

A Good Priest.

In other chapters I have frequently pointed out the predatory practices of certain priests of Zarathushtra's society ~ the karpans and the usigs ~ priests whom Zarathushtra condemned and rejected because of their corrupt and oppressive behavior.¹

There can be no doubt that Zarathushtra's idea of the relationship between man and the Divine is a direct one. In the Gathas, he does not establish any hierarchy of priests, as intermediaries between man and the Divine. Nor do the Gathas, direct us to obey priests, or give priests control over the way we live our lives and make our decisions. Nor do the Gathas give priests the authority to mandate articles of faith.

But Zarathushtra was not against all priests ~ only those who behaved wrongfully.

I think he recognized that even the humblest priest is a leader in the sense that he is in a position to influence the lives of those to whom he ministers, because although Zarathushtra condemns priests who have become greedy and tyrannical, he values and praises a good priest.

How do we know that?

Because he does exactly that in Y33:6. This verse has a couple of GAv. words which have not yet been decoded, but in important essentials, the sense of the verse comes across in all translations.

"The priest who is just [*ərəzuš* 'straight'] in harmony with truth [*aša-*], is the offspring from the best spirit [*mainyu- vahišta-* the most-good way of being]. In consequence of this, he is allied with that (good) thinking by reason of which he has respected to bring to realization his pastoral (*vāstrya-*) duties. By reason of this very thinking, Wise Lord, I am eager for Thy sight and Thy counsel." Y33:6. Insler 1975.

The word which Insler has translated as "just" is *ərəzuš* which means 'straight', as in 'not crooked' (Skjaervo's Old Avestan Index), and Insler has translated *ərəzuš* as 'straight' in other verses.² And "in harmony" is not in the Avestan text. So I would translate the first four words of this verse as follows,

yā zaotā aša ərəzuš '(the) priest [*zaotā*] who [*yā*] (is) straight [*ərəzuš*] through truth (the true order of existence), ...' Y33:6.

This verse has some interesting things to tell us regarding Zarathushtra's idea of a good priest, the first of which is the word he chooses for 'priest'.

In the Gathas, Zarathushtra specifically calls himself a *mqθran-* 'one who composes, recites, sings, Divine precepts (Y32:13, Y50:5). In other words, someone who teaches the Word of Wisdom. But here (in Y33:6), he chooses the word *zaotar-* which means a priest who performs rituals. In Zarathushtra's society, rituals included not only performing various ritual acts, but also addressing the deities with appropriate invocations. Reichelt 1911 defines *zaotar-* as 'one who pours butter into the fire, offers an oblation', or 'one who invokes the gods'. Skjaervo's Old Avestan Index has roughly the same opinion.³ Humbach 1991, and Humbach/Faiss 2010 translate *zaotar-* as 'priest', with a comment by Humbach/Faiss 2010, that "*zaotar-* does not mean 'member of the priest class' but 'officiating priest'." p. 175.

So the 'priest' mentioned in this verse (Y33:6) is a ritual priest.

Yet the verse itself does not mention a single ritual, nor even any component of a ritual, nor any ritual formula, nor any ritual invocation, nor the duty (or ability) of the priest to invoke the Divine on behalf of others. Nor does it say that all ritual priests are great guys. He praises only the ones who have certain qualities ~ qualities that comprise the path to the divine). In his view:

- ~ this ideal priest is straight in accordance with the true (correct, good) order of existence (*aša-*);
- ~ his way of being derives from the 'most-good way of being (*mainyu- vahišta-*);
- ~ his (good) mind, his (good) thinking, help him to understand that the nature of his duties is pastoral,⁴ (*vāstrya-*) ~ nurturing, taking care of, helping, all souls and all aspects of existence,
- ~ the kind of thinking that helps us to understand the Divine ~ Wisdom ~ and Its teachings.

For me personally, rituals are not an important part of my life. I prefer to pray without using formal words and preferably in the open ~ surrounded by trees, and sky, and grass, in dappled sunlight. But I recognize that for many people, rituals are a necessary and useful part of religious experience. If beautiful, they can inspire a spiritual high. The chanting can bring a feeling of peace. And they also fill communal needs ~ celebrating happy events, comforting the bereaved in times of illness and death, and just worshipping together. Man is a social animal (I do not use animal in a derogatory way ~ animals are not inferior to us, they are simply a part of the diversity of existence).

I think by using *zaotar-*, a ritual priest, in this verse, Zarathushtra may have intended to convey that rituals serve a useful function in filling human needs. But by describing the ritual priest in terms that do not include his ritual duties, he shows us even more clearly, what qualities and actions are required for a person to be a good priest.

Priests are human beings, and as such, their characters and conduct come in all flavors. Throughout the long, long, history of Zoroastrianism, down through and including present times, we have seen, and continue to see, evidence of priests who see their role solely as performers of rituals, and enforcers of rules (none of which are found in the Zarathushtra's teachings, and many of which are contrary to his teachings). In fact, some priests see themselves as religious dictators, with high sounding titles, who are critical of others in derogatory ways. There are no high sounding titles for priests in the Gathas.⁵

It is interesting that even during Younger Avestan times, the conduct of, and choices made by, priests were not all good. The YAv. *Fragment 24* (the *Vishtasp Yasht*), has this to say about 'bad' priests (although Darmesteter cautions that the translation may in places be uncertain). Notice the 'bad' priests are 'unfriendly' ones. And here (as so often in YAv. texts) the author places the idea he wants to get across as having been said by Ahura Mazda to Zarathushtra (although this text was composed many centuries after Zarathushtra's time, and even after YAv. times, because its grammar is so faulty, according to Darmesteter's introduction to this text). It says,

"Thus said Ahura Mazda unto the holy Zarathushtra, and thus again did Zarathushtra say unto the young king Vishtaspa: Have no bad priests or unfriendly priests; for bad or unfriendly priests will bring about much harm, and though thou wish to sacrifice, it will be to the Amesha-Spentas as if no sacrifice had been offered." Yt. 24:12, Darmesteter translation.⁶

In the Pazand text, *Mainyo-i-khard*, the spirit of wisdom is asked, what are the vices of various callings ~ the priests, the warriors, the agriculturists and the artisans. Regarding the vices of priests it replied (expressing the views of the author of this part of the text),

"The Spirit of Wisdom answered thus: The vice of the priests is hypocrisy, and covetousness, and negligence, and slothfulness, and attention to trifles, and unbelief in the religion." Ch. 59 §§ 6 - 7; E. W. West translation, English section, p. 183.

What did the author mean by a priest's vice being [unbelief in the religion](#)? This Pazand text's view of belief in the religion appears right at the beginning,

"... it is declared, that there was a Sage who said that if this be known, that [God's religion is truth](#), and his law is excellence, and he is good-willed and compassionate ..." Ch. 1, §§ 14 - 16, E. W. West translation, English section p. 127.

In understanding this phrase ~ [God's religion is truth](#), ~ we need to remember that truth (*aša-*) means not only factual truth, but also the truths of mind/heart/spirit ~ all that is good, right ~ the true order in the existences of matter and mind.⁷

And we also see (in ancient texts, in history, and in our own times) evidence of many, many good priests ~ beautiful, luminous, caring souls who understand that Wisdom's "[religion is truth](#)" which is intrinsically good (*aša- vahišta-*), who see their role as one of taking care of people, filling their spiritual needs, helping them in happy times and in times of difficulty ~ being '[pastors \(vāstrya-\)](#)'; luminous souls who have had (and continue to have) the quiet courage to follow truth, and try to heal existence, in the face of great adversity, harrassment, opposition and indeed, even persecution. I have been privileged to know many such priests in my long (and often misspent) life.

It is ironic (is it not?) that perhaps more than 1,000 years before the advent of Christ, Zarathushtra called his idea of good people and good priests '[pastors](#)'. Today, that idea is reflected in the titles of priests in many Christian denominations ~ Pastor, Minister etc. Whereas many of us Zoroastrians have long since forgotten Zarathushtra's idea that we (and our priests) should be '[pastors](#)' of all that exists.

The famed Rustam of the Shahnamah is regarded as the quintessential hero of Persian mythology ~ a man who faced formidable adversaries with unbeatable courage and intelligence. Like Rustam (but without his fame), many unsung priests (both ancient and modern) have faced, and continue to face today, the assaults of prejudice, hatred and ignorance, with intelligence and courage, but in a different way ~ with the weapons of Wisdom ~ with truth, knowledge, good thinking, a loving, generous, care of all the living that enables a flowering of the Divine in mortal existence (*frashō.kərāiti-*).⁸ Which is exactly Zarathushtra's idea of a [pastor](#) ~ a good person (Y29) and a good priest (Y33:6).

I love, admire, and honor, every one of these unsung heroes ~ the good priests, and all good laypersons as well (*behdin*) who are committed to the envisionment and implementation of an existence of goodness ~ the beneficial-sacred way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*), and their role as pastors ~ healers of existence (*ahūm.biš*).

"... the loving man [*kāθō* '(the) loving (one)'] ...
such a person, [*spənta-* 'beneficial'] through truth [*aša-*],
watching over the heritage for all,
is a world-healer [*ahūm.biš*]
and Thy ally in [*mainyu-* '(his) way of being'], [*mazdā-* 'Wisdom']. "
Y44:2, Insler 1975.

* * * * *

¹ Discussed in *Part One: The Nature of the Divine*.

² Insler 1975 has translated the Avestan word *ərəzuš* as "just" in this verse (Y33:6), and as "[straight](#)" in these other verses. The following are his translations.

"... the paths [straight](#) [*ərəzuš paθō*] in accord with truth..." Y33:5;

"... the straight paths [*ərəzuš* ... *paθō*]..." Y43:3;

"... the straight paths [*ərəzuš* *paθō*]..." Y 53:2.

Skjaervo's Old Av. Index shows the adj. stem *ərəzu-* 'straight (not crooked)'.

³ Skjaervo in his Old Avestan Index says that a *zaotar-* is a 'libator' (one who performs libations).

⁴ Zarathushtra's use of this metaphor '*pastor*' is discussed in more detail in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Cow and its Network*.

⁵ The fact that there are no high sounding titles for priests in the Gathas, calls to mind the founding fathers of the United States who made it clear that there would be no titles in the new country ~ the title of the highest person in the land being the same as the title of an ordinary citizen ~ **Mr.** President. Of course in those days, women did not even have the right to vote ~ let alone serve as President ~ so there was no consideration given of the title by which a woman President would be called.

⁶ SBE 23, p. 331.

⁷ What 'truth' (*aša-*) means in the Gathas, is discussed in *Part One: Truth, Asha;* and *The Search for Truth*.

⁸ The meaning of *frašō.kərəiti-* based on its linguistic genesis in the Gathas, and the ways in which it is used in YAv. texts means 'forwarding (existence) to truth (*frašō*) (and) making it happen (*kərəiti-*), discussed in *Part Three: Heaven in Other Avestan Texts*.