

*Introduction.*<sup>1</sup>

Why do I think Zarathushtra's teachings need to be "liberated"? Liberated from what?

Well, following two major wars ~ first Alexander's destruction of the Achaemenian Empire, and second the Arab invasion of Iran ~ the learned were killed, books were looted or burned and a great deal of knowledge was lost especially since, in those ancient times, literacy was not universal, and knowledge was mostly transmitted verbally, by teaching, stories, poems and songs. Subsequently for more than a 1,000 years, Zoroastrians have lived under various dominant cultures, languages, and religions (often under intense persecution). And these influences have molded the thinking of even the best teachers, and have generated certain traditions and ideas that are far removed from the Gathas, and even from some later texts. So if you are interested in Zarathushtra's own ideas, we will explore them in these 7 short chapters ~ liberated from many of these later influences (as best I can), because regardless of whether you are a 'Zoroastrian' or simply are curious, you may find that his teachings make a real difference in the way we look at things, and relate to each other, to other life forms, to the environment. Here is the first of these 7 short chapters.

**Gender Equality & Social Justice.**<sup>2</sup>

The Gathas contain specific evidence of both gender equality and what today we call 'social justice'. This evidence is corroborated by later Avestan texts, by archeological evidence, as well as by ancient legends.

In the Gathas, there are many instances in which Zarathushtra specifically addresses men and women together. For example, he says,

"These things are exactly true, men; exactly women..." Gathas, Yasna 53, verse 6, Insler translation 1975, indicating that men and women were present ~ at the same time ~ in his audiences, and were his followers, which is corroborated in the Younger Avestan *Farvardin Yasht* which identifies the names of both men and women disciples of Zarathushtra.

And in the Gathas, he advises his youngest daughter Pouruchista,

"Do thou persevere, Pouruchista ... To thee shall He grant the firm foundation of good thinking (*vohu- ... manah*), ... of truth (*asha*) and of wisdom (*mazda*-)..." Gathas, Yasna 53, verse 3, Insler translation 1975.

To Zarathushtra, 'good thinking', 'truth', 'wisdom' are qualities that the Divine personifies, which he thought a woman capable of attaining.

According to tradition, this last Gatha was composed for the wedding of his daughter Pouruchista (whose name means 'full of illumined understanding'). In those ancient times, many brides and grooms got married at one time. And Zarathushtra gives some advice to those brides and grooms who were getting married on that day, on how they should treat each other for a successful married life. He does not tell the brides to be obedient to their husbands (although some later texts do). He says instead:

"Let each of you try to win the other with truth [*asha*-] and this shall be of good gain for each ..." Gathas, Yasna 53, verse 5, Insler translation 1975,

expressing the notion that the marriage relationship is one of partnership, with each spouse having to make the same effort to win the love and respect of the other with all the values that comprise *asha*- 'the true order of existence' which in the Gathas includes factual truths as well as the truths of mind/heart/spirit ~

qualities such as goodness, what's right, honesty, generosity, friendship, lovingkindness, compassion, being just, (as in being fair) etc.<sup>3</sup>

And this advice is applicable to all our relationships. If each of us would try to win others with all these good qualities that are implicit in an order of existence that is true, wholly good, (*asha- vahishta*), it would solve so many of the problems that plague our societies.

Of course, we should use common sense in protecting ourselves from those who are not well intentioned. But a later text tells us that even to enemies, we should be just (as in being fair). In the *Ashirwad* portion of the Zoroastrian Wedding Ceremony, the priest gives advice to the couples getting married on how to live their lives, and treat other people, in accordance with the teachings of the religion.

And one of these bits of advice says,

"... Deal with your enemies according to justice, ... " *Ashirwad*, translation (unpublished) by Shahin Bekhradnia.

Think about that for a moment. If we are required to be just, fair, even to our enemies, how much more should we be just (fair), to all living things regardless of whether or not they are members of our family, our community, friends, strangers, people of different color, different cultures, different nations, and other life forms. An inclusive social justice.

But as valuable as justice is, Zarathushtra requires that we go a step further. He requires that we give a hand up. He describes a person who makes right choices ~ not as 'just'; not even as 'righteous'.

He says, "... the beneficent have correctly chosen ...", *Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 3*, Insler translation 1975.

'Beneficence' means a bountiful generosity that springs from active goodness, lovingkindness, caring, concern. A step beyond 'social justice'.

We all have power. In Zarathushtra's concept of 'good rule' (*vohu- xshathra-*), power is a trust, to be used for the benefit of everyone, all the living, our world.<sup>4</sup>

A very late Avestan text, (written after Avestan times) recounts an ancient legend which states that the Lord Wisdom asked a legendary figure Yima (in later times called Jamsheed) to be the teacher of His law.<sup>5</sup> But Yima turned down this invitation, stating that he was not born to be a preacher, nor taught to be one. Did the Lord Wisdom hurl a thunderbolt at him, or otherwise punish him for his disobedience and independence?

Not at all. He not only respected Yima's freedom to choose, He offered him another way of doing good.

This text has the Lord Wisdom saying (purportedly, in a story telling way)

"4. Then I, Ahura Mazda, said thus unto him ...,

'Since thou wantest not to be the preacher and the bearer of my law, then make thou my worlds thrive, make my worlds increase: undertake thou to nourish, to rule, and to watch over my world.' *Vendidad*, Ch. 2, § 4, Darmesteter translation.

In short, a good ruler should rule for the benefit of the ruled, ~ not for his own aggrandizement, not by ignoring their needs, or marginalizing them, or exploiting them, or being untruthful with them. In fact, in the Younger Avestan *Zamyad Yasht* we are told that when Yima (Jamsheed) became arrogant, and turned to lies, the kingly divine glory ~ his authority to rule ~ left him.

If we can translate into actions, this teaching of generosity, of lovingkindness, of friendship, nurturing each other, being fair ~ make it an active part of our lives ~ what a force for good we could be.

An intelligent generosity to those who are disadvantaged, enables equal opportunity. And equal opportunity, is a foundation of social justice.

So too is the freedom to speak. But let us be clear about one thing. Even in law, the freedom to speak has never included the freedom to lie. As the late Mr. Justice Holmes (of the Supreme Court of the United States) once wrote,

"... The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre ...".<sup>6</sup>

According to Zarathushtra, our freedoms include corresponding responsibilities. All of the values that we cherish – the freedom to think, speak, make choices, values such as justice, truth, generosity, goodness, lovingkindness, friendship, compassion, – all these values are implicit in the notion of *asha* – 'the true (good) order of existence'. These are not things we can take for granted. These are qualities we have to create, and re-create, give substance to, over and over, with our choices in thought, word and action, as long as we have life. Because if we don't, we lose them. They cease to have reality in our societies, in our lives, in our beings. It's that simple.

In addition to the Gathas, we see many instances of gender equality in other Avestan texts.

The *Yasna Haptanghaiti* says,<sup>7</sup>

"... May a good ruler, man or woman, thus assume rule over us ..." *Yasna Haptanghaiti* 41, section 2, Humbach 1991 translation.

This prayer takes it for granted that a woman could be a good ruler, so the history of those times must have included good women rulers.

Gender equality extended even to rituals and the priesthood. The *Aerpatastan & Nirangistan*, is a much later administrative text written for the guidance of the priesthood (according to linguists in grammatically faulty Avestan). So it likely represented the dominant views of the religious establishment which included having women priests in post-Avestan times (although it meticulously includes dissenting opinions).<sup>8</sup> Here are just 2 examples of the majority view.

Fire is a symbol of truth (which the Divine personifies). So it is not surprising that in the centuries following Zarathushtra, as the religion became institutionalized, fire became a central part of the ritual. This text states that women priests are deemed fit for the guardianship of even the highest fires.<sup>9</sup>

This text states that whenever priestly duties require a priest to travel, as between two priests who are married to each other, if both have control over property and can manage wealth, then either one may travel to perform priestly duties. Surprisingly, it also states, that if only the woman priest has control over property and can manage wealth, then her husband should travel to perform priestly duties, so that the financial interests of the family would not suffer by the woman's absence, indicating not only that women were priests, but that women had independent control over property even after marriage, which has since been confirmed by archeological evidence.

In the early 1900s, an archeological dig in Persepolis, discovered hundreds of clay tablets.

The discovery of these tablets must have come as quite a shock to that generation of archeologists who, in the early 1900s, themselves had no conception of gender equality as we understand it. Those scholars also believed that the Achaemenian kings used slave labor to build their palaces.

But these tablets include numerous and meticulous payroll records which show that the workers who built Persepolis were paid employees ~ not slaves ~ and that the numbers of male and female workers were well balanced. Women were employed as both workers and supervisors. They received the same rates of pay in wine, beer, grain or silver, as their male colleagues. And these tablets show that women enjoyed economic independence, even after marriage. They:

- ~ owned large estates and properties throughout the empire,
- ~ disposed of their rents and income,
- ~ engaged in their own grain and wine businesses,
- ~ employed work forces, and
- ~ paid taxes.

They had their own personal seals, under which they issued orders to their own stewards, and they participated in the social life of the Court.

Even after the fall of the Achaemenian Empire, this ancient tradition of gender equality did not entirely disappear in outlying areas ~ at least for a few centuries. Moulton writes of a foreign diplomat, Tchang K'ien, who in 128 BCE described certain communities in Khorassan and Bactria as follows:

"... there is no supreme ruler, each city and town electing its own chief. They pay great deference to their women, the husbands being guided by them in their decisions." <sup>10</sup>

Ancient Iranian legends described in the Shahnamah, speak of women warriors.

The eldest daughter of the legendary hero Rustam, was a warrior. So also was a garrison commander's daughter who is described as unrivalled in the arts of warfare. When the legendary hero Sohrab laid siege to her father's castle, she challenged him (anonymously) to single combat, during which the tip of his lance caught her helmet, and her long hair streamed out as she rode, which (according to Firdausi) caused Sohrab to wonder in astonishment: If the women of Iran are so valiant, what must their men be like ~ not exactly a statement of gender equality! But at least giving credit where due.

These legendary stories of women warriors are echoed factually in the Cambridge History of Iran, which mentions that the women warriors of a Persian satrap, were introduced to Alexander the Macedonian at a banquet. The Greeks were shocked. The women of their families were not permitted even to attend feasts ~ private or public feasts ~ let alone fight as warriors.

In that time period, gender equality was not a part of Greek culture.

Yet, it is ironic, (is it not?) that for many generations the academicians of our times have considered the ancient Greeks to be the founders of democratic values and freedoms, and the ancient Persian culture to be devoid of these qualities. Of course, the Achaemenian kings were not elected rulers (unlike the early Median kings and Iranian tribal traditions of elected rulers). And Xerxes did his utmost to conquer the independent Greek states ~ depriving them of their freedom to choose entirely ~ which may have influenced these academic opinions.

Unfortunately, after the destruction of the Achaemenian Empire, and even more so, after the Arab invasion of Iran and the migrations of many Zoroastrians to India, gender equality took a hard hit in Zoroastrian thought in both Iran and India. Yet, many Zoroastrians, even those who themselves were denied social justice and equality, did indeed continue to extend truthfulness, and generosity, to others.

But here, let us take a moment to remember something important. It is one thing to look at history with a (hopefully) impartial eye. It is another thing entirely, to keep alive ancestral grudges or hatreds against anyone, or any peoples, today. Zarathushtra teaches individual responsibility. Each person is responsible for his own choices. So we should not condemn, or feel hostility towards, anyone today (who is innocent), because of what their ancestors may have done.

We come now to an interesting question. Does gender affect Zarathushtra's perception of the Divine ?

We will discuss his perception of the Divine in 2 future sessions, because they are among his most beautiful, and unusual, ideas ~ largely forgotten under the influence of other religious paradigms. So here, I will address only how 'gender' does, or does not, come into it.

In Avestan, (as in Spanish and French),<sup>11</sup> all nouns and adjectives have gender ~ masc. fem. or neuter. But unless the meaning of a noun is intrinsically male, like 'son', etc., or intrinsically female, like 'daughter' etc., the genders of nouns, and adjectives, are purely grammatical.

Now one of the names for the Divine in the Gathas, is *ahura*-, and you might think that *ahura*- 'lord' is an intrinsically masculine noun. But in Zarathushtra's time period, since both men and women could be rulers, the concept of 'lordship' would have had to apply to both men and women, ~ just as more than 400 years ago, Queen Elizabeth I in England, was sometimes called the 'lord' of her subjects.

And in the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses *ahura*- 'lord' ~ repeatedly ~ in a rather lovely way to which gender is not relevant.

He uses *ahura* as one who has 'lordship' over the qualities that make a being divine (which as we have seen, Zarathushtra thought his daughter capable of attaining). He speaks of the Divine as,

"... the very Wise Master [*ahura*- 'lord'] of good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

"... Lord [*ahura*-] of the word and deed stemming from [*vohu- mainyu*- '(a) good way of being'] ..." Gathas, Yasna 45, verse 8, Insler translation 1975;

"... Thou art the Lord [*ahura*-] by reason of Thy tongue (which is) in harmony with truth, and by reason of Thy words stemming from good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 51, verse 3; Insler translation 1975;

"... [*mazda*- 'Wisdom'] in rule [*xshathra*-] is Lord [*ahura*-] through [*aramaiti*- 'embodied truth']." Gathas, Yasna 47, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

We will get into the meanings of these qualities (over which the Divine has acquired 'lordship') in the next session.

Now, it is true that in the Gathas, the Divine is called the 'father' of truth, good thinking, and *aramaiti*- ~ a 'father' who is said to have birthed existence.<sup>12</sup> But fathers don't give birth. So it is easy to see that these two words ~ "father" and "birthed" ~ were being used allegorically, to express Zarathushtra's unusual ideas about the creation of existence.<sup>13</sup>

Now, in Avestan (as in English), even intrinsically masc. nouns, like 'man' sometimes are used generically, to include all the sexes.

For example, in English we have *mankind* ~ a generic use of 'man' which includes all humans. In the Gathas the word *nar*- 'man' is also used generically, to include all sexes. For example, Zarathushtra says,

"... Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man [*naREM naREM*] for himself ~ ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 2, Insler translation 1975.

Here we know that '*man by man*' is generic, because we have seen that he specifically includes both men and women as practitioners of his teachings.

Zarathushtra also uses masculine pronouns for the Divine. But in Avestan (as in English), masculine pronouns also, are used generically.

If Zarathushtra specifically wanted a pronoun for the Divine that would have universal application, the generic masculine would have been the only option available to him in the language of his culture.

Gender is a function of our physical shells. If, as the Gathas and later texts imply, the Divine is a part of all that exists ~ that would include the physical, and all genders. But the Divine is not limited to the physical. It transcends the physical. Gender is irrelevant to the Divine ~ a being not bound by a physical shell.

And indeed, if the Divine is within all that exists (as the Gathas and later texts imply),<sup>14</sup> of what relevance are skin color, ethnicity, wealth, poverty, social standing, and the many other material, physical things that inform our prejudices, and that we allow to divide us?

If the Divine is within all that exists, and if as Zarathushtra specifically says, the Divine is a beloved friend,<sup>15</sup> how can we be less than friends to other human beings, other life forms, any part of existence?

If the Divine is a part of all that exists, there are no 'others'.

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<sup>1</sup> These 7 short essays (with some modifications), originally were given as 7 talks, in monthly ZOOM seminars of the California Zoroastrian Center (CZC), each followed by a Q & A period. If you are interested in the Q & A sessions, you are welcome to view recordings of these 7 sessions on CZC's website at <https://www.czc.org/philosophy>. CZC also has placed all 7 of these sessions on YouTube.

In these 7 short pieces, to keep things simple, I have not used transliterated symbols for Avestan words (except sometimes in footnotes).

<sup>2</sup> Detailed with references and additional evidence, in *Part One: Gender Equality*.

<sup>3</sup> Detailed in *Part One: Truth, Asha*.

<sup>4</sup> More details in *Part One: Good Rule, Vohu Xshathra & Power*.

<sup>5</sup> Yima (Vedic Yama) was a pre-historic legendary figure in both Vedic and Iranian texts, so he was an Indo-Iranian legend (before the ancestral Indo-Iranian tribe split into Indic and Iranian tribes (detailed in *Part Four: Ancient Origins & Homelands*). However, the Vedic references to Yama do not mention Ahura Mazda, so we know that the stories about Yima in Avestan texts were 'Zoroastrianized'.

<sup>6</sup> *Schenck v. United States*, 249 U.S. 47, 52 (1919).

<sup>7</sup> The *Yasna Haptanghaiti* is in Old Avestan. It is not part of the Gathas, and was not composed by Zarathushtra, but it is in the same most ancient form of Avestan in which the Gathas are composed, so we know that it is closer to Zarathushtra's time than the Younger Avestan texts (composed in a later form of Avestan). Translations of parts of this text (the *Yasna Haptanghaiti*) are scattered throughout the chapters of this website, including: *The Home Page: Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds*; *Part One: Truth, Asha*; and *Part Six* which translates a few verses from the *Yasna Haptanghaiti*.

<sup>8</sup> This text, with meticulous honesty, discloses the opinions of a few priests, who hedged a bit on whether women priests could perform all rituals; these dissenting opinions are detailed in a footnote in *Part One: Gender Equality*, on my website.

<sup>9</sup> *Aerpatastan & Nirangistan*, Chapter 3, p. 18, S. J. Bulsara translation, 1915 (published by the Bombay Parsee Panchayat Funds and Properties Trust in 1915).

<sup>10</sup> Moulton 1912 *Early Zoroastrianism*, pp. 85 ~ 86.

<sup>11</sup> Avestan, Sanskrit, English, Spanish, French, German, (and many other languages), are within the Indo-European family of languages, having descended from one re-constructed (surmised) ancestral language which linguists call "Proto-Indo-European" (PIE). One of the (surmised) descendent languages (descendent from PIE) was what linguists call "Indo-Iranian", which was spoken by one tribe, which later split into 2 tribes, Indic and Iranian. Detailed in an amazing diagram in Anthony 2007, p. 12; and discussed in *Part Four: Ancient Origins & Homelands*.

<sup>12</sup> The question of how Zarathushtra accounted for the presence of evil in existence ~ *not* through the idea of cosmic dualism ~ is detailed:

In *Part Two: The Puzzle Of Creation*, and

In *Part One: Good & Evil*.

<sup>13</sup> Detailed: *Part Two: The Puzzle Of Creation*.

<sup>14</sup> Detailed in the following chapters:

In *Part One*:

*The Identity Of The Divine*; and

*The Fire In All Things*; and

In *Part Two*:

*A Question Of Reward & The Path*;

*Light, Glory, Fire*

*The Puzzle of Creation*;

*A Question Of Immanence*;

*Did Wisdom Choose Too?*

And in other puzzles in the chapters in *Parts One, Two, Three* and *Six* of this website.

<sup>15</sup> Detailed in *Part One: The Nature Of The Divine*, and other chapters in *Parts One, Two, and Three* of this website.