Although the general opinion has always been that the name *Ahura Mazda* means ‘the wise Lord’, this interpretation has been questioned or disputed from time to time. Thus, in the beginning of this century, Edv. Lehmann interpreted the name as “visdommens herre” or “den herre visdom” (*Zarathustra II*, Copenhagen 1902, p. 33) and about the same time A. V. Williams Jackson wrote more cautiously “Der Name *Ahura Mazda* . . . bedeutet ‘weiser Herr’, der ‘Herrsch’er (ahura), welcher ‘weise oder die Weisheit’ ist (mazdah, Skt. *mēdhas*)” (*Grundriss der iranischen Philologie II* [Strassburg, 1896–1904], p. 632). The idea was taken up in later years by Benveniste, by Maria Wilkins Smith (1929) in the context of a very personal theory, 1 and by Sten Konow (1932–33, published in 1937). 2 The latter’s theory was further developed in 1945 by Kaj Barr 3 who, however, abandoned it in later years, and in 1960 by Paul Thieme. 4 It has recently found some supporters. 5 Since

1 Maria Wilkins Smith, *Studies in the Syntax of the Gathas of Zarathushtra together with Text, Translation, and Notes* (Language Dissertation No. 4), 1929, pp. 25–28. From Bartholomae she took over the idea that ‘wise’ was the original meaning (p. 26). A few years earlier (in 1926) Benveniste, in the first Ratanbai Katrak lectures translated the name as ‘the Lord Wisdom’ and said “His abstract name, Mazdā, is prior to the reform, to which he does not even owe the essential rôle which has devolved upon him. Against the hypothesis of an entirely Zoroastrian origin, one can bring forward both internal and external evidence.” See *The Persian Religion according to the Chief Greek Texts*, Paris 1929, p. 40.


in an article on Ahura written for the Encyclopaedia Persica I could only briefly mention the existence of this theory, it may be useful to discuss it at some greater length.

It is hardly possible in this connection to enter upon difficulties arising from basically different approaches to the phenomenon of religion. Since from the point of view of an historian of religion such an Aryan figure as Rta/Asa can be studied as an entity in its own right, comparable with Greek Thémis and Egyptian Ma-a-t, the hotly disputed question as to how rītā should be translated in a modern European language would seem to be of little relevance to the archaic religion itself. Nor am I able to accept, I am afraid, Thieme's statement to the effect that the main concern of the historian of religions is "Menschen, die sich Gottheiten ersinnen und dann an sie glauben." Since the results of modern research do not seem to contradict the working hypothesis that archaic religions have a systematic character, the proper object of research is the total system and the function of a certain entity in it. For such a study the etymology of a name is in the majority of cases of little help, just as the etymology of the name Christ explains next to

6 See III. 3 (1959), 207-212.
7 See, e.g., III. 8 (1964), 96-129.
9 To illustrate Thieme’s different point of view attention may be drawn to p. 400, where he refers to Indra as a god whose name was, “possibly already for the Vedic poets”, nothing but a proper name. It is certainly true that proper names are “an und für sich sinnlose Etiketten” – one might say, it is their very function simply to indicate, not to describe – but Thieme then characterizes Indra’s activity in the words “es ist das Wirken nicht einer allseitig erlebten Naturkraft, sondern einer nur erschlossenen übermenschlich-menschlichen Planung, die seinen Anhängern zugute kommt.” These words are here quoted, not to discuss the question of their correctness – they were written in 1960 – but because they illustrate what consequences in Thieme’s opinion the etymological obscurity of a name has for the interpretation of the nature of a god. Cf. on the other hand p. 411: "Von ehemaliger 'Identität' der Figuren kann man . . . nur dort sprechen, wo neben Vergleichbarkeit einzelner Züge und Funktionen ein identischer Name und damit ein fester Kern nachweisbar ist” and p. 412, where a typological relationship between gods is contrasted with "die historische Verwandtschaft, die durch die Vergleichung von Namen allein sicher feststellbar wird –, es ist die 'Verwandtschaft' zwischen dem griech. Zeüs patēr und dem vedischen Dyaus pītā 'Vater Himmel', auf die man ohne nachweisbare ursprüngliche Identität des Namens kaum kommen könnte." The last remark is true but then, the Mediterranean pantheon of the Greeks is so much different from what must have been the Proto-Indo-European one that an isolated name is the only reminiscence of the Indo-European past. For comparative religion the historical identity of the names does not help much. The Old Iranian and the Vedic religion cannot be equated with the Greek religion and here the possibility of taboo must be considered. See III. 5, 55, 8, 109, n. 68.