

# 'Ahyh 'Ašr 'Ahyh: The Achaemenid-Zoroastrian Background of the Burning Bush Pericope\*

*'Ahyh 'Ašr 'Ahyh: O pano de fundo aquemênida-zoroastriano da perícope da sarça ardente*

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## Abstract

Various types of impact, assimilation, and engagement of certain redactional layers of the Hebrew Bible with Achaemenid-era Zoroastrianism have long been noted by biblical scholars and by researchers of ancient Iranian cultic practices. Both disciplines, however, are facing similar challenges regarding the problem of the transmission history of their sacred texts, which is complex, perplexing, and vigorously debated. Thus, due caution must be taken when considering latent echoes of one tradition within the corpus of the other. The following article focuses on one particular, intricate, and very well-known biblical story often associated to various degrees with the so-called "P(riestly) source"—namely, the "Call of Moses" (CoM) in the initial portions of the famous scene at the "Burning Bush" on Mt. Horeb (here defined as Exod 2:23–3:15)—examined in relation to Achaemenid-era Zoroastrianism. I begin with an assessment of the

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relevant cultic elements that can be securely dated to that timeframe or to its later evolution—especially those that can be shown to have impacted Yahwists at the time. This preliminary study then serves as a foundation to examine the passage in question in a more systematic manner. The conclusion points to a deep familiarity and assimilation of Zoroastrian fire veneration practices by the Priestly author/redactor.

**Keywords:** *Priestly source. Zoroastrianism. Achaemenid. Hebrew Bible.*

## Resumo

*Diversos tipos de impacto, assimilação e engajamento de certas camadas redacionais da Bíblia Hebraica com o zoroastrismo da era aquemênida há muito vêm sendo observados por estudiosos bíblicos e por pesquisadores das práticas culturais do antigo Irã. Ambas as disciplinas, contudo, enfrentam desafios semelhantes quanto ao problema da história da transmissão de seus textos sagrados, a qual é complexa, desconcertante e amplamente debatida. Portanto, é preciso tomar o devido cuidado ao considerar possíveis ecos latentes de uma tradição no corpus da outra. O presente artigo concentra-se em uma narrativa bíblica específica, intrincada e muito conhecida, frequentemente associada, em diversos graus, à chamada “fonte P (Sacerdotal)” — a saber, o “Chamado de Moisés” (CoM) nas partes iniciais da famosa cena da “Sarça Ardente” no monte Horebe (aqui definida como Êxodo 2:23–3:15) — examinada em relação ao zoroastrismo do período aquemênida. Início com uma avaliação dos elementos culturais relevantes que podem ser datados com segurança para esse período ou para sua evolução posterior — especialmente aqueles que demonstram ter exercido influência sobre os javistas da época. Este estudo preliminar serve, então, de base para examinar a passagem em questão de forma mais sistemática. A conclusão aponta para uma profunda familiaridade e assimilação das práticas zoroastrianas de veneração do fogo por parte do autor/redator sacerdotal.*

**Palavras-chave:** *Fonte sacerdotal. Zoroastrismo. Aquemênida. Bíblia Hebraica.*

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## 1. Introduction

The following article builds upon a number of recent studies by myself and several of my colleagues on the history and characteristics of Yahwism and Achaemenid-era Zoroastrianism (henceforth: AZ)—and the relations between the two. It is dedicated to applying some of the directions that were opened up by this research to examining one specific and well-known case where certain concepts from Zoroastrian cultic traditions seem to have impacted a biblical passage in a particularly distinctive manner. The case in point is the theophany in the famous scene of the “Call of Moses” (henceforth CoM) and the revelation of the meaning of the name of the deity *yhwh* in the book of Exodus (focusing here specifically on Ex 2:23–3:15) in which Moses stands barefoot on a high mountain before a divine fire which engulfs a bush yet does not consume it. The deity *yhwh* is presented as speaking to Moses from within this fire—both as the deity itself and as its messenger (*ml'k*). This scene is immediately followed by the first two objections raised by Moses which revolve around the question of authority and meaning of the divine name (DN) *yhwh*. My study will focus both on the scene of this fire theophany and Moses' position in front of it as well as the “name midrash” which introduces the DN—and will examine them from an AZ perspective.

That being said, as a matter of sound methodology, prior to exploring any possible absorption of AZ-inspired notions into the Hebrew Bible (HB), it is vital to define those features of AZ which can be documented to have been observed in the Achaemenid period—as opposed to later stages of Zoroastrianism—with a high level of certainty as well as to distinguish them from other Indo-Iranian cultic practices. Our sources on AZ are scant yet highly instructive—as I have shown in some detail elsewhere (Barnea, 2025e, p. 1–3). I will summarize my findings here with some additional observations relevant to the topic of this article.

### 1.1 The Indo-Iranian Cultic Sphere and Achaemenid Zoroastrianism

The specific features of AZ cultic practice, ideology, and traditions in the Achaemenid empire during the period covering the mid-sixth to the late fourth centuries BCE—as they were practiced and promulgated at the time—have been a subject of debate for well over a century (see overview in De Jong, 2021, p. 1199–1209; See also Lincoln, 2012; 2013, p. 253–265). It should first be noted that AZ, as a phase within the evolution of Zoroastrianism in general, derives from a specific current within the overarching Indo-Iranian cultic sphere. This ecosystem contains central characteristics that are broadly common to all Indo-Iranian cults (Gnoli, 2013; Redard; Losilla; Moein; Swennen, 2020) including, but not limited to, the ritual, symbolism, and divinity of fire (*ātar* in Iran; *agni* in India), the cult of *\*sauma* (Av. *haoma*-/Skt. *soma*)—an intoxicating drink made by pressing the juice out of a plant by the same name—and the concept of *aša* or *rta* (translated as “truth” or “order” referring to the cosmic, ritual, social, and moral order) all of which are also deified as divinities (“*yazatas*”). Likewise, certain deities or divinities, such as *mitra*/*miθra* or *ārmaiti*/*aramati* as well as the Ahuras/Ashuras and the Daevas are also common to this cultic sphere—although they are interpreted differently among the various cultic systems.

There are a number of features that make a given textual context stand out against the larger Indo-Iranian backdrop as properly Zoroastrian: The employment of uniquely Zoroastrian terms such as *mazdā*, *spānta*, *fravarti*, etc. and—of supreme importance—any quote from what can be identified as the Avesta (the Zoroastrian scriptures) which at the time were exclusively orally transmitted (Kreyenbroek, 2023, p. 5–6 and *passim*). The DN *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā*, “Lord Wisdom”—the chief deity of the Avesta—is properly Zoroastrian. This deity also figures frequently and prominently in Achaemenid texts—most notably in the imperial inscriptions but also in other written sources in various languages from that period (see e.g., Henkelman, 2021, p. 1224–1228) and as Henkelman rightly notes: *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā* (or *Uramasda*, as he is found in the Persepolis Fortification Archives)

should be seen as “an Achaemenid god in his own right” (Henkelman, 2021, p. 1224). Certain concepts and practices of AZ that can be considered securely as Zoroastrian were brought to the forefront during the Achaemenid period at the highest levels of imperial messaging—vigorously promulgated by the kings themselves. This is most prominently displayed in the royal inscriptions—not only in the central role *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā* plays in them but also, in certain cases, in the content, the framing, and the ideology they promulgate. Most notably, Darius I’s famous Bīstūn inscription (DB) seems to have been crafted around a specific Avestan or, more precisely, *gāθic*, passage and the Avestan understanding of “the Lie” as the ultimate cosmic force of evil (Barnea, 2025b). Darius’ son, Xerxes, in his famous “daiva” inscription (XPh) also reflected *gāθic* principles by putting the spotlight on sacrificing jointly to *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā* and *ṛta* and declaring that by the possession of the cosmic *aša/ṛta* (“t/Truth” or “o/Order”), the faithful adherent of AZ can become an *ṛtāvan* who would enjoy a pre- and post-mortem state of blessedness (Barnea, 2025d).

Even more prominently, familiarity with the *gāθās* is also reflected in the most common regnal names of the Achaemenid kings (Darius/*Dārayavauš* and Artaxerxes/*Artaxšaça*) as well as the mythical apical ancestor of the dynasty (Achaemenes/*Haxāmaniš*), which are “Zitatnamen” (“citation names”) i.e., names formed by quoting a passage from an authoritative text—in this case, the Avesta and specifically the *gāθās* (table 1).

Table 1 – *Gāθic* Zitatnamen in Achaemenid throne names

Name	Quotation	Reference	Translation
Darius/ <i>Dārayavauš</i>	<i>dāraiaṣ vahištām (manō)</i>	Y31.7	“(that) the best thought shall possess”
Artaxerxes/ <i>Artaxšaça</i>	<i>as .ā xšaθrāmčā</i>	Y29.10 <sup>1</sup>	“Ruling with Arta”
Achaemenes/ <i>Haxāmaniš</i>	<i>(tām) māhmaidī... huš.haxāim</i>	Y46.13	“(we account) to be a familiar friend with your Right.”

Source: Author (2025).

It is important to note that there are strong indications that by the Achaemenid period, the reception of the Avestan corpus already displayed markings of fossilization: a mature state of acceptance of opaque formulaic expressions among its adherents. An indication of this can be found in the names of the deities that are mentioned in the inscriptions or in other documents from across the empire such as those found at Persepolis or Elephantine in Egypt. They contain Avestan elements in specific forms which suggest that, by that time, certain Avestan concepts and expressions were already ancient and fossilized. The DN *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā*, for example—a compound name composed of Ahura (“Lord”) and Mazda (“wisdom”) which in the Avesta was separated and mobile—became compound and fixed, as did other agglutinated expressions such as *išpandaramattiš* (*spānta ārmaitī*). These names demonstrate an inclination to join together elements of nomenclature that “in Avestan are more or less mobile collocations of ‘name’ and ‘epithet’” (De Jong, 2021, p. 1201). This codification of cultic terms reflects a more mature form of the Avestan text’s reception. Given these datapoints, the presence and even use of certain Avestan passages (the defining characteristic of Zoroastrianism) can be demonstrated for the Achaemenid era.

<sup>1</sup> Cf. Y20.3 *asai xšaθrām* (in Young Avestan).

## 2. Fire Rituals in the Achaemenid empire

As noted above, rituals of fire veneration common to all Indo-Iranian cults are also at the heart of the principal Zoroastrian ritual, the *yasna* (Boyce, 1987, p. 7–9). What this ritual may have entailed in Achaemenid times can only be known in very rough and general contours (Cantera, 2017, p. esp. 60–62) from scant textual and pictographic data. Still, some version of observances that parallel portions of the *yasna*—or, at least, of fire-veneration—can be seen in various visual sources from Achaemenid times. One such source is Xerxes' depiction of himself in front of a fire-holder (sometimes erroneously referred to as a “fire altar,” see below) on his tomb relief at Naqš-i-Rostam (fig. 1).

Figure 1 – Xerxes standing in front of a fire-holder (Naqš-e-Rostam)



Source : A.Davey Creative Commons Attribution 2.0 Generic.

However, a more instructive datapoint—with special relevance to the “burning bush” pericope—to which I will return below—is a seal impression which was found in multiple copies at Persepolis (fig. 2). The central position of this seal impression is occupied by a fire-holder with a mortar and a pestle next to it used in a cultic setting—flanked by two people who seem to be priests. However, as I have shown elsewhere (Barnea, 2025a, p. 13-14; See also Boyce, 1982, p. 146), the person on the right, holding what is most probably a set of barsom twigs in one hand and a large pole in the other, cannot be a priest but is most likely the sponsor of the *yasna* ceremony. This interpretation is corroborated by a similar image found on a relief from Dascylion (figure 3) on which the color has not washed away and which presents a person in an analogous position as a purple-clad high-ranking official.

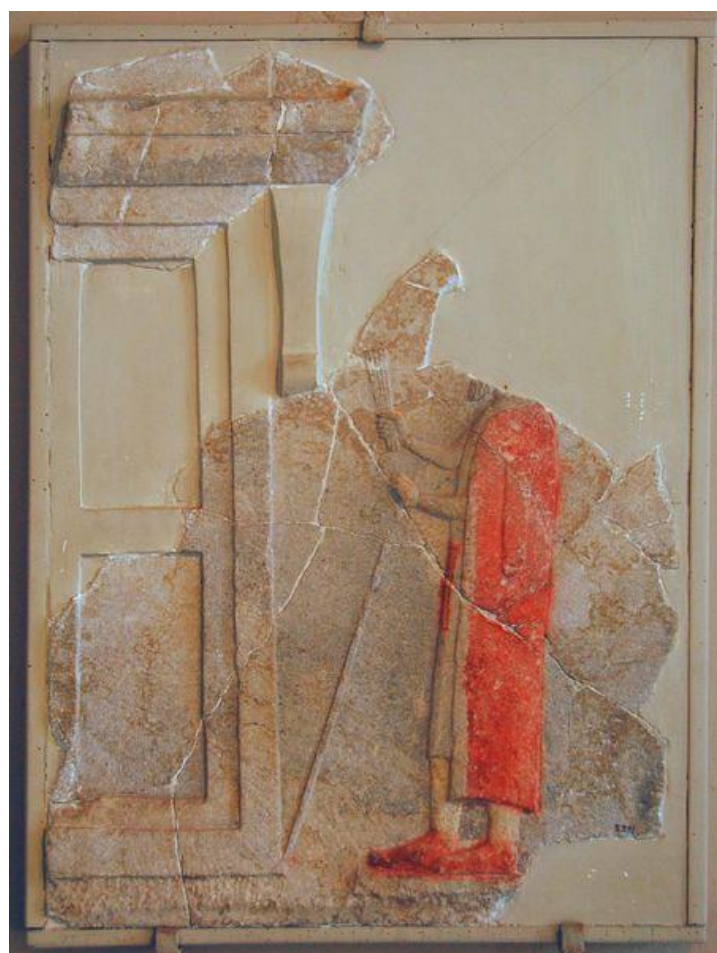


Figure 2—Seal impression PTS 20



Source: Courtesy M.B. Garrison and the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project

Figure 3— Relief with a Man Wearing Purple, Holding Barsom Twigs, Venerating Fire.



Source: Istanbul, Arkeoloji Müzesi, CC0 1.0 Universal

### 3. Achaemenid-Zoroastrianism and Yahwism

Having provided a high-level overview of what are some of the relevant central features of Zoroastrianism that can be dated to the Achaemenid period with a high degree of confidence, I will now zoom-in on documented touch points between AZ and Yahwism during that time. These contacts are best documented on the island of Elephantine in the fifth century BCE—where a Yahwistic Community settled and constructed a temple to the deity *yhw* (Porten, 1968; Granerød 2016; Toorn 2019; Becking, 2020).<sup>2</sup> Yahwists started arriving to the island in the middle of the sixth century while Egypt was still under Saite rule—only a couple of decades or so prior to the first Persian conquest of Egypt (Barnea, 2023b). In the second half of the fifth century BCE, especially, the Yahwists living on this island are well-documented to have already established long-term and close interactions with AZ concepts (Barnea, 2025e). These include familiar relationships with Zoroastrian priests (“Magi”)—who even served as witnesses in contracts in which the parties to the transaction were Yahwists (Barnea, 2025e, p. 5). Moreover, we find documented longstanding personal interactions between Yahwists and people bearing names containing clear Avestan elements suggesting that they would have been, in all probability, familiar with the meaning of these names and thus with the AZ concepts behind them (Barnea, 2025e, p. 5–7). However, the most significant evidence to the extraordinary level of cultic intimacy that existed at the time between Yahwists and adherents of AZ is the fact that these Yahwists possessed an unmistakable Zoroastrian fire-holder, which was associated with the temple to *yhw* (Barnea, 2024a, p. 5–7)—a temple which the Yahwists had been operating on this island since before Cambyses’ conquest of Egypt in 526 BCE (Barnea, 2023b, p. 113–114; Quack, 2011).

The existence of this Zoroastrian fire-holder is documented on a fragmentary papyrus (Tadae A4.5) dated to ca. 407 BCE, which mentions an *’atrwdn* (אתרודן). This compound term is a technical cultic loanword in Aramaic deriving from the aforementioned Avestan *ātar* (“[holy] fire”), combined with the suffix *-dan* (“place”). This term is still used for the Zoroastrian fire-holder—*ātašdān*—to this day, except with in the older Avestan form, *ātar* (Barnea, 2024a, p. 5). The term *’atrwdn* has often been misunderstood and translated simply as “brazier”—but if the Yahwists wanted to refer to a common “fire-container” and avoid the Avestan cultic connotations—of which they could have hardly been ignorant given their exposure to Zoroastrian priests and concepts (Barnea, 2025e, p. 5–7). They could have easily expressed it in pure Aramaic with an expression along the lines of *dwd’ dnwr’* or even used the Egyptian equivalent *’ḥ* (Shehab, 2022, p. 178–181), which was also used in temple settings. If the reference was to an altar, they could have also employed the common semitic term *mdbh’* (“altar”) here—which they did, in fact, use in other documents which associate a *mdbh’* with the temple of *yhw* (Tadae A4.7:26, 4.8:25) around the same time that the papyrus which mentioned the *’atrwdn* (Tadae A4.5) was written. Thus, the *yhw* temple seems to have possessed both an *’atrwdn* and a *mdbh’* at the same time. The papyrus upon which the term *’atrwdn* appears details one of the instances of violence against the *yhw* temple—perpetrated during one of the incidents related to the early phases of Egyptian revolt, most probably related to the departure and replacement of the Persian satrap *Aršāma* (Barnea, 2025c). This fire-holder is mentioned in the immediate context of an offering—a *mnḥh* (a term familiar from the Hebrew Bible)—to *yhw* the god (figure 4). Nevertheless and although it may be tempting for scholars who come from a Jewish or Christian background to consider the *’atrwdn* and the *mnḥh* offering as related—with the *’atrwdn* conceivably being an “incense altar” (e.g., Lev 2:1–16), this view cannot be sustained. Zoroastrian fire-holders (denoted by the term *’atrwdn*) are not altars in the sense this term is generally understood. Such a fire holder serves solely for the purposes of the veneration of fire—and must be kept absolutely pure at all times—nothing can be offered

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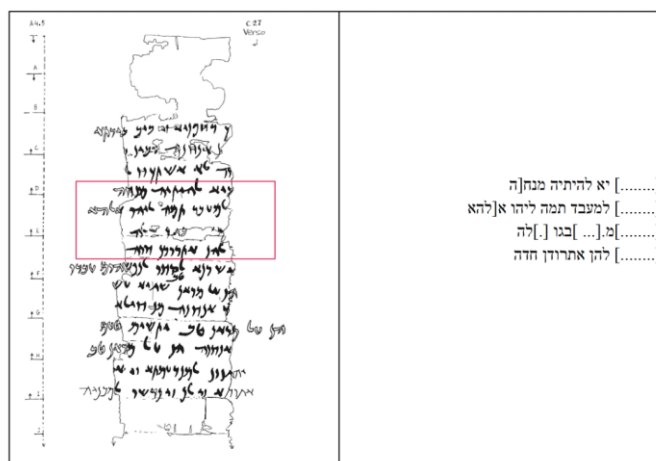
<sup>2</sup> I am currently completing a new book covering the history and profile of this community which should be out in 2026 in Palgrave Macmillan’s “The New Antiquity” series.

on it or consumed by its fire (Gnoli, 2013). Moreover, another document from the same timeframe mentions a *mnḥh* with an altar on which it is specifically to be offered, which was designated by the term *mdbh* (Tadae A4.9:9–10)—showing the association between these two terms (*mnḥh* and *mdbh*) rather than with the *'atrwdn*.

Figure 4 – the relevant section of TADAE A4.5

### Translation:

[.....] to bring *mnḥh*  
[.....] to offer there to yhw<sup>the</sup> g[od]  
[.....] in which ... [  
[.....] but a brazier/fire-altar [...



Source: © Porten and Yardeni. Used with permission. Image cropped with red rectangle added by the author.

In sum, the Yahwists' choice to use the cultic term *'atrwdn*, whose AZ underpinnings could not have escaped their attention, must have been conscious and deliberate—this is not a common or intuitive term and this papyrus is, in fact, its earliest documented appearance.

## 4. The Cultic Fire in the so-called “P” source of the Hebrew Bible

Traces of the general impact of AZ on the HB have already been recognized in many studies for well over a century (see most recently Barnea; Kratz, 2024; Hensel, 2024; see Jackson, 1893; See also Kiel, 2013). This impact seems to have been a particularly distinctive feature within the so-called “P(riestly) source” of the HB, to which Exod 1–14 (and, therefore, also the “burning bush” pericope) is generally assigned. An important and relevant study to mention in this context, was recently offered by Itamar Kislev (Kislev, 2024) who examined the theme of the “ever-burning fire” in this redactional layer. He noted six interpolations of cultic fire into this source that derive from Iranian influence. These are discernable, for example, in the requirement to maintain a perpetual fire on the altar and the characterization of the fire as coming from *yhw* to burn the offerings on the altar at the final stage of the tabernacle's inauguration (Lev 9:24a) effectively branding it as divine and thereby providing the rationale for maintaining an ever-burning fire. Kislev also noted that, in the story of the death of Nadab and Abihu, Aaron's sons, the expression “alien fire, which he had not commanded them,” was an inserted to show that they died because they used alien fire, not divine fire from the altar—intended to be understood as a warning against independent lighting of cultic fire (compare also Num 3:4; 26:61). Similar insertions are found in Lev 16:12–13 and following the account of the burning of the 250 chieftains in Num 17. These insertions reflect a consistent theme deriving from an awareness by the Priestly redactor of a Yahwistic assimilation of the AZ veneration of fire and seems to revolve specifically around the concept of a divine eternal fire. In other words, it would seem that a Priestly redactor incorporated AZ concepts and cultic practices specifically in the case of the ever-burning fire.



Although Kislev considers the fire theophany in Exod 3:2–6 as “predating the Persian period” (Kislev, 2024, p. 226), there are good reasons to add it to the list of interpolations—as an additional dimension of the same divine fire theme. The fire in this passage is presented as unequivocally divine and as intrinsically tied to the deity—and the deity’s messenger—who speaks to Moses from *lbt h’s* (“the heart/flame? of the fire”).<sup>3</sup> However, the fire theophany is entirely disconnected from the rest of the pericope. It is not necessitated by any of its themes, and it is never mentioned or alluded to again. It is subsidiary to the main theme of the CoM, which is Moses’ commission by *yhwh* to deliver the people, the sons of Israel (*banê yiśrā’ēl*), out of Egypt—using what Römer aptly defines as the “dtr Credo”—as stated in Deut 26:7 (Römer, 2014, p. 130; Römer, 2006, p. 78). This “divine liberation” motif revolves around the familiar biblical trope of the deity “hearing the cry” of the people and descending to deliver it from their oppressors. Expressing this core idea in smooth and unbroken manner by removing the fire theophany scene, the oldest layer of this passage could conceivably have been expressed quite naturally—flowing from 2:23–3:1 directly to 3:7–10 (a section known as the “second commissioning” of Moses),<sup>4</sup> producing the following narratively and ideologically consistent text:

וְיִהְיֶה בַּיָּמִים הָהֵם וַיָּמָת מֶלֶךְ מִצְרַיִם וַיָּאָנְחוּ בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה וַיִּזְעֻקוּ וַתַּעַל שְׁוַעֲתָם אֶל־  
הָאֱלֹהִים מִן־הָעֲבֹדָה: <sup>2:24</sup> וַיִּשְׁמַע אֱלֹהִים אֶת־נַאֲקָתָם וַיִּזְכֹּר אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּרִיתוֹ אֶת־אֲבֹרָהָם אֶת־יִצְחָק וְאֶת־  
יַעֲקֹב: <sup>2:25</sup> וַיֵּרָא אֱלֹהִים אֶת־בְּנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל וַיִּדַּע אֱלֹהִים: <sup>3:1</sup> וּמֹשֶׁה הָיָה רֹעֶה אֶת־צֹאן יִתְרוֹ חֹתֵנוֹ כֹּהֵן מִדְיָן וַיִּנְהַג  
אֶת־הַצֹּאן אַחֲרֵי הַמִּדְבָּר וַיָּבֹא אֶל־הַר הָאֱלֹהִים חֹרֶב: <sup>3:7</sup> וַיֹּאמֶר יְהוָה [לְמֹשֶׁה] רֹאה רְאִיתִי אֶת־עַנְי עַמִּי אֲשֶׁר  
בְּמִצְרַיִם וְאֶת־צַעֲקָתָם שָׁמַעְתִּי מִפְּנֵי נִגְשָׁיו כִּי יִדְעִתִּי אֶת־מַכְאֲבֵיו: <sup>3:8</sup> וְאַרְדּוּ לְהַצִּילוֹ מִיַּד מִצְרַיִם וְלִהְיוֹתָם לִי  
הָאָרֶץ הַזֹּאת אֶל־אֶרֶץ טוֹבָה וְרַחֲבָה אֶל־אֶרֶץ זָבֶת חֶלֶב וְדָבַשׁ אֶל־מְקוֹם הַכְּנָעֲנִי וְהַחִתִּי וְהָאֱמֹרִי וְהַכְּנִזִּי וְהַיִּבֹּסִי: <sup>3:9</sup> וְעַתָּה הִנֵּה צַעֲקַת בְּנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל בָּאָה אֵלַי וְגַם־רְאִיתִי אֶת־הַלֹּחֶץ אֲשֶׁר מִצְרַיִם לֹחֲצִים אֹתָם: <sup>3:10</sup> וְעַתָּה  
לֵךְ וְאֶשְׁלַחְךָ אֶל־פַּרְעֹה וְהוֹצֵא אֶת־עַמִּי בְנֵי־יִשְׂרָאֵל מִמִּצְרַיִם

And it was in those many days, and the king of Egypt died and the sons of Isreal sighed from the labor and their plea rose up to the god from the labor. And god heard their groan and god remembered his treaty with Abraham, with Isaac, and with Jacob. And god saw the sons of Israel and god knew. And Moses was shepherding the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, priest of Midian and he drove the flock after the desert and he came to the mountain of the god, to Horeb. And *yhwh* said [to Moses], I have seen the affliction of my people which is in Egypt and I have heard their cry from its oppressors for I have known its pains. And I have come down to deliver it from the hand of Egypt and to bring it up from that land to a wide and good land to a land flowing with milk and honey to the place of the Canaanite, and the Hittite, and the Amorite, and the Perizzite, and the Hivite, and the Jebusite. And now, here is the cry of the sons of Israel coming to me and I have also seen the oppression by which Egypt is oppressing them. And now, go and I shall send you to Pharaoh and you shall make my people come out of Egypt.<sup>5</sup>

This reading seems to be supported by the fact that v. 7 in the LXX version has *yhwh* speaking πρὸς Μωϋσῆν (“to Moses”) which I consider to be a remnant of this hypothetical older layer of the text and which I have retained in the reconstruction above as it also makes this passage flow with an unhindered internal logic. The CoM thus remains intact and loses nothing of its narrative or ideological force. The detail about Moses driving the flock through the desert to Mt. Horeb in v. 3:1b seems to be a Priestly redactional addition by the same redactor who inserted the fire theophany—in order to place it in a cultically significant, temple-related, location. It bears repeating that neither the fire, the holy ground or the bush are ever mentioned again and they play no role whatsoever in the ensuing storyline and its theological concerns. The insertion of the fire theophany here seems to be a stereotypical P source editorial undertaking—tasked with inserting a reference not only to

<sup>3</sup> Either from the root *lbb* (“heart”) or *lhbh* (“flame”), as it found in the SP. For the various interpretations of this spelling, see PROPP (1999, p. 183)

<sup>4</sup> See similar conclusion in (BERNER, 2022, p. 110).

<sup>5</sup> My (very literal) translation. Two additional editorial layers are emphasized using a different font.

the primordial tabernacle/temple of Mt. Horeb/Sinai but also to Moses' role as priest.<sup>6</sup> If indeed, as it has often been proposed—correctly, in my view—this scene prefigures the temple or, more precisely, the tabernacle (Jeon, 2013, p. 193–194), it would serve to highlight the divine fire as the tabernacle's most distinctive feature. This scene would have thus been inserted as a direct link to the divine fire associated with the tabernacle—most specifically to the Menorah (Robinson, 1997, p. 120), which is also a *tmyd* תמיד—a “perpetual fire” (see esp. Lev 24:4, Exod 27:20–21).

The unnecessary repetition in v. 9 of the “dtr Credo” trope—inserted before the concrete commission statement of Moses by *yhwh* (v. 10)—is another indication of redactional activity in this passage. It is followed in vv. 11–12 by the first of Moses' objections, which he presents to avoid his divine calling—a common feature of the *Berufungsbericht* or “hero's journey” genre (Campbell, 1949, p. 59–68; Habel, 1965; Phinney, 2011) as found, for example, in the story of the call of Gideon (Judg 6:11–17, 36–40), Jeremiah (Jer 1:4–19), and Ezekiel (Ezek 1:1—3:15).<sup>7</sup> The first objection deals with Moses' authority: “who am I that I should do this?” The response: כִּי־אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ (v. 12), which would be read intuitively as “for I will be with you,” can also be read, once the reader becomes familiar with the second objection and its response (vv. 13–15) as “for 'ahyh<sup>DN</sup> is with you.” In both cases, which are not mutually exclusive, the answer is that Moses' authority derives from *yhwh*'s. However, the succinct nature of the response in v. 12 and the nonobvious choice to use the same form and tense as in v. 14 makes it probable that the author of this passage was familiar with vv. 13–14 and intended to prefigure them. It would have certainly been more fitting in v. 12 to avoid using the verb (in Hebrew) and simply state “for I am with you” כִּי אֲנִי עִמָּךְ (compare, e.g., Gen 28:15, Isa 41:10, Jer 15:20) expressing that the deity is already with Moses at present rather than at some point in the future. With regards to the second objection (3:13–15), it is clear that vv. 14 and 15 are not contemporaneous. Although it has been argued that v. 14a was inserted later (e.g., by JEON, 2013, p. 112–113), it seems much more likely—for the reasons mentioned above—that both v. 12's כִּי אֶהְיֶה עִמָּךְ and v. 14b's אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם presuppose v. 14a. In fact, from a grammatical standpoint, 'ahyh<sup>DN</sup> is used as an unmistakable proper noun in a PN/DN position in 14b while the well-known and expected form of the DN is only made explicit in v. 15 with אֶהְיֶה שְׁלַחְנִי אֲלֵיכֶם . . . יְהוָה. Thus, v. 14a is not the answer to the request to learn of the DN of *yhwh*, but an exegetical narrative device whereby *yhwh* refuses to divulge his name and instead turns to his temporal essence: 'ahyh 'ašr 'ahyh—which, as noted by Achenbach, is to be understood as “die Selbigkeit der Gottesgegenwart in ihrem Sein und Werden in Vergangenheit, Gegenwart und Zukunft” (Achenbach, 2024, p. 33). Hutzli recently suggested that this refusal can “be read as a reaction against the theonym theory of P, which emphasizes the importance of God's names, in particular that of YHWH” (Hutzli, 2023, p. 246). However, quite to the contrary, this refusal highlights and underscores P's theonym concern through the dramatic device of refusal, which only accentuates the importance of the name which, after all, is well known to all the readers/hearers of the text.

<sup>6</sup> There have been several studies of the HB portraying Moses as a priest. This is explicit in Ps 99:6, but is implicitly mandated by several contexts in the Pentateuch (Lierman, 2016, p. esp. 48 note 42; Milgrom, 1991, p. 555–558). Moses came from a family of priests, from the tribe of Levi and his older brother, Aaron, was to be the first High-Priest. Moses is presented as having served as a priest at least during the seven days of preparation (Lev 8:33).

<sup>7</sup> The idea that Ezekiel's call includes a latent objection is argued by Phinney (2005).

## 5. The AZ Background of the “Burning Bush” pericope

The character of the CoM in its two constituent parts: the fire theophany and the underscoring of *yhwh*'s temporal essence can be traced to the Zoroastrian features of the Achaemenid period. First, I will examine the relatively complex “fire ritual” and the fire theophany of *yhwh* on Mt. Horeb as well as the “sandal removal” directive from an AZ perspective and second, I will present the concept of the “god who ‘exists’”—which, as I will show, received a distinctly Achaemenid theological development.

### 5.1 The “Fire Ritual” and the Fire Theophany

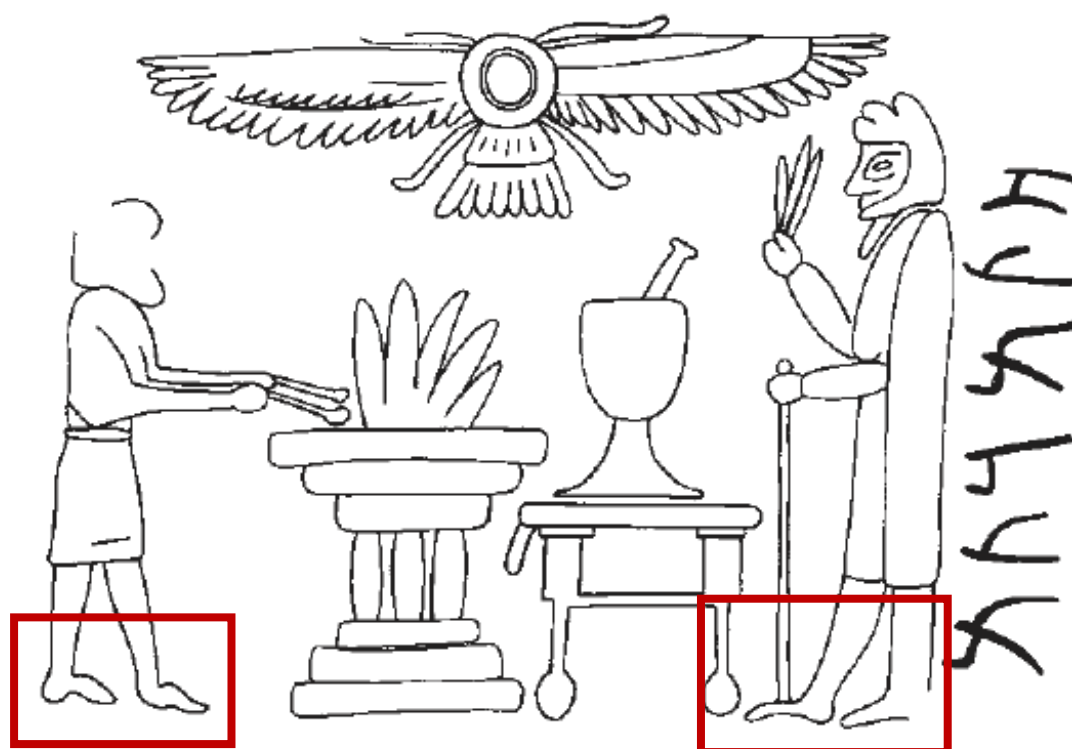
An interesting detail of the setting of the stage for the fire theophany is the use of the verb *nšl* “to loosen” (Greek λύω) in v. 5 in order to denote some form of removal of Moses’ shoes from his feet: “Then he said, ‘Do not come near; release (*nšl*) your sandals off your feet, for the place on which you are standing is holy ground’” (Ex 3:5). As opposed to the common understanding of this verse, this verb does not denote a full removal of the sandals—which would typically be expressed using the verb *swr* (see, e.g., Gen 38:14, 41:42), but seems to refer more precisely to the act of loosening them (as correctly expressed in the Greek). The difference is subtle and leads to the same result, namely, that Moses is to stand barefoot in front of the divine fire, but denotes a progression in the process of discarding the sandals that can be traced to AZ practices. This verb is never used with any other piece of clothing and only applies to Moses and Joshua (where the context evidently refers back to Moses in Ex 3). While the removal of shoes in sacred spaces is well attested and ubiquitous in ancient cultures (Gaster, 1975, p. 231), what makes this scene unique—and connects it more specifically to AZ—is the fact that the context of holiness is driven by the presence of the deity—and his emanation/messenger—within/as the divine fire.

#### 5.1.2. Footwear in The Fire Ritual of the Yasna

In this particular scene, the choice by the redactor to use the rare verb *nšl* seems to denote a special relationship to the sandals when facing a divine fire—as is the case in Zoroastrianism. In the yasna ritual, the priest’s sandals play a distinctive and complex role when approaching the fire. As described by Drower:

The *rāspī* (assistant priest) fed the fire with pieces of sandalwood, the *zoti* (chief priest) chanted the ‘homage to fire’ ... reciting, (he) mounted to his *khwan* (stone slab/table), discarding his sanctuary slippers as he did so and lifting first the right foot and then the left. Throughout, neither priest ever allowed the bare sole of his foot to touch the ground within the *pavi* (consecrated area for ceremonies in the fire temple): only when on his *khwan* was the priest barefoot. Upon his *khwan* the *zoti* stood facing the south, with the great toe of his right foot placed over the great toe of the left. The *raspi*, too, shuffled out of his slippers, standing not on a *khwan* but on the ground, and in such a manner that he did not touch the ground with his bare foot, but stood on (*not in*) his slippers; like the *zoti* he faced south, placing his right great toe over his left. This curious action is described by Modi as standing ‘on one foot’ (DROWER, 1944, p. 83)

Figure 5 – Seal impression PTS 20 with red squares added by author



Source: Courtesy M.B. Garrison and the Persepolis Fortification Archive Project) with red squares added.

In PTS 20, which, as discussed above, is a seal impression that was found in Persepolis and can be securely dated to the Achaemenid period, the *rāspī* priest faces the fire to tend to it. He is depicted as barefoot with the arches of his feet clearly visible and rather exaggerated (figure 5, left rectangle).<sup>8</sup> Conversely, the sponsor of the ceremony—who is not a priest and not in direct contact with the fire—seems to be wearing some sort of footwear (figure 5, right rectangle). Notably, this is also how the sponsor is represented in the relief from Dascyion (figure 3, above) where his footwear still shows its original color.

## 5.2. The god “Who Is”

The theological concept of the “god who is” or the “ever-existing god” has had a massive impact on all three so-called “Abrahamic” religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—and the philosophical schools that derive from them.<sup>9</sup> The key expression is found in Ex 3:14. I present it here in the original Hebrew as well as Greek (LXX, Aquila, and Theodotion), Latin (Vulgate), and English (NRSV) translations with the formulation of the “verb of being” emphasized.

<sup>8</sup> Compare to similar but more elaborate depiction of unmistakable bare feet on an Achaemenid era Rhyton (Treister, 2015, p. 75 [fig. 28]).

<sup>9</sup> In his book *L'esprit de la philosophie médiévale*, Étienne Gilson referred to Exod 3:14 in several places as the “métaphysique de l'Exode” (Gilson, 1932). See also Fieger and Roesner (2022).

### Hebrew:

וַיֹּאמֶר אֱלֹהִים אֶל־מֹשֶׁה אֲנִי אֲהִיָּה אֲנִי אֲהִיָּה וַיֹּאמֶר כֹּה תֹאמַר לְבְנֵי יִשְׂרָאֵל אֲהִיָּה שְׁלַחְנִי אֵלֶיךָ

### Greek (LXX):

καὶ εἶπεν ὁ θεὸς πρὸς Μωυσήν Ἐγὼ εἰμι ὁ ὢν· καὶ εἶπεν Οὕτως ἐρεῖς τοῖς υἱοῖς Ἰσραὴλ Ὁ ὢν ἀπέσταλκέν με πρὸς ὑμᾶς. (A. Θ. ἔσομαι (ὁς) ἔσομαι).

### Latin (Vulgate):

Dixit Deus ad Moysen: **Ego sum qui sum.** Ait: Sic dices filiis Israel: Qui est, misit me ad vos.

### English (NRSV):

God said to Moses, “**I am who I am.**” He said further, “Thus you shall say to the Israelites, ‘**I am** has sent me to you.’”

The expression *'ahyh 'ašr 'ahyh* (usually translated in English as “I Am Who I Am”) is a paronomasia—a play on words—used, as argued above, in the deity’s initial refusal to divulge his name. It associates the Hebrew verb “to be” to the letters that make up the name of the deity *yhwh*. As such, it serves as a “name midrash” for this DN. A “name midrash” is a specialized genre which is found throughout the Bible but is probably of Greek origin,<sup>10</sup> that seeks to explain a given PN/DN using a micro-legend. For example, PNs throughout the book of Genesis are often introduced with a “name midrash” as in the case of Simeon (Gen 29:33) explained as deriving from the verb *šmʿ* (“to hear”) or the case of Judah, explained as giving thanks (*ydy/ydh*) to *yhwh* (Barnea, 2024b). In Ex 3:14, however, it explains the well-known and well-established name of the deity *yhw(h)*—documented at least from the beginning of the first millennium BCE (see e.g., Berlejung, 2017)—as a verb of existence. The verb *hwy* “to be” must have naturally had a folk-etymology connection to this DN which would have already been popular among Yahwists. However, since Hebrew lacks a present tense for the verb “to be,” it was rendered in the imperfective (*yiqtol*). In the Greek—a language which has a fully conjugated “to be” verb, this statement is rendered more precisely with the participle as ὁ ὢν, and in Latin using the present tense “sum.”

## 5.2.2. The “God Who Is/Exists” in Achaemenid sources

Darius I’s famous royal inscription from Bisotūn (DB) contains the remarkable line: Auramazdā-maj upastām abara utā an[iyāha ba]gāha, tayai *hanti*” (DB OP. IV,60-61[§62]) which can be translated as “Ahuramazdā and the other Gods who are/exist, brought help to me” (Barnea, 2025b). Gershevitch (Gershevitch, 1964, p. 18) suggested that “other gods who are” referred to the *Aməša Spəntas* (Pahl. Amešāspand, [A]mahraspand)—the seven “Holy/Bounteous Immortals” divinities or *yazatas* (Boyce, 1989). This view was criticized by Kellens, who noted that in Yasna 51.10 *tā duždā yōi hantī*, “the greedy ones who exist,” the verb *hant-* is attributed to demonic creatures. However, this is certainly not the case in the Achaemenid imperial inscriptions and, at any rate, this fundamental ontological state of existence is not necessarily limited to the

<sup>10</sup> This genre is not special to the Bible but is found in several ancient Greek works starting with Homer. For example, consider Od. 19.407–409 where the name Odysseus (Ὀδυσσεύς, Ὀλυσσεύς) is explained as deriving from the term “anger” (ὀδύσσομαι), as asserted by Odysseus’ maternal grandfather, Autolycus: πολλοῖσιν γὰρ ἔγωγε ὀδυσσάμενος...ἰκάνω...τῷ δ’ Ὀδυσσεύς ὄνομ’ ἔστω ἐπώνυμον.” This was also the case with divine names. For example, the Lydian epithet for Zeus was Labrandeus, which seems to have had a long folk tradition connecting it to λάβρυς, (probably Lydian for ‘axe’). This is relayed by Plutarch (Questions 45, 2.302a) and also seems to be portrayed visually with Zeus holding a double-axe in Achaemenid coins from Caria (Valério, 2016).



“cosmic good.” Moreover, the implication of the idea of *being* becomes explicitly clarified in later sources, evolving from the more ambiguous usages in the Avesta to the Bundahišn (I.2) where only Ohrmazd (*a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā*) “was and is and will be” (*būd hēnd ast ud hamē bawēd*), whereas Ahreman (I.3) “was (in the darkness), is, yet will not be (existent) (*būd ast kē nē hamē bawēd*).” The gods “who are” seem to derive from the Avestan formulaic reference to a certain use of the verb “to be,” especially to its present participle stem, *hant-*. This concept is not directly paralleled in other ancient cultic systems.<sup>11</sup> For example, in Egyptian cult, the “eternal” god is not “eternally existing” and is not related to a verb of being such as *wnn* (“to be/exist”). Rather, in Egyptian theology, gods are “constantly self-reproducing.”

Verbs of being often have wider etymological semantics than merely the dimension of “existence.” For example, In Vedic and Sanskrit, we find *satyá-* (“what is true”) from *sant-*, “being” and in other IE languages e.g., Greek ὄν (“being”) > οὐσία, (“substance, essence, true nature”) or Latin *essentia* (“essence,” true nature of anything)—coined by Cicero—from *esse* (“to be”). In Indo-Iranian languages, the neutral accusative was adverbially used with the meaning of “true, truly” (Ved. *satyám*, Av. *haiθīm* and OP *hašiyam*). In OP, the exact correspondent form *hašiya-*, “what is true,” was used in the context of DB IV 44 (§57), to support the veracity of the speech performed by the king in opposition to what is “false,” i.e., *duruxtam*, the accusative neuter of the passive past particle of the verb *drauγ-*, “to lie.” Thus, being and truth are linguistically tied in Indo-Iranian (or Indo-European) languages. Exod 3:14–15 seems to import this notion into the Semitic context of the HB when *yhwh*’s ever-existing essence serves as the first argument in convincing the sons of Israel of the truth of Moses’ calling.

## 6. Conclusions

Yahwists are documented to have had longstanding and intimate contact with AZ, which led to various degrees of assimilation. *Yhwh* is documented both in the biblical text (Dan 2:18–19, 37, 44; Ezra 5:11–12) and in extra-biblical sources from Elephantine with the title “god of heaven” אלה שמיא (Beyerle, 2010; Granerød, 2020; Barnea, 2023a, p. 9–10). In the Achaemenid period, this title was commonly associated with *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā*.<sup>12</sup> The most notable indication of the level of cultic assimilation, as mentioned above, is that the Yahwists at Elephantine (and likely in other similar Yahwistic temple settings at the time), possessed an *’atrwdn*—a Zoroastrian cultic fire-holder—in the confines of their temple to *yhw*. These datapoints show a particularly close and strong assimilation of AZ concepts among Yahwists—specifically as relating to the divine fire—which, as argued above can be traced in the “perpetual fire” theme in the P source. The central cultic concepts of fire veneration, a fire divinity, and the priest facing the fire while serving barefoot were documented in Achaemenid times in various textual and pictographic representations. Moreover, the concept of the god who continually “is/exists” can be traced to the Achaemenid period—specifically to Darius I’s DB inscription—a notion that derives from earlier Avestan traditions and formulations. In the pericope of the “burning bush,” the deity is presented as both a *ml’k yhwh* “messenger of *yhwh*” and as *yhwh* himself at the same time (compare vv. 2 and 4)—or a deity and his emanation, sharing the same essence.<sup>13</sup> Additionally, this presentation of Moses, in

<sup>11</sup> A Hellenistic influence has been proposed by Fieger and Roesner (2022) without actually providing any Hellenistic sources.

<sup>12</sup> For details on the identification of Ahuramazdā as the “god of heaven,” see (Skjærvø, 2002, p. 400–402).

<sup>13</sup> On the complex setting of *yhwh* vs. the “messenger of *yhwh*,” see discussion in (PROPP, 1999, p. 198). In the Avesta, *de yazata* Atar (fire) is frequently called “son of A<sup>h</sup>uramazda.” Consider, for example, Y 1:12ab: “I announce (and) carry out (this Yasna) for you, o Fire, son of Ahura Mazda, together with all the fires...” Fire is an “offspring” of *a<sup>h</sup>uramazdā* who is identified with the source of fire—the sun—as is expressed, for example, in the beginning of the *gāθīc* prayer “Arise for me, Lord (Mazdā) . . .” (Y. 33.12) (Boyce 1984).

a conspicuous position of a priest—as he is also presented elsewhere in the Hebrew Bible<sup>14</sup>—facing the divine fire only serves to highlight the link to the tabernacle and by extension to the temple.

Though the similarities are significant, it is no less important to examine the differences—which demonstrate that the P redactor did not blindly assimilate AZ principles but also engaged, amplified, and developed them in a new direction. In contrast to its use in AZ sources, the divine “ever-being” existence in the biblical text is no longer just a qualifier of the deity but becomes the meaning of the name itself—without qualification. The dating of the insertion of the P source can’t be determined with precision but the Priestly redactor was certainly familiar with AZ-inspired practices—specifically of the ritual of divine-fire—which may have also been adopted in the temple at the time, possibly as a remnant from the time an *’atrwdn* was still in use. The concept of the “ever-existing” deity in general and the influence of DB in particular cast a long shadow on subsequent generations at least up to the turn of the first millennium and is documented even in a scroll found in Qumran that contains an exegetical legend on a passage of this Achaemenid royal inscription, for which I am currently publishing a critical edition (Barnea, 2025b; 2026 in-press).

## 7. Postscript: The Ever-Existing Deity: Later Developments

Later developments of the concept of the ever-existing deity, as found in the Bundahišn—the Sassanian-period Zoroastrian compilation of concepts of cosmogony and cosmography that are based on the Avesta—contain significant developments of the notion of the ever-existing deity—notably in Bundahišn 1:6, *ohrmazd būd ud ast ud hamē bawēd* (“ohrmazd was, and is and always will be”)—using the particle *hamē* which is used to express the idea of “eternally/forever” to convey continuous action. This expanded concept and its formulation interfaces with the New Testament book of Revelation in passages such as Rev 1:4 “Grace to you and peace from him who is and who was and who is to come and from the seven spirits who are before his throne” (see also Rev 1:8, 4:8, 11:17, 16:5) and may have influenced its author directly or indirectly.<sup>15</sup> A similar theme is found in the Targum Pseudo-Jonathan into Aramaic, which may have been exposed to Sassanian concepts where Deut 32:39 is translated interpretatively as “I am he who is and was, and I am he who will be, and there is no other god beside me.”<sup>16</sup> Thus the activity of the P redactor, while limited to specific themes and contexts, has cast a long shadow influencing later Judaism, Christianity, and Islam<sup>17</sup> to this day.

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<sup>14</sup> See footnote 9, above.

<sup>15</sup> However, although the Bundahišn undoubtedly contains ancient material, it probably reached its final form in the seventh century CE. It is therefore impossible to know in which direction the influence flowed. It cannot be excluded that some Christian concepts may have been adopted by the author(s) of the Bundahišn—or that they share a common ancestor.

<sup>16</sup> The Aramaic is *אנא הוא דהווי ואנא הוא דעתיד למהוי ולית אלקא חורן בר מיני*.

<sup>17</sup> For a recent overview of this verse’s impact in the Qur’an, see Galadari (2024, p. 145–146).

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