

The Meaning of the Name 'Zarathushtra'.

The meaning of Zarathushtra's name has long been the subject of debate. Many Zoroastrians today prefer 'golden star' as the meaning of 'Zarathushtra'. According to Vasunia, the second half of the name is close to the word for 'star' (*astêr*) in ancient Greek, which he says gave rise to such explanations as 'one who worships the stars' or 'one who divines from the stars', or (because *zô* meant 'life' in Greek), 'living star'.¹

But I agree with him that this (superficial) similarity is misplaced. The Gathic Avestan word for 'star' is *star-* (pronounced like the English 'star' but with a short 'a', and perhaps a soft 't') which probably is related linguistically to the later Greek word *astêr* ~ both Greek and Avestan are in the Indo-European family of languages. But Avestan *star-* is quite dissimilar to *uštra-*, the 3d syllable of Zarathushtra's name. There can be no doubt that in Av. *uštra-* means 'camel' and appears as such in the Gathas ("[...ten mares together with their stallions and a camel \[uštrāmcā\]...Y44.18](#)).² As Mills comments on *uštra-* (in another context): "It means a camel; so the Pahlavi translator rendered many centuries ago before Europeans even knew what the Indian "ushtra" meant, which simple analogy Neryosangh first drew."³ The possibility of a linguistically different view, is discussed in a footnote in *Part Four: Zarathushtra's Date and Place*.

Vasunia 2007 (diplomatically) suggests that the name Zarathushtra perhaps means "possessor of gold camels" p. 52. Others (less diplomatic) think it means 'possessor of yellow camels' ~ *zaraθa-* being associated with the color yellow.⁴

On the other hand, I question whether 'golden' or 'yellow' are a good fit. Skjaervo 2003 shows 'golden, tawny' to be *zairi-* in Avestan, with the following related words ~ none of which are a good fit with Zarathushtra's name ~ *zaranaēna-* 'of gold'; *zaranya.paiti.θwaršta-* 'inlaid with gold'; *zaranya.karāta-* 'gilded'; *zaranya.srva-* 'with golden hooves'. Indeed, in GAv. ~ *zar-* means 'to anger' (Skjaervo 2006). But so far, no one has argued for '(having) angry camels' as the meaning of the name Zarathushtra.

Some of my fellow Zoroastrians (who are dear to me) express indignation and disbelief at the idea that the founder of the religion could possibly be called 'possessor of yellow camels'. But (regardless of how *zaraθ* may modify *uštra-* 'camel') babies' names tend to reflect their parents' aspirations. And camels in Zarathushtra's society were indicia of wealth, as were horses. Zarathushtra's father was called '*pourushaspa*' meaning '(having) many mares'. It would have been understandable for parents to give their baby a name which indicated possession of an aspect of wealth in that society ~ especially since traditional stories of Zarathushtra's birth and childhood show that his father had no desire whatsoever to have a spiritual philosopher for a son. It would have been very unlikely for Zarathushtra's parents to have given him a name which reflected his later achievements and stature (which they would have had no way of knowing).

Taraporewala expresses the opinion that Zarathushtra was not his original birth name, that it was a title given to him "when he became a Prophet" and that his birth name was Spitama, after one of his ancestors. (Taraporewala 1951, p. 73). With respect, I disagree.

We know that in ancient Iran, families (sometimes) took on the name of a revered or famous ancestor as a family name. Thus in ancient Iran the descendants of a king named *Hakhamaneesh* (Greek *Achaemenes*) were known as (or called themselves) the Achaemenians. In the same way, in Zarathushtra's family, Spitama was an ancestral family name. Zarathushtra himself calls his family "["ye Spitamas" Y46.15](#).

And (with respect) the idea that 'Zarathushtra' was a title is contradicted in both the Gathas and certain later texts. In the Gathas, Yasna 29 he is called 'Zarathushtra Spitama' *before* he is chosen by the Divine to teach Its envisionment ~ indicating that 'Zarathushtra' was his birth name, and 'Spitama' was his family name. In

Yasna 29 Wisdom asks the allegorical 'good thinking' if he has found anyone who could bring Wisdom's teachings to mortals.

"... 'Who has (been found) by thee, good thinking who might give these things to the mortals below.'" Y29.7, Insler 1975;

And good thinking replies: "This one Zarathushtra Spitama [*zaraθuštrō spitāmō* nom. sg.] has been found by me here to be the only one who has given ear to our commandments. He wishes, Wise One, to recite hymns of commemoration for us, and for truth if he might receive for himself sweetness of speech." Y29.8, Insler 1975.

In later texts, he is called Zarathushtra Spitaman or Spitman. In Avestan, the suffix *-an* is one of the possessives, indicating 'belonging to' ~ just as 'Aryan' means 'a person belonging to the Aryas'. So 'Zarathushtra Spitaman' means 'Zarathushtra belonging to the Spitamas'.

In the *Doa Nam Setayeshne*, a Khordeh Avesta prayer composed many centuries after Zarathushtra, Kanga shows that he is called Zarathushtra Spitaman or Spetaman (pp. 52 - 53). As translated by Sethna, it says, in part:

"Homage to the all knowing tolerator [or 'Tolerant-One'], who sent through Zarathushtra Spitman ... teachings of religion for the people of the world so that they may have friendship, inculcate faith and inner wisdom and knowledge gained from hearing. For the information and guidance of all men who are, who were, and who will be hereafter ..."5

Even Zarathushtra's geneology, (purportedly) given in the Pahlavi *Bundahishn* shows his name to be "Zartûsht"

"...As Païtirâsp had two sons, one Pôrûshasp and one Arâsti, by Pôrûshasp was Zaratûsht begotten ... and by Arâsti was Mêdhyôk-mâh begotten..." *Bundahishn*, Ch. 32, § 2, E. W. West translation.⁶

It is true that in later YAv. texts spiritual (and perhaps also secular) leaders were called 'Zarathushtrotema', and also Zarathushtra,⁷ and in § 6, Zarathushtra the messenger of Ahura Mazda, and the Zarathushtrotema the religious chief, are both mentioned in the same section.⁸ But I think this title was given because Zarathushtra was such an influential and popular religious leader in his time period.

In conclusion: I think the meaning of the name 'Zarathushtra' is an Avestan word (one of many) that has not yet been decoded. All attempts are simply best guesses.

But is the meaning of his name important?

A moment's reflection makes it clear that it is not. His name was simply given to him at birth, before his parents knew what his spiritual teachings or stature would be in the future. True, the later traditions speak of unusual signs and even miracles following his birth. But even if these are true, the later traditions also reflect that his father was totally unimpressed by such things, was not a particularly spiritual being. Zarathushtra's name does not reflect on Zarathushtra. It reflects only the aspirations of his of his parents (probably only his father), in naming a new born son.

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¹ Vasunia 2007, p. 63.

² The word *uštrāmcā* is *uštrām* the acc. sg. form of the stem *uštra-*, with the suffix *-cā* 'and' tacked on (Skjaervo 2006).

³ SBE 31, p. 120, ft. 1.

⁴ Taraporewala 1951, p. 73

⁵ Sethna 1963, *Khordeh Avesta*, (3d ed. 1980) p. 63.

⁶ SBE 5, p. 141.

⁷ During YAv. times, the title given to a religious and/or secular chief is shown in YAv. texts, was sometimes called *Zarathushtra* and also "*Zarathushtrotema*" It is not without interest that in the section which immediately follows (Yy19.18), the lands which are "different from, and **outside of** the Zarathushtrian regency or domain" are described as having five chiefs as follows,

"18. (Question.) How are the chiefs (constituted) [*kaya ratavō••*]? (Answer.) They are the house-chief the village-chief, and the tribe-chief, the chief of the province, and **the Zarathushtra** [*nmānaō. vīsyō. zaṇtumō. dāhyumō. zaraθuštrō*] as the fifth..." Yy19.18; SBE Vol. 31, p. 265; Mills' ft. 5 to the words "and the Zarathushtra" states "The title of a governor."

Whereas the lands **within** the Zarathushtrian domain are described as having four chiefs as follows,

"...They are the house-chief, the village-chief, the tribe-chief, and **the Zarathushtra** as the fourth." Yy19.18. Mills translation, SBE Vol. 31, p. 265.

If Mills' translation is correct, we see here in Yy19.18 (and also in other YAv. texts, composed centuries after Zarathushtra's time) that the head chief (whether a secular governor or possibly a religious chief) is described as "**the Zarathushtra**" ~ a title. What is really intriguing (to me) is that this title "**the Zarathushtra**" is given to the head chief, even of lands not under the Zarathushtrian domain. So one has to wonder: In own time period, Zarathushtra, was Zarathushtra a personal name? a secular/religious title that became a personal name (such as 'Christ', or 'Lord')? Did his parents name him 'Zarathushtra' because of their aspirations that he would one day become a chief or governor? We have no way of knowing.

⁸ SBE 31, p. 385.