

CHAPTER 2

THE EPOCH OF ZARATHUSHTRA, THE FIRST PROPHET OF THE HUMAN RACE

It is quite clear, I think, from our study hitherto that religious belief in the Vedic period was by no means undeveloped; in other words, religion—in the sense of a systematic code of beliefs, ethics, and spiritual lore—among the Indo-Iranians, or even among the original Aryans in their arctic home, was not in any sense of the term “primitive” or unsophisticated. Great Sages were reputed to have taught even the Gods; as **Bhrigu** was the Preceptor of the **Asuras**, so **Brihaspati** was of the **Devas**; and Divine Knowledge, **ब्रह्मविद्या** **Brahmavidyâ**, is said to have been imparted not only by **Rishis** to their disciples, but by **Brahmâ** the Creator Himself to his “first-born son”. However, until the time of Zarathushtra, no single Sage, Seer, **Rishi** or Prophet—whether Aryan, Semitic, Egyptian, Chinese or of any other geographical or ethnic group—had promulgated *a complete scripture*, in the sense of having laid the foundations of an *entire and independent religion*.¹ This was first done by Zarathushtra; and we are thus justified in entitling him “The First Prophet of the Human Race”.

As we have seen, long before Zarathushtra’s time the Aryan peoples had developed the **Paourya-tkaesha** or **Pitryâna** and, somewhat later, the **Daeva yasna** or **Devayâna**. The former seems to have gained greater acceptance in Iran while the latter emerged as the more powerful force in India, although in neither case was the dominance complete until well after Zarathushtra appeared on the scene. In addition to these two major trends, there were also the various **Rishis** or Sages who sang their Hymns and made their mark upon the community; the various deities worshipped by the people (at times through the medium of idols and at times otherwise); and the various customs, conventions, rites and rituals hallowed by tradition and quasi-sacred in status, and which with the passage of time grew to become part of the Vedic religion itself.

For instance, long before the time of Zarathushtra, it had become a custom among Aryans to drink an elixir, most likely extracted from a plant, called in India **Soma**² and in Iran **Haoma**, the effect of which was, by all accounts, exhilaratingly hallucinogenic. The reader will remember the ecstatic song of the **Soma** drinkers from the *Rigveda* reproduced earlier. In time the importance of this custom grew so great that **Soma** itself began to

¹ To say that Zarathushtra promulgated a “complete scripture” is not also to assert that the entire Avesta is his own work. The **Gathas**, the only material reputed to be Zarathushtra’s own words, comprise in fact only a tiny portion of the totality of the Zoroastrian texts; but they are their core, and the final authority upon which all the subsequent hagiographa rest. In this sense however Zarathushtra’s authority is not quite as absolute or overwhelming as, for instance, **Hazrat Muhammad**’s is for Muslims. Nevertheless Zarathushtra certainly antedates Moses, Confucius or the Buddha, what to speak of Jesus Christ or **Rasul Muhammad**; and thus his chronological primacy as a Prophet is unchallengeable. (Of course, we are using the term “Prophet” rather loosely here, in the sense of “Founder of a Religion”).

² We already said something about **Soma** in the previous chapter. The use of psychotropic substances for religious ritual is by no means restricted to the Aryan culture; in fact in recent years the best-known such custom is perhaps that portrayed in the works of Carlos Castaneda, who describes the Mexican Yaqui usage in this regard in the most intriguing terms. No culture, however, pushed the practice as far as the Indo Iranian (see *ff*); and it may have reached quite unmanageable proportions by the time of the Buddha, who was evidently disgusted by it, and prohibited in his **Pancha Shîlas** or “Five Precepts” the use of all mind-altering substances. However, during Vedic times the drinking of **Soma** or **Haoma** was probably rather restricted, and carried out only on special occasions; for the drink can’t have been easily available, the art of brewing it confined to a select few; and therefore it probably did not reach levels which could be considered abusive. (Not having tried it out, moreover, I don’t think we can assert it to have necessarily been a bad habit, especially since we have no idea whether it was habit-forming at all!) In more recent times **Soma** came to be synonymous with the moon, which was worshipped under that name (as **Soma Nâth**, “Lord **Soma**”), and for whose worship enormous temples and idols were built—the most celebrated of which was the great idol of **Soma Nâth** smashed to pieces by one of the first Muslim invaders who came to India. Hindus of

be worshipped as a deity; and an entire Veda, the *Sâma Veda*, was compiled out of the Hymns addressed to it, many of which pay homage to the potion as if it were a conscient entity. In other Hymns the listener is encouraged to “drink this mead that confers immortality”:

इममिन्द्र सुतं पिब ज्येष्ठममर्त्यं मदम् ।
शुक्रस्य त्वाभ्यक्षरन् धारा ऋतस्य साधने ॥

Drink, drink, drink this immortal mead,
this drink that is the greatest.
Let waves of brilliance flow as streams
from the Eternal Righteousness.

Sama Veda 344, 946

In Iran too the **Haoma** plant and the drink distilled from it have been immortalised in the form of an entire book of prayers, the *Haoma Yasht*.³ In fact it was so important a beverage that several Iranian legends grew up around it, one of the most prominent being the story that Zarathushtra himself administered a potion to his patron, King Vistasp, as a result of which the monarch remained in a trance for three days and nights, experiencing—it is said—something of the Spiritual Realm.

It is also significant that the draught has, in the Sama Vedic **shloka**⁴ quoted above, been called **मदम् madam**; for this word derives from the root **मद् mad** which in Aryan speech connotes many wondrous things. It signifies “to rejoice”: for example **जयामीति मद्यमि jayâmîti madyâmi** “I rejoice because I am winning”. It also means “to be drunk” (*i.e.*, intoxicated)—not surprisingly, since it happens to be the origin of the English word “mead”. It is also the origin of the English word “mad” (as in “insane”, and maybe also as in “angry”!): but in its more ancient connotation it meant “mad” in a more positive kind of way—“mad about God”, let us say.⁵

The Sanskrit word for “honey”, **मधु madhu**, is also derived from it; and this word became so important to the Indians that **Sri Krishna** himself is at times called **माधव Mâdhava**, “made of honey”. Mead is, of course, also made of honey; and it is possible that the English term **Media**, which formed a large part of Iran—and which was apparently called in Sanskrit **माध्य mādhyā**, derives its name from this word: “Land of Mead, or Honey”. (And it is interesting to speculate as to whether the Aryans who migrated to Europe retained some memory of sacred syllable **Hon** used by their brethren in Iran, and found in it the origin of their own Anglo-Saxon words **honig** (German) and **honey** (English), thus establishing a kind of reverse parallel with the deification of the “immortalising mead” by the eastern

a later age too, along with the Buddhists, had come to look somewhat askance at the drug kick; and as the custom of actually drinking the beverage waned, references to it in the sacred texts were explained away as metaphorical allusions to a symbolic nectar, a spiritual essence which fortifies and immortalises as a result of its divine virtues—much like the Greek **αμβροσια ambrosia**, whose name is thought by some to be a foreshortened and degenerate form of the Persian equivalent: **Haoma Duraosa** “Death dispelling **Haoma**”. Because of this gradual mythification of the drink, **Soma** became perhaps the strangest of Vedic gods, and in legend appears in numerous forms—as a plant, a drink, a giant, a poet, a human embryo, a bird, a bull and, as we said above, the moon.—The translation given on the right here, by the way, is liberal, not literal.

³ **Yasht** is the Avestan word meaning “prayer”, from the root **ya** “[to] pray”. We shall speak more of the **Yashts** later on.

⁴ The Indian sacred texts are composed of **shlokas**, which term perhaps best corresponds with the “verses” of the Bible: a sentence or two (though not necessarily in verse form) conveying some single idea. As Dr. Irach Taraporewala—the most eminent Parsi Zoroastrian scholar of recent times—has perceptively noted, in the Vedas as well as in the Gathas “a unit of verse is [generally] a unit of sense”; and thus it is as well to become conscious of this peculiarity of the Indian scriptures.

⁵ Insanity was not, in past cultures, always looked upon in a totally negative light; and even in Shakespeare’s days it was not thought of quite as ill as we do, as illustrated by his treatment of Hamlet: indeed as Bernard Shaw points out, most Londoners went to see Hamlet, when it was first performed, with a view to seeing a madman unleashed!—And then, of course, there were the Viking **beserkers** who used to tear off their clothes and go beserk on their raids, and for which they were highly honoured by their comrades.

Aryans).

These small asides go merely to show that the commonality among Indians and Iranians did not cease after they migrated south from Lake **Mânasarovara**, but continued well into the time of Zarathushtra.

It is not my intention in this book to give a full and complete description of the life and teachings of Zarathushtra; these subjects can be found in many other books, and would in any case take us too far afield for the purposes of our study. However, I shall outline a few aspects of them, in order to establish the close links that must have existed between Zoroastrianism and Vedism during the Prophet's own lifetime.⁶

Zarathushtra, as we mentioned earlier, is said to have been born in a royal family. The city in which he was born was, as we said earlier, called **Râji**; and he is thus known as **Narepish Rajish**, “the Prince of **Râji**”. Later Iranians pronounced the name of this city as **Ragha**, **Ragau** or **Rae**, and it is in these forms that it is best known to us, particularly from being mentioned in the Bible and its Apocrypha, where the pronunciation was derived from a Greek version of its name: **Ραγες (Rhages)**. Today this important city of antiquity is a ruin located not far from Teheran. It is quite possible that this was the city of King **Râji** who is mentioned in Indian legend, and may even derive its name from him (or from an ancestral namesake). According to this legend, King **Râji**, although a mortal, aspired to become the **Indra**, or Chief, of the gods. He fought a victorious war against the **Indra** of his time, who happened to be the pure and saintly **Prahlâd**. (The story of Prahlâd's trials and tribulations at the hands of wicked individuals have been recorded in several Indian texts, and notably so in the **Vishnu Purâna**).

If our conjecture is correct, then, it indicates that even in Purânic times—which were far subsequent to the Vedic epoch—Iranian Kings and cities were mentioned in Indian legends and tales without the authors having cause to point out that they lay “outside India”. In fact the very term “India” was unknown: inasmuch as people did know this word (or rather its prototype in the Vedic tongue), it was known merely as **सिन्धु Sindhu** or **सप्त सिन्धु Sapta Sindhu**, meaning “[the Land of] the Seven Rivers”. These rivers were the Indus and its five tributaries—the **Kabul** river being, in all probability, the seventh. (The number Seven being a sacred figure for the ancient Aryans no less than for the Jews, it was used for anything and everything, even when it wasn't quite apposite). The term **Sapta Sindhu** was pronounced **Hapta Hindu** in Iran, and it thus gave rise to the terms “Hindu”, “Hind” and “India” in languages that lay farther west, its “-u” ending being reflected in the ancient Hebrew name for India: **הודו Hodu**.

⁶ This chapter—and indeed the first few of this book—are written to set the stage, so to speak, for the main theme of our study. Hence they may in places be boring, but bear with me a while; without this background much that follows might be unintelligible.

However, these words did not signify, at the time of which we speak, any territory other than the Indus Valley region. In Vedic Sanskrit the word **Sindhu** simply means “river”—any river. The Indus, being the largest river in this region, was therefore called, matter-of-factly, “**Sindhu**”. It was also, on occasion, probably called **सरस्वती Sarasvatī** (from the linguistic root or element **स sr** “[to] flow”), which was also a generic term for “river”: in Iran another stream, the **Horaqvaiti**, was so called for much the same reason.⁷ (It is one of the glories of the Aryan tongue that it has an amazingly rich vocabulary, and many words may be used to denote the same thing, with almost imperceptible differences in shades of meaning. This was sometimes done so that each word might be used in its fit and proper place; but often different terms for the same concept were employed, in wild exuberance, merely in order to avoid repetition, which was considered inelegant. Thus a river might be called, in addition to **sindhu** and **sarasvatī**, by other terms such as **daryâ**, **nadî**, and so on).

The Indus Valley region was the most fertile of the Aryan lands, and many Aryans settled there. Others, agriculturally less fortunate, settled to the west and to the east of this region. In the **Rigveda** we find names which in all likelihood were used at that time denote each of these three geographical entities: **इरा Irâ** or **इळ Ilâ** denoting the western part, that is to say Iran, and **भारती Bhârati** denoting the plains of the Ganges and the Jamuna, more or less east of what is today Delhi—the third region being called, of course, **Sindhu** or **Sarasvatī**. In the following Rigvedic verse we find all three mentioned together:

आ भारती भारतीभिः सजोषा इळ देवेभिर्मनुष्येभिर्अग्निः ।
सरस्वती सरस्वतेभिर्अवाक्सिस्रो देविर्वहिर इदं सदन्तु ॥

O **Agni**, may these three presiding deities, viz., that of India [**Bhârati**], Iran [**Ilâ**] and the Indus Valley [**Sarasvatī**] take their seats here on the grass, along with the Sages thereof.

Rig Veda 7.2.8

The very name “Iran” may derive from the Rigvedic term **Irâ** or **Ilâ**. This land is also called at times **आर्ययान Âryayâna** (“Aryan Way”); in which case the stretch of territory we now refer to as North India is called **आर्य वर्त Ârya Varta** (“Aryan Region”). This was probably because the Aryans coming from the north would have to pass through Iran in order to reach India.

In the well-known **Hiranyagarbha Sûkta** of the **Rigveda**,⁸ a Hymn to the Cosmic Being, we find the following lines:

⁷ The Indo-European root **sr** also survives—as is to be expected, of course—in Europe, in such terms as the French word **source** “a spring of water” and the English word “stream”.—As for the river **Sarasvatī**, in modern times it is looked upon as a quasi-mythical stream, supposed to flow underground from its source, and join up with the Ganges and the Jamuna at their junction, called **Triveni**, situated near Allahabad (where the **Kumbha Mela**, the famous festival recurring every fourteen years, is held, and where more people—many millions—gather together in one place than anywhere else in the world). This however is a fairly recent tradition—at least in comparison to Vedic antiquity—and the name **Sarasvatī** in the Vedas themselves appears to refer far too clearly to the Indus for there to be too much doubt about it.—It may however be mentioned that recent geological evidence has shown the possibility of a large river having existed in North India several thousands of years ago, which has now dried up; and the conjecture is that it is to this river that the name **Sarasvatī** was given in ancient times. This is definitely possible, of course; however, as we have seen from the Iranian cognate **Horaqvaiti**, the same name seems to have been applied in Vedic times to more than one stream; and thus it is also quite possible that the Indus was also called **Saravati** by at least some Vedic people in those days. (This note is written mostly for the benefit of Hindus, who might look askance at my equating **Sarasvatī** with **Sindhu**, such being quite contrary to modern Hindu practice).

⁸ For philologists unacquainted with this Hymn—who may question my translation of the last line here—I should like to point out that although the original runs in a form which in Classical Sanskrit would indicate an interrogative (**कस्मै देवाय हविषा विधेम kasmai devâya havishâ vidhema**), in the Vedic version of the language the same word can also be looked upon as a simple affirmative (**कस्मै kasmai** being equivalent to **तस्मै tasmai**, being in this case the correlative of **यस्मै yasmai** with which the verse begins).—And for the layman I may mention that here again (as with the **Nâsadiya Sûkta** of the **Rigveda** quoted earlier) I have attempted to echo the metre of the original; and to some extent I have succeeded, though not as well I would have liked. (In this instance I have taken as a base to work from Griffiths’s excellent translation).

यस्यमे हिमवन्तो महित्वा यस्य समुद्रं रसया सआहुः ।
यस्येमा प्रदिशो यस्य बाहु कस्मै देवाय हविषा विधेम ॥

His might and majesty these snowy regions,
The ocean and the **Rasa** do exhibit.
His arms outstretched are all this far-flung domain.
This God do we adore with our oblations.

These lines can perhaps be taken as a description, in a poetic sense, of the boundaries of the Aryan Land known to the people of the time. “To the north, the Great Snowy Region; to the south, the Sea; and to the west, the river **Rasa**.” The eastern boundary is not mentioned here, since the Aryans were even then in the process of expanding their settlements in that direction.

The word used here for the northern boundary is **हिमवन्त्** **Himavant**. Nowadays in Sanskrit it denotes the Himalaya mountain range, but its literal meaning is simply “snowy”. Another snowy mountain in Iran, Mt. Damavand, has been called by the same name: the word **Damavand** is, in fact, none other than the Persian pronunciation of the Sanskrit term **Himavant**. These mountains are so called because they are among the very few places in India and Iran where there happens to be an abundance of snow.

However, the Aryans could not have been, at the time of the composition of the Vedas, unacquainted with abundant snow; they surely must still have retained some memory of their ancestral home in the steppes and forests of Russia, and of the vast snowy regions they had left behind. The word **Himavant**, then, in this passage at least, may well be taken to denote these snowy northern stretches of land; and such a conjecture becomes all the more credible when we note that the sea is taken as the southern boundary; for at the time this Hymn was composed the Aryans had not yet migrated much into South India; and it is hard to believe that they knew, in a widespread way, that India, like Iran, was also bounded by the sea to the south. And our hypothesis gains further support by the mention of the eastern boundary, the river **Rasa**; since this important stream—which is also mentioned in the Avesta where its name is pronounced **Ranha**—most probably refers to the Tigris, which divides the Aryan lands from the Semitic: for as the *Rigveda* also states, **Sâramâ** the messenger of **Indra** had to cross the **Rasa** to reach the land of the **Panis**—which word the Aryans may have used to denote the Phoenicians.

The Aryan Land known to the middle- and late period Vedic Sages was, then, a region comprising most of today’s Iran, all of Pakistan,⁹ only a part (the northern part) of India, and probably a considerable portion of what is today Afghanistan and southern

⁹ In our study we shall denote by the term “India” the entire Indian sub-continent, and in general avoid references to modern political entities like Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan and so on; for they are historically so recent and short-lived that it would merely confuse us to talk of them. To citizens of these other countries who may read my book, I should like to apologise in advance for this, and assure them that by doing so I have no political or emotional overtones in mind.

Russia, along with other southern republics of the former Soviet Union; and it is of this fairly large stretch of territory that the lines above would seem to sing.

The locality where Zarathushtra finally established his religion was known as the kingdom of **Balkh**. This region, which is about five hundred kilometres north of present-day India, is still called “Balkhash” by the Russians. The original kingdom of Balkh lay partly in what is today Afghanistan and partly in the former USSR. Balkh, along with neighbouring Herat, is mentioned in the *Mahabharata* as follows:

अरट्टा नाम ते देशाः वाहलिका नाम ते जनाः ।
Arattâ nâma te deshâh, Vâhlikâ nâma te janâh.

Karna Parva 44.32

If we take **Arattâ** here to signify “Herat”, it become clear what locality is meant: “**Herat** is the name of the place, and **Balkhis** the name of the people”. In later ages this region came to be known as Bactria.

Iran proper was divided in those days into three main parts: Parthia, Persia and Media. All three are clearly mentioned in the *Rigveda*:

प्रचा गव्यन्तः पृथुर्पशवो ययुः ।
Prachâ gavyantah PrithuParshavo yayuh

The Parthians and Persians proceed eastward in search of pasture for their cows. (This very likely refers to the migrations of the Aryans into India).

Rigveda 7.83.1

शतं अहं तिरन्दिरे सहस्रं पर्शावाददे ।
shatam aham Tirindiré shasram Parshâvâdadé

I obtained [as largesse] a hundred [coins?] in Tirindira, and a thousand in Persia.

Rigveda 8.6.46

दुर्नाशेयं दक्षिणा पार्थवानाम् ।
durnâsheyam dakshinâ Pârthvânâm

The largesse the Parthians dispense is beyond the capacity of others.

Rigveda 6.27.8

मूषो न शिशना व्यदन्ति
mûsho na shishnâ vyadanti

माध्यः स्तोतारं शतक्रतो
Mâdhyah stotâram Shatakrato

O Shatakratu [*i.e.*, Indra], the Medians gnaw at thy worshipper, as a mouse gnaws at the weaver's thread.

Rigveda 10.33.3

The three regions were even recognised to form a kind of Union known as त्रिषध Trishadha, "The Three Together". We often find references to this confederation in the Indian scriptures.

Of the three, Persia was the most important; and its name ultimately became a synonym for the entire confederation. In India it was called पशु Parshu; in Iran, Parsa or Pars. (Perhaps it was called Parshu in Sanskrit because it was close to India, for the word पार्श्वम् pārshvam signifies "side" or "flank".)¹⁰ The Hebrew word for Iran, פָּרַס Paras, also derives from the same source.

The word Parshu was quite familiar in India, and denoted the people of that country as well as the country itself. In Pânîni's rules of grammar we find the following dictum:

पशुदि यौधेयादित्य अन् अक्रौ ।

"By the addition of a suffix, the word Parshu is changed to Parshava, which means 'The Persians'."

Pânîni 5.3.117

...And, commentators note, the Parshavas were worshippers of Asura (=Ahura); weapon-wielders (*i.e.*, militant); and fond of confederation—all three of which were characteristic features of the ancient Iranians (and not quite so much of the ancient Indians). Thus the rules of Pânîni also confirm that by the term Parshu the Veda refers to Persia.¹¹

The view that Iran and India during the time of Zarathushtra were virtually one land and one folk finds support in additional references too numerous to fully note here. For instance, the Sage Kashyapa is said to have lived on the shores of the Caspian Sea, which may derive its very name from him; and the King Vasu is said to have ruled over a land called Chedi, and to have bestowed a gift of one hundred camels on the Sage Kanva; and it is obvious from this and other references to Chedi that the term refers to Bactria, renowned for its two-humped camels. The adjoining province of Khorasan most probably derives its name from King Kuru Shrivana, who ruled over it in Vedic days, as recounted in the *Rig Veda*:

¹⁰ The speaker of Hindi will recognise the descendant of this word in his own Hindi पास pās "near". We should, perhaps, also remark on the interchangeability of the -v- and -u- sounds, whether in western or eastern languages: for in Roman times they were both represented by the same letter (and indeed can be thus found in many Latin texts); and the same applies to the Hebrew alphabet. And in Sanskrit, as Pânîni's dictum quoted here shows, it was by no means uncommon either.

¹¹ All this is important for a later chapter in our study, for it enables us to establish a most significant link between the Indian and Iranian branches of the Aryan religion, in the person of one of the most celebrated of Indian Avatâras or "Descending High Beings", namely Parshu Râma. But we shall leave that very interesting tale to be told later.

कुरु श्रवणम् आवृणि राजानम् त्रिसदस्यवम् ।

Rigveda 10.33.4

The name **कुरु Kuru** (as in **कुरु श्रवण Kuru Shravana**) is also of great interest, as we shall later have occasion to note. For the moment it is sufficient to remind ourselves that areas close to **Balkhash** in the former Soviet Union are called **Kara Kum**, **Kara Teri** and **Kara Boghaz-Gol**; and we might thus give consideration to the hypothesis that the name **Kuru** might have originally signified “Man of **Kara**”.

There are other interesting indications of Indo Iranian interaction in Vedic times. For instance, the word **अश्व ashva** “horse” in Sanskrit, which becomes **aspa** in Zend (and **EQVVS** or **EQUUS** in Latin), was a very important one to the Persians; for they were during that period the most skilful of all peoples in equestrian ability and technique. They were among the first peoples to evolve the use of horse-riding for military purposes; and the Hebrew word for “cavalry”, **פרשים parashim**, derived (as it could well be) from the name **פרס Paras** “Persia” itself, testifies to their prowess on horseback. (Even today regions north of Persia are known for outstanding horsemanship: for those are the lands of the Cossacks or **Kazakhs**, world-famous for their riding skills).

The Latin term for alfalfa grass, **Medicago sativa**, is another indication of the Iranians’ abilities in this field, for it derives from the name **Media**—the soldiers of this region being known to carry alfalfa seeds in their pouches, for planting in distant lands when on long military campaigns, in order to provide fodder for their mounts. Many Iranian names contain to this day the suffix **-asp**, indicating a connection with horses: **Vistasp**, **Gush-tasp**, **Tehmurasp**, **Pourushasp**, **Jamasp**.

The Sanskrit name **अश्वपति Ashwapati**, which finds mention in the **Râmâyana**,¹² is also connected with horses: it means “Lord of the Steeds”. The inference is very strong, therefore, that **Ashwapati** was an Iranian or West-Aryan nobleman: the more so since he is reputed to have presented a set of fine horses to a distinguished recipient, his grandson **Bharata**, the son of King **Dasharatha** of **Ayodhyâ**¹³ and brother of **Sri Râmachandra**. The fact that Bharata was on hand to receive the horses also points to the fact that Indians periodically paid visits to Iran. The inference is further strengthened when we remember that Ashwapati’s daughter, the mother of Bharata, was called **Kaikeyi**; and that **Kekaya**, the word from which that name is derived, could well have been what the Indians called the Caucasus region (**Кавказ** [pronounced **Kavkaz**] in the former USSR). References in later writings such as the **Mahâbhârata**, to which we shall return later on, fortify the belief that **Kekaya** was in-

¹² The **Râmâyana**, the oldest Epic poem in the world—extolling the deeds of **Sri Râma** or **Râmachandra**, the most famous King in Indian history or mythology (take your pick as to which)—was composed by the Sage **Vâlmiki**. It is so familiar in India, even to the most illiterate peasant, that to find that one has actually to explain what it is feels uncomfortable: somewhat like explaining King Arthur to an Englishman. It is unfortunate that even such magnificent examples of world literature as the Indian Epics—though Indian in origin, they belong indeed to all humanity, for much of their message and interest is universal—should be so totally unknown to the Europeans: who are, moreover, genetically and linguistically related to the Indians more closely than to people of any other civilisation, ancient or modern, and not excluding even the Children of Israel. Mindful of this I am tempted to leave the **Râmâyana** unexplained here, merely closing this note with a pat on the shoulders of the reader, and a gentle suggestion to go look up the work in a decent library.

¹³ Some Indians are unwilling to accept suggestions that the tales recounted in the great Indian Epics speak of any localities other than India (after all, chauvinism is not a badge of the French alone). However, as a glance at the Atlas will show, the distance from Ayodhyâ, the birthplace of Sri Râmachandra (which lay in what is now called Avadh in northern India) to Sri Lanka, where Sri Râmachandra is said to have fought and defeated Râvana (the abductor of his wife Sîtâ), is not much less than the distance from Ayodhyâ to Armenia. In later ages, but using much the same kind of transportation technology, Chinese and Indian Buddhists travelled much greater distances, and over much more difficult terrain; and thus to speak of an Indian prince’s voyage to the Caucasian mountains can hardly be considered exaggerated.

deed somewhere near today's Armenia. If, moreover, we trace the route the offices of his homeland took in going to **Kekaya** in order to inform **Bharata** of his father's demise, and to bring him back to India to take up the throne, we find that they had to proceed further northwest after coming to **Bâhlikâ**. When Ayodhyâ and Armenia enter into matrimonial alliance, there can be little doubt that the people of both lands were socially the same. It is no longer surprising, then, to find in the Tel-el-Amarna inscriptions unearthed in Iraq references to a king called "**Dasaratta**" or "**Tursaratta**" who in a later age (around 1600 BCE) ruled over a region of Mesopotamia, and who may have called himself so after his distinguished namesake of **Ayodhyâ** of yore.¹⁴

The foregoing has been mentioned here to illustrate that during the period under discussion, the Aryan Land extended in one wide swath, so to speak, from Asia Minor (and perhaps even farther west) all the way through Iran into North India. It would be extremely surprising, therefore, if the Foremost Prophet of the Age did not leave his mark upon this entire region, and perhaps even on adjacent non-Aryan lands. As we shall see, Zarathushtra's influence did in fact extend over all this territory, and even beyond. But for demonstrating that we shall have to gather some more information, especially in order to establish the context of our study. Let us proceed to do so now.

At the time Zarathushtra appeared on the scene, several deities were worshipped by the Indo-Iranians. Of these the two main ones for our purpose were **Indra** and **Varuna**.

Far more Vedic Hymns are addressed to **Indra** than to any other deity. He is called "The Chief of the Gods"; as a matter of fact the very term **इन्द्र Indra** means "Chief", as for instance in the words **गजेन्द्र Gajendra** (*i.e.*, गज + इन्द्र Gaja + Indra) "Chief of the Elephants" or **भुजगेन्द्र Bhujagendra** "Chief of the Serpents". The term **Indra** was, therefore, a *title* rather than a proper name. In different ages, according to Hindu mythology, different individuals had been the "**Indra**": thus at one time the "**Indra**" was **Prahlâda**, at another time **Nahusha** was given that title, and so on.

The other principal Vedic God, **Varuna**, was not as popular as **Indra** in *India proper*; but he was certainly more popular in the rest of the Aryan land. He is not just an Indo-Iranian God: he is an Indo-European God, and appears in the Greek pantheon as **Ουρανός (Ouranos)**, and in the Roman as **VRANVS**¹⁵ or **URANUS**, where he is considered to be no less than the ancestor of **Zeus** himself, the King of the Græco-Roman Gods.¹⁶

As opposed to **Indra**, who was, of course, a **Deva**, **Varuna** in

¹⁴ And of course one might remember that people of Indo European and Semitic extraction are nowadays referred to, especially in the West, as "Caucasian". To find Indian names in Mesopotamia or Asia Minor ought not to be too unexpected, for our relatively modern idea of looking upon Semites and Aryans as different from each other was not known to the ancients—who did not, therefore, allow such distinctions to dictate their actions. What to speak of men, even gods borrowed names both ways: for instance the Babylonian water- or ocean-deity **Apsu**—from whose name we derive the English word "Abyss"—obviously took his title from the Vedic term **Âp** (of which many variants, including **Apsu** itself, can be found in both the Vedas and the Gathas).

¹⁵ It ought to be remembered that the Romans did not possess lower-case letters, and as we see in their ruins, wrote everything in all caps. And as we already said earlier, they also did not distinguish between the written **V** and **U**, though it is very likely that they did so in pronunciation. It is thus not known how they actually pronounced the name **URANUS** or **VRANVS**; but most likely the accent, as in Vedic and Greek, was on the first (and not the second) syllable.

¹⁶ The name **Varuna** also has an interesting homophone among the Celtic gods: **Belenos**, whose name apparently meant "shining", and who was most likely a solar and/or fire deity: for we find his name applied to the May Day Fire-Feast of the Druids, **Beltain**. It is known, of course, that the Druids celebrated solstices, and in general revered the Sun; and moreover the Celtic language shows great affinity to Sanskrit, a fact which is bolstered by Julius Caesar's statement that the Gauls "all assert their descent from **Dis Pater**"—a name sounding far too much like **दौस पितृ Dyaus Pitr** (literally, "Father Sky") of the Vedic Hymns (and of which the Græco-Roman cognate was, of course, **ZEUS PATER** or **JUPITER**) to be lightly explained away. The similarity between Gaulish and Indian customs and lore is in fact so great, that it has prompted more than one occidental eccentric to assert that the Druids were in reality Brahmins who had migrated to Europe from India. This—in its literal sense—seems of course to be quite absurd; but if taken in a broader sense, as pointing to a common ancestry for both the Gauls and the Indians, it is indeed quite correct.

the *Rigveda* is more often referred to as an **Asura** (in the honourable sense of that term, of course). He is, moreover, also addressed as “Father **Varuna**”, as in the following lines from the Veda:

अपोनिषिञ्चन्नसुरः पिता नः ऋसन्तु गर्गरा अपां वरुण ।

May **Asura Varuna**, our Father, rain water down upon us.

Angirasa Veda 4.15.12

That he was highly revered in Iran is attested to in the next stanza:

अवनीचीर्षप सृज वदन्तु पृष्निवावहो मण्डुका इरिणानु ॥

May the shaven Sages¹⁷ of Iran, with the **Prishni** in their hands, hail the downpour.

Ibid

Of the two, **Varuna** is the older deity. The cult of **Varuna** was the **Pitryâna**, which, as we have seen, appears to have gained greater following in Iran, while the rival cult, the **Devayâna**, won more adherents in India. As we shall discover, it is in fact the rivalry between these two cults that prevented the teachings of Zarathushtra from spreading as such into India. All the same, the force of his personality and the enticing sublimity of the faith he founded could not be kept completely out, and his ideas certainly have, in pretty full measure, appeared in India, albeit in a veiled form. We shall see in due course how this happened. However, before we come to that, we have to do a bit more background study. In particular, we must study the Sages who sang the praises of these two deities.

The Vedas as we know them today are four in number.¹⁸ The first three—the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda* and the *Sâma Veda*—are essentially parts of the same book: as the Sanskrit scholars Goldstücker and Griffith point out, the *Rigveda* is the original collection of material, while the *Yajur* and *Sâma Vedas* are largely liturgical compilations from it, depending on the metrical quality of the text. The prose portions were in the main compiled into the *Yajur Veda*, while the *Sâma Veda* (the name possibly deriving from **सामन्** *sâman* “equal”) contains the songs having *equal* lines.

To these three Vedas, which as we saw all have the same source, was subsequently added the fourth Veda, the *Atharva Veda*.¹⁹

The name **Atharva** is of particular significance. One of the most ancient of Aryan Seers has been called **Atharvân**: the

¹⁷ It is interesting to see that this verse refers to Iranian Sages as **mandukâ** “shaver” (which probably included elimination of head hair as well as beard, after the manner of Buddhist monks). The tradition does not seem to have persisted in Persia, for in most illustrations of Zarathushtra he is portrayed with a long beard and hair. Of course all these illustrations are of relatively recent origin, and we have no idea as to whether he actually shaved or not; perhaps our mental picture of his appearance—like so many other things about him—is quite erroneous; and whatever the case, even if he did not himself shave his hair and beard completely, there is no reason to assume that all other Sages in Iran went about hirsute.—The **पृष्नि Prishni** (more accurately transliterated as **Prûshni**), is, by the way, an Indian sacred text, of which we shall speak some more later.

¹⁸ The four are, of course, the *Rig Veda*, the *Yajur Veda*, the *Sâma Veda* and the *Atharva Veda*. However, because of the fact that they were all compiled from a single original collection of material, and of them the first three in particular share many **shlokas**, it is somewhat a matter of opinion as to whether their number should be considered as one (the original undifferentiated lore), two (as regarding the *Atharva Veda* separate from the other three, which can be taken as different versions of the same Veda), three (taking the *Rik*, *Sâman* and *Yajus* alone to be canonical, and leaving the *Atharva Veda* out altogether as apocryphal), or four. Different sects have held each of these views—a fact reflected in some Indian names such as **Dwivedi**, **Trivedi** and **Chaturvedi**—and we in our study shall leave it to the reader to choose which tradition he will follow.

¹⁹ The reader may have noted that at times we write *Rig Veda* and at others *Rigveda*, at times *Mundaka Upanishad* and at others *Mundakopanishad*, and so on. This merely reflects in roman letters the practice in Sanskrit; for the Indian tradition being in origin exclusively oral, the way a word or phrase was written was relatively unimportant, so long as the written form reflected its pronunciation more or less faithfully. This being so, the system of writing developed in India—it is neither an alphabet nor a syllabary, but something in-between the two—is completely phonetic; and had Bernard Shaw looked to India for a “phonetic way of writing English” he would have found such a system ready-made. (The reader may remember that Shaw in his will left his considerable estate to someone who would come up with just such a thing). The Indian “alphabet”, or rather the Indian system of letters used in writing called **देवनागरी devanâgarî**, is also highly systematic (pardon the pun), and is not laid out with the whimsical randomness which characterises the

Mundaka Upanishad calls him the “first-born son of **Brahmâ**, the Creator”:

ब्रह्मा देवानां प्रथमः सम्भूव विश्वस्य कर्ता भुवनस्य गोप्ता ।
स ब्रह्मविद्यां संविद्याप्रतिष्ठां अथर्वाय ज्येष्ठपुत्राय प्राह ॥

Brahmâ, the first of the Gods, came into being—He who is the Creator of all, the world’s Protector. To **Atharvân**, his first-born son, He revealed the Knowledge Divine, on which all sciences are founded.

Mundaka Upanishad 1.1.1

The term **Atharvan** was well-known in Iran too; in fact, so well known that Zarathushtra himself has been called *The Atharvan* (*par excellence*, so to speak):

Ushta no jato Athrava yo Spitamo Zarathushthro

Fortunate are we that to us is born The **Atharvan**, [he who is] Zarathushtra of the Spitama clan.

Farvardin Yasht 944

The term **Atharvan**, in its different versions, was therefore a very honourable term among the Aryans, and this is hardly surprising when we realise that it is derived from the root **अत्र atr** (Sanskrit) or **atar** (Zend), meaning “fire”. The term **Atharvan** thus literally means “Keeper of the Fire”, and for this reason Zoroastrian priests are even today sometimes called **Atharvans**, for they tend the Eternal Flame in the Fire Temples.²⁰

Atharvan, then, was also among the ancient Aryans an honourable *title* of sorts, rather than a proper name. (And very understandably so too, when we consider that without a fire in the Siberian winter they would all have frozen to death!)

The *Atharva Veda* has at least some claim to have been composed by **Pitryanists**: for its name, in light of what we have seen above, means “The Veda of the Fire-priest”. The *Gopatha Brâhmana*, as a matter of fact, gives it the double barrelled name of भृग्वक्त्रिसी संहिता *Bhrigu-Angirasi Samhitâ*, and both these terms भृगु Bhrigu and अङ्गिरस Angirasa have their roots in terms for fire: भ्रक् bhrk “the blazing of the fire” and अङ्गार angâr “the (glowing) coal (or ember)”. This other appellation, thus, also points to the fourth Veda’s connection with Fire, as does its more common name **अथर्व Atharva**.

In actual fact the *Bhârgava Samhitâ* and the *Angirasa Samhitâ* are each *separate* from the other. This is the reason the *Gopatha Brâhmana* says that there are not four, but *five*, Vedas—these two, in addition to the *Rik*, *Sâman* and *Yajus*. The

western and Semitic alphabets (where, for instance, **A** is followed by **B**, a totally unrelated sound, and **B** followed by **C**, also totally unrelated). In the devanâgarî arrangement, all the vowels come first, alternating long and short (-a-, -â-, -i-, -î-, etc.); then those consonants, like -k-, -kh-, -g-, and -gh- which are pronounced in the throat, alternating aspirated and unaspirated, voiced and unvoiced; then, in similar alternating fashion, those consonants that are pronounced on the palate, like -ch- and -j-; and after them those on the teeth, like -t- and -d-; and last but-not-one those on the lips, like -m- and -p- — all sounds from the inside of the mouth outwards, in order; the list being rounded off with semi-consonants like -y- and -w-, and aspirated and sibilant sounds like -h- and -s-. In actual writing, all vowels—except the initial one if there is one—are represented not by their respective letters, but by abbreviated marks above, below or besides the consonants; and this makes for great compactness, and economy in pen strokes. No other ancient system of writing seems to have been so systematically thought out—the only systems rivalling the Indian being those developed in the last two centuries by linguistics professionals—and it is unfortunate that the system’s value is not recognised enough in India itself, and that there is a movement afoot to “romanise” Indian writing (as Atatürk did with Turkish).

²⁰ Most people think of Zoroastrians as worshipping in Fire-temples (to which, indeed, in this benighted day and age Parsis will not even allow entrance to non-Parsis); but in ancient times the worship was most likely conducted under the vault of heaven—which, to my way of thinking, calls forth from the human breast far more spiritual ardour than any man-made fane. This, of course, was the custom with most ancient Aryans; among the Celts for instance “the sanctuary was a lonely forest clearing” (as Stuart Piggott tells us in his book *The Druids*). The temple in Zoroastrianism is in fact thought by some to have been introduced as recently as the 4th century BCE by the Achamænian Emperor Artaxerxes, probably in imitation of Semitic practices (for he is mentioned in the Bible as encouraging the Jews to go back to Jerusalem, and providing them with funds for building their own Temple there). However, in the Zoroastrian temple nothing is allowed to detract from the glory of the fire; for unlike almost all other sacred buildings the sanctum sanctorum remains bare of all ornamentation other than the flame, thereby evoking “an enormously powerful sense of the holy” (John Hinneberg in *Erdman’s Handbook to the World’s Religions*).

²¹ Some think this tradition must be mistaken, and that the author of the *Mahâbhârata* could not also have

Mahâbhârata confirms this statement, and declares that the arranger or, as we should nowadays put it, the “editor” of the Vedas, the Sage **Vyâsa**, who is also considered to be the author of the *Mahâbhârata*,²¹ taught the first four Vedas to his four disciples, and the fifth in secret to his son:

चत्वारस्ते वयं ऋष्याः गुरुपुत्रस्तु पञ्चमः ।
इह देवाः प्रतिष्ठेर्षेणः वः काक्षितः वरः ॥

Mahâbhârata, Shânti Parva 335-40

The *Bhârgava Veda* and the *Angirasa Veda* must have come into existence *after* the Indo-Iranians became divided on the question of Asura-worship and Deva-worship, **Paourya-tkaesha** and **Daeva-yasna**, monotheism and iconolatry, **Varuna**-worship and **Indra**-worship: a development we shall now proceed to study.

As we saw above (see page ...), **भृगु Bhrigu** was the Preceptor of the Asuras. **बृहस्पति Brihaspati**, the Preceptor of the Devas and **Bhrigu**’s long-time rival in Indian myth and legend, was also at times called **अङ्गिरस Angirasa**.

In time the terms **Bhrigu** and **Angirasa**, like the term **Atharvân** before them, also came to be used not so much as names but as titles. Descendants of **Bhrigu** came to be called “**Bhrigu**” indiscriminately—as well, of course, as being called “**Bhârgavas**”²²—in the Indian texts. Thus we find **Chyavana** being called “**Bhrigu**”, his descendant **Richika** being called “**Bhrigu**”, **Vashishtha** being called “**Bhrigu**”, and **Parashu Râma** being called “**Bhrigu**”. The fact that there were also many “**Angirasas**” is testified unto by the epithet **अङ्गिरष्टम Angirashtama** bestowed upon **Indra**: it means “the Greatest [patron] of the **Angirasas**”. They are also mentioned in the Gatha of Zarathushtra:

Kada ajem murthem ahya maghahya ya Angraya Karpanao
urupayeinti

(Or, to put the same lines in Vedic Sanskrit, to show how similar the two languages, Vedic and Gathic, were):

कदा अहं मूर्तिम् अस्य मघस्य यां अङ्गिरसाः कर्पणा रोपयन्ति

Kadâ aham mûrtim asya maghasya yâ Angirasa Karpanâ
ropayanti

When [O Mazda] shall I [be able to] uproot the idol from this
Congregation—this idol set up by the Agirasas and the Karpanas?²³

Gatha 48.10

been the editor of the Vedas, and that the latter was a different individual altogether (for the term **Vyâsa** is actually not a name but a title, and literally means simply “Editor”). If, however, both these works were carried out by the same person, he must be acknowledged to have been by far the greatest man of letters ever to have graced the world of literature. Can one imagine how stupendous a task it was, after having arranged in a systematic order, accurate to the last syllable, the vast quantity of Vedic material—several times as extensive as the Bible—*entirely in his head*, without jotting down a single word on paper (and which material was even then to be found only in a language almost as archaic to him as the idiom of Chaucer is to us), to have then set about composing an Epic poem eclipsing the works of both Homer and Tolstoy in size as well as scope; possessing an appeal so universal that to this day almost every Indian, no matter how “uneducated”, knows at least the main outline of the story, and often much more; and including a core—the *Bhagavad Gîtâ*—so eloquently sacred that for millennia it has been revered by not just millions but *billions* of Hindus as the Word of The Lord Himself? No person of letters born in any other land matches such towering literary eminence, Confucius conceivably coming closest; and the only other “author” who can really be compared with Vyâsa is perhaps **Hazrat Muhammad**, who—alone of all the great world Prophets—singlehandedly gave the world a scripture *so complete that nothing needs to be added to it to serve as Holy Writ*, at least for the Muslims. (It is not often appreciated by non-Muslims how stupendous *this* feat must have been!)

²² The adjective derived from the term **Bhrigu** is in Sanskrit **Bhârgava**, which term also came to be looked upon as a clan name, and in a sense remains so to this day. (This note is inserted for the benefit of non-Indian readers; my Indian audience will of course know these things, and are perhaps wondering why I take the trouble to point them out. Perhaps I should point out to *them* that India is not the whole world—though I have to admit that at times it certainly feels like it, especially to one living there!)

²³ The **Karpanas** were the followers of **Kripa**, a great favourite of **Indra**. By the way: I am aware that this verse has alternative renderings, but I prefer not to enter into a dispute here, merely satisfying myself that this rendering is also acceptable, at least to some scholars.—The reader may be intrigued by the fact that while in this book, wherever I have quoted from the Indian scriptures I have given the original in the **devanâgarî** or Indian script as well, when quoting from the Iranian texts I normally give the original only in a

The **Bhrigus** and the **Atharvans** are also referred to in the plural, as in the *Rigvedic* dictum

अथर्वाणो भृगवः सोम्यासः ।

“Soma-drinking **Bhrigus** are **Atharvans**”.

... and in the *Chûlika Upanishad*:

अथर्वाणो भृगुत्तमाः ।

“The elders of the **Bhrigus** are the **Atharvans**”.

From all these remarks one can conclude that there was the greatest amity between the **Bhrigus** and the **Atharvans**: while between them and the **Angirasas** there was a certain amount of rivalry.

And this becomes all the more obvious when we realise with a shock²⁴ that the term **Bhrigu**, which does not appear in this form in the Iranian scripture, is however present there as **Spitaman**.

The Iranian word **Spitama** is a contraction of the superlative **Spitatama** and corresponds to the Sanskrit word श्वेततम **Shwetatama** “most white”. From a softening of the **-p-** sound in **Spitama** we also derive the present-day Hindi word सफेद **safed** “white”. And **Bhrigu**’s alternate name, as we have seen, was शुक्र **Shukra** which easily varies to शुक्ल **Shukla** (the **-l-** sound often interchanges with the **-r-** sound in many languages—indeed in Chinese and Japanese they are identical)²⁵. **Shukla** means “white”, and it is easy to see, therefore, how the **Bhrigus** came to be known as **Spitamans** in Iran.

Zarathushtra was the most prominent **Spitaman**. Other members of that clan are also mentioned in the Gatha. Thus **Maidhyomaha**,²⁶ a cousin of the Prophet, is called “**Spitaman**”; **Haechad-aspā**,²⁶ another relative, is also called “**Spitaman**”; and even a lady, **Pouru-Chista**,²⁶ thought by many scholars to have been Zarathushtra’s own daughter, is called a “**Spitami**”.

All this goes to show that Zarathushtra of the **Spitama** clan was one of the **Bhrigus**. His teachings too, as we shall see in due course, were in consonance with the **Bhârgava** teachings as they are recorded in Indian spiritual texts. Being a **Bhrigu**, he was descended (*vide* quotation on page ...) from the **Atharvans**. As we delve deeper into the matter we shall find further corroboration for this inference.

One of the best-known descendants of **Bhrigu** was the Sage **Vashishtha**. His name is pronounced **Vahishta** in the Avesta,

roman transliteration. This is because although Iran did possess, not just one, but several scripts (an example of one of the more ancient of these being the one reproduced earlier, the older ones are now quite extinct, and no one but scholars can read them; while the **devanâgarî** script (along with those used in writing Greek, Hebrew, Arabic, Russian, Chinese, the Japanese **hirangana** syllabary and, of course, the Roman script)—all of which are used in one place or another in this book—do survive as living means of communication. This book being written for the living and not for the dead, I thought I may as well dispense with the dead systems of writing.

²⁴ The “shock” is perhaps only so to Zoroastrians (and to some extent Hindus); most others who have read this far are probably wondering why this term has been used at all, given Zarathushtra’s Vedic antecedents. I should, however, explain that among the Parsis (of today, at any rate) there is a great reluctance to acknowledge any sort of kinship with the Hindus. This likely stems from the days of the British Raj, during which the Parsis, probably because of their fairer skin, grew in favour with the even more fair-skinned rulers, and ultimately became the most westernised of all Asians (with the exception, perhaps, of the inhabitants of Portuguese-ruled Goa). Some Parsis even adopted English nicknames; and they began, like their English mentors, to despise all things “Hindoo”—which was their own loss. Parsis in more ancient times were probably not so bigoted; this is indicated, among other things, by Dastur Nairyosangh Dhaval’s magnificent 12th-century attempt at translating the entire Avesta into Classical Sanskrit.

²⁵ The phenomenon is by no means confined to East Asia; the term **pahlwân** “muscle-man” in modern Persian and Urdu, for instance, is derived from the more ancient term **Pârthavan** “Parthian” (those people having apparently been fond of body-building, and indeed having given rise to the redoubtable heroes Rustam and Sohrab, whose exploits are known wherever Persian tales are told). In the more ancient form of the Persian written language, in fact, there did not even exist a separate letter for the **-L-** sound.

²⁶ For those interested, the meanings of these names are as follows: (a) **Maidhyomaha** (or more accurately **Maidhyomaongha**) means “mid moon”—perhaps he was born in the middle of the month, what the Romans used to call the “ides”; (b) **Haechad-aspā** is सैचदश्च **Sechad-ashwa** in Sanskrit, signifying a connection with horses; and (c) **Pouru-chista** (पुरु चैता **Puru-Chetâ** in Sanskrit) is a beautiful name for a girl, signifying “[she who embodies] the fullness of wisdom”.

where it signifies a quality: it is the superlative form of the term **vohu** “good”, and therefore means “best”. In point of fact, the very word “best” in English is a contraction of the Iranian pronunciation of this name; for in later ages in Iran its pronunciation became **Behesht**, and came to denote “Paradise”: in other words, the “Best [of all possible states of being]”.²⁷ In Vedic times it signified something like “the greatest good”, as for example, in one of the most basic prayers of the Zoroastrian creed, the *Ashem Vohu*:

Ashem vohu, vahisitem asti

Righteousness is good; it is the greatest good of all.

In the Gathas the term **Vahishta** is an attribute of the Great **Asura** Himself:

**Vahisitem thwa vahishta yem
Asha vahishta hazaoshem
Ahurem yasa va'unus
Naroi Frasoshtraï maibya cha**

(Or, to render it in Sanskrit, again to demonstrate the similarity between the two tongues):

वशिष्ठं तवां वशिष्ठं अयम् {जनः}
अषया वशिष्ठया सुजोषाम् ।
असुरं यासे वन्वानः
नरे पृषोष्ठाय मभ्यं च ॥

**Vashishtham tvâm Vashishthah ayam {janah}
Ashâya Vashishthâya sujoshâm
Asura yâse vanvânah
Nare Prishoshtrâya mabhyam cha**

“Thou art the Greatest Good; this [also] is the greatest good. I would realise Thee, O **Ahura**, Who Art the Greatest Good; with love would I worship Thee, for the good of the valiant **Fra-shoshtra**, and for my good too”.

*Gatha 28.8*²⁸

In the first line of this verse there is perhaps a hint of a pun,²⁹ in that Zarathushtra may also be applying the term to himself: the phrase “this [also] is the best” may be taken to mean “this [person: *i.e.*, Zarathushtra] is [also] “the Best”, [that is, a **Vashishtha**]. For the name **Vashishtha**, like the names **Bhrigu**, **Atharvan** and **Angirasa**, also came to be used as a sort of title, denot-

²⁷ I must confess to a great appreciation for the concept of *appreciation*, and thus appreciate immensely a notion of heaven suggested to me by my good friend Paul Wyszowski: namely, a state wherein one *appreciates* (in the sense of being sensitive to, and enjoying) just about everything. This is a faculty which, if carried to its limits, would surely “make a heaven of hell” ... and which may be taken as a philosophical vindication of Lao-Tzu’s teaching of **wu-wei** or “non-action”; for a person capable of appreciating all things fully need do nothing to make the world different from the way it actually is, and has only to relax and enjoy. This, perhaps, is the ultimate or esoteric idea intended by the term **Behesht** signifying “heaven”; for although it is obviously impossible for us imperfect mortals to retain such a calm and beatific outlook at all times (aggravating as some of our daily routines are), presumably the pure soul, perfect “as the Father in heaven is perfect”, does in fact in Paradise appreciate so perfectly.

²⁸ I might perhaps mention here (see also page ...) that the **Gatha** does not stand by itself, but is *imbedded* in another, larger text called the **Yasna**, whose 28th chapter is the Gatha’s first (or second, according to some scholars). In most books, in fact, when the **Gatha** is quoted, the chapter and verse given are those of the **Yasna**. So also here: when we write, for instance, “**Gatha 28.8**” etc., we mean chapter 28, verse 8 of the **Yasna**. This is actually chapter 1, verse 8 of the **Gatha** itself.

²⁹ This should not be taken, however, to mean a pun in the pejorative or western sense of the term; for the ancient Indo-Iranian idiom, in addition to possessing a huge vocabulary and assigning many words to the same meaning, also assigned many meanings to the same words. This was perhaps inevitable, given the vast number of mouths that gave rise to the language and wealth to its idiom. In any case, punning as a literary device was considered quite respectable in Indo-Iranian; and in Sanskrit at least it was sometimes carried to extremes, and completely overwhelmed the reader by its torrential profusion, producing an effect quite impossible to imitate in English: for as the Marxist maxim goes, “Quantity has a quality all its own”.

ing membership in a clan or sect. There were many **Vashishthas**; and, according to the Vedic scholar Griswold, the **Vashishthas** were the special guardians of the worship of **Varuna**.

The *Rigveda* recounts the story of **Varuna** saving **Vashishtha** from drowning:

वशिष्ठं हि वरुणे नावि अघात् ।

Vashishtha in the *Rigveda* is the chief of the Sages who sang the Hymns of **Asura Varuna**. This is not surprising, for **Varuna** was venerated for upholding righteousness (“good thoughts, good words, good deeds”)³⁰—in keeping with the meaning of the term **Vashishtha**—as opposed to **Indra**, who was more famous for his physical prowess:

वृत्राणि अन्यः समिधेषु जिघ्रन्ते
ब्राताणि अन्यः अभिरक्षते सदा ।

Indra protects from the external foe;
Varuna upholds the moral order.

Rigveda 7.83.9

It is thought by scholars, moreover, that Bactria (**Balkh**) was the homeland of the **Vashishthas**. As Tilak and Griswold point out, it would not be surprising if some of the Vedic Hymns to **Varuna** had been composed there—maybe even the two quoted above.

The Iranian tradition definitively states that Zarathushtra was descended from a long line of “Sage Kings”,³¹ going as far back, as we have mentioned earlier, as **Yima Kshaeta** of the Ice Age. That he was an **Atharvan**—indeed *the Atharvan*—is of course beyond question. That he was a **Bhrigu**, or **Bhârgava**, can as we have seen be inferred. That he was a **Vashishtha** can also be inferred, particularly when we keep in mind that the **Bhrigus** and the **Vashishthas** were on very friendly terms, and each sect claimed that the other was, in fact, descended from them. (The current opinion of scholars—the legend notwithstanding—seems to be that the **Bhrigus** were descended from the **Vashishthas** and not the other way round.)

Our study hitherto has thus demonstrated quite conclusively that Zarathushtra was a Vedic **Rishi** who composed Vedic Hymns;³² and he therefore ought to be (and more significantly, to *have been* in ancient times) as important to the Hindu religion

³⁰ **Humata, hukhta, huvarshta**. (“good thoughts, good words, good deeds”). These are the three basic principles of Zoroastrian ethics, comparable in importance, one may say, with the Ten Mosaic Commandments, or the **Pancha Shîlas** of Buddhism. They are the source of our English phrase “[in] thought, word and deed”, and are reflected in the Buddha’s “Eight-fold Path” to Liberation, in which the second, third and fourth “steps” are **सम्यक् संकल्प** “perfect understanding”, **सम्यक् वाक्** “perfect speech” and **सम्यक् कर्मन्त** “perfect action” (the first, and the fourth to the eighth inclusive, being in one sense—though not in all—merely extensions to these basic three).

³¹ The idea of Kings who were also Sages, or Sages who were also Kings—a very common one among the Eastern Aryans—was to some extent familiar to the Western Aryans too; for it was reiterated by Plato in his *Republic*, where he asserted that the only happy State is one ruled by a “Philosopher” (literally, a “lover of wisdom”). The Sanskrit term for such wise rulers was **Râja Rishi**; and it has an interesting Biblical homonym in מֶלֶכ־יִזְרְקֵל **Melchizedek**, whose name is an exact Hebrew translation of **Râja Rishi**, and regarding whom we shall have a lot more to say in a subsequent chapter.

³² It has always appeared to me strange that in spite of the fact that scholars have long known that the Gathas and the Vedas are geographically, linguistically, stylistically, and in most other respects too, identical or nearly so, not one of these so-called “scholars” ever drew the obvious conclusion from all this, viz. that Zarathushtra was a Vedic Sage; and the first person to have actually said so in so many words was Shri J. M. Chatterji, who was no scholar but an amateur like myself. Indeed I find in the Preface to his book *The Ethical Conceptions of the Gatha*, published in the year 1935 or thereabouts, the following words: “I did not come across any book which points out that Zarathushtra is as much a Prophet of the Vedic Religion as Ramachandra, and as much a Reformer of the Vedic society as Gautama Buddha. ...As a matter of fact Zarathushtra stands nearer to the Vedic religion than Gautama Buddha does. For while Buddhism has sometimes been suspected of atheism, Parsi-ism (equally with Hinduism) is nothing if not theistic. ...Yet no scholar thought of presenting the matter in this light. Had anybody done so, I would have been spared the derision for the ridiculous attempts of a dwarf.”—And I

as to the Zarathushtrian. We shall see in due course how very important he was indeed, even though the name “Zarathushtra” had been virtually forgotten by Hindus of more recent days.

Another famous “Sage-King” of Vedic legend—indeed a King who, after overcoming enormous difficulties, ultimately became a Sage—was **Vishwâmitra**. As is well known (at least in India), he was a great warrior: in fact, his very determination to become a **Rishi** arose from his not being able, in spite of his great skill at arms, to defeat **Vashishtha**, who during their celebrated duel withstood all his onslaughts armed only with a staff. When **Vishwâmitra** learned to use his stupendous strength and will-power to fight his own baser self, and to that end performed the most arduous austerities and penances, **Brahmâ** Himself bestowed upon him the status of a **Brahmarishi**, the highest level a **Rishi** could attain.³³ As we shall see, **Vishwâmitra** could quite possibly have been a blood-relation of Zarathushtra; and at any rate he certainly did have a predilection for the cult of **Ahura**, and in a celebrated Hymn composed by him and recorded in the **Rig Veda**, we find the name **Mazda** clearly mentioned (in its Indian form of pronunciation, **Mahad**) for the first time in Indian sacred lore:

महद् देवानाम् असुरत्वम् एकम्

Mahad devânâm asuratvam ekam

Mahad constitutes the divinity {**asuratvam** = ‘asura-hood’} of the **devas**.

Rigveda 3.55

There are twenty-one stanzas in this Hymn and the burden or refrain (that is to say, the last line) of each of them is the above phrase. The fact that the term **Mahad** here is a noun and not an adjective is clearly evident not only from the text of the Hymn (part of which is given on page ...), but also from its first two lines:

उषसः पूर्वा अध यद् विजषुर महद् विजज्ञे अक्षरं पदे गौः ।

He Who existed before the [very] dawn [of creation], that imperishable **Mahad** manifested Himself along the wake of the world (पदे गौः **padé gauh**, lit. ‘in the footsteps of the earth’).³⁴ {It is this same **Mahad** that is repeated in the fourth line.}

However, although **Mahad** here is clearly not an adjective, it could well be a noun *derived from* an adjective; for as everyone knows, **महा mahâ** in Sanskrit means “great” (as for instance in

for another would have learned a lot more about the religion of my ancestors while I was still a young lad; for though I was quite liberally educated in this matter—my parents having been close associates of Mahatma Gandhi and my father having in fact been his personal physician and close confidante—it was never explained to me that Zarathushtra was as much a Vedic **Rishi** as **Vashishtha** or **Bhrigu**; and I for my part could not fit Zoroastrianism into any religious or historical context I could think of.

³³ Originally, it would appear, the term **Rishi** was unqualified, and there was no hierarchy among the Righteous. With time, however, the Indians—as always past masters at complicating things—devised a series of prefixes for the term, as a result of which several hierarchies were set up (I say *several* because each text had its own idea of where the different terms fit in). Thus, for instance, we get the titles *Mahârishi* “Great Rishi”, *Paramarishi* “Supreme Rishi”, and, as mentioned here, *Brahmarishi*, which term can hardly be translated at all. Most of this dates from the Purânic period, which embellished the legend of Vishwâmitra, among numerous others. However, Vishwâmitra is also mentioned in the Rigveda, and thus his legend, though adorned to the point of outrageous exaggeration, must have had some solid Vedic records upon which to base itself.

³⁴ The ancient Vedic गौः **gauh** “earth” is reflected in the Greek γεως **geos**, whence for instance our English word “geography”. However, in ancient Vedic a similar root, गौ **gau**, signifies “cow” (which English word also reflects its origins); and this ambiguity gave rise to an interesting error into which almost all scholars have fallen. At the very beginning of the Gatha there appears the phrase **geush urva**, in which the first word, **geush**, appeared to early European scholars to be derived from the latter rather than the former root; and thus most of them translated it as “The Ox Soul” (since the term **urvan** means “soul”). When professors of a later date remembered the other meaning of **gauh**, they made confusion worse confounded by translating this line as “The soul of the earth, *in the form of a cow*” ... and it has often tickled me a little to see not one of these wise persons catching on to the fact that neither geology, geography nor geometry have anything to do with cows.

महात्मा Mahâ-âtma “Great Soul”, or **महाराजा Mahâ-râjâ** “Great King”). As we shall see, this may be the first—although certainly not the last—occasion that the Almighty has been called “The Great One”. But that interesting tale, and its even more intriguing ramifications, should be recounted in their proper place. At present we may leave it here, merely pausing to point out that the Vedic root **मह mah-** “great” becomes in Gathic **maz-** (the **-h-** sound in Indian tongues becomes a **-z-** sound in Iranian: see page ...); and that the related Iranian term **mazishto** is the very source of the English word “majesty”—suggesting very strongly that the term **Mazda** was, indeed, intended by the Prophet to indicate the Greatness of God.