

The fragment that has come down to us is written in the Pahlavi alphabet employed on the coins of the Sassanides. But the Avesta undoubtedly dates from a far earlier period than the Sassanian dynasty. The ideas conveyed in the text were thoroughly developed in the time of Philip of Macedon and earlier, and the account given of the Zoroastrian religion by Theopompus, born B.C. 380, agrees with the Avesta in all essentials.

If it had originated in the time of the Sassanides, it would naturally have been written in the old Sassanian language and not in an independent language intimately allied with the Old Persian and Sanskrit dialects. The Sassanides must, therefore, have received the text in a foreign tongue.

From this we may conclude that the priests which taught this religion were foreigners. They were called Magi, and both Greek and Persian authors assign their origin to Media. Grecian writers speak of a race of Magi, and originally the term had doubtless a national signification. They differed from the Persians not only in language, but in customs. Herodotus says that the Persians buried their dead, but that the Magi exposed theirs; a custom which became universal among the Sassanides. The Pushtoo, or language of Afghanistan, has a closer affinity to the language of the Avesta than any other known language. The term Zoroaster, like Christ or Buddha, is rather a title than a name, and his origin is lost in the myths of antiquity, in which he is represented as the foe of the demons. All creation waited for his coming to put an end to the dominion of evil. He spoke the words that shattered the dominion of the devils by proclaiming the laws of Ahriman. But although his life is obscured in fable, there is no room to doubt that he was a real existence; the obscurity in which he is enveloped simply indicates the remoteness of his time. The names of his father and daughter and his own family name (Spitama) are preserved, and his writing indicates a marked individuality.

These writings are divided into two clearly distinct parts—the Gathas, and the remaining Avesta. The Gathas or songs embrace five, or, according to an internal division, seventeen chapters; they are in metrical verse, and written in an obscure dialect, constituting the most difficult text in the realm of Indo-Germanic philology. They are supposed to be more ancient than the Avesta, in which they are occasionally cited.

The Gathas are nearest to Zoroaster, and were compiled either by himself or his disciples. They represent him as a teacher of great gifts; he is evidently not merely the founder of a religion, but a leader and reformer who delivered his people from great evils. He regarded himself as one of the last of a long series of prophets, and came to restore order among the people of Ascharan the pious.

The Gathas treat of actual realities, free from myth or miracle, but indicate clearly a deep religious movement of which Zoroaster was the leader. The people who listened to his teachings were pastoral and agricultural communities, worshippers of the *Devatas*, between whom and the worshippers of the Ahuramazda, the Creator, there was a prolonged struggle.