

Existence of Zoroaster

- by Dr Pallan Ichaporia, D.Phil., PhD.
Mainz University, Germany

Recently Oktor Skjervo, Prof. Pirrat among others have doubted the existence of Zarathushtra. Almost a hundred years ago Darmesteter did the same after Parsis in Bombay when he visited them laid prostrate at his feet same as Skjervo was invited and applauded recently in New York by FEZANA, WZO and ZAGNY (Parsi Associations) when he spoke on the Gathas whose composer, our prophet Zarathushtra he strongly denied in the Gathas the only person mentioned who speaks to Ahura Mazda is Zarathushtra so a probable connection is established, namely that the person of Zarathushtra is the speaker or creator of the verses, for we are talking of poetry.

The question arises, did Zarathushtra compose the verses of the Gathas, or did another person compose hymns of praise to his mentor or teacher? In either case a person must have existed who was called Zarathustra in the Avesta. Some like Skjervo may claim that Zoroaster was a made up name given to a spirit or a deity, but that does not change the need to find a human being who composed the Gathas since the verses hardly just wafted down from the sky.

There has been a controversy over the authorship of the works of Shakespeare, some claiming that Marlowe or another person wrote some or all of them. But generally the plays and poetry are assigned to Shakespeare. Let us proceed similarly with Zarathustra, about whom many more legends have accumulated than about Shakespeare.

Using an Aristotelian syllogism, a person is the author of the Gathas; Zarathushtra is a person; therefore Zarathushtra is the author of the Gathas. Or if one objects to the word author, then the object may be substituted for author of.

If we continue to analyze the Gathas some probable conclusions may be drawn. The language of the Gathas is very close to the Sanskrit of the Rigveda, such that they could be termed related dialects. The Rigveda is generally dated at least a millennium B.C. so the Gathas should be similarly ancient. How ancient is a matter of dispute since one language might have been more conservative than another, conserving archaic forms in the vocabulary and grammar.

Some scholars have given the date of Zarathushtra, hence also the Gathas, as the time of Cyrus or even Darius in the sixth century B.C. Most likely, however, Zarathushtra composed and preached his Gathas in a language his contemporaries understood rather than a long defunct tongue which was not meant to be understood by those around him. Consequently most likely the Gathas belong to a period of time closer to that of the Rigveda than to the time of the Achaemenids.

No one disputes the assertion that the Gathas were composed in an eastern Iranian language and milieu.

Some scholars have narrowed the focus of a spotlight on a region where the Gatha tongue was at home, and that large area where Zarathushtra was born, preached and died has been designated as extending from Sistan through Herat, and even to Balkh, to use more recent geographical terms rather than ancient names. This geographical area has been favored over Central Asia (mainly contemporary Uzbekistan) because we have no Middle Iranian linguistic remains from that area, whereas texts in the Sogdian, Khwarazmian and Bactrian languages do exist and not one may be called a descendant of either dialect of the Avesta, i.e. the Gathas and the Younger Avesta.

The remains of those languages, however, are at least a thousand years later than the presumed date of the Avestan tongue, and many changes may have occurred in that long period of time.

We already have ventured into the realm of conjecture and uncertain information, but a hope remains that archaeology some day may reveal clues that will clarify the picture of Zarathushtra and the rise of the religion generally after him called Zoroastrianism today. No longer can one propose that the religion is much later than the date given above, as James Darmesteter did over a century ago. and whose feet were kissed by the Parsis of that era in Bombay.

Additions or changes to the rites, rituals or doctrines of the Zoroastrian religion obviously were made, and some may be traced in later writings. Scholars investigate phases of the history of the religion, while believers are comforted by the long existence of the faith.

While one may debate many questions of the long history surely the existence of Zoroaster would be difficult to deny.