

Introduction to Part Three, In Depth Discussions.

Part Three is for those who are interested in studying certain aspects of the Gathas in depth. In *Part One*, chapters 1.3 through 1.8, we looked at the meanings of the seven attributes of the Divine (amesha spenta) in depth. Here, we will explore in depth, the meanings of certain other key Avestan words, as well as some other subjects that are relevant to Zarathushtra's thought. These provide the foundations for conclusions which I simply state in earlier Parts.

And in this *Part Three*, we will take an in-depth look at the Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu), the Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo), and the Yenghe Haatam manthras, together with ancient commentaries on them (to the extent available).

When I disagree with eminent linguists of the past or present, I sometimes feel like a daring mouse with a toothpick sword, taking on a giant. But (as always) truth is an imperative ~ at least to the extent that we can ascertain it. And the meanings of certain key words are essential to an accurate understanding of Zarathushtra's thought. As he tells us, we should question, listen to others, think for ourselves, and make (informed) choices. So I will give you the evidence of conflicting views, including my own, and let you decide for yourself.

Zarathushtra did not express his thoughts in any of the languages that are in use today. And often there is not one word in a given language that corresponds exactly with one word in another language, as anyone who has tried to translate a joke from one language to another is well aware. In addition, the meanings of words evolve over time. Mr. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, late of the United States Supreme Court, once said (in a different context),

"A word is not a crystal, transparent and unchanged, it is the skin of a living thought and may vary greatly in color and content according to the circumstances and the time in which it is used."¹

This is so very true of words in all languages ~ examples abound in English, and also in Avestan. And indeed, tracing changes in the meanings of words that have evolved over time is so common that it is part of what linguists call the study of etymology. Add to this the fact that for many centuries, Avestan had become an unknown language ~ its grammar and vocabulary were not understood ~ and you can glimpse the challenges we face in attempting to understand Zarathushtra's own thoughts.

De-coding an ancient language is not easy. Differences abound.

Sometimes the differences in translation are based on inherent ambiguities in the language itself, sometimes on differences of opinion about the appropriate cognate in other ancient Indo-European languages ~ cognates whose meanings may also have changed over time. Sometimes, the English word selected by a given translator might reflect his pre-conceived mind-set, based on the paradigms of later texts, or on the paradigms of the religion in which the translator has been raised (none of which existed in Zarathushtra's day). Such pre-conceived mind-sets often are not consistent with all of the evidence regarding the ways in which Zarathushtra uses a given word.

His paradigms regarding the nature and identity of the Divine, and how we should worship, are very different from the culture in which he was raised. And indeed, the priests and princes of his day persecuted and ostracized him because of his ideas. Yet his only means of communicating his ideas

was the vocabulary of his society. How then would Zarathushtra use the vocabulary available to him to express his own, radically different, ideas?

Well, I surmise (based on the evidence of the Gathas) that where existing words were adequate to express his views, he used them. Where they were not, he used them in a context that was inconsistent with the ways in which such words were used in the traditions of his culture, and thus would have caught the attention of those who sang his Gathas, leading them to puzzle over these inconsistencies, and so understand Zarathushtra's thought. His (new) ideas regarding the words 'Lord', 'reward', and 'worship' (discussed in the puzzles of *Part Two*) are good examples of these radically different usages. There are many others.

These contextual inconsistencies with the usage of the vocabulary of his culture would have been easier to catch for Zarathushtra's contemporaries, who were fluent in the language of the Gathas. Once knowledge of that language died out, catching such 'puzzles' became more difficult, because the only tools available for decoding Gathic Avestan were the cognates in other ancient Indo-European languages, and the Younger Avestan texts ~ including the baggage they carried pertaining to many ancient paradigms which Zarathushtra rejected.

Therefore, in ascertaining Zarathushtra's intent in using a given word, it is important to examine, not just cognates in other ancient languages, but ~ even more important ~ all the different contexts in which he uses a given word, as well as the macro context of his ideas. This is what I have attempted to do throughout this book, and particularly in discussing the GAv. words in this *Part Three* (and *Part Six*).

In *Part Two*, I have discussed Zarathushtra's ideas on hell as a wrong-headed, unenlightened state of being in mortal existence.² In this *Part*, I debunk, with evidence, the widespread idea that Zarathushtra invented the notion of 'hell' as a punitive place of torment ~ an idea that has been promoted by scholars ~ Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian ~ in good faith, but inaccurately. To that end, I have included some chapters on 'heaven' and 'hell' in later texts ~ Avestan and Pahlavi/Pazand, which show how some of them reflect Zarathushtra's thought, how some of them have moved away from it, and how and when the idea of a punitive hell of torments entered the religion ~ more than 1,000 years after Zarathushtra!

This phenomenon (of differing and inconsistent ideas in the history of a religion) exists in all religions. The ideas of later (and spiritually lesser) religious authorities, often are very different from the founder of a given religion. We see this so clearly in Christianity, in which (to cite just one example) the horrors of the Inquisition and the burning alive of 'heretics' (to say nothing of those unfortunate women who were labelled 'witches') were so very far removed from the teachings of Christ (as recorded in the Gospels of the New Testament).

One of the Pahlavi texts, the *Arda Viraf Namah*, which specializes in the torments of 'hell', has a cruelty which is so very far removed from Zarathushtra's thought, that I did not want to discuss or even mention it ~ especially since this text would be good fodder for those who wish to condemn and denigrate the Zoroastrian religion (as they have done for many centuries!).

But it does no good to hide from such horrors. It is more important to know about them, show factually how they came into the religion, and how they are so very far removed from Zarathushtra's thought, so that misinformation (and lies) can be refuted ~ whether well intended or motivated by

malice. That is a more effective way to answer those who unintentionally or deliberately confuse Zarathushtra's teachings with inconsistent teachings in later texts (or other religions paradigms).

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¹ Opinion of the Court in *Towne v. Eisner*, 245 U.S. 418, 425 (1921).

² Detailed in *Part Two: The Houses of Paradise & Hell*.