

“LIFE” AFTER LIFE ACCORDING TO ZARATHUSHTRA

Kersey A. Antia

February 15, 2018; Updated December 28, 2018

Asho Z. (Zarathushtra) is recognized by most historians as being the first in human history who laid down a rationale for what awaits us humans after our life on this earth comes to an end. There were many beliefs about afterlife even in his own prehistoric times but they had, to speak the least, no logical coherence and they gave wide range to imagination, superstition and manipulation by priests of which Z. himself so often complains in the Gathas. (Yasna 32.12, 14,44, 20, 46.11, 48.10, 51.14). For the first time in human history Z. expounded a very logical doctrine of what happens in afterlife, which was as modernistic in his ancient times as it is today. Z.'s genius which had to be inspired and guided by a divine intervention and revelation, consists not only in propounding a very unique doctrine regarding afterlife but also intricately linking it with what we do with our life while on this earth, thereby making them two sides of the same coin. In the very beginning paragraphs of the Gathas, he makes it very clear: we are granted “the attainments of both existence – yes of the spiritual as well as corporeal world” (Y.28.2) by following the precepts he lays down for us. If we do so, we will be able to usher into “the foremost existence.” (Y.28.11). In Y.30.9 he exhorts us to be in the vanguard for bringing about the renovation (Frashokereti) of the world, which will make the world free of all evil (leading to the resurrection of souls and Final Judgment) just as it was in the beginning, that is as good as the spiritual world itself.

How can mankind bring this about? Z. was the first sage in human history to recognize the importance of free will which I have discussed at length in the paper I presented at the First Gatha Conference and I am planning to write more about its eternal significance. Y.30.2 is quoted often in this regard but Y.31.11 is even more explicit about it: “O Mazda! A person with free will is able to carry out his wishes (only) because at the very outset Thee by Thy (Good) Mind, created this material world and Daena (Conscience that should guide all our actions, e.g., Religion), Intelligence, (and) because (Thou gavest us) corporeal body and breath (along with) (ability to make use of) both actions and precepts.” Thus, Ahura Mazda Himself has created free will. Why?

Because, Z. says there are two primeval spirits, twins which are known to be in (constant) conflict – one good and one bad, and the good person chooses rightly between these two (spirits) but not the bad

one. (Y.30.3). Moreover, when they first came about, they created life and non-life (death, destruction and so on), and at the end (of existence), worst existence will be the fate for those who strayed from the true path but the Best Mind for those who followed the path of Asha. (Y.30.4). Thus, a person could be dead in spirit (Ajyaiti) even while alive because of making wrong choices in life and those who make the right choices can enjoy mentality (mano) which is Vahishta (best), which later became a word for paradise – Bahesht. I have elsewhere expounded in detail about attaining spirituality in Zoroastrianism (*Chehernama*, Issue No. 146, Summer, 2007) and so I won't dilate on it here. Suffice to say that one can easily see the genius of Z. in coming up with the concept of Ahura Mazda, All-Knowing Lord, along with His manifestation in seven Amesha Spentas, Immortal (eternal) Beneficent Beings, each representing an essential Godly attribute which we are exhorted to emulate constantly and dedicate them to Mazda “in the very greatest measure.” (Y.34.1). The same sentiment is expressed in Y.33.12, 34.11 and 45.5.

These are, in short, the principles Z. lays down for this life. What happens to the mortals after they pass away from this earth depends exactly on the choices they make while on this earth: Akem Akaai, Vanghuhim Ashim Vanghaove (Y.43.5). See also Y.46.18. Those who will not follow Z.'s precepts “exactly” as he says, “there will be (nothing but) woe at the end of existence.” (Y.45.3). The good, beings, “be it men or women” “shall (easily) cross the Chinvat Bridge (Bridge of the Selector where we will be judged for our sojourn on this earth.) (Y.46.10). But those who made the bad choices “will become guests in the Abode of Lie forever.” (Y.46.11) and will be troubled at the Chinvat Bridge – Y.51.12, 13. Z makes it very explicit in Y.49.11: “But the souls of the deceitful persons, (who indulged) in misrule, bad actions and bad utterances, bad conscience, bad mentality shall continue to encounter bad Khwareh and truly end up as the guests in the House of Lie.” “These things,” emphasizes Z., “are exactly true (for men) and exactly (for) women, Yasna 53.6. Bad Khwareh shall be for those deceitful persons), as they cry 'woe'” (Y.53.6), which Insler explains as: “when they shall be in hell.” See also Y.51.15,53.7,53.8. However, I for one find no word in the Gathas for 'hell' or 'heaven' but only “worst existence” and “Best Mentality” or “Most blessed state of mind.”

Later on a comprehensive belief system developed about heaven and hell, but Z.'s message is simple: true to Z.'s most important aspect of Ahura Mazda being Vohu Mana, Good Mentality, Ashavan attains Khathra (happiness – Y.28.2) and a blessed existence of mind and the Dregvant trembles and fails at the Chinvat Bridge and becomes a guest in the House of the Falsehood or Lie forever, though they are ultimately redeemed per later texts. The Ashavan “wins the prize of a

future existence “as well as material prosperity.” (Y.46.10). See also Y.43.1, 44.18, 49.9. As Z. declares so unambiguously in Y.45.7:

“Because those who are alive, and those who have existed in the past and those who will be born in future, shall opt for their salvation that comes from Him, the One who offers solicitude. (Know ye know) that the soul of the Ashawan will attain the strength of immortality, that (the soul) of the wicked is saddled with eternal woes. These things indeed were created by Ahura Mazda because of His (Divine) Authority.”

Such a theology hardly leaves any room for priestly intervention for a person's fate in the other world, though it could provide significant solace to the living, if not to the deceased soul. Even the conservative priest such as Sir J.J. Modi have attested to it: “I do say and believe that the worship of a pious Zoroastrian does not need priestly aid! (*Fezana Journal*, Fall 2001, p. 47).

Thus, inspired by nothing less than divine inspiration to which he admits often in the Gathas (Y.43.5, 43.7,8,9,10,11,12,13 and 15), Z. endowed us with precepts about life and afterlife by linking the two with theological sophistication and logical coherence unknown in his times and long thereafter. By preaching the doctrine of One Loving God who for his love for mankind and its progress created a material world in the image of the spiritual world for the spiritual upliftment of mankind and granted human beings free will, thereby making humans the center of the universe and making them responsible for their own deeds in this life as well as in the afterlife. Z. thus delivered great service to all mankind by removing all superstitions and illogical beliefs hitherto prevalent about afterlife and by preaching a very intricate monotheism (so unknown in his times) as the basis of his teachings for this world and beyond – made so explicit in Y.45.7. It is not surprising therefore that the echos of his teachings can be found in the Judeo-Christian traditions. I have written a lot about it ever since winning a K.R. Cama Oriental Institute's essay prize on this subject while still a freshman in college and intend to write more about it. But at the moment suffice to say that Z.'s revelation was a turning point in the history of beliefs in afterlife and his emphasis on free will laid the foundation of human progress, liberty and modernity. Most scholars recognize this fact. For example, Dr. James Russell who has devoted his life to the study of Zoroastrianism acclaims: “It is because of these original declarations, possibly the most momentous in human culture – that Zarathushtra should be called by all good men our prophet. (*Ushta*, VIII(4), Dec. 1988, p.4).

Even those who had a relatively cursory acquaintance with Zoroastrianism such as Prof. Ken Vincent have noted: “In a very real way, the religion of Zarathushtra is the foundation of all Western religion.” And the late Prof. Oxtoby told me some time ago he was going to include Zoroastrianism under the Judeo-Christian traditions in the book he was editing then on World Religions and he has actually done that.

Let us conclude: “Ushta No Zato Athrava Yo Spitamo Zarathushtra.” (Farvardin Yasht). “We are blessed that Asho Spitama Zarathushtra was born for us.” Amen!

ORALITY IN ZOROASTRIANISM

To all those who find fault with the Mazdean orality, I would like them to consider Michael Axworthy's remarks:

“To ourselves, at our great remove of time, awash with written materials every moment of our working lives, dominated by the getting and spending of money, a human system that was largely non-literate and operating for the most part on the basis of payments in kind, not cash, even if it be a great empire capable of stunning monuments and great sculptural art, seems primitive. But the history of human development is not simply linear. It is not quire right to see the oral tradition of sophisticated cultures like that of Mazdaism as unreliable, flawed or backward, something we have gone beyond. The Persians were not stupidly trying, with the wrong tools, to do something we can now, with the right tools, do incomparably better. They were doing something different, and had evolved complex and subtle ways of doing it very well indeed, which our culture has forgotten. To try to grasp the reality of that we have to step aside a little from our usual categories of thought, for all the apparent familiarity of Mazdaean concepts like angels, the day of judgement, heaven and hell, and moral choice. The Achaemenid Empire was an Empire of the Mind, but a different kind of mind.” (*Empire of the Mind: A History of Iran*, Hurst & Co., London, 1988, pp. 23-24).