

GATHA STUDY CIRCLE, SESSION 2019-2020, ZAMWI, JUNE 13, 2020

Thus Speaks Zarathustra To Me

(More accurately, random thoughts and references to sources that shape my thinking of the Gathas).

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WHY I JOINED THE GATHA STUDY CIRCLE (GSC)

I have often been intrigued by the place of the Gathas in Zoroastrian Scriptures. While we pay homage to the Gathas on five special days (presently) at the end of the year and we recite the Gathas on some other occasions, such as at funerals, a common book of prayers, 'Paak Khordeh Avesta' (in Gujarati, published by Karani & Sons, Bombay, 1959) that I possess, lists just the names of the Gathas, while the other prayers are spread out on nearly 500 pages of the prayer book. The general emphasis is on the daily or regular recitation of those prayers, while the Gathas are assigned to just certain days and occasions.

So, I asked myself, if the Gathas were composed by Zarathustra himself, as is generally accepted except by one or two detractors - the only prophet whose message comes directly to mankind in his own words, why do we appear to give them short shrift or, at best, confine them to a special but small corner of our spiritual lives? Should not the Gathas be accorded the reverence and prominence that the words of the founder of Zoroastrianism deserve?

At the same time, I was vaguely aware of the "Gathas Only" movement that took hold in 19th century India after the knowledge of the Gathas began to spread among the educated Zoroastrians. But that, too, was equally puzzling to me as the appellation appeared to indicate the rejection of several millennia of Zoroastrian history and of the canonized scriptures that followed the time of Zarathustra.

At one time, ZAMWI held Gatha classes for High School seniors. The classes were taught by learned luminaries like Mr. Adi Davar, the founding-President of ZAMWI, and the late Dr. James Lovelace, a scholar of the Gathas. After several years the classes were ended for reasons not known to me. I thought that it was time to re-start the study of the Gathas, not as classes, but as discussions.

After participating in several sessions of the discussions, I felt that instead of the "Gathas Only" approach, I would like to suggest that "Gathas [be the] First", and that our prayers and thoughts about the message of Zarathustra should begin with the Gathas and then be followed by the later scriptures. Surely, I thought, that should not be so radical a proposition as to invite controversy.

CIRCLE OF CONTEMPLATIVE THOUGHT

During our discussions, I made use of a book by Dastur Framroze Ardeshir Bode, ‘Songs of Zarathushtra, The Gathas’ (1952). Dastur Bode was a Parsi High Priest of the Petit Fasali Atash-Kadeh in Bombay.

Bode made me aware of a striking coincidence in the naming of our ‘Gatha Study Circle’:

“To achieve his [Zarathustra’s] mission, he formed the Circle of Contemplative Thought. Although the Circle is not thus mentioned by name, there is abundant evidence in the Gathas that it existed. It was in this Circle of the ‘faithful’ that the Divine Powers entered, so that men spoke ‘with the words and tongue of the Good Mind’ (Y. 47.2; 51.3).” (pg. 21)

The purpose of the Circle was to make the members experience a personal approach to Mazda to be achieved through the exercise of free will. “Freedom of choice, therefore, is a fundamental doctrine with Zarathushtra who emphasized that no intelligent being may evade moral responsibility to himself, his fellow men and the universe.” (pg.22)

(Dastur Bode’s book is available in the ZAMWI library).

UNIVERSAL PRINCIPLES OF THE GATHAS

Another striking piece of writing on the Gathas that has impressed me is a note on the universal reach of the Gathas, by Professor K. D. Irani in “What Do We Find in The Gathas?” (FEZANA Journal):

“The most revolutionary and far-reaching conception was the shift of focus of religious commitment from the tribal to the individual. Religious commitment is viewed as an act of individual reflection, choice, and active dedication, which has nothing to do with the fact of birth in a community or tribe. ... Such an idea was so different from the tribal focus of the various Indo-European ancient religions, that its full implications were recognized only by the intellectually discerning religious thinkers of Iran and also of ancient India and Greece.” (emphasis added)

GATHAS, AMONG THE OLDEST TEXTS OF HUMANITY

A publication in French by Dr. Ann Van Sevenant, “Ainsi Pensait Zarathoustra, Une philosophie avant la lettre” (2018), boldly claims:

“The history of philosophy begins with the thought of Zarathustra, a thousand years before the birth of Greek philosophy.” Calling it “one of the oldest texts of humanity” Van Sevenant believes that the Zoroastrian religion had a considerable influence on the “three monotheisms” i.e. the Abrahamic faiths. She further states that there is an existential dimension in the thoughts of Zarathustra, which have inspired great Eastern and Western philosophers throughout history, including Pythagoras, Heraclitus, Plato, Aristotle, Plotinus, Mani, Augustine, Avicenna, Thomas Aquinas, Plethon, Ficino, Spinoza, Hume, Voltaire, Kant, Hegel and Nietzsche. (Based on translation by Google).

(Dr. Van Sevenant recently participated in the GSC zoom session on May 9, 2020, to discuss her latest book, this time in English, “Thus Replied Zarathustra” (2020). In the Foreword, Dr. Jenny Rose writes that the author addresses: “a series of questions concerning the applicability of this ancient yet ‘universalisable’ philosophy to the timeless challenges of being human.”)

TRANSLATIONS OF THE GATHAS

We discussed the benefits and deficiencies of the various translations of the Gathas. On that issue, Mary Boyce, the great scholar of Zoroastrian studies, once asked, “who were likely to have a deeper understanding of the ancient Zoroastrian religion and terms, western academics or the devout priests who have upheld the ancient beliefs and practices for thousands of years?”

She developed her theory of the continuity of Zoroastrian belief and practice from the time of the seer/prophet of the ancient Aryans, Zarathustra, right down to modern times. She summed this up in a little-known article “The Continuity of the Zoroastrian Quest.”

Boyce rejected the biblical/evangelical approach and understanding of Zoroastrian concepts, and saw Zarathustra as a visionary, seer/prophet, and an inspired, Indo-Iranian poet-priest. For her, the background and training of Zarathustra as a poet-priest of the ancient Indo-European tradition was fundamental in understanding his Gāthās or Sacred Songs/Poetry.

Boyce took issue with translations of Humbach, Insler and Kellens for approaching the Gāthās /Sacred Songs of Zarathustra only from a textual perspective, and not taking account of the beliefs, and ancient commentaries of the Zoroastrian tradition. (“Authentic Gathas” a blog periodically circulated by one “Ardeshir”).

Thus, textual interpretation alone is not adequate in learning of the Gathas. Zarathustra’s vision as a prophet/seer/poet/priest is fundamental in gaining their understanding.

CONNECTION WITH VEDAS

As Professor Rajesh Kochar has noted, the most remarkable aspect of the Gathas “is the fact that its language is so closely related to the Rgvedic language that one cannot be studied without the help of the other. The differences in grammar are very small.” (Vedic People, pg. 32). A correct appraisal of the Gathic text may be made by juxta positioning it with Vedic texts. Thus, the Avestan ‘zaotar’ (priest) is same as the Sanskrit ‘hotr’; while the Avestan ‘daeva’ (demon), is ‘deva’ (god) in the Rgveda.

It was the closeness of the language of the Gathas with Sanskrit, that led to their translations in the modern era. “They would never have been deciphered without the “Rosetta Stone” of ancient Sanskrit.” (Bhote, Zoroastrianism 32). There is also an “elder brother – younger brother” relationship in time and religious philosophy between the Gathas and the Rig Veda.” (Id.)

The connection of the Gathas with the Vedas was more fully discussed in our session on Armaiti (see separate note on Armaiti).

ZARATHUSTRA’S PERSONALITY

The personality of Zarathustra (“the flesh and blood reality of the man depicted in the Gathas, (Bode 20), also vividly emerges in the Gathas:

- A dedication to his mission.
- His preaching on origin of evil and the perfection of the spirit.
- His struggle against unbelievers, ritualists and barbarians.
- Despair at being deserted by his kindred.
- His communing with Mazda. (Bode 24)

Along with the doctrine of Free Will, Zarathustra taught that the good is its own reward, for “whoever toils with word or thought ... or directs his fellow man towards the good, [will] accomplish the Divine Will out of love for the living God of Life and Wisdom (Y. 33.2) ... and dwell in the green pastures of the Divine Law and the Good Mind (Y. 33.3) (Bode 23).

ARE GATHAS RITUALS?

“The Gathas speak of no sacred ritual acts.” The references to some ritual acts are to those of the priests of raiding groups whom Zarathustra characterizes as evil and whose practices he repudiates. (K. D. Irani, “Understanding Zarathushtra to Interpret the Gathas”, Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium, editor Farrokh Vajifdar, World Zoroastrian Organization, London, 1998, pp. 57, 65).

Zarathustra expresses his praise of Ahura Mazda and addresses devotional verses to him. His theology may be said to indicate the philosophy of a reflective religion. His religious vision is a combination of a view of the world, attached to a way of life. Upon hearing the Gathas, a person reflects upon them and may find significant insights into the nature of existence, and a rationale for striving in life. He may then accept the concepts presented, “otherwise he passes it by.” (Id. pg. 66).

Zarathustra’s conception of a reflective religion and the acceptance of choice, rather than obedience, is generally misunderstood. Some say that “Gathas are beautiful poems of the praise of God, but they have no directions for religious practice.” They further say that the “Gathas only deal with individual and social ethics, whereas the actual religion, i.e. the mode of worship comes from other teachings of the Prophet which must have been preserved by his disciples.” (Id.)

This is a misconception, since Zarathustra proclaimed with clarity that “the moral life, the life dedicated to a progressive transformation of the world, is the predominant sacramental act, praiseworthy in the eyes of the Lord, and justifying human salvation.” (Id.)

CONCEPTS DERIVED FROM THE GATHAS

Truth, Good Thoughts, etc.

There is a repeated emphases of “Truth”, “Good Thought”, “Holy through Truth”, “Father of Truth”, “Truth and Righteousness”, “Creator of Good Thought”, “Right mindedness”, “Delivering deceit into the hands of truth”, “Vohuman (good mind)”, “Truth and Wisdom”, “Defeating the followers of Untruth”. As asked: “Good thoughts, good speech, good action” are the most important virtues that may be possessed by humans. But, what do they mean or signify in the Gathic poems? (Prods O. Skjaervo, *The Literature of the Most Ancient Iranians*, Proceedings of the Second North American Gatha Conference, eds. S. Manekshaw and P. Ichaporia, 1996, 233).

First, discard preconceptions from the Christian and other religious and ethical systems, and second do not project into them any modern American ideas they might evoke. Above all, guard against thinking of the opposites “bad thoughts”, etc., as morally bad, thinking “dirty” thoughts, especially with sexual implications.

Basically, these expressions imply thinking and speaking about the world as the ordered Cosmos created by Ahura Mazda and to perform the acts required to maintain this ordered Cosmos. “Sinning basically consists in thinking and saying things that disagree with cosmic reality.” Thus, the central theme of the triad: Assisting God and his ordered Cosmos in the battle against the forces of Chaos.” The starting point for modern Zoroastrians to contemplate is the concern for Order and Truth in the world and an altruistic concern for fellow human beings. (Id. pg. 234).

Free will and human choice

In what is called his first sermon, in Yasna 30.2 Zarathustra expounds on mankind’s freedom of choice between good and evil and the consequences of that choice. This entitlement to choose, without being dictated to, is fundamental to Zoroastrianism.

The right to choose is starkly featured in the current struggle between East and West, according to Anthony Pagden, a distinguished professor of political science and history at University of California, Los Angeles, who writes:

“The society of Islam is ultimately based not upon human volition or upon contract but upon divine decree. In the societies of the West, by contrast, every aspect of life has been conceived as a question of human choice. And for the devout Muslim that is, and can only be, an offense against God.” (In “Worlds at War, The 2,500-Year Struggle Between East and West” (2008), pg. 533).

This means that the West is a great exponent of the Gathic concept of mankind’s exercise of free will. Pagden thus concludes:

“It seems unlikely that the long struggle between East and West is going to end very soon. The battle lines drawn during the Persian Wars more than twenty-three centuries ago are still, in the selfsame corner of the world, very much where they were then” (pg. 538)

GATHAS AFTER ZARATHUSHTRA

As we discussed, the Gathas were submerged soon after the death of Zarathushtra. As one author puts it, under the Achaemenians, “the more important forms of Iranian belief were blended into a single syncretic religion, and the Zoroastrian priests were compelled to accept a number of heathenish deities.” (W. B. Henning, ‘Zoroastrianism’) (Bode 35).

In “Zoroastrianism, Mother of All World Religions”, Keki Bhote lists 12 “Zoroastrian Retrogression After Zarathustra: Cults, Heterodoxies and Heresies” chapter 8.

Paradoxically, it is the syncretic belief that made Gathic ideas pass into the thoughts of other communities. “It is ... not surprising to find concepts very similar to Gathic ones in Jewish and Christian Apocryphal writings, and in the philosophical speculations of the Gnostics, heretics of the first to the third centuries Christian era. (Bode 36). These apocryphal concepts stemming from a syncretic Zoroastrianism are extensively analyzed by Norman Cohn, in ‘Cosmos, Chaos and The World to Come, The Ancient Roots of Apocalyptic Faith’ (1993). As stated on the book jacket:

“Until around 1500 BC, it was generally believed that once the world had been set in order by the gods, it was in essence immutable... Various combat myths told how a divine warrior kept the forces of chaos at bay and enabled the world to survive. Sometime between 1500 and 1200 BC, the Iranian prophet Zoroaster broke from that static yet anxious world-view, reinterpreting the Iranian version of the combat myth.

For Zoroaster, the world was moving, through incessant conflict, towards a conflictless state – ‘cosmos without chaos’. The time would come when, in a prodigious battle, the supreme god would utterly defeat the forces of chaos and their human allies and eliminate them for forever, and so bring an absolutely good world into being.”

SUMMARY

Zarathustra’s personality as a seer/prophet/poet/priest is fundamental to understanding the Gathas. Zarathustra’s personality vividly emerges from:

- Dedication to his mission
- Preaching on origin of evil and the perfection of the spirit
- Struggle against unbelievers, ritualists and barbarians
- Despair at being deserted by his kindred
- Communion with Mazda.

The influence of Gathas on religious thought:

- Gathas were soon submerged after his death and the acceptance of heathenish deities
- Syncretism made Gathic ideas pass on to the thoughts of other communities
- Gathic concepts were introduced into Jewish, Christian and other writings.

Major aspects of the Gathas:

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- Universality of the faith
- Choice based on freedom of thought, not on birth
- Twin mentalities - the twin aspects of the human mind, have no meaning apart from the working of the mind and the moral choice of the individual
- Doing good is its own reward for whoever toils with word, thought, or action to drive out evil and directs fellow men and women towards the good, accomplishes the Divine Will out of love for God & Wisdom (Y. 33.2).