

Zarathushtra

INTRODUCTION

The most ancient records we have of humanity having evolved a culture, a religion, and even a language, are to be found in the *Vedas*¹. The earliest of these Hymns go so far back in time as to seem to be almost contemporaneous with the beginnings of language itself: the first tentative attempts made by humans to say something, to express themselves in words. We can observe this process taking place before our very eyes and inside our very ears when we read and, more importantly, *listen to* the Vedas, for in many cases, the very sound of Vedic words convey their intended meaning: for this was, of course, the only way they could gain acceptance in those early days when, in all probability, no other language existed—when speech itself began to evolve from undifferentiated sound. We also see in the Vedas the process of a simple language acquiring greater and greater complexity, as we observe words becoming linked to each other through what linguists call their “roots” or “elements”—simple basic sounds which give rise to many different meanings, related in concept and yet distinct from each other.

The sound of the Vedas is one of the most fascinating features of this most ancient of ancient literatures, and of the language that gave rise to it. It is a language and a literature whose very resonances, whose very sounds, have rich and vibrant meaning. Indeed, this is one reason the Vedas are called श्रुति *shruti*, “that which is heard”. Not merely heard: the Vedas are *chanted*; in fact, the English word “chant” is very probably derived, in the ultimate analysis, from the Sanskrit term छन्द *chhanda*, which denotes the “metre” according to which Vedic Hymns are to be recited aloud. In fact, the word छन्दस् *chhandas* was another name for the Hymns of the Vedas themselves; for it is with this meaning that the word is at times used in the *Upanishads*²: they are referred to as “The Chants”.

If this word छन्द *chhanda* has found its way even into English (via Latin) as “chant”, it would be strange indeed if it were not found in languages which were spoken in lands far closer to India. And, as a matter of fact, so it is: it is the word *Zend*, found in the language of ancient Iran.

The *Zend Avesta*—the sacred scripture of the followers of Zarathushtra³—is the most ancient book of Iran. In fact the San-

¹ “*Vedas*: Ancient scriptures of India held to be ... the very revealed word of divinity. They go back to the early centuries of Aryan migration into India, some of the hymns doubtless having been in use before their arrival in India. There are four Vedas, the basic Rig-veda upon which the remaining three depend to a considerable degree; the Sama-veda or Chant-veda; the Yajur-veda and the late Atharva-veda. Theoretically the later Hindu sacred writings serve but to elucidate further the teachings of the Vedas.” (Note by Charles S. Braden in *An Encyclopedia of Religion* edited by Vergilius Ferm). What the learned scholar does *not* say is perhaps more fascinating than what he does. He does not mention, for instance, that the Veda—considered as a whole—is the oldest book humanity possesses; or that its language is the first known form of the vast majority of languages of both Europe and India, not excluding English, and far antedating Greek and Latin; or that it contains among the most marvelous poetry ever uttered by man—or woman. It would be impossible to do justice to this, arguably the world’s most magnificent literary work, in a short space; and indeed we shall not even attempt it: for of this entire book the Vedas will be one of the principal *leitmotifs*; and the more you read here, the more, we hope, you will be fascinated.

² “*Upanishads*: the basic philosophic texts of Hinduism, upon which all the orthodox schools of Hindu philosophy are supposed to rest. They are writings which record the speculations of the Hindu sages upon the nature of the world and of ultimate reality, and how man may find salvation.” (Charles S. Braden again, in the same *Encyclopedia of Religion* quoted above.) The word उपनिषद् *Upanishad* itself is derived, it is thought, from the terms उप-नि *upa-ni* “near to” and षद् *shad* “[to] sit”; for these were treatises—or so it is conjectured—expounded to disciples who *sat near* their teachers, most probably in forest glades, in order to learn the wisdom contained in them. (The word वेद *Veda*, on the other hand, comes from an ancient root *vid* meaning “knowledge”, and from which the English term “wit”—as in “wit and wisdom”—is also derived). It would be as unnecessary to explain these terms to Hindus as to explain what the Old and the

skrit word **पुस्तक** **pustaka** or “book” is itself thought by some to be derived from the term **Avesta**, which word, by application of the phonetic rules of transposition from Iranian into Indian pronunciation, becomes at first **उपसथा** **upasthâ** and thence **अपिस्तक** **apistaka** in Sanskrit. The word—or rather, a derivative of it—was so important to Pânîni⁴, the foremost grammarian of ancient India, that he singled it out for special emphasis: he says **उपान्मन्त्रकरणे** **upan mantrakarane**, *i.e.*, “**Upân** means ‘to compose **mantras** (or hymns)’” (*Pânîni 1.3.25*). The term **Zend Avesta**, then, can be translated as “A Book of Vedic Hymns”; and indeed the core of the **Avesta** are Zarathushtra’s own Hymns, his **Gathas** or Songs.

It is hardly appreciated, whether by the Hindus or the Zoroastrians of today, how close to one another the Gathas and the Vedas are. Their relationship is so intimate that entire passages from the Gathas can be rendered into the purest Vedic Sanskrit by the mere application of phonetic rules—that is, by merely exchanging some sounds for others; for instance, the Sanskrit word **अहम्** **aham** “I” is pronounced **ajem** in the Gatha, while the Sanskrit **जीव्हा** **jîvhâ** “tongue” becomes the Iranian **hijva**. Not only are the words of both languages derived from the same roots, but it is very likely that both versions of this common tongue were understood by people on either side of the Indus; for not only the words, but the grammar and syntax of the two idioms are virtually the same: in fact, some of the rules enunciated by Pânîni for Sanskrit⁵ grammar apply far more often to the language of the Gatha than they do to Vedic and even post-Vedic Sanskrit. Many names, on either side of the River, were in those times similar, and moreover, meant the same thing; for in ancient days personal names were epithets, describing some distinguishing characteristic of the person named—as for instance **शुक्र** **Shukra** meaning “bright” or “white”, and **कृष्ण** **Krishna** meaning “dark” or “black”. Traditions observed by people on either side of the Indus Valley were similar, and so were their myths and legends; many of their religious rites had virtually the same form and content, and were at times even called by the same or similar names. These people felt themselves free to intermarry among each other, and have offspring to inherit their property; for some of them settled down in Iran while other did the same in India, and yet others had relations and homes in both these territories. For in those days what we now call the frontier between the two lands—the imaginary line dividing people of imaginary differences—did not exist; the Vedic people populated both Iran and India equally freely. They established kingdoms, formed alliances, and created common systems of worship and living and trade and even measurement and mathematics; developed ongoing cultural and trade contacts with peoples

New Testaments are to Christians; but since generally speaking the votaries of each religion believe theirs to be superior (and others’, moreover, to be inferior), few Christians know even the names of the texts of Hinduism, much less bother to study them. That, of course, is their own loss; but in a way it is everyone’s, for the world of wisdom is the more impoverished thereby.

³ **Zarathushtra**, founder of the religion known as Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism (from *Mazda* or *Ahura Mazda*, the name of the god prophesied by Zarathushtra). The etymology and history of *Zarathushtra*, the Avestan and oldest form of the name, is uncertain ... The form *Zoroaster*, derived from the Greek *Zoroastres*, was used traditionally in European culture until the eighteenth century, when *Zarathustra*, closer to the original (and as found in Nietzsche) came into common use after the rediscovery [in the West] of the Avesta, the collection of sacred books of Zoroastrianism, and the resulting studies in Iranian philology.” (Note by Gherardo Gnoli, writing in *The Encyclopedia of Religion*—not the same *Encyclopedia* as the one quoted earlier though: a far more comprehensive one in fact, edited by the redoubtable Prof. Mircea Eliade). At one time one of the most widely-spread of all religions—mainly during the epochs of the great Persian Empires, the first of which was the first great empire of human history—it has now dwindled to very few formal adherents indeed; and yet, as we shall show, its impact on your own religion, dear reader, was so phenomenal as to leave almost no facet of it untouched.

⁴ **Pânîni**, the greatest grammarian of all time. He was the first to carry out (probably some time in the first millennium BCE, though to fix a definite date or even century is difficult if not impossible) a thorough study of the Sanskrit language and its even-then vast literature, and to codify its rules of grammar in a remarkably comprehensive work which, for conciseness of expression, has no rivals: indeed this trait became the badge of all subsequent Indian grammarians, who were reputed to rejoice more over half a syllable saved than over the birth of a son. Pânîni’s epoch-making treatise exerted such a potent effect on the language that Sanskrit was never the same after him.

⁵ **Sanskrit**. This most beautiful and fascinating of languages—whose expressions run the gamut from the most starkly simple to the most intricately complex ever enunciated—is (if the Vedic idiom be included in this definition) the longest-lived of all human tongues: neither Chinese nor Hebrew can match its immense antiquity; and while it is no longer spoken widely, it never quite died out even as a spoken language, for even today All-India Radio broadcasts the daily news in

of rival cultures as far away as Mesopotamia, Phoenicia and even Egypt; and carried their language so far west that the westernmost Isles of the Eurasian land mass are to this day called “Eire” after the term **आर्य** **Ārya**⁶, used by these people to describe themselves since even before some of them migrated south into Iran and India, others west into Europe and still others as far east as Japan, from their ancient arctic home.

In this book we shall make an attempt to trace the various links between the different cultures that grew up within the numerous branches of the Aryan peoples; explore their common linguistic, cultural and religious heritage; and try to determine their links with another major group of people who gave the world a large part of its culture, civilisation and religions: *viz.*, the **Semitic**⁷ peoples.

Two great religions have emerged out of the Land of Israel, which also used to be called Palestine: these two are Judaism and Christianity. They may be termed “World Religions”⁸, for their adherents are spread over major parts of the globe; these faiths have given rise to Spiritual Masters of the highest calibre and attainments, and have endured thousands of years. A third World Religion, Islam, emerged out of Arabia; although more recent than the others, it has nevertheless lasted more than a millennium; its founder was one of the most dynamic and multi-talented individuals who has ever lived; and it too has spread over enormous tracts of the earth’s territory and been embraced by hundreds of millions. These three World Religions are of Semitic origin: their founders and earliest adherents were all Semitic, and they exhibit a distinctly Semitic temper in their teachings and doctrine.

Two other Great Religions, namely Hinduism and Buddhism, are the product of the Aryan genius; they also have given rise to Seers of the highest spiritual level, have also lasted thousands of years, and can also boast hundreds of millions of adherents in many parts of the world.

These two groups—the Semitic creeds on the one hand, and the Aryan faiths on the other—exhibit pronounced differences between one another, at least outwardly: differences far more significant than those exhibited by the Semitic religions among themselves, or the Aryan religions between each other. Indeed, for years it was considered that, whether it be from the linguistic, cultural or religious point of view, the two peoples—Aryan and Semitic—developed independently of each other. This, however, is not quite correct; for as we shall show in the following pages, there exists a tremendously profound and immensely important historical link between these two great branches of the spiritual and cultural development of humanity. That link happens to be Iran and its ancient system of belief,

Sanskrit, and some Indian families employ it exclusively in the home. It is, of course, only ignorance that isolates most non-Indians—and many Indians too—from this wonder of the world of the mind: one whose magnificence prompted Pandit Nehru, India’s first Prime Minister, to say (rightly or wrongly—depends on your viewpoint) that the Sanskrit language and its literature are India’s greatest gift to humanity.

⁶ The word **Āryan** has, after the Nazis’ misuse of it, acquired in the West highly opprobrious overtones; and modern writers therefore avoid using it whenever possible, preferring alternatives like “Indo-European” whenever they have to talk even of the ancient Aryans. However Hitler has been, historically speaking, a very recent phenomenon, and a very transitory one at that; and we can hardly allow that *creep* to dictate to us our choice of words, now can we?—especially with regard to this noble term (**आर्य** **ārya** itself, in Classical Sanskrit, means “noble”). The word is employed in Indian texts so often that in any study connected with them it is unavoidable; and etymologically it survives in Europe too, for scholars think it originally derived from an ancient word for land, **âré** (whence also our English “acre” and “area”, as well as the basic metric measure of land, “are” or 100 square metres)—since the originators of this term obviously thought of **agri**-culture (another word derived in part from the same linguistic root) as an **aristocratic** (yet another word!) or **noble** occupation. For our study anyway it is indispensable; and we shall therefore use it freely and without additional apology, simply stating that by doing so no offense (nor pretense) is contemplated.

⁷ **Semitic**. Another term supercharged with emotion. As a word however it is much more recent than **Aryan**, having been coined by scholars (from **שֵׁם** **Shem**, the name of one of Noah’s sons) in order to designate Middle Eastern peoples—past or present—speaking a group of languages very distinct from the Indo-European; and of whom the Jews and the Arabs are the main modern survivors. As we shall have cause to show, they can in no way be looked upon as *racially* different from Aryans; however, *linguistically* there can be no question as to their separateness; and since in this study linguistic analysis is brought to bear with what some might consider a heavy hand, I’m afraid we shall have to retain in our book the word **Semitic** as well: again with the clarification, of course, that in using it no disrespect—or for that matter respect either—is intended.

⁸ For the sake of definition, we shall refer by the term “World Religion” only to those faiths which fulfil the following criteria: (i) The creed in question must have spread, at one time or another in history, over a major portion of the globe; (ii) It must have given rise to spir-

namely Zoroastrianism: the sixth of the Great World Religions of history, founded by Zarathushtra, the composer of the Gathas of the Vedic Age, the Prophet of the Mazda Yasni faith of the ancient Aryans of Iran, and the most important personality in the religious history of humankind.

For as we shall demonstrate quite conclusively in this book—and stupendous though the thesis may sound—Zarathushtra has, directly and indirectly, and over the millennia, exerted more influence on the world than any other person who has ever lived. The Parsis, as those who formally follow his faith are called today, number less than a hundred-thousand; but the impact of Zarathushtra can be powerfully felt in contemporary Christianity and Judaism, Islam and Hinduism, Sikhism and Baha'ism. His voice, though disguised as another's, has been heard on the slopes of Mount Fuji and on Hadrian's Wall; the hills of Judea and the shores of the Sea of Galilee have echoed his teaching, albeit unacknowledged, and so have the banks of the Ganges and the plains of the Punjab. The Bible, which does not mention his name, was nonetheless so strongly influenced by his teaching that without him Judaism would have been a very different faith from what it is, and Christianity as we know it might not, arguably, even have come into existence⁹, and certainly not spread in the direction it did. The transformation of *Vedism*—the ancient religion of the Aryans before they entered India from the north—into *Hinduism*, a pronouncedly Indian form of the original Aryan faith—is a result that has come about largely due to his work, unrecognised though his contribution has been. Islam has been so strongly influenced by the ideas of Zarathushtra—without even its founder, Rasul Muhammad, suspecting it to be so—that this most recent of World Religions has been adopted wholeheartedly by the people of Zarathushtra's very homeland: for the post-Sassanian Persians of the time did not realise that by embracing the strict monotheism, aniconism and simplicity emphasised by Islam, they were doing exactly what Zarathushtra had taught their ancestors to do when he first sang his Songs in praise of the Mighty Formless Spirit. And since the doctrines of exoteric Islam as enunciated by the Arabian genius could not completely satisfy the philosophical longings of the Persian mind, the Iranians appended an esoteric superstructure to Islam which goes by the name of *Sufism*, whose roots lie deep in Zarathushtra's own Songs, the Gathas. Not even Buddhism has escaped Zoroastrian influence, for the region around Afghanistan and Bactria, where Zarathushtra lived many years, and which to this day harbours esoteric communities and hermitages deriving their teachings from ancient Zoroastrian lore, was at a crucial time in history one of the main centres of the development of **Mahâyâna** Buddhist philosophy. Zarathushtra's thoughts, words, deeds

itual Masters of the highest calibre; and (iii) It must have endured a thousand years or more. (For this definition I am indebted to my father, Dr. Dinshah K. Mehta, the founder of the Society of Servants of God—and to whom, as may readily be imagined, I am indebted in many more ways too: indeed far too many and far too important to even begin to enumerate here). These criteria are to some extent subjective, especially the first two, and open to conflicting interpretations; but they *are* convenient at times to work with.

⁹ "...For had Cyrus, the Mazda-worshipper, not brought the [Jewish] people back [from Babylonian Exile], the later prophets might not have spoken at Jerusalem, nor might Jesus have been born at Bethlehem, nor taught in the region."—Words, not of a Zarathushtrian (who might conceivably have an axe to grind), but of a Christian clergyman, the Rev. L.H. Mills who lived and taught at Oxford. My own arguments bolstering this thesis—in some ears perhaps too strong, but which as I shall be able to show (especially in Chapter 18) is no exaggeration—are even more compelling. And over and above all that, we ought to remember that Christianity is an emanation out of Judaism, whose tenets were accepted *in toto* by Christ himself (see **Matthew 5.17-19**); and so any doctrine that influenced Judaism *ipso facto* influenced Christianity as well. As for Zoroastrianism's impact on Judaism, it has been so extensively researched by scholars, both Western and Eastern that there is hardly any need to elaborate on it here. Nevertheless, we shall be saying something about all these matters in the course of this study. Read on!

¹⁰ Of all of these we shall have a great deal more to say in this book. One distinguishing feature of an inquiry like ours is the proliferation in it of innumerable terms belonging to cultures and creeds foreign to one's own—familiar enough to those with whom they are native, but often very strange and exotic to others. And to the ordinary reader their mention in passing (as being "understood", so to speak) is at times irksome, and makes for heavy going; to lighten which load I have decided to adopt this system of margin notes wherein, whenever a term of such nature occurs for the first time in the main body of the text, I have attempted to give some elucidation. However, for some terms (like those in bold print here opposite) this is not quite an appropriate process; and these have, instead, been explained in the text itself, over a number of pages. So also with a few—like **Vedas** and **Upanishads**—regarding which some introduction has already been supplied in the margins: for they are far too complex and involved to be defined briefly.—The margin notes also serve to express lines of thought which now and again branch off in more than one direction—some-

and personality have captured the hearts and fired the imaginations of such important thinkers of our own times as H.P. Blavatsky and G.I. Gurdjieff, Rudolf Steiner and Friedrich Nietzsche¹⁰.

He was the *First Prophet* of Humanity, for we know of no person before him who singlehandedly founded an entire religion: a monotheistic religion at that, and one which has survived down to our own days. He was also the *Foremost Prophet* of Humanity, for not only did he found his own faith, but had a profound impact on almost all subsequent ones.

No other individual in the entire history of the world from the time Time began has ever had greater importance, influence, or impact on humanity; and yet he has been so neglected, even by the majority of historians (who surely ought to know better) that many—perhaps most—people in the world have not so much as heard of him.

It is about this unknown but mighty figure of human history, then, that this book is written; and it is to him that it is dedicated.

thing which occurs in the human mind all the time, but which mental process, owing to the exceedingly *linear* nature of written text, is hard if not impossible to represent in a book with but a single body of text: that is to say, *without* margin notes. (The idea for this method of book design I have pinched—as my Jewish readers will immediately discern—from the *Talmud*, which carries the concept much farther, and provides margin notes to margin notes: a superb way to render in writing the natural processes of the mind, and of which I am astonished to see so few other authors take advantage. Indeed had I the time, skill and patience—which of course I don't—to make this book as intricate as the *Talmud* even in the matter of its typesetting, I would willingly have done so: for although somewhat convoluted, such a layout much more faithfully mirrors the multi-dimensional complexity of human thought than does the common or garden variety of book. (Those familiar with computers and the World Wide Web will immediately realise that the *Talmud* anticipated, more than two millennia ago, the idea of hypertext—a magnificent feat indeed!)