

Bahá'u'lláh as Zoroastrian saviour

CHRISTOPHER BUCK

Abstract

This paper¹ explores theoretical tensions between modern scholarship and modern messiahship. Messiahs, typically, advance truth claims and adduce proof texts. Prophecies foretell; messiahs fulfil. But what if the proof texts are other than what they purport to be? What if a prophecy turns out not to be genuine? How might this affect the truth claim? An ideal case-study is that of Bahá'u'lláh whose claim to multiple messiahship is unusual in the history of religions, paralleled only by the second-century world-prophet, Mānī (d. 276). Bahá'u'lláh's truth claims were anchored in several apocalyptic traditions, interpreted as convergent. Bahá'u'lláh's claim to be Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand, the Zoroastrian messiah, is a case in point. A theoretical problem arises once it is shown that Zoroastrian apocalypses that foretell the advent of Shāh Bahrām are primarily medieval texts, lamenting the Byzantine, Arab and Turkish invasions of Iran. These texts are hardly prophecies, but are cast in the form of prophecies, through use of a literary device known as "vaticinatio ex eventu" (prophecy after the event).² These prophecies are a type of inverse history, where recent history (the calamity of conquest) is recounted, followed by a scenario expressed in the future perfect tense (prophecies), which more or less narrates what should have been, in the name of what shall be. It will be shown that Bahá'u'lláh's appeal to the Shāh Bahrām tradition circumvents this problem by radically reinterpreting the Zoroastrian prophecies themselves, thereby reinventing the figure of Shāh Bahrām.

Introduction

In 19th-century Iran, the founder of the Bahá'í Faith, Bahá'u'lláh, was acclaimed by a significant number of Zoroastrian converts, mainly from Yazd and Kerman, as the promised Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand, a Zoroastrian messianic king foretold in several Pahlavi and New Persian texts. Later, still other Zoroastrians, primarily from the Īrānī Zoroastrian community in India, were won over to the nascent faith. (There were actually few converts from among the Parsis.) Indeed, Zoroastrians were among the first non-Muslim converts to the Bahá'í Faith in its formative era.

Recognition of the advent of this promised saviour depended greatly on one's perception and acceptance of Bahá'u'lláh's fulfilment of Zoroastrian prophecies. This fulfilment was not literal at the level of text, which

¹ This paper was presented at the Bahá'í Studies Colloquy, Annual Meeting of the American Academy of Religion (Orlando, Florida), on 21 November 1998.

² Cf. E. Osswald, "Zum problem der vaticinia ex eventu." *Zeitschrift für die Alttestamentliche Wissenschaft* 75 (1963): 27–44.

required certain prodigies to establish prophetic warrant, and had laid out a scenario wherein the Zoroastrian religion and the vanquished Sasanian empire would be restored and the golden age of Zoroastrianism reign triumphant. Shāh Bahrām was supposed to be a Zoroastrian warlord, who would fight an apocalyptic battle of cosmic proportions. But Bahá'u'lláh was a prisoner and exile during his forty-year ministry (1852–92). He did not restore Sasanian Iran, nor did he re-establish the Zoroastrian religion. Nor did he reinvest Zoroastrian high priests with their former authority, nor has the golden age of Zoroastrian Iran been revived as the messianic era, the Renovation. A messiah is supposed to be a victor, not a victim. In Judaism, for example, the notion of a crucified messiah was absurd, incredible. (St. Paul calls the idea of a crucified messiah a “scandal” among Jews.) In traditional Zoroastrian terms, an imprisoned messiah was no messiah at all. Drawing from the Jewish ideal of the three highest offices (*tria munera*), which gave rise to an expectation of three messiahs at the time of John the Baptist (note the three questions addressed to the Baptist in the first chapter of the gospel of John), Bahá'u'lláh was neither a “royal” messiah, nor was he a “priestly” messiah. But was he a “prophetic” messiah?

While Bahá'u'lláh's claim, on the face of it, failed to fulfil Zoroastrian apocalypses literally, he did succeed in making a case for fulfilment symbolically. As stated, Persian Zoroastrians who accepted Bahá'u'lláh recovered neither their former monarchy nor their lost empire. But they did get a new world religion, the Bahá'í Faith, which, like Zoroastrianism, was Persian in origin, and had a number of resonances with, if not elements of, Zoroastrianism itself. In this light, the Bahá'í Faith was embraced by Zoroastrian converts as Zoroastrianism reborn. But, for other Zoroastrians, the Bahá'í religion was simply Zoroastrianism abandoned.

Together with other signs of prophetic warrant – charisma, miracles, and the like – prophecy is adduced as special evidence of prophetic credentials. In other words, the messiah is who he says he is because prophecies are interpreted as foretelling his advent. Consequently, there exists a dynamic relationship between the truth claim and the proof text. Were the proof text clear enough, it would require little interpretation. The truth claim would simply be validated by the proof text, and the messiah would then have an easy time attracting converts. But let us consider the case of Bahá'u'lláh, in which the relationship between truth claim and proof text is not only *not* apparent, but, worse still, appears to be contradictory. This paper will also examine how it came to be that Bahá'u'lláh could have been accepted, in Zoroastrian terms, as a messianic king without a kingdom, and how this cognitive dissonance was rationalised and overcome.

Moses and Zoroaster

Moses and Zoroaster are universally regarded as the fathers of (universal) monotheism. Zoroaster (the Greek name for Zarathuštra), was probably the younger contemporary of Moses. (Scholarship has reached a near consensus in rejecting the traditional date of Zoroaster in favour of a date between

1200 and 1000 BCE.) Zoroaster, the ancient Persian prophet, was by profession a priest, and by calling a prophet, who taught monotheism alongside ethical dualism. While Moses proclaimed the uniqueness and transcendence of the one, true God, Zoroaster, in the few authentic hymns of his that have survived, vivified the attributes of God by personifying them. “Zoroaster,” writes Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, “is, in fact, in the full sense of the word, *the first theologian*.”³ Having transformed the archaic view of time from a circle into a spiral, and having invested history with a teleological dimension, it is hard not to agree with Duchesne-Guillemin when he further states that: “Zoroaster is the first apoclypt.”⁴ Mary Boyce concurs: “Zoroaster was thus the first to teach the doctrines of an individual judgment, Heaven and Hell, the future resurrection of the body, the general Last Judgment, and life everlasting for the reunited soul and body. These doctrines were to become familiar articles of faith to much of mankind, through borrowings by Judaism, Christianity and Islam; yet it is in Zoroastrianism itself that they have their fullest logical coherence.”⁵ A 1997 reference work goes so far as to claim that Zoroaster “is the first of the world’s religious prophets.”⁶

Zoroaster proclaimed that man has choice, and that his choice for good over evil is the voice of his own destiny, in accordance with the will of God. A good choice is a choice for the good, which assures one’s destiny in the afterlife. Following the Zoroastrian ideal of “good thoughts, good words, good deeds,” the ethical and religious life becomes a moral and social force. In this way, humanity participates in, rather than imitates, history. Zoroaster inspired confidence that the reign of righteousness would ultimately triumph over evil at the end of time. One scholar calls the introduction of such ideas into so archaic a setting “an astonishing fact of history.”⁷

In the Zoroastrian scheme of salvation-history, which spans a “world-year” of 12,000 years (evidently inherited from Babylonian cosmology), Zoroaster appears in the cosmic year 9000. In good Indo-European tradition, Zoroaster, according to the Younger Avesta and passages in Middle Persian texts, foretells the coming of three saviours, who appear in successive millennia after him.⁸ There is, apparently, a symmetry between these three future saviours and Zoroaster’s three historical sons. The last of these

³ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *The Hymns of Zarathustra*. M. Henning, trans. (Boston: Beacon Press, 1963) 2.

⁴ *Ibid.*, 18.

⁵ Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1979) 29.

⁶ “Zoroaster,” in John Bowker, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 1069–70 [1069].

⁷ George C. Cameron, “Zoroaster the Herdsman,” *Indo-Iranian Journal* 10.4 (1967) 261–81 [261].

⁸ Mary Boyce, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984): 20-1; 90-4.

saviours is Astvat-ereta, the true Saoshyant, whom later Zoroastrian tradition has associated with the advent of Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand. As Mary Boyce states: "the future hope of ordinary people seems to have been fixed on the coming of the one Sōšyant, who will be mightily helped, it is believed, by Vahrām, the *yazad* of Victory...at the end of the 10th millennium (i.e. the present one)."⁹ It is now around 3,000 years after Zoroaster, according to the best estimates of when Zoroaster lived. As Boyce implies, the appearance of Shāh Bahrām is either imminent, or overdue.

Apocalyptic texts

After the fall of the Sasanian dynasty under invasions by Arab Muslims in the 7th-century, and with further oppression under Seljuk Turks in the 11th-century and Mongols in the 13th–14th centuries, what Zoroastrian Iran longed for was not simply the restoration of its expired state religion, but of its vanquished state as well. "The Sasanian era," according to one authority, "was perhaps the time of the greatest courtly splendour in Iran, with lavish royal patronage of great temples, with magnificent palaces decorated with mosaics, furnished with superb utensils, many of which have survived the ravages of history and enable scholars to reconstruct much of Sasanian magnificence. The monarchs threw their considerable power behind the official priesthood (magi), so church and state were spoken of as 'brothers, born of one womb and never to be divided'."¹⁰ In orthodox Zoroastrianism, religion and royalty are inseparable.

Such malaise, such compensatory longing for revival of religion and empire, imbued Zoroastrian apocalypses with bittersweet nostalgia. Zoroastrianism, after all, had had a long history of being the state religion of Persian and Iranian empires. Zoroastrianism was the state religion of the first Persian empire (550–330 BCE), established by Cyrus the Great. Another Iranian empire was that of the Parthians (c. 238 BCE–224 CE), a people of northeastern Iranian uplands, where Zoroastrianism continued to flourish as the state religion.¹¹ The Parthian empire was succeeded by the second Persian empire, that of the Sasanians (224–642 CE), which

⁹ Mary Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1975) 292. A *yazad* is a Zoroastrian angel. In this case, the *yazad* of Victory of whom Boyce (referring to *Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 7.28) speaks is the old Verethragna (the etymological root of the name, "Vahrām/Bahrām"), a pre-Zoroastrian, Indo-Iranian god who defeats the Devil at the end of time. In later Zoroastrian tradition, the two figures of *Wahrām ī warzāwand* (= Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand) and *Wahrām ī amāwand* (Verethragna) became confused and sometimes conflated. Surprisingly, the epithet "*warzāwand*" had once referred to Zoroaster himself (*Dēnkard* 7.1.2, 7.1.46). See Carlo Cereti, "Again on Wahrām ī warzāwand," in *La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo in collaborazione con l'Istituto Italiano per il Medio ed Estremo Oriente* (Roma, 9-12 novembre 1994) *Estratto* (Rome: Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei, 1996) 629-639 [629]. I am indebted to Prof. Cereti for kindly faxing me this article.

¹⁰ "Zoroastrianism," in Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions*, 1070–72 [1071].

¹¹ Mary Boyce, "Zoroastrianism," in John Hinnells, ed., *A New Handbook of Living Religions* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1997) 236–60 [237].

constituted the golden age of Zoroastrianism.¹²

A study of comparative apocalyptic literature discloses that last events are often modelled on past events, and that utopian visions are typically projections of some nostalgic golden age that embodies the ideals that religions hold dear. Such a wish-image was expressed in Zoroastrian apocalyptic texts of the type classified by John J. Collins as “historical” apocalypses as distinct from otherworldly journeys.¹³ These texts predicted that a messianic king would, one day, come from India, to defeat the Arabs/Turks and re-establish the Persian empire. The name of this royal messiah, in New Persian, was Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand (Middle Persian: Wahrām ī Warčāwand), who is mentioned in the *Zand ī Vahman Yasn* (= *Bahman Yašt*, VII. 4–5; VIII.1 [III.14; III.39]) and *Bundahišn* (XXXIII.27), and other texts.

Apocalypses typically provide the reader with both retrospect and prospect. The latter takes the form of prophecy. Prophecy is popularly thought of as a kind of literary crystal ball, a telescopic glimpse into the final phase of history, where both heaven and hell are historicised in the teleological intersection of sacred and linear time. While some prophecies may be transparent in meaning, others may be expressed in coded narratives. Employing the future as tense metaphor, rhetorically reinforced by hortative and optative moods, the faithful are asked to endure until the clock of history strikes its final hour, when the pious are vindicated and the impious are vanquished, when the bygone righteous, the “special dead,” rejoin the living, when the longed-for messiah appears on the historical horizon in the twilight of time, to execute justice and restore righteousness. Visions of the end are re-visions of history.

As crisis literature, an apocalypse is typically a register of social malaise, described in cosmic terms. Eschatological tension is sustained as the faith-community participates vicariously in the apocalyptic drama. In Zoroastrian apocalypses, this drama reaches its climax in the advent of the messianic king, who fights a cosmic battle of world-historical proportions, and who, after his glorious victory, returns Zoroastrianism to its rightful place as the dominant tradition of Persia. One of the texts in which Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand appears is as follows:

When may it be that a courier comes from India (*hindūkān*),
(And says) that: “The Shāh Vahrām from the family of the Kays has

¹² Willard Oxtoby, “The Zoroastrian Tradition,” in idem, ed., *World Religions: Western Traditions* (Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1996) 152–96 [174].

¹³ John J. Collins, “Persian Apocalypses,” in idem, ed., *Apocalypse: The Morphology of a Genre. Semeia* 14 (1979) 207–17 [208–13]. Cf. Fereydun Vahman, “Works on Iranian Apocalypticism,” [bibliography], in idem, *Ardā Wirāz Nāmāg: The Iranian “Divina Commedia.”* Scandinavian Institute of Asian Studies, monograph series no. 53 (London and Malmo: Curzon Press, 1986) 319–21. The present writer has not yet accessed the latest article on Persian apocalypses: Anders Hultgård (University of Uppsala), “Persian Apocalypticism,” in John J. Collins, ed., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism. Volume One: The Origins of Apocalypticism in Judaism and Christianity* (New York: Continuum Pub. Co., 1998).

come,
 That there are a thousand (*hazār*) elephants, upon their heads are
 elephant keepers,
 That he holds the raised standard in the manner of the Husrav,
 That the advance-guard is led by the army chiefs!"
 An intelligent man (*mart ī basīr*) should be made (our) clever inter-
 preter,
 Who may go and speak to the Indians:
 Namely, "What have we seen from the hand of the Arabs (*dast ī*
tāčīkān)!
 For the unique people they ruined the Religion (*dīn*) and killed the kings
 (*šāhān*).
 We are from the Aryan (stock), they are like the Dīvs;
 And they hold the Religion [as nothing (?)], eat the bread like dogs.
 They have taken away the sovereignty from the Husrav,
 Not by skill, nor by manliness, but by...
 They have taken it away (and) made mockery and scorn...
 They have taken away by force from men
 (Their) wives and wealth, sweet places, parks and gardens.
 Capitation-tax they have imposed, they have bestowed it upon (their
 own) chieftains;
 ..., they have demanded a heavy tribute.
 Consider how much evil that Druž has cast upon this world,
 So that nothing worse than that —?— world!"
 "From us shall come that Shāh Vahrām,
 The Glorious (*ān Šāh Vahrām ī Varčāvand*), from the family of the
 Kays.
 We will bring vengeance on the Arabs (*tāčīkān*),
 As Rōtastahm brought vengeance —?— on the (whole) world.
 Their mosques will we cast down, we will set up fires,
 (Their) idol-temples we will dig down and blot them out from the world,
 So that 'nihil' shall be the miscreations of the Druž
 From this world (*hač ēn gēhān*)."

(Tavadia 1955, 31–2)¹⁴

This and similar vaticinations of the advent of Shāh Bahrām cannot be
 regarded as genuine prophecies without qualification. The texts were
 composed after many of the events had transpired. These recapitulations of
 recent history are narrated as having been foreseen by Zoroaster himself.

¹⁴ Pahlavi text in J. M. Jamasp-Asana, ed., *The Pahlavi Texts contained in the Codex MK*
 (Bombay, 1913) II, 160–61. Four English translations may be compared: (1) Herbert W.
 Bailey, *Zoroastrian Problems in the Ninth-Century Books* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1971
 [reprint of 1943]); (2) J. C. Tavadia, "A Rhymed Ballad in Pahlavi," *Journal of the Royal*
Asiatic Society 1955) 29–36; (3) Naib Dastur Minocher Jamaspi Jamasp Asa, "*Madam*
Matan-i Shāh Vaharam-i Varjāvand: On the Advent of King Behram Varjavand," in
 Jivangi Jamshedji Modi, ed., *Sir Jamsetjee Tejeebhay Madressa Jubilee Volume* (Bombay,
 1914); (4) Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria, in Jamasp-Asana, 52 (partial trans.).

(Zoroaster's predictions, of course, turn out to be true.) Some Zoroastrian apocalypses that foretell Shāh Bahrām were composed in the 9th–10th centuries, posterior to the Arab conquest of Iran. These texts, if one were to reduce them to their bare essentials, are lamentations over the fall of the Sasanian empire to the Arabs, and the fall from power of the Zoroastrian sacerdotal order as well. Here we see a literary form which Tord Olsson classes as a *descriptio mundi inversi*, or the inversion of ideal social values,¹⁵ associated with the Arab conquerors whose conquest proved catastrophic to both Zoroastrian church and state. It should be no surprise, therefore, to find that the descriptions of Shāh Bahrām are bellicose, pervaded by an unabashed revenge motif. Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand leads into Persia a large army from India – a force both formidable and frightening, considering the impact that one thousand elephants would likely have had on Persians who had scarcely seen such creatures.

Czeglédý notes that: “Among the Persian apocalyptic writings which, in the form of a *vaticinatio ex eventu*, relate Sasanian history, the collapse of the Sasanian empire, the Arab rule and then, in the form of a genuine prophecy, describe the events of the last days, most important are the *Zand-i-Vahuman Yasn* (*Bahman Yašt*) and the • *āmāsp Nāmak*... The • *āmāsp Nāmak* refrains from naming the victorious Prince of the Last Days; the *Zand-i-Vahuman Yasn* calls him *Vahrām*.”¹⁶ The passage referred to explicitly names “the leather-belted Turk” and “the three, Turk, Arab, and Roman” as oppressors of Zoroastrians, one of the saviours of whom Ahura Mazdā announces, in the form of a prophecy: “O Zartosht the Spitaman [Zoroaster]! When the demon with dishevelled hair of the race of Wrath comes into notice in the eastern quarter,...in the direction of Chinistan [China], it is said – some have said among the Hindus – ‘is born a prince (*kai*); it is his father, a prince of the Kayanian race, approaches the women, and a religious prince is born to him; he calls his name Warharan [Bahrām] the Varjavānd,’ some have said Shahpur.”¹⁷ In this passage, Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand is said to be “Shahpur” – ostensibly a reference to one of the great Sasanian kings (or else to one of the historical sons of Bahrām Chūbīn, according to Julie Meisami of the Oxford Oriental Institute [see note 56]). The wish-image of a restored Persian empire is implicit. The close relationship between royalty and religion is evident further in the text: ‘And regarding that Warharan the Varjavānd it is declared that he comes forth

¹⁵ Tord Olsson, “The Apocalyptic Activity: The Case of the *Jāmāsp Nāmāg*,” in D. Hellholm, ed., *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East*. Proceedings of the International Colloquium on Apocalypticism held in Uppsala, August 12–17, 1979 (Tübingen, 1983) 21–49 [34].

¹⁶ K. Czeglédý, “Bahrām Čōbīn and the Persian Apocalyptic Literature,” *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 8.1 (1958): 21–43 [32–3]. Cf. A. H. Shahbazi, “Bahrām Čōbīn,” *Encyclopaedia Iranica* III, 59; Anne-Marie Destrée, “Quelques reflexion sur le héros des récits apocalyptiques persan et sur mythe de la ville de cuivre,” in *La Persia nel Medioevo* (Rome: 1971) 639–52.

¹⁷ Trans. E. W. West, *Bahman Yašt, Sacred Books of the East*, vol. 5, part 1 (Oxford University Press, 1897) 229–30 (Chap. 3, vv. 8, 9, and 13).

in full glory,...and having entrusted him with the seat of mobadship of the mobads, and the seat of true explanation of the religion, he restores again these countries of Iran which I, Ohrmazd, created'.¹⁸ Note that the literary figure of Ahura Mazdā is neither foretelling Bahá'u'lláh, nor the Bahá'í religion, but rather the restoration of Zoroastrian sceptre and mitre.

The *Zand ī Vahman Yasn* (also known, as Czeglédy states, as the *Bahman Yašt*) is probably the most important of Zoroastrian apocalypses. It is also the most textually problematic due to its redaction history. By its very title, this Pahlavi (Middle Persian) work purports to be a "commentary" or "interpretation" of a lost book of the Avesta, the *Vahman Yasn*. The *Zand ī Vahman Yasn* is extant also in Pazand and Persian versions. Among religious-minded Parsis, the chanting of this apocalypse over a period of forty days was believed to be meritorious and would conduce to the fulfilment of prayers.¹⁹ Significant portions of this work can be dated to the Hellenistic age. One effort has been made to restore the original version by stripping away strata of late origin, leaving only the ancient source as it probably stood.²⁰

Revisions of prophecy

The *Zand ī Vahman Yasn* underwent extensive alterations over time. Internal evidence suggests that the original apocalypse had been a composite of several other sources. The text itself identifies three commentaries on the Avesta – the *Vahman*, *Hordād*, and *Aštād Yašts* – from which it is said to have derived.²¹ Since the first verse of the *Zand ī Vahman Yasn* is a paraphrase of the *Sūdgar Nask*, there must have existed at least four distinct documents behind the extant text. Apart from these sources, much other material was added. This is shown by the extensive glosses of successive editors. Eddy points out that seven separate homelands for the army of the avenging saviour who restores Iran are given. Furthermore, five places are named as locations for the final apocalyptic battle. The acquisitive nature of such geographical data shows how the prophecies were continually revised to keep abreast of the fluctuating political situation over the course of time.²²

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, verse 39.

¹⁹ Behramgore Tehmuras Anklesaria, trans., *Zand-i Vohuman Yasn and Two Pahlavi Fragments. With Text, Transliteration and Translation in English* (Bombay, 1957) iii–iv.

²⁰ Samuel K. Eddy, *The King Is Dead: Studies in the Near-Eastern Resistance to Hellenism, 214–311 BC*. (University of Nebraska Press, 1961) 343–49 (Appendix: The Bahman Yasht).

²¹ Carlo Cereti, "On the Date of the Zand ī Vahman Yasn," in idem, ed., *K. R. Cama Oriental Institute. Second International Congress Proceedings* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1996) 243–58 [244]. Cf. idem, *The Zand ī Vahman Yasn, A Zoroastrian Apocalypse* (Rome: 1995); and idem, "Central Asian and Eastern Iranian People in Zoroastrian Apocalyptic Texts," in *Kontakte zwischen Iran, Byzanz und der Steppe* (Proceedings of the Conference held in Rome 1993). Ed. C. Balint (Budapest: Varia Archaeologica, forthcoming).

²² Eddy, op. cit.

In the *Zand ī Vahman Yasn*, five distinct saviours appear. Three are mythical figures: Hushedar, Peshyotanu, and Saoshyans. The other two are Sasanian kings: Shapur and Bahrām V (Varjāvand), providing internal evidence of periodic redactions. The evidence suggests that, in its original form, this apocalypse was a four-monarch prophecy, undergoing further revision during the Sasanian period and was eventually transformed into seven-monarch prophecy in the process. Re-editing was needed in order to adapt the text to changing historical circumstances. Revision continued until around the thirteenth century, as the obvious references in the text to the Arab and Turkish invasions of Persia attest.

Zarathuštra, in the first chapter of the *Zand ī Vahman Yasn*, prays for immortality. God (Ahura Mazdā, the “Wise Lord” or, perhaps, “The Lord Wisdom”)²³ grants to the prophet “the wisdom of all-knowledge” instead. Zarathuštra then beholds a vision of a tree with four branches: gold, silver, steel and mixed iron, the latter representing the “dominion of the heretics.”²⁴ In the longer account found in the third chapter, the branches become seven in number. All of these are interpreted as kingdoms, “and so provide an *ex eventu* prophecy of the periods of world history.”²⁵ Chapters Four through Six portray a series of political and cosmic disasters. Varjāvand appears in the eighth chapter. Boyce describes the close of the text so: “The longest section of the *Zand* is devoted to the Age of Iron, told with bitter feelings...The text ends with a prophecy of the coming of Wahrām-i-Warčāwand, God of Victory, to restore Iran and the Good Religion, and to usher in the last millennium.”²⁶ This prophecy reads as follows: “As regards Vahram-i-Varjavand, it is manifest that he will come forth with full radiance,...and having settled the adjudged and true position of Religion, he will restore these Iranian villages which I, Ahura Mazdā, created. Avarice, indigence, revenge, anger, lust, envy, and wickedness will wane from the world. The wolf age will pass away and the lamb age will enter.”²⁷ Duchesne-Guillemin observes that the “career” of Varjāvand “is recounted all through the Bahman Yasht, in which he eclipses not only the other precursors, but the Saviours themselves (Zarathuštra’s three sons). He restores Iran’s independence, and unites the throne to the altar.”²⁸

A closely-related apocalypse was • *āmāsp Nāmak*, or *Jāmaspī* (hereinaf-

²³ “Ahura Mazda,” in Bowker, *The Oxford Dictionary of World Religions* 34.

²⁴ Cereti, “On the Date of the *Zand ī Vahman Yasn*,” 246.

²⁵ Collins, “Persian Apocalypses,” 209.

²⁶ Mary Boyce, “Middle Persian Literature: Visionary and Apocalyptic Texts,” in *Handbuch der Orientalistik* 4k1, Section 2, Literatur No. 1 (Leiden: E. J. Brill, 1968): 31–66 [50]. Cf. idem, “On the Antiquity of Zoroastrian Apocalyptic,” *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 47 (1984): 57–75.

²⁷ Anklesaria, trans., *Zand-i Vohuman Yasn* 125.

²⁸ Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin, *Religion of Ancient Iran* (Bombay: Tata Press, 1973): 235.

ter referred to as the • *āmāsp*), also composed in Pahlavi.²⁹ Of all the extant Pahlavi texts, none has been so well-known among the Parsis in India as the • *āmāsp*. For some time, it was held in great veneration by the orthodox Zoroastrians, especially by the female members of the community. Now and then the book was consulted for foretelling some events. This exercise of divination is consistent with the perceived prophetic nature of the apocalypse. Bearing this in mind, it can be seen why Varjāvand remained such a popular eschatological figure among pious Parsis.

The • *āmāsp Nāmak* occurs also in Pazand and Persian versions as Chapter Sixteen of the poorly-preserved work known as the *Ayātkār-i Jāmasp*. It is the untranslated Persian version that specifically mentions Varjāvand. Why the Pahlavi and Pazand versions fail to give Varjāvand's name, while the Persian version does, is a unsolved problem. Instead, in the Pahlavi and Pazand versions, Varjāvand is referred to as the King of Patasvargar, which is Tapurastan or Tabaristan. This area, first conquered by the Arabs in 758 CE, is a somewhat inaccessible mountainous region. It runs along the southern shores of the Caspian Sea. The area had only been superficially converted to Islam at the time of conquest, and pockets of Zoroastrianism persisted here even in the ninth century.³⁰ Of the • *āmāsp* in the Persian vernacular, Modi states: "The Persian Jamaspi treats of six principal subjects...The sixth chapter treats of different prognostications, that will usher in the age of a coming apostle (Beheram) Varjavand. It corresponds to Fragment No. one of the Pahlavi Jamaspi and to the ninth chapter of the Pazend Jamaspi. The Persian Jamaspi has clear references to the rule of the Turks in the beginning of the tenth century."³¹

The prophecies of the Persian messiah, Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand, are clearly modelled on the legendary Persian warlord Bahrām Čōbīn, whose stunning victory over the Turks in 589 CE saved the Persian empire from extinction.³² Anders Hultgård concurs: "The expectations of a redemption coming from the east, from India, which appear in passages concerning Vahrām ī Varčāvand (Bahman Yašt, VII. 4–5; VIII.1 [III.14; III.39] and Bundahišn XXXIII.27), may correspond to real attempts to restore the national independence of Iran after its subjugation by the Arabs."³³ Cereti offers the novel theory that Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand is to be identified with A-luo-han, the Chinese name of Yazdegard III's son Wahrām [d. 710 CE],

²⁹ For English translation and commentary, see Herbert W. Bailey, "To the • *āmāsp Nāmak* I," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 6 (1930): 55–85; and idem, "To the • *āmāsp Nāmak* II," *Bulletin of the School of Oriental Studies* 6 (1931): 581–600.

³⁰ Czeglédy, "Bahrām Čōbīn and the Persian Apocalyptic Literature," 37; Allesandro Bausani, *The Persians: From the Earliest Days to the Twentieth Century*. Trans. from the Italian by J. B. Donne (London: Elek Books Ltd., 1971): 80.

³¹ Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, trans. *Jāmāspī: Pahlavi, Pāzend and Persian Texts* (Bombay: Education Society's Press, 1903), "Introduction."

³² Margit Biró, "Bahrām Čōbīn and the Establishment of the Principality in Kartli," *Acta Orientalia Academiae Scientiarum Hungaricae* 33.2 (1979): 177–85 [177].

³³ Anders Hultgård, "Forms and Origins of Iranian Apocalypticism," in Hellholm, *Apocalypticism in the Mediterranean World and the Near East* 406.

who fled, along with other members of Sasanian royalty after the Arab conquest in 642 CE, to the Chinese capital, where he served in the imperial court of China. Woven into the Varjāvand prophecies were traits and motifs of his legendary namesakes, Bahrām Čōbīn and Bahrām Gōr.³⁴ Richard Frye explains this promotion of Bahrām Čōbīn to Persian messiah by appealing to some characteristic features of Persian hagiography: “Thus, to refer to the Sasanian period of Iran’s history, Vahram-i Varjavand, seems to me to be a greatly heroised example of the millenary tradition, for he is a truly messianic personality, even though probably a greatly heroised form of the historic Bahrām Chobin. As I have frequently stated, in the past of Iran, for the people, history was not what really happened, or even what they thought had happened, but what they thought should have happened. This is a fundamental characteristic of the view of the past among a people who have a strong epic tradition and a messianic tradition of time speculation.”³⁵

Providing insights at both ends of the historical spectrum, from the prophets who foretell to the prophets who fulfil, scholarship has largely disenchanted the prophetic authenticity of the apocalyptic genre in general. The eschatological promotion of a celebrated hero into a future saviour is by no means an isolated religious phenomenon. One has only to look to the Hindu messianic lore surrounding the tenth avatar, Kalki Viṣṇuśaṣas, who eschatologically echoes Yasodharman, a warlord roughly contemporary with Bahrām Čōbīn, but who repulsed Huns rather than Turks.³⁶ A further example is to be seen in the figure of King Geser of Ling, who in later versions of the Central Asian epic returns to earth during the last days, when his superhuman prowess as a warrior prepares the world for the advent of the future Buddha, Maitreya.³⁷

We may thus conclude the following regarding Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand, a central figure in Pahlavi apocalyptic literature: (1) While etymologically derived from Verethragna (the Persian Mars), this Bahrām is not, according to Cereti, the God of Victory, even though this *yazad* can be identified with another apocalyptic figure, *Wahrām ī Amāwand* (*Zand ī Wahman Yasn* 7.28); (2) Shāh Bahrām exhibits epic traits peculiar to the exploits of Bahrām Čōbīn, Sasanian usurper and scourge of the Turks (589 CE), popularized in the Romance of Bahrām Čōbīn (*Bahrām-Chūbīn-Nāma*); (3) Shāh Bahrām further combines features of another popular namesake, Bahrām Gōr (son and successor of Yazdegard I); (4) A final layer in the construction of Shāh Bahrām as a composite figure may be his possible identity as a son of Yazdegard III, Wahrām (d. 710 CE), whom Chinese

³⁴ Cereti, “On the Date of the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*,” 248–49.

³⁵ Richard Frye, “Methodology in Iranian History,” in *Neue Methodologie in der Iranistik* (Wiesbaden: Otto Harrassowitz, 1974): 57–69 [66]. Cf. idem, “The Charisma of Kingship in Ancient Iran,” *Iranica Antiqua* 6 (1964): 36–54.

³⁶ K. Jayaswal, “The Historical Position of Kalki and His Identification with Yasodharman,” *The Indian Antiquary* 46 (1917): 145–53.

³⁷ L. Luvsandorji, “The Question of the Origin of the Geser and Jangyar Epics,” *Archiv Orientalni* 48.2 (1980): 122–28.

history knows as the Persian noble, A-luo-han. Persian Zoroastrians hoped that Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand was to return from China, by way of India, with an army assembled by the Emperor of China, to recapture Persia. Thus, Sasanian political propaganda was transformed into an apocalyptic wish-image. Herein lies the deconstruction of apocalyptic literature by modern scholarship which, as suggested in the introduction, stands in tension with the claims of modern messiahship, of which the figure of Bahá'u'lláh is an example *par excellence*.

Bahá'u'lláh as Shāh Bahrām

Edward Granville Browne corroborates the vitality of the expectation of Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand among Persian Zoroastrians in the nineteenth-century. In 1887, Browne wrote: "I found that the Dastur...was also very full of a rare old book called the Jamasp-Name...This book he described as containing a series of prophecies, amongst which was included the announcement of the return of Shāh Bahrām, the Zoroastrian Messiah, to re-establish 'the Good Religion.' This Shāh Bahrām...is believed to be a descendant of Hurmuz the son of Yezdigird (the last Sasanian king), who fled from before the Arab invaders, with Peshutan and other fire-priests, to China; whence he will return to Fars by way of India in the fulness of time. Amongst the signs heralding his coming will be a great famine, and the destruction of the city of Shushtan."³⁸ During his 1887–88 travels in Persia, Browne also reports:

Moreover, the Babis recognize Zoroaster as a prophet, though without much enthusiasm, and are at some pains to conciliate and win over his followers to their way of thinking, as instanced by the epistles addressed by Beha from Acre to certain of their number; while some few at least of the Zoroastrians are not indisposed to recognize in Beha their expected deliverer, Shāh Bahrām, who, as Dastur Tir-andaz informed me, must appear soon if they were to be rescued from their abasement, and "the Good Religion" re-established. The Dastur himself, indeed, would not admit that Beha could be this promised saviour, who, he said, must come before the next Naw-Ruz if he were to come at all...I found that the Dastur...was also very full of a rare old book called the *Jamasp-Nama*, of which he said only one copy, stolen by a Musulman named Huseyn from the house of a Zoroastrian in Yezd, existed in Kirman, though he had information of another copy in the library of the Mosque at Mashhad. This book he described as containing a continuous series of prophecies, amongst which was included the announcement of the return of Shah Bahram, the Zoroastrian Messiah.³⁹

Significant numbers of Zoroastrians, including Zoroastrians of

³⁸ Edward Granville Browne, *A Year Amongst The Persians* (London, 1893) 442.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 395.

significance, found the promised Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand in the person of Bahá'u'lláh. Later, tracts were written to strengthen the Bahá'í mission to Zoroastrians, whose strongholds were in the Iranian cities of Kerman and Yazd. One of these tracts was written by the greatest of the early Bahá'í savants, Mírzá Abu'l-Faḍl Gulpaygání. In order to demonstrate the truth of Bahá'u'lláh's truth claims, Abu'l-Faḍl adduced passages from a text known as the *Desatír*, a late pious fraud which the Cambridge Orientalist labelled a "forgery." In any event, the marshalling of proof texts in support of Bahá'u'lláh's messianic claims served their purpose very well, because of the currency and popularity of the *Desatír* among the Zoroastrians of Iran, who accepted the authority of this text. One may speak of the inauthenticity of a text, but the messianic hope of Zoroastrians was as genuine as it was long-standing.

Nevertheless, Bahá'u'lláh's claim of prophecy-fulfilment is problematic for two reasons, as mentioned in the introduction: first, Bahá'u'lláh accomplished none of the prodigies that Zoroastrian texts required, nor did Bahá'u'lláh overthrow the oppressors. Instead of restoring Sasanian Zoroastrianism, he brought a new religion, soon to be known as the Bahá'í Faith, which, in all fairness, did represent itself as the renewal of the old Zoroastrian religion. Bahá'u'lláh was a prisoner of the Ottoman empire, not a military hero, and simply did not fulfil the Zoroastrian prophecies as popularly expected.

Worse still, some of the teachings Bahá'u'lláh promulgated appeared to be at odds with traditional Zoroastrian teachings. For example, the Bahá'í Faith, as a universal, global religion, attracts converts from virtually all religions and cultures, while the policy that prevails among Zoroastrians today is insularity. Like Judaism during the Second Temple period, there might have been a time during which Zoroastrianism had been a missionary religion. Now it is strictly an ethnic religion, antithetical to conversions, and thus is a dying religion. Present-day Zoroastrianism strongly discourages intermarriage outside one's religious and ethnic community, whereas the Bahá'í Faith encourages interracial and cross-cultural marriages.

The second reason is that the Zoroastrian prophecies themselves were not genuine prophecies. They were certainly wish-images, and authentic documents registering despair, with lamentation followed by vaticination. If we accept the position that apocalyptic is a form of crisis literature, then the historical value of these texts is beyond reproach in terms of having captured the mood and especially the malaise that prevailed among Zoroastrians of that time. In the interest of reclaiming a lost Persian glory and of restoring the Zoroastrian clergy to power, these prophetic texts employ, as mentioned above, a literary device known as *vaticinatio ex eventu*, or prophecy after the event, where past events become last events, in which a nostalgic golden age is projected into the future.

Converting Zoroastrians

Returning to our initial focus on Zoroastrianism, if Bahá'ís appealed to

Zoroastrian prophecies that were themselves suspect, this was done either out of critical innocence, or missionary zeal, or both. The motive, obviously, was missionary. Bahá'ís simply wanted to persuade Zoroastrians that Bahá'u'lláh was the promised Shāh Bahrām. But things were *not* that simple. Outwardly, no prophecy-fulfilment had evidently taken place. Bahá'u'lláh did not make the sun stand still, for example. This was one of the eschatological events that was to take place at the eschaton, according to the *Zand ī Vahman Yasn.*⁴⁰ If Bahá'u'lláh did not fulfil what the prophecies had literally required, we may legitimately ask how the Bahá'ís succeeded in creating among their Zoroastrian converts the requisite suspension of disbelief⁴¹ in order to accept the possibility that Bahá'u'lláh was the expected deliverer.

'Abdu'l-Bahá was asked about one of the prodigies that Shāh Bahrām was to have performed: "Thou hadst written that in the sacred books of the followers of Zoroaster it is written that in the latter days, in three separate Dispensations, the sun must needs be brought to a standstill. In the first Dispensation, it is predicted, the sun will remain motionless for ten days; in the second for twice that time; in the third for no less than one whole month."⁴² Here 'Abdu'l-Bahá restates the question posed by a Zoroastrian Bahá'í. What is represented as Zoroastrian prophecy is quite accurate. The Parsi scholar Maneckji Nusservanji Dhalla gives the most accessible sources.⁴³ While there are several Zoroastrian texts that may be cited in support of this statement, the most concise may be the following: "It is said that the sun will stand in the midst of the sky in the time of Oshedar Bami [Hushēdar Bāmī] for 10 days and in the time of Oshedar Mah [Hushēdar Māh] for 20 days and in the time of Soshyosh [the final Soshyant or saviour] for 30 days."⁴⁴

This eschatological prodigy had such importance for establishing the legitimacy of any prophet-claimant that the late Czech scholar Otakar Klíma, gave an interesting notice of it. Klíma suggested that the feat of arresting the sun in its zenith was a requirement fabricated by dasturs (Zoroastrian priests), along with the creation of other miracle-tests, "with the intention of preventing self-appointed prophets from pretending."⁴⁵

⁴⁰ Mary Boyce, ed. and trans., *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984) 94.

⁴¹ While the notion of "suspension of disbelief" is drawn from film and drama theory, we can clearly see that Zoroastrian apocalypses are, themselves, eschatological dramas. Conversion to the Bahá'í Faith required participation in this religious "fiction." In the academic study of religion, such identification and vicarious participation in apocalyptic scenarios is termed "realized eschatology."

⁴² Trans. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1969) 101–102.

⁴³ Maneckji Nusservanji Dhalla, *Zoroastrian Theology* (AMS reprint, 1972 [New York, 1914]) 285–87.

⁴⁴ *Jāmāsp Nāma*, cited in Ervan Dhabhar, ed. and trans., *Persian Rivāyats of Hormazdar Framarz and Others* (Bombay: K. R. Cama Oriental Institute, 1932) 492.

⁴⁵ Otakar Klíma, "The Date of Zoroaster," *Archiv Orientalni* 27 (1959): 562–63.

‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation of this prophecy is as follows:

The interpretation of this prophecy is this: the first Dispensation to which it refers is the Muhammadan Dispensation during which the Sun of Truth stood still for ten days. Each day is reckoned as one century. The Muhammadan Dispensation must have, therefore, lasted no less than one thousand years, which is precisely the period that has elapsed from the setting of the Star of the Imamate to the advent of the Dispensation proclaimed by the Báb. The second Dispensation referred to in this prophecy is the one inaugurated by the Báb Himself, which began in the year 1260 AH and was brought to a close in the year 1280 AH. As to the third Dispensation – the Revelation proclaimed by Bahá'u'lláh – inasmuch as the Sun of Truth when attaining that station shineth in the plenitude of its meridian splendour, its duration hath been fixed for a period of one whole month, which is the maximum time taken by the sun to pass through a sign of the Zodiac. From this thou canst imagine the magnitude of the Bahá'í cycle – a cycle that must extend over a period of at least five hundred thousand years.⁴⁶

This interpretation is complicated by the issue of religious allegiances and nationalistic aspirations. As mentioned, Shāh Bahrām was to lead a war, to vanquish Islamic overlords, and to re-establish the primacy of the Zoroastrian religion. In traditional Zoroastrian perspective, ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s explanation involves a difficult paradox: while the Zoroastrian prophecies called for war, Bahá'u'lláh advocated peace. When the religion of Islam – a

⁴⁶ Trans. Shoghi Effendi, *The World Order of Bahá'u'lláh* 102. Evidently, some Bahá'ís were puzzled over the differing valuations which ‘Abdu’l-Bahá assigned to each of the days, finding the apparent inconsistency in interpretation problematic. To the national spiritual assembly of the Bahá'ís of the United States, in a letter written on behalf of the Guardian in reply to questions sent to him, came these explanations:

Concerning the passage in “The Dispensation of Bahá'u'lláh” in which the Guardian quotes ‘Abdu’l-Bahá’s interpretation of the prophecy referring to the times when the sun would stand still in the heavens, he wishes me to explain that the days referred to in this prophecy have to be reckoned differently. In the Sacred Scriptures of various religions there are to be found frequent references to days, but these have to be considered as indicating different periods of time, as for instance in the Qur’án a day is reckoned as one hundred years. The first ten days in the above mentioned prophecy represent each a century, making thus a total of one thousand lunar years. As to the twenty days referring to the Bábí Dispensation, each of them represent only one lunar year, the total of twenty years marking the duration of the Revelation of the Báb. The thirty days in the last Dispensation should not be reckoned numerically, but should be considered as symbolizing the incomparable greatness of the Bahá'í Revelation which, though not the final, is nonetheless by far the fullest revelation of God to man. From a physical point of view, the thirty by days represent the maximum time taken by the sun to pass through a sign of the Zodiac. They thus represent a culminating point in the evolution of this star (i.e., the earth). So also from a spiritual standpoint these thirty days should be viewed as indicating the highest, though not the final, stage in the spiritual evolution of mankind. (Dated August 7, 1934; published in *Bahá'í News* No. 87 [Sept. 1934]: 1.)

false religion from the Zoroastrian point of view – was supposed to have been extirpated from Iran, Bahá'u'lláh confirmed the truth of *both* religions. And while the Zoroastrian high priests were to have reclaimed their authority, Bahá'u'lláh proclaimed: “This is not the day whereon the high priests can command and exercise their authority. In your Book it is stated that the high priests will, on that Day, lead men far astray, and will prevent them from drawing nigh unto Him. He indeed is a high priest who hath seen the light and hastened unto the way leading to the Beloved.”⁴⁷ To accept, in Bahá'í terms, prophecy-fulfilment is to negate such fulfilment in Zoroastrian terms.

It was symbolic exegesis that succeeded in inducing a suspension of disbelief in the realisation of, or vicarious participation in, the apocalyptic drama. The Zoroastrian texts were fulfilled through a negation of the literal text, in favour of an allegorising technique that proved to be a process of rewriting prophecy through reinterpretation. While the prophecies were invested with traditional authority, Bahá'í interpretations effectively created a new locus of authority. It is as though the prophecies themselves were overruled, through a curious appeal to their authority – the authority of scripture – combined with a radical reading that all but deconstructed the literal meaning.

Bahá'u'lláh's fulfilment of Zoroastrian prophecy was never meant to bear the test of textual and hermeneutical scrutiny. The new revelation was the new divine standard, the fresh locus of authority, the touchstone of truth, past and present. The fulfilment motif provided the eschatological climax at the crescendo of salvation-history. The old prophecies served as bridges into the Bahá'í era, the dawn of a new chiliasm or eschatological millennium. The old, mantic and vatic texts had served their purpose in the

⁴⁷

Trans. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1980 [1941]) 77. See alternative, provisional translation by Juan Cole, online: “Today is not the day of royal decrees or the regulations of the Zoroastrian priests. In your book [the Avesta] is a saying to this effect: ‘The Zoroastrian priests in that day shall keep the people distant and prevent them from drawing near.’ A true dastur priest is someone who has seen the light and hurries to the court of the friend. Such a one is a beneficent priest, and is the essence of illumination in this era” (<<http://bahai-library.org/provisionals/zoroaster.html>>).

Bahá'u'lláh further states: “Say, O high priests! The Hand of Omnipotence is stretched forth from behind the clouds; behold ye it with new eyes. The tokens of His majesty and greatness are unveiled; gaze ye on them with pure eyes....Say, O high priests! Ye are held in reverence because of My Name, and yet ye flee Me! Ye are the high priests of the Temple. Had ye been the high priests of the Omnipotent One, ye would have been united with Him, and would have recognized Him....Say, O high priests! No man's acts shall be acceptable, in this Day, unless he forsaketh mankind and all that men possess, and setteth his face towards the Omnipotent One” (*Promised Day*, 77–8). Cf. Cole's translation: “O servant of God: Say, ‘O priests of the Zoroastrian faith, gaze with fresh eyes at how the hand of power has appeared from behind the cloud, and look with pure eyes at how the signs of grandeur and greatness have been unveiled and become manifest.’ O servant of God: The sun of the eternal world is shining from the orient of God's will, and the ocean of divine generosity is billowing. Those who have not seen it are bereft, and all who have not attained it are dead. Close your eyes to this world, and open them upon the visage of the peerless friend, and unite with him” (Cole, op. cit.).

eyes of the Zoroastrian Bahá'ís. Prophecies, in the post-conversion experience, were only referentially meaningful. At first, Bahá'u'lláh was validated by the prophecies, when Zoroastrians embraced Bahá'u'lláh as the promised Shāh Bahrām. After becoming Bahá'ís, the reverse was true: It was Bahá'u'lláh who validated the prophecies concerning Shāh Bahrām. In effect, Bahá'u'lláh redefined the role of Shāh Bahrām.

In fairness to the Zoroastrian converts, while the Bahá'í religion did not restore Sasanian Zoroastrianism by overthrowing Islam, it most definitely superseded Islam and reclaimed the position of Zoroaster in the Bahá'í roster of prophets. And the transition was not as great as, say, conversion to the Bahá'í Faith from a Buddhist background. While the Bahá'í Faith is not, strictly speaking, a Persian religion, Zoroastrian converts could, culturally as well as religiously, feel somewhat at home in the new religion. For example, the Bahá'í (or Badí') calendar resembled the Zoroastrian calendar in some striking ways, most notably in preserving the ancient Iranian new year, Naw Rūz, celebrated at the vernal equinox, or first day of spring, and in using divine attributes to name all days, months and so on. That Bahá'u'lláh was Persian, and, moreover, had both royal and prophetic lineages, was another factor in his acceptance by Persian Zoroastrians. The essentially ethical character of the Bahá'í religion resonated strongly with the Zoroastrian ethic of "good thoughts, good words, good deeds," in marked contrast to the perceived misdeeds of the Arab, Turk, and Mongol overlords during the conquest of Iran, from which the Zoroastrians never fully recovered. The Bahá'í social system was superior in its egalitarianism, having abolished the Islamic *dhimmī* system which effectively relegated Zoroastrians to an inferior social status, with abbreviated rights and benighted prospects for meaningful amelioration under the Shī'ī legal system. While the Bahá'í Faith did not fulfil Zoroastrian national aspirations, the conversion of Zoroastrians to the Bahá'í religion significantly contributed to the amelioration of the Zoroastrians of Iran, as Susan Stiles Maneck has shown.⁴⁸

Bahá'u'lláh's writings to Zoroastrians

There are a number of tablets that Bahá'u'lláh revealed to Zoroastrians – a few revealed in pure Persian without the presence of Arabic loanwords – added to which are a number of tablets by 'Abdu'l-Bahá as well. One of the most well known of these writings is Bahá'u'lláh's Tablet of Seven Questions (*Lawḥ-i haft pursish*), for which a provisional translation was undertaken several years ago.⁴⁹ The fourth question explicitly asked if the advent of

⁴⁸ Susan Stiles Maneck, "The Conversion of Religious Minorities to the Bahá'í Faith in Iran: Some Preliminary Observations," *Journal of Bahá'í Studies* 3.3 (1990–91): 35–48. See also Susan Stiles [Maneck], "Early Zoroastrian Conversions to the Bahá'í Faith in Yazd, Iran," in *From Iran East and East: Studies in the Bábí and Bahá'í History*, vol. 2. Juan Cole and Moojan Momen, eds. (Los Angeles: Kalimát Press, 1984).

⁴⁹ Shahriar Razavi, "The Tablet of the Seven Questions of Bahá'u'lláh (*Lawḥ-i haft pursish*) An Introductory Note and Provisional Translation," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 7.3–4 (June 1993): 48–59 [Persian text, 53–59]. Cf. Stephen Lambden, "Appendix One: A Few

Shāh Bahrām had transpired,⁵⁰ to which Bahá'u'lláh poetically answered in the affirmative. Bahá'u'lláh asserts a general fulfilment of Zoroastrian prophecies in proclaiming: "Whatsoever hath been announced in the Books hath been revealed and made clear. From every direction the signs have been manifested. The Omnipotent One (*yazdān*) is calling, in this Day, and announcing the appearance of the Supreme Heaven (*mīnū-yi a'zam*)."⁵¹ And further, in the Tablet of Seven Questions: "O high priests (*dastūrān*)! Ears have been given you that they may hearken unto the mystery of Him Who is the Self-Dependent, and eyes that they may behold Him. Wherefore flee ye? The Incomparable Friend (*dūst-i yik-tā*) is manifest. He speaketh that wherein lieth salvation. Were ye, O high priests, to discover the perfume of the rose garden of understanding, ye would seek none other but Him, and would recognize, in His new vesture, the All-Wise and Peerless One, and would turn your eyes from the world and all who seek it, and would arise to help Him."⁵²

This is a call to Zoroastrian high priests, and, by extension, all Zoroastrians, to effectively fulfil their religion's highest ideals by abandoning it. In so doing, the new religion, the Bahá'í Faith, which purports to be a renewal of the essential teachings of the Zoroastrian religion and of all other world religions, would compensate this voluntary loss of the former religion by immortalizing Zoroaster within the Bahá'í canon of "Manifestations of God." Ironically, while Zoroastrianism has traditionally not allowed converts, every Bahá'í doctrinally becomes a Zoroastrian to the extent that he or she accepts the authenticity of the ancient Persian prophet.

According to Cereti, "the apocalyptic prophecy regarding the arrival of *Wahrām* should be interpreted as a political oracle heralding the return of a scion of the Sasanid house."⁵³ As such, the figure of Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand "belongs to very early Islamic times."⁵⁴ Moreover, "his literary character was created from Sasanian epic material."⁵⁵ The original intent of the prophecies regarding Varjāvand was nationalist and manifestly political,

Expository Notes on the *Lawḥ-i haft pursish*," *Bahá'í Studies Bulletin* 7.3–4 (June 1993): 48–59.

⁵⁰ See Persian text of *Lawḥ-i Haft Pursish*, in Bahá'u'lláh, *Majmū'a-yi alvāh-i mubāraka hadrat-i Bahá'u'lláh* (Wilmette: Bahá'í Publishing Trust, 1978 [Cairo: 1920]) 240–48 [243]. In a recent book containing 735 Tablets from Bahá'u'lláh and Abdu'l-Bahá, *Majmū'a-yi alvāh bi iftikhār-i yārān-i Pārsi* ["Collection of Tablets in Honour of Zoroastrian Baha'is"] (Germany: Baha'i Verlag, 1999), Shāh Bahrām is mentioned on pages 228, 250, 330, 388, and 446. Personal communication, Prof. Fereyduun Vahman (University of Copenhagen).

⁵¹ Trans. Shoghi Effendi, *The Promised Day Is Come* 77.

⁵² *Ibid.*

⁵³ Cereti, "On the Date of the Zand ī Wahman Yasn," 248. The present writer has not yet accessed Dr C. Cereti's conference paper: "Again on Wahrām ī warzāwand," Proceedings of the Conference, "La Persia e l'Asia Centrale da Alessandro al X secolo," (February 1997).

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*

not to mention anti-Islamic or at least anti-Arab. Zoroastrian apocalypses express the longing for the restoration of royalty and religion. This is an historical-contemporary interpretation of Zoroastrian apocalyptic material. In an unpublished paper, Julie Meisami of the Oriental Institute at Oxford has demonstrated how the prophecies concerning the Zoroastrian “King from the East” were effectively transformed into Islamic prophecies, with their own distinct trajectories.⁵⁶

As such, we can probably conclude that the prediction regarding the advent of Shāh Bahrām is a failed prophecy. It is not susceptible of fulfilment in literal terms. Considering that Zoroastrianism is a dying religion, due to its adamant non-conversion policy which, sadly, probably dooms the faith-community to inexorable attrition, one must conclude that such prophecies can only be dismissed, unless they are radically reinterpreted. Those Zoroastrians who chose to do so, who elected, by faith, to embrace Bahá'u'lláh as Shāh Bahrām Varjāvand, were obliged to abandon particular aspirations for universal ones, thus transforming Zoroastrian identity, and actualising prophecy by demilitarising and ultimately universalising it.

This paper has explored some theoretical tensions between modern scholarship and modern messiahship, as personified by the nineteenth-century world-prophet, Bahá'u'lláh. On comparative grounds, apocalyptic scenarios exhibit some universal features, such as lamentation, nostalgia, wish-image, ethnocentrism, and vengeance or vindication. Equally significant is how apocalyptic scenarios are fulfilled. When a truth claim is advanced by a messianic claimant, to suggest suasively that the time of the end is upon us, apocalyptic prophecies are appealed to as proof texts. This paper has argued that, at least in one case, the net effect of such a claim is to overrule the apocalypse itself, in which the apocalyptic scenario is effectively negated in the process of its being fulfilled.

⁵⁶

Julie S. Meisami, “The King from the East and the End of Days: Myth, History, and Politics in the Samanid Milieu” (Oxford: Oriental Institute: unpublished [1997]).