

# Zarathushtra's Message: The Gāthās

## The Gāthās

The fountain-head of Zarathushtra's religion lies in his hymns—the *Gāthās*, which are reputed to be his own utterances. Divinely inspired and revealed, the *Gāthās* are in the form of exalted poetry, within which lies a myriad of esoteric truths.

"Poetry often conveys many levels of reality and can touch numerous springs of human understanding, which often philosophical discourses cannot penetrate."<sup>1</sup> The poetry of the *Gāthās* is profoundly instructive though quite enigmatic, and hence the hymns lend themselves to many different interpretations.

The *Gāthās* are composed in a richly developed language, intricate in style and syntax, by a man who must undoubtedly have undergone a rigorous priestly training. His passionate utterances seem to have formed the basis of a religious experience leading into a dialogue between himself and his Creator—Ahura Mazda, the Lord of Wisdom. Zarathushtra thus, was the recipient of a revelation which when accepted by the ancient Iranians, became a religion, making him the first prophet-priest of the oldest revealed religion in the world.

Zarathushtra's *Gāthās* are divided into five hymns, within which are incorporated seventeen chapters (*Av.Hās*). The hymns are not in chronological sequence, but appear to follow a poetic metre according to which they have been arranged.

1. Ahunavaiti *Gāthā* (*Hās* 28–34)
2. Ushtavaiti *Gāthā* (*Hās* 43–46)
3. Spentamainyu *Gāthā* (*Hās* 47–50)
4. Vohukshathra *Gāthā* (*Hā* 51)
5. Vahishtoisti *Gāthā* (*Hā* 53)

The hymns of the prophet have been faithfully preserved and for centuries, have been orally transmitted down in an unchanged form by his

1. Dale Bishop in "A Western Response to Zarathushtra".

followers. The *Gāthās* were probably first systematically written down as late as the sixth century A.C., when the Avestan alphabet was invented.

The divine outpourings of Zarathushtra show the depth of his vision, his intellectual quest, his spiritual seeking, and above all, his longing to understand the workings of the world from a specific source whom he perceived to be the Lord of Wisdom. For the first time in human history, man was shown a new path—a path leading towards the recognition of the mind, and thereby a better understanding of one's self.

## A Thematic Analysis of the Gāthās

### Zarathushtra's God

#### God Is Wisdom:

"...when I grasped Thee in a vision to be the Father of the good mind, the real Creator of Truth, (and) the Lord of existence in Thy actions." (Y.31.8).

"Yes, I have already realized Thee to be bounteous, O Wise Lord ...." (Y.43.9).

"...These things indeed and others I wish to know, O Wise Lord." (Y.44.3).

"...the Lord who is famed to be Wise in His soul...." (Y45.10).

#### God Is the First One:

"Yes, although Thou art the First One ...." (Y.31.8).

"... when I saw Thee to be the First One at the creation of the world, ...." (Y.43.5).

#### God Is Omniscient:

"... Thou, whom no one is able to deceive." (Y.43.6).

"... the All-viewing Lord is not to be deceived." (Y.45.4).

"... that which the Wise Lord, the Knowing One, told me: ...." (Y.45.3).

#### God Is Eternal:

"Thou who dost guard truth and the good mind for eternity ...." (Y.28.11).

"Then I recognized you, O Mazdā, in (my) thought as being the beginning and the end ...." (Y.31.8).<sup>2</sup>

#### God Is the Creator:

"....O Wise Lord, I am helping to discern Thee to be the Creator of everything....." (Y.44.7).

".... Through the good mind the Creator of existence shall promote the true realization ...." (Y.50.11).

#### God Is Good:

"..... The Wise One is Lord through such actions stemming from good spirit." (Y.45.5).

"..... seen the Wise One in a vision to be Lord of the word and deed stemming from good spirit ...." (Y.45.8).

#### God Is Mighty:

".... Grant thou, piety, your rule of the good mind for the glory of the Mighty One." (Y.51.2).

".... instruct us to the straight paths of the Mighty One ...." (Y.43.3).

#### God Grows:

"..... Through this spirit, O Wise Lord, Thou art to grow, Thou who, upto now indeed, hast been the same, Lord." (Y.31.7).

#### God Is Man's Friend:

"..... Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a friend should grant to a friend ...." (Y.46.2).

#### God Is Virtuous:

".... and virtuous like Thee, O Wise Lord." (Y.43.3).

"Yes, I shall (truly) realize Thee to be both brave and virtuous, O Wise Lord....." (Y.43.4).

The core of Zarathushtra's teachings appears to be in his apprehension of a primeval unity in a perfect world created by the One, Supreme, Eternal, All-knowing God of the good creations – Ahura Mazdā the Lord of Wisdom, whom he perceived to be wholly wise, good and just.

Zarathushtra did not see his God as an omnipotent Being, for he declared in his hymns that God must grow, through the cumulative power of man's good thoughts, words and deeds. This in turn he promised, would strengthen the power of God who at the end of time he proclaimed, would become truly omnipotent when evil would be utterly vanquished by the possessors of truth – the *ashavans*.

God he extolled, was mighty and the strongest, though never to be feared; for he saw God as an ally and a friend of man. Zarathushtra perceived God to be perfect and ethically excellent, and his greatest triumph seems to have been in revealing to his people, that "....man can both serve and honour God" through a rational, ethical structure rather than through the process of instinctive worship or blind faith.

#### Duality

"Yes, there are two fundamental spirits, twins which are renowned to be in conflict. In thought and in word, in action, they are two: the better and the bad .....when these two spirits first came together, they created life and death, and how, at the end, the worst existence shall be for the deceitful, but the best thinking for the truthful person ..... Of these two spirits, the deceitful one chose to bring to realization the worst things. (But) the very bounteous spirit, who is clothed in the hardest stones, chose the truth....." (Y.30.3 – 5).

2. See Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* Vol.1 p 197.

"Yes, I shall speak of the two fundamental spirits of existence, of which the bounteous one would have thus spoken to the evil one: 'Neither our thoughts nor teachings nor intentions, neither our preferences nor words, neither our actions nor conceptions nor our souls are in accord.'" (Y.45.2).

The prophet recognized the need for a fundamental dualism in the relative world, reflected through the existential paradoxes observable in life, such as those of light and darkness, truth and falsehood, righteousness and wickedness, order and disorder, life and death. The Bounteous Spirit, he taught, upheld the foremost principle of existence, that which is the life-enhancing, conserving force; whereas the evil spirit, he declared, came into a transient existence in the relative world as the agency of excess and deficiency, which he saw as the deviation from the "golden mean". Evil he thus held, was a corrupt, destructive and life-negating force whose defeat he promised, has been master-minded through the wisdom and all-knowingness of God.

The concept of duality in Zoroastrianism therefore, is not one based on mere physical power, nor one that alludes to the worship of two antagonistic spirits, but one that is founded upon the intrinsic contrasting natures of the two opposing forces in the relative world. Thus the role of man in this cosmic struggle, is to assist God in bringing about the final annihilation of evil and the eventual triumph of the forces of good, through the ethical power of cumulative good thoughts, words and deeds.

#### **The Nature of Evil**

"...who by reason of the commandments of deceit, continue to destroy the creatures of truth ...." (Y.31.2).

"....all of you are the offspring stemming from the evil mind, deceit and disrespect. Hateful, too, are your actions ...." (Y.32.3).

"....that deceit is to be destroyed for its (false) profession ...." (Y.49.3).

"But the deceitful persons, bad in rule, bad in actions and words, bad in conceptions and thoughts, ...." (Y.49.11).

"....let that affliction, most mighty with death's bondage, come to these (deceitful), and let it come quickly." (Y.53.8).

"Poison adheres to those of evil preferences. They are decline and darkness, these furious violators of truth whose persons have been condemned...." (Y.53.9).

Zarathushtra clearly recognized a distinct dichotomy between the forces of good and evil in the relative world. In his quest to explain duality, Zarathushtra found it necessary to conceptualize evil as everything abhorrent to the good creations.

Evil, in Zarathushtra's vision, seems to have been the corruption of good, resulting in the imperfection within the relative world. This imperfection he strongly advocated, could not come from Ahura Mazdā – a perfect Being, but was in fact the antithesis of all that, which at the point of creation, was intrinsically existent and good.

#### **Choice and Free Will**

"Listen with your ears to the best things. Reflect with a clear mind – man by man for himself – upon the two choices of decision, being aware to declare yourself to Him before the great retribution." (Y.30.2).

"....whereby a person with volition, expresses his preferences." (Y.31.11).

"Him who left to our will (to choose between) the virtuous and the unvirtuous...." (Y.45.9).

Man, for the first time in history was introduced to the concepts of choice and free will based upon an objective ethical structure, as outlined in the prophet's hymns.

Zarathushtra taught that the free will to choose is the God-given right of man – a right which man should exercise judiciously within an intellectual framework. Man is thus equipped to discern through volitional consciousness, between the forces of truth and falsehood.

#### **The Ethical Structure**

The Bounteous Spirit –  
God's Creative and Motivating Force:

"Therefore, Lord, this Zarathushtra chooses that very spirit of Thine which indeed is the most bounteous of all, O Wise Lord ...." (Y.43.16).

"....the Wise Lord, hast come into the world with Thy virtuous spirit ...." (Y.43.6).

The Good Mind/Thinking –  
God-given Gift to Man:

".... when I grasped Thee in a vision to be the Father of the good mind, ...." (Y.31.8).

".... Be for us, Wise Lord, the revealer of the good mind." (Y.31.17).

".... Thou didst create the wondrous powers of good thinking allied with truth." (Y.43.2).

".... and also if the force of the good mind shall come to me." (Y.43.4).

"Thou who dost guard truth and the good mind for eternity ...." (Y.28.11).

The Best Truth –  
Certain to Prevail:

".... knowing, as he does, the creator and companion of truth,...." (Y.34.10).

".... those rewards Thou shalt give, through the heat of Thy truth-strong fire ...." (Y.43.4).

"..... those attainments befitting truth through which one might set Thy supporters in happiness." (Y.28.2).

"However, it has been fated for this world O Wise Lord, that the truth is to be saved for its (good) preference,...." (Y.49.3).

The Desirable/Sovereign Kingdom –  
The Dominion of God:

".... I shall seek for myself their rule of strength, through whose growth we might conquer deceit." (Y.31.4).

"But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth ...." (Y.30.7).

".... He serves truth, during his rule, with good word and good action ...." (Y.31.22).

".... By your, rule, O Lord, Thou shalt truly heal this world in accord with our wish." (Y.34.15).

Holy Piety/Devotion –  
The Love for God:

".... And His daughter is piety of good actions ...." (Y.45.4).

"Virtuous is the man of piety ...." (Y.51.21).

".... May there be piety under the rule of Him who has the appearance of the sun ...." (Y.43.16).

".... The Wise One in rule is Lord through piety ...." (Y.47.1).

Perfection/Completeness –  
The Goal of Man:

".... who shall tell me the real precept concerning the truth of His completeness and immortality:...." (Y.31.6).

"Yes, both perfection and immortality are for Thy sustenance ...." (Y.34.11).

Immortality/Undyingness –  
An Unending Beginning:

".... Thou didst receive for Thyself immortality, truth, and mastery over completeness, ...." (Y.34.1).

".... by reason of Thy most bounteous spirit, grant Thou to me immortality and perfection ...." (Y.51.7).

Man's unique spiritual quest is bound up with the recognition, reverence and affirmation of the essence of God together with God's good mind, His truth, His power, His piety, His perfection and His immortality – qualities which in Zarathushtra's teachings, later came to be identified as the attributes of the Bounteous Immortals – the *Amesha Spentas*. Through these seven divinities, Zarathushtra brilliantly wove together the abstract and the concrete, linking them to the ultimate goal in his vision, which was of creating a harmonious perfect state in both the seen and unseen worlds.

#### **The Hereafter**

The Judgement: Life Continues ....

"...with all these I shall cross over the Bridge of the Separator." (Y.46.10).

Heaven – The Reward,  
Hell – The Retribution:

"Heavenliness shall be the future possession of him who shall come to a truthful person (now). (But) a long lifetime of darkness, foul food, the word woe - to such an existence shall your conception, along with its (corresponding) actions, lead you, ye deceitful ones." (Y.31.20).

"I shall always obey (you), the truly sincere ones existing in the House of Song." (Y.50.4).

"....But their own soul and their own conception did vex them when they reached the Bridge of the Judge, (there) to become guests in the House of Deceit." (Y.46.11).

"....just as He shall be the first (to do so) during the requitals with the (molten) iron." (Y.30.7).

The *Saoshyants*:

"Yes, those men shall be the saviours of the land, namely, those who shall follow their knowledge of Thy teaching...." (Y.48.12).

The Making Wonderful:

"....to have their prizes, namely, bad for the bad, a good reward for the good, (each to be given) through Thy skill at the final turning point of creation." (Y.43.5).

Upon death, which in Zoroastrianism is seen as a temporary triumph of evil, the soul is judged at the Bridge of the Separator where it receives its reward or punishment. If found righteous, the soul ascends to the House of Song (Heaven), while if wicked, it descends as a guest to the House of Deceit (Hell). The latter state however is a temporary one, for at the end of time the imperfect soul will become cleansed, and will join the blessed. There is a promise then, that the *Saoshyants* will appear, to complete the triumph of good, when evil it is believed will be utterly vanquished, and Ahura Mazda – the Infinite One will triumphantly become fully omnipotent in Endless Light!

Subsequently, the general Last Judgement of all the souls awaiting redemption will take place, followed by the resurrection of the physical body, which will once again meet its spiritual counterparts, the soul and the spirit. Time will cease to be, upon "the accomplishment of the Making Wonderful" and all the seven creations of Ahura Mazda will be gathered together in eternal blessedness and perfection, reflecting a unity within a harmonious multiplicity, in both the seen and unseen worlds.

#### **Zarathushtra: A Man with a Vision**

The Reverence:

"With hands outstretched in reverence....I first entreat all (of you), O Wise Lord, ...." (Y.28.1).

The Quest:

"I who shall serve all of you, O Wise Lord, with good thinking, to me are to be granted

the attainments of both existences – yes, of matter as well as of mind – those attainments befitting truth through which one might set Thy supporters in happiness.” (Y.28.2).

#### The Mind — A Giant Leap Forward:

“Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire both the good mind and the way to the Lord? ... as long as I shall be able and be strong, so long shall I look in quest of truth .... Thou didst create the wondrous powers of the good mind allied with truth.” (Y.28.4–5, Y.43.2).

#### His Doubts:

“Have ye the mastery, have ye the power, O Wise Lord, for the act to protect your needy dependent – as I indeed am....?” (Y.34.5).

#### His Struggle:

“Yes, throughout my lifetime I have been condemned as the greatest defiler, I, who try to satisfy the poorly protected (creatures) with truth, O Wise Lord....” (Y.49.1).

#### Revelation — The Dialogue:

“This I ask Thee. Tell me truly, Lord. Which man in the beginning was the father of truth during the creation? Which man did fix the course of the sun and of the stars?.... Through whom does dawn exist, along with midday and evening, (all of) which remind the worshipper of his purpose? .... Which man, O Wise Lord, is the creator of the good mind....? By these (questions), O Wise Lord, I am helping to discern Thee to be the Creator of everything....” (Y.44.3–5, 7).

#### His Frustration:

“To what land to flee? Where shall I go to flee? They exclude (me) from my family and from my clan. The community with which I have associated has not satisfied me, nor those who are the deceitful rulers of the

land. How, then, shall I satisfy Thee, O Wise Lord? .... I know that (reason) because of which I am powerless, O Wise Lord: by my condition of having few cattle, as well as (that) I am a person with few men. I lament to Thee. Take notice of it, Lord, offering the support which a friend should grant to a friend. Let me see the power of the good mind allied with truth!” (Y.46.1–2).

#### The Search Continues:

“This I ask Thee. Tell me truly, O Lord, .... Who is truthful or who is deceitful? Is this one evil or is that one evil?.... How shall we repel deceit away from us and onto those who.... do not pursue truth’s care and company....? How might I deliver deceit into the hands of truth, in order to destroy it in accord with the precepts of Thy teaching....? How shall I, with your accord, impassion your following, so that my voice might be powerful (enough) ....?” (Y.44.12–14, 17).

#### His Triumph:

“Through his rulership (following) along the paths of good thinking, Kavi Vishtāspa reached this understanding of our task, which he respected in harmony with truth.... This prize has been promised to you during the times of salvation by reason of your good mind and truth. .... O Wise Lord, grant to me Thy support.” (Y.51.15–16, 18).

Nearly three and a half thousand years later, the prophet’s hymns still ring true in the hearts and minds of his followers, communicating to them the depth and intensity of his spiritual quest. The reward for man, Zarathushtra promised, is eternal blessedness if one consciously chooses to be the soldier of truth in thought, word and deed – a revelation truly stupendous for all mankind to follow!

(All the above translations, with minor alterations, have been taken from *The Gāthās of Zarathushtra*, translated by Stanley Insler, Acta Iranica Series, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1975).