zoroastrian texts formed the basis of the study by Pavry 1929: esp. 67–68, 80–91, 101–109. In addition, see Goldman 2015 on the *Yašt* to Rašnu.

<sup>18</sup> Details in Choksy 1988: 256–261.



givenness for transgressions]?’ (*Vohuxšaθrā Gāθā*, *Yasna* 51.4).<sup>19</sup> The notion of seeking mercy or forgiveness also shows up elsewhere in the *Avesta*, ‘Praise,’ especially in the Standard Avestan *Yašts*, ‘Devotional Poems, Prayers,’ composed between the ninth and fourth centuries BCE and canonized into fixed form by the third century BCE. A stanza in the *Mihr Yašt*, ‘Devotional Poem to Miθra (Middle Persian Mihr),’ the worship-worthy spirit who oversees covenants and contracts, portrays Zoroastrian devotees pleading: *āca.nō jamiiāt marždikāi*, ‘May he [i.e., Miθra] come to us for mercy’ (*Yašt* 10.5), rather than as the *arənaŋ.caēšəm*, ‘punisher of wrongdoers’ (*Yašt* 10.35), who *hakaŋ astēasca varəšēasca mastarynasca vohunišca zəmāda haŋm.raēθβaiieiti miθrō.dru-jaŋ mašiiānaŋ*, ‘co-mingles upon the ground the bones, hair, brains, and blood of persons who break the covenant’ (*Yašt* 10.72).<sup>20</sup> Similarly each worshiper was expected to beseech Aši (Middle Persian Ard, Ahrišwang), the female yazata of recompense, *frā.maŋm aiβi.uruuāēsaiiaŋ<sup>h</sup>ha marždikəm*, ‘turn (your) mercy toward me’ in the prayer that honored her (*Yašt* 17.15).<sup>21</sup> Another Standard Avestan text, the *Vīšperad* (Avestan *Vīšpe Ratauuō*), ‘[Prayers to] all the [Spiritual] Chiefs,’ a collection of supplementary materials to the *Yasna* dedicated to Ahura Mazda as ‘the chief and master of all creation,’ praises the act of listening to pleas and granting forgiveness: *sraotəmca marždikəmca yazamaide...marždikəm vahmanəm*, ‘We worship hearing and mercy... the mercy granted upon appeal’ (21.3).<sup>22</sup>

Much later, the *Sīh-rōzag* or *Sīrōza*, ‘Thirty days,’ redacted during the eleventh century CE and containing short invocations to thirty-three Zoroastrian divine spirits individually, also mentioned mercy. The *nānā*, ‘shorter,’ *Sīrōza* states in Standard Avestan: [*xšnūmaine*] *xšaθrahe vairiiehe aiiōxšustahe marždikāi θrāiiō.driyaouue*, ‘[Praise] for the [holy immortal] Xšaθra Vairya, for [his] molten metal, for [his] mercy, for [his] protection of the poor’ (*Sīrōza* 1.4).<sup>23</sup> The passage’s Middle Persian *Zand*, ‘Commentary,’ states: *šahrewar ī mēnōg ayōxšust āhen-widāxt āmurzišn srāyišn ī driyōšān*, ‘[Praise for] the spiritual Šahrewar, [for his] metal [molten iron], [for his] mercy, [for his] protection of the poor.’<sup>24</sup> The *mōti*, ‘longer,’ *Sīrōza* essentially duplicates the previous line with minor variations in the Avestan and Pahlavi texts: *xšaθrəm vairīm amašəm spəntəm yazamaide aiiōxšustəm yazamaide marždikəm θrāiiō.driyūm yazamaide*, ‘We worship the holy immortal Xšaθra Vairya, we worship [his] molten metal, we worship [his] mercy, we worship [his] protection of the poor,’ and *šahrewar ī a-marg ī abzōnīg yazom āhen-widāxt yazom āmurzišn [ud] srāyišn ī driyōšān yazom*, ‘We worship the bountiful immortal Šahrewar, we worship [his] molten metal, we worship [his] mercy and protection of the poor’ (*Sīrōza* 2.4).<sup>25</sup> Xšaθra Vairya (Middle Persian Šahrewar) is believed to have been created by Ahura Mazda to produce metals and, at the end of time, his molten metal will supposedly be used during the final purifica-

<sup>19</sup> Geldner 1886: 180. Geldner’s edition, while much needing replacement, remains the most comprehensive and therefore is utilized by me as the basis of translations, supplemented here and elsewhere for the *Gāthās* by Taraporewala 1951, Insler 1975, Kellens and Pirart 1988, Humbach and Ichaporia 1994, and Humbach and Faiss 2010. Also note the cognate Rig Vedic verb *mīd-* ‘to have mercy,’ used to ask divinities to show mercy for transgressions against them, on which see Jamison 2007: 92–93. Regarding Zarathushtra’s time and place see Eduljee 1980, Boyce 1989: 190, 1992: 45, Humbach and Ichaporia 1994: 11–12, Russell 1996, Humbach and Faiss 2010: 2–3, and various essays in Stausberg and Vevaina 2015: esp. 31–67.

<sup>20</sup> Geldner 1889: 126, 133, 140. See also Gershevitch 1967: 76, 90, 106, 108.

<sup>21</sup> Geldner 1889: 234. See also Lommel 1927: 162, and Malandra 1983: 133.

<sup>22</sup> Geldner 1889: 29.

<sup>23</sup> Geldner 1889: 260. See also in Raffaelli 2014: 86. On this *šnūman*, ‘dedication,’ see Cantera 2022: 230–231.

<sup>24</sup> Following the text in Raffaelli 2014: 87, but modifying his translation.

<sup>25</sup> Geldner 1889: 263. See also Raffaelli 2014: 122, but again modifying his translation.



tion of humans from their wrongdoings.<sup>26</sup> Hence, pious text and exegesis understandably contain themes that Xšaθra Vairya dispenses forgiveness for transgressions and protects the worshippers of the Wise Lord.

The *Aogamadaēcā*, ‘We profess,’ an Avestan dirge that was redacted by the twelfth century CE, refers to mercy in the context of self-forgiveness. Its unidentified Zoroastrian compiler recorded the phrase: *anāmarždikō zī asti hauuāi marždikāi*, ‘Merciless indeed is he/she toward his/her own mercy.’ The text’s Pahlavi *Zand*, and later Pāzand or Middle Persian in Avestan script, Sanskrit, and Gujarati renditions, explained: *anāmurzīd hast kē ān ī xwēš ruwān nē āmurzad*, ‘Merciless indeed is that one who has not mercy for his/her own soul’ (49).<sup>27</sup>

## ROYAL WORDS AND DEEDS

The gist of those high-minded scriptural words seemingly was paid scant attention by the Achaemenian King of Kings Dārayavauš I (Darius I, ruled 522–486 BCE). Darius boasted repeatedly in his Old Persian royal inscriptions: *pasāvašaiy adam utā nāham utā gaušā frājanam utāšaiy I cašma avajam duvarayāmaiya basta adāriya haruvašim kāra avaina pasāvašim...uzmayāpatiy akunavam*, ‘Then I cut off both his nose and two ears and gouged out one of his eyes. He was kept bound at my palace gate [where] all the troops saw him. Then I impaled him...’ (Behistun inscription 2.88–91, cf. Behistun 2.73–76 where the *hazān-/hizān-*, ‘tongue,’ was cut off too).<sup>28</sup> Darius justified his lack of mercy and forgiveness, and even his torturing of political foes, by attributing their rebellious actions to *drauga-* (Avestan *drug-*, Middle Persian *druz*), ‘confusion, bad, deceit, the Lie,’ or evil par excellence, claiming his responses were in conformity with *arta-* (Avestan *aša-*, Middle Persian *ardā*), ‘order, right, the Truth.’ King Darius alleged: *drauga dahiyauvā vasiy abava*, ‘the Lie became excessive in the land,’ and *draugadiš [hamiçiyā] akunauš*, ‘the Lie made them rebellious’ (Behistun inscription 1.34, 4.34).<sup>29</sup> Even Herodotus knew of this Iranian belief, and wrote: ‘They (Iranians/Persians) hold lying to be foulest of all’ (1.138).<sup>30</sup> So Darius claimed that *martiya haya hataxšataiy anudim [ha]kartahayā avaθādīm paribarāmiy haya [v]ināθayatiy anudim vinastaha[yā ava]θā parsāmiy*, ‘The man who makes works constructively, I reward according to his action. He who does harm, I punish according to his offense’ (Naqsh-e Rostam inscription b 16–19), suggesting kings must uphold the divinely-decreed dualistic system of good opposing and vanquishing evil.<sup>31</sup>

Darius was drawing upon an established Iranian tradition in which Zoroaster was quoted as reciting: *ač tā mainiiū pouruiiē yā yāmā xʷafənā asruuātəm; manahicā vacahicā šiiioθanōi hī vahiiō akəmcā; āscā hudāñhō θraš višiiātā nōit duždāñhō*, ‘Then these two primordial twin spirits revealed themselves through a vision. They are the better and the worse in thoughts, words,

<sup>26</sup> Choksy 1989: 10–11, 121, 131.

<sup>27</sup> Following JamaspAsa 1982: 35, 96, for the texts but diverging from his translations on 67. For dating of this text see JamaspAsa 1982: 9.

<sup>28</sup> Kent 1953: 122, Schmitt 1991: 61. On the issue of knowledge of Avestan materials see further Cantera 2017.

<sup>29</sup> Kent 1953: 117, 129, respectively, Schmitt 1991: 51, 69, respectively. On the issue of interpreting such rebellions see further Podrazik 2017.

<sup>30</sup> Following the translation by Godley 1926: 177.

<sup>31</sup> Kent 1953: 138, Schmitt 2000: 39. On Darius’ actions see the analysis in Lincoln 2007: esp. 8–9, 11–12, 87–94. On the dualism of ancient Iranian, and specifically Zoroastrian, theology see Choksy 1996 and Shaked 1994.



and deeds. Between these two [spirits] may all of you choose wisely not confusedly' (*Ahuna-uuiti Gāthā, Yasna* 30.3).<sup>32</sup> Zoroaster added: *aiiā mainiuuā varatā yē drəguuā acištā vərəziio; ašəm mainiuš spəništō yē xraoždīštəng asəno vastē; yaēcā xšnaošan ahurəm haiθiiaš šūaoθanāiš fraorət mazdəm*, 'Of the two spirits, the confused one chose to do the worst [deeds]. The holiest spirit, who is clad in the hardest stones, chose order. And [so do] those who please Ahura Mazda through good deeds' (*Ahuna-uuiti Gāthā, Yasna* 30.5).<sup>33</sup> Just as Ahura Mazda the 'Wise Lord' chose correctly to do good and Anra Mainiu (Ahreman) variously rendered by scholars as the 'Evil, Bad, Painful, Angry Spirit' chose poorly to do harm, all humans too are expected to decide between right and wrong.<sup>34</sup> King Darius' actions likely reflect a conclusion—influenced also by older Assyrian ones—that the rebels' chose poorly, their threats outweighed any benefits accrued from his dispensing pardons to them, and as ruler he was vindicated by religion in torturing and executing them to set an example.<sup>35</sup>

Not only Achaemenian kings but Sasanian ones too would allege that the Lie lay at the root of strife and therefore had to be countered with force—thereby trying to dispel perceptions of their being ruthless. For example, King of Kings Šābur I (Shapur I, ruled 240–270 CE) had inscribed in a trilingual Middle Persian, Parthian, and Greek inscription: *kēsar bid druxt ē...winās kerd ud amā abar frōmāyīn šahr wihīšt ahēm*, 'Caesar [i.e., Marcus Julius Philippus aka Philip the Arab] lied again and...did wrong; and so we struck the Roman Empire' (Naqsh-e Rostam inscription, Parthian text, 4).<sup>36</sup> Indeed the Pahlavi *Daftar ī Wizīrgard ī Dēnīg*, 'Book of Religious Judgments,' specifically mentioned as late as the thirteenth century CE, that: *dastwarān guft hēnd kū margarzān mardōm pad...wixšayīšn nē ēwēn dādan*, 'The religious authorities said that [It is] not fitting to grant forgiveness to death-deserving people' (1.2).<sup>37</sup> So mercy or forgiveness seems to have been considered an appropriate action only if and when it would serve as an instrument to further god's will and counter the devil's machinations. When extended under those appropriate conditions, *mərəždika* or mercy and forgiveness could further *šiyātim martiyahyā*, 'happiness for humanity'—believed by Darius (Naqsh-e Rostam inscription b 3; cf. Naqsh-e Rostam a 4) to have been created by 'the great god Ahura Mazda'.<sup>38</sup>

However, examples of granting mercy to political rivals are also preserved. Artaxšaça I (Artaxerxes I, ruled 465–425 BCE) forgave his father Xšayāršā's (Xerxes I, ruled 486–465 BCE) foe the Greek naval commander and politician Themistocles (lived ca. 524–459 BCE). Themistocles had led the Greeks to victory at the Battle of Salamis in October 480 BCE and been hailed as a hero in his native city of Athens before falling out of his fellow citizens' favor and being ostracized

<sup>32</sup> Geldner 1886: 106.

<sup>33</sup> Geldner 1886: 107.

<sup>34</sup> Note also that while Zoroastrians writing in Middle Persian during Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages designated Ahreman as *ganāg mēnōg*, 'foul or bad smelling spirit'—deriving the first word from Old Persian *gasta-* 'gas' hence 'stench or foul smell,' compare Avestan *ganti-*, from Indo-European *ghēu-*, on which see Watkins 2000: 31, 120—their doing so reflected the pollution and decay believed to be result from the harm and death caused by that spirit and his minions rather than a direct translation of the Avestan name Anra Mainiu. Nor can *anra-* and *ganāg/gannāg* be compared in original meaning to Indo-European *dher-*, 'dark,' and *bhel-*, 'black,' contra Skjærvø 2011: 9. The contrasting Middle Persian terminology is best seen in *Čīdag Handarz ī Pōryōtkēšān* 9–14, in Kanga 1960: 3–4.

<sup>35</sup> On models for Darius' actions see Gaspa 2017.

<sup>36</sup> Back 1978: 294–295, and Huyse 1999: p. 28 (the passage is listed as sec. 9).

<sup>37</sup> Sanjana 1848: 2. The edited version was based on a mid-eighteenth-century CE manuscript, as noted by Sheffield 2005: 181–183, who also discusses the controversy surrounding initial publication of the *Wizīrgard*.

<sup>38</sup> Kent 1953: 138 and 137, respectively, Schmitt 2000: 33 and 25, respectively.



in the year 472 or 471 BCE. Then the Spartans demanded he be tried by a Greek council for treason. So, Themistocles fled eastward, a flight that convinced even the Athenians of his guilt and they deemed him a traitor. Eventually reaching Asia Minor, Themistocles contacted Artaxerxes I, presented himself before the Achaemenian monarch, acknowledged that he had done the Persian Empire much harm but said as an excuse that his actions were self-defense against invaders. Stating, ‘I come prepared to receive the favor of one [i.e., Artaxerxes] who benevolently offers mercy,’ Themistocles requested from the king of kings a year to learn the language and customs of the Persians while pledging to serve the empire thereafter. Themistocles’ family too fled Greece and joined him. Artaxerxes I eventually appointed Themistocles to the governorship of Magnesia, a Greek city in Ionia which was part of the Achaemenian Empire, and its surrounding region (Plutarch, lived ca. 45–125 CE, *The Parallel Lives* 2.27.1–2.29.7).<sup>39</sup> The Sasanian Empire’s founder Ardaxšir I (Ardeshir I, ruled 224–240 CE) was advised as a young man, according to the *Kār-Nāmag ī Ardaxšir ī Pāpakān*, ‘Book of Feats of Ardeshir of the Lineage of Papak,’ to *bōzišn gōw*, ‘speak [i.e., ask] for forgiveness,’ of inappropriate actions from his royal patron the last Parthian ruler Ardawān IV (2.26)—a plea that was granted.<sup>40</sup>

## EXEGETICAL INTERPRETATIONS

The choice of more measured responses than those of Darius I and Shapur I is apparent in the previously mentioned instances. Indeed the *Dēnkard* recommended: *ān ī abaxšāyišn ne awēnišn*, ‘Do not reproof a person who [warrants] forgiveness’ (6.15).<sup>41</sup> Going even further, words attributed to the renowned fourth century CE Sasanian high magus Ādurbād ī Māraspandān emphasized that *pad pādīfrāh ō mardōmān kardan waranīg ma bāš*, ‘do not be eager to punish people,’ *an-āmurzīd nē bāš*, ‘do not be merciless,’ and *ma zanēd dušmen pad kēn čē paydāg kū kē ān ī kamist kēn framōšēd ā-š az ān ī mehīst bīm bōzēd pad čēh-widarag*, ‘do not strike the enemy in vengeance, for it is obvious that whoever foregoes [even] the smallest vengeance is saved from the greatest terror on the Bridge of the Complicier’ (*Pahlavi Texts*, ‘Counsels of Ādurbād ī Māraspandān,’ secs. 27, 66, 4, respectively).<sup>42</sup> So mercy shown by a human while alive was believed to result in a better outcome during judgment of his or her soul at death and a more tranquil passage to the afterlife.

Though mercy could be found from sociopolitical superiors such as monarchs, divine forgiveness was regarded as far more important. A ninth-century CE Zoroastrian catechism, the *Čīdag Handarz ī Pōryōtkēšān*, ‘Select Counsels of the Ancient Sages,’ begins with a series of fundamental questions including: *az kē abaxšāyišn ud az kē an-āmurzišn*, ‘From whom is [i.e., comes] forgiveness and from whom mercilessness’ (1). The response follows later in the text, *az wināh ī-tān kard ēstēd pad petīt bēd tā-tān man be āmurzom*, ‘Repent of the sins you have committed so that I may forgive you’ (51, cf. 36), where those revelatory and forgiving words of Ahura Mazda were compared to purifying sunlight.<sup>43</sup> Indeed, for forgiveness and mercy to be extended, *petīt*

<sup>39</sup> Following the translation by Perrin 1914: 77–82.

<sup>40</sup> Antia 1900: 9 (Pahlavi text). See also the text in Nyberg 1964: 4 and Grenet 2003: 62.

<sup>41</sup> Madan 1911: 476, and Dresden 1966: bottom center p. 169 [370], omit this line. It is provided in Christensen 1936: fol. 179v. See also Shaked 1979: 8, who includes it.

<sup>42</sup> Jamasp-Asana 1913: 60, 63, 144, respectively. See also translations in Zaehner 1976: 103, 104, and 102, respectively.

<sup>43</sup> Kanga 1960: 1, 10, 8, respectively.





(Avestan *paitita-*, also Middle Persian *petitīgih*), ‘penance, penitence,’ and *pašēmānih* (Manichaeic Middle Persian *pašēmānīg*), ‘repentance,’ were deemed necessary.<sup>44</sup> So a long Pahlavi prayer, the *Petit Pašēmānih*, served as the standard Zoroastrian liturgy of confession.<sup>45</sup> Additionally, a passage in the *Dēnkard* emphasized: *tōzišn ī wināh ud šōyišn ud yōzdahrīh ī aziš kū fradom abaxših ud xwastūgih ud petitīgih*, ‘Atonement for sin, and cleansing and purification from it, foremostly [involve] forgiveness, acceptance, and penitence’ (5.10.1).<sup>46</sup>

The Manichaeic tradition of the third through ninth centuries CE drew upon the Zoroastrian one when couching pleas for mercy. One weekly hymn sung in the Parthian language repeatedly had devotees intoning *āmužd pad man*, ‘have mercy on me’ (M 284a, b).<sup>47</sup> Several other Parthian hymns from the eighth century CE began by seeking *axšaδ*, ‘mercy,’ or by referring to *axšādāg*, ‘merciful’ one(s) (M I II 3, 14, 26, 31, 32, 43, III 25–31).<sup>48</sup> Translations of Manichaeic texts like the confessional *Xwāstwānīft* into Sogdian and non-Iranian languages like Old Uyghur preserved Parthian calls to *man āstār hirzā*, ‘forgive my sin!’ (Sogdian *Xwāstwānīft* fragments 1, 2, Uyghur *Xwāstwānīft* I–XV).<sup>49</sup> Manichaeans were warned in the *Huyadagmān* (formerly read as *Huwīdagmān*), ‘Fortunate for Us,’ and *Angad Rōšnān*, ‘Rich [Friend] of the Beings of Light,’ hymn cycles about *naharīg abnās kū āmužd nē ast*, ‘hellish destruction where there is no mercy’ (*Huyadagmān* IVb 2, T II D 178 I) awaiting impenitent sinners for *nē ast [kē] niyōš ō abaxšāh abar hawīn*, ‘there is no one [who] will hear and have mercy upon them’ (*Angad Rōšnān* VIIa, M 620 R and M 918a R).<sup>50</sup> Moreover, Manichaeic sources have a wider range of terms for mercy, forgiveness, pardon, and taking pity due to the centrality of penance in communal activities—an additional example in Parthian is *axšaδ* (*Huyadagmān* I, M625 b R; VIb 22, M 502 b V); those in Sogdian include *yān*, ‘grace,’ (from Old Persian and Avestan *yāna-*, ‘boon,’ ‘favor,’ ‘gift’) and *axšnām*, ‘absolution, forgiveness,’ (from Avestan *xšnūmaine-*, ‘propitiation’).<sup>51</sup>

According to a ninth century CE Zoroastrian theological text, the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, [Book of] Religious Judgments, pious souls can *abar yazadān abaxšāyīšnēnāg*, [produce] forgiveness among the divine spirits’ for the misdeeds of their living relatives (21.2).<sup>52</sup> While discussing the fate of evildoers in the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, its author *Manuščihr ī Juwānjamān*, the high magus of Fars and Kerman, pointed out to lay readers that each sinner’s soul *zāyišn ī āmurzišn xwēšihēd*, ‘takes up for himself/herself a request for mercy,’ which will be answered positively by Ahura Mazda *pad rist-āxēz zamānag*, ‘at the time of the final resurrection’ (18.6).<sup>53</sup> *Manuščihr* even cited an example of the mythical Iranian hero *Jamšēd* seeking *āmurzišn az dādār*, ‘mercy from the

<sup>44</sup> Bartholomae 1904: 829, Nyberg 1974: 153, MacKenzie 1986: 66, 68, Boyce 1977: 74.

<sup>45</sup> For the text and translation of this prayer see Dhabhar 1927: 54–61 and 1963: 100–122, respectively.

<sup>46</sup> Madan 1911: 443, and Dresden 1966: bottom center p. 181 [346]. See also Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000: 46.

<sup>47</sup> Assmussen 1975: 68. See also Reck 2004: 106–117.

<sup>48</sup> M1 photographs are reproduced in Sundermann 1996: pls. 1–2. Translations in Müller 1913, Assmussen 1975: 78, Klimkeit 1993: 170–175, and Reck 2004: 90. For the terms see Boyce 1977: 6, 11, 15, 19, Durkin-Meisterernst 2004: 15, 41, 55, 78, 402, 411, 414.

<sup>49</sup> Klimkeit 1993: 299–306. See also Assmussen 1965: 20.

<sup>50</sup> Photographs in Sundermann 1990; translations in Boyce 1954: 84–85, 164–165, Assmussen 1975: 95, and Klimkeit 1993: 100–117.

<sup>51</sup> Boyce 1954: 66–67, 100–101. See also Boyce 1977: 19. For Sogdian terms consult Gharib 1995: 82–83, 172, 193, 287, 443, 455, and Durkin-Meisterernst and Sims-Williams 2022: 45, 108, 268, 299, 306.

<sup>52</sup> Anklesaria 1899: 46. My translation is influenced by the amended reading of Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 78, rather than that by Kanga 1980: 212.

<sup>53</sup> Anklesaria 1899: 42, Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 74–75.



creator,' after being led astray by evil (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 38.21).<sup>54</sup> Likewise the anonymous author of the *Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, a Middle Persian treatise accompanying the [*Book of*] *Religious Judgments*, probably writing between the late ninth to early tenth centuries CE, claimed that the mythical hero Kersāsp *pad peīt kard u-š be āmurzīd*, 'was penitent and [so] was granted mercy' by Ahura Mazda for transgressions (18f32).<sup>55</sup>

Both those medieval writers were choosing well-known examples to stress the importance of seeking forgiveness and receiving mercy, especially when bad deeds occurred under stressful conditions. Because his flock and he lived during the time when Iran was under Muslim rule of the Abbasid caliphate and Zoroastrians were converting to Islam, Manuščīhr explained that even after acts of heresy and apostasy a penitent individual who returned to the ancient Iranian faith *āmurzišn windēd u-š ruwān bōzihēd*, 'will find mercy and his/her soul will be saved' (*Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 40.5).<sup>56</sup> But Zoroastrian commentators also stressed that mercy had to be sought prior to death in order to avoid the tribulations of hell (*Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg* 28b-c).<sup>57</sup> Moreover, forgiveness for a sin could not be obtained if the offender merely *pad bōzišn guft*, 'said as an excuse' rather than truly repented (compare *Škand Gumānīg Wizār*, 'Doubt-Dispelling Exposition,' a Zoroastrian rebuttal of other faiths composed by Mardānfarrox ī Ohrmazddādān in the ninth century CE, 11.216).<sup>58</sup> Indeed, writers of the *Dēnkard* emphasized that 'sin should be followed by seeking forgiveness due to shame' (9.15.4).<sup>59</sup>

## DIVINE DISPOSITION, HUMAN PRACTICES

In reality, as demonstrated by Darius I and Shapur I, forgiveness and mercy were often espoused by mortals in words but not deeds. So, in the ancient and medieval Iranian traditions under consideration, true dispensation of mercy and forgiveness was believed to originate from the divine creator. During the question and answer discourse of the *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad*, the wise man is said to have asked *kē wixšayišnīgтар*, 'who is more forgiving?', and the Spirit of Wisdom responded *Ohrmazd ī xwadāy wixšayišnīgтар*, 'Ahura Mazda, the lord, is more forgiving' (28.2, 28.8).<sup>60</sup> Holy fires, as Ahura Mazda's creation, were thought to grant true forgiveness too, as claimed in the *Dēnkard* (9.15.4).<sup>61</sup>

Not surprisingly the wish for forgiveness as part of seeking mercy entered the *monājāt* tradition adopted by Zoroastrians from Muslims after the Arab conquest and Islamization of Iran. Prose and poetry *monājāts*, 'devotional songs,' composed by Zoroastrians using Classical and New Persian in Iran and using Gujarati in India from the thirteenth century CE to the present day, speak of *yazad*, 'divine spirit'—i.e., by this time referring specifically to Ohrmazd (Ahura Mazda) as god—as the source of all forgiveness, even designating him as 'the merciful one.'<sup>62</sup> The Parsi

<sup>54</sup> Anklesaria 1899: 119, Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 158.

<sup>55</sup> Dhabhar 1913: 95, Williams 1990: 109.

<sup>56</sup> Anklesaria 1899: 131, Jaafari-Dehaghi 1998: 170. On the trajectory and consequences of conversion from Zoroastrianism to Islam during the Middle Ages see Choksy 1997: 76–93.

<sup>57</sup> Dhabhar 1913: 95, Williams 1990: 131.

<sup>58</sup> Jamasp-Asana 1887: 100, de Menasce 1945: 142.

<sup>59</sup> Text in Vevaina 2023: 159. My translation, however, diverges from that by Vevaina.

<sup>60</sup> Sanjana 1895: 48, Tafazzoli 1975: 47–48.

<sup>61</sup> As noted by Vevaina 2023: 166.

<sup>62</sup> Russell 1989: 56–57. Also consult Schmermbeck 2013 for further details and sources.



dastur, ‘high priest,’ Darab Pahlān composed a *Kholāseh-ye Din*, ‘Exposition of Religion,’ in 874 Persian couplets during the year 1690 CE. In chapter 9 of that poem he enumerated 100 names of Ahura Mazda, modelling his list loosely along Muslim ones for Allah, including *abarzāh* (from *āmarzandeh*, *āmorzesh*), ‘pardonner,’ (40) and *avakhshidār* (from *bakshidār*), ‘merciful one’ (93).<sup>63</sup> Paralleling such designations, the Persian *Revāyat-e Ithoter*, ‘Discourse of Seventy-Eight (Chapters),’ brought to the Parsis or Zoroastrians in India from their coreligionists at Yazd and Kerman in Iran during the late eighteenth century CE, began with the benediction ‘*be nām-e yazad bakhshāyandeh bakhshāyeshgar mehrbān*, ‘In the name of god, the bountiful, the merciful, the benevolent.’<sup>64</sup> This phrase still is recited by Zoroastrian congregations when commencing the *chāshni*, ‘communal meal,’ which follows prayer services.<sup>65</sup> So, the creator deity came to be seen, and among contemporary Zoroastrians still is regarded, as the source of mercy and forgiveness.

When the eponymous landing of Zoroastrian Iranians at Sanjan in Gujarat—attributed to the year 716 CE or to the year 936 CE depending on interpretation of the date’s numerals—was recorded in a New Persian epic poem the *Qesse-ye Sanjān*, ‘Story of Sanjan,’ during the late sixteenth century CE by Bahman Kaikobad Sanjana, a Zoroastrian priest, it was written that ‘He (god) is forgiving and accepting of penitence’ (l. 5, compare ll. 36, 40, 50).<sup>66</sup> Yet, for Zoroastrians in early modern times, divine agency was believed to be manifested through human actions too as in earlier times. Supporting data is found in a catechism compiled in Gujarati by dastur Erachji Sohrabji Meherjirana during the year 1869 CE, where the question of ‘Should we be merciful?’ is answered with the injunction ‘It is the teaching of our religion to show mercy to everyone. In our religious books, a person without mercy is said to be (the equivalent of) a demon’ (chap. 14).<sup>67</sup>

According to medieval Zoroastrian theology, codified after the fall of the Sasanian Empire when the faith’s followers were subjects of Muslim and Hindu rulers, and preserved in Pahlavi books such as the *Bundahišn*, ‘[Book of] Primal Creation’ (major redaction during twelfth century CE), the eschaton will commence in the religious year 11973 when the final savior Sōšāns resurrects the dead. Each human soul would return to earth from heaven, hell, or limbo to gain a final body. Then, Ohrmazd would descend to the Earth, and, per the divinity’s command, the final savior will separate the righteous individuals from the evil ones at an assembly of all humans. During that final judgment each sinner, having already suffered in hell after death, is forgiven and cleansed of his or her wrongdoings. The devil Ahreman will be rendered innocuous and forced to scuttle back to hell which would be sealed shut with molten metal, safeguarding the spiritual and corporeal worlds from evil forever. Finally, Ahura Mazda is said to bring about *frašagird* (Avestan *frašō.kərəti-*), ‘refreshment,’ of the universe during the year 12000 (*Bundahišn* 34.1–32). Through those eschatological actions, the faithful believe, their divinity will fulfill his role as ‘the merciful one’ by ensuring no further triggers for thoughts, words, or deeds that require future dispensations of forgiveness.<sup>68</sup>

The sources analyzed in this article have ranged geographically and chronologically from ancient Central Asia through the Iranian plateau to the Indian subcontinent. Those documents

<sup>63</sup> Modi 1924: 58–62 (text), 83–91 (translation).

<sup>64</sup> Vitalone 1996: 41.

<sup>65</sup> Modi 1937: 280–281.

<sup>66</sup> Williams 2009: 54–55, 60–61, 62–63, 64–65.

<sup>67</sup> Kotwal and Boyd 1982: 108.

<sup>68</sup> Anklesaria 1908: 221–227, Anklesaria 1956: 283–293, Pakzad 2005: 374–388. See also the translation by Agostini and Thrope 2020: 179–182.



reflect religious doctrines, clerical interpretations, imperial claims, and pious sayings. The materials were shaped under divergent social and political conditions—pastoral and settled communities of the second and first millennia BCE, empires of the Persians under Achaemenians and Sasanians from the sixth to fourth centuries BCE and the third to seventh centuries CE respectively in which Zoroastrians were at their zenith, and caliphates and kingdoms from the seventh century CE in which Zoroastrians become religious minorities among Muslims and Hindus. The languages they used to record their thoughts were various Iranian and even Indian ones. Yet, as this examination determines, such disparate settings notwithstanding, those Zoroastrians who recorded their ideas about the merits of and conditions for practicing forgiveness and mercy maintained an enduring homogeneity informed by their faith's tenets.

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