Zoroastrian Polemics against Judaism
In the Doubt-Dispelling Exposition

Jason Mokhtarian

Abstract

This essay focuses on two anti-Jewish chapters from the ninth-century Zoroastrian apologetic-polemical book called the Doubt-Dispelling Exposition (Škand Gumānīg Wizār). This book represents the earliest sustained engagement of Zoroastrianism with Judaism and Jewish texts. Through a close analysis of the text, this essay demonstrates how the author of this complex work, who synopsizes Genesis 1–3 and some other passages from the Bible and rabbinic literature, focuses his attack on the inconsistencies and internal contradictions in how the “First Scripture” describes God’s power over creation, His intentions, and human free will. While this paper focuses on the contents and form of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār itself, it also alludes to the broader historical and intellectual environment in which the author, an educated Zoroastrian layman in search of religious truth, was operating in early Islamic Iran.
Introduction

Polemical writings represent a subset of texts produced by religious groups in Iran in the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods. Scholars of this time period have demonstrated the high levels of interaction in many aspects of life between the different religious and ethnic communities who resided alongside one another in Mesopotamia ca. 400–1000 CE. By dint of these interactions, the various literary corpora produced by Jews, Christians, Mandaeans, Manichaeans, Zoroastrians, and Muslims contain a rich library of polemics that are deserving of greater scrutiny. Yet across these writings, it is difficult for scholars to use a single definition of polemics that would apply to all of these different texts. At times, it is obvious that a text is polemical to the extent that it explicitly cites and rebuts others’ scriptures. At other times, polemical texts implicitly engage theological beliefs or ritual practices that may have impinged upon the authors’ own self-definition. The scholarly task of defining polemics is complicated by various factors, especially the fact that many polemical writings from the Sasanian period tend to be evasive in their historical objectivity and rooted in imaginative encounters, even though it is clear that debates and dialogues did happen in numerous social and institutional settings, such as in the Sasanian court. As this essay shows, the rise of Islam marks a significant rupture in the way in which religious communities engaged in polemics against other groups. In part due to the new social order and ruling religion, the early Islamic era (ca. 700–1000 CE) witnessed a flourishing of the genre, including texts by Zoroastrians.

Intended for internal consumption, polemical writings often represent a given community’s attempt to define aspects of its identity relative to competing belief systems. A community defends its truth-claims against alternative truths by attacking others’ beliefs and scriptures in light of their own internal mythologies, traditions, and language. Although ostensibly directed against others, polemical writings are as much expressions of the authors’ self-definition as they are objective analyses of the object of criticism, which gets distorted. To the extent
that polemical writings explicitly address—and even value erudition in—outsider knowledge, they run counter to the predominance of what Albert de Jong, in an important essay on Zoroastrian polemics, astutely calls a “rhetoric of insularity” whereby the religious texts of the Sasanian period describe one’s “own community as being self-contained and autonomous.” As such, polemical writings in late antique Iran—ranging from those in the Babylonian Talmud to Syriac Christian sources, as well as in Zoroastrian and Arabic texts—offer scholars a solid platform upon which to examine the formation of religious identities.

Each of these literary corpora has an idiosyncratic expression of polemical argumentation against other religions. The contents and targets of polemical texts were in part dictated by the political position of their authors within Iranian society. For instance, imperial polemics by the Sasanian-Zoroastrian elite, such as the inscriptions of Kirder, had a different form and intended function than did those composed by the Jews or Mandaeans, who wielded little authority outside their own communities. The polemics produced by the imperial elite against other religions were often a means to spread propaganda about how political sovereignty was evidence for religious truth. As for minority populations, polemical writings helped to differentiate their communities from those in power over them, as well as from their neighbors who were both similar to and different from them.

Another driving force in the polemics of late antique Iran was one religion’s proximity to and entanglements with others, in terms of scriptures, theology, law, and other aspects. This overlap is exemplified by the case of Jews and Christians in Iran. As recent studies demonstrate, Syriac Christian literature’s polemics against Jews and Zoroastrians are a result of theological and political controversies, respectively. For their part, the Manicheans—whose origins were tied up with the Jewish-Christian Elchaisites in Sasanian Mesopotamia—were frequently singled out for criticism because of Mani’s universalist, supersessionist claims. Missionizing faiths such as Christianity and Manichaeism are in certain ways more aggressive in pursuing polemical strategies and, due to their successes, were commonly the focus of attacks by others from whom
they were trying to gain followers.⁵ And, finally, the Mandaeans—a
gnostic, ritualistic religio-ethnic group from southern Mesopotamia—are
rarely referred to in Sasanian literature, though they themselves engage
in polemics against other groups.⁶ Polemics thrived among groups at the
bottom of the political and social ladder.

As for the Jews of late antique Iran, the situation is complex. There
are two trajectories to consider: polemics against Judaism, and polemics
produced by the Jews against others. As a vast compendium of rabbinic
law and lore, the Babylonian Talmud contains many passages about (and
specific rabbis who engage in) religious disputations with non-Jews.⁷
There are also stock phrases employed therein that imply dialogue
between Jews and non-Jews (e.g., “should someone tell you”).⁸ In rabbinic
literature, including the midrash, the rabbis often critique others between
the lines or with generic names such as “heretics” or “nations of the
world.” Studies on the talmudic passages about Jesus, as well as other
research, further corroborate the existence of Jewish-Christian dialogue
and polemic in the Talmud.⁹ As Peter Schäfer argues in a book on the
Jesus passages, such texts “are polemical counternarratives that parody
New Testament stories, most notably the story of Jesus’ birth and death.”
The rabbis “ridicule,” “contest fervently,” “counter” and “reverse”
aspects of Jesus’s life-story, from the Virgin Birth to the Resurrection.¹⁰

More recently, Yaakov Elman has gone beyond the Jewish-Christian
paradigm to suggest that the Talmud also contains polemics against
Manichaeism and Zoroastrianism.¹¹ Thus, scattered throughout the
Babylonian Talmud are traces of hostility towards ideas and figures from
outside religions.¹² Still, to the best of my knowledge, the Talmud does
not openly cite sentence-length or longer excerpts of the Christian New
Testament or Manichaean and Zoroastrian writings in order to show
their internal contradictions. Such rationalist critique of other religions
emerges among Jews only after the rise of Islam. In Sasanian times, the
Babylonian rabbis were in fact just as concerned with declaring their
supremacy over their Palestinian brethren as they were over outsiders
(perhaps even more so).¹³ Such inner-Jewish polemics continued cen-
turies later in the form of Rabbanite-Karaite debates.¹⁴ Indeed, it is clear
that in the history of polemics in Iran, the emergence of Islam marked a rupture for some groups, especially Jews and Zoroastrians, from latent forms of critique to more explicit and open engagement with outsider writings and ideas.

In my view, talmudic polemical passages do not reflect an attempt on the part of the Babylonian rabbis to polemicize against other religions in an open and systematic way. By contrast, Christians, Zoroastrians, and early Muslims do not hide their critiques of Judaism (or Jews or the Bible) in Syriac, Pahlavi, and Arabic writings from the late Sasanian-early Islamic period. For the rest of this essay, I would like to focus on a Zoroastrian polemical work against Judaism and other religions dated to the tenth century CE called the Škand Gumānīg Wizār.

*The Škand Gumānīg Wizār and the Iranian sectarian milieu*

The Škand Gumānīg Wizār—the title of which is often rendered in English as the *Doubt-Dispelling Exposition*—is both a Zoroastrian apology and a polemic against Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Manichaeism, and other sectarian groups. This lengthy text, which is also apologetic in nature, offers a unique glimpse into the Zoroastrian perspective on the history of religious interactions in Iran.

The Škand Gumānīg Wizār is part of the Pahlavi corpus produced by Zoroastrians residing in the Islamicate world in the ninth and tenth centuries CE, though some of its contents may reflect late Sasanian thought. The author of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār had access to parts of the *Dēnkard*, a nine-volume compendium of Zoroastrian thought, the third book of which also contains polemics. The original Middle Persian version of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is no longer extant; the extant version is composed in a later form of transcription called Pāzand, a system of writing Middle Persian in the Avestan alphabet, with some exegetical influences mixed in. The Indian copyist and scholar Neryosang Dhaval, working perhaps in the eleventh or twelfth century, is probably responsible for both the Pāzand and the Sanskrit recensions of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār. Despite its late date of composition in the ninth or tenth
century, the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is, for all intents and purposes, the earliest fully developed Zoroastrian engagement with Judaism, though there are other references to Jews and Judaism in earlier and contemporaneous sources.\textsuperscript{19} The relevance of this source for scholars of Sasanian and early Islamic Iran cannot be overestimated, since it dates to the early Islamic period, that is to say, within a new sociohistorical paradigm in which explicit polemical exchanges thrived, in contrast to the more subtle expressions of religious disagreement found in the Sasanian period.

An updated critical edition of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is a desideratum. The standard version that exists today is Jean-Pierre de Menasce’s French translation from 1945, while new critical editions of parts of the text are provided in two dissertations as well: Dieter Taillieu’s 2004 dissertation provides critical editions of the anti-Manichaean chapters, while Samuel Thrope’s from 2012 does so for the anti-Jewish chapters.\textsuperscript{20} Excerpts of other parts of the book have been published elsewhere. The Škand Gumānīg Wizār is a masterpiece of apologetic-polemical literature, and hence deserves more attention by academics interested in the religions of Iran of the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods.\textsuperscript{21} In this paper, I make an introductory effort at advancing our understanding of the anti-Jewish chapters.

The author of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār was a man named Mardān-farrox ī Ohrmazddādān whose stated intention was to compose a philosophical work of religious self-exploration that could be used as a manual for Zoroastrians who encountered other beliefs about God. The work contains sixteen chapters total. Chapters two through four are the author’s responses to questions by a man named Mihrāyar ī Mahmadān from the city of Isfahan, who (at least judging by his name) appears to have been either Muslim or at least the son of a Muslim.\textsuperscript{22} This question-and-answer form is common in the Pahlavi tradition. It is the last six chapters of the book that contain polemics against the other faiths: against Islam, and more specifically against the Mutazilites and Asharites (chs. 11–12); against a Judaism that has been influenced by Islam in various complex ways that remain to be fleshed out (chs. 13–14); against Christian doctrines such as the Virgin Birth and the Trinity (ch. 15); and,
finally, against Manichaeism (ch. 16). The Mardānfarrokh’s book is a response to the sectarian milieu of Iran in the late Sasanian and early Islamic periods, and hence it contains additional information about religious sects. For example, in chapter 6.1–8, the author warns against a group called the daharī, from the word for “time,” which designates materialists or some form of belief in which it is held that there is no beginning or end of time. An excerpt of this passage reads as follows:

Another deception is that of the atheists, who are called daharī, and consider themselves to be delivered from religious discipline and the toil of performing meritorious deeds. They foolishly utter much nonsense. Notice this: This world with all its manifold transformations and organizations of its constituents and organs, its oppositions and combinations, is considered to have for its principle the Infinite Time, and that there is no reward for merits and no retribution for sins, no paradise or hell, no agent to direct good or evil deeds, and that all things are material and the spiritual world does not exist.

This passage criticizes as “utter nonsense” the view of these atheists called daharī. According to Mansour Shaki, Mardānfarrokh argued against these atheists “in complete accord with the accounts of the Islamic heresiographers and theologians of the time.” In attacking this sect, Mardānfarrokh is also in harmony with the Dēnkard Book III, which defines this same sect as devil-lovers:

He who does not believe in the existence of the creator Ohrmazd, [who denies] the Religion and the Prophet and supports the doctrine of the devils, is in religious terminology called “adorer of the devil,” heretic, and non-Iranian and, in the popular parlance, sophist, as well as daharī. The Dēnkard defines these atheists as heretics and non-Iranians.
As other scholars have pointed out, Mardānfarrox was familiar with and working from within the same cultural context as the Dēnkard and the Zādspram, the latter being a ninth-century work compiling traditions of Zoroastrian cosmogony, theology, legend, medicine, and other types of material.27 Mardānfarrox praises the Dēnkard as a work from which he drew:

From the very power of the knowledge of the religion and from the conscientious writing of the bright Ādur-pādyāwand, and from the writing written by the blessed Rōšan son of Ādur-farrbay, which is named Writing of Rōšan (Rōšan nibēg) and that also of the great, bright and righteous Āurfarrbay son of Farroxzād, leader of those of the Good Religion. The writing, which explains the Religion and is named Dēnkard, has saved me from many doubts, errors, and deceit and from the evil of the sectaries.28

This passage references certain Zoroastrian authorities, such as the first compiler of the Dēnkard (Āurfarrbay ī Farrozadān), and perhaps his mentor Ādbād ī Yāwāndād, and finally Rōšn, son of Āurfarrbay.29

Mardānfarrox includes several autobiographical passages in the book. One alludes to the fact that the author’s desire for truth and personal doubts about his Zoroastrian faith led him to travel around Iran and the Indian subcontinent to inquire about other sects. Carlo Cereti interprets this as a literary topos, with a parallel in the Mēnōg ī Xrad (1.35–39), a Pahlavi question-and-answer book that contains advice for how to live a proper life.30 While Mardānfarrox did not travel far and wide, he was undoubtedly someone who came into contact with non-Zoroastrians in his pursuit of religious knowledge. Here is one autobiographical excerpt from chapter 1.35–38:

(As to) me, I am Mardānfarrox son of Ohrmazddād. I have written this composition because in (our) times I have seen
sectaries of many kinds, of many religions and of many different practices. And from childhood on I have always sought and investigated the truth with a fervent mind. For this very reason I have gone to many countries, up to the shore of the sea. And this summarised discourses which derive from it (contain) the questions of those who seek after the truth, gathered and selected from the writings and the memoirs of the antique sages and the good Dasturs, among whom the most famous was the blessed Ādur-pādyāwand. These were gathered in the memoirs that go under the name of Škand Gumānīg Wizār. Because it is very necessary for the explanation of the doubts of new disciples about the knowledge of truth, of the trustworthiness and the truth of the Good Religion and about the misery of the adversaries. And I have made and arranged this not for the wise and skilled (abzārōmandān), but for the students and the unskilled (nō-abzārān). So that many may be without doubt about the prosperity and trustworthiness of the discourses of the Good Religion of the Ancient Teachers.\textsuperscript{31}

The author, in his quest for truth, describes the Škand Gumānīg Wizār as a collection of memoirs. He states that the purpose of the work is to dispel doubts among Zoroastrian disciples, especially for “the students and the unskilled.” The author appears to have thought of this as a Zoroastrian commandment (“one is commanded to examine [the contradiction and error of the scripture]”).\textsuperscript{32} With respect to Mardānfarrox’s social status, Thrope has concluded: “It seems that Mardānfarrox himself was a layman, rather than a priest; this fact alone makes the [Škand Gumānīg Wizār] unique among Zoroastrian literature.”\textsuperscript{33} Perhaps the author’s status as a layman was the reason that he was able to pursue religious studies in the first place, thereby gaining detailed knowledge of the Qur’ān, hadīth, Hebrew Bible, rabbinic literature, New Testament, and Manichaean writings.\textsuperscript{34}

The author saw Manichaeism as one of the main rivals to orthodox Zoroastrianism. Mardānfarrox was familiar with Manichaean terms and
theodicy, often disparaging Mani himself:

And in particular from that of the deceiver, the great Mazandar (demon), the evil teacher, the leader of the drunken, Mānī, whose faith is sorcery and deceit of the religion and evil teaching, and whose manner is to go under cover. Now I am wisely professing (the Good Religion) by the power of wisdom and the strength of the knowledge of the religion.\(^{35}\)

Mani is here described as someone who deceives and goes “under cover” in order to spread its evil teachings. This is the type of threat that the author targets.

At its core, the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is a rationalist critique of religious doctrines focusing on the internal contradictions of scriptures about God’s power and good and evil and was influenced by Islamic rationalist theology (kalām).\(^{36}\) In its adaptation of the approach to such questions in kalām, rationalistic thinking was turned outward to find problems in others’ writings, and turned inward to defend against the potential critique by others against Zoroastrian thought. For example, chapter two of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār articulates how to fend off questions from outsiders about the apparent contradictions or inconsistencies in Zoroastrian cosmogony that, as Thrope explains, “seem to violate the absolute division between the good creator god Ohrmazd and the primordial evil antagonist Ahriman.”\(^{37}\)

With respect to Mardānfarrokh’s exposition against the monotheistic religions, scholars have drawn comparisons between the Škand Gumānīg Wizār’s methods and Marcion’s criticisms of the Old Testament, as well as the thought of Ḥīwī al-Balkhi, a ninth-century Jewish rationalist-Marcionite.\(^{38}\) Ḥīwī al-Balkhi was a biblical critic from Balkh, in Khurasan, who wrote “a polemical work in rhyme against the Bible, containing two hundred questions and difficulties.”\(^{39}\) This book is unfortunately no longer extant, but the author’s ideas were widely rejected by both the Karaites and the Geonim, including Saadya Gaon, who wrote a lengthy response
to Ḥīwī al-Balkhī’s ideas about God’s role in the Adam and Eve story, why men suffer and die, and God’s attributes. Rosenthal has argued that Ḥīwī al-Balkhī may have borrowed from the Škand Gumānīg Wizār, an argument that Thrope has since questioned. However, at the very least, these two works share a set of similar concerns that were in circulation in the ninth and tenth centuries.

**The Škand Gumānīg Wizār’s chapters against Judaism**

Perhaps the most studied chapters in the Škand Gumānīg Wizār are chapters 13 and 14, its critique of Judaism, to which I now turn. As mentioned earlier, these chapters have been transcribed and translated by Thrope in a recent dissertation. In terms of structure, chapter 13 is essentially divided up into two parts: first, a series of pseudo-citations of Genesis 1–3, and second, the author’s refutations of those pseudo-citations using rationalist thought. The chapter begins with the following statement:

Concerning the contradictions and vile utterances of the First Scripture [naxustīn niḥā] which they call ‘noble’ [āzēf] and they are unanimous in their opinion that God wrote it by his own hand and gave it to Moses.

The chapter begins with a description of its main aim—namely, to highlight the internal contradictions and evil ideas found in “the First Scripture.” The term naxustīn niḥā is difficult to identify. The word niḥā can mean “writing,” “scripture,” or “book.” It is hard to know whether the use of this term implies that the author is deriving his analysis from a written version of the text. If so, is this phrase (“first writing/scripture”) a reference to the entire Torah? Or perhaps just to Genesis? Or maybe, given the strong Islamic coloring of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār’s understanding of Judaism, it could be an allusion to the Old Testament being the first of the three monotheistic scriptures? The text’s description of God writing the First Scripture by hand and giving it to Moses is an
apparent allusion to the revelation of the Ten Commandments as told in the Exodus narrative. By comparison, Dēnkard Book III, chapters 227 and 288 both refer to the Torah, which they call “the fundamental book” (bun nibēg/nibēg bun), and say it was given by the Zoroastrian evil serpent Dahāg to Abraham who then passed it on to Moses.\(^47\) The introductory passage from the Škand Gumānīg Wizār cited above never mentions Abraham, though the patriarch plays a prominent role in other passages.

Based on the fact that Mardānfarrox draws from a fluid array of possible written and oral sources, this term “First Scripture” probably does not refer to any single corpus such as the Torah. It could be symbolic, similar to how one might say “Bible” to refer to any number of different texts. It behooves scholars to move away from the idea that Mardānfarrox’s critique of Judaism stems from knowledge of Jewish texts extant in the Bible, rabbinic literature, targums, Enochic corpus, or transmitted via the medium of other written works.\(^48\) It may be that Mardānfarrox was exposed to such works in the course of his education, but, in my view, the two chapters against Judaism are not based in the author’s direct citation from them. To me, it seems possible that Mardānfarrox is summarizing what he learned based on memory so that when his readers encounter these texts they will know what to say.

*The Škand’s critique of Judaism, I: Cosmogony*

After the introduction, chapter 13 offers Mardānfarrox’s summary of the contents of Genesis 1–3. Lines 5 through 14 begin with the introductory formula “It says at the beginning of the book,” followed by partial citations or paraphrases of Genesis 1:2–4 (when God creates light) and Genesis 2:2–3 (when God rests on the seventh day). The text conspicuously does not mention God’s creation of the heaven and earth in Genesis 1:1, though it conflates verses 2–4 before then jumping ahead to Genesis 2:2–3, which the author merely summarizes. In line 14, the author then interjects that God resting on the seventh day is the basis of the Jews in his time observing the Sabbath [šuṅbat].
The next unit (lines 15–45), set off by the phrase “this as well,” discusses parts of the Adam and Eve story that are found in Genesis 2:7, 2:21–23, 3:1–15, and 3:22–24. This section is a free-floating summary of the story of Adam, Eve, and the serpent. There are some discrepancies in the way the Škand Gumānīg Wizār describes the event, especially in line 31 where it says “Ādīnō became angry” after Adam confessed to God that he knew was naked.⁴⁹ The Škand Gumānīg Wizār often emphasizes the Jewish God’s anger (see esp. chapter 14). Also, in this unit, the description of God’s expulsion of Adam and Eve from Eden is abbreviated and not totally accurate.

After this, the text moves on (marked by “they also say this”) to summarize Genesis 1:26–30. A comparison of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār’s paraphrase and the Hebrew text demonstrates the loose nature of the former text’s pseudo-citations of the latter. I have italicized the parts of the biblical text that make up the building blocks of the Persian text:

Škand Gumānīg Wizār 13.46–47:

They also say this: “He made and created this material world [gāθr] with everything in it for human beings and he made human beings kings over all creation, the wet and the dry.”⁵⁰

Genesis 1:26–30:

And God said, “Let us make man in our image, after our likeness. They shall rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, the cattle, the whole earth, and all the creeping things that creep on earth.” And God created man in His image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and God said to them, “Be fertile and increase, fill the earth and master it; and rule the fish of the sea, the birds of the sky, and all the living things that creep on earth.” God said, “See, I give you every seed-bearing plant that is upon all the earth,
and every tree that has seed-bearing fruit; they shall be yours for food. And to all the animals on land, to all the birds in the sky, and to everything that creeps on earth, in which there is the breath of life, [I give] all the green plants for food.” And it was so.\(^{51}\)

This portion of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is a synopsis of Genesis. Mardānfarrox may not have known more than he says here, or he may just be giving an outline for his readers to the biblical narrative such that if and when they encounter Jews who propound doctrines based on Genesis they have a rebuttal ready.

Interestingly, Mardānfarrox’s switch from pseudo-citation to critique (lines 48–58) focuses on the same verses and terms that were used in lines 5–47. In other words, the relationship between parts 1 and 2 is well organized. The author did not attach the appropriate critiques to the biblical verses, but rather suspends them until after the pseudo-citations.

In delving into Genesis 1’s description of God as the creator of light, the Škand Gumānīg Wizār jumps immediately into the argument that God is not light:

Where and in what limits were the desolate earth and darkness and God and his spirit and the black water? Or, rather, of what nature was God himself? It is evident that he was not light for when he saw the light it was because he had not seen it before that it seemed good to him.\(^{52}\)

This passage raises several questions: first, what were the limits of the earth, darkness, and water? And second, what does this passage imply about God’s nature? From here, the author offers three rebuttals to the creation narrative:

(A) If they say God is light, you say: God cannot be light. Why? Because the reason that He called it “good” is because He had
never seen it before. Also, He would not have been surprised.

(B) If they say God is darkness, you say: God cannot be darkness. Why? Because darkness would then be the origin of light.

(C) If they say God is neither light nor dark, then they must demonstrate a third type of being that is neither light nor dark.

Time and again, Mardanfarrokh’s critique of Judaism focuses on the internal contradictions of scripture, especially in how it describes God’s power and knowledge. The Škand Gumānīg Wizār goes on to argue that “if light exists, then it is not a creation of Ādinō.” The author arrives at this conclusion based on various rational objections to the way the Bible describes God’s role in creation. For instance, God’s command to create light had to have been received by an entity in order to be enacted: “For this is certain that it is possible to give a command [only] to one who is commanded.” Does this mean that there existed already a light before God created light? Or if there was nothing before light, then how could nothing have heard Ādinō’s command to create light? The author continually uses basic principles of logic—e.g., the premise that something must exist as a recipient of God’s command in order for the command to be followed, or that thought precedes speech—in order to critique the biblical description. Another example of this is Mardanfarrokh’s questioning of why God, if all He needed to do in order to create the elements of universe was to say the word “Be!”, would have needed six whole days to create the world, and how God could even count days before He created the sun (see lines 92–105).

The Škand’s critique of Judaism, II: The Fall

In the next unit of chapter 13, the Škand Gumānīg Wizār engages the problem of God’s will versus human freedom in the story of Adam and Eve. In lines 106–120, the author examines the problem of whether God wanted Adam and Eve to sin or to follow His command not to eat from
the Tree of Knowledge. Did God intend for Adam and Eve to sin? Either answer—yes or no—proves that there are flaws in God’s character. First off, Mardānfarrox asks, if God knew that Adam and Eve would violate His will, then why is God described as getting angry? Thus, Mardānfarrox here calls God’s anger “unreasonable.” As I mentioned earlier, this characterization of God as angry is not as prominent in the Old Testament itself as Mardānfarrox makes it out to be. According to the Škand Gumānīg Wizār, this proves that Ādīnō “himself did not fully realize the desire of His will and it reveals Him to be His own opponent and adversary.” In other words, God does not have control over creation and works against Himself without realizing it.

On the other hand, what if God did not intend for Adam and Eve to sin? In other words, what if Adam and Eve had free will? If this is true, Mardānfarrox writes, then this merely demonstrates that God is not all-knowing and all-powerful, but rather that He is “ignorant and unrecognizing.” It also suggests that humans were stronger than God.

In lines 121–131, the polemic subsequently argues that the implication of God having to call out to Adam to find out where Adam is (“Then Ādīnō came into the garden, called Ādam by his name saying, ‘Where are you?’”), and then having to ask him whether he ate from the tree (“You have not eaten from the Tree of Knowledge which I said you were not to eat from, have you?”) is that God is not omniscient.

The Škand’s critique of Judaism III: The divine nature

As the previous examples show, throughout the chapter, the Škand Gumānīg Wizār concentrates upon three aspects of God: His will, knowledge, and command. In one of the last lines in chapter 13, the author gives what I take to be the thesis of the entire chapter: “Now it is evident that all three are opposed to each other: will, knowledge, and command.” The main threads of attack against the Jewish God are against His omnipotence, omniscience, and goodness of intentions. These attacks are, in fact, very similar to Mardānfarrox’s critiques of Christianity and Islam, as recently elucidated by Shaul Shaked and Yuhan Vevaina.
Shaked explains that Mardānfarrox’s “arguments against Islam concentrate on the contradiction of faith in an omnipotent deity who permits evil to exist in the world: this means, according to the author, either that He is not all-powerful, or not good, or lacking in wisdom, or lacking in forgiveness.” In the view of the author, the critique of the Jewish God is one part of a critique against the monotheistic deity more generally.

Chapter 14 contains similar attacks against a series of pseudo-citations in a more rapid and expansive fashion. It concentrates on aspects of God’s personality that are superficially negative. For instance, the chapter opens up by pointing to a self-proclamation of God as a vengeful deity:

I am Adonay, vengeance-seeking and vengeance-repaying and I pay the vengeance of seven generations through the children, and I never forget (this) vengeance.

As Dan Shapira has shown, the first phrase in this passage (“vengeance-seeking and vengeance-repaying”) accurately “reflects the Massoretic text.” Drawing from later Judeo-Persian translations of the Torah, Shapira argues that this passage “affirms a continuation from the Jewish Bible translations through Middle Persian and to New Persian.” Again, one has to consider whether these accurate renderings imply a textual basis for the Škand Gumānīḵ Wizār’s quotations. While there may indeed be some aspects of and correspondences in terms in the pseudo-citations that one can trace to various other sources, I would again emphasize that there are also differences between the above-cited verse and these other sources. The subsequent citations of the biblical text are not verbatim citations from known Jewish sources.

The critiques in this chapter, which emphasize God’s anger and violent tendencies, lead to several conclusions about God’s will, knowledge, and command. For example, chapter 14 points out passages, such as Genesis 6:6, in which God expresses regret that He created humankind (“His final work is entirely regret”). Towards the end of the chapter,
the Škand Gumānīg Wizār sums up its criticisms of the biblical God after
telling a tale, also found in the Babylonian Talmud (b. Taʿanit 24b–25a),66
about how an angel reports to poor people that God cannot change their
fate:

From these words it is apparent that He himself is not the
dispenser of lots and destiny, their allotment is not according
to His will, and He cannot change fate. The revolution of the
sphere, the sun, moon, and stars are not in the compass of His
knowledge, will, and command... This catalogue of their many
erroneous sayings that I wrote seems long. Whoever considers
and contests these sayings should for his sake consult [about]
the āzād (noble [?]) with a dastur, so that he will become aware
of the nature of that same scripture and the truth of that which
I said. Now if these are the signs and tokens of that God, then
truth is far from Him, mercy is unknown to Him, He has no part
of wisdom, and therefore He himself is the druž (lie), the lord of
Hell, of gloomy darkness, of the dark race whom those perver-
ted by demonic evil praise and worship by the name Adīnō.
This chapter is here completed.67

This conclusion to the polemical chapters against Judaism assails
the biblical God for having virtually no control over the fate of human
beings or the movement of the cosmos which He himself created. Mardān-
farrox advises his readers to consult with a Zoroastrian priest (dastur) to
help work through the criticisms. The final line of the chapter leaves no
room for confusion: the biblical God—lacking in mercy and wisdom—is
a demon who spawned the “dark race” of the Jews who worship Him.

Conclusion

Although Zoroastrian polemics against Judaism likely predate the
rise of Islam, it was not until the ninth century that this mode of engage-
ment with Judaism and the other religions of late antique Iran became a
formalized literary genre. In part, this change was a result of the loss of imperial authority among Zoroastrians, some of whom by the ninth century felt that it was necessary to rebut the claims of other faiths, especially Islam. This was part of a wider trend in the early Islamic period (ca. 700–1000 CE), a time of radical change in the way in which religious groups engaged with the doctrines of others.

As illustrated in the Škand Gumānīg Wizār, Zoroastrian polemics against Judaism and Jews in the ninth century were focused on the internal inconsistencies in how sacred texts described God’s character and omnipotence. Although preserving earlier traditions, the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is a rationalist critique of theological principles written in the same mode as found in contemporary intellectual currents, particularly kalām. For this reason, scholars of Islamic thought are well-positioned to contextualize its method of critique. The author of the Škand Gumānīg Wizār, Mardānfarrokh, was an educated layman in quest of religious truth. He presumably pursued religious studies alongside members of other faiths as, ultimately, a means to defend Zoroastrianism. Self-definition was thus as much of an exercise in proving why others’ beliefs were wrong as it was in proving why one’s own beliefs were right through, for instance, exegesis of one’s own scriptures. Mardānfarrokh was clearly affected by the highly sectarian environment of his time, in which debate and critique, especially between dualists and monotheists, were rampant regarding questions such as the role of human free will or the power and nature of God. The Škand Gumānīg Wizār is one of the richest sources of information for historians who are interested in such debates in this period.

Indeed, the most fruitful approach to the Škand Gumānīg Wizār would be to compare it to the plethora of other polemical writings produced by non-Zoroastrians from this time period. For instance, the flourishing of Islamic polemics in the ninth century is attested in the anti-Christian writings of Abū ʿĪsā al-Warrāq, a ninth-century Muslim with Shiʿi and Manichaean tendencies who criticizes the idea of the Trinity.68 These and other polemics from the ninth century lay a foundation for later authors, such as the Iranian Muʿtazilite ʿAbd al-Jabbār
(d. 415/1025) and, even later, Ibn Qayyim al-Jawziyyah (d. 751/1350), who criticize Judaism, Christianity, and Zoroastrianism.\textsuperscript{69} Moreover, the study of these Arabic writers would be greatly enhanced by additional research into the polemics found in other corpora, including in Christian Syriac, Geonic, Karaite, and even Judeo-Persian texts.\textsuperscript{70} It is only once each of these writings is studied on its own terms that historians can perhaps try to reconstruct broader trends in the evolution of polemical culture in Iran throughout late antiquity. In sum, while the Škand Gumānīg Wizār is deserving of further study by experts in Zoroastrianism, its appeal as a gem of Middle Eastern literature extends to scholars who research religious debate and identity formation in Iran ca. 600–1000 CE.
All digital content cited in this article was last accessed via the URLs provided in the notes below on January 5, 2021.


12. By way of example, see b. Sanh. 46b where, in search of a biblical prooftext for the requirement to bury corpses, the rabbis enter into dialogue with King Shapur II, a monarch who adhered to the Zoroastrian religion which prohibits such burials.


Oriental Studies, Section 1: The Near and Middle East 73; Leiden: Brill, 2003), 339–362.


22. For an overview of the scholarly opinions regarding this name, see Carlo G. Cereti, “Škand Gumānīg Wizār,” Encyclopædia Iranica, s.v. (https://iranicaonline.org/articles/shkand-gumanig-wizar; originally published December 8, 2014): “According to de Menasce (1945, p. 36), the very name of this character or rather his patronymic, reveals that he belongs to the Muslim faith—a hypothesis which seems to be confirmed by the contents of some of the questions that he asked. However, this position is not shared by Jâmâsp-ʿĀsānâ and West (1887, pp. xvi-xvii), according to whom both Mardānfarrox and Mihrayâr son of Mahmād are Zoroastrian laymen... [O]ne should also mention that in this context the epithet *hamē*pērōzgar ‘Ever victorious’ preceding Mihrayâr’s name would fit better a Zoroastrian than a Muslim.”

23. It is still an open question whether the ‘Judaism’ represented in these chapters is merely the author’s foil for what is actually an attack against the dominant religion of Islam, or whether it is some form of Judaism that has been influenced by its Islamic surroundings. The extreme view is that expressed by de Menasce, “Jews and Judaism in the Third Book of the Dēnkart,” 45: “the attacks on Judaism and retorts against attacks allegedly made by Jews against Zoroastrianism, are really aimed at Islamic teachings, shared, it is true, by Judaism, but more characteristic of what was more fundamentally repugnant to Zoroastrians in Islam and also more of a danger to them at the time.” It appears that this substitution of Judaism for Islam was also common in Christian apologetics, according to Sidney H. Griffith, “Jews and Muslims in Christian Syriac and Arabic Texts of the Ninth Century,” Jewish History 3 (1988): 65–94: “A review of the published Christian apologetic texts from the first Abbasid century reveals that the writers of these defensive tracts consistently characterize Islamic beliefs and practices as Jewish, or at least as Jewishly influenced” (65).


29. See Škand Gumānīg Wizār 9.1–3 and Dēnkard Book III, ch. 239.


31. Translation from Cereti, “Some Notes,” 2–3, with slight adjustments. This trope transcends confessional boundaries and is attested in Muslim and Christian heresiographies.

32. Škand Gumānīg Wizār 14.3; Thrope, “Contradictions,” 222.


38. For an overview, see Thrope, “Contradictions,” 32.
41. See Thrope, “Contradictions,” 218, n. 128.
43. For an overview of the different interpretations of this term, see Thrope, “Contradictions,” 197, n. 4.
44. Thrope, “Contradictions,” 213.
46. This is the opinion of Neusner, “Zoroastrian Critique,” 283.
49. On this name, see Thrope, “Contradictions,” 73–78.
50. Translations are from Thrope, “Contradictions,” 215.
52. Chapter 13, lines 49–53; Thrope, “Contradictions,” 215.
53. Chapter 13, line 75; ibid., 216.
54. Chapter 13, line 29; ibid., 217.
55. Chapter 13, line 108; ibid., 219.
56. Chapter 13, line 109; ibid., 219.
57. Chapter 13, line 115; ibid., 219.
58. Chapter 13, line 29; ibid., 214.
59. Chapter 13, line 33; ibid., 214.
60. Chapter 13, line 147; ibid., 221. See also line 115: God’s “will and command are contradictory and discordant”; ibid., 219.
63. Chapter 14, lines 4–8; Shapira, “Biblical Quotations,” 180.
65. Chapter 14, line 32; Thrope, “Contradictions,” 223.