

## CHAPTER 5

### A BRIEF OUTLINE OF THE BASIC TENETS OF ZARATHUSHTRA'S TEACHINGS (PART I)

It would not, of course, be possible in such a brief space as two or three chapters of this book to deal in depth with *all* of Zarathushtra's religion: and such in any case is not my intention; the subject has been discussed fairly extensively by others, and it is only necessary to go to a good library to look up excellent books on the topic. Here I propose simply to outline the basic tenets of his teachings, and that more with a view to understanding how they compare with the basic tenets of other religions—and if in the process I also give some idea of their depth, impressiveness and unique position in world history, well then so much the more fruitful will my labours have been.

In the first place, let us take up the *Avesta* as a whole: the scripture of Zoroastrianism in its totality. The entire scripture was not composed by Zarathushtra himself. The *Avesta* comprises four books or volumes: the *Yasna* or Book of Hymns, the *Yashta* or Book of Prayers, the *Visparatu* or Book of “Universal Righteousness”—these are also basically prayers—and the *Vidaevadata* or Book of Laws. There are people who believe that at one time many more Books (or *Nasks*, as they are called) existed, up to twenty-one in all; and these were, they say, lost over the ages, particularly at the time of the unfortunate arson of the Great Library at Persepolis instigated by Alexander of Macedon.<sup>1</sup> Nevertheless the oldest and most important of them all, the *Yasna*, has survived, although perhaps what has survived is only a part of what the complete text of the *Yasna* used to be in bygone ages. The other three Books mentioned above are subsidiary to it.

There are 72 Chapters in the *Yasna* and 17 of them, containing 238 verses in all, go to form the *Gatha* or Divine Hymns, reputed to be the words of the Prophet Zarathushtra himself. The *Gatha* is embedded in the *Yasna*: as for example the *Bhagavad Gîtâ* is embedded in the *Mahâbhârata*, or the Sermon on the Mount is embedded in the Gospels.

The *Gatha* is the cream of the *Avesta*. It reflects the mind and personality of the Founder of the Zarathushtri religion, the First and Foremost Prophet of Humanity. Even if all the other Books of Zoroastrianism were for any reason lost, the followers of Zarathushtra would still be able to remain faithful to their Prophet's teaching, in letter and in spirit, with the help of the *Gatha* alone.

<sup>1</sup> This figure is known in Western history as “Alexander the Great”, but in ancient Persia, his main victim, he was much more understandably known as “Alexander the Accursed”. The arson of the Great Library of Persepolis, much like the arson by Julius Caesar's legions of the Great Library at Alexandria, was a great loss—perhaps as great a loss to the East as the latter was to the West. There is debate among scholars as to why it took place. Some think that it was carried out under the instigation of Alexander's tutor, Aristotle, who may have been jealous of the Persian scholars' grasp of philosophical concepts (for at any given epoch in history—at least until the post-industrial period—the East had always been ahead of the West in such things); while other writers, basing themselves on Persian legends asserting that Alexander was Darius's exiled half-brother, think of the entire campaign of Alexander against Persia along the lines of a family feud (of which there were plenty in those days). Yet others think Alexander ordered the arson in a fit of drunken stupor. Who knows what the truth is: it all happened a long time ago; and the records, as we say, were destroyed. But there's no debate about the fact that humanity lost many incalculably valuable documents in that arson.

If the *Gatha* were lost, all would be lost; if the *Gatha* remains, nothing is lost. The *Gatha* is as important to the Zarathushtri as the *Veda* is to the Hindu, the *Torah* to the Jew, the Gospels to the Christian.

The term “*Gatha*” is derived from the root गै *gai* “to sing”. Like the *Veda*, the *Gatha* was intended to be *sung* or *chanted*. There are metrical rules governing its mode of recitation, just as there are for the Vedas, and they are strictly followed by Zoroastrian priests or **Mobeds** to this day.

Of all Zoroastrian scriptures, the teachings of the *Gatha* are supreme. Whenever disputes arise as to the significance of Zoroastrian teachings contained in any other Zoroastrian scripture, they can be resolved by referring to the *Gatha*, which must be the final authority.<sup>2</sup> Hence a study of the main tenets of the *Gatha* should enable us to get as good a grasp of Zoroastrianism as could possibly be obtained in so short a space as three chapters of this book.

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One of the distinguishing features of the *Gathas* is the enormous emphasis they place on the uniquely Zoroastrian system of **Amesha Spentas**. So to begin with we shall try to grasp what these are.

The word **Amesha** signifies “immortal”—it is cognate with the Sanskrit अमृत *amrita*, from which the English word “immortal” is itself derived—and as we already saw earlier, the word **Spenta**, like its Vedic cognate श्रान्त *Shvânta*, means “Holy”. The term **Amesha Spenta**, then, is often translated as “Holy Immortals” (using the word “Immortal” here as a noun rather than an adjective).

According to Zoroastrian doctrine there are seven **Amesha Spentas**. There is dispute, however, as to exactly which Sacred Seven the term refers. According to the most renowned Parsi scholar of this century, Dr. Irach Taraporewala of Bombay, they include the Supreme Being, **Ahura Mazda** Himself, while according to Shri Jatindra Mohan Chatterji of Calcutta they do not—and in this case they include the Angel **Sraosha**. We need not enter into controversy here, and just for the sake of argument—or rather for the sake of *avoiding* argument!—we shall adopt Dr. Taraporewala’s view here, without necessarily committing ourselves to it.<sup>3</sup>

Dr. Taraporewala in his book *The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra* has devised a visually striking diagram to show the Sacred Seven and their interrelationships. It looks something like the Jewish “Star of David”,<sup>4</sup> and we have it reproduced in the margin of the facing page.

<sup>2</sup> This is not, however, the view held by some extremely orthodox Parsis, who regard *all* the scriptures of Zoroastrianism to be the word of Zarathushtra himself, revealed to him by **Ahura Mazda**. However, this view cannot be sustained by any common-sense considerations, for all the Zoroastrian scriptures other than the *Yasna* are written in much more recent forms of the various Iranian languages than are the *Gathas*, and Zarathushtra could not possibly have lived so long as to cover all these various epochs. Of course it is common to many religions to believe that all their scriptures are the word of God Himself, or at least of their Prophets. But it is obviously not so (except in the case of the *Qr’an*); for the Bible, for instance, does not even claim to be entirely the word of God, or even of the Prophets.

<sup>3</sup> To be fair, Dr. Taraporewala does mention that **Sraosha** “is often mentioned in close association with the Holy Immortals” (in Part I of his book *The Religion of Zarathushtra*). By the way: Dr Taraporewala has sometimes been accused of injecting a considerable number of Theosophical notions into his translations and interpretations of the Zoroastrian scriptures. Now this may well be true; but it is by no means un-Zoroastrian for one who professes to follow the teachings of Zarathushtra to accept whatever he may find acceptable in the teachings of other religions, or even other philosophies: indeed he is actually *obligated* as a Zoroastrian to do so. The reason is, that a Zoroastrian is enjoined by the tenets of his religion—unlike the adherents of most other faiths—to use his Good Mind or **Vohu Manah** to diligently seek the Truth or **Asha**; and thus if he finds anything true anywhere in any text, whether its source be Zoroastrian or not, he is honour-bound as a Zoroastrian not only to accept it, but to incorporate it into his world-view. Dr Taraporewala may well have found some truth in Theosophy—I myself have found much truth there too—so it is not at all un-Zoroastrian for him to have incorporated these truths into his interpretations and translations of the Zoroastrian scriptures.

<sup>4</sup> The so-called “Star of David” (erroneously so called, by the way, since the Jews themselves call it מָגֵן דָּוִד *magen david* or “Shield of David”), although most commonly associated with Judaism, is by no means found in the Jewish religion alone: like the Swastika, it too has been found in diverse cultures all around the world, even in aboriginal North American ones (which no one can reasonably say had any contact with Judaism.)

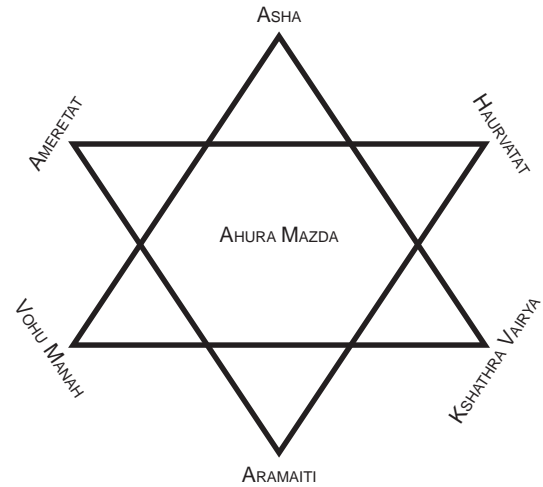
After **Ahura Mazda** Himself, the first of the Amesha Spentas—as depicted at the very top of the Star—is **Asha**. Let us read what Dr. Taraporewala has to say about **Asha**:

In the word **Asha** is contained the true essence of Zarathushtra's teaching. ...Today [among Parsis] the word **asho** implies only bodily purity, adherence to religious rites and customs, and ordinary goodness of character. If, however, we go back a thousand or fifteen hundred years, we find the same word in the literature of Sassanian Iran, where it implies, above and besides what it means today, purity of mind and soul, control of the senses, a loving heart, and other similar spiritual virtues. If we go back still further, we find it mentioned in the (late) Avesta literature that the Divine Beings, the **Yazatas**,<sup>5</sup> are also **asho**. These great Divine Powers fulfil their tasks in accordance with **Asha**. Each of them has been called "Lord of **Asha**". Finally, in the fundamental texts of the Avesta, in the *Gathas* of Zarathushtra, our whole life is described as founded upon **Asha**. We are also told that the whole creation is progressing along "the path of **Asha**." ...In *Yasna 60.12* the worshippers express the wish that "Through the best **Asha**, through the highest **Asha**, may we get a vision of Thee (O **Ahura Mazda**), may we draw near unto Thee, may we be in perfect union with Thee".<sup>6</sup> And in *Yasna 71.11* we are told that "There is but one path—the Path of **Asha**—all others are false paths."

The word **Asha** occurs in the Avesta Texts in a variety of forms, making a regular series: **asha, arsh, eresh, arta, ereta**. The last variant is clearly the **rita** of the *Veda*. It is also quite clear that the Avestan **asha** and the Vedic **rita** are two variants of the same word. ...In the *Vedas* we are also told that **Rita** supports and upholds all Creation. ...**Ahura Mazda** [Himself] has been described several times in the *Avesta* as "He who is highest in **Asha**, who has advanced furthest in **Asha**." In the *Gathas* He is described as being "of one accord with **Asha**". This seems to me to represent the very apotheosis of the word **asha**, for here we find **Asha** raised to the level of **Ahura Mazda** Himself. The Supreme is also pictured as journeying along the path of **Asha** at the head of His Creation. Only one conclusion can now be possible as to the meaning of the word **Asha**, viz., that **Asha** (as also **Rita**) is the Changeless Eternal law of God, His First Plan according to which all the universe has come into being, and obeying which it is progressing towards its destined fulfilment.

#### *The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra*

**Asha**, then, means Righteousness, Truth, Divine Law, Justice, the *summum bonum*, Spiritual Illumination, Enlighten-



DR. TARAPOREWALA'S DIAGRAM OF THE SEVEN AMESHA SPENTAS

<sup>5</sup> According to tradition there are 33 **Yazatas**, and they include such things as Fire, Water, Wind and Earth, and other such forces of nature, as well as spiritual qualities such as Blessing (**Ashi**) and Wisdom (**Chisti**). The term **Yazata** has derivatives in modern languages like Urdu and Hindustani too, as for example **izzat** "honour". Thus in ancient times it essentially meant "The Honourable Ones", and in Sassanian times—that is, during the time of the last Iranian Empire, which was overthrown by the Muslims—they were personified and actually worshipped, which goes very much against the grain of the strict monotheism preached by the Prophet. For this reason there are several distinguished scholars of the Zarathushtri religion who do not accept the Sassanian forms of worship as being truly Zoroastrian at all, and claim in fact that it was due to this that the Muslims did manage to introduce Islam, with its strict monotheism, back into Iran. I myself tend to an acceptance of this view, for it makes a lot of sense to me (and I shall discuss this at greater length later on in this book.) But it is also true that many orthodox Zoroastrians do not agree with the views of these scholars, and claim instead that the Sassanian period is also part of the Bigger Picture of the religion founded by Zarathushtra, and cannot be entirely divorced from it. And I have to admit that they do have a point there.

<sup>6</sup> There are some who claim that the Zoroastrian religion, unlike the Hindu religion, does not aim at an eventual merging with the Divine. The verse quoted here from the *Yasna* should put an end to such claims.

ment—no single word, in English or virtually any other language, is adequate to translate it fully, although as pointed out above the Vedic ऋत *rta*<sup>7</sup> comes closest. The simplest, most oft repeated Zoroastrian prayer says:

**Ashem vohu vahishtem asti.**

**Ushta asti.**

**Ushta ahmai hyat ashai vaihstai ashem.**

**Asha** is Love;<sup>8</sup> it is the Greatest [Love of all]. It is Enlightenment! [And] Enlightenment is his, who follows **Asha** for the sake of most Loving **Asha** alone.

**Asha**, then, is the first of the “Holy Immortals”. At times these Seven have been represented, perhaps in order to make them more easily understood to those who cannot grasp the abstract, as “Angels” or “Archangels”; but they are in actual fact *principles*—eternal and undying, and therefore “Immortal”, spiritual principles. And at the head of them all stands **Asha**, the most basic and important tenet of the Zoroastrian religion.

The second **Amesha Spenta** is **Vohu Mano**. Let us read again Dr. Taraporewala’s illuminating words regarding the meaning of this term:

The literal meaning of the name **Vohu Mano** is usually given as “Good Mind”. This name also might be considered in greater detail and from the point of view of the deeper truths implied in it. If we trace the word **vohu** its origin, we find it derived from an ancient root **vah-** (Skt. **vas-**), “to love”. And so... “**Vohu Mano**” is all-embracing LOVE. ...{Moses}<sup>9</sup> taught mankind, “Love thy neighbour as thyself”, and the same teaching is implied in the name **Vohu Mano**. ...In the New Testament (*I Corinthians 13.13*) Paul has spoken of Faith, Hope and Love,<sup>10</sup> and has declared Love to be the greatest of the three. And it is a fact that all Founders of Religions have pointed to Love as the one goal of creation. Love is indeed the Wish and the Plan of the Creator.

*Ibid.*

(And it is for this reason that I have translated the words **vohu** and **vahishtem**—in the **Ashem Vohu** prayer above—as “Love” and “the Greatest Love” respectively. It is also Dr. Taraporewala’s surmise that the meaning of the name of the Rishi **Vasishtha** is “the Greatest *Lover* [of God and His Creation]”; and as we also saw from the Gathic verse quoted earlier, Zarathushtra addresses **Ahura Mazda** as **Vahishtem**, and refers—probably—to himself as **Vahishta**:

<sup>7</sup> Whence the English “right”. The Greek ὀρθός **orthos** meaning “right”, “true”, “correct” (as in “orthodox”) is closer to an Iranian variant of the Vedic ऋत *rta*, namely **arta**: which, when softened to **arsha** and subsequently after dropping the -r- sound, becomes the familiar (to Zoroastrians) **Asha**. Although it has, of course, extreme connotations of righteousness, it is also used, as for instance in the *Upanishads*, as the synonym of सत्य *satya* “truth”, as in the already-quoted lines सत्यमेव जयते नान्ऋतम् *satyameva jayate nānrtam* “It is truth that is victorious, not unrighteousness”. Thus its meaning is a *combination* of both truth *and* righteousness, a concept for which no modern language (and few ancient ones either) have a single word. Indeed as Dr. Taraporewala has shown (and you too will see if you read further), it even includes the concept of love; and thus it goes far beyond what in modern times has come to be understood as “truth” (as for instance in the term “scientific truth”). In my own view, in fact, the best elucidator of the meaning of ऋत *rta* for modern times is Robert Pirsig, the author of the ‘60s classic *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* and its ‘90s sequel *Lila*, in the former of which he has gone to some lengths to equate the Vedic term *rta* with the Chinese term **Tao**, thereby according to it the very highest connotation any term can bear in any language. (Although Pirsig does not seem to have heard of Zoroastrianism, he *is* familiar with the Vedic *rta*, and thus may be considered to be dealing equally with the Zarathushtri term **Asha**.)

<sup>8</sup> Literally the translation would be “**Asha** is good; it is the Greatest [Good of all]... (etc.)” However, as Dr. Taraporewala points out in a subsequent passage in the same book (and which I have reproduced on this page too), the term **vohu**, normally translated as “good”, also has connotations of “love”.

<sup>9</sup> Dr. Taraporewala, like most people, mistakenly think it was Jesus who first said “Love thy neighbour”, forgetting that when he said it he was merely quoting from the **Torah** or **Pentateuch**, the first five books of the Old Testament traditionally attributed to Moses. Indeed in the **Torah** itself the passage appears dictated by the LORD God Himself, and so Dr. Taraporewala is not at all wrong when he writes “Love is indeed the Wish and the Plan of the Creator.”

<sup>10</sup> The *King James Version* has “charity” instead of “love”, but the Greek original of the New Testament (and of St. Paul himself, who wrote in Greek), was ἀγάπη **agape** which literally means “love”. The “charity” in older forms of English is derived from the Latin **caritas** which is the Latin translation of **agape**.

**Vahisitem Thwa Vahishta yem**

Thou art the Greatest Love; and this one [*i.e.*, this person, namely Zarathushtra] is Thy greatest lover [*i.e.*, devotee].

The third **Amesha Spenta** is **Kshathra Vairya**. The term **Kshathra** is very familiar in India: for in Hinduism the warrior caste is called **क्षत्रिय kshatriya**. It derives from the root **क्षि kshi-** “[to] rule” or “[to] have power over”...and in an inscription hewed into rock two and a half millennia ago, the Emperor Darius of Persia proudly refers to himself using this term:

**Ajem Darayavaush, kshayathiya vajraka, kshayathiya kshayathianam, kshayathiya dakhyunam.**

I am Darius, the adamantine<sup>11</sup> **Kshatriya**, the Ruler of rulers, the Ruler of [many] nations.

And from the term **kshayathiya kshayathianam**, which in later ages contracted to **Shah’n’shah** or “King of kings”, we derive the title Persian Emperors used to bestow upon themselves, and by which they were known the world over—even to the compilers of the Bible, who translated it into Hebrew: **המלכים מלשון Melech ha-melachim**.<sup>12</sup>

So the word **Kshathra** connotes “Power” or “Kingship”. And the term **Vairya** is derived from the root **वृ vr-** “[to] choose”, and means “capable of doing what he *chooses*” or, by extension, “worshipful”, “revered”, **वरणीय varaniya** “venerable”.<sup>13</sup>

The term **Kshathra Vairya**, therefore, stands for the All-Powerful *Will*, or *Might*, of God: a meaning reflected in a Hebrew term very possibly derived from this source: the name **אל שדי El Shaddai** “Almighty God”.

(For although it is not certain, the Hebrew word **שדי Shaddai** could itself be a contraction of the Iranian **Kshathra**. The **-r-** of **Kshathra** elides, as we saw above, even in Achamænian Iran: the **-thr-** thus becomes **-th-** or **-tt-**, and, in a foreign tongue, could thereafter easily become **-dd-**. And as there is no **ksh-** sound in Semitic languages, the **Ksh-** of **Kshayathiya** contracts (as it does in later Iranian itself) to **Sh-**, giving at this stage **Shaddiya** or **Shaddaya**. And finally, as there are no true vowels in Semitic writing, the **-y-** sound, represented by the Hebrew letter **י yod**, which is at times capable of representing Hebrew diphthongs as well, begins to be pronounced **-ai-**, rendering the name **Shaddai**. And hence the early English translation of the term **El Shaddai**, “Almighty God”, appears to me more apt and fitting than the meaning more often accepted by occidental scholars nowadays: “God of the Mountain”.<sup>14</sup>)

<sup>11</sup> The term **वज्रक vajraka** is normally translated as “strong” or “powerful”, but the literal meaning of **वज्र** is “diamond”—the other meanings obviously *derived* from the earlier one, since diamond is the strongest substance in the world—and thus the term **vajraka** may quite accurately be translated as “adamantine”.

<sup>12</sup> And which, after the rise of Christianity, was subsequently applied to Christ. As we shall see later on in this book, the influence exerted by the Zarathushtri religion on Judaism and Christianity is nothing short of enormous.

<sup>13</sup> The implication here, that the Sanskrit term **वरणीय varaniya** may linguistically be related to the English term “venerable”, may justifiably raise a few eyebrows. However, Indo-European languages do possess the peculiarity that terms in them that *sound* similar also have similar *meanings*, even if the terms in question are not related *via* their linguistic “roots” or elements. This probably occurs because there is no hard-and-fast dividing line between one language and another, each passing into the neighbouring language over a geographical “transition zone” of sorts. People living in such transition zones—who by necessity are usually bi-lingual—when hearing a term belonging to one of the languages in question, often use a like-sounding term in the other language in pretty much the same way: after all, users of language are not normally experts in the theory of language, and cannot be expected to know in what way any term was *historically* derived from its so-called “roots”—which are in most cases hypothetical constructs of linguists anyway. And although Sanskrit and English are geographically by no means neighbours, it must not be forgotten that English derives much of its own vocabulary from ancient Greek and Latin, both of which were in close contact with the Persian languages and dialects of those times.

<sup>14</sup> I shall have much more to say about this linguistic relationship in a later chapter; and that is why I have opened a door to the subject here. Exactly why, by the way, the term **אל שדי El Shaddai** is translated by modern scholars as “God of the Mountain” escapes me. If any of my readers does know, I shall be most grateful if they’d let me know as well!

Whatever the case, the third **Amesha Spenta** in Zarathushtra's scheme of "Holy Immortals" is the *Strength, Power, Might* of God. For it would appear that Zarathushtra, who as we have seen was a very practical man, considered it absolutely essential for God to have the *power* to do good, to be righteous, to love: otherwise all talk of goodness and righteousness and love would be futile; it would degenerate the Message of **Mazda** into a series of "goody-goody" Sunday School lessons, fit perhaps for little children, but hardly able to command the respect of even average adults, what to speak of Kings and Princes and people in positions of political power, whom—as we know—Zarathushtra was especially keen on converting in order to spread the Word.<sup>15</sup>

The Principles represented by the words **Asha, Vohu Mano** and **Kshathra Vairya** are so important in Zarathushtra's teaching that they are mentioned in *every single verse* of the **Gatha**. And it is to them the most sacred and oldest prayer in Zoroastrianism,<sup>16</sup> the **Yatha Ahu Vairyo**, is dedicated:

**Yatha Ahu Vairyo atha Ratush**  
**Ashat chit hacha;**

**Vangheush dazda Manangho**  
**Shyothananam angheush Mazdai;**

**Kshathrem cha Ahurai**  
**A yim daregobyo dadat vastarem.**

*Yasna 27.4*

This is the Iranian equivalent of the Hindu **Gâyatrî**, quoted earlier; for the **Yatha**, as it is sometimes called, is the most highly revered verse among the Zoroastrians. To this day Parsis sometimes call upon its power for help in time of trouble, or before undertaking any important task: **Yathâ, târi madad!** "Yatha, thy help!"

There are more than fifty translations of this (for Parsis) very important **manthra**, and all the interpretations differ from each other, sometimes greatly. I shall give my own, for what it is worth, and shall also give some alternative meanings for the first stanza, for I find it hard to be in agreement with all the points of any translation I have yet seen.<sup>17</sup> I have therefore tried to give the best of whatever I have read.

Here is my first rendering:

As the Lord is capable of doing what He wills, so also the Prophet—by reason of his great store of Righteousness [**Asha**].

<sup>15</sup> In this benighted day and age Parsis do not accept converts, but it is clear from a reading of the **Gathas** that Zarathushtra intended his religion to be for everyone, regardless of their birth or origin. Indeed he was so keen on converting Vistasp, the King of Balkh, that according to legend he is said to have performed miracles for the King—specifically, healing the King's favourite horse of lameness in all four legs—but only on condition that the King, his family, his courtiers and all his kingdom all accept and adopt the Zarathushtri **daena** (religion). It must be admitted, however, that all this seems to be a bit apocryphal, since in sharp contrast to the Judæo-Christian heritage, Zarathushtra himself does not seem to have proffered miracles as "proof" of the correctness of his teaching, relying instead on the listener's "Good Mind" (**Vohu Manah**) to accept his **daena** only because what it says is true: that is to say, in consonance with **Asha**.

<sup>16</sup> Whether the prayer really antedates Zarathushtra—as some scholars, including Dr. Taraporewala, think—is debatable; however, it does occur in the **Yasna** just before **Gathas** themselves, which are the oldest *known* Zoroastrian texts. It does not, however, seem to be a part of the recorded words of Zarathushtra. But the **Yasna**, in which the **Gathas** are embedded, could well be composed at least partially from material that existed in some kind of recorded or remembered form during—and maybe even before—the time of the Prophet; and if so, could well contain pre-Zarathushtri concepts, and perhaps even entire passages.—It should also be noted that this verse is not a "prayer" in the Western or Christian sense, for it does not pray for anything, in the sense of making a request of the Almighty. It is, in fact, more accurately a **manthra**, a formula to be *contemplated in the mind*, so as to help the devotee realise deeper and deeper meanings in it every time it is repeated.

<sup>17</sup> And it's not just me: many others have the same problem. The reason, as I see it, is that it is so far removed from us in time that over the millennia its words have acquired very different meanings from those which they originally possessed, at least for listeners of that epoch. In this book I have devoted an entire chapter—Chapter 17—to the problem of adequately translating extremely ancient texts, and thus I shall leave details of my arguments to that part of my book; however, it is as well to become aware that the problem does exist, and is perhaps more pronounced for the **Gathas** than for virtually any other literary work.

The gifts of the Loving Mind [**Vohu Mano**] are for those who perform deeds for the Great Lord of Existence.

The Power [**Kshathra**] of the Almighty is indeed his, who makes himself a protector of the poor, the needy and the meek.

This verse stands immediately preceding the *Gatha Ahunavaiti*, the first—and longest—of the five *Gathas*. Dr. Taraporewala says that he believes this **manthra** to be “the foundation on which the teaching of the **Gatha Ahunavaiti** rests”. If so, it would be worthwhile going into it in some depth, to try and get a good grasp of **Ahura Mazda**’s Message.

The first stanza says:

Just as God [**Ahu**] is all-capable [**Vairya**],<sup>18</sup>  
So is the Prophet [**Ratu**]—  
because he has a great store of Truth and Righteousness [**Asha**].

The word **Ahu** is usually translated, by most scholars, as “Lord temporal”, or Prince; and in many contexts in Gathic literature this is indeed its meaning. However, as Dr. Taraporewala himself admits, even while committing the error<sup>19</sup> I have tried to avoid, *viz.* that of translating **Ahu** as “Lord Temporal”, the word itself is most probably derived from **Ahu** or **anghu** (Skt. असु **asu**) meaning “life-breath”. Now this is one of the roots from which the word **Ahura** or असुर **Asura** is itself thought to have been derived. In the **Unâdi**, another ancient Sanskrit lexicon, we find this phrase:

नितारं अस्ति इति असु  
Nitâram asti iti asu

**Asu** means “the Only Reality”.

This term, then, in its Iranian form **Ahu**, is the one used in the **Yatha**, and signifies “God” or “The Formless, Incorporeal Truth [that is God]”, in resonance with the meaning of सत् **Sat** in the *Nâsadiya Sûkta* of the *Rigveda* quoted earlier.<sup>20</sup> At all events, it does not make much sense to imagine Zarathushtra, an intensely spiritual as well as practical individual, as ascribing omnipotence to anyone but the Almighty—he certainly would not, in any case, suggest to an earthly King that “Lords Temporal” are “all-capable”...being, I imagine, quite awake to the fact that even if his subjects did not, the King himself would know better, being pretty acutely conscious of his own rather severe limitations in this regard!

The translation of **Ahu** as “Lord Temporal” also spoils the

<sup>18</sup> The term **vairya** is one more of those terms that are very very hard to translate. We shall go into it in greater detail later; suffice it to say here, however, that although the most commonly-used way in which the word is translated is “all-powerful” or “all-capable”, it is not necessarily the best way to translate it. Nevertheless, because it has been commonly so translated, I have used it here for my first rendering.

<sup>19</sup> As Dr. Taraporewala himself puts it in the *Foreword* to his book *The Religion of Zarathushtra*, “The Gathas are *spiritual* in the fullest sense of the word. Therefore, we must never bring down their Message to the material level. The Bible speaks of ‘the Good Shepherd, ... [but] in the spiritual sense the ‘sheep’ are human souls [and the ‘Shepherd’ is Christ]. If we see [in those passages of the Bible] only ‘sheep’ [in the material sense] ... we should lose [the Biblical text’s] inspiration completely.” And so should we lose the **Yatha Ahu Vairyo**’s inspiration completely, if we translate **Ahu** as “Lord Temporal” or “Prince”—as many occidental scholars have done, and which Dr. Taraporewala has himself unfortunately copied—rather than as “The Lord” or “God”.

<sup>20</sup> It is also notable that the Iranian term **Ahu** (pronounced **Asu** in the Indian form of the Vedic language) may also be traced back to the Indo-European root **as-**, from which the English word “is” as well as the Latin **EST** (also meaning “is”) are derived as well. Thus another meaning of **Ahu** could be “That which *is*”; and if we take the Vedantic dictum ब्रह्म सत्यम् जगन् मिथ्या **Brahma satyam jagan mithyâ** “God [alone] is truth, the world is a lie” to mean that in reality only God exists, then the term **Ahu** cannot legitimately be translated, in a spiritual sense, as anything but “God”.

symmetry of the entire verse; for as may be noted, in each of the three stanzas above the Almighty, along with one of the three most important **Amesha Spentas**, is mentioned. Since the Gathic name of God, **Ahura Mazda**, contains only two words, and since a repetition would probably mar the rendering in the ears of Vedic people, it seems fairly clear that the composer contracted the term **Ahura** to **Ahu**—and, in my opinion, contracted it to make it *better*, at any rate closer to its own ancient Aryan root.<sup>21</sup>

There is another term in this verse that needs examination, the word **Vairya**. We have translated it, as do many other scholars, as “capable of doing anything [He, or It] *chooses*”, since one possible derivation of this word is from the element वृ **vr-** “[to] choose”. (From this root is also derived the Sanskrit word वीर **vir** and its Latin cognate **VIR** “hero”, and possibly also the English “war” and “warrior”, for both the warrior and the hero may be regarded as waging war in order to be able to “do what they *choose*”). However, the Sanskrit language has another word derived from this same root, which is also used in the **Gâyatri Mahâ Mantra** quoted earlier: वरणीय **varanîya** “venerable”, “worthy of adoration”. The Avestan **Vairyo** may well be cognate with *this* term, and if so the word *Ahu* become even more applicable to God, and less so to the Princes of this world:

Just as God is worthy of veneration,  
so is the Prophet—  
because he is truthful and righteous.

Now *this* assuredly makes sense!

The term वरणीय **varanîya** is, moreover, the very source of the name वरुण **Varuna**, and as we saw earlier, it was **Varuna** who, through his epithet **Vedhas**, gave rise to the name **Mazda**. What could be more natural, then, if this verse indeed antedates Zarathushtra,<sup>22</sup> that the name **Varuna** be at least hinted at in it?

यथा असुर वरुण [ वरणीय ] तथा ऋषिः  
**Yathâ Asura Varuna [varanîya] tathâ Rishih**

As **Asura Varuna** [is venerable], so [is his] **Rishi!**

This rendering seems to me to make as much, if not more, sense than any of the others, considering the context—and if so accepted, the verse’s pre-Zarathushtrian date as well. It is also lent support by the closing verse of the *Shwetâshvatarâ Upanishad*—which, as we shall see, is so full of Zoroastrian concepts that an extremely strong case can be (and has been) made out for its being an attempt to introduce the teachings of Zarathushtra into India without actually mentioning his name:

<sup>21</sup> Of course there may well be debate as to precisely from *which* Aryan root any particular word is derived. And if a word may be derived from two or more roots, it is often very controversial as to which of the two derivations should be taken as the “authentic” one. In this particular case, however, I know of no root from which the term **Ahu** could be derived so as to cause it to mean “Prince” or “Lord Temporal”, even though I know that the word *has* been so used elsewhere in the *Yasna*.

<sup>22</sup> Or even if it doesn’t...it should be recalled that the name **Varuna** returned to Iran as one of the 101 Names of God in later Zoroastrianism. Of course this is understandable, as **Varuna** is one of the major Indo-European deities, appearing (under different variants of his name) in places as far away as India and Ireland.

<sup>23</sup> It is to be noted that the very earliest portions of the sacred texts—of any religion—do not extol “Prophets” of any nature. The *Vedas*, for instance, although composed by **Rishis**, do not extol the **Rishis** themselves, but the various Vedic deities: the **Rishis** are very much on the sidelines compared to the Vedic gods. In other scriptures too the same trend is evident. The earliest part of the Bible, for instance, speaks of the generations from Adam to Noah as all having heard the voice of the LORD, but no one among them—not even Enoch, who was so righteous that he is said to have “walked with God”—is considered to have been a “Prophet”. Even Noah is not a Biblical “Prophet”, although he alone of all the population of earth—along with his family—was righteous enough to merit being saved from the Deluge. And not even the Hebrew Patriarchs—Abraham, Isaac and Jacob—are considered to be of the same spiritual stature as the true Prophets, the first of whom was Moses, “whom the LORD knew face to face” (*Deuteronomy 34.10*). And yet, not even Moses is regarded as being the “Son of God”, that place being reserved in Christianity for Christ alone. And although Christ is considered by Christians to be God, he is not as closely identified with the Supreme Being in Chris-

यस्य देवे परा भक्तिर्यथा देवे तथा गुरौ ।

Just as God is worthy of worship, so is the **Guru**.

*Shwetâshvatara 6.23*

Almost word-for-word the same as **Yatha Ahu vairyo atha Ratush!** Here in the *Shwetâshvatara*, for the first time in all of Indian literature, is the dignity and indeed divinity of the Prophet asserted in unambiguous terms: a concept that was born in Zoroastrianism, intensified in Hinduism (with its notion of **Avatâras** or Incarnations of God) and in Christianity (with its doctrine of the **Trinity** of Father, Son and Holy Ghost), and reached its culmination in Buddhism, in which the Supreme Being and the Prophet are not only equal in stature, but have become one and the same.<sup>23</sup>

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At this stage, and just for the sake of clearing up a confusion which has developed in Zoroastrian communities down the ages and unfortunately persists even among the majority of scholars—who really ought to know better—I should like to point out that the **Yatha Ahu Vairyo** and the **Ahuna Vairya** are *two different terms* denoting *two different mantras*: they are *not the same thing!* This point seems to have been missed even by the otherwise very careful Dr. Taraporewala. The **Ahuna-Vairya** (or **Ahunavar** or **Honover** as this term was contracted at later periods in Iran), was originally, as we showed in Chapter 1, the Iranian **Pranava**, namely **hun** or **hon**.<sup>24</sup> The word **a-hun-a** is made up of the three sounds **-h-**, **-u-** and **-n-** with the addition of an initial and a final **-a-**. The first **a-** is added as contra-aphesis, added for ease of pronunciation: a common enough phenomenon in many languages, illustrated in English by the term “accredit” deriving from “credit”, for instance, or “especially” from “special”; and the final **-a** is added for a similar reason: to render the following word, **Vairya**, easier to pronounce (for the **-n-** and the **-v-** sounds do not sit well in conjunction, in any language).<sup>25</sup>

The word **Vairya**, as we have seen, means “venerable”, “adorable”, “worthy of worship”; and so **Ahuna-Vairya** means “the Worshipful [or Venerable] **hon**”. This is the **बीज मन्त्र beej mantra**, the “seed **mantra**”: the First and Foremost of All Sounds, as the Zoroastrian tradition unmistakably testifies no less than the Vedic:

The Sacred Word of **Ahuna-Vairya** did I, **Ahura Mazda**, repeat ... The Word which was before the Earth, before the Creatures, before the Trees, before Fire-the-Son-of-**Ahura-Mazda**,<sup>26</sup>

tianity as is the Buddha in the Buddhist religion: for even though Christ said “I and my Father are one” (**John 10.30**), he also said “My Father is greater than I” (**Ibid. 14.28**). Since Zoroastrianism historically influenced all these religions, it is definitely possible that this concept born in Iran ultimately spread to India and Israel too.—And it is also to be carefully noted that although the **Yatha** does indeed extol the **Ratu** as being “as God”, Zarathushtra *personally* never speaks of himself as being Divine: as Christ in Christianity, for example, or Sri Krishna in Hinduism, always did.

<sup>24</sup> The **-u-** and **-o-** sounds are often interchangeable in many languages: indeed in Hebrew and Arabic a single letter represents both.

<sup>25</sup> There is, admittedly, another hypothesis, namely that the term **Ahuna Vairya** is composed of the terms **Ahu**, **-na**, and **Vairya**: the **-na** being equivalent to the English word “of” (as in modern Gujarati, for example, or ancient Celtic.) Thus the phrase may be taken as “The **Vairya** of **Ahu**”. But although *linguistically* this hypothesis does stand up, from the *common sense point of view* it doesn’t satisfy the inquiring mind—for then the question immediately arises: how should the phrase be *translated*? As “The Venerable [stature] of God”? The prayer—even in its first line—doesn’t speak of the venerable stature (or even heroism—that meaning derived from **vir**, “hero”) of *God*, but of the *Prophet*. The translation, in other words, doesn’t fit the meaning of the text itself.

<sup>26</sup> This phrase **Atar puthro Ahurahe Mazdao**, “Fire-the-son-of-**Ahura-Mazda**”, is commonly found in the Zoroastrian scriptures outside the **Gathas**, but is not found in the **Gathas** themselves. However, it is very likely *this* phrase that makes people think that Zoroastrians have scriptural sanction to worship fire as God,

before the Holy Man, before the Evil Ones, ... before all Corporeal Life, before all the Good Creation of **Mazda**, the Seed of **Asha**.

*Yasna 19*

It is quite clear from the above description that it refers to the Vedic **Pranava**, the Sound in which the Quintessence of All Wit<sup>27</sup> and Wisdom is expressed, expounded in the *Katha Upanishad* by the common ancestor of the Indians and Iranians, the Wise **Jamshed** or **Yama** the King (cf. यमं राजानं वरुणमग्नि-मन्वारभामहे, the **mantra** of commencing the **Pujas**) to **Nachiket**as his disciple, and illustrated in no less superlative terms:

The seat or goal that all the Vedas glorify and which austerities declare, for the desire of which men practice holy living, of That I will tell thee in brief compass. **Om** is that goal, O **Nachiket**as.

For this Syllable is **Brahman**, this Syllable is the Most High; this Syllable if one knows, whatsoever he shall desire, it is his.

This Support is the best, this Support is the highest; knowing this Support one grows great in the world of **Brahman**.

This One is not born, neither does It die; It came not from anywhere, neither is It anyone; It is unborn, everlasting, ancient and sempiternal; It is not slain by the slaying of the body.

*Katha Upanishad 1.2.15-18*

And almost like an echo, **Yasna** also declares:

And whosoever in this corporeal life, O Spitama Zarathushtra, doth mentally repeat this Word of Mine, and further mentally repeating it doth mutter it, and further muttering it doth chant it aloud, and further chanting it doth sing its praises—his soul will I, **Ahura Mazda**, help to cross over the Bridge into the best World, into the Highest World, the World of Truth, the Realm of Eternal Light.

It could almost be **Yama**, the King of Death, speaking to young **Nachiket**as, couldn't it?

The reason for even early Zoroastrians confusing the term **Ahuna-Vairya** (or its later versions, **Ahunavar** and **Honover**) with the prayer **Yatha Ahu Vairyo** seems to have been the antagonism the followers of Zarathushtra quickly developed for the Indian branch of the Vedic religion, which had not seen fit to adhere to Zarathushtra's injunction to abjure **Indra** and the other gods. Since the Indians laid enormous emphasis on their **Pranava**, the Iranians tried to get rid of *theirs*; and in this they largely succeeded, for it does not figure nearly as prominently in

when in actual fact they do not. Of course there is no question that fire is regarded as sacred in the Zarathushtri scriptures (no less than in the Vedic). But in all Zarathushtri scriptures, **Atar** or Fire is regarded as a **Yazata**, not even an **Amesha Spenta** (let alone the equal of **Ahura Mazda**.) And a reading of the *Gathas* makes abundantly clear that their message is one of uncompromising and strict monotheism; and Fire, "the son of **Ahura Mazda**", is definitely not sacred enough in the eyes of Zarathushtra himself to be quite on a par with the Almighty.

<sup>27</sup> The English term "wit" is derived, in fact, from the same Indo-European root as the Sanskrit term वेद **Veda**, namely **vid-**, which signifies "knowledge". Most interestingly, however, the word "wit" has come to be regarded in our own days as being synonymous with a dry sort of humour: as in "The witty Mr. Oscar Wilde". Now one thing that strikes the modern reader when reading almost any ancient sacred text is the singular lack of humour in it. Perhaps that is why anyone who speaks or writes of sacred subjects in a humorous way is regarded as being at least borderline blasphemous—as the Monty Python gang were regarded when they made their hilarious film *Life of Brian*. But it seems, at least to me, that a God without a sense of humour would show Himself up to be very imperfect, and thus not even worthy of worship! Perhaps we ought to remind ourselves, before we condemn any treatment of sacred subjects in a funny or witty way as being even borderline—if not entirely—blasphemous, that the term **wit** is derived from the same root as the term **Veda**, and thus should be considered just as sacred.

<sup>28</sup> Having spent a considerable number of years debating this subject with scholars on the Internet, I have found that the vast majority of them are reluctant to accept my thesis outlined herein with regard to the meaning of the term **Ahuna-Vairya**. However, it is not my thesis alone, but that of the redoubtable Shri Jatindra Mohan Chatterji as well—in whose translation of the *Gathas*, in fact, I first saw the thesis propounded. All I have done is take his original idea and develop it, adding arguments of my own to bolster it. It seems to me that those who refuse to accept this thesis do so because of a mental inertia they appear to have got into, not as a result of a carefully reasoned conclusion they appear to have arrived at. Thus I would

Zoroastrianism as it does in Hinduism or even Buddhism. And in order to do this they deliberately mutated the original meaning of the term **Ahuna-Vairya** and contrived to make it synonymous with the **Yatha Ahu Vairyo** prayer (and this was done in a very forced and unnatural manner, hardly convincing as a spontaneous process to even the most casual student). But the *Zend Avesta*, as its very name signifies, is a Book of Vedic Chants; and for this reason if for no other, this most Vedic of Vedic sounds, the **Pranava** or **Om**, could hardly have been absent from it at its inception. And thus there cannot be any doubt, at least in the mind of any impartial inquirer unencumbered with a load of erudition, tradition and stick-to-it-iveness, that its title in its original Iranian form was **Ahuna-Vairya**.<sup>28</sup>

Furthermore, and to clinch the argument, the *Gatha Ahunavaiti*, the first and longest of the five *Gathas*,<sup>29</sup> is so called from the fact—mentioned by Vyâsa himself in the *Mahâbhârata*—that “it is adorned with the Grace of **Om-kara**” [or **Hon-vara**: *i.e.*, **Honover** or **Ahuna-Vairya** in Iranian]. It is because of *this* fact that it is called हुँवति *Hun-vati* or *Ahunavaiti*.<sup>30</sup> The matter becomes very clear when we note that the titles of all the five *Gathas*, like those of many ancient sacred works (*cf.* the Hebrew names of the Five Books of Moses; the *Nâsadiya Sûkta* of the *Rigveda*; and the *Isha* and *Kena Upanishads*) are taken from the first word or two of their text. The *Gatha Ahunavaiti* does *not* begin with the words “**Yatha Ahu Vairyo**” or even the words “**Ahuna Vairya**”; it begins quite differently (see Chapter 6). The conclusion is therefore inescapable: at the very head of this Iranian sacred text of the Vedic period is placed the **Pranava**, *just as it is at the head of every other Vedic sacred text*; and *that is* the reason it is called *Ahunavaiti*, which is to say, “The **Hon**-bearer”.

like to emphasise to Zoroastrian readers that even if the thesis sounds contrary to their accepted traditions and beliefs, I do have very strong and carefully considered reasons for saying what I say.

<sup>29</sup> The five *Gathas* are known as the *Ahunavaiti*, the *Ushtavaiti*, the *Spenta Mainyu*, the *Vohu Kshathra*, and the *Vahishta Ishti*. Except for the first of the five, they all take their names from the opening word or two in their first verse.

<sup>30</sup> It is to be noted that the second *Gatha*, the *Ushtavaiti*, begins with the words **Ushta ahmai**, which is not *exactly* the same as the name of the second *Gatha*; while the third, fourth and fifth *Gathas* begin with the words **Spenta Mainyu**, **Vohu Kshathra** and **Vahishta Ishti**, all of which are *exactly* the same as the names of these *Gathas*. Thus the meaning of the term **-vaiti** in the term *Gatha Ushtavaiti* seems to be something like “The word with which this *Gatha* begins”, namely **Ushta** (which can be translated, more or less, as “Radiant Happiness” or “Enlightenment”). If the term **-vaiti** in the name *Ahunavaiti* signifies much the same thing—and it is reasonable to assume that it does—then the term *Ahunavaiti* as a whole must mean that this *Gatha* begins with the word **Ahuna** (*i.e.*, it bears at its head the **Hun** or **Hon**, namely the Iranian version of the ancient Vedic प्रणव **Pranava**).