

Gathas are not didactic

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The only authentic religious and literary heritage left to posterity by Zarathushtra are his five Gathas, a collection of seventeen religious hymns. These form the nucleus of Yasna ceremony performed in the fire-temple.

Legendary history of the Avesta (particularly of the Gathas) is found in the Pahlavi literature. It begins with the king Vistaspa who, after his war with Arjaspa (q.v.), is said to have sent messengers and books to disseminate the Mazdayasnian religion. It culminates with the Sasanian redaction of the Avesta under Kosrow Anosheravan (for sources see Humbach, 1991, Vol.I, pp. 49-55).

The prophet's authorship has recently been questioned by Jean Kellens and Éric Pirart, (Vol I, p. 17 ff.), who emphasize that the name of the prophet is given in the third person in ten Gathic occurrences, for instance "who is the man to be an ally of Spitama Zarathushtra" (Y. 51.11), and that he is even addressed in the vocative as in its parallel "O Zarathushtra, who is your trustful ally" (Y. 46.14). Yet these are rather figures of speech well known in oriental poetries, which are applied here by the prophet in order to imprint his name for praising Ahura Mazda. The tradition is corroborated by Yasna 43.8, where Zarathushtra being asked for his name, introduces himself as "(I am) Zarathushtra"; cf. also "for (me), Zarathushtra who devote myself to you" (Y. 49.12) and "I who am Zarathushtra" (Y. 46.19), which can hardly mean "for me ... in favor of Zarathushtra." The discussion culminates in "to Zarathushtra and to us" (Y. 28.6), which, according to Kellens and Pirart (loc. cit.), would definitely exclude the prophet's authorship but which can easily mean as much as "to (me) Zarathushtra and to (all of) us."

The prophet was a member of the priest class as he is called athrawan. . . Zarathushtra in Young Avestan Yasht 13.94. He must even have been the descendent of a family of practicing priests, which was the compulsory precondition for his becoming the heir of the religious and poetical tradition that we can reconstruct by comparison with numerous Vedic data, but of which he is our only immediate witness. He must also have been well-trained in ritual procedures, speaking of himself as a zaotar- (Y. 33.6), thus using a term which scholars usually take as being synonymous with athrawan - but actually meaning "officiating priest." As seen from Young Avestan *tum no athraom zaota ste* "you, O Athrawan, are to be our Zaotar" (Visprad 3.7), zaotar- denotes an athrawan who is entrusted with directing a given sacrificial ceremony, an unmistakable evidence of the sacrificial function of the Gathas.

When referring to the cattle-breeding herdsman (*vastriia- fashuiante-*), Zarathushtra evidently includes himself. In the Younger Avesta this expression denotes the lowest of the three social classes, but in the Gathas it does not at all qualify the prophet as being of low origin; it just shows that priests, no less than other people, could occupy cattle-breeders

Almost all scholars, not to speak of lay translators, are inclined to interpret each single Gathic phrase as representing an integral element of an underlying religious system conceived by the prophet, thus considering the Gatha as a didactic poem, a sort of religious handbook with

carefully coordinated and harmonized paragraphs. Yet this opinion is contradicted by the enigmatic style of the majority of Gatha stanzas (Y. 28-51), which evidence a sacrificial mysticism and spiritual isomerism of which Yasna 29, the so-called "Complaint of the Cow," is particularly characteristic. This song must have been completely unintelligible to the public and, therefore, absolutely unsuited for any didactic approaches. Mystics cannot be rationalized. It is the fifth Gatha only (Y. 53) that, though being unsystematic as well, is of a distinct didactic nature.

The overwhelming majority of stanzas of the first four Gathas is explicitly addressed to Ahura Mazda. All the evidence indicates that Zarathushtra composed this group of texts to enter in contact with Him for the purpose of invoking and glorifying Him, and to commune with Him about both spiritual and worldly subjects, about the elimination of evil in the world and the freedom from evil in the after-world, and, furthermore, about the material problems of his own and of his adherents, particularly about providing for himself the funds required for getting people to accept his religion by increasing his reputation and public esteem.

In the Gathas the term ahura- , 'lord' is used twice to denote the divine helpers of Ahura Mazda, see the phrase mazdaoscha ahuraonghoo in 30,9 'O Mazda (wise one) and you (other) Ahuras' in vocative sense and in 31,4 'Mazda and other Ahuras are present' . Furthermore Ahura Mazda is described as the father of divine beings (ahuras) in Y.44,3 and Y.47,2 ptaa ashaya ' father of truth' and in Y.31.8 vangheush ptrem managho, ' the father of good thought'

Beings other than Ahura Mazda are addressed only in a few passages: The addresses to the "approaching ones" found in Yasna 30.1 and Yasna 45.1 both of which are customarily interpreted as opening sermons for a crowd of people, are directed to Ahura Mazda and the divine entities accompanying him rather than to humans (cf. the addresses to the entities asha- "truth" and armaiti- "right-mindedness" in Y. 28.7 etc.). They are negatively mirrored by the scorning of the demons (daewa) in Yasna 32.1, 3, 5, for which, cf. the apostrophe of the noxious animals (xrafstra) in Yasna 28.5, that of men in general in Yasna 30.11 (mashiiiongho), and that of the deceitful in Yasna 31.20 (daregaam).

The further addresses of humans by the prophet found in his first four Gathas are clothed in the form of rhetorical digressions, After having started with the nominative, Zarathushtra passes over to the vocative in the three passages in which he proclaims two or more names of his respective sponsors: Vishtaaspo, Haechat.aspaa... Farashaoshtraa ... Dejamaspaa... (Y. 46.14-17),

Of his adherents the prophet speaks in a lofty tone. They are styled ashawan- (truthful) by him, he himself being the truthful one par excellence. Of the rulers and the other persons hostile to him, qualified by him as dregwaatoo- (deceitful) and summed up as kawis and karapans, Zarathushtra draws a very negative picture. In Yasna 49.1 he calls down divine help for immediate extermination of Bendwa, a chieftain, who hosts a deceitful teacher; in Yasna 51.12-14 a person called Vaeipiia- is blamed by the prophet for not having hosted him in his home, and a hellish fate is predicted for his soul. Due to the sharp contrast the eulogy of Vishtaspa's merits found in the two following paragraphs (Y 51.15-16), and the promise of his paradisiacal future, is rendered even more impressive by the prophet.

In the numerous stanzas that must have been entirely unintelligible to his human audience, the prophet demonstrates the secret knowledge shared by him with Ahura Mazda. Other

stanzas, in which statements, requests, and questions are addressed by Zarathushtra to Ahura Mazda in a language, which was intelligible at least partially, were meant to reach his audience indirectly. Typical of this method is the question "will I deserve that prize: ten mares with a stallion, and a camel" (Y. 44.18), which is formally addressed to Ahura Mazda but actually to the prophet's patron. Both this passage and Yasna 46.19, where Zarathushtra requests two cows, belong to the traditional elements of Indo-Iranian sacrificial poetry coming to light in the Gathas. Occasionally even short allusions may have been perspicuous to the audience, such as the prophet's very short reference to the legend of Yima (Y. 32.8), with which people undoubtedly were well acquainted.

Only occasionally do the Gathas give an exact and clear picture of Zarathushtra's actual teachings, but in general they reflect them in a modified and elaborated form, many times marked by complexity and ornate ness of style, the prophet demonstrating his poetical skill in order to stimulate Ahura Mazda@ to fulfill his requests or to answer his questions. There is, e.g., a notable disagreement between the descriptions found in Yasna 45.11 and Yasna 51.13 of the destiny of the soul (urwan-) of a deceased deceitful person upon its arrival at the account-keeper's bridge (cinuato peretu-; and the part which is played there by his religious view (daena-), a disagreement which cannot be explained but by poetical license.

Poetical elaboration on the syntactical level is found in the series xúaetu-, verezena-, airiaman- (family, community, tribe), which is attested in its basic form at best in Y. 33.4, whereas its three other occurrences clearly show syntactical or/and lexical variation: "the family entertreats, the community along with the tribe" (nom., nom., instr.; Y. 32.1);

As to the prophet's actual instructions, we may safely assume that he affected a cultivated but perspicuous way of speech, perhaps in the manner of the Buddha's utterances, hammering the triplet manah-, vacah-, shiiaotana- (thought, speech, action) into the minds of his followers again and again. Yet, whereas this triplet is well attested in its basic form in the Younger Avesta, it is usually presented by the prophet in his Gathas in numerous variations and transformations of lexical and syntactic nature.

According to the picture drawn by Zarathushtra in the Gathas, Ahura Mazda@ is accompanied by a number of divine entities which are partly understood as divine or human qualities, but which can also present themselves in personified form as divinities. In the latter case they are similar to the Amesha Spentas (q.v.) and Yazatas of the Younger Avesta, but in the Gathas their name is Ahuras as attested in the phrase mazdâscha ahuraonghoo "you Ahuras and (Ahura) Mazda" (Y. 30.9, 31,4). Among these Ahuras certainly are aatr- "fire" a manifestation of Ahura Mazda's fiery spirit, furthermore thworaeshtar- "the shaper" and geush tashan - "the fashioner of the cow" (q.v.), two names of one mythical person which is different from Ahura Mazda: see in Y29,2 "the fashioner of the cow asked the truth" , and in Y29,6 "the shaper has fashioned you", but whose activity is ascribed to Ahura Mazda himself in ye gam tasho "you who fashioned the cow" (Y. 51.7).

The sacrificial mysticism, which dominates the first, four Gathas is not easily accessible to readers of our time. Most typical of this mysticism is the idea of the miraculous multiform of Ahura Mazda's manifestations at the sacrifice in which the principles of Zarathushtra's morals are applied and realized at the highest possible level, the sacrifice being in itself a representation, at the microcosmic level, of the farashem ... ahum .

The interpretation of the Gathas as didactical poetry, versified sermons or even lessons in dogmatics is justified in the case of the fifth Gatha (Y. 53) only. This song, which unfortunately is poorly transmitted, is without the complicated figures of speech, which makes the interpretation of the first four Gathas so difficult. Obviously being composed in connection with the marriage of Pouruchista to Haechat.aspana, Zarathushtra's youngest daughter (Y. 53.3), it is the only song of a less sacrificial and more private nature. Apart from the bride and her father, the text mentions Kawi Vistaspa, the Zoroastrian Spitama, a son of the prophet, and Fersshoshtra (Y. 53.2), all of whom seem to serve as witnesses to the marriage. Fersshoshtra's brother Jamaspa is not mentioned. If the legendary tradition is right in considering him as the bridegroom, the song must have been recited at the bride's departure from her father's home, the bridegroom not yet being present, perhaps expecting her in his own house. A larger public is included in the following lines. Vividly and in the non-puritanic manner of an archaic unadulterated society, these describe the worldly bliss that is bestowed on the faithful couple, but they also depict the disaster and death, which is to be brought upon the deceitful evildoers who have to expect eternal damnation.

So it will be important to sum up and stress that the Gathas are not didactic as often looked upon and are not a religious handbook with carefully coordinated paragraphs and although the Gathas are poetical texts of visionary character. They are composed according to rules of a poetical technique which were in vogue at the prophet's time. Modern readers are unaccustomed to this technique and need to train themselves to understand it. We believe that most of the evidence briefly given indicate that Zarathushtra composed the Gathas to invoke and glorify Ahura Mazda

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Appendix

It may be of interest to know that Av.Gaathaa- = 'Strophic form, Hymn of a certain strophic form, Group of hymns of the same strophic forms' But in Ved. Gaatha = 'Song'