

God's Good Rule, Vohu Kshathra. (To be Chosen by Man)

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In his magnificent conception of God, Asho Zarathushtra also includes a unique vision of God's Good Rule (Vohu Kshathra) which he exhorts man to choose and pursue in this world, by good thinking, righteousness and piety (Y46.16).

It is hard to conceive that at a time when most of mankind tried to please the gods through human and animal sacrifices, Zarathushtra not only conceived of One God but also saw God and man in an active partnership. The best way for man to worship Mazda is to emulate him and help to establish His Good Rule on this earth. (Y28.3, Y30.7, Y47.1).

Even the later prayers seem to have preserved this notion. For example, in *Hoshbam*, one yearns to become One with the Lord (*Hamem thiva hakhma*). At the root of such a vision of God lies the origin not only of ethics but also of the dignity of man, humanitarianism, individual responsibility, freedom of choice, human rights, and the like, which ultimately paved the way for modernity. Yasna 29 well illustrates this point. There we learn that this world had slipped into such a sorry state of sordidness and evil that good thinking (*vohu mano*) recommended Zarathushtra to exhort man to be Godlike, and thereby defeat evil. Zarathushtra promises the reward of Good Rule to such men (Y29.10). Man's purpose on this earth is to imbibe God's divine qualities and become an active ally (*Hamkar*) of God. Nowhere is this message so clear as in Y34.1:

By whichever action, by whichever word, by whichever worship,
Wise One, Thou didst receive for Thyself immortality, truth, ...
[dominion and] completeness, let these very things be given by
us to Thee, Lord, in the very greatest number.¹

The same sentiment is also echoed so well in Y34.2, Y47.1, and Y51.21. As Professor James Russell wisely contends:

¹ Insler translation.

It is from these original declarations, possibly the most momentous in human culture, - (for it is from them that the noblest ethical systems and concepts of human rights and law seem to bear their imprint) - that Zarathushtra should be called by all good men OUR prophet.²

Concept of the *Amesha Spenta*

It is hard to unlock all the treasures of the Gathas as they are like a hidden treasury with keys missing. One of the most difficult concepts to decipher is that of the *Amesha Spenta* (Benevolent Immortals) and why Zarathushtra found it so basic to his philosophy. He talks of them as separate entities as well as abstract qualities. He addresses Mazda himself as a single entity and also as a plural being (Y28.2, Y33.8, Y30.9, Y34.10, Y49.5, and Y50.4, 8). No one can claim to speak with certainty about this (or other things about the Gathas), but it seems to me that when Zarathushtra addresses Mazda in the plural, he is referring to all the *Amesha Spenta*, attributes of Mazda as they have become *hamem thwa hakhma* – one and the same with the Lord.³

The seven *Amesha Spenta* are like the seven colors of the rainbow – they may be separate but they are part and parcel of the same phenomenon. Like the colors of the rainbow, if you merge them together, they form one entity — white light – *spenta mainyu*, which may represent the divine essence of all the seven *Amesha Spentas*.⁴

Kshathra is no exception to this rule. It is a distinct, separate attribute or aspect of Mazda, and yet it is not possible to conceive of it in the absence of the other *Amesha Spenta*. Yasna 47.1, which is the only place in the Gathas where all the *Amesha Spenta* are mentioned together in one verse, emphasizes their interdependent nature. One attains Good Rule only by being Godlike in every way.

In this respect, it makes little sense to determine the status of an *Amesha Spenta* by the number of times it is mentioned in the Gathas, as is so often done. The importance of an *Amesha Spenta* lies in the fact that the divine quality it represents is necessary for man to emulate, to become divine himself.

2 USHTA, VIII (4) Dec. 1988, p. 4) (Emphasis in the original).

3 Gershevitch's extensive research in the FESTSCHRIFT for Helmut Humbach in 1986 fully supports this interpretation. In a lengthy review of various interpretations known to him, he concludes that the phrase means "Ahura Mazda and (his) lords" or "aspects". Heretofore, however, such a view has not been popular. Insler also translates the phrase as "Wise One and ye other lords" (Y30.9) in *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, page 35.

4 The word *sufed* (white) in Persian and Gujarati seems to me to be a derivative of *Spenta*, although it is commonly derived from *spanah* (power and strength). Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Volume 1, page 196.

It should be noted that the collective term *Amesha Spenta* is not Gathic, but a later term and there are other abstract qualities of God also mentioned in the Gathas, though not as often, which may explain why they were not assigned as much importance as the *Amesha Spenta* in later times. However, we do not know for sure how and when the concept of the *Amesha Spenta* developed.

Zarathushtra realized so well the limitless love of God for man and His eternal effort to help man realize his Godhead (*hamem thwa hakhma*) that even when he personally saw God as a single entity, as

the First One in the creation of the world,⁵

he saw Him accompanied by such *Amesha Spenta* as Truth (*asha*) and Good Thinking (*vohu mano*). For Zarathushtra to see and realize God is to see and realize Him in all His beautiful rainbow-like glory, because no one attribute could fully describe Him. He explained this vision in the concept of the Ameshd Spenta and used it to its fullest to exhort man to be God-like by developing the divinity in him and qualifying for “the best existence” forever.

To be God-like in the exercise of power is particularly difficult for man, because power corrupts him so easily (Y51.10-14, Y32.6, Y32.11-12). But without attaining this goal, man cannot expect to attain piety and Godhead. An entire Gatha, Yasna 51, therefore has been devoted to *Vohu Kshathra*, which is somehow not done in the case of the other *Amesha Spenta*, if we do not include *Spenta Mainyu* among them.

Vohu Kshathra Gatha.

In this Gatha Zarathushtra emphasizes the realization by man of the divine essence of God on this earth (Y51.2). Man must actively choose Good Rule for the spiritual progress of the world, which will lead mankind to the highest good and the most fortunate existence (Y51.1), the likes of which will not be known to man until renovation takes place. For this to happen, man must make the right choice (Y32.2) and become "Mazda's envoys forever" (Y49.8). For this reason, I very often regard Zarathushtra's religion as the Religion of Right Choice. Good Rule has to be actively chosen and sought by man, even as one has to choose the prophet himself.

Zarathushtra does not talk about the need for making a choice for the sake of making a choice but for the sake of establishing Good Rule (Y51.1). Therefore, he talks about those righteous persons who actively work for the Good Dominion (Y51.8-15), including those who helped him in his own lifetime to spread his divine message (Y51.16-19). Yasna 51 ends with the

5 Y43.5, Insler translation.

promise of Good Rule accompanied by all the divine attributes of God. (Y51.21-22). Zarathushtra declares,

Virtuous is the man of piety. He is so by reason of his understanding, his words, his action, his conception.⁶

Yasna 51.22 ends as beautifully as it begins, even though it is translated and interpreted differently by different scholars. Insler translates it as follows:

I know in whose worship there exists for me the best in accordance with truth [*asha*]. It is the Wise Lord as well as those who have existed and (still) exist [namely the *amesha spenta*]. Them (all) shall I worship with their own names [that is, I shall worship truth, *asha*, with truth, good thinking, *vohu mano*, with good thinking]. And I shall serve them with love.

In this translation, one finds the emphasis on worshipping each of the Wise Lord's *Amesha Spenta* attributes.

Many scholars, however see in this verse, Y51.22, the origin of *Yenghe Haatam*, our third most important prayer (after *Ashem Vohu* and *Ahunavar*) and translate it differently. For instance, Jafarey translates Y51.22 as follows:

The Wise God knows best any person of mine for his or her veneration done in accordance with righteousness. I shall, on my part, venerate such persons, passed away or living, by their names, and shall lovingly encircle them.

No two scholars tend to agree completely in their interpretation of the Gathas, yet such is their beauty that each interpretation still remains steeped in spirituality, even as it is cloaked in mystery so difficult for even the best scholars to unravel. Like those Rorschach ink-blot, one tends to interpret the Gathas in terms of one's own past conditioning and mind-set. My own conditioning leads me to believe that Y51.22 refers both to the *Amesha Spenta*, and to those human beings who have realized their essence in their lives, thus becoming worthy of our adoration and emulation, for they have fulfilled what Y51.1 expected of them by choosing the Good Rule. Thus Yasna 51 both begins and ends with the emphasis on man as an instrument of divine will and power on earth. Man can realize the divinity in himself by following the precepts in Y51.1-21, and finally himself could become worthy of adoration as any *amesha spenta*, being revered individually by name, as we always do in all our prayers for the departed because each Zoroastrian is expected to fulfill this goal in his or her lifetime. Such an interpretation of Y51.22 is lent credence by

6 Y51.21, Insler translation.

the fact that originally *amesha spenta* meant any person, alive or deceased, who had attained perfection and immortality (*Hamem Thiva Hakhma*) because of his piety. (Preface to Y28).

The use of the masculine gender in this article, though used only for convenient reading, is regretted by the author and should not be ascribed to Zarathushtra who makes it explicitly clear that

These things [teachings] are exactly true [for] men; [and] exactly [for] women.⁷

And man or woman both cross over the Chinvat (Judgment) Bridge by following his teachings (Y46.10). The prayer *Yenghe Haatam* faithfully represents the spiritual equal rights of women. And since to Zarathushtra this material world is but an extension of the spiritual world, women are entitled to equality in matters material as well. Zarathushtra further emphasized women's equality by perceiving some *Amesha Spenta*, such as *Spenta Armaiti*, as feminine. Even the name *Mazda* is commonly, if not universally, acknowledged as being derived from a feminine noun.

***Vohu Kshathra* in Actual Practice.**

The Good Dominion envisioned and preached by Zarathushtra 3,000 or so years ago is the vision of a perfect world. One finds echoes of it in the Bible, the Koran and even in the texts of Mahayana Buddhism, Ramayana, and Gita. The echoes of this vision for the Good Rule are found in the rock inscriptions of Achaemenian kings who led the way for religious tolerance and human progress some 2,500 years ago. The echo of this vision was felt even by Firdausi, who made his entire epic, the *Shahnameh* a monument to the concept of Good Rule by depicting it mainly as a chronicle of good versus bad rulers. This is not to say that the Zoroastrian kings were always exemplary rulers but Zarathushtra's vision of *Vohu Kshathra* always provided them with an inspiration to be exemplary rulers. Firdausi best expresses the sentiment of the Gathas when he maintains that "King Faridun was not an angel adorned with musk and perfumes, but he obtained righteousness by justice and charity, and if you guide yourself by justice and charity/ you could also become (an angel like) Faridun." So forceful is the influence of ideas.

By revealing to mankind ideas and words never spoken before (Y31.1) by anyone, ideas which later infiltrated into Judaism, Christianity, Mahayana Buddhism, Mithraism, Manichaeism, and through the Greeks into European traditions, Zarathushtra was the first known prophet to lead mankind into such noble and spiritual concepts, not the least of which is *Vohu Kshathra*.

⁷ Y53.6, paraphrase of Insler translation.

It is only when man will overcome all the evil within himself and in this world that such a kingdom will come. If in the meantime we suffer, it is because we are not yet heeding Zarathushtra's advice in bringing it about.

According to E. Kulke,⁸ Mary Boyce,⁹ and Duchesne Guillemin,¹⁰ it was this latent tendency to work for the renovation of the world and Good Rule that, instinctively drove the 19th century Parsis to work towards industrial revolution, political independence, social and educational reforms, labor and social welfare and other progressive causes, although there were no translations of the Gathas (or any other religious texts) available to them then. Kulke was surprised not only by the extensive charities of the Parsi baronets and industrialists, but also by innumerable small benevolent acts of unknown Parsis, such as, for example, one Mr. Cama who awarded prizes for the best essays on small-pox in the 19th century, and distributed them free wherever small-pox was raging in India. Such selfless human acts and the willingness of man to help his fellow-human beings will ultimately ensure the establishment of God's good Kingdom¹¹ on this earth.¹² Let us all work towards that goal.

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- 8 Kulke, Eckehard. *The Parsees in India A Minority As Agent of Social Change*. München: Weltforum Verlag, 1974. The teachings of Zarathushtra made an indelible impact on his followers, so that even when they were compelled to migrate to India and lived in a very different religious system, and even when they did not know the meaning of the Gathas or any other prayers, they nevertheless intuitively tried to put the principle of Vohu Kshathra into practice in their daily lives. Kulke well establishes this fact by quoting from 19th century Parsis on this subject. Thus he quotes *By A Zoroastrian*, appearing in the *Indian Spectator* (July 14, 1889) as follows: "The true prayer lies in action and practice ... on the physical, moral and spiritual planes." "In his poems," observes Kulke, "B.M. Malabari glorifies the deed as a prayer, as salvation, and divine duty." (*East & West*, Volume 21, 1921, page 33). He states: "The view that man is predestined to shape the world and to set it in motion, can be demonstrated in the correspondence of individual Parsees. Thus, for example, Dadabhai Naoroji remarks that '...We have to put nature into motion. If we don't do so, nature by its inertial will remain still.'" (Kulke, at page 258). Until K.R. Cama, an intimate friend of Dadabhai Naoroji, started learning and teaching the Avesta grammar, the Parsis had no conception of the Gathic principle of *Vohu Kshathra*. And yet, as an article in *The Reader's Digest* (April 1983, pp. 248-252) clearly delineates, J.N. Tata was so driven by this principle.
- 9 Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1987.
- 10 J. Duchesne-Guillemin, *Religion of Ancient Iran*, (English translation, Bombay, 1973). At page 4, he wonders "whether the rise of the Parsis – as was the case in fact with Puritans – was not aided by their religious commandments."
- 11 I agree with Mary Boyce when she asserts that "as Christians pray to God 'Thy Kingdom come', so also Zoroastrians long to establish the kingdom of Ahura Mazda here below." She adds: "Taraporevala rejected the translation of 'kingdom' as giving a distinctly Christian color to ancient Zoroastrian ideas: but this coloration seems in fact due to Christianity having borrowed certain of these ideas from Zoroastrianism." Boyce, *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Volume I, page 209. Such a connection between the Kingdom of God and renovation/resurrection is made abundantly clear in Y34.15.
- 12 In the later Zoroastrian literature *Kshathra* is linked with metal, but nowhere in the Gathas does one find such a connection, even though the word metal is mentioned twice there.