

A Zoroastrian Dispute in the Caliph's Court
The *Gizistag Abāliš* in its Early Islamic Context

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Abstract

The Gizistag Abāliš is a ninth- or tenth-century Pahlavi text, recording a debate which took place at the court of al-Ma'mūn between a Zoroastrian priest and a heretical dualist. This article, the first in-depth study of this important work, examines the text in its broader Islamicate environment. It argues that the narrative itself is probably fictional, but reflects a real historical phenomenon, namely the interreligious debates which took place among Zoroastrians, Muslims, Christians, and Jews during the 'Abbasid period. It argues that the text is a unique Zoroastrian example of a literary genre that was common among Christians at the time, namely, "the monk in the emir's majlis." By comparing the Gizistag Abāliš to these Christian texts, it explores why Zoroastrians generally did not launch explicit polemics against Islam, comparable to that of other non-Muslim communities. It seems that Zoroastrian authors were more concerned with explaining their own doctrines than critiquing the beliefs of others. This is curious considering the large numbers of Zoroastrians who were converting to Islam at the time. Finally, the article proposes new ways of refining how we read Pahlavi texts, by analyzing them alongside the literatures of other religious communities in the early Islamic empire.

Keyword

Zoroastrianism, Islam, Abbasids, Pahlavi, Interreligious Polemics, Arabic, Syriac, Christianity, Conversion, al-Ma'mūn

Introduction

One of the most important genres of Christian literature from the Islamic Middle East is a group of texts known as “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*.” These works, studied by Griffith and others, record alleged disputes between high-ranking Christian clergy and powerful Muslim rulers.¹ The most famous example is *The Disputation of Timothy and al-Mahdī*, a stylized account of a debate between the East Syrian patriarch and the ‘Abbasid caliph, written in Syriac.² The debate hinges on several classic points of controversy between Christians and Muslims, including the Trinity, the divinity of Jesus, Muhammad’s standing as a prophet, and the Qur’anic revelation. *The Disputation of Timothy and al-Mahdī* is also typical of the genre in that it transforms real historical figures into literary characters who are used to convey punchy theological arguments. Islamic and Jewish variations on the genre also exist.³ Collectively, these

My thanks go to Dan Sheffield, who introduced me to the *Gizistag Abāliš* and suggested that it might make a good project for someone interested in Zoroastrians and Muslims. Later, I was lucky to read the text in manuscript form with Prods Oktor Skjærvø and the other members of the Pahlavi reading group, all of whom helped me understand it much better.

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The Córdoba conference was held in honor of the late Patricia Crone, and I dedicate this piece to her memory.

¹ Griffith, “Monk in the Emir’s *Majlis*”; see also Bertaina, *Christian and Muslim Dialogues*.

² For an overview, with further bibliography, see *CMR*, Vol. 1, 522-26 (Heimgartner).

³ On the Jewish side, see Tanenbaum, “Polemics Real and Imagined,” among other examples.

build on a tradition of literary dialogue and debate stretching back centuries in the Mediterranean and Middle East.⁴

Christians and Muslims, however, were not the only ones to write within the genre during the early Islamic period. We also possess a unique Zoroastrian Middle Persian text known as *Mādayān ī Gizistag Abāliš* (Pahl. *The Book of the Accursed Abāliš*), which instead of featuring a learned monk or bishop, tells the story of a debate between a Zoroastrian priest and a heretical dualist (Pahl. *zandīk*) at the court of the caliph al-Ma'mūn (r. 198-218/813-33).⁵ To my knowledge, specialists in the Christian and Islamic literatures of the period have not recognized the similarity; indeed, with few exceptions (notably Spuler and van Ess), they have not taken notice of the text at all.⁶ For their part, specialists in Zoroastrian literature – who know the *Gizistag Abāliš* well, but tend to be less familiar with Christian or Islamic sources – have failed to realize that it belongs to a wider genre of apologetic writing.⁷

In light of this, the present paper seeks to accomplish the following: to summarize the contents of the *Gizistag Abāliš*; to contextualize it within the *majlis* culture of the early 'Abbasid

⁴ Goldhill, *End of Dialogue*; Cameron, *Dialoguing in Late Antiquity*.

⁵ For orientation, see Tafazzolī, "Abāliš," *Elr*; Boyce, "Middle Persian Literature," 44; Cereti, *Letteratura Pahlavi*, 185-89; Macuch, "Pahlavi Literature," 136; Andrés-Toledo, "Avestan and Pahlavi," 526.

⁶ On the Islamic side, notably Spuler, *Iran in the Early Islamic Period*, 128 n. 24 (who links the text with reports about debates in the *majlis* of the Shī'ī imam 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Ridā, under the patronage of al-Ma'mūn); van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 3, 219 (who links the text with reports about a debate between al-Ma'mūn and a dualist named Abū 'Alī). For more on both, see below.

⁷ Two exceptions include de Jong, "Zoroastrian Self-Definition"; and de Jong, "The *Dēnkard* and the Zoroastrians of Baghdad," 230-31, which remarks in passing: "... [The *Gizistag Abāliš*] shows the adaptation for a Zoroastrian audience of a meaningful and well-known narrative from an Islamic, mostly likely Iraqi context."

period; to compare its contents to those of related Christian texts; and through these, to better understand its purpose. In many ways, the greatest question surrounding the *Gizistag Abāliš* is why the text seems so unconcerned with Islam – this despite its resemblance to “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*,” a genre which at its core is deeply concerned with the challenges of the ruling religion. By broaching an answer to this question, I hope to shed light on the bigger puzzle surrounding why, with few exceptions, Zoroastrians failed to launch a targeted apologetic response to Islam in the post-conquest period, comparable to that of Christians. This, in turn, will help us better understand the fate of the community in the early centuries of Islamic rule.⁸

Finally, this article represents an experiment in refining ways of reading Zoroastrian texts more broadly. Much of what scholars regard as classical Pahlavi literature was written or redacted in the ‘Abbasid period (ca. 9-10th c. AD). Yet these sources are rarely interpreted in their Islamicate context.⁹ Instead, they are often read for insights into the state of Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian period and earlier. This is presumably because many specialists

⁸ For overviews of Zoroastrianism in the early Islamic period, see Morony, “Madjūs,” *EI2*; Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 145-62; Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*; Stausberg, *Religion Zarathustras*, Vol. 1, 263-251; Daryaee, “Zoroastrianism under Islamic Rule”; Shaked, “Islam”; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 159-88; Crone, *Nativist Prophets*; Savant, *New Muslims of Post-Conquest Iran*.

⁹ Exceptions include de Menasce, “Zoroastrian Literature” (which singles out texts of the Islamic period, but does not strongly situate them in a wider Islamicate context); Hoyland, *Seeing Islam*, 241-43, 321-30, 511-12 (which takes a generally pessimistic view of these sources for the study of early Islamic history); Daryaee, “Middle Iranian Sources for the Study of Medieval Islamic History” (which is more encouraging); and de Jong, “The *Dēnkard* and the Zoroastrians of Baghdad” (a superb article, the only one to my knowledge which discusses the problems facing the study of Zoroastrian literature in the Islamic period in comparison with sources from other communities); many articles by Shaked follow this line of inquiry; see his collected essays in *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam*.

regard the Sasanian period as the “golden age” of Zoroastrian history, before the ancient Persian Empire disappeared and Iranian society began converting. There is indeed Sasanian material in the Pahlavi texts, but scholars have no surefire way of distinguishing it from the post-Islamic content.¹⁰ Thus, to uncritically use texts of the ‘Abbasid period to retrieve insights about Zoroastrianism centuries earlier is methodologically risky.¹¹ In the meantime, the most immediate – and methodologically defensible – way of reading the sources is rarely undertaken, namely, to analyze them in the early medieval environment in which they were written.¹² This article aims to show what scholars can gain by putting Zoroastrian texts in conversation with the literatures of their non-Zoroastrian contemporaries, especially Muslims and Christians. By engaging in such comparisons – particularly when texts belong to the same genres – we can begin to understand what made Zoroastrians unique among the religious communities of the medieval Middle East. It can also help us remove the aura of exceptionalism which sometimes surrounds Zoroastrians by showing what made them so similar.

The Text and Dating

¹⁰ Scholars have attempted to develop techniques for distinguishing Sasanian from post-Sasanian Pahlavi, notably using linguistic criteria, as in Cantera, *Studien zur Pahlavi-Übersetzung*. Such techniques have great potential for matters of language, but they are less useful when it comes to matters of content, where “Sasanian” and “Islamic” layers in the texts remain difficult to distinguish from one another.

¹¹ A recent example is Payne, *State of Mixture*, esp. 16-58. Despite its rich and provocative ideas, the book uncritically treats various Islamic-era texts as reflecting the views of Zoroastrians in the Sasanian period. This is in marked contrast to the (appropriately) critical handling of the Christian material, mainly hagiographical texts in Syriac.

¹² For successful examples of this method, see various studies in Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam*; along with Vevaina, “Miscegenation, ‘Mixture,’ and ‘Mixed Iron,’” esp. 252-66; Rezania, “*Denkard* Againsts its Islamic Discourse”; Terribili, “*Dēnkard* III.”

The oldest copy of the *Gizistag Abāliš* comes from a manuscript called K20, now housed at the University Library in Copenhagen.¹³ The manuscript is dated to 1322 to 1371 AD on the basis of its Middle and New Persian colophons, and contains a miscellany of Zoroastrian texts. The *Gizistag Abāliš* itself is relatively short, filling only ten folios, and is written in a clear, legible hand. Along with the Pahlavi, there also exist versions in Pāzand (Middle Persian written in Avestan script) and Parsi (Middle Persian written in New Persian script). Together, these three versions hint at the text's enduring appeal to later readers. The *Gizistag Abāliš* was first edited and translated by Barthélemy in 1887, then by Chacha in 1936. More recently, Skjærvø has produced an updated English translation, though the text awaits a modern critical edition.¹⁴

Of course, the date of the oldest manuscript tells us nothing about when the *Gizistag Abāliš* was originally written. Most scholars regard it as a product of the world in which it is set, that is to say, the ninth or tenth centuries AD. Though rarely spelled out explicitly, this theory seems to rest on the assumption that if the *Gizistag Abāliš* has a basis in historical fact, then it must have been composed shortly after the events it describes (ca. 819-833). Otherwise, it would have failed to engage the interests of its immediate audience. A further argument in favor of an early date is the idea that the *Gizistag Abāliš* appeared around the same time that Christians were writing their earliest versions of dispute texts during the ninth and tenth centuries (some of which also feature al-Ma'mūn, as we shall see below). If this is the case, the

¹³ A facsimile of the manuscript is reproduced in Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 148r-152r.

¹⁴ Barthélemy, *Gujastak Abalish*; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 243-47. Citations of the *Gizistag Abāliš* will henceforth refer to the manuscript K20 (as reproduced in Christensen's facsimile), Chacha's edition, and Skjærvø's translation.

Gizistag Abāliš is a powerful example of how certain genres of apologetic literature were shared across religious communities in the early Islamic Middle East (apocalyptic responses to the rise of Islam being another).¹⁵

That being said, such arguments are conjectural, as there was nothing stopping a later Zoroastrian writer from using the reign of al-Ma'mūn as a dramatic setting for a composition like the *Gizistag Abāliš*. Indeed, the reign of al-Ma'mūn was considered paradigmatic for later Muslims too, as we shall see.¹⁶ We witness something similar with Christian texts, in which figures from the 'Abbasid period such as Theodore Abū Qurra (d. post-816) appear in dispute texts from slightly later periods.¹⁷ We also have an example of this on the Zoroastrian side in a little-known New Persian text of the thirteenth century known as the *Hikāyat-i shāhzāda-i īrānzamīn bā 'umar-i khattāb* (*The Tale of Shāhzāda of the Land of Iran with 'Umar b. al-Khattāb*). Despite its late date, the composition revolves around an alleged conversation between a captured son of the last Sasanian king Yazdgerd III and the second caliph 'Umar (r. 13-23/634-44) on the topic of just rule.¹⁸

¹⁵ For a recent effort to analyze Zoroastrian apocalyptic literature alongside Islamic, Christian, and Jewish texts of the same genre, see Shoemaker, *Apocalypse of Empire*; building on Daryaei, "Apocalypse Now"; and Hoyland, *Seeing Islam* (per n. 9 above), among others.

¹⁶ For instance, the court of al-Ma'mūn was the setting for quasi-hagiographic accounts of debates between the sixth Shī'ī imām 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Ridā and various religious opponents: Wasserstein, "The Majlis of al-Riḍā" (and more below). For an overview of intellectual and theological culture during the reign of al-Ma'mūn, see van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 3, 214-550.

¹⁷ *CMR*, Vol. 1, 556-64 (Bertaina), more on Theodore Abū Qurra below.

¹⁸ Unvala, *Dārāb Hormazyār's Rivāyat*, Vol. 2, 244-59; also printed in Asha, *Dastūr dīnyār va payāambar-i dumdār*, 59-115; and brief summary in Dhabhar, *Persian Rivayats*, 586-89. I thank Dan Sheffield for drawing this text to my attention.

Ultimately, it is impossible to say precisely when the *Gizistag Abāliš* was written. As a text, it is shorn of the kind of contextual information that could help us date it precisely. The narrative features a Zoroastrian priest and an ‘Abbasid caliph who are well known from outside sources. But these function as literary characters, not as anchors to the author’s own period, whenever that may have been. Personally, I would favor a ninth or tenth century date primarily on the basis of the parallels with the Christian material. These similarities also recommend placing the author in ‘Abbasid Iraq – as opposed to other centers of Zoroastrian literary production further east, such as Fars or Kirman. In this sense, the *Gizistag Abāliš* may belong to the same efflorescence of Zoroastrian literature which also gave us the *Dēnkard*, dated securely by its colophon to Baghdad ca. 1020 AD.¹⁹ In such a setting, it is easy to imagine how a Zoroastrian author, exposed to the writings of Christians and Muslims, might have tried his hand at this “ecumenical” genre of apologetics, but customized it for a Zoroastrian audience.

The Story

The text revolves around a figure named Abāliš, who is said to have come from the city of Stakhr in Fars province, the first capital of the Sasanian kings, where Zoroastrianism continued to thrive long after the Arab conquest.²⁰ Throughout the work, this Abāliš is given the

¹⁹ de Jong, “The *Dēnkard* and the Zoroastrians of Baghdad,” esp. 232-33.

²⁰ According to the geographers al-Istakhrī and Ibn Hawqal (both fl. 4th/10th c.), Zoroastrians were the single largest non-Muslim community in Fars, ahead of Christians and Jews. See al-Istakhrī, *al-Masālik wa-’l-mamālik*, 139; Ibn Hawqal, *Surat al-ard*, Vol. 2, 292 (both associate the large number of Zoroastrians in Fars with the fact that it was the seat of the ancient Persian kings, and thus, the center of the Zoroastrian faith; Zoroastrians were reportedly more numerous in Fars than anywhere else). I owe these references to Peter Verkinderen. More broadly, Daryaee, “Zoroastrianism under Islamic Rule,” 110; for a

epithet *gizistag*, meaning “accursed,” which Zoroastrian authors elsewhere affixed to Alexander the Great and other notorious evildoers.²¹ Abāliš is also described as a *zandīk*, an opaque term meaning “apostate” or “heretic,” but often used in connection with Manicheans, specifically (e.g. Ar. *zindīq*).²² In this sense, we might see Abāliš as an errant dualist, and indeed, the text states he was a believing Zoroastrian who eventually lost his way (though not to Islam, at least explicitly, contra the view of van Ess).²³

Abāliš’s fall from grace occurred during a visit to a fire temple called “Pušt.” The text tells us that he came there seeking to take the *wāj* – the priest’s blessing before the meal – but no one was available to help him. Therefore, he left the temple and bumped into a man who was possessed by Wrath (Pahl. *xešm*), one of the most powerful demons, sometimes associated in Zoroastrian lore with Arabs and Islam.²⁴ This man convinced Abāliš that he had been turned away from the temple because he was perceived as “lazy and lowly,” and this incited him to

particularly vivid anecdote about the Zoroastrians of Shiraz in the following century, see Yavari, “Abū Ishāq Kāzarūnī.”

²¹ Kotwal and Kreyenbroek, “Alexander the Great ii. In Zoroastrian Tradition,” *Elr*; more broadly Yamanaka, “From Evil Destroyer to Islamic Hero.” For the term *gizistag* in Book 3 of the *Dēnkard*, where it is applied to non-Iranian invaders who threaten Iran, see de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkart*, 57-58.

²² de Blois, “Zindīk,” *EI2*, Vol. 11, 510-13; van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 1, 488-535; and for the term’s appearance in Book 3 of the *Dēnkard*, see de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkart*, 117, 144-45, 273-74.

²³ van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 3, 219.

²⁴ Asmussen, “Aēšma,” *Elr*. The demon Wrath was closely associated with several legendary tyrants, including the dragon Dahāk, whom Islamic-era authors regarded as the progenitor of the Arabs (Skjærvø, “Aždaha i: In Old and Middle Iranian,” *Elr*). In a later Zoroastrian New Persian text, Wrath is associated with the Banū Hāshim specifically, and Muslims generally (Dhabhar, *Persian Rivayats*, 457ff, 481ff). For Wrath in contemporary Pahlavi sources, see de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkart*, 329; Williams, *Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, Vol. 1, 186-87, Vol. 2, 86; Jaafari-Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, 142-43. More broadly, de Jong, “Fate of Demons.”

abandon his faith altogether. Now under the influence of Wrath, as well, Abāliš ceased sacrificing to the gods and engaged in disputes with the learned men of Fars, including Zoroastrians, Arabs (Pahl. *tāzīgān*, meaning Muslims), Jews, and Christians.²⁵

Eventually Abāliš's disputing brought him to Baghdad (Pahl. *bakdād*) and the court of al-Ma'mūn, whom the text refers to using the title, "commander of the faithful" (Pahl. *amīr ī mūminīn*, from Ar. *amīr al-mu'minīn*).²⁶ Along with the *qādī* of Baghdad (Pahl. *kadīg*), the caliph assembled a motley crew of debaters to challenge Abāliš, including Muslims, Jews, and Christians.²⁷ The key debater, however, was the priest Ādurfarnbag son of Farroxzād, whom the text refers to as the *hudēnān pēšōbāy*.²⁸ This probably means he was the leader of the Zoroastrians of Baghdad, an office analogous to that of the East Syrian catholicos or the Jewish exilarch. All three were heads of semi-autonomous non-Muslim communities, bound by ties of tax and investiture to the 'Abbasid court. We know from outside sources that this Ādurfarnbag

²⁵ For the foregoing, see Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 148v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 11-12; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 243.

²⁶ Baghdad also appears in a short Pahlavi geographical treatise, and is named in connection with its founder, the caliph Abū Ja'far al-Mansūr (ca. 145/762): Daryae, *Šahrestānīhā ī Ērānšahr*, 23, 28, 74. For a parallel rendering of the title *amīr al-mu'minīn* (*ameroumnēs*) in a Greek Christian text of roughly the same period, see Sagner, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, 107.

²⁷ For the foregoing, see Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 148v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 12-13; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 243.

²⁸ On the office, see Kreyenbroek, "Zoroastrian Priesthood," esp. 163; also Boyce, *Zoroastrians*, 153; Chosky, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 98, 122; Stausberg, *Religion Zarathustras*, Vol. 1, 279, 474; Rose, *Zoroastrianism*, 163; with further references in Book 3 of the *Dēnkard*: de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkart*, 147 (Ādurfarnbag), also 38, 157 (just *pēšōbāy*); and the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*: de Menasce, *Škand-Gumānīg Vicār*, 116-17; Taillieu, "Zoroastrian Polemic Against Manichaeism," Vol. 1, 80-81 (Ādurfarnbag).

was among the most famous priest-scholars of the classical Islamic period.²⁹ He is remembered as the first compiler of the *Dēnkard*, the great compendium of Zoroastrian religious knowledge; the author of a large collection of legal *responsa*, many of which address the challenges of living under Islamic rule; and he is quoted as an authority in later texts such as the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg* and the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*. As a *dramatis persona*, therefore, Ādurfarnbag was meant to impress the reader as an exemplary Zoroastrian and a top-notch debater.³⁰

The remainder of the text is structured around seven questions which Abāliš poses to Ādurfarnbag. Ādurfarnbag then responds, and at the end of each, al-Ma'mūn sides with the priest. By the conclusion of the text, having failed to persuade the caliph, Abāliš is expelled from the court.³¹ In general, Abāliš's questions are pointed but civil in tone. Ādurfarnbag's answers are in turn detailed, often relying on imaginative and colorful analogies to make their points. We shall revisit these questions at the end of the paper when we consider the purpose of the text. For now, suffice it to say, the *Gizistag Abāliš* features what at first glance strikes the reader as a semi-random collection of topics. What is more, they seem to have little explicit connection to Islam, Manichaeism, or any other religion implied by the frame story:

²⁹ Tafazzolī, "Ādurfarnbag ī Farroxzādān," *Elr*. For his *rivāyat*, see Anklesaria, *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag and Farnbag-Srōš*; Rezai Baghbidi, *Revāyat of Ādur-Farrōbay*.

³⁰ Indeed, Rezaia ("Dēnkard Against its Islamic Discourse," 342) goes so far as to state, "[Ādurfarnbag may] definitely be called the greatest Zoroastrian philosopher in the whole history of the religion."

³¹ For the concluding section, see Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 151v-152r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 25-26; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 247.

Question 1: Water and fire as sacred substances³²

Question 2: Dead matter (Pahl. *nasā*) and pollution³³

Question 3: Theodicy and Ohrmazd's responsibility for evil in the world³⁴

Question 4: Washing with bull's urine (Pahl. *gōmēz*) and ritual purity³⁵

Question 5: The reasons for fire worship³⁶

Question 6: Why the corpses of Zoroastrians are more polluted than the corpses of non-Zoroastrians (Pahl. *anērān*)³⁷

Question 7: The sacred girdle (Pahl. *kustīg*)³⁸

The Historical Context

Is there any historical reality behind the narrative? As with “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*,” we must be sensitive to the fine distinction between actual events and their representation in literary form. This applies especially to the main characters – Ādurfarnbag

³² Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 148v-149r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 13-14; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 243-44.

³³ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 149r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 14-15; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 244.

³⁴ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 149r-149v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 15-17; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 244.

³⁵ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 149v-150r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 17-19; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 245.

³⁶ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 150r-150v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 19-21; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 245-46.

³⁷ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 150v-151r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 21-23; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 246.

³⁸ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 151r-151v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abâlish*, 23-25; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 246-47.

and al-Ma'mūn – but also the mysterious Abāliš, whose true identity remains unclear (if it can ever actually be ascertained).

What we can say with certainty is that the *Gizistag Abāliš* portrays a historical reality in which it was common to find high-ranking Zoroastrians or Zoroastrian converts at the 'Abbasid court. One famous example is Ibn al-Muqaffa' (d. 139/756), the famed Persian translator and Arabic belle-lettrist, who served the caliph al-Mansūr (r. 136-58/754-75) and was a convert from Zoroastrianism or another Iranian faith.³⁹ A similar figure was the astrologer Nawbakht al-Fārisī (fl. mid-second/ mid-eighth c.), a Zoroastrian convert who predicted al-Mansūr's rise to power and whose descendants became prominent administrators, intellectuals, and Shī'ī partisans.⁴⁰ Al-Ma'mūn, the star of the *Gizistag Abāliš*, knew his fair share of Zoroastrians, as well. Two of his most famous viziers were the brothers al-Fadl b. Sahl and al-Hasan b. Sahl, who came from a family of Sasanian petty nobles (Ar. *dahāqīn*) near Kufa. According to Islamic sources, the brothers converted from Zoroastrianism to Islam under the patronage of the powerful Barmakid family before eventually entering the orbit of al-Ma'mūn. Later in life, al-Fadl's enemies unsuccessfully tried to ruin his career by claiming that he was still a Zoroastrian.⁴¹ Another example from the reign of al-Ma'mūn is Māzyār, the Qārinid prince of Tabaristan, who was deposed by a local rival and came to Baghdad seeking the caliph's help. Al-Ma'mūn agreed to support him, but on the condition that Māzyār abandon Zoroastrianism and

³⁹ Kristó Nagy, *Pensée d'Ibn al-Muqaffa'*.

⁴⁰ Pingree, "Abū Sahl Nawbakht," *Elr*; Massignon, "Nawbakht," *EI2*; for the conversion scene, see al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, Vol. 5, 211.

⁴¹ Cooperson, "An Early Arabic Conversion Story"; for al-Fadl's conversion scene, see al-Jahshiyārī, *Wuzarā' wa-'l-kuttāb*, 229-31.

become a Muslim. Māzyār initially consented, but upon returning to Iran, rejected Islam, resumed practicing Zoroastrianism, and reportedly harassed local Muslims.⁴²

The caliph al-Mutawakkil (r. 232-47/847-61) also kept company with Zoroastrian converts, including a boon companion who had once been a high-ranking priest (Ar. *mawbadh*, from Pahl. *mowbed*). This individual, known by various names in the Arabic sources – including Zardusht b. Ādhurkharra and Muhammad al-Mawbadh al-Mutawakkilī – may be none other than the son of the chief disputant in the *Gizistag Abāliš*, Ādurfarnbag. As de Blois has argued, Zoroastrian sources hint that the early recension of the *Dēnkard* which Ādurfarnbag had a hand in compiling was lost due to a mysterious misfortune which befell the man’s son, Zardušt. One possibility is that the misfortune refers to Zardušt’s conversion.⁴³ If this is true, then one of Zardušt’s notable deeds before embracing Islam was to have taken part in al-Mu‘tasim’s interrogation of the Iranian general al-Afshīn (d. 226/841), who was accused of harboring secret Zoroastrianism (or Buddhism?) after allegedly becoming Muslim.⁴⁴

Zoroastrians also played a prominent role in the *majlis* culture of the ‘Abbasid court, which is represented in stylized form in the *Gizistag Abāliš*. Al-Mas‘ūdī (d. 345/956), for example, describes a *majlis* convened by the Barmakid vizier Yahyā b. Khālīd (r. 170-87/786-

⁴² Rekaya, “Mazyar, résistance ou intégration”; Haug, “Ṭabaristān and the Early Empire” (and see below, n. 70).

⁴³ de Blois, “Persian Calendar,” 45-46; for the passage in Book 3 of the *Dēnkard*, see de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkard*, 380. On this event and others leading to the final redaction of the text, see now Rezaia, “*Dēnkard* Against its Islamic Discourse.”

⁴⁴ al-Tabarī, *Annales*, Part 3, 1309-10; on the trial, see now Turner, “Heretic, Rebel or Rival?”

803) which featured a motley crew of Shī'īs, Khārijīs, Mu'tazilīs, Sunnīs, and Zoroastrians.⁴⁵ We gain a similar picture from an oft-quoted passage by al-Humaydī (d. 488/1095), who describes the visit of an Andalusī Muslim to Baghdad in the late tenth century. The visitor, Ibn Sa'dī, was appalled by what he witnessed in the *majālis* of the Muslim theologians, which included “every kind of group, Sunnī Muslims and heretics, and all kinds of infidels, Zoroastrians, materialists, atheists, Jews, and Christians.”⁴⁶

Along with these anecdotes, we possess several specific stories about Zoroastrian priests disputing in the presence of al-Ma'mūn, much as we see in the *Gizistag Abāliš*. For obvious reasons, these are potentially important for establishing a historical setting for the text. One of the most interesting comes from the *'Uyūn akhbār al-ridā* of Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (d. 381/991-2), an account of the life and works of the eighth Shī'ī imam, 'Alī b. Mūsā al-Ridā (d. 203/818).⁴⁷ Al-Ridā was famously summoned to Marw in 201/816 to become al-Ma'mūn's heir, and for the next two years, resided with him, taking part in disputes sponsored by the caliph. Ibn Bābawayh records two such sessions which involved Zoroastrians. One, on the topic of the sinlessness of the prophets (Ar. *'ismat al-anbiyā'*), is very short and states only that al-Ridā

⁴⁵ al-Mas'ūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab*, Vol. 4, 236-43, esp. 241 (concerning the presence of an unnamed “*mūbadh* ... and *qādī* of the Zoroastrians”); cited in Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 31, 153 n. 49.

⁴⁶ al-Humaydī, *Jadhwat al-muqtabis*, 161-62; translation adapted from Griffith, “Monk in the Emir's *Majlis*,” 62; with further discussion in Cook, “Ibn Sa'dī on Truth Blindness.”

⁴⁷ For more on this work, see Wasserstein, “The *Majlis* of al-Ridā”; Cooperson, *Classical Arabic Biography*, 70-106. Many years ago Spuler (*Iran in the Early Islamic Period*, 128 n. 24, for the recent English translation) remarked on the similarity between Ibn Bābawayh's account and the *Gizistag Abāliš* (along with another text written by the Christian bishop Theodore Abū Qurra; see below, n. 58). That being said, he wrongly assumed that the texts described the same historical incident, whereas they simply make use of the same literary trope.

disputed with people of various faiths, including Zoroastrians.⁴⁸ The other, however, on the topic of monotheism (*tawhīd*) and convened by the aforementioned vizier (and Zoroastrian convert) al-Fadl b. Sahl, is longer and more detailed.⁴⁹ Interestingly, Ibn Bābawayh commits much less space – not more than a paragraph – to the exchange between al-Ridā and the unnamed Zoroastrian priest (*al-hirbidh al-akbar*, from Pahl. *hērbēdān hērbēd*, presumably). This is in contrast to his lengthy exchanges with the Christian catholicos (*al-jāthlīq*), the Jewish exilarch (*ra's al-jālūt*), and a prominent Sabian named 'Imrān.

According to Ibn Bābawayh's transcript, al-Ridā invited the priest to explain what proof he had that Zarathustra had been a prophet. The priest stated that Zarathustra had performed things which no prophet before him had done. He also permitted the Zoroastrians to do things which no one had permitted them to do in the past, and for these reasons, they chose to follow him. Al-Ridā then challenged the priest, asking why, if the Zoroastrians had followed Zarathustra, they had not heeded (still greater) prophets such as Moses, Jesus, or Muḥammad. The priest could not provide an excuse, and al-Ridā prevailed.

A similar scene unfolds in a bawdy anecdote concerning al-Ma'mūn, a Christian catholicos (*al-jāthlīq*), and a Zoroastrian priest (*al-mawbadh*), as recorded by the litterateur al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī (d. early fifth/ eleventh c.) and discussed by van Gelder.⁵⁰ According to the story, al-Ma'mūn was surrounded by theologians and religious leaders in his *majlis* when the

⁴⁸ Ibn Bābawayh, *'Uyūn akhbār al-ridā*, 191-95 (esp. 192).

⁴⁹ Ibn Bābawayh, *'Uyūn akhbār al-ridā*, 154-78 (esp. 167-68).

⁵⁰ al-Rāghib al-Isfahānī, *Muhādarāt*, Vol. 2, 243; cited in van Gelder, *Close Relationships*, 61.

catholicos asked him whether he wished to have a laugh at the Zoroastrian's expense. Turning to the priest, the catholicos said, "This man claims that Paradise is in his mother's vagina, and that the more he copulates with her, the closer he gets to the Gate of Paradise" – playing on the well-known invective against Zoroastrian next-of-kin marriage. The priest then returned the insult, saying, "We used to do that, until we were told that your god came out of such a place." Al-Ma'mūn bent over with laughter, while the catholicos fell silent. The anecdote is so unusual that one wonders whether there is a ring of truth to it.

A gentler report comes from the historian Ibn Abī Tāhir Tayfūr (d. 313/925-26), who records a short speech by a mowbed in the presence of al-Ma'mūn, who asked the priest to explain "the fruits of the rational intellect" (*thamarat al-'aql*).⁵¹ Finally, in his chapter on Zoroastrians (NP. *mughān*), the New Persian heresiographer Abū 'l-Ma'ālī (fl. 485/1092) mentions how a dualist (*thanavī*) debater appeared in the *majlis* of al-Ma'mūn and announced his beliefs to the assembled theologians and jurists. Repulsed by these, the Muslims told al-Ma'mūn that the only way to dispute with him was by the sword. The caliph paused, then launched into the debate himself, pointing out the contradiction inherent in believing that a Good Creator could be both all-powerful and co-exist with an Evil Creator. The dualist relented, and al-Ma'mūn then had him executed.⁵²

Of course, the *Gizistag Abāliš* is not strictly speaking an account of a dispute between Zoroastrians and Muslims. Rather, it is a dispute between a Zoroastrian and an errant dualist,

⁵¹ Ibn Abī Tāhir Tayfūr, *Kitāb baghdād*, 52.

⁵² Abū 'l-Ma'ālī, *Bayān al-adyān*, 43; cited in Mashkūr, *Dīnkard*, 25-27; noted in passing in Rezania, "Dēnkard Against its Islamic Discourse," 324 n. 20.

Abāliš, whom the text refers to as a *zandīk*. Islamic sources also preserve accounts of debates between al-Ma'mūn and dualists which may help contextualize our story. One such figure was Abū 'Alī the *zindīq*, whom al-Ma'mūn is said to have personally debated. The story is preserved in the writings of al-Jāhiz (d. 255/868f), along Ibn Qutayba (d. 276/889), Ibn Abī Tāhir Tayfūr, and Ibn 'Abd Rabbih (d. 329/940).⁵³ Van Ess has gone so far as to argue that the *Gizistag Abāliš* “looks like a response to – or indeed the original of – the Muslim tradition.” As evidence of this, he cites the similarity between the names “Abāliš” and “Abū 'Alī,” as well as a general correspondence between al-Ma'mūn's arguments and the subject of Question 3 in the *Gizistag Abāliš*, the matter of who is responsible for good and evil in the world.⁵⁴

Another important anecdote comes from the *Fihrist* of Ibn al-Nadīm (d. 385/995), who describes how al-Ma'mūn summoned the Manichean leader Ibn Yazdānbukht from Ray in order to take part in a disputation in Baghdad. The man was reportedly vanquished in the debate, prompting al-Ma'mūn to order him to convert. Ibn Yazdānbukht, however, reminded al-Ma'mūn that he was not in the habit of making men abandon their faiths – a point with

⁵³ al-Jāhiz, *Hayawān*, Vol. 4, 442-43 (with lots about the *zanādiqa* in the surrounding pages); Ibn Qutayba, *Uyūn al-akhbār*, Vol. 2, 152-53 (followed by an account of a dispute between Hishām b. al-Hakam – a prominent Imāmī Shī'ī theologian, known for his associations with dualists and his participation in disputes [see Madelung, “Hishām b. al-Ḥakam,” *EI2*] – and an unnamed Zoroastrian mowbed, 153; and a dispute between al-Ma'mūn and “an apostate to Christianity,” 154-55); Ibn Abī Tāhir Tayfūr, *Kitāb baghdād*, 51 (followed by the aforementioned speech of the mowbed, see above, n. 50); Ibn 'Abd Rabbih, *al-Iqd al-farīd*, Vol. 2, 196-97 (followed by an account of a dispute between al-Ma'mūn and an “apostate from Khurasan, who converted under his watch, whom he brought with him to Iraq, apostatized from Islam,” similar to the aforementioned dispute between al-Ma'mūn and the Christian, 197-98).

⁵⁴ van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 3, 219 (for previous speculation on the meaning of the origin of the name “Abāliš,” see n. 31); with praise from de Jong, “Zoroastrians of Baghdad,” 230-31.

which the liberally-minded caliph readily agreed (strange, considering the caliph's actions during the *mihna*). Al-Ma'mūn then settled the Manichean in the Mukharrim Quarter of Baghdad on the east bank of the Round City. There, he lived under the protection of guards – much as he had debated the Muslim scholars only after receiving a promise of protection – in a sign of how just how repellent his ideas may have been among Muslims of his day.⁵⁵

Does any of the foregoing get us closer to the historical reality behind the *Gizistag Abāliš*? In my view, none of these anecdotes represents a smoking gun. No single story combines all three figures from the Pahlavi text – the Zoroastrian priest, the dualist, and the caliph – and no story remotely mirrors the variety of topics contained in it, either. The brief debate from the writing of Ibn Bābawayh, for example, is concerned with Zarathustra's standing as a prophet, which is not addressed in the *Gizistag Abāliš*. The dualist debate from the work of al-Jāhiz, meanwhile, touches on evil like one part of the *Gizistag Abāliš*, but in an oblique manner that makes no reference to specifically Zoroastrian ideas, such as belief in the deities Ohrmazd and Ahrimen.

Instead of trying to peg the *Gizistag Abāliš* to a specific event, as Spuler and van Ess proposed doing, I would argue it is better to see the text as a literary prototype reflecting a general historical context. The author of the *Gizistag Abāliš* probably turned to the figure of Ādurfarnbag because he could serve as an exemplary mouthpiece for the Zoroastrian tradition as a whole – much as contemporary Christians wrote dispute texts featuring the famous Arabophone bishop and theologian Theodore Abū Qurra. The author also turned to the figure

⁵⁵ Ibn al-Nadīm, *Fihrist*, Vol. 2, 793, 801, 805.

of al-Ma'mūn given his reputation for sponsoring *majālis* and for his broad intellectual interests, which brought him into contact with Muslims and non-Muslims alike.⁵⁶ He may have also been perceived as sympathetic to Persian and Zoroastrian interests, since his mother reportedly came from Bādghīs and was the daughter of the quasi-Zoroastrian rebel Ustādhsīs (though this is a matter of dispute).⁵⁷ As such, al-Ma'mūn could be portrayed as an effective, high-status referee. In my view, Abāliš is probably fictional, a Zoroastrian manifestation of a kind of character who pops up frequently in Christian texts of the period. Like Abāliš, these Jewish and Muslim disputants were inserted into Christian works so as to quarrel with their Christian protagonists, and in so doing, make the Christians' arguments shine more brightly.⁵⁸

The Purpose of the Text

Having identified a historical context for the *Gizistag Abāliš*, what more can we say about the genre to which it belongs? Reading the text alongside examples of “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*,” one is struck by their obvious similarities in form, but their profound differences

⁵⁶ For background on the caliph’s reign, especially his role in promoting philosophy, theology, literature, and science, see Cooperson, *Al-Ma'mun*. Around the same time, Christian authors were transforming al-Ma'mūn into a very different kind of literary character, one so sympathetic to the church that he is said to have converted to Christianity! See Swanson, “Christian al-Ma'mūn Tradition.”

⁵⁷ Al-Ma'mūn’s mother, known as Marājīl, seems to have entered the harem of Hārūn al-Rashīd, al-Ma'mūn’s father, as a prisoner of war following Ustādhsīs’s defeat in 151/768, though scholars have debated whether the sources are trustworthy in this respect; see Madelung, “Was the Caliph al-Ma'mūn a Grandson of ... Ustādhsīs?”; Crone, *Nativist Prophets*, 151-57.

⁵⁸ For example, *The Disputation of the Monk Ibrāhīm al-Tabarānī*, a Melkite Arabic text set in the ninth century, features a *majlis* made up of Muslims, Christians from different denominations, recent Christian converts to Islam, and Jews. In the final scene, impressed by the monk’s skill in debate (and miraculous resistance to poison and fire), the converts and the Jews go over to Christianity; overview in *CMR*, Vol. 1, 876-81 (Swanson).

in content. This is attributable not only to the Zoroastrian and Christian beliefs of their respective authors, but also to these writers' polemical aims. In short, Christian *majlis* literature of the early Middle Ages is deeply concerned with Islam, both in terms of defending Christianity against Muslim critiques and in going on the offensive against Muslim doctrines. By contrast, the *Gizistag Abāliš* shows no explicit concern with Islam. What accounts for the difference?

Let us briefly consider two famous examples of Christian dispute texts set during the reign of al-Ma'mūn. The first of these, *The Debate of Theodore Abū Qurra*, is based loosely on an actual encounter between the caliph and the famous Melkite bishop of Ḥarrān in 829. Despite its grounding in historical reality, however, the encounter quickly transforms into a literary dialogue which became one of the most famous works of Christian Arabic literature. Today, thirty-one manuscripts of the debate survive in both Melkite and Syrian Orthodox recensions, the oldest of which (MS. Vat. Borg. Ar. 135) dates to 1308, making it roughly contemporary with the oldest surviving copy of the *Gizistag Abāliš*. *The Disputation of Theodore Abū Qurra* addresses a number of issues pertaining explicitly to Islam: circumcision, the maidens of paradise (Ar. *hūrīs*, e.g. Q. *al-Tūr* 52:20, *al-Wāqī'a* 56:36-37, *al-Naba* 78:33, etc.), the humanity and divinity of Jesus, Jesus' identity as the "Word and Spirit of God" (e.g., Q. *al-Nisā'* 4:171), the identity of the Qur'anic pagans, the status of Christians in the Qur'an, the Trinity, the death of Jesus, and the crucifixion, among other topics.⁵⁹

⁵⁹ For an overview, with extensive bibliography, see *CMR*, Vol. 1, 556-64 (Bertaina). A separate treatise – written by Abū Qurra himself and concerning the nine principal religions of his day – attacks Zoroastrians (particularly adherents of Zurvan) for practicing next-of-kin marriage and for believing that God had created man chiefly to enjoy worldly pleasures; see Theodore Abū Qurra, *Wujūd al-khāliq wa-'l-dīn al-qawīm*, 201-2; with emendations in the

Another Christian dispute text set during the reign of al-Ma'mūn is *The Apology of al-Kindī*, an alleged debate between a Christian and a Muslim ('Abd al-Masīh al-Kindī and 'Abdallāh b. Ismā'īl al-Hāshimī, both probably pseudonyms, if they were real people at all), under the patronage of the caliph. Structured as a series of letters between the disputants, the Muslim initially invites the Christian to convert, calling on him to renounce the cross, the Trinity, and other Christian beliefs. The Christian then responds in an unusually vituperative tone, discussing several issues of direct concern to Christian-Muslim rivalry: Islam's claim to the heritage of Abraham, the Trinity, Muhammad's instruction by the monk Bahīrā, Muhammad's affair with Zaynab, Muhammad's status as a prophet, and the Qur'an's status as divine revelation, among others.⁶⁰

In sharp contrast, the *Gizistag Abāliš* shows no concern with explicitly Islamic themes. In a way, this is unsurprisingly, since Zoroastrians were extremely slow to mobilize a targeted critique of Islam in the first centuries after the Arab conquests. Indeed, the only sustained and explicit attack against Islam in Pahlavi literature comes from the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār* (*The Doubt-Dispelling Disquisition*), often described as a "kalām-style" defense of Zoroastrianism, which was written by the layman and onetime Manichean Mardānfarrox son of Ohrmazddād, in

translation of Lamoreaux, *Theodore Abū Qurrah*, 1-2; overview in *CMR*, Vol. 1, 448-50 (Lamoreaux).

⁶⁰ For an overview, with extensive bibliography, see *CMR*, Vol. 1, 585-94 (Bottini). Note that "al-Kindī" refers to the Kinda, one of the most important Arab Christian tribes of the pre- and early Islamic periods, while "al-Hāshimī" refers to the Banū Hāshim, the clan of the Prophet Muhammad and of the 'Abbasid family. The two correspondents are thus meant to represent "ideal types" (equivalent to a modern American dispute text which might feature two characters named "Fr. O'Connell" and "Rabbi Schwartzman").

the tenth or eleventh centuries, but possibly even later.⁶¹ Despite the silence of the Middle Persian sources, Muslims were leveling their own targeted critiques of Zoroastrianism at the time. These critiques focused on themes such as dualism and monotheism, Zoroaster's contested status as prophet, the Avesta's contested status as a divine revelation, the Zoroastrians' contested status as "People of the Book" (vs. "People of the Covenant"; Ar. *ahl al-kitāb* vs. *ahl al-dhimma*), and controversial Zoroastrian customs such as next-of-kin marriage (Pahl. *xwēdōdah*).⁶² A text like the *Gizistag Abāliš* would seem to be the ideal place to rebut at least some of these points, but with the exception of dualism, it addresses none of them. In fact, as Rezania has recently pointed out, the *Gizistag Abāliš* and other priestly texts of the ninth century mostly center around "ritual effectiveness and efficiency," not "theological or philosophical debate," which is striking.⁶³ Is there any logic to the particular basket of issues the *Gizistag Abāliš* chooses to discuss? Even if it does not address Islam explicitly, is there a way to read certain passages as addressing Islam implicitly?

The major themes of the *Gizistag Abāliš* may be described as follows: creation (Question 1), purity and pollution (Questions 2, 4), the problem of evil (Question 3), fire worship (Question 5), and boundary maintenance (Question 6, possibly 7). Seen in such bare-bones terms, the *Gizistag Abāliš* actually deals with a range of predictable themes that would have

⁶¹ For the Islamic section of the text, see de Menasce, *Škand-Gumānīk Vicār*, 122-73; Taillieu, "Zoroastrian Polemic against Manichaeism," Vol. 1, 84-117. Remarkably little has been written about this fascinating and important section.

⁶² This is another subject which merits more thorough investigation. Along with the overviews listed above (n. 8), see Ridwān, *Ahkām al-majūs fī 'l-islām*; Bürgel, "Zoroastrianism as Viewed in Medieval Islamic Sources"; Friedmann, *Tolerance and Coercion*, 72-76; van Gelder, *Close Relationships*; Magnusson, "Muslim-Zoroastrian Relations."

⁶³ Rezania, "Dēnkard Against its Islamic Discourse," 342.

mattered to any Zoroastrian in the medieval period, indeed at any time before or after. To my knowledge, however, they do not correspond to a specific catechetical or doctrinal program. If anything, they seem to mirror the well-known practice in Pahlavi literature of including lists of “things,” sometimes numbering four, five, six, seven or more items, wide-ranging in their content and semi-random in their order.⁶⁴

As we have seen, dualism was a major focus of debates between Muslims and Zoroastrians, and if there is an Islamic concern in the background of the text, this is it. In Question 1, for example, Abāliš asks Ādurfarnbag why water and fire are mutually antagonistic if both were created by Ohrmazd and both are holy substances.⁶⁵ The question concerns the mechanics of creation, but also Ohrmazd’s ability to control creation, and thus Ahrimen’s power over it, too. In Question 3, Abāliš asks Ādurfarnbag who is responsible for the “wounding and punishment of humans”: when “lords” order men to be “struck, wounded, or killed” in retaliation for their sins, who commands this, Ohrmazd or Ahrimen?⁶⁶ If it is Ohrmazd, can we rightly believe he is all-good, and if so, does this mean Ahrimen is not actually responsible for causing suffering? Ādurfarnbag replies by explaining that punishment in this world saves souls in the next, for “priests, teachers, and judges” (Pahl. *mowbedān ud dastwarān ud dādwarān*) who chastise sinners now spare them from the tortures of demons later.

⁶⁴ There are numerous examples of this across Pahlavi literature; for instance in Book 3 of the *Dēnkard*: de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkart*, 38, 77, 134-35, 136-38, 145-46, 190, 202-3.

⁶⁵ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 148v-149r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 13-14; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 243-44.

⁶⁶ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 149r-149v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 15-17; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 244.

Along with theodicy, there are several other themes which could be read as addressing the Islamic environment. Question 5 provides the rationale for fire worship, and in so doing, seems to answer a timeless critique about this strange practice (at least to non-Zoroastrians): why ask the fire for “wealth ... instant comfort, protection, and good living” if the fire is also “so weak, powerless, and poor?”⁶⁷ Question 6 discusses a curious distinction between the polluting power of Zoroastrian (Pahl. *tan ī ahlawān*) and non-Zoroastrian (*ān ī druwandān*, and later, *anērān*) corpses.⁶⁸ Contrary to what one might expect, the former are explained to be much more impure than the latter, since the Amahrspands accompany the souls of the righteous to paradise after death, abandoning their bodies to the demons down below. Meanwhile, when the wicked die, the demons automatically escort their souls to Hell, leaving their bodies untouched on earth. Could this reflect anxieties about how to handle the corpses of non-Zoroastrians (especially Muslims) or Zoroastrians who live in non-Zoroastrian areas – a theme that also surfaces in the *rivāyat* of Ādurfarnbag?⁶⁹

Finally, Question 7 concerns the *kustīg*, the girdle worn by Zoroastrians.⁷⁰ This is the most polemical section in the entire text, as Abāliš asks Ādurfarnbag whether asses, camels, and horses will make it to heaven before him since their belts are tied around their waists seven times (that is, the harnesses of their saddles, as opposed to just once, for a man’s belt).

⁶⁷ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 150r-150v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 19-21; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 245-46.

⁶⁸ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 150v-151r; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 21-23; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 246.

⁶⁹ Anklesaria, *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag and Farnbag-Srōš*, 21-22, 50-51, 60-61; Rezai Baghbidi, *Revāyat of Ādur-Farrōbay*, 27-28, 72, 89-90.

⁷⁰ Christensen, *Codices Avestici et Pahlavici*, Vol. 1, 151r-151v; Chacha, *Gajastak Abālish*, 23-25; Skjærvø, *Spirit of Zoroastrianism*, 246-47.

Therefore, they must be more virtuous. One wonders if the question reflects actual Muslim (or Manichean) mockery of the practice. Here, it is important to note that the *kustīg* took on added importance for Zoroastrians after the rise of Islam. It came to be considered a totem of Zoroastrianism as a whole, and indeed, Zoroastrian and Muslim sources speak of the removal of the belt as the supreme gesture of conversion to Islam (much as Christians spoke about this in connection with the *zunnār*). For the same reason, the refastening of the belt was considered the supreme gesture of conversion back to Zoroastrianism.⁷¹ Along with this passage in the *Gizistag Abāliš*, we also possess a treatise on the topic, entitled *Čim ī Kustīg* (*The Significance of the Sacred Girdle*), which may date from the same period and reflect similar concerns from the Islamic environment.⁷²

What does the foregoing suggest about the purpose of the text? Even if there are echoes of debates with Muslims in some parts of the *Gizistag Abāliš*, there is no concrete engagement with Islamic ideas. It is thus not an anti-Muslim polemical work like its Christian counterparts. But could it be an anti-Manichean work? After all, the main antagonist is not the

⁷¹ On the *kustīg* and conversion, see Kiel and Skjærvø, “Apostasy and Repentance,” esp. 224-27, 238. On the parallels with the Christian *zunnār*, see Sahrer, *Christian Martyrs under Islam*, 57-59, 71, 103, 202. Upon returning to Iran in ca. 825, the Qārinid prince Māzyār apostatized from Islam and refastened his *kustīg* as a Zoroastrian (Ibn Isfandiyār, *History of Ṭabaristān*, 150). Later, the caliph al-Mu’tasim persuaded his nephew Qārin to convert to Islam by removing his *kustīg* (Ibn Isfandiyār, *History of Ṭabaristān*, 150); cited in Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation*, 41 (155 n. 76), 91 (166 n. 47).

⁷² Junker and Tavadia, *Kustīk; Asha, Sacred Girdle*; along with this, see Anklesaria, *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag and Farnbag-Srōš*, 70-71; Jaafar-Dehaghi, *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*, 152-65 (which underlines the dangers of removing the *kustīg*, perhaps reflecting the threat of apostasy: “Since the decision of having no sacred cord is so severe (i.e. in its consequences), when that decision is accepted, it is observed that danger is strengthened. To not wearing [sic] this girdle ... is the first sign of the destructive danger,” 160-61). On the *kustīg* more broadly, see Stausberg, “Significance of the *Kusti*.”

Muslim al-Ma'mūn, but the *zandīk* Abāliš. We might consider the possibility that the Zoroastrian author wrote the work to differentiate his beliefs from those of the Manicheans. Such a task would have been pressing for two reasons: Zoroastrians and Manicheans shared the same broadly dualist worldview, and thus there was a risk the Muslim authorities would confuse and conflate them. At the same time, as van Ess speculates, the Muslim authorities – perhaps recognizing the similarity between the two groups – may have played Manicheans and Zoroastrians off each other, especially in competitions for bureaucratic power in a place like Iraq.⁷³ Thus, could the *Gizistag Abāliš* represent an internal Zoroastrian effort to differentiate themselves from their Manichean rivals (an impulse which is also evident in Book 3 of the *Dēnkard* and the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*, which contain extensive anti-Manichean polemics)?⁷⁴ If so, could it be that the Zoroastrian author turned to the caliph's court as a setting to assign value to competing systems, based on the principle that an imaginary *majlis* was the ideal place to weigh Zoroastrian claims against those of its dualist competitors?

Along these lines, the text highlights a few Zoroastrian-specific doctrines which the Manicheans did not accept. These include the use of bull's urine for purification, fire worship, and the sacred girdle. Could these be interpreted as points of dispute between two otherwise similar dualist religions? But if this is so, why does the *Gizistag Abāliš* not treat more serious areas of disagreement between them, beginning with the status of their respective prophets, Zoroaster and Mani? Or why does it not explore the ethical, theological, and cosmological

⁷³ van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 1, 492.

⁷⁴ de Menasce, *Troisième livre du Dēnkart*, 47, 117 (*zandīks*), 153, 209-10 ; de Menasce, *Škand-Gumānīk Vicār*, 226-61; Taillieu, "Zoroastrian Polemic Against Manichaeism," Vol. 1, 142-49.

critiques of Manichaeism found in a later work like the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*?⁷⁵ Furthermore, if the text is concerned with discrediting Manichaeism, why is the frame story set during the reign of al-Ma'mūn and not that of his predecessor al-Mahdī (r. 158-69/775-85), who was famous for persecuting the *zanādiqa*?⁷⁶ Ultimately, despite the presence of the *zandīk* Abāliš, I do not regard the Manicheans as any more plausible a target of the work than Muslims.

In light of this, I would prefer to see the *Gizistag Abāliš* as an internal catechetical work written primarily for a priestly audience, but possibly including educated lay people, too. The topics it addresses, while somewhat random, would have been useful for basic educational purposes, as each one provides the author with an opportunity to plainly and succinctly describe core Zoroastrian doctrines, especially on ritual matters, which was typical of texts from the ninth and tenth centuries. This would have been useful in the new Islamic environment of the 'Abbasid period, when the Zoroastrian flock was beginning to shrink and the remaining faithful (including clergy) needed basic instruction about religious matters. The *Gizistag Abāliš* must have been somewhat successful in this respect, for between its brevity and simple style (at least in contrast to complex analytical works like the *Dēnkard* or the *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*), it could be easily digested by such an audience.

Conclusion

⁷⁵ Taillieu, "Zoroastrian Polemic Against Manichaeism," Vol. 1, 361-445; on Zoroastrians and Manicheans more broadly, see Hutter, "Manichaeism in Iran" (arguing that the *Gizistag Abāliš* reflects Zoroastrians' concerns – not for doctrinal Manichaeism – but a looser "Gnostic-Manichaean esotericism" which was ascendant at the time, see 486-87).

⁷⁶ de Blois, "Zindīk," *EI2*; van Ess, *Theology and Society*, Vol. 1, 493 (which downplays the extent of the violence); for the intellectual milieu in which the alleged crackdown occurred, Gutas, *Greek Thought, Arabic Culture*, 61-74.

Even if the *Gizistag Abāliš* is a unique example of “the monk in the emir’s *majlis*” on the Zoroastrian side, it is not unique as an example of Zoroastrian debate literature, more broadly. Other prominent examples include the exchanges between Ādurfarnbag – the same priest in the *Gizistag Abāliš* – and the Christian Bōxt-Mārē and the Jew Ya‘qūb Xaledān in Book 5 of the *Dēnkard*.⁷⁷ Later Zoroastrian authors in New Persian returned to the genre with slightly different characters and narratives. Along with the aforementioned *Hikāyat-i Shāhzāda-i Īrānzamīn bā ‘Umar-i Khattāb*, the most famous examples are two texts both bearing the title *‘Ulamā’-yi islām (The Scholars of Islam)*.⁷⁸ Both are structured around questions posed by Muslim scholars to Zoroastrian priests, and both concern Zoroastrian takes on bigger themes, such as the creation of the world, the origins of evil, and cosmology. This follows a pattern evident across many Zoroastrian debate texts from the late medieval and early modern periods, which despite featuring Muslim characters, almost never go on the offensive against Islam. Like the *Gizistag Abāliš*, they are much more concerned with explaining Zoroastrian doctrines than critiquing the beliefs of others.

Herein lies a profound distinction between Zoroastrians and other religious communities in the medieval Middle East, especially Christians. Such groups confronted the threat of Islam with finely tailored arguments, sometimes by drawing on the sacred texts of their opponents, sometimes by universalizing their own beliefs and arguing for them on the

⁷⁷ Amouzgar and Tafazzoli, *Cinquième livre du Dēnkard*.

⁷⁸ Unvala, *Dârâb Hormazyâr’s Rivâyat*, Vol. 2, 72-86; with comment in de Blois, “‘Ulamā i Islām”; Sheffield, “New Persian,” 535-36 (for a brief description of other Zoroastrian New Persian dispute texts).

basis of first principles of Aristotelian logic.⁷⁹ By and large, the Zoroastrians did not do this, even in settings and genres in which one assumes they could have done, such as the *Gizistag Abāliš*. If there was an apologetic response to the rise of Islam, it was to systematize and codify Zoroastrian knowledge – as one sees most obviously in the case of the *Dēnkard* – not to write texts that attacked the ruling religion. One assumes that if this was a conscious choice, it was based on the assumption that the best way to conserve the Zoroastrian flock was to educate its members about what they did believe, rather than warning them against what they should not believe.

Considering that Zoroastrianism seems to have disappeared faster and more thoroughly than other religions across the Islamic Middle East (at least in the view of most historians), one wonders if this tactic backfired in the long term.⁸⁰ There were numerous factors which handicapped the Zoroastrians as they confronted the new challenge of Islam. These included their preoccupation with purity and pollution, which posed major problems in an Iranian world now ruled by infidels; and their tradition of transmitting religious knowledge orally, which risked the complete loss of this knowledge when learned elites apostatized (as we saw earlier in the case of the Zardušt son of Ādurfarnbag, the mowbed convert to Islam). But the absence of a targeted, specific, and explicit critique of Islam – on the scale of what one finds on the Christian

⁷⁹ For a broad overview of this tendency among Christians, see Griffith, *Church in the Shadow of the Mosque*, esp. 45-105.

⁸⁰ See above, n. 8 for literature on the state of Zoroastrianism in the early Islamic period.

side, for instance – is surely one of the most striking examples of how Zoroastrians were caught somewhat flat-footed after the Arab conquests.⁸¹

⁸¹ As noted above, the great exception to this rule are the sections against Islam in the later *Škand-Gumānīg Wizār*: de Menasce, *Škand-Gumānīk Vicār*, 122-73; Taillieu, “Zoroastrian Polemic against Manichaeism,” Vol. 1, 84-117.

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