Death: The Temporary Triumph of Evil

According to the Zoroastrian doctrine, death occurs when the breath of life (ushiana) leaves the body upon it being afflicted by evil. ".....ungodly Ashmaogha directly defiles the creatures of the good spirit.....and he smiles the faithful man with a deadly blow that parts the soul from the body."

(Vis. 5.36–37).

Contrary to popular belief, death in Zoroastrianism is not ordained by God but it is the temporary triumph of Ahriman, the evil spirit, whose inherent nature is to cause destruction within the physical world. In the Greater Bundahishn it is stated, "Thereupon, the Evil Spirit spoke: 'I shall not bring help unto Thy creatures, nor shall I offer praise; I will destroy Thee and Thy creatures too, upto eternity'...." (GBd. 1.22).

The first person to conceive death to be the work of an apparent agency outside of God, was none other than Zarathushtra himself. In the Gathas, the prophet brilliantly outlined the need for a fundamental duality within the relative world which, he declared, was in a state of heightened conflict. He saw the protagonists of this cosmic battle to be two spirits—Spenta Mainyu the Incremental Spirit, and Angra Mainyu the Hostile Spirit. ".....In thought, in word, and in action, they are two: the better and the bad. And between these two, the beneficent have correctly chosen, not the maleficent." (Y.30.3).

The Antagonists

Not only did Zarathushtra realize the existence of a primordial duality, but he recognized the importance and rationality of not attributing evil to emerge from God. "Yes, the person indeed who shall try to destroy us, Wise One, is different from us: he is a son stemming from deceit's creator and thereby maleficent (to those) who exist." (Y.51.10). The Incremental Spirit, he declared, was the Creator of life, while he saw the Hostile Spirit as being the bringer of death. So diametrically opposite are the natures of these two spirits, that he revealed in his hymns, "Yes, I shall speak of the two fundamental spirits of existence, of which the Bounteous One would have thus spoken to the evil one: Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our preferences nor words, neither our actions nor conceptions nor our souls are in accord."

(Y.45.2).
If good and evil do come from the same source, why would Zarathushtra so emphatically have declared their different sources and irreconcilable natures? Can a perfect, all-good Being (God) remain perfect, if part of the nature of that Being is deemed to be evil? In Zarathushtra's mind the answer was clearly "NO!". If he thought God to be partially evil, then that element of God would have to be relegated to Hell—clearly an untenable axiom to postulate, as nowhere in the Gāthās is God declared to be imperfect nor is He held to be responsible for the source of evil and imperfection in the world.

The great strength of Zoroastrian doctrine lies in the fact that the agency which perpetrates excess or deficiency by way of poverty, chaos, disease and eventually death, is not that which is ordained by God but that which is perpetrated by the antagonistic spirit of evil.

To conclude then, death, the negation of life, is the maleficent action of a hostile evil spirit who is fundamentally antagonistic to the inherent goodness of God. Therefore in Zoroastrian doctrine, God cannot be held responsible for death nor can He be deemed to be the creator or perpetrator of evil in the world.

Additional references indicating death to be the work of evil in Zoroastrian doctrine:

1. "...who, by reason of the commandments of deceit, continue to destroy the creatures of truth...." (Y.31.1).
2. "It is suffering and death that destroys the body, not the Creator whose will is good, and who preserves and maintains the body." (Šk β.64).
3. "...and the destroyer is the accursed destructive spirit, who is all wickedness and full of death, a liar and a deceiver."1
4. "The good spirit tries to prolong life, whereas the evil spirit strives to destroy life, and to frighten away the soul."1

1. The Pahlavi texts pp 41–50, tr. by Dastur J.D.M. Jumasp Asana, Bombay 1897.
2. Persšošn 16.2–3, tr. by Dastur Dr. K.M. Jumasp Asa.

5. "...he let loose Astavidat (the demon of death) with a thousand death-producing dévs...." (GbD.4.24).
6. "...and Astavidat (the demon of death) who devours every creature and knows no satiety." (Mkh.2.117).

The After-life Doctrine

Upon death the wholeness of man is sundered, for "...when men die, during the antagonism of Ahriman, the body unites with the earth, the life with the wind, the prototype with the Sun, and the soul with the spirit, so that they cannot destroy the soul." (GbD.3.13).

At the Point of Death

In the Dēnkard a clear reference is to be found as to what happens at the point of death. "...there is the overpowering attack upon the body by the 'death causer' and the 'inactivity producer' demon Astavidat, and the distressful separation of life from it...and the dragging into the body of those demons...who are the separators." (Dbk.5.19.1 Vol.10 p 16).

The act of death is the triumphant attack by evil who violently snatches away the breath of life. "The injury of the destroyer to the body of those passed away is contaminating; the nasū (corpse demon) rushes on it, and owing to its violence, it becomes triumphant over the life of the righteous man, and puts itself into the place of the body, that body is then for that reason, called nasā (dead matter)." (Db.17.7, SBE Vol.18 p 39).

The Soul's Timidity

Upon death, the soul is timid and fearful like "...a stranger who does not find his way anywhere and is not able (to find it out) and remains in torment." (Saddar Bd.40.5).

A Three-day Wait

The Potential Righteous Soul

According to the Hūdokht Nasḵ (Y.22.1 – 20), "Upon death, the soul takes its seat near the
head chanting the sacred hymns."

A series of rhetorical questions is allegedly said to have been asked by Zarathushtra to Ahura Mazda.

"O Ahura Mazda, most Holy Spirit, Creator of the material world, Thou Holy One! When a righteous one dies, where does his soul abide the first night... on the second night... on the third night?"

Ahura Mazda answered thus —

"It takes its seat near the head, chanting the Ushvatavi Gāthā, proclaiming happiness... On that night, his soul experiences as much joy as all that which (he experienced as) a living being." (Yt.22.1 - 6).

In the Vīshāpa Yasht, there is an accretion in which it is stated that the righteous soul dwells with all its good words on the first night, all its good deeds on the second night, and dwells on the path just before Heaven and Hell on the third night (Yt.24.54).

In the Pahlavi texts, a more elaborate description of the soul’s three-night sojourn is given. It is stated that during these three nights, various demons like Vīzaresha, Astavīd and Aeshma attempt to capture and kill the soul. During this three-day vigil, the Yazata Sraosh is invoked by the living as Sraosh is the chief protector of the soul as well as the Lord of Prayer. The Yazata Sraosh may also be propitiated in advance by the living soul in anticipation of its future death, through the performance of the zinda ravan ceremony (Per. Riv. p 422).

The Potential Wicked Soul

In the Hádokht Nask, it is stated that a wicked soul suffers immensely as it is confused and in a distressed state. It runs around the head, chanting the words of the Kima Gāthā — "...unto what land, O Ahura Mazda, shall I go to flee? Whither to flee? On that night his soul experiences as much unhappiness as all that which (he experienced as) a living being." (Yt.22.19-24). The soul laments and suffers from mental anguish, as it begins to realize the impending doom at the Bridge of the Separator (Av. chinvat, pērētāv). The demons Vīzaresha, Astavīd and Aeshma triumphantly taunt the wicked soul.

In the Pahlavi texts it is stated that the soul spends the first, second and third nights with its bad words, bad deeds and on the precipice of Hell respectively. The wicked soul, recognizing its folly and doom, wishes to return back to earth, only to realize that it is on a path of no return. "...I am separated from everyone and from the joy of the material world, which is the great hope of spiritual life and I have attained to the severe accounting and to greater danger." (Dat.16.4). As the soul utters these words, it regrets its mistakes and short-sightedness, knowing that it is going to become a guest in the House of Desec (Hell). In short, the souls of the wicked — repenting, rebuking, wailing and distressed — proceed to await their Judgment on the dawn of the fourth day after death.

The Dawn of the Fourth Morning

According to the Hádokht Nask, at the end of the third night when dawn appears, the soul of the righteous person passes through beautiful plants and trees, inhaling the fragrant scents. A southerly wind blows and advancing with the wind, appears the daēnā (conscience) in the form of a maiden who is beautiful, radiant, white-armed, robust, fair-faced, erect, high-breasted, and of glorious lineage. "What virgin art thou?", asks the pious soul. "I am the daēnā of thine own self; I am, O youth, thy good thoughts, words and deeds." (Yt.22.9-12). The daēnā then accompanies the righteous soul to the Bridge of the Separator where it will be judged.

If the soul is potentially wicked, then on the dawn of the fourth morning, it experiences frost and terrible stenches. A foul-smelling
northerly wind blows, bringing the conscience in the form of a hideous hag. In the Ardīy Wīrāz Nāmag, the hag is described as "...a profligate woman, decayed, naked, with exposed thighs in front and buttocks behind, bandy-legged, gaping, lean-hipped, with endless spots like scales (AWN 17). The surprised soul asks of her identity, "I am thy bad deeds, O youth of evil thought, word, deed and of evil conscience. It is on account of thy will and action, that I am ugly and vile, disgusting and diseased, decrepit and of evil complexion, unfortunate and distressed as it seems to thee", replies the old hag (AWN 14-15). The hag then accompanies the wicked soul to the Bridge of the Separator.

The Moment of Judgement
All the souls of the departed undergo a judgement at the Bridge of the Separator which is believed to be guarded by the celestial dogs. The soul is judged by a team of heavenly assessors, namely Ahura Mazda, the Amesha Spentas, Zarathushtra, Rashn (Lord of Justice), Mithra (Lord of Contract) and Sraosh (Lord of Prayer). It is here at the Bridge of the Separator that the soul receives its reward or punishment depending upon the balance of its thoughts, words and deeds.

The reward is meted out by the judges, while the soul's retribution appears to be the result of its own wicked thoughts, words and deeds. It is the soul which has wrought havoc upon itself by choosing to become imperfect, and thereby black-balling itself from the House of Song where only the righteous souls dwell. Thus, it is the soul which through its own bad thoughts, words and deeds, brings about a self-inflicted retribution (upon itself). Ahura Mazda, therefore, cannot be held responsible for the soul's torment and punishment in the hereafter, as the perpetuation of suffering and pain is alien to the inherent nature of Ahura Mazda.

If found righteous, the soul ascends to the abode of joy and light; while if wicked, the soul is dragged into the abode of gloom and darkness by the demon Vizaresha. For in the Gāthās, Zarathushtra declares — "Heavenliness shall be the future possession of him who shall come to a truthful person (now), (But) a long lifetime of darkness, foul food, the word woe — to such an existence shall your conception, ...lead you, ye deceitful ones." (Y.31.20).

If the good thoughts, words and deeds equal the bad thoughts, words and deeds, the soul is relegated to an in-between state (Ph. hamnastagan) (AWN 6.1 – 12).

Heaven: A Place of Perpetual Profit
In the Pahlavi texts, Heaven is seen as a bright, joyful, happy place, and one of perpetual profit (Ph. hamnastagan), where all is imperishable and perfect. Here, the soul eternally experiences pleasure and tastes the fruits of immortality.

Hell: A Dungeon of Darkness, Gloom and Stench
Hell is described as a very narrow and fearful place in which there exists darkness, gloom, stench and extremes of temperature, where no existence is possible. The noxious creatures tear, seize and worry the souls of the wicked who are in a perpetual state of misery, pain and suffering (AWN 18).

Reincarnation: A Zoroastrian Heresy
In Zoroastrian doctrine man is given the assurance that divine justice, by way of spiritual accounting, is meted out to all. The soul must discern judiciously, as it incarnates only once into the physical world. Contrary to popular belief, there seems to be no textual evidence supporting the theory of reincarnation, by which is meant the repeated return of the same soul in different earthly forms.
Eduljee, in a recently written article\(^4\) has argued, “Just as the fate of a soul in this life is determined by its behaviour in its former life, so its fate in the former life must have been determined by its life previous to it, and that life by the one that preceded it, and so on ad infinitum. This means that there is no point in time when one can say: ‘Existence begins now’; in other words, there is no point at which creation begins and if there is no creation, then there can be no Creator. But one of the prime attributes of God is that He is the Creator. This argument is not just a clever play of words. The logic of reincarnation is not compatible with the belief in a Creator and therefore was accepted by Mahavira and the Buddha, whose religious teachings were founded upon an atheistic (“no God”) point of view. Zoroaster, on the other hand, perceived Ahura Mazda as the One, Supreme God, as well as the Creator of everything good.”

Eduljee continues, “...It is noteworthy that Christianity and Islam, which are religions that have spread all over the world and that satisfy the hopes and aspirations of, and give comfort and consolation to millions of people, do not include reincarnation in their doctrinal beliefs. These religions have certain common features with Zoroastrianism: they all believe in one God; God is the Creator of the Universe; and man as God’s supreme creation, has a vital part to play in fulfilling God’s purpose; there is a Heaven and a Hell, in which the souls are rewarded or punished according to the lives that they have led on this earth; the life span of the world is limited in time, with a beginning, a middle and an end; and at the end, there is a resurrection. Religions with these characteristics have no place for reincarnation.”

Eduljee has also clearly shown that the much quoted Gāthic verses of Y.46.11 and Y.49.11 in support of reincarnation, have been wrongly translated and interpreted by the advocates of reincarnation, namely, Taraporewala and Dabu.

In the *Denkard* Vol. 2 p 83, it is stated — “…the soul of that sinful man owing to his sin being greater than his righteousness...is imprisoned in the abodes of Hell, with the evil-bodied ones. And the information which is found in the good religion about this (matter) is this, that for him there is no liberation till the time of *Frashō.kereit* (Making Wonderful), but that he will have to suffer (till then) the pains and stings of Hell.” If, as it is stated, the wicked soul remains in Hell till the end of time, then how can the same soul reincarnate into another earthly body?

The strongest evidence against the theory of reincarnation comes to us from the *Jāmāsp Nāmag*, in which it is clearly stated, “They cannot return to this world once again so that they may do virtuous deeds.” (*Per.Riv.* p 485).

According to the theory of reincarnation, a person is punished or rewarded in this life for the bad or good actions done in a previous incarnation. How can a morally just and benign God inflict punishment upon a person, who in this present existence is not even aware of the alleged crime that is meant to have been committed in an apparent, previous life? It is the soul of man that ensures a spiritual existence in the hereafter, depending upon the thoughts, words and deeds generated in this life. No intercession is possible for the soul of a man who continuously chooses to be the agent of excess or deficiency in this world. Clearly then, the task of man during this only earthly sojourn is to become the master of his destiny and not be a mere pawn of a never-ending, cyclical, futile existence.

The Zoroastrian Answer

It is popularly believed by those who subscribe to the theory of reincarnation, that the inequalities in this world are the direct result of a previous incarnation. Their argument runs on the lines that some people
are born rich and others poor, some are born healthy and others diseased or maimed because God (they believe) in His divine plan, has ordained a series of rewards and punishments upon His creations. A strange and cruel God surely, if He chooses to punish His creations in such an arbitrary merciless way by inflicting unhappiness, pain, poverty, suffering, and ultimately death upon them.

According to the Zoroastrian viewpoint which is an eminently rational one, the inequalities within our world are not deemed to be God-ordained, but are held to be the direct result of the constant open conflict between the forces of good and evil. It is the innate nature of evil to be corrupt and destructive, thereby causing continuous affliction upon the whole of creation in the relative world. "...and the destroyer is the accursed destructive spirit, who is all wickedness and full of death, a liar and a deceiver." 15

In other words, evil due to its intrinsic nature will continue to attack God's perfect creations at random, in order to thwart the progress and increase of all that is good in this world. Therefore, the inequalities reflected through poverty, despair, misery, pain, suffering, disease are not due to a previous life punishment, but exist as a result of the constant battle between the two antagonistic forces in this life. The inequalities will continue to remain until man, through the ethical weapon of good thoughts, words and deeds, is able to overwhelm the Lie and thereby trounce the forces of darkness, thus ridding the world of evil and making God as a result of it truly omnipotent!

The "reincarnationists" also claim in support of their theory, that there are some people in the world who are able to narrate factual occurrences inspite of not having had any previous knowledge of the same. Their explanation for this phenomenon is based upon the theory of reincarnation on the grounds that, as a result of a previous life experience, one is able to recount something factually and accurately in this life. Once again turning to Zoroastrian doctrine, it is stated that upon death there is a hereafter wherein the soul dwells in Heaven or Hell, depending upon the life it has led in this world. It is also believed that the souls of the dead possess a memory, and therefore are able to maintain a link between both the physical and spiritual worlds. Does not a Zoroastrian invoke the blessings of the souls and spirits of the departed near and dear ones in a various ritual, or during the festival of 

The concluding remarks of J. E. Sanjana 6 on this topic are particularly apt. "...I have heard men of fair education wondering why any objection should be taken to a Zoroastrian believing in the dogma of reincarnation....A little thought should show that it matters a great deal; a little reflection should show that faith in this dogma is so incompatible with the letter and spirit of traditional Zoroastrianism, that it can be said without any exaggeration and with the most perfect reason and justice, that a man who believes in reincarnation is no true Zoroastrian...."

5. The Pahlavi Texts pp 41 - 50, tr. by Dastur J.D.M. Jamsukh Asna, Bombay 1897.