

### General Introduction.

The question has been asked: Are Zarathushtra's teachings a religion or a philosophy? I think he saw his teachings as a religion that is a way of living and a framework for viewing existence as a whole. So in that sense, his religion is a spiritual philosophy. Indeed, the word 'philosophy' means 'love of wisdom' (in Greek), which suits Zarathushtra's religion very well.

Insler's teacher, Thieme, has pointed out, that in a religion which has no images of the Divine (such as Zarathushtra's) the name(s) given to the Divine reveal Its nature. Zarathushtra calls the Divine by many names, but most often:

'Wisdom' (*mazdā-* which Insler 1975 and others translate as 'Wise One', but which Thieme says means personified Wisdom); and

'Lord' (*ahura-*), which Zarathushtra uses in the sense of one who has attained lordship over (has mastered) the qualities which make a being divine ~ truth, its comprehension, its embodiment in thought, word and action, its rule, its complete attainment, a perfected existence that is not bound by mortality.<sup>1</sup>

These names, their meanings, and what they reveal about the nature of the Divine are detailed in another chapter.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the uncertainty of Zarathushtra's date, there is no dispute that it was very ancient, which makes it all the more interesting that he generated the ideas that he did, coming from the religious and cultural climate in which he was raised ~ ideas that we find in his songs called the Gathas, the lyrics of which are poems ~ ideas that are as relevant to our times as they were to his.

Most scholars believe that the Gathas are Zarathushtra's own words. The word 'gatha' simply means 'song'. The Buddhists also have 'gathas'. Such songs were an ancient tradition among the pre-historic Indo-European tribes, one branch of which (the Indo-Iranians) migrated into Iran and northern India.

We no longer know the music to which Zarathushtra's songs were sung. And very few people know the language in which he composed them. So only his ideas remain (in translation).

Among the ancient Greeks, Zarathushtra enjoyed a reputation for great wisdom. Eudoxus, who was a disciple of Plato, considered Zarathushtra's thought to be the noblest and most useful of the schools of philosophy.<sup>3</sup> And Hermippus who lived in the 3d century BCE, claimed to be an exponent of two million verses composed by Zarathushtra.<sup>4</sup> If indeed Zarathushtra did compose two million verses, nowhere near that number have survived. Nor have any verses, or commentaries on them, survived in ancient Greek.

The Gathas have come down to us in a language which some scholars call Old Avestan or Gatha Avestan,<sup>5</sup> to distinguish it from the later forms of the Avestan language (called Archaic Young Avestan, and Young(er) Avestan), in which many of the later Zoroastrian texts were composed.<sup>6</sup> The Zoroastrian texts are the only surviving forms of the Avestan language. There are no other inscriptions or secular literature in Avestan. Later still, other Zoroastrian texts were written in Pahlavi (Middle Persian) and Pazand. Avestan and Persian are in the Indo-European family of languages.<sup>7</sup>

There are 17 Gathas ~ cryptic, multi-dimensioned, full of puzzles, and not always easy to read or understand. The prevailing academic view is that these poems were composed in times before the Avestan people had a written language. I have some doubts about that. But there is no dispute that they were sung and passed down verbally from generation to generation. After many centuries, they also were memorialized in written texts, copied and re-copied, down through additional centuries, some of which copies survive to this day.

Unfortunately, because of the long passage of time, and destructive wars in which texts were burned and the learned killed, knowledge of the Avestan language became largely unknown.

You may wonder, if knowledge of the language died out, how do we know today what Zarathushtra said? Well, in the late 18th century, scholars in Europe discovered the Avestan texts, and then, quite by accident, noticed the marked similarity between Avestan and Vedic Sanskrit, which started the long, slow process of de-coding the Avestan language (of the Gathas and Younger Avestan texts). Since then, approximately 80% of the Avestan language has been decoded. So even today, differences remain both in translation and interpretation – a powerful reason to not be dogmatic in our conclusions. In addition, due to ambiguities inherent in the language itself, and also to Zarathushtra's cryptic, (and sometimes intentionally ambiguous) ways of expressing his ideas, some Gatha verses are susceptible to more than one translation or interpretation.

How then can we be sure of what he actually said? Well, fortunately, he often expresses the same ideas in many different ways, so despite differences in the translation (and interpretation) of a given verse, we can discern a substantial part of his system of thought because they are also expressed in other verses (and sometimes also in later texts).

Some scholars think that the Gathas were composed strictly as liturgical hymns for ritual purposes.<sup>8</sup> A few think that the Gathas were composed by a committee of learned men.<sup>9</sup> And yet others have speculated that when the Gathas were composed, Zarathushtra was already an ancient "saint",<sup>10</sup> i.e. not then alive. But (with respect) these views are contrary to the evidence of the Gathas.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra complains to the Divine about the persecution to which he was being subjected. Here are three examples.

"To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan. The community with which I have associated has not satisfied me, nor those who are the deceitful rulers of the land. How then shall I satisfy Thee, Wise One?" Y46.1, Insler 1975.

He complains to the Divine "Yes, throughout my lifetime, I have been condemned as the greatest defiler, I who try to satisfy the poorly protected (creatures) with truth, Wise One ... come to me, and give support to me. Through good thinking, find a means of destruction of this." Y49.1, Insler 1975.

In another verse, referring to himself in the third person (a technique often found in eastern songs and literature), he complains of being denied hospitality, "...although his two draft animals were trembling from wandering and from cold." Y51.12, Insler 1975.

Such verses are the words of an individual in trouble. They would not have been composed by a committee of learned men, or as a liturgy for ritual purposes. The Gathas do indeed mention elements of Indo-Iranian rituals (milk, butter, bread), but these elements are used as metaphors to project Zarathushtra's new envisionment.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the Gathas themselves contain evidence that they were composed by Zarathushtra to interest intelligent minds. He tells Jamaspa, who was the prime minister of his patron king Vishtaspa, "...o Jamaspa Haugva, I [sg.] shall declare to you [pl.] in verse - not in non-verse - in total inspiration, ... the glories of Him who offers solicitude ... the Wise Lord ..." Y46.17, Insler 1975.

Notice, he does not use the 3d person plural ('we shall declare' as a member of a committee) nor does he say that he will declare what rituals Jamaspa should engage in. Here Zarathushtra refers to himself (1p. sg.) as the composer of these poems ("...I shall declare to you in verse ~ not in non-verse ~ ..."), indicating that he composed them ~ with poetic skill ~ to express his ideas of the Divine ("...the glories of Him who offers solicitude ... the Wise Lord..."), to win over the minds and hearts of the prime minister and others (the plural "you") at the King's Court.

Why do we stay up till 2:00 a.m. reading a mystery, or a fantasy novel? Because it concerns the adventures of individuals (even imaginary ones), and (if well written) we get hooked. We like (or dislike) the characters. We want to know what happens next, and how it all turns out. We can read a good book about people and their adventures at a gallop, and sometimes, we have a hard time putting it down.

But (as a general proposition) abstract ideas are more difficult to relate to. We have to think about them, and consider how they might apply to our lives. We cannot read a book about abstract ideas at a gallop. Often such books can be read only in small segments, before taking time off for other things. That is what I recommend you do with the material on this website. Read it when you are not in a hurry. And read it in small segments. It may be indigestible in large chunks.

Why have I written this book.

I have done so because I do not want Zarathushtra's ideas to be lost to the mind of man. They are rational and beautiful. They provide a way of looking at existence that is not fear based, one that includes all aspects of existence ~ the material and the spiritual; the logical and the insightful; the intellectual and the emotional; the practical and the mystical. They envision existence as an adventure, a search for truth, with a joyful enjoyment of both the material and the spiritual in existence. They recognize the problems and sufferings of existence. They provide solutions. Without being pollyanna-ish, they express the idea that no matter how 'bad' or 'evil' or 'dreadful' a given situation is, good will inevitably come from it, and that good will eventually prevail (*because* of our freedom to choose! *because* of our problems and sufferings) ~ that the solution to defeating evil is not punishment, but changing minds, freely, from within. Zarathushtra has some unique solutions to certain eternal questions which have troubled the mind of man for millennia.

And I have found the conventional wisdom regarding his ideas to be, in many ways, very far from accurate, and very far from complete.

Even first class linguists and scholars tend to read Zarathushtra's thought through the spectacles of the religious practices of Zarathushtra's culture (most of which he rejected), or through their own pre-conceived religious and cultural paradigms, or the later texts ~ none of which existed in Zarathushtra's day. Such interpretations (with respect) are not consistent with the evidence of the Gathas, and do not accurately convey his ideas.

And Zoroastrians themselves have lived for so long in environments that were (and continue to be) dominated by certain major religions that their own mind-sets have been influenced (perhaps

unconsciously) by such religions, in ways that are alien to the Gathas, and in some respects that are alien even to the later YAv. texts.<sup>12</sup> I do not claim to have all the answers. I consider myself a student. As Mardan-farukh, a Zoroastrian intellect in around the 9th century CE said in a Pahlavi text that he authored: "Because I, who am the composer, do not hold the station of teaching, but of learning."<sup>13</sup> A wise man indeed (at least in this respect), because when it comes to Zarathushtra's thought (and the eternal questions that engage our minds/hearts/spirits) we all are students.

I have discovered his ideas in bits and pieces, over a long period of time ~ an evolutionary process. In fact, in writing the materials on this website, more than once I started out with certain ideas in mind which, as I more carefully analysed the evidence, I had to discard or adjust, because my original conclusions were not consistent with *all* the evidence.

I have prepared this website in several Parts, to address the needs of different readers. Like the many dishes on a dining buffet, each reader may choose to read the Parts that interest him, and ignore the Parts which do not. Then again, the interests of a reader may change over time (as mine did). She may at first be interested only in a general understanding of Zarathushtra's thought (as I first was). Later, she may find herself wanting to study it in greater depth (as I later did). So read what you want to, and do not feel guilty about ignoring what you do not want to be bothered with. However, in *Parts One* and *Two*, the evidence in earlier chapters will be useful in understanding later chapters, so you may benefit from reading the chapters in *Parts One* and *Two* in the order in which I have arranged them.

I usually skip Introductions in the books I read. But I hope you won't follow my bad example. I hope you will at least read the Introduction to *Part One: The Basics*, and especially the Introduction to *Part Two: Puzzles & Paradigms*, which will help you to better understand Zarathushtra's thinking, the ways in which he expresses his ideas, and perhaps why.

*Part Three: In Depth Discussions* is for those who may be interested in finding out about certain topics of information in depth, and also for those who are interested in general knowledge, but would like to see in more detail, the evidence on which I base some of my conclusions in earlier *Parts*.

*Part Four* provides an historical overview, and discusses some historical information that may help the general reader to better understand Zarathushtra's thought, and also the later texts.

*Part Five: Languages & Texts*, provides a general overview regarding the ancient (surviving) Zoroastrian texts and the languages in which they were written. Feel free to pick and choose amongst its chapters, in accordance with what interests you.

In *Part Six: Selected Translations* ~ one of my favorite *Parts* ~ I have given my translation of selected Gatha verses (and some other Avestan texts), followed by a discussion of the ideas the verse or passage contains, followed by a detailed word by word linguistic analysis. And each chapter concludes with translations of the verse or passage by eminent linguists for comparative purposes. Once again, if you are not interested in the linguistics, just skip that part of each chapter. These verses and passages have been selected for specific reasons (detailed in the Introduction to *Part Six*, and sometimes in its chapters).

In all the *Parts* where feasible, I try to avoid sending you on a hunt for explanations given elsewhere. I therefore opt for a little repetition where it will facilitate easy access to information. In addition, Zarathushtra often expresses the same ideas in different ways and contexts, and because I would like you to be able to dip into whatever subjects interest you, I sometimes have to say certain things in more than one chapter. Then too, we quite naturally bring our own mind-sets to the meanings of certain English words and phrases ~ mind-sets that are different from Zarathushtra's thought. I therefore often find it necessary to repeat qualifying words and phrases, to make clear the meanings of certain English equivalents ~ all of which may seem repetitious. (And sometimes, I repeat myself through sheer forgetfulness, which I have tried to watch out for and eliminate). For all such repetitions, I ask your indulgence.

A word (or two?!) about my many footnotes. They are not intended to be pretentious. Please forgive me if they seem so. My friend, the late Farrokh Vajifdar assured me that I have 'footnotitis'. The footnotes are intended to serve a number of purposes:

- ~ To refer the reader to other parts of this web book, which contain the evidence that supports a given statement;
- ~ To show corroborating evidence from the Gathas, (or later texts) which would clutter up the main text if not relegated to footnotes; I sometimes show multiple instances of corroboration so that you can feel assured that the conclusions are credible, and not aberrations supported by only one or two examples (especially in light of translation differences);
- ~ To provide linguistic information which may interest some readers, but not others;
- ~ To clarify older translations that now are somewhat obsolete ~ no longer state of the art ~ for certain Avestan words, so that the sense of an ancient text may be more accurately shown;
- ~ To provide historical information, especially from later texts;
- ~ To give more details on ideas that are just briefly touched upon in the main part of the chapter;
- ~ And sometimes simply to provide information and ideas from the later texts which are just so interesting, that I cannot resist sharing them with you.

But if the footnotes aggravate you, or do not interest you, just ignore them.

I hope you will forgive any typos. Try as I might, I cannot seem to get rid of them. And this work has not benefitted from the watchful eye of a professional editor, which accounts for its many shortcomings.

Finally, a word about the surviving Younger Avestan and Pahlavi/Pazand texts. These texts were composed for purposes, and in ways, that often are culture-bound, and so may be a turn off to people reading them today. If you read them cold, you may think they are devoid of any spiritual significance. But if we can look past their culture bound aspects (and other turn offs), we sometimes see some rather lovely things, which are consistent with, and supplement, Zarathushtra's teachings in the Gathas. Sometimes these views are expressed in ways that reveal hearts overflowing with love for the Divine, and an integrity which touches me. Some of these I have endeavored to show throughout this web book.

In many other respects, the later texts are very far removed from Zarathushtra's thought. We need to know how these texts differ from Zarathushtra's thought ~ not for the purpose of trashing everything that is not the Gathas, but to understand Zarathushtra's teachings by separating later cultural traditions (which today are obsolete) from the original teachings (which today are so very relevant) ~ keeping what is good in the later texts, and relegating what is obsolete to historical footnotes ~ as all other surviving ancient religions have done and continue to do.

#### *Guest Essays.*

At one time, I had hoped to have a whole *Part* just for guest essays. But I simply have not had the time to manage the logistics. However, I do already have a few guest essays.

*Part One* contains a guest essay by Professor Insler *Love of Truth In Ancient Iran*;<sup>14</sup> one by Professor Jenny Rose on *Nowruz*, one by Mr. Rusi Sorabji, on feeding birds and animals, *Chom-e Schwa*, and one by Sousan Abadian, *Things I Love About Zarathushtra*.

And in *Part Four: History & Traditions*, I hope to have an essay by Shahin Bekhradnia on *Loss of Knowledge After the Arab Invasion of Iran*. I have thought long and hard on whether such information should be part of this web book, because the loss of knowledge was occasioned by burning texts, killing the learned, massacres, atrocities, deprivation of the most basic human rights, and intense persecution. And I do not want to incite or increase hatred. We need to remember Zarathushtra's teaching that each person is responsible for his own actions. We should not ascribe the wrongdoings of ancestors (or others) to people today who are innocent of such acts. I decided that I needed to include such an essay only because some of the teachings in texts composed after the Arab invasion, are so very different from Zarathushtra's teachings. And these later teachings are repeatedly pointed to ~ even by scholars ~ as foundational beliefs of Zarathushtra (which is far from true). To be credible, it is not enough to state that there was a loss of knowledge which resulted in these very different beliefs. It is necessary to show at least an evidence based overview of the devastation that caused so great a loss of knowledge.

#### *In conclusion:*

Any attempt to give you the ideas of a person ~ Zarathushtra ~ who lived perhaps more than three millennia ago, and who expressed himself in an ancient language that became unknown for more than two millennia, and has not been completely decoded even now, is a chancey thing at best. But the ideas I have discovered in the Gathas are world healing ~ so interesting, so beautiful, so relevant to life today (and so surprisingly consistent with each other) that I think it worth the effort. I will give you the evidence from the Gathas (and sometimes the later texts) on which my conclusions are based, so that you can decide for yourself whether they accurately reflect his teachings. More important, you can decide for yourself if his ancient wisdom is meaningful to life today, and to your own evolution (in the existences of matter and mind).

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<sup>1</sup> The qualities that make a being divine (called in later texts 'amesha spenta'), are detailed in the first few chapters of *Part One*.

<sup>2</sup> See *Part One: The Nature of the Divine*.

<sup>3</sup> Humbach 1991, Vol. 1, p. 24.

<sup>4</sup> Humbach 1991 Vol. 1, p. 24.

<sup>5</sup> We do not know in what geographical area(s), the Avestan language was used, although linguistic similarities with other languages incline some scholars today to believe that Avestan was used in or around the eastern (or north eastern) Iranian area.

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars are of the opinion that the Avestan of the Yashts (which is called 'Young(er) Avestan') did not evolve or descend from the Avestan of the Gathas, but that the two are dialects of one language, existing contemporaneously at the same time period. See for example, Gershevitch's opinion in *Dissent and Consensus on the Gathas*, pp. 15 et seq. appearing in *Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium, 1993* (WZO 1998). Although I have much respect (and affection) for Professor Gershevitch, I disagree with his opinion, based on evidence in the other Yasnas (which are in YAv.) and in the Yashts (also in YAv.) which show that Zarathushtra and his teachings were already regarded as ancient, indeed legendary, at the time such YAv. Yasnas and Yashts were composed ~ indeed thinking of him as someone living in the original (and even by then, unknown) homeland Airyana Vaejah. This evidence is briefly discussed in *Part Four: Zarathushtra's Date and Place*, and in *Part Three: Evolution of the Name(s) Ahura, Mazda*.

<sup>7</sup> See *Part Four: Ancient Origins and Homelands*.

<sup>8</sup> For example, Professor Humbach has expressed the opinion that (except for the last Gatha Y53),

"the other sixteen chapters of the Gathas, i.e. Y28 - 34 and Y43 - 51, obviously are religious hymns composed exclusively for ritual purposes." Humbach, *Zarathushtra, Poet and Prophet*, appearing in *Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium, 1993* (WZO 1998) p. 32.

<sup>9</sup> This view was expressed in 1988 by the French scholars Kellens and Pirart (as co-authors). It was given short shrift by Gershevitch in his essay *Dissent and Consensus on the Gathas* appearing in *Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium, 1993* (WZO 1998). In addition, Professor H. P. Schmidt gave a lecture at the California Gatha Colloquium (1994) in which ~ with devastating logic ~ he laid out the evidence from the Gathas which disproved the contention that the Gathas were composed by a committee. Unfortunately, the lectures from that Colloquium were not published, and I do not know if that lecture of Schmidt's has been published elsewhere.

<sup>10</sup> Moulton dismisses this theory (that the Gathas were composed long after Zarathushtra), in a footnote to his translation of Y43.5, as follows,

"... It is strange that Thiele (*Religionsg.*, 100) should have inferred that ... Zarathushtra is a saint of the dim past. On such rickety foundations are mythological theories based!" Moulton, *EZ*, p. 365, ft. 1.

And I have been dismayed by the "rickety foundations" on which quite a few scholarly opinions today are based, regarding the nature, and purpose of the Gathas (in addition to their authorship).

<sup>11</sup> See in *Part Two: The Puzzle of Worship; The Puzzle of the Cow & Its Network; Light Glory Fire; Molten Glowing Metal; and Earth Waters & Plants*. See also *Part One: Worship & Prayer*.

<sup>12</sup> There are many examples of Zoroastrians being influenced by religious paradigms that are alien to Zarathushtra's teachings and even to YAv. and Pahlavi texts. Here is just one.

In the *Qesse - ye Sanjan*, we find the author of the text referring to Adam as part of his creation beliefs ~ expressing the idea that from Adam comes nothing except sin! (Alan Williams' excellent translation of this text (Brill 2009), p. 65, line 63. This is totally alien to the early and even late Zoroastrian texts. Adam is

not part of any creation stories in any Zoroastrian texts. He is part of the creation stories of Judaism, Christianity and Islam. And in the Gathas, there is no concept of man being born (or continuing to live) totally sinful. True, Zarathushtra says that we are born with (and continue to have) the capacity for evil, but in his thought, man also has (imperfectly) within him each attribute of the Divine (amesha spenta) except for completeness and non-deathness, which he is capable of attaining, as detailed in chapters 1.3 to 1.8 in *Part One* which discuss each attribute of the Divine; see also in *Part One: Differences in the Spirit of Friendship*.

Examples of the mind-set of scholars and non-scholars ~ Zoroastrians and non-Zoroastrians ~ being influenced by other religious paradigms appear throughout this book (see for example, *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?* and *Part Three: Is Wisdom A 'God' of Wrath, Enmity?* and *Part Six: Yasna 43.12* for examples of such paradigms influencing both non-Zoroastrian and Zoroastrian scholars.

<sup>13</sup> In a Pahlavi text composed some time in or about the 9th century C.E., called *Sikand Gumanig Vijar*, as translated by E. W. West, SBE 24, p. 121.

<sup>14</sup> This essay previously appeared in *An Introduction to the Gathas of Zarathushtra*, Issue # 7, which may be viewed on Shahriar Shahriari's website, [www.zarathushtra.com](http://www.zarathushtra.com).