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Zarathustra's Essential Teachings, and Their Transformation Over the Ages

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Part Two: Their Transformation Over the Ages

Introduction

Zarathustra's real teachings/1 were briefly explained in Part I of this article in Hamazor's last issue. They need to be kept in mind to understand the magnitude of their transformation over the ages and how different our beliefs and practices are today.

Clearly, no religion flourishes over thousands of years in a vacuum of its own. A revealed religion, particularly one as ancient as Zoroastrianism, is no exception. Being revolutionary in its teachings, it transforms individual and societal ways of thinking, defies established religious and political institutions and undercuts traditional bases of wealth and power. It has to withstand and grow in the milieu of deep-rooted traditional beliefs, ideologies and practices it replaces, whose beneficiaries are loath to give them up.

Such forces usually manifest themselves through changes in a religion's rituals, rites, practices, traditions and religious leadership. But basic doctrine and their underlying theology, remain essentially intact. This has been the case with all major religions, except Zoroastrianism. Over the ages, its reformist monotheistic teachings were increasingly blended with pre-Zarathustrian deities and percepts denounced by Zarathustra. Religious practices and religiosity that he castigated, were also reintroduced. Moreover, some modifications made in them in one era, were altered in subsequent ones.

As their sweep is too expansive for a brief article, the transformation/2 will be explored illustratively through a limited number of topics, over 3 time periods:

The Gathic Period (GP), from around 1700 up to 1400 BC;

The Younger Avestan Period (YAP), from around 1400 BC up to 250 AD (the advent of the Haptanghaiti Gathas until the end of the Parthian era); and

The Later Avestan Period (LAP) , from about 250 to 900 AD (Sassanian/ Islamic era) up to the present times.

Topic 1: Ahura Mazda's Attributes & Man's Qualities.

In the GP, belief continued in Zarathustra's teachings that Ahura Mazda created everything through His innate Mentalities and abstract Attributes, and He endowed man/3 with Qualities akin to His Attributes so that he could help perfect the world by perfecting his urwan. They were: Asha (Absolute Truth /Righteousness), Vohu Mano (Good Mind/ Divine Love); Armaiti (Divine Service/ Devotion); Khshathra (Divine Power/Energy); Haurvatat (Perfection); and Ameretat (Immortality).

Such monotheistic teachings made it difficult for the priests of the pre-Zarathustrian faith to generate fear in the laity that it had to perform expensive rites and rituals to assuage various godheads, primordial and supernatural divinities. Faced with the resulting loss of influence and income, they began agitating against the new teachings.

During the YAP, such opposition intensified. Zarathustra's weak successors could not resist the rebelling priests who were determined to revert to pre-Zarathustrian beliefs and practices to regain wealth and power. Ultimately, a "grand compromise" was forged between them. It is reflected in the Haptanhaiti Gathas, and later scriptures. In essence, the syncretism introduced, was to retain the concept of Ahura Mazda in name, while blending pre-Zarathustrian entities and practices into many of the strictly monotheistic doctrinal underpinnings of the Prophet's teachings.

How was it all done? It began by keeping Ahura Mazda as supreme, but subtly eroding His omnipotence. His six innate Attributes were personified into primordial "Amesha Spentas". He was then only placed at their head, to form Heavenly Council of 7 "Holy Immortals". For the first time in our faith, a divine Zoroastrian pantheon was thus created. Amesha Spentas held first rank like that enjoyed by archangels of subsequent faiths. Each personified Attribute was made responsible for a physical earthly domain: Vohu Manah, for the Cattle Kingdom; Asha, for Fire; Spenta Armaiti, for Mother Earth; Khshathra Vairya, for the Mineral Kingdom; Haurvatat, for the Water Kingdom; and Ameretat, for the Plants Kingdom.

Many of Zarathustra's percepts were abandoned. For instance, that: Ahura Mazda endowed man with Qualities akin to His Attributes, so that he could cope with his responsibility for deciding whether to perfect his urwan and thus the world, and for the fate of his urwan's fate in afterlife; by using the keys of good thought, good words and good deeds, man should live by the faith's basic principles of Good Thinking, Truth and Service and perfect his urwan and the world. Instead, he could now seek the help of Amesha Spentas and Yazats. Rituals and ceremonies denounced by Zarathustra, were grafted into the faith. Under the garb of his teachings, many supernatural elements of the pre-Zarathustrian times were effectively blended into the faith. And almost all rituals and prayers now implored their help along with that of Ahura Mazda.

In the LAP: The 7 Amesha Spentas continued as the Heavenly Council. But they were now called “Aspandads”. Ahura Mazda was renamed, “Ormazad”. New languages used in this period, probably account for the name changes.

The Aspandads are no longer responsible for the different earthly domains. Except for Ormazad, each now represented objects used in ceremonies and rituals: Arthavahista – Fire, Vohuman – Milk, Spandarmad – fruits and vegetables, Shatravar – Metals, Kurdad –Water , and Amardad – Oil.

Topic 2: Yazats:

In the GP, there were no Yazats or any primordial or supernatural force to believe in or worship. They were simply not part of Zarathustra’s real teachings.

In the YAP, the Yazats (Adorable Ones) were introduced along with the Amesha Spentas, for the first time into Zoroastrian theology as part of the compromise reflected in the Haptanghaiti Gathas. They were made part of the newly created divine pantheon, but below the Amesha Spentas (at the level of angels in later religions). Unlike them, Yazats were not primordial. They were “ahura dhatas”, created by Ahura Mazda.

Groups of Yazats helped each Amesha Spenta to take care of the material and spiritual aspects of his/her earthly domain. “Mainyava” (spiritual or celestial) Yazats like Daena, Serosha, Mithra, Rashnu, Verethragna , presided over wisdom, contracts, rectitude, victory, etc; and the “gaethya” (material or terrestrial) Yazats like Atar, Ardivi Sura, Vayu, Tishtrya, over fire, water, wind, rain, etc.. Later in this period when Persian empires expanded, the polytheistic gods of conquered nations began to be absorbed for political reasons into Zoroastrianism as Yazats. Their numbers therefore multiplied.

Elaborate ceremonies, rituals and religiosity reentered the faith, achieving the rebelling priesthood’s goal of regaining lost wealth and power. Yashts were composed to honor every major Yazat. Man recited them to seek boons, benedictions and help from the Yazats. Such reliance further eroded man’s responsibility for making choices relevant to the perfection of his urwan and the world.

Zarathustra had taught that Ahura Mazda endowed each man with a Daena, which received His guidance through His Divine Messenger Mentality, Serosha. Their role was now played by the new concept of fravashis. Both were also demoted, as celestial Yazats.

Zarathustra, and Ahura Mazda, are now often called Yazats. Even the juice of the intoxicating ephedra plant, Hoama, whose consumption and use in pre- Zarathustrian rituals was castigated by the Prophet, is personified as a Yazat. A Yasht was composed to honor him and recited while paying homage to him through a ritual.

Zarathustra's taught that Ahura Mazda created the Universe through His Spenta Mainyu Mentality. That credit is taken away. Instead, Amesha Spentas, Yazats and others are credited with helping Ahura Mazda in the creation process.

In the LAP, Yazats, renamed "Izads", multiplied to over 31,000 by the end of the Sassanian era (632 AD). They continued to be worshipped through an increasing number of prayer ceremonies and rituals, which included recitation of Yashts composed to honor the major ones. Power and responsibilities of Izads now outstripped those of Aspandads.

Serosha, Mithra and Rashnu are no longer "celestial" Yazats. All three, are made the Judges at Cinvat Bridge. The Prophet's teaching that Ahura Mazda is the only Judge at the Bridge, was thus modified.

Topic 3: Fravashis:

In the GP, there was no belief in fravashis. They had no place in Zarathustra's teachings.

In the YAP, fravashis were introduced into Zoroastrian theology for the first time, as part of the "grand compromise". They are "holy souls" who "existed since "the dawn of time", i.e. before the creation process began. Another primordial force was thus blended into Zarathustra's revolutionary monotheistic faith. Fravashis joined Ahura Mazda, Amesha Spentas and Yazats in the creation process. Ahura Mazda's omnipotence in the creation process was thus further diluted and His Spenta Mainyu Mentality's role cut out.

Zarathustra's teaching that Ahura Mazda guides every man's Daena through His Serosha Mentality, is discarded altogether. Instead, man receives guidance from his heaven-based fravashi, or guardian spirit. Everyone and everything, even Ahura Mazda and the Amesha Spentas, have fravashis. One of the oldest Zoroastrian prayers written in this period, the Fravardin Yasht, lists about 300 fravashis, some primordial and others of persons who played invaluable roles in spreading Zarathustra's teachings in many lands.

The new prayers, including those composed for socio-religious occasions, invoked not only Ahura Mazda's help, but also that of fravashis, Yazats and Amesha Spentas.

In the LAP, fravashis, renamed "farohars", underwent a transformation from the preceding period. It is Ahura Mazda, renamed Ormazd, who created them before He decided to create the universe.

Yet another major transformation in Zoroastrianism's theology was, that farohars agreed to Ormazd's request not to live with Him in heaven, but on earth within man to serve as his guide in earthly life and return to heaven only when his body dies. Zarathustra's original concepts of Daena and Serosha, as well as the change made in them in the YAP, were thus discarded. As the world today has over 7 billion persons, it now has, by implication, over 7 billion fravashis instead of about 300 in the Fravardin Yasht.

Whatever a man's transgression may be, his fravashi always intercedes on his behalf with Ahura Mazda. It accompanies his urwan across Cinvat Bridge, to plead for him with its 3 Judges. It also does that in his after-life. The monotheistic teaching that man is responsible for the fate of his urwan in afterlife is thus watered down.

Topic 4: Angre Mainyu or Ahriman:

In the GP, there was no belief in Angre Mainyu, It was simply not part of Zarathustra's teachings. As explained in Part I of this article, he mentions Wickedness (called "Evil" in later scriptures) in 3 places, in the context where the word means a "doer of wickedness", "wicked person" or "victim of wickedness". This suggests that Wickedness has no substance, until man gives it life by choosing to think, speak or act wickedly.

In the YAP, Wickedness is personified for the first time in Zoroastrianism as "Angre Mainyu", the Evil Spirit. As part of the "grand compromise", it emerges as a primordial spirit that is always in opposition to Ahura Mazda's innate Spenta Mainyu Mentality (His Creative Mentality). That Mentality is thus turned into a personified primordial spirit.

Angre Mainyu's goal is to overthrow Ahura Mazda and lure men into becoming his allies. Although Zarathustra had castigated belief and worship of daevas and divs, they re-enter Zoroastrianism as Angre Mainyu's panoply of the evil forces. They are always engaged in perpetrating evil in the universe and persuading men to commit evil.

Towards the end of YAP, in the Achamanean era (549-330 BC), the "Zurvanite heresy" gained credence amongst Zoroastrians. Namely, that Zurvan (i.e., Time), not Ahura Mazda, was the father of both Spenta Mainyu and Angre Mainyu.

In the LAP, Angre Mainyu was renamed "Ahriman". From his position as the rival of Ormazd's Spenta Mainyu Mentality in the YAP, he is now made Ormazd's co-equal. This was done through the Avesta-Zend compiled in the Sassanian era. In other words, it was only 1,700 years ago that the name as well as co-equality of Ahriman with Ahura Mazda was introduced in our 4,000 year-old faith. Is that duality compatible with Zarathustra's teaching of monotheism?

Ahriman swears vengeance against Ormazd and His creations. He vows to destroy them. He creates all evil in the universe, including falsehood, disease, pestilence, war and death. With his panoply of daevas and divs, he spreads and deepens evil in all forms everywhere. When any man abandons the worship of Ormazd, Ahriman makes him his partner. He is determined to prevent Frasho-keriti (Ultimate Renovation of the Universe), a concept also grafted into Zoroastrianism in the Sassanian era. All this is a drastic change in Zarathustra's teaching that evil has no substance until man makes it a reality.

A further change occurred in Sassanian times. In place of the Achamanean heresy of Zurvan, Zoroastrians now believed that Zurvan fathered Ormazd and Ahriman as twins. Learned

scholars like Mary Boyce have concluded that most Sassanian kings, and presumably many Zoroastrians at the time, were Zurwanite in their belief.

Topic 5: Religious Prayers and Rituals:

In the GP, man followed Zarathustra's teaching of venerating Ahura Mazda, His Mentalities and Attributes, by reciting individual prayers with outstretched arms (Ha. 50.8), doing simple rituals to reaffirm devotion and by living life according to the faith's basic principles. This was done before an ever-burning hearth fire, whose light was symbolized by the Prophet as Ahura Mazda's light of Wisdom and Creativity. Since Zarathustra had denounced rites and rituals that led to the loss of the wealth and influence of the pre-Zarathustrian priests, it might be safe to assume that Zoroastrian priests only performed "socio-religious" ceremonies. No one seems to know what prayers they then recited. But presumably, they only invoked Ahura Mazda and drew upon the relevant stanzas of those Gathas that Zarathustra had composed to teach his faith.

The YAP however witnessed a revival of many ceremonies and rituals of the pre-Zarathustrian era, inclusive of animal sacrifices, gift offerings and libations. Since Amesha Spentas, Yazats and fravashis were now blended into the faith, prayers recited at all rituals and socio-religious prayer ceremonies, invoked their blessings and help besides that of Ahura Mazda.

The Hoama ritual was revived and new ones introduced. For example, certain days of the year were earmarked as "fravardigan days", when the Fravardin Yasht's 300 fravashis come down to earth. Man had to propitiate them in order to persuade them to look after the urwans of their deceased family members. New expensive ceremonies like the afringan, faroksi and varsi had to be performed throughout the year to help those urwans. Such practices transformed Zarathustra's basic teaching that a man's urwan pays in after life, for living or not living according to the faith's basic principles.

In the LAP, the expensive Nirang and Vendidad ceremonies were added. But animal sacrifices and gift offerings ceased. Fire, milk, fruits, metal objects, water and an oil lamp, the earthly domains that were assigned to the 7 Aspandads in this period, were used instead. Religiosity and rites increasingly become man's means of venerating Ormazd, rather than through individual prayers and simple personal rituals.

As in the YAP, eminent priests continued to compose prayers invoking Amesha Spentas, Yazats and Fravashis, besides Ahura Mazda. But phrases from the Gathas were now interwoven into them to give them the authenticity of reflecting Zarathustra's teachings. That was also the purpose of inserting the surviving 17 Gathas composed by Zarathustra, in the middle of the 72 chapters of the Avesta-Zend.

By the Islamic period (around 632 AD), the number of fravashis swelled to 9,999. Yet another change was introduced in fravardigan practice. Fravashis of the deceased relatives accompanied Fravardin Yasht's 300 fravashis. Family members propitiated them to cajole them into taking care of their relatives' urwans. That practice again changed in later centuries. On favardigan

days, only the fravashis of the deceased family members came in the company of their urwans. But since the last 200 years, urwans of the deceased relatives alone came, so that their families could remember them.

Topic 6: Heaven and Hell

In the GP, belief continued in Zarathustra's teaching that a man who had lived according to the faith's principles and perfected his urwan, is rewarded on crossing Cinvat Bridge by being absorbed in Ahura Mazda's emanation, the allegorical Abode of Light and Song. Those who had not, went to the allegorical Abode of Woe and Misery.

In the YAP, a four-fold division for both heaven and hell replaced the GP's two-fold division. Heaven's 4 divisions were: Anaghra Roaocha (endless light), where Ahura Mazda, Amesha Spentas, Yazats and the fravashis of perfected souls dwell as reward for having perfected themselves on earth; the remaining 3 lower heavens, in a descending order, awaited those who had led less perfect lives, namely, those of Humata (Good Thought), Hukhata (Good Words) and Huvarshta (Good Deeds). Hell's 4-fold divisions, in a descending order, were those of Dushmata (Evil Thought), Dushukhta (Evil Words), Dushvarashta (Evil Deeds) and Angra Temati (Endless Darkness). In addition, man who lived life with an equal measure of good and wickedness, went to Misvana Getu (place of mixing), a mid-way place between heaven and hell.

In the LAP, these divisions remained. But the urwans for whom no obsequies were done by their relatives, went to a lower level of heaven. Those for whom they were done, ascended to its highest level, Garotman. Locations of heaven are set in different parts of the cosmos. From the lowest to highest, they were between stars to moon, moon to sun, and sun to Garotman and Garotman to endless light where Ahura Mazda resides. The 4 location of hell are in the middle of the earth, below Cinvat Bridge. Each is distinguished by increasing gradation of punishment meted by Ahriman and his divs to the urwans. The midway heaven is located between the earth and stars.

Summary & Conclusions

The objective of this article is simply to provide information not easily available to most Zoroastrians. Readers might ponder over it and reach their own conclusions as to whether what they practice as their faith, reflects Zarathustra's original strictly monotheistic teachings. Or, whether it is closer to the practice of the Sassanian era, by which time Zarathustra's teachings had regressed through blending pre-Zarathustrian divinities, primordial and supernatural beings into them and also rituals to propitiate them.

It seems to the author that the extensive blending initiated through the "grand compromise" reflected in the Haptanhaiti Gathas, was deepened in our later scriptures because Zarathustra's teachings had become dimmer and dimmer by that time. This was probably due to the inability

over those centuries to understand the ancient Gathic language in which Zarathustra had composed them. Together, they succeeded in drastically changing most of his strict monotheistic teachings, not merely the faith's rites, rituals, practices, traditions and religious leadership - as it happened in other major faiths.

The net result was: to preserve the concept of Ahura Mazda, not as the sole omnipotent Creator, but as one who relied on supernatural beings and forces even in the process of creation itself; to personalize His innate Mentalities and abstract Attributes, and turn them into supernatural forces; to create a hierarchical divine pantheon of Amesha Spentas and Yazats, akin to arch angels and angels of later faiths; to revere Ahura Mazda not only through personal prayers, but increasingly through expensive and frequent rituals and ceremonies invoking such divinities and forces; for man's Daena not to receive Ahura Mazda's guidance through His Serosha Mentality, but instead be guided by a supernatural guardian angel, a man's fravashi, that Zarathustra mentioned nowhere.

Further results were: to continue venerating Ahura Mazda, along with the supernatural Amesha Spentas, Yazats and fravashis who had no place in Zarathustra's teachings; for man to no longer be the one who gives substance to Wickedness, but instead pass the blame to a primordial Evil, Ahriman; to make him equal to Ahura Mazda; for man to rely on supernatural Yazats and fravashis to help him perfect his urwan and the world, rather than choosing to lead life based on the faith's basic principles; to nourish hope of a better fate for his urwan in afterlife through the intercession of his fravashi and obsequies done by relatives, rather than reap the benefit of, or the penalty for, the way he lived on earth.

The reality seems to be, that Zoroastrianism today rests on beliefs and practices that do not reflect Zarathustra's pristinely monotheistic teachings. Should Zoroastrians practice it as it has evolved "by tradition", in the erroneous belief that it is what Zarathustra taught? Or, should they practice the faith only as he taught it? Or, while doing that, should they also respect the traditions that have grown up over the ages, while recognizing that they are merely time-honored traditions which do not reflect the Prophet's real teachings? Each Zoroastrian must confront this dilemma alone, and live with his personal decision.

As followers of a tolerant faith premised on the use of man's Good Mind and Truth, is it possible to consider engaging in a productive discussion about what has happened in Zoroastrianism? In such a dialogue, can we remain firm in our beliefs without demonizing those with just as strongly held different convictions? Can we thus come to some common understandings, which can be passed on as a legacy to future generations? Is it too much to hope for such a mutually beneficial outcome?

REFERENCES

1. Zarathustra's teachings mentioned in the article, are drawn from the 17 surviving Gathas ascribed by scholars to him. Each teaching is based on the translations by the pre-eminent Parsi scholar Dr. Irach Taraporewala in "The Divine Songs of Zarathustra", Bombay,

1993, and the leading Gatha scholar, Stanley Insler in his “Gathas of Zarathustra”, Leiden, 1975

2. Among the surveys of historical transformation of the faith, the most erudite in the author’s view, and on which he has relied, is the one made by scholar-priest Dasturji M.N. Dhalla in History of Zoroastrianism, 1985, Bombay
3. “Man” or “men” are the abbreviations used in the both genders