

Translations.

The revolving quotations from the Gathas on the Home Page.

Unless otherwise stated, these translations are by me.

Translations of the Gathas in the chapters of this book.

All quotations from the Gathas in this book are (with his generous permission) from the Insler 1975 translation, unless otherwise stated.

At the Gatha Colloquium in London, in 1993, Professor Gershevitch expressed (mildly scornful) disapproval that anyone would attempt to translate *all* the verses of the Gathas on our present state of knowledge. I agree that on the present state of our knowledge, it is not possible to translate every Gatha verse in a definitive way. But I am eternally grateful to those linguists who have made the attempt. Admittedly in some verses, such translations might involve some guess-work (as linguists themselves have admitted in their commentaries). But the effort was (and continues to be) very worthwhile. Educated guesses can be steps in the right direction.

True, sometimes such guesses reflect a mind-set that is informed by other religious paradigms which are not based on the evidence of the Gathas, and indeed sometimes are contrary to Zarathushtra's thought. Anyone who has read several translations of the Gathas is aware how very different these translations can be ~ even when done by first class linguists ~ to say nothing of the many variations in the ancient manuscripts themselves (as shown in Geldner's footnotes). There is, inevitably, a certain amount of interpretation in the translations of most Gatha verses, which of course leads one to wonder:

Are we reading the ideas of the translator, or of Zarathushtra?

Well, when one reads a 'free' translation (i.e. largely interpretive), one is stuck at the level of understanding of the translator. It is only with a translation that is as literal as possible (consistent with readability, etc.) that one begins to glimpse Zarathushtra's own thoughts.

I have a passion for the truth (as best I can ascertain it). The more I studied the Gathas, the more I wanted to know what Zarathushtra's own thoughts were ~ unfiltered (to the greatest extent feasible) by the interpretations of the many translations I continued to study. In an effort to ascertain what is interpretive and what is literal in these various translations, I began to (and continue to) study the Avestan language itself (slowly and painfully).¹

I have arrived at perhaps ninety percent (or more) of the conclusions in *Part One: The Basics*, and *Part Two: Puzzles and Other Paradigms*, using the Insler 1975 translation. Many of these conclusions have not been drawn by Insler himself, (although based on his translation), and many of these conclusions are quite different from conventional conclusions about Zarathushtra's thought. But the evidence of the Gathas is remarkably consistent, and the conclusions I have drawn are corroborated not only in other parts of the Gathas, but also in certain later texts, which gives me some confidence that they are accurate.

As I continued to study Avestan (primarily GAv.), in some instances I found myself in disagreement with Insler's 1975 opinions and interpretations, based on other evidence in the Gathas themselves

(using his translation), or based on the opinions of other linguists, or later texts.² But Insler's 1975 translation is (in my view) the least interpretive, and the most careful and insightful. And he has very generously and specifically, allowed me to use his translation for the materials on this website (as stated in my copyright notice on the home page) even though we disagree here and there.

In addition to its quality, the use of such an independent translation (as Insler's), enables you to see that I have not molded the evidence of the Gathas to suit my conclusions. Where I (with respect) disagree with the Insler 1975 translation, I have given my own translation, and have endeavored to support my views with the opinions of first class linguists, as well as contextual evidence. Because I express these differences, it may seem as though I disagree with the Insler 1975 translation more than I do.

In addition, I need to make clear that the disagreements I (respectfully) express with Insler 1975 (and other translators) are a bit unfair in that Insler made his translation more than 40 years ago. All good scholars continue to re-think their conclusions, and Insler's more recent translation preferences may in some respects be quite different from his translation preferences of 40 + years ago. But his 1975 translation, (and such supplemental information as I have footnoted) is all that I have of his thoughts. So when I disagree with some of his translation preferences, please remember, he may have long since changed his mind about such preferences (although not necessarily in accord with my thinking). And the same is true of other translators.

Gathic Avestan is a language of inflection (as are Latin and Vedic Sanskrit).³ To make it easy for the reader (especially in *Parts One* and *Two*), whenever I use an Avestan word in quotations and discussions, I show it in its stem form, unless the inflected grammatical form is relevant for some particular purpose. The stem form is indicated by a little dash or hyphen at the end of the Avestan word (although in their commentaries, linguists do not consistently use such dashes). We should remember, all Avestan roots and stems are conjectured (based on how the word is inflected for case, number and gender) ~ most often from parallels in Vedic Sanskrit. In fact, after Avestan became an unknown language for more than a millenium, it was only possible to decode it primarily through its similarity to Vedic Sanskrit (with assistance from the principles of linguistics and philology, and other ancient languages in the Indo-European family of languages).

Showing an Avestan word in its stem form makes it easy for a reader who may recognize an Avestan word in stem form, but may not know its various grammatical forms, and so may not recognize the given word for what it is (especially since manuscripts and translators themselves may not always agree on the grammatical forms of a word). For example: "... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth [*aṣa-*]." Y28.4. In the GAv. text, the word *aṣahyā* 'of-truth' is the genitive sg. form of the stem *aṣa-*. But *aṣahyā* might seem strange and puzzling to readers who are familiar with the word *aṣa-*, but are not familiar with its inflected forms (showing case/number/gender).

A word about other translations given for comparative purposes. I have over 30 translations of the Gathas ~ some by linguists and some by non-linguists who nevertheless have valuable insights regarding Zarathushtra's ideas and the meanings of certain key words. Obviously, it is not feasible to give you the opinions of all such translators for comparative purposes.

So for the meanings of the Av. words which comprise the amesha spenta and the 3 foundational manthras, I have tried to give the opinions of as many translators as feasible, because these are the

most foundational words and teachings. In almost all other instances, I have limited the number of translations to a small group of translators who are professional linguists, who know the Vedic language and Vedic texts, who are familiar with Old Persian and other ancient Indo-European languages, who also know Avestan and the Avestan texts (to the extent they have been de-coded), and who understand the many linguistic rules which pertain to languages and their evolution ~ especially the ancient Indo-European languages. Some of the linguists in this group are modern, and some are from an earlier generation of linguists, when the decoding of Avestan was still in its infancy.

This use of a limited number of translators does not reflect an opinion on my part that other translators do not have excellent insights. Far from it. I often have benefitted from such insights ~ each giving a particular dimension or flavor to Avestan words which do not have precise English equivalents (an excellent example being the many different translations of *haurvatāt*- footnoted in *Part One: Completeness and Non-Deathness, Haurvatat, Ameretat*).

You may well wonder: If I am not a professional linguist, what useful contribution could I possibly make towards an understanding of Zarathushtra's thought?

I leave that for you to decide. My answer is this. One of the tools of my profession (the law, which I practiced for 40 + years) is objective, logical analysis ~ analyzing factual evidence, looking for what is consistent and inconsistent, looking for corroborating evidence, analyzing statutes in context, with a view to determining the intent of the legislature in passing a given law, analyzing the ideas in legal precedents in context, and synthesizing these ideas to see how (or if) they apply to (other) given situations. These are precisely the tools that are required for a meaningful study of the many linguistic opinions (and interpretations) of GAv. words and translations. And (with no disrespect intended) these are the tools that all too often are in short supply among professional linguists.

If we truly are interested in ascertaining Zarathushtra's thought as accurately as possible, a careful, logical analysis of the verses of the Gathas ~ the linguistics of each word, as well as the context in which it appears ~ with corroborating (consistent or complementary) evidence in other verses of the Gathas and in later texts as well ~ a micro/macro/micro analysis ~ is necessary. This is also necessary to remove the spectacles of religious and cultural conditionings in the mind-set of a given translator, which spectacles have resulted in inconsistent interpretive translations.

I therefore start with the opinions of professional linguists, and look to see which opinions are contextually consistent (or inconsistent), applying the analytic tools of my profession.

It is interesting (is it not?) that logical precision in analysing the Gathas is necessary to reveal their multi-dimensioned, abstract, sometimes mystical, luminous, soul-delighting, insights.

A paradox? True. But then again, human beings are paradoxical creatures (only robots are 100% logical), and the Gathas are full of wonderful paradoxes.

Transliterations of quotations from Avestan texts.

Except where otherwise stated, quotations in Avestan from the Gathas and later Avestan texts, are from Geldner's (1886) *Avesta*, which is written in Avestan script, and which I have transliterated into English letters. Where relevant, I have attempted to point out where Geldner's selection of a given word (from mss. variations) is different from that of a given translator. And I have relied on

Insler 1975 and Humbach/Faiss 2010 in identifying the ceasura (the poetic break in each line) in certain Gatha verses, which I show by a diagonal slash.

Translations of passages from the GAv. Yasna Haptanghaiti.

Insler has not translated the *Yasna Haptanghaiti* (so far as I am aware). So for quotations in English from the *Yasna Haptanghaiti* I give my own translation, and sometimes ~ usually for comparative purposes ~ also the translations of Humbach (1991), or Humbach/Faiss (2010) or Mills (1894).

Translations of passages from Younger Avestan Texts.

The Younger Avestan texts have not been translated ~ even in substantial part (such as all the Yasnas, or all the Yashts) ~ since the publication of SBE in about 1887 - 1894, giving the translations of Darmesteter and Mills ~ both excellent for their time period, but reflecting an early stage in the decoding of Avestan, so they do not reflect more recent developments in understanding Avestan. These translations are also inclined to be heavily interpretive in key respects (and sometimes very 'free'). But absent any alternatives, for YAv. texts I rely mostly on Mills' and Darmesteter's translations, although I sometimes give my own translation ~ especially when their translation of a given passage is heavily interpretive, and also sometimes when a passage is so beautiful that I cannot resist giving you my own (more literal) translation.

For the *Zamyad Yasht*, in addition to my own translation, I also give the more up to date English translation of Almut Hintze (1994), mostly for comparative purposes.

Translations of passages from Pahlavi and Pazand Texts.

I do not know Pahlavi/Pazand. When quoting from such texts, I have used the only translations available to me ~ the excellent translations of E. W. West ~ most of which appear in SBE. True, he tends to read the texts through the spectacles of his own mind-set (created by the cultural/religious conditioning of the society in which he was raised and lived). But his translations of the Pahlavi texts have made me better understand certain important strands of Gatha thought, and I fully concur in the esteem with which E. W. West was held by Geldner as a linguist and scholar (as stated in the Prolegomena of Geldner's *Avesta*). E. W. West's comments and explanations reveal him to be meticulous, detailed, insightful, thoughtful, while having a kind, generous spirit. I value him highly (even though I don't always agree with him).

Translations of Old Persian Inscriptions, and the Persepolis Fortification Tablets.

For translations of Old Persian inscriptions, I have used the excellent translations by Kent 1950. I also acknowledge my debt to Maria Brosius' excellent work on the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, some of which she also has translated.

Going forward.

I hope that future students of the Gathas will acquire all the skills necessary to translate them, and will translate these magnificent poems in as literal a manner as possible, choosing translation alternatives that are consistent with the micro/macro context of Zarathushtra's thought. If you decide to learn Avestan, you may at first feel overwhelmed by linguistic explanations ~ especially if

you are not familiar with a language of inflections.⁴ I was certainly overwhelmed when I first started. But do not be discouraged. Take it in small steps. With continuous exposure and practice, it will soon become much easier.

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¹ There are no Avestan dictionaries or text books of Avestan Grammar available in English other than the following, which are the resources I have used to teach myself Avestan.

Skjaervo's on-line Introductions to Old Avestan (2006) and Young Avestan (2003) and his most useful 2006 *Old Avestan Glossary* (for which I have blessed him a 1,001 times), as well as his *Young Avestan Glossary* (2003).

Jackson's 1892 *Avesta Grammar*, excellent and detailed, but in some ways reflecting the limitations of an early generation of linguists who worked on decoding Avestan (YAv. and GAv.) ~ to give one small example, his chapter on pronouns do not include the (difficult) category of possessive pronouns (as distinguished from the genitive case of other pronouns).

Beekes' 1988 *A Grammar of Gatha-Avestan*, ~ most useful for learning the various stems and their inflections for nouns, adjectives and pronouns (somewhat less useful for verbs); however the focus of his work was to show what he believed to have been the original form of Gatha Avestan, rather than the way it is written in the manuscripts. So his spelling is different from manuscript spellings.

The most useful tables in Martinez & de Vaan 2001 *Introduccion Al Avestico* (which I had to read with a Spanish dictionary ~ well worth the effort!). I understand that their book has now been printed in English by E. J. Brill, which should be a valuable basic resource.

The linguistic explanations and commentaries of Insler 1975, Humbach 1991, Humbach/Faiss 2010, and Taraporewala 1951 in their respective Gatha translations.

Insler and Humbach bring to their translations of the Gathas (which are quite different in many respects), their vast knowledge of the vocabulary, grammar, syntax and idioms of Vedic Sanskrit, the Vedic texts, their knowledge of other ancient Indo-European languages, as well as knowledge of the rules of linguistics, and how languages evolve ~ all of which are necessary for decoding the grammar, vocabulary, syntax and idioms of Gathic Avestan from scratch. Their linguistic commentaries are sometimes difficult (because they assume the reader already knows Avestan or Vedic Skt., or the principles of linguistics) but nevertheless very helpful and worth the effort ~ although (with respect) I do not always agree with their interpretive mind-sets when informed by other religious and cultural paradigms and certain Pahlavi texts, through which they sometimes interpret certain Gatha verses.

Taraporewala's commentaries in particular have been invaluable because he gives an analysis of the grammatical values and meanings of almost every word in each Gatha verse, giving also the opinions of various eminent linguists of his time period (not available to me), as well as Vedic cognates. Although he may not have known as many other ancient Indo-European languages, he was thoroughly familiar with Skt. (including Vedic Skt.), having obtained a tripos in Sanskrit from Cambridge University. And he studied briefly under Bartholomae, who was one of the foremost scholars and a giant in the field of Avestan and other Indo-European languages in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Taraporewala's 1951 Gatha book also includes an English translation of each verse translated by Bartholomae (which is almost identical with Moulton's translations in *EZ* 1912). I am most grateful to Taraporewala, and have blessed him (also a 1,001 times) for his detailed commentaries, which were state of the art for his time period ~ an early stage in decoding Avestan ~ but which naturally do not reflect more recent developments in understanding this language. However, I (respectfully) do not always agree with his conclusions and interpretations, just as I do not always agree with the conclusions and interpretations of other linguists.

² I sometimes do not agree with Insler's choice of a given English word as a translation of a Gathic Avestan word (see for example, *Part Three: Xratu*), or with his opinions on syntax (for example, in his syntactic choices in lines Y51.2a and b, discussed in *Part Six: Yasna 51.2*). And sometimes, I do not agree with his interpretations. For example, he interprets certain verses to indicate that Zarathushtra believed in the Evil One as an entity (see *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?*), and also in a final judgment, damnation and punishment in hell ~ to give a few examples. And because I use his translation primarily, I have taken the time to detail where I disagree with him, and why. But in many other respects, his insights are often luminous ~ both linguistically and also when it comes to Zarathushtra's use of metaphors and allegories. And I am deeply grateful to him for the knowledge and ideas reflected in his 1975 translation and his commentaries, without which I would never have understood the Gathas, or even glimpsed Zarathushtra's wonderful puzzles.

³ See the chapters in *Part Five: Languages & Texts*, which give brief explanations of the Avestan language.

⁴ There is an excellent little book, Goldman, Norma, 2004, *English Grammar for Students of Latin*, (Olivia and Hill Press). A wonderful, simple guide which helped me to understand how a language of inflections works. Latin and Avestan are both languages of inflection (and both are in the Indo-European family of languages), even though they are very different in many ways.