

A Question of Weapons

There is a verse in the Gathas which has generated much controversy as to whether or not Zarathushtra's notion of the Divine is one who punishes the wicked by striking them down with (His) weapon. Here is this verse in the Insler 1975 translation.

"No one at all who belongs to the deceitful [*drəgvatō*]¹ (faction) has listened to your precepts and instructions. For such a person has (already) placed house and settlement and district and land in strife and destruction. Therefore cut [*sāzdūm*] these down with your weapon [*snaiθišā*]." Y31:18, Insler 1975.

As you can see, the pertinent sentence is the last one. Not all translators agree that *sāzdūm* means 'cut ... down'. Some translate the word as 'teach', some as 'resist'. But translators generally agree that *snaiθišā* is 'weapon'.² And there can be no dispute that in this verse, this 'weapon' is needed to combat those who have engaged in untruth, strife and destruction.

Which raises the question, What is the 'weapon' of Wisdom (*mazdā*-).

Zarathushtra lived in a society in which the chief occupations were those of warrior, herdsman/artisan,³ and priest. They had no law enforcement mechanisms except for the king's warriors who protected against breaches of the peace ~ both foreign and domestic ~ and enforced the king's decrees. So it is understandable that Zarathushtra would use imagery that would be meaningful to the people of his society ~ imagery such as 'weapon', 'horse or chariot racing', 'charioteer' as well as his pastoral imagery which abounds throughout the Gathas.⁴

Some scholars scoff at the idea of metaphors in the Gathas, (even though the later Avestan texts are also full of metaphors). But let us set aside opinions (mine included), and deal with facts. Zarathushtra does not specifically identify what the 'weapon' of Wisdom in Y31:18 might be. He does so only impliedly. For example,

In Y46:1 - 2, the weapon with which the Lord (who is) Wisdom protects Zarathushtra from persecution is 'the power of good thinking allied with truth.'

"To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan ... Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a friend should grant to a friend. Let me see the power of good thinking allied with truth !" Y46:1 ~ 2, Insler 1975.

In Y49:1, he says: "Yes, throughout my lifetime I have been condemned as the greatest defiler, I who try to satisfy the poorly protected (creatures) with truth [*aša*-], Wise One... come to me ... give support to me. Through good thinking, find a means of destruction of this." Y49:1, Insler 1975.

With what weapon does he ask the Wisdom (*mazdā*-) to destroy the persecution and slanders against him? With good thinking ~ the comprehension of truth. And parenthetically, with what weapon does Zarathushtra himself help the poorly protected in this last verse? With truth (as best he understands it). And there are other verses as well which say the same thing.⁵

This conclusion is corroborated in the later Avestan and Pahlavi texts where there are many instances which demonstrate that there was a long tradition of considering the teachings of the Wisdom as the 'weapon' with which to fight wrongdoing. Here are a few examples.

In the YAv. Yy57:22 the 'weapon' ~ 'axe of victory' ~ is the Ahuna Vairya, a manthra which encapsulates the teachings of Wisdom.

"... to whom the Ahuna-vairya has come, the axe of victory ..." Yy57:22, Mills' translation.⁶

A central focus of the Ahuna Vairya is truth. In this manthra, not only what we worship, but how we live ~ our whole existence ~ must be 'in accord with truth indeed' (*ašācēt hacā*).⁷ And indeed, in both the Ahuna Vairya and in the Gathas, the teaching of Wisdom is the path of truth.⁸ The Ahuna Vairya is described as a weapon in other YAv. texts as well.⁹

In the YAv. Srosh Yasht Hadhokht, the 'best fiend-smiter' is the 'word of truth'.¹⁰

"the word of truth is the fighter that is the best of all fiend-smitters." Yt. 11:13, Darmesteter translation.¹¹

Even so late a YAv. text as the *Vendidad* (written after Av. times in faulty Avestan) identifies Zarathushtra's 'weapons' as 'the Words taught by Mazda'. By the time of the *Vendidad*, Angra Mainyu (which literally means an 'inimical' or 'harmful' way of being),¹² had become an entity ~ the Devil.

"9 (28). Thus in answer to him [Angra Mainyu] said Spitama Zarathushtra: ' ... the Words taught by Mazda, these are my weapons, my best weapons!

By this Word will I strike,

by this Word will I repel,

by this weapon the good creatures (will strike and repel thee), O evil-doer, Angra Mainyu! ...'. *Vendidad* 19:9, Darmesteter translation.¹³

In a later Pahlavi text, we also see through the use of metaphor that 'righteous understanding' is a strong defense against evil. Although the word 'weapon' is not mentioned here, we see the same type of martial imagery used against Aharman (Av. Angra Mainyu), the Devil, as we see in the YAv. texts.

"1. ... Auharmazd [Av. Ahura Mazda] prepared another rampart, that is stronger, around the sky which is called 'righteous understanding' (ashok akasih). 2. And he arranged the guardian spirits of the righteous who are warriors around that rampart, mounted on horses and spear in hand, ..." *Selections of Zad-spāram*, Ch. V, §§ 1 - 2, E. W. West translation.¹⁴

'Righteous understanding' is understanding the true (correct) order of existence (*aša-*) ~ an order that includes what is 'right' ~ an 'understanding' which is a part of good thinking.

So we see ~ implied in the Gathas, and specified in later Avestan and Pahlavi texts ~ a tradition extending for more than 1,000 years, in which the 'weapon' of Wisdom (*mazdā*) against what is false, evil, wrong, is all that is true, right, good ~ the true order of existence and its comprehension, good thinking.

In light of this evidence, it would be reasonable to conclude that in the Gatha verse Y31:18, the 'weapon' with which Wisdom is asked to strike down what is false and those who practice it, is comprehending the true order of existence ~ which is good thinking, which ultimately is an enlightened existence ~ wisdom/Wisdom (*mazdā-*).

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¹ The word *drəgvatō* is an adjective, which in Av. can be used as a noun that is a person, a concept, or other thing. Here, most translators have opted to translate *drəgvatō* (gen. sg.) as a faction of deceitful or untruthful people, but dividing people into factions ~ one good, and the other evil ~ is not in accord with Zarathushtra's teachings (nor even with reality), in which each (unperfected) way of being is a mix of bad and more-good (Y30:3), harmful and more-beneficial (Y45:2), therefore *drəgvatō* could with equal accuracy (and more consistent with Zarathushtra's teachings)

be translated as a concept ~ that which is deceitful, or untruthful. I would translate the phrase 'No one at all who belongs to (what is) deceitful/untruthful...' see *Part Three: Ashavan & Dregvant*.

² Skjaervo's Old Avestan Index shows *snaiθiš-* a ntr. noun, meaning 'weapon', with a Ved. cognate.

Humbach (1991) has "...Teach them therefore with (Your) weapon." Y31:18, Humbach (1991) Vol. 1, p. 130;

Humbach/Faiss (2010) have "...Teach therefore those (deceitful) with (your) weapon." Y31:18, p. 89;

Taraporewala (1951) has "...so resist these with-(spiritual)-weapons." Y31:18. Tarap. (1951) pp. 234, 236. Taraporewala in his commentary notes that Bartholomae sees *sāzdūm* as deriving from *sā-* 'to resist'. Although in translating *sāzdūm* as 'resist', he thinks the word derives from a different stem.

Moulton (1912) has "...Resist them then with weapon!" Y31:18. Moulton EZ, p. 354.

³ There are those who 'artisans' as an occupation in Zarathushtra's society. But there can be no doubt that it was. In more than one Gatha verse Zarathushtra speaks of the metal making process (from ore to metal) as 'molten, glowing' ~ a process he uses metaphorically for the soul-refining process; detailed in *Part Two: Molten, Glowing Metal*.

⁴ See the following chapters in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Cow and Its Network*; and *Other Metaphors*.

⁵ Here is another example from the Gathas in which Zarathushtra implies that Wisdom's weapon of choice is truth and its comprehension, good thinking,

"Come Thou together with good thinking. Along with truth, grant ... Wise One, the long-lived gift of strong support to Zarathushtra and to us, Lord, through which we shall overcome the enmities of the enemy" Y28:6, Insler 1975. The "enemy" in the Gathas is what is false, untruth, which is overcome by the weapon of truth and its comprehension, good thinking.

And there are many other examples (quoted in *Part One: Worship & Prayer*) in which (although the word 'weapon' is not used) Zarathushtra implies that the way in which Wisdom (*mazdā-*) defeats the 'enemy' (which is falsehood, wrongdoing) is with truth and its comprehension, good thinking.

⁶ SBE 31, p. 303. The YAv. Yy57 is devoted to Sraosha, ~ a name which literally means 'hearing and implementing' (the teachings of Wisdom), as discussed in *Part Three: Seraosha*.

⁷ The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo) is not a part of the Gathas (in their present form), but it is in Old Avestan (the same form of Avestan in which the Gathas are composed) and is believed to have been composed by Zarathushtra himself. It is discussed in *Part One: The Manthra of Choice, Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo)*, and in more detail in *Part Three: The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo), An Analysis*; and *The Ahuna Vairya, Ancient Commentaries*.

⁸ Detailed in *Part Two: A Question of Reward & the Path*.

⁹ For example, in the YAv. *Ashi Yasht*, Angra Mainyu (the Evil One of the later texts), says of Zarathushtra,

"He smites me with the Ahuna Vairya, as strong a weapon as a stone, big as a house;..." Yt. 17:20; Darmesteter translation, SBE 23, p. 275.

¹⁰ Most of the 'fiends' in the later texts were human vices; detailed in *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?*

¹¹ SBE 23, p. 160.

¹² See *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?*

¹³ SBE 4, p. 206. Here is the context in which the words quoted in the main part of this chapter appear in *Vendidad* 19, §§ 8 - 10. The conversation is (purportedly) between Angra Mainyu (the Devil) and Zarathushtra.

"8 (27). Again to him said the guileful one, the Maker of the evil world, Angra Mainyu: 'By whose Word wilt thou strike, by whose Word wilt thou repel, by whose weapon will the good creatures (strike and repel) my creation, who am Angra Mainyu?'

9 (28). Thus in answer to him said Spitama Zarathushtra:

'The sacred mortar, the sacred cup, the Haoma, the Words taught by Mazda, these are my weapons, my best weapons!

By this Word [no mention of Haoma] will I strike,

by this Word [no mention of Haoma] will I repel,

by this weapon the good creatures (will strike and repel thee), O evil-doer, Angra Mainyu! To me Spenta Mainyu gave it, he gave it to me in the boundless Time; to me the Amesha Spentas the all-ruling, the all-beneficent gave it.'

10 (35). Zarathushtra chanted aloud the Ahuna Vairya..." *Vendidad* 19:8 - 10, Darmesteter translation in SBE 4, pp. 206 - 207.

The *Vendidad* (like most YAv. texts) was written after the worship of certain old Indo-Iranian deities (which included the worship of Av. haoma; Ved. soma) had been brought into Zarathushtra's religion, centuries after Zarathushtra's time (see *Part Four: The Syncretization*). And in *Vendidad*. 19 § 9 (quoted above) "Haoma" and the implements of its worship ~ the cup and mortar ~ are included in the understanding of 'weapon', together with "the Words taught by Mazda ...".

But §§ 8 - 9 themselves show that this mention of Haoma was a later addition to the traditional idea of "the Words taught by Mazda" as the 'best weapon' with which to fight evil, because in § 8, the 'Devil' asks "By whose Word" will Zarathushtra strike and repel him and his creatures, and in § 9 Zarathushtra says that he will 'strike' and 'repel' by this Word ~ Haoma is not mentioned in these sections as a means of striking and repelling evil. In addition, after the repeated phrases 'by this Word' all references to the 'weapon' are sg. not pl. which could not be the case if 'haoma' was included as part of the 'weapon'. Finally, the sacred mortar, the sacred cup, the Haoma plant are not Words and are not responsive to the question by the Devil in § 8 "By whose Word" ~ suggesting that these ritual items were a later addition.

In the entire corpus of the Gathas there is no specific mention of haoma at all (other than what some translators have interpretively added) ~ let alone haoma as a weapon against untruth. So in attempting to understand the nature of the 'weapon' mentioned in the Gatha verse Y31:18, if we remove from *Vendidad*, 19:9, the later (post-syncretic) mention of Haoma, we once again get the traditional view mentioned in other YAv. texts ~ that the 'weapon' which defeats evil is the teaching of Wisdom (*mazdā*), ~ Wisdom's Word ~ which is generated by a beneficial way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*) and the qualities of the divine (*amesha spenta*) ~ all consistent with the teachings of the Gathas, in which a beneficial way of being generates an understanding of the nature of the Divine (Y43), which is also the way to the Divine ~ the 'path(s) of truth', and the 'path(s) of good thinking,' and the reward for taking that path, as detailed in *Part Two: A Question of Reward & the Path*.

¹⁴ SBE 5, p. 167.