Orality and literacy in the Transmission of the Gathas

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One of the rallying cries of the Protestant Reformation in Christianity was "sola scriptura" ("Scripture alone"). It was both a condemnation of much of Church tradition that seemed to be either irrelevant or run counter to what the reformers understood to be the essence of Christianity, and also it was a exhortation for believers to return to the Scriptures as the sole foundation of belief. Four centuries later, and especially after the publication of Albert Schweizter's *The Quest of the Historical Jesus* (*Vom Reimarus zu Wrede*, 1906) the position became incontrovertible that the Gospels of the New Testament were already the product of the early Church, that is, part and parcel of the ongoing ecclesiastical tradition. While it is certainly the case that the NT Gospels contain the words of Jesus mediated through Greek translation and a generation of oral tradition, Zoroastrians and Muslims can claim that the Gathas and Qur'an contain the very words of their respective prophets in the very languages they spoke. Let me focus on the Gathas.

As we heard most eloquently here in Chicago more than a year ago from Martin Schwartz and Helmut Humbach, the Gathas are poetic creations of an historical individual, man named Zarathustra. These hieratic poems were memorized by Zarathustra's followers, who then passed them down through generations in an unbroken oral tradition, for in a non-literate society any break in the tradition means a total loss, since no archive can be turned to to have preserved a backup copy. In spite of the many vicissitudes experienced by the Iranian peoples in general and Zoroastrians in particular over history, the received text of the Gathas shows a remarkable fidelity to what must have been Zarathustra's original words, a fidelity that can only be explained through the oral tradition of priestly memorization and recitation.

Having said this, however, I must quickly qualify what I may have implied. Anyone who has worked in a scientific manner on the Gathas understands that these have not been transmitted directly from the Prophet's mouth to our ears and eyes. There have been intervening stages of transmission that have altered the original poems in various ways. Permit me to suggest that the Gathas as we possess them today are themselves the product of tradition, and further, in order to understand them we must learn how tradition has altered the originals.

The Gathas were composed in a particular dialect of Old Iranian, known either as Gatha-Avestan or as some now prefer "Old Avestan," as if the other related dialect generally known as "Young-Avestan" or as I prefer with Ilya Gershevitch "Standard Avestan," is not old enough. Whatever nomenclature one follows, it is clear that Standard Avestan, the language of the Yasna, Yašts, Vendidad etc., became the dominant religious language in Achaemenid Iran, the Gathic dialect being retained only in the recitation of the Gathas, Yasna Haptaŋhāiti and the sacred prayers. Linguistically we can see certain intrusions of the dominant dialect on the Gathas themselves. Here is one example of the verbal root *zbā-* 'to call, invoke.' Observe that the deficient syllable in each line is made good when we restore the reconstructed form.

33.5a

    yastE wIspV.maziStvm   svraoSvm zbayA awaMhAnE (7 + 8)
    yas-tai wispa-maziStam srauSam zu>ayA awahAnai

46.14e

    tVNg zbayA   waMhVuS uxDAiS manaMhO (3 + 7)

    tLh zu>ayA   wahauS uxDAiS manahO

49.12a

    kaT tOi aCA   *zbayaNtE awaMhO* (4 + 6)

    kat tai RtA   zu>ayantai awahO

As such linguistic data show, the priests who were reciting the Gathas at the end of the Achaemenid period, shall we say, were not native speakers of Gathic Avestan. In fact, as the locus of imperial power moved to the west, it is equally certain that the sacred compositions in StAv were also in a language foreign to the priests, who were probably speaking forms of early Middle Western Iranian. I should mention that there are scraps of evidence that there were other local traditions, especially in the Sogdian cultural sphere. Be that as it may, the evolution of the Gathic texts we have received took place in W. Iran.

Despite the pious fiction repeated in the Pahlavi Books about the entire Avesta having been set to writing on ox-hides and stored in the treasury at Istaxr, later to be lost to Alexander, at some point in time attempts to transcribe the spoken word into written text must have taken place. When this began is impossible to say with any precision. In my opinion this could not have been possible until after the Imperial Aramaic script began to be modified and employed in the writing of Iranian languages. Evidence for this places the process well into the Arsacid period. When we follow the sketchy history of the Dēn contained in the 4th book of the Dēnkard, we might suppose that an impetus for making written versions of the sacred Avestan compositions came during the first systematic attempt to collect the scattered compositions held in the memories of the priests. According to the Dēnkard that took place sometime in the middle of the first century CE during the reign of Vologases I. Unfortunately there is no direct evidence for this. So all we have is a vague *terminus post quem*. There was another major codification at the beginning of the Sassanid period, under the direction of Tōsar/Tansar, the minister of Ardaxšīr; that is the first half of the 3rd century CE. And yet another codification was organized by Adurbād Māraspandān a century later during the long rule of Shapur II. Some scholars hold that the magnificent Avestan alphabetic script was invented at this time, while others believe that the invention of the script belongs to the reign of Xusro Anōšruwān in the mid to late 6th century. If the later date were, indeed, the case, that would not preclude there having been an earlier written text or texts in the simpler Pahlavi script. Irrespective of what script may have been available, it seems to me that campaigns to establish an orthodox text would have required the promulgation of a written canon as a bulwark against innovation and heresy.

I have brought up this digression from the Gathas into the questions of the organization and writing of the Dēn, in order to place a context for what I will next propose. The Gathas, as well as the Avesta generally, such as we have received them both in written manuscript form and in the oral performance of the priests, are based on a written text. I shall explain.

Let us imagine an *hērbedistān*, a priestly school, post-Adurbād. What would have been its curriculum? What would the scholar/priests who staffed the hērbedistān have been interested in? Absolutely essential would have been that the *hāwištān,* the students, both learn the correct performance of the rituals and commit the sacred canon to memory. In addition to these basics, there were various intellectual matters abundantly documented in the Pahlavi Books. Among them was linguistics. As with the early Prātiśākhyas and the establishment of the Padapāṭha text of the Indian Vedic tradition, the overriding concern of the Zoroastrian scholars was phonetics, whose grand testament was the script itself, which was able to

produce all the subtleties of the priestly diction. However, there was also an interest in the structure of words, especially the parsing of compounds.

The monument of such linguistic analysis is the text itself! A half century ago, the great German scholar, Karl Hoffmann, observed that, "We have before us an edited school text."[1] What did he mean? Here are two types of scholastic changes made in the text.

1) The Five Gathas or major sections of Zarathustra's hymns are arranged according to the metrical patters of the poems. Unlike the transmission of the Yašts, where the tradition had ceased to recognize that the poetry is in meter, the transmission of the Gathas shows an awareness of the metrical structure. Nevertheless, when we scrutinize the metrics of individual verses of the Gathas we find many anomalies, deviations from what we would expect the correct syllable count to be. There are various explanations for these deviations. I have already suggested one in the example given of the verb *zbā-*. Another type of deviation from the expected meter occurs regularly where a preposition/preverb is separated in a verse line from the verb, a phenomenon called *tmesis*. Here is an example from Y 33.8a with the received text with its Pahlavi gloss.

frO   mOi   frawOizdUm   *arvqA tA*   *yA wohU SyawAi manaMhA*
frAz O man pad frAz-niwEyiSnIh dahEd pad harw dO dAdestAn kU-m   rawAd wahman

In Zarathustra's diction this was approximately

fra mai [fra]waizdwam arθā tā   yā Wahū šyawa'ai Manahā (7 + 9)

2) Like so many languages, Avestan has the ability to combine independent words in compounds that form a new grammatical and semantic unit. As English examples, we can combine 'horse' and 'cart' to create 'cart-horse' (a horse that pulls a cart) or 'horse-cart' (a cart that is pulled by horses). Avestan has scores of compounds, all composed in accordance with a number of fixed grammatical rules. As in Vedic, Avestan compounds normally consist of two words in such a way that the prior or first member is not declined (there are a few exceptions). Only the final member is declined, since the compound is regarded as a unit. According to this rule one expects the many nouns and adjectives ending in a short-*a* stem form, to be combined with the following word of the compound as a stem without inflection. Looking at the cognate Old Persian and Vedic languages, we find this to be the case. However, in Avestan, more often than not, the prior member, when an *a*-stem, receives the ending of the nominative singular. While compounds abound in StAv, Zarathustra avoided using compounds to a great extent. An example, though, is *rānyō.sk r iti-* an epithet of the Cow, "who gives much felicity." Of note is the fact that the word was erroneously divided, the original in Zarathustra's diction being **rānyas-kṛti-*.

In Avestan manuscripts the scribes marked word divisions with a dot, and this device was adopted for transliteration in Roman script. In the example just cited observe the dot separating the members of the compound. It was also extended to certain suffixes, for example the superlative *–tama-*, appearing regularly as *°ō.t ma-*. For example, *huxšaθrō.t ma-* for **huxšaθratama-*. This convention was observed in other sorts of compounds as well, for example, *haEcaT.aspa-* "son of Hicadaspa," Also, certain verb and

[1] *Handbuch der Oientalistik*, 1.4. "Iranistik," 1 *"Linguistik"* (Leiden-Köln, 1958) p. 8.

noun inflectional endings are sporadically separated by the dot.[2] The dat./abl. pl. of *drugwant-*, originally *drugwadbyō*, became *dr gwō.d byō*. The 2nd pers. pl imperative *gūšadwam* became *gūšō.dūm*

I have attempted to show thus far, that there was, in late Sassanid times, a scholastic edition of the Gathas which deviated from what would have been transmitted in the oral tradition. In my opinion this was a *written* text that was used in the hērbedistān for instructional rather than liturgical purposes. I now turn to the Pahlavi Yasna of the Gathas (and Yasna Haptaŋhāiti).

In certain manuscript traditions the Avestan text is accompanied by a Pahlavi text that consists of two parts. One is a near word for word gloss of the Avestan; the other consists of fairly brief comments. Clearly the gloss is the basic text, to which comments were appended. These comments have every appearance of being marginal notes which the owner of a manuscript may have scribbled as he read the gloss. Here again is Y33..8a

> frAz O man pad frAz-niwEyiSnIh [ka tan be O aSmA niwEyom] dahEd pad harw dO dAdestAn [abestAg ud zand] kU-m rawAd wahman [kU-m pad tan mehmAn bawAd].

As already noted that the preverb *fra-*, which is repeated in the Avestan text in such a way that the meter is distorted with the addition of a superfluous syllable, is also repeated in the Pahlavi. What this, along with other examples, shows is that the basic text for the gloss was the Avestan school-text. Why is this significant? I believe its significance is that for the scholar or scholars who composed the gloss the school-text was already *the* official text. One might suppose that it is still just another artifact of the instructional curriculum. But if that were so, why would they have chosen to gloss the artificial school-text and not the original upon which it was based?

At this point we can assume as fact that our received text of the Gathas does not represent the original diction of Zarathustra. I have expressed the opinion that the received text was at its inception a written text. However, one can appeal to the Vedic evidence where a sophisticated reworking of the hymns, the Padapāṭha, was the product of an exclusively oral tradition. Why would not the learned Sassanid priest-scholars have been capable of such feats of orality? A strong argument, though not absolutely decisive, is that literacy was an integral part of Sassanid culture and education.[3] Further, we learn from written Pahlavi literature that Zoroastrians wished to portray their religion as a religion of the book, probably as a polemic response to Christians, Jews and Manichaeans, and later to Muslims. In contrast the culture of the Vedic period which produced the Padapāṭha (ca. 9th century BCE?) was entirely non-literate. Moreover, I think there is one decisive piece of evidence internal to the Yasna and the Pahlavi Gloss that there existed a text written in Avestan script that was regarded as authoritative.

In what appears to be an appendix to the Hōm Yašt (Y 11.9), there is a very clever numerological play on words.[4] The redactor has cleverly strung together a sequence of Gāthic

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[2] It is interesting to observe that these are mostly what in Sanskrit are called *pada-* or word-endings. Is this evidence for a tradition that treated such endings as obeying the rules of external sandhi?

[3] Note, for example, the references to writing as part of the school curriculum of Ardašīr in the late Sassanid romance, the Kārnāmag ī Ardašīr.

[4] See my article "Hōm Yašt" in *Encyclopaedia Iranica* (<iranica.com>).

quotations, citied, according to custom, by the opening word(s), in such a way that one counts from one to ten. The citations, given in Standard Avestan rather than Gāthic, suggest: 'one' (*yō nō aēwō* Y 29.8 for *yV nV aēwō*), 'both' (*aT tē uye* Y. 34.11 for *aT tōi ubē*), 'three' (*θrāyōidyāi* Y. 34.5), 'fourth' (*tūrahe* Y. 36.12 for *tūrahyā*), *'five' (*mvndāidyāi* Y.44.8 for *mvṇdaidyāi*), 'sixth' (*xšwīdvm* Y 29.7), 'seven-eight' (*haptāždyāi* Y. 31.22 *haptī* + Y. 51.17 *āždyāi*), 'nine tenth' (*nawa dasme* Y 41.2 *nV wā* + Y. 28.9 *dasvmē*), to which is added the fuller citation of Y. 28.9 *yōi wV waēθma* (for *yōi wV wōiθmā dasvmē*). The only real problem the redactor faced was 'five', as there is no word even approximating the anticipated *paṇca* or *puxδa-*. If this stanza were the creation of a late Sassanid redactor familiar with the Avestan script, then a graphic explanation will clarify the enigmatic *mvndāidyāi*. That is, if one writes a ᴘ *p* upside down and rotates it, the result is something resembling a ᴍ *m*; further, if one substitutes a ᴅ *δ* for ᴅ *d*, the result is the same letter in the Pahlavi script for *c* (c). In this way, the visual pun achieved **pvṇcaidyāi*.

Now, one might expect the PhlGl of *m ndaidyāi* to contain an interpretation of *m ndai°* as deriving from perhaps either *menīdan* 'to think' or *māndan* 'to dwell' + the usual gloss of infinitives in *°dyāi* with some form of *dādan* 'to give; place.' Astonishingly, the gloss reads *ān ī 5 dahišn*. What could have prompted *panj* to stand for *mvndai°*? Obviously the gloss is relying upon the graphic pun of Y 11.9. None of this would make sense if the we were not dealing with a written tradition.

At the beginning of this presentation I emphasized the importance of the oral tradition. Without that unbroken link between teacher and pupil the general fidelity to what we may as nearly as possible reconstruct as Zarathustra's original diction, would be inexplicable. Nevertheless, as I have tried to show, the peculiar form in which we have received the Gathas must, in addition, rely upon a written text. At some point in time, this written text became the proof-text for the priestly oral tradition down to our day. It is a splendid example of the symbiosis of orality and literacy.

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Abstract

This paper summarizes various facets of Gathic scholarship bearing on the transmission of the received text of Zarathustra's Gathas. While it is affirmed that the oral tradition is fundamental to the transmission of this sacred poetry, it is shown in the course of oral transmission certain phonetic changes were made owing to the fact that the priests were no longer speakers of Gathic Avestan. Further, it is shown that the received text of the Gathas is actually an instructional, school-text, that deviated from the oral delivery of the priests in the context of the ritual. It is then proposed that this school-text was a written text and that, in the course of time, it became the standard text both for the Pahlavi Gloss and for the priestly recitation.