

**"WHAT DO WE FIND IN THE GATHAS"**  
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The Gathas are the Hymns composed by Zarathushtra about 3,500 years ago. The poetic complexity and beauty of these songs is almost beyond belief. Each Ha (one of the Chapters) has its own symmetric structures; and each verse contains, quite often, parallel structures sometimes coordinated and sometimes contrasting. Since the theology of the Gathas has been discussed often, I shall limit myself to the innovative and lofty religious elements contained in Zarathushtra's Hymns.

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. The consequence of this is the unavoidable individual responsibility before God for a worthy life, and the foundation of personal salvation. Such an idea was so different from the tribal focus of the various Indo-European ancient religions, that its full impli-

cations were recognized only by the intellectually discerning religious thinkers of Iran and also of ancient India and Greece.

Turning to the notion of the **religious act**. Ordinarily people take this to be an act of worship, and indeed there are Gathic Hymns expressing veneration and worshipful invocation of Ahura Mazda, Asha, Vohu-mana and Spenta-Armoity. Ahura Mazda is the Divinity and the rest are the personalized essences through which our lives are to be guided. However, the central act of religious commitment is living a life of reflective righteousness, of Good Thought, Word, and Deed.

The fundamental teaching of the Gathas is its Ethic, for which Iran was known throughout the ancient world. **The Ethic of the Gathas is reflective, not prescriptive;** though prescriptive elements were introduced into the faith, years later. Ancient religio-moral traditions commonly enunciated prescriptions, that is, rules specifying what to do and what not to do. **The Gathas offer no such rules;** they place upon the individual the heavy responsibility to discern the

Truth, that is, what any situation ideally should be, through the Good-Mind, and act so as to promote it.

The world we live in is good and was meant to evolve to perfection, but it is contaminated with the effects of the Spirit of Opposition, the Spirit of Evil. This contamination we are supposed to remove, or minimize, with our actions. And when our actions render the wronged world right, in physical and social existence, then we are justified. When the whole of humanity acts thus, evil is destroyed. For when evil is not chosen, when its manifestations are removed, then it is truly destroyed. This brings about the advent of the final renovation in which we, humans, play a crucial role.

This is the optimistic message of the Gathas; to act free of anger and hatred, free of the guilt and sin, directing effort of thought and action to the cleansing of the world, especially our social world, toward, what Ahura Mazda has assured us, the dawning of a perfected existence.