

The Manthra of Choices, Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo)

The name of this prayer in Avestan texts is the Ahuna Vairya (Pahlavi 'Ahunavar'), although later it was called by its first three words *yatha ahu vairyo* (there are no capital letters in Avestan script). And many scholars believe it was composed by Zarathushtra himself. I agree. This manthra also ~ like the Asha Vahishta (*ashem vohu*) ~ contains core teachings in the Gathas, expressed in ways that are simple (for those who want simplicity) and also multi-dimensioned (for those who want an in-depth understanding). In other chapters I explore this manthra in more depth.¹ Here are its words in Avestan.

- a. *yaθā. ahū. vairyō. aθā. ratuš. ašātcīt. hacā.*
b. *vañhəuš. dazdā. manəjhō. šyaοθananəm. aṇhəuš. mazdāi.*
c. *xšaθrəmcā. *ahurāi.ā.² yim. drigubyō. dadaṭ. vāstārəm.:* Y27:13.

Here is my translation. Words in black font are not in the GAv. text, but (in my view) are implied in accordance with well established Avestan usage in which words that are first expressed are sometimes later implied, and implied words are later expressed. Linguists call this technique ellipsis. It is typical of Zarathushtra's poetic style, and appears frequently in the Gathas. So this technique in the Ahuna Vairya would not have seemed strange to Zarathushtra's contemporaries who were fluent in the language. It would just have provided them with a mildly intriguing puzzle, easily resolved ~ especially if the resolution were assisted by the music to which the original was sung (long since lost to us).

To enable you to see more easily the beautiful balancing and alternating of expressed words (in red font) which in other places are implied (in round parentheses and black font), I have divided lines a. and b. into their segments (as created by the caesura).³

- a. *yaθā. ahū. vairyō.*
'Just as the Lord/existence (is) to be chosen (in accord with truth itself),

aθā. ratuš. ašātcīt. hacā.
so also (is) (good) judgment⁴ in accord with truth itself (to be chosen),

- b. *vañhəuš. dazdā. manəjhō.*
(so also) the establishment / (gifts)⁵ of (this) good thinking,

šyaοθananəm. aṇhəuš. mazdāi.
(the establishment/gifts) of actions stemming from an existence (in accord with truth itself), for wisdom/Wisdom,

- c. *xšaθrəmcā. *ahurāi.ā. yim. drigubyō. dadaṭ. vāstārəm.*
and the rule (in accord with truth itself, is to be established), for the lord/Lord whom they have made pastor for the ones in need.' Y27:13.

The Insler 1975 translation is footnoted for comparative purposes.⁶

This manthra was crafted to give teachings to those who want something straightforward and basic, and also for those who like puzzles, who are interested in eternal questions to which no one can know the answers for sure. For the puzzle lovers, the ideas of the Ahuna Vairya have been crafted in multi-dimensioned ways, blending into and out of each other, giving food for thought, and a glimpse into Zarathushtra's own thoughts on these questions. Here, I would like to show you both the basic and a few

multi-dimensioned levels of this manthra. And there are no capital letters in Avestan script, which results in certain words having double entendres (discussed below).

In the long history of Zoroastrianism, the Ahuna Vairya has been regarded as something of a talisman, a very potent charm, capable of producing extraordinary effects. In a later Avestan text composed long after the Gathas, it is written that the Ahuna Vairya can redeem us from our mortality:

"... this utterance is a thing of such a nature, that if all the corporeal and living world should learn it, and learning hold fast to it, they would be redeemed from their mortality!" Yy19:10, Mills' translation.⁷

And a still later Pahlavi text, the *Bundahishn* (written in about the 9th century CE an effort to preserve more ancient knowledge) describes it as a formula for defeating evil:

"... even so as is declared in revelation, that when one of its (the Ahunavar's) three parts was uttered, the evil spirit⁸ contracted his body through fear, and when two parts of it were uttered, he fell upon his knees, and when all of it was uttered he became confounded and impotent as to the harm he caused the creatures of Auharmazd [Av. Ahura Mazda] ... " *Bundahishn*, Ch. 1, § 22, E. W. West translation;⁹ words in round parentheses have been inserted by West.

It is significant, that even after the devastation wrought by Alexander (in about 331 BCE) and the later Arab invasion (about 641 CE), the idea survived in what remained of the Zoroastrian community, that the Ahuna Vairya is so powerful, that it not only enables us to transcend our mortality as stated in Yy19:10, but also enables the defeat of evil, as the *Bundahishn* states. A potent talisman indeed.

Naturally, one wonders: How? How does the Ahuna Vairya defeat evil? How does it enable us to transcend our mortality?

To answer how it defeats evil, we have to remember Zarathushtra's ideas about the nature of evil.¹⁰ It is the product of wrongful choices. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra describes evil as a primordial way of being (Y30:3; Y45:2). He does not specify its origin. But he says that in our existence, we bring it to life, we give it substance, we make it real, when we choose it in our thoughts, words and actions. Therefore, a key to the destruction of evil and the suffering it causes, is making the right choices, which brings us back to the Ahuna Vairya ~ the prayer of choices.

At a basic level.

In a nutshell, the Ahuna Vairya reflects choosing (in concept and being) the true (correct) order of existence ~ an existence which is wholly good (*aša- vahišta-*), an existence which is Divine. The Ahuna Vairya encapsulates five choices which are foundational teachings of Zarathushtra. Specifically,

1. Choosing the Divine (the object of our worship) and existence (the way we live our lives) ~ in accordance with the true order of existence. The stem *ahu-* means both 'lord' and 'existence' and here the form of this one word (*ahū*) is nominative dual.¹¹ I think Zarathushtra uses the word with double entendre to mean the quality of existence ~ both in what we worship (the nature of the Divine Who personifies the true wholly good order of existence), and in our own existence, our lives (the path of the true wholly good order of existence).

2. Choosing to make our 'judgment in accord with the true good order of existence' (which includes factual truths, and the truths of mind/heart/spirit ~ all that is correct, good, right). The idea of good, right 'judgment' is a mental activity, a mental process, which includes the way we understand things, arrive at

conclusions, make decisions ~ which is good thinking (*vohu- manah-*) ~ an on going search for, and comprehension of, the true good order of existence.

3. Choosing the 'establishment of (this) good thinking' (in our existence) ~ from which words and actions flow.

4. Choosing (to establish) 'actions stemming from an existence' (in accord with truth) ~ which is the concept of beneficial-sacred embodied truth *spənta- ārmaiti-*, for the sake of wisdom/Wisdom and here again (as in choosing the Lord/existence), I think that Zarathushtra intends a double meaning ~ wisdom as a quality of existence, and the Divine who personifies this quality.

5 Choosing (to establish its) 'rule' which is the rule of truth, its beneficial-sacred embodiment, and its most-good comprehension (Y51:4) ~ a state of enlightenment, (which is 'wisdom/Wisdom') ~ in ourselves and in our social units, 'for the lord/Lord whom they have made pastor for the ones in need' ~ the last few words exemplifying the concept of mutual, loving help, which is a component of each attribute of the Divine and is necessary for perfecting existence.¹² I discuss the double entendre for 'lord/Lord' below.

Let us consider each of these choices which comprise Zarathushtra's basic primer for living.

The First Choice:

What does he mean by choosing the Lord/existence [*ahū*] in accord with the true (correct) order of existence? Let us start with choosing the 'Lord' and then discuss choosing 'existence'.

There are no capital letters in Avestan script, and some scholars have interpreted 'lord' to mean an earthly, secular authority. But in the Gathas, except for one verse in which the term 'lords and ladies' is used for thieving aristocrats,¹³ 'lord' is never used to refer to earthly rulers or authorities ~ not even to Zarathushtra, who in the Gathas is not a secular or religious ruler, and who calls himself 'powerless' ~ as the world defines 'power' ~ "I know that (reason) because of which I am powerless, Wise One: by my condition of having few cattle, as well as (that) I am a person with few men ..." Y46:2. But there is ample evidence that in the Gathas he refers to the Divine as 'lord' (using the augmented form *ahura-*). And in the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses *ahura-* 'lord' in the sense of one who has acquired lordship over the qualities that make a being Divine.¹⁴ Therefore it would be reasonable to conclude that by *ahū* 'lord' in the Ahuna Vairya Zarathushtra is referring to the Divine. In essence, in line a. he says that we have to choose, for the object of our worship, a being whose nature is in accord with the true order of existence which is wholly good (*aša- vahišta-*). To understand the significance of this choice, we have to think back to Zarathushtra's time period.

Today, we are used to thinking in terms of a benevolent monotheism. But the situation was very different in Zarathushtra's time. We know from the Gathas that the deities of his society (as described and promoted by their priests) were violent, cruel, tyrannical, oppressive, and people were controlled by fear, to live and worship in the ways the priests specified ~ fear of punishment, fear of capricious tyranny, fear of the unknown ~ a situation which Zarathushtra did not like. And he made a choice. He concluded that cruel, angry, tyrannical deities were not worthy of worship.¹⁵ Having rejected their 'godhood', he found himself re-thinking the whole notion of divinity. To be worthy of worship, the Divine could only be wholly good (*vahišta-*), the wholly beneficial-sacred way of being (*spənta- mainyu-*) a way of being that is the true (correct) order of existence which is wholly good (*aša- vahišta-*) in all its aspects.¹⁶

But Zarathushtra also sees 5 of these divine qualities in man (although incompletely). And he sees these divine qualities as the path to the Divine ~ the quality of existence.

In other words, the first choice of the Ahuna Vairya requires that we choose two aspects of *existence* ~ the object of our worship, the Divine (the *Lord, ahū*), and also the quality of our own *existence* (*ahū*) ~ the way we live our lives ~ in accord with the true (correct) good order of existence itself (*aṣātcī hacā*) ~ an order of existence that Zarathushtra equates with all that is right (correct) ~ good, generous, beneficial, loving, compassionate, friendly et cetera.

Although the pantheon of cruel, violent, tyrannical deities with whom Zarathushtra had to contend, are not around today, the first choice of the Ahuna Vairya is still relevant to us. Like the people of Zarathushtra's time, we too tend to worship many gods, just different ones ~ self-aggrandizement, wealth, power, prestige, appearances, position. By Zarathushtra's standards, such gods are not worthy of worship. We need to choose the existence (Being) we worship and our own existence in accordance with the truth (correct, good) order itself (*aṣātcī hacā*).

A word about the double entendre '*lord/existence*'. At first thought, these two words seem to mean two completely unrelated things. But Zarathushtra is simply speaking of two aspects of one existence. '*Lord*' simply represents the perfected apex of '*existence*', a re-union of the fragments of existence that have made it (that are completely in accord with truth), whereas the rest of us have not (yet!) made it. Thus in this first choice, the double entendre for *ahu-* is really one underlying idea ~ existence ~ perfected existence (the Divine), and unperfected existence (the rest of us, and how we live our lives) ~ both to be chosen in accord with truth ~ '*Just as the Lord/existence (is) to be chosen* (in accord with truth itself)'.

The Second Choice

The second choice of the Ahuna Vairya is "*so also (is) (good) judgment [ratuš] in accord with truth* (to be chosen)." Judgment here is good, right (correct) judgment, a mental activity ~ good thinking. The word *ratu-* is derived from an older root *ar-* 'to fit', which also generated Old Persian *arta-*, Vedic *rta*, and Avestan *aša-*.¹⁷ Therefore *ratuš* in the Ahuna Vairya means judgment ~ a mental activity ~ that is intrinsically true, right, good, ~ which is good thinking, the comprehension of truth ("*Truth, shall I see thee as I continue to acquire ... good thinking ...*" Y28:5, Insler 1975).

Good thinking is the key to accessing the factual truths of our planet and universe(s). Good thinking is also the key to understanding the abstract truths of mind/heart/spirit. It is the key to solving the problems of existence, problems caused by natural calamities, by wrongful choices (evil), and by the many other factors (earned and unearned) that adversely affect our lives and cause suffering.¹⁸ Good thinking is the key to accessing an understanding of the Divine (as a being who personifies the true order of existence). And good thinking, according to Zarathushtra, requires that in searching for truth, and reaching our conclusions (making our judgments) we must think for ourselves ~ not blindly accept what others may tell us "*... Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man for himself...*" Y30:2, Insler 1975.¹⁹

The Third Choice.

The third choice of the Ahuna Vairya is choosing to establish this good thinking (*vanhəuš dazdā manəhō*). Our thoughts generate (and affect the quality of) our words and actions. Therefore, the establishment of good thinking lays the foundation for the words and actions that create an existence in accord with truth.

The Fourth Choice.

The fourth choice is '(the establishment) of actions stemming from an existence (in accord with truth itself),...' ~ truth embodied in beneficial-sacred thoughts, words and actions' (which is *spənta- ārmaiti*) ~ an attribute of the Divine, which man also has (incompletely).

These choices are made 'for wisdom/Wisdom'. In Avestan, personal names do not start with capital letters (because there are no capital letters in Av. script). The word *mazdāi* 'for wisdom', reflects Zarathushtra's most used name for the Divine (*mazdā*- 'Wisdom'), whose existence is the true good order of existence. And in the Gathas and the Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) he tells us to choose the true (most good) order of existence for its own sake. I think he uses *mazdāi* 'for wisdom/Wisdom' here with double entendre, to include his idea that all the living can achieve that exalted state (wisdom) which is the existence of the Divine (Wisdom), by choosing the path of truth ~ and (incrementally) achieving its comprehension, its embodiment ~ an existence in accord with truth.

It has become fashionable in some Zoroastrian circles to dismiss the precept 'good thoughts, good words, good actions' as simplistic ~ 'just ethics' ~ not really worthy of serious consideration as a defining element of Zarathushtra's teachings. I disagree.

It is true that this particular phrase ~ good thoughts, good words, good actions ~ does not appear in the Gathas in that form. But the ideas contained in this little maxim do indeed encapsulate the teachings of the Gathas in 1,001 beautiful ways. This simple little precept ~ good thoughts, good words, good actions ~ encompasses every (good) aspect of (wakeful) existence; it encapsulates the nature of the Divine (*aša*-, *vohu*- *manah*, *spənta*- *ārmaiti*-), the path to the Divine, and the reward for taking that path. In fact, 'most-good existence' (*ahu*- *vahišta*-) ~ an existence which generates and embodies good thoughts, words and actions ~ is one of Zarathushtra's terms for the state of being that is paradise.

In these third and fourth choices of the Ahuna Vairya, I think Zarathushtra intended to use a double entendre in that the establishment of qualities of the Divine by us, are our gift to Wisdom (which is corroborated both at the end of Yasna 29,²⁰ and also by Zarathushtra's idea that we worship the Divine, make It offerings (gifts), which are the qualities of the Divine (*amesha spenta*).²¹ This double entendre is discussed in more detail in *Part Three: Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo), An Analysis*.

The importance of these third and fourth choices of the Ahuna Vairya ~ 'the establishment of good thinking' and 'of actions stemming from an existence (in accord with truth indeed)' ~ is reflected in Zarathushtra's view of what it takes to be a *saošyant*- a 'savior'.

In the Gathas, (unlike the later texts), there is no one savior (or two or three) who will come to fix things for us. We have to fix things for ourselves, with help from the Divine, and each other (and all the living). According to Zarathushtra, each individual is a potential *saošyant*- ~ a potential savior ~ a person of actions stemming from good thinking and truth.

"Yes, those men [*tōi* 'those (one)']²² shall be the saviors [*saošyant*-] of the lands, namely, those who shall follow their knowledge of Thy teaching with actions in harmony with good thinking [*vohu*- *manah*-] and with truth [*aša*-], Wise One. These indeed have been fated to be the expellers of fury." Y48:12, Insler 1975. The 'enemy' to be expelled is a destructive way of thinking, a destructive way of being ~ fury, rage.

The phrase in Y48:12 (quoted above) "actions in harmony with good thinking and with truth [*aša*-]," expresses the same thought as the phrase in the Ahuna Vairya 'the establishment of good thinking, of actions stemming from an existence (in accord with truth)' ~ which is the meaning of *ārmaiti*- ~ thereby bringing the divine to

life, in our selves, and in our social units, which establishes good rule (*vohu- x šaθra-*), a rule that is divine, which is the fifth choice.

The Fifth Choice.

This fifth choice is choosing to establish 'rule' (in accord with truth). In understanding 'rule' (in line c.), let us remember how Zarathushtra uses this word in the Gathas. Good rule is first the way we rule ourselves, which affects the ways in which we rule our various social units ~ the family, the community, the nation, our world. In the Vohu Xshathra (Good Rule) Gatha, in Y51:4, the nature of this 'rule [*x šaθra-*]' includes protecting, not harming, being compassionate, and is the rule of truth, its embodiment, its comprehension. Zarathushtra encapsulates the components of **Wisdom's rule** in rhetorical questions which contain their own answers.

"Where shall there be protection instead of injury?
Where shall [*mərəždikā* 'compassion']²³ take place?
Where truth [*aša-*] which attains glory?
Where [*spənta- ārmaiti-* 'beneficial-sacred embodied truth']?
Where the very best thinking [*manah- vahišta-* '(the) most good thinking']?
Where, Wise One, through Thy rule [*x šaθra-*]?" Y51:4, Insler 1975.

Avestan has no question marks. So the last line could equally be,

"Where, Wise One? Through Thy rule [*x šaθra-*]." Y51:4.

In the Ahuna Vairya 'rule' is associated with being a **pastor for those in need** (line c.). So ~ as in the Gatha verse Y51:4 ~ the desired rule in the Ahuna Vairya is a nurturing rule ~ one that protects, does not injure, one that is brought about by good thinking (*vanhəuš. dazdā. manahō*) and actions [*šyaoθananqm*] ~ all in accord with the true order of existence (*ašaθcī hacā*), ~ qualities of the Divine ~ and therefore the rule of the Divine.

And this divine rule is established with our choices.

The Gatha verse Y51:4 (in offering 'protection instead of injury' and 'compassion'), and the Ahuna Vairya (in being a 'pastor to ones in need' line c.), both exemplify the core teaching of mutual, loving, help, between man and the Divine and all the living. To make it, we all have to both give and receive help.²⁴

To summarize: At a basic level, the talismanic virtues of the Ahuna Vairya as a formula for defeating evil and the suffering it causes, is quite simple.

When we (incrementally) choose the qualities of the Divine, we do not choose evil (in such choices). When we stop choosing evil, we deprive it of substance in the reality of thought, word and action. Lacking substance, evil becomes impotent, unable to cause harm, as the *Bundahishn* tells us.

But what of the promise of Yy19:10, that if we learn the Ahuna Vairya, and learning, hold fast to it, we will be redeemed from our mortality.

In Zoroastrian lore, which includes some lovely metaphors, we are told that the Chinvat Bridge,²⁵ stretches from mortal to non-mortal existence. I take the imagery of the bridge to be a metaphor for transition from imperfect mortal existence, to an existence that is completely in accord with the true order of existence which is wholly good (*aša- vahišta-*) ~ an existence which is Zarathushtra's paradise, a most good existence (*ahu-vahišta-*). In the Gathas, Zarathushtra says that he will cross over this bridge (i.e. make this transition), in the

company of those who have attained the attributes of the divine ("... in the glory of your kind [*x šmāvatqm*],²⁶ ..."), with all those ("...whoever ~ be it man or woman ~ ...") who give "... truth for the truth, and the rule of good thinking ..." Y46:10, Insler 1975 (the full verse is footnoted).²⁷

This Gatha verse echoes the Ahuna Vairya formula that we must choose the divine in our thinking, in our actions, and in rule. When we do so incrementally, and eventually completely (*haurvatāt-*), we become a part of the Divine (a union that is a plurality), and we make the transition (we cross over the bridge) from mortality to a non-mortal state of being (*amərətāt-* 'non-deathness'), or as the author of the Yy19:10 puts it, we are redeemed from our mortality.

In short, at a basic level, the Ahuna Vairya is a blue print for living which is to choose the true order in existence ~ in who we worship, in the way we live our lives, in thought (word) and action, for wisdom/Wisdom and Its rule ~ a rule through which we help each other make it, which enables the defeat of evil (as promised in the Bundahishn), and redeems us from our mortality (as promised in Yasna 19:10).

The enigmatical 'they' and the lord in line c.

I would like to offer you a mini-puzzle ~ in line c., the identity of the 3d person plural 'they'; and the lord. Here is the full line again.

Line c. '... and the rule for the lord/Lord [*ahurāi.ā*] whom they-have-made [*dadaŋ*] pastor for the ones in need' (my translation).

Let us start with lord. In Avestan script there are no capital letters such as would assist us in identifying Zarathushtra's intent in using lord. But it is clear that the lord is the pastor in line c. So who is this lord who is a pastor?

Well, it is true that the last line of the Ahuna Vairya is very similar to the last line of the last Gatha (Y53:9), in which it is clearly Wisdom (*mazdā-*) who nurtures the 'needy dependent'. "Such is Thy rule, Wise One, through which Thou shalt grant what is very good to Thy needy dependent who lives honestly." Y53:9, Insler 1975. There is no ambiguity there. No interplay between the human and the Divine.

However, in the last line of the Ahuna Vairya, Zarathushtra chooses to equate the 'lord' with being a 'pastor'. And in the Gathas, both the Divine and man (perfected and unperfected existence) are called 'pastors'.²⁸

In Yasna 29, it is both the Divine (Wisdom, truth, good thinking, a beneficial way of being) and unperfected man (exemplified by Zarathushtra) ~ who nurture existence (as pastor), heal it of the suffering so eloquently detailed in Y29:1 ~ heal it through making known the Word of Wisdom ~ the path of truth, its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule, the beneficial-sacred way of being ~ the blueprint for healing existence.

In the Ahuna Vairya, it is man choosing the Divine ~ in the object of his worship and his existence (*ahū*), establishing (good) thinking and actions ~ all in accord with the true order indeed (*ašātēt hacā*) which is the existence of the Divine ~ which bring 'wisdom/Wisdom' (lines a. and b.), as well as (good) rule which brings lordship (line c.) ~ which in the Gathas is used in the sense of having lordship over the qualities that make a being divine.²⁹

So it would be reasonable to conclude that in the Ahuna Vairya (as in the Gathas) both man and the Divine are nurturers ('pastors'). And in Zarathushtra's use of the pastor who is the lord/Lord [*ahurāi.ā*] in line c., we see the same interplay between the human and the Divine, as we do in his use of *ahu-* lord/existence in line a., and *mazdāi* wisdom/Wisdom in line b.

But, as I understand Zarathushtra's thought, these two ~ the Divine and mortals ~ are parts of one 'being' (at different stages of the perfecting process), hence the sg. *yim* 'whom' and the sg. 'pastor' ~ consistent with the interplay between the sg. and the pl. that we also find in the Gathas, and is one of its meaningful (and beautiful) puzzles.³⁰

Is there any corroborating evidence that the *lord* in line c., refers to both man and the Divine (unperfected lordship and perfected Lordship) Well, it is interesting that in a late Pahlavi text, there is a commentary on the Ahuna Vairya which sees the idea of mutual loving help expressed in a way that includes mortals as the givers of help. It explains that in the Ahuna Vairya, "mutual assistance of the creatures" is the 3d thing necessary for the renovation of existence ~ that we all make it.³¹

"Thirdly, the existence of the mutual assistance of the creatures, or along with and owing to mutual assistance, their collective warfare; it is the triumph of warfare over the enemy which is one's own renovation." *Selections of Zad-spāram*, Ch. 1, § 19, E. W. West translation.³²

The 'enemy' of one's own renovation is of course, the 'enemy' within ~ untruth.

Which brings us to the enigmatical 'they' in line c. Let us (once again!) look at the full line, for the context in which 'they' appears.

line c. '... and the rule for the lord/Lord whom they-have-made [*dadaŋ*] pastor for the ones in need', (my translation).

The 3d person plural 'they' is implicit in the verb *dadaŋ* (the 3p pl. being part of the verb form *dadaŋ*). This surely is a bit of a puzzle. There is no plural noun in lines a., b., or c., for which 'they' could stand. So who does Zarathushtra intend for this unidentified *they* implicit in the word *dadaŋ*?

Humbach/Faiss 2010 surmise that 'they' could mean the community of Zarathushtra's followers because in their translation they use the implied "(people)". But there is no parallel idea in the Gathas of people appointing anyone as 'pastor'. Indeed, in the Gathas, each person ~ through his own efforts ~ must be a pastor, one who nurtures existence.³³

I am inclined to think that 'they' refers to the qualities that make a being divine (amesha spenta).

In Yasna 29, it is Wisdom, truth, good thinking and (in masked form) the beneficial way of being that choose Zarathushtra (a man who thinks and is caring) ~ to bring nurture to mortal existence through making known Wisdom's Word ~ the path of truth (the path of Wisdom's divine qualities, later called amesha spenta) thereby healing the suffering caused by wrongdoing and untruth (complained of in the first verse Y29:1). If we look past the imagery of divine qualities as allegories in Y29, we see the idea that it is these qualities (the true order of existence, its comprehension good thinking, a beneficial way of being) that inform the kinds of thoughts, words and actions that are required of the Divine and humans to heal existence from wrongdoing and untruth.

Applying the foregoing to the Ahuna Vairya, the beneficial way of being *spənta- mainyu-* is not mentioned by name in this mantra, but in the Gathas, this way of being is the true (good) order of existence, its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule,³⁴ ~ which indeed are referred to in lines a., b. and c. of the Ahuna Vairya. Therefore (based on Yasna 29) I think 'they' refers to the divine qualities that make a being ~ both perfected (Divine) and unperfected (man) ~ a *pastor* to those in need, those who have not yet made it.

The meaning of the title, Ahuna Vairya.

This Avestan title appears in YAv. texts (not in the manthra itself), and therefore would conform to Avestan usage. I have not come across a translation of the title, 'Ahuna Vairya', by any linguist. Nor have I come across a linguistic explanation of the meaning of *ahuna* by anyone who knows the Avestan language, and also Vedic and other ancient Indo-European languages, such as would explain the function of the suffix *-na*, and what meaning this suffix gives to *ahu-* when tacked on to create the word *ahuna*:

We have already seen that *ahu-* means both 'lord' and 'existence'. According to Jackson, the suffix *-na* makes the word to which it is attached possessive, giving many examples. For example, *zrayana-* 'of the sea'; *vahmana-* 'praiseworthy' [literally 'worthy of praise']; *airyana-* 'Aryan' [literally 'of the Aryas']; *xayana-* 'belonging to a well'.³⁵ So it would be reasonable to conclude from this evidence that the suffix *-na* would make *ahu-* possessive, giving *ahuna* the meaning 'of (the) Lord/existence' ~ there are no articles ('the' or 'a') in Avestan.

vairya is a gerund (a noun derived from a verb ~ just as 'dancing' is a noun derived from the verb 'to dance'). In this instance *vairya* is derived from the verb stem *var-* and the suffix *ya-* ~ which in English we would translate by adding 'ing' to the verb 'choose'), creating the noun '(the) choosing'. This gives us a translation of the title 'Ahuna Vairya' which describes exactly the contents of this manthra.

ahuna vairya '(The) choosing of (the) Lord/existence' my translation.

Additional dimensions.

Those who like to play with puzzles, may enjoy the following additional dimensions in the Ahuna Vairya (there doubtless are many more). Those who find such puzzles annoying may prefer to skip what follows. But then you will miss the ideas they convey.

There are some lovely interplays of ideas in this manthra, each one blending and flowing into and out of the others, which conveys through the sheer beauty of Zarathushtra's poetry, ideas that are meaningful. Let us start with a simple dimension.

The Ahuna Vairya starts with the Divine, refracts into the attributes of the Divine, and ends with the Divine.

- * Divine, (*ahu-*)
- * in accord with the true (correct) order of existence (*aša-* a Divine attribute),
- * (good) judgment in accord with truth and its establishment ~ which is good thinking, (*vohu- manah-* a Divine attribute),
- * actions stemming from an existence (in accord with truth) (*armaiti-* a Divine attribute)
- * (good) rule (*vohu- xšaθra-* a Divine attribute)
- * for the Divine (for Wisdom *mazdāi*, for the Lord *ahurāi.ā...*)

Let us take it a step further. In refracting the Divine and Its attributes, each line of the Ahuna Vairya actually involves the choices of (unperfected) mortals.

- * mortals choosing the Divine/existence,
- * mortals making this choice in accord with truth, (*aša-* a Divine attribute that mortals bring to life with their choices),

- * mortals establishing (good) judgment, good thinking, (*vohu- manah-* a Divine attribute that mortals bring to life with their choices),
- * mortals establishing an existence of actions (in accord with truth), (*ārmaiti-* a Divine attribute that mortals bring to life with their choices),
- * mortals establishing (good) rule, (*vohu- xšaθra-* a Divine attribute that mortals bring to life with their choices),
- * for the sake of (mortals) attaining **wisdom/Wisdom** personified, and for **lordship** (over the qualities that make a being divine, *mazdāi ... ahurāi.ā ...*),
- * with mutual, loving help for those who have not yet made it (and also for those in material need, since our existence here is that of both matter and mind).

The incremental choosing and establishing by (unperfected) beings, of the attributes of the Divine the amesha spenta in mortal existence (lines a., b., and the beginning of c.), nurtures existence (end of line c.), and leads to its perfecting (which is the attainment of the true order of existence ~ the existence of the Divine (line a.).

The Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) and the Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo) complement each other. It is no accident (in my view) that the Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) ends with *aṣāi vahištāi aṣəm* 'truth, for the most-good true order of existence', (the existence of the Divine), and the Ahuna Vairya ends with *mazdāi* and *ahurāi.ā*, 'for wisdom/Wisdom' and 'for the lord/Lord' ~ which is for the existence of the Divine, the *aṣāi vahištāi aṣəm* of the Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) .

I used to think that the Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) was about concepts, and the Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo) was about 'being' ~ making the concepts real. But I now realize that Zarathushtra was not so one-dimensional.

The Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) and the Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo) both encapsulate Zarathushtra's teachings in **concept** and in **being** each showing the same ideas in an interplay of different perspectives.

In the Asha Vahishta (Ashem Vohu) we have the **concepts** of

- ~ the true order of existence (*aṣa-*),
- ~ its nature (which is good *vohu-* and indeed the superlative of intrinsic goodness *vahišta-*),
- ~ desiring it, searching for it,
- ~ that it is attainable, that we can will it into existence, and
- ~ the resulting happiness and illumination
- ~ which is the true order of existence (the path) for its own most-good sake (the result).

Yet in the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses 'most-good' *vahišta-* as a name for the Divine (in **being**), and also to describe paradise (*ahu- vahišta-*) ~ the existence which is attained by **living beings**.³⁶ Both the Divine and paradise *are* the most-good true order of existence (*aṣa- vahišta-*).³⁷ So in the Ashem Vohu, we see that **concept** and **being** flow into and out of each other. Like a piece of shot silk, in which the warp is one color and the woof is another, so that if you look at the silk in one way you see pre-dominantly one color (but also the other), and if in another way, you see pre-dominantly the other color (but also the one).

The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo), speaks about choices and action, which can only be done by beings. Yet these choices are informed by concepts.

- ~ the true order of the lord/existence (being informed by a concept)
- ~ its comprehension good thinking (being informed by a concept),
- ~ actions stemming from an existence in accord with truth (being informed by a concept), and
- ~ the resulting good rule (being informed by a concept).

Such choices make the divine real, for the sake of the Divine (perfected and unperfected) as being ~ mazdāi and ahurāi.ā which, for completeness, requires helping those (beings) who have not yet made it, thereby bringing about the ultimate, complete, Divine in being, which (to be mischievous) is Zarathushtra's concept of the Divine, which we can choose to bring into being.

There doubtless are other dimensions to the Ahuna Vairya, which are informed by Zarathushtra's thought in the Gathas. I hope you see and enjoy them, as you recite and meditate on this beautiful manthra ~ which was one of the purposes for which Zarathushtra crafted it.

* * * * *

¹ This mantra is studied in depth in *Part Three: The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo), An Analysis*, (which also contains a word by word linguistic discussion, with other translations for comparative purposes) and in *Part Three: The Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyo), Ancient Commentaries*.

² The mss. in Geldner do not show ahurāi.ā. as one compound word, but many good linguists today take it as such.

³ In Latin, Greek and Old English poetry, a 'caesura' is a pause or break within a line of poetry required by rhythm, syntax, or sense. McArthur, *The Oxford Companion to the English Language*. We also find this kind of line break in the Gathas, which is usually required by the meter, and linguists have adopted the Latin term 'caesura' for it (because we do not know what it was called in Avestan). Avestan, Latin, Greek and English are all within the Indo-European family of languages.

⁴ The word 'judgment' here is used in the sense of an exercise in good thinking ~ the function of discerning, deciding (as in having 'good judgment' or 'bad judgment'); ratu- words are frequently used in the Gathas for 'judgment' in this sense. In the Ahuna Vairya, Insler in 1975 and also Humbach/Faiss 2010 have also translated ratuš as 'judgment', but an older generation of scholars has translated the word as 'judge' ~ which is not consistent with Zarathushtra's teachings.

⁵ Linguists are puzzled by dazdā and their opinions vary greatly regarding its meaning and grammatical value. For reasons which I won't detail here, I think it means 'establishment' (deriving from the Av. verb dā-, one of the meanings of which is 'to establish'). However, both the earliest YAv. commentary, as well as the Pahlavi translation, see the idea of a gift in the Ahuna Vairya ~ one of the meanings of the Av. verb dā- is 'to give'. Based on Zarathushtra's thought in the Gathas, I think Zarathushtra uses dazdā with double entendre, primarily intending the 'establishment' (of qualities of the divine in existence), with a secondary meaning of 'gifts'. In the Gathas, there is a mutual giving (gifting) of divine attributes (amesha spenta) from the Divine to us (in the form of Wisdom's teachings), and from us to the Divine (in the way we live our lives); discussed in *Part Two: The Solution Of Yasna 29*. I see this same idea in the Ahuna Vairya.

⁶ Here, for comparative purposes, is Insler's 1975 translation of the Ahuna Vairya,

"Just as the Lord in accord with truth must be chosen, so also the judgment in accord with truth. In consequence of (this) good thinking, institute ye the rule of actions stemming from an existence of good thinking for the (sake of the)

the Wise One and for the lord whom they established as pastor for the needy-dependents." Y27:13, S. Insler, *The Ahuna Vairya Prayer* (in Monumentum H. S. Nyberg, Acta Iranica, E. J. Brill, 1975). pp. 419 ~ 420.

⁷ SBE 31, pp. 262 ~ 263.

⁸ There is no 'Devil' or 'Evil Spirit' as an entity in the Gathas (other than interpretations personal to a given translator). The evidence supporting this conclusion is detailed in *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?* It was only centuries after Zarathushtra that we see the advent of the idea of the Devil as an entity in later texts. Unfortunately *mainyu-* has been translated as 'spirit'. But if you look at each way in which Zarathushtra uses the word in the Gathas, the only meaning that fits each context of all such uses is a 'way of being'; detailed in *Part One: The Beneficial-Sacred Way of Being, Spenta Mainyu*.

⁹ SBE 5, pp. 8 - 9.

¹⁰ Detailed in *Part One: Good & Evil*.

¹¹ In line a. of the Ahuna Vairya *ahū* is the form for both nom. dual, and instr. sg. (Jackson 1892 §§ 262, 264, pp. 77 - 78). But here the instr. sg. ('with/by/through____') does not fit the context, so the grammatical value of *ahū* can only be nom. dual ~ a good fit for the double meaning of *ahū* as 'lord' and 'existence'.

¹² The earliest commentary on the Ahuna Vairya states that it "has three stages or measures", Yy19:16, Mills translation SBE 31, p. 264 (which I take to mean its 3 metrical lines) and 'five teachings' (*panca tkaēša*), Yy19:14, (YAv. words from Geldner 1P, p. 78). No translation of the commentary (available to me) identifies these 5 teachings. However, I see these five teachings in the 5 choices which I discuss in the main part of this chapter. The numbering of these teachings that I have itemized as 5 is reasonable enough, but they could just as easily be further shortened, or further subdivided, so I do not think the *panca tkaēša* of the commentary necessarily lends credibility to my conclusions, which should stand or fall based on whether they accurately understand the Ahuna Vairya and how it encapsulates Zarathushtra's teachings in the Gathas.

¹³ "Those deceitful ones who appear in grandeur as lords [*anjhavasā*] and ladies, even they have ruined this life by stealing the property of the (true) inheritor (as well as those) who have tried to deflect the truthful from the very best thinking [*vahišta- manah-* 'most-good thinking']." Y32:11, Insler 1975. The word *anjhavasā* 'lords-and' in this verse is nom. pl. of the stem *ahu-* 'lord' (Skjaervo's Old Avestan Index updated to 2022), with *-cā* 'and' tacked on.

¹⁴ Detailed in *Part One: The Nature Of The Divine*, which gives several quotations from the Gathas which show that Zarathushtra uses 'lord' as a name for the Divine, in contexts which establish that 'lord' is one who has acquired 'lordship over the qualities that make a being divine. Zarathushtra uses 'lord' in 2 other Gatha verses in ways that are consistent with other fragments of existence who have achieved 'lordship' over the qualities that make a being divine, detailed in *Part Two: The Lords & The Equations of Y34:1*.

¹⁵ Detailed in *Part One: The Nature Of The Divine*.

¹⁶ The idea that to be worthy of worship, a being must be wholly good, is a tenet of Zarathushtra's thought that was so central and well established, that it survived the invasions of Alexander and the Arabs and the destruction of texts and the killing of the learned, and is found in two Pahlavi texts composed around the 9th century CE:

(1) In *Selections of Zad-spāram*, (in which the high priest Zad-spāram states that the first necessary step for the renovation of the soul is the recognition that the Divine is wholly good); and

(2) In *Sikand Gumanig Vijar*, in which a (lay) Zoroastrian intellect of that time states that a being who is a mix of good and bad would not be worthy of worship.

These Pahlavi sources are referenced and discussed in *Part One: The Nature of the Divine*, and (in more detail) in *Part Two Asha & the Checkmate Solution*.

¹⁷ Discussed in *Part Three: Ratu*.

¹⁸ The message of Yasna 29 is that good thinking is the genesis of solving the problems of existence (discussed in *Part Two: The Solution of Yasna 29*), and we see it also in a story from a later (Pahlavi) text, *Selections of Zadsparam*, in which Zarathushtra is lead by Good Thinking to the seat of the enquirers, and asks questions of Ahura Mazda and His attributes (discussed in *Buried Treasure in Ancient Stories*, which appears on the Home Page and in *Part One*).

¹⁹ "Listen with your ears to the best things [*vahištā* 'to (the) most good (things)']]. Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man for himself..." Y30:2, Insler 1975.

"... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth. Truth, shall I see thee as I continue to acquire both good thinking and the way to the Lord?..." Y28:4 ~ 5, Insler 1975. The "way to the Lord" in the Gathas, is the path of the truth and its components qualities (later called amesha spenta).

²⁰ See *Part Two: The Solution Of Yasna 29*.

²¹ Discussed in *Part One: Worship & Prayer*; and in *Part Two: The Puzzle of Worship*.

²² The word *tōi* is a demonstrative pronoun masc. pl. 'those, those (ones)', (M & DeV, 2001, p. 72). In Avestan (as in English) the masc. gender is sometimes used generically to include all genders. Avestan and English are both in the Indo-European family of languages.

²³ The meaning of *mərəzdikā* as 'compassion, kindness, grace' ('grace' in the sense of giving goodness, lovingkindness, that does not have to be earned), and how it fits Zarathushtra's thought is discussed in a ft. in *Part One: Good Rule, Vohu Xshathra, & Power*.

²⁴ The idea of a bountiful generosity in the Gathas (and throughout Zoroastrian texts) includes generosity in the existences of both matter and mind. I therefore think that the meaning of *drigubyō* 'for the ones in need' includes both material needs (for those in poverty), as well as the mental, emotional, spiritual needs of those who have not yet made it, who do not yet possess completely, the wealth of the true (correct) order of existence, which is wholly good.

²⁵ The meaning of the term, 'Chinvat Bridge', and how it fits in Zarathushtra's thought is discussed in *Part Three: Chinvat, The Bridge Of Discerning*. Translators are in disagreement as to the meaning of 'Chinvat' which has variously been translated as the Bridge 'of the Separator', or 'of the Judge' or 'of the Account Keeper' (the word appears as *cinvatō* three times in the Gathas ~ in Y46:10, 11, and Y51:13), each of which is discussed in the foregoing chapter in *Part Three*.

Insler 1975 translates the term 'Bridge of the Judge' commenting that he follows Bartholomae in taking the stem *cinvant-* as present participle of *ci-* 'decide, discern', p. 271. The present participle of 'to decide, discern' would be 'deciding, discerning'. With respect, I think 'Bridge of the Judge' is too interpretive, and is not consistent with Zarathushtra's thought because in the Gathas (as distinguished from certain Pahlavi texts and other religious paradigms) there is no final, end of life, or end of times, judgment through which a person is condemned or rewarded (although that idea has been read into the Gathas, interpretively). I take it that the activity (for want of a better word) that occurs at this allegorical bridge is to discern whether a person has attained the true order of existence completely, so that the person can make the transition ~ cross over the bridge ~ from mortality to a state of being no longer bound by mortality (*amərətāt-* 'non-deathness'). I therefore translate Chinvat Bridge as the 'Bridge of Discerning', which conforms exactly to Bartholomae's linguistic opinion.

This conclusion is somewhat corroborated in the earliest commentary on the Ahuna Vairya which is Yy19. Sections 6 and 10 express parallel thoughts in which crossing the Chinvat Bridge (§ 6) is equated with being redeemed from mortality (§ 10).

²⁶ *x šmāvatqm* literally means 'of possessing-you-ness', detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle Of The Sincere Ones & Others*.

²⁷ "Wise Lord, whoever ~ be it man or woman ~ would grant to me those things which Thou dost know to be the best (*vahišta*- 'most good') for existence, namely, the truth for the truth and the rule of good thinking (with that person) as well as those whom I shall accompany in the glory of your kind [*x šmāvatqm* 'of possessing-you-ness] ~ with all these I shall cross over the Bridge of the Judge [*cinvatō ... pārētūm* '(the) bridge of discerning']." Y46:10, Insler 1975.

²⁸ The ways in which Zarathushtra uses '*pastor*' in the Gathas is detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Cow & Its Network*.

²⁹ Detailed in *Part One: The Nature of the Divine*; and in *Part Two: The Lords & The Equations of Y34:1*.

³⁰ Detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Singular & The Plural*.

³¹ The three factors necessary for the renovation of existence (in this Pahlavi text) are:

(1) A recognition that the Divine is wholly good;

(2) The law of consequences, and

(3) Mutual assistance.

Discussed in a ft. in *Part Two: Asha & the Checkmate Solution*.

³² SBE Vol. 5, p. 158.

³³ Detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Cow & Its Network*.

³⁴ See *Part One: The Beneficial-Sacred Way of Being, Spenta Mainyu*.

³⁵ Jackson states that *-na* is one of many "principal secondary" suffixes in Avestan and he gives "*ahuna* 'the Ahuna formula'," as an example of a noun created by attaching the suffix *-na*. But he does not translate *ahuna*- nor does he explain what grammatical function or meaning the suffix *-na* gives to *ahu*- when attached to that word. But all the other examples of the suffix *-na* that he gives ~ which he does translate (quoted in the main part of this essay) ~ make the resulting word possessive in nature, Jackson 1892 §§ 824, 826, 848 (# 21), pp. 227, 228, 232 - 233. It would be reasonable to conclude from this evidence that the suffix *-na* would make *ahu*- possessive, giving it the meaning: 'of (the) *ahu*-' ~ there are no articles ('the' or 'a') in Avestan.

³⁶ Detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle of the Most Good, Vahishta*.

³⁷ Detailed in *Part Two: A Question of Reward & The Path*.