



Zoroastrianism and the Environment

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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Wherever Zoroastrianism is discussed, its environmental footprint is certain to be noticed; whenever described, it is largely in connection with ritual and ceremonial. In our present context these are closely intertwined. Whilst the environmental issue has been frequently rehearsed, and with increased vehemence nowadays, it has long been the major preoccupation of Zoroastrian doctrines going back at least to 1000 BCE. Such concern was expressed by Zarathushtra / Zoroaster himself and followed up by his successors. Depending on one's standpoint on this global issue, these concerns are conscientiously aired regionally or casually dismissed as another's problem elsewhere. They are our collective responsibilities.

A brief notice on Zarathushtra's self-description and his office follows (1). Loosely termed prophet, he was a forth-teller, not a fore-teller – in fact, he prophesied nothing. As 'manthran', or insightful composer of traditional sacred verse, his 'manthras', or sacred utterances, are inspired precepts for the guidance of the well-disposed. (Our present-day mantra, being something loosely axiomatic, or reduced to mere "spell", is a constriction of its former innate vitalizing power.) Zarathushtra is a 'zaotar', or invoker of the forces of Truth, and from his vocation as composer of profoundly charged verses he is 'ereshi', corresponding to the Indic 'rishi'. As the recipient of esoteric knowledge, he is 'vidva', obtained through 'chishti', insight; as supplicant after this deep wisdom, he is 'drigu'. He sees it his purpose, as 'ahum-bish', world-healer, to ameliorate mankind's troubled existence. He makes no claim to divinity, only to divine knowledge.

Two main strands inform the Zoroastrian religion: that deriving from Zarathushtra's own teachings – his *Gathas* and the early Avestic texts, and those depending from the priestly compilations of the *Vendidad* ('The Law for the Expulsion of Demons'), the liturgical *Visperad*, and the non-Gathic *Yasnas*. Broadly, the poetic former are reflective and salutary; the prose latter prescriptive and sanitary. Just what are these 'demons' in the minds of the *Vendidad*'s composers are made clear by their treatment – they are the agents of disease and death. Both texts express environmental concerns; yet they are differently constituted, for the *Gathas* deal with the science of the Mind, the later texts tackle the science of the Body. Together they propose 'a sound mind in a healthy body' unity.



Zarathushtra's radical reforms were intended for a re-ordering of the socio-economic norms of his day. He proposed these through the rationality of a non-speculative philosophy and a thoroughly practical doctrine. A realist before his time, he nevertheless saw within his own lifetime his ideas being actualised against this ideal of a stable, world-wide humanity in harmony with nature: his revitalisation programme envisaged a global regeneration of society through the enlightened and responsible participation of all mankind.

An ancient code for right-living with strong moral purpose, the system of the ancient Iranian preceptor lays great stress on the individual, his/her place in society, and personal responsibility for actions and their accountability. There is no room for predestination which so cripples all moral activity. The element of free will is fully exercised, as is the imperative of choice. Morality was then nothing new, but the ethical basis for it was given an unprecedented impetus by Zarathushtra. Throughout, there was full gender equality (2). Closely following was his clear insistence that his message of healing was for all humankind (3). Also very noteworthy was his vehement rejection of the old priest-ridden ritual impositions upon the hard worked pastoralists of the tripartite social milieu of his time and place. He taught that monotheisms need no priestly middlemen; that endangered environments need protection. His rationalist appeal was through humankind's higher nature which saw no conflict between reason and religion.

Zarathushtra's angry rejection of the empty religiosity enforced by an unscrupulous clutch of mumblers-priests was both rational and revolutionary (4). It was plain that the old gods had not served the oppressed pastoralists and agricultural toilers. What he proposed was founded on a deep inner conviction that the ills of his unequal society could be remedied through uplift from uncaring brutishness to civilised norms of behaviour. His appeal was firstly made through approaches to the class of warrior-nobles, the land-owners and cattle-barons; the highly refined language of his complex discourse, in traditional sacred verses, would have been only hazily grasped by the land-workers. Cattle were the mainstay of their rural economies, and following unthinking ancient custom, animal sacrifice occurred on a wasteful scale (5). Ancient poems to sanguinary old gods and natural forces are still with us as reminders, albeit superficially Zoroastrianised (6), and they retain accounts of such hecatombs offered up to secure boons from bloodthirsty dedicatees. Additionally, there was the ever-present cattle-rustling by violent nomadic raiding parties whose gods were conceived in their own rapacious likenesses.

Zarathushtra did away with these old false gods and condemned them, together with their followers, as demonic. He calls them the authors and offspring of evil-mindedness (7). In their place he installed the personification of Wisdom, Mazda, as the only divinity worthy of worship (8). Wisdom being a subtle amalgam of Knowledge, Understanding, Experience, Insight and Common Sense, it becomes evident that this supreme Being, classed as an 'Ahura' or Sovereign Master, could only be explained in abstract terms free from material and external conceptions of the godhead. Veneration of Mazda would henceforth be through the devotee's cultivated Good Thoughts, Right Speech, and Benevolent Works. No longer would it be necessary to accompany such unselfish, spiritualised worship with propitiatory animal sacrifice; instead, this primordial element of Fire, symbolic of the Light of Truth, would directly convey to Mazda the sincere offerings of the sacrificer (9).

In theological terms, Mazda could be regarded as a monad; in philosophical terms as a pantheism. Mazda reaches out to the devotee through his attributes – his agencies – of Good Mind, Truth, Good Governance, and Right-mindedness, all of which were seen in strict dependence on Mazda whose facets they were. Zarathushtra saw Mazda, as Ahura, in symbiotic relationship to Man: he is both transcendent and immanent, part of man's very being, so much so that the right-living pastoralist is likewise termed ahura. No mediator or intercessor was deemed necessary for the spiritual veneration of a solicitous divinity logically



projected as All-Good, Omnipresent, Omniscient, and Omnipotent. Mazda stands above and beyond the conflict of the twin Primordial Cosmic Principles (10), one allied wholly to Good; the other having chosen Evil, separated itself from Mazda and ever since sought to deflect mankind from its destined path of Truth and Goodness (11). As 'mainyu-s', or mental forces, they condition the minds of humankind.

Society being in disarray, and its environment disrupted through the wrong-headedness and perversity of men of violence, in his sacred verses this ancient thinker metaphorically presents the pastoral life as the best for promoting Mazda's ideals (12). Not surprisingly, Zarathushtra's precepts are explained through scenes and events of everyday life, his pleas being addressed to the warrior-nobles dominating the societies of his times: 'May those exercising good power, not bad power, govern us with actions guided by Good Insight and Right-mindedness.' (13) Elsewhere we hear: 'May a good ruler, man or woman, thus govern our physical and spiritual existence.' (14) Similar concepts of 'philosopher-king' would later inspire Plato in faraway Greece to seek such a ruler. In this connection, on the closure of the Neo-Platonist Athens Academy in the 6th century CE, and the expulsion of seven of its 'pagan' teachers who sought refuge in Sasanian Iran under the Zoroastrian king Khosro 'of Immortal Soul', it was declared of that monarch, 'A disciple of Plato (!) sits on the Persian throne.' (15)

Such envisaged ruler-guides being in place, how were they to preserve and promote the environment? Zarathushtra as pastoralist had taught that the rights of animals were to be enforced – for this he made appeal to the Good Mind aspect of Mazda to protect the animal kingdom from the wanton cruelty of fury and violence, from the neglect and blood-lust which brought ruin to the pastoral life (16). Some have diverted these teachings into fanciful notions of vegetarianism, stemming from theories of reincarnation, but in Zoroastrianism they are aberrations. Elsewhere, Zarathushtra links Mazda's attributes of Un-dying-ness and Wholeness – of Life and Health – to the preservation and increase of waters and plants – the promotion of pastures and agriculture, both peaceful pursuits for the furtherance and prosperity of mankind. The *Gathas* are replete with injunctions to seek and sustain the good life.

Seven prose chapters compiled by Zarathushtra's priestly successors expanded the worship of Mazda's creation and bounty: 'We hereby venerate Mazda, the Ahura who has created the Kine, and Truth, created the good waters and plants, the Lights [Sun, Moon, and the Stellar Lights], and the Earth, and all Good Things!' (17) This short prayer is still recited before meal-times in Zoroastrian households. The universality of this all-embracing worship is explicit: 'We revere the souls of Truth-possessing men and women wherever born – of those of good spiritual attainment in the past, the present, and those to come.' (18) There is no conflict between physical and spiritual in Zoroastrianism, just as there is no asceticism or mysticism: neither mortification of the body, nor psychotropic manoeuvring of the mind. He taught of the union of matter and mind, and that body and soul were closely bound up throughout one's lifetime (19).

The purity laws of the priest-composed *Vendidad* were intended as physical protection against sickness and disease, regarded as issuing from the demonic world. Hence the painstaking precautionary measures to prevent contagion to the human and wanton pollution of nature. Scant fuel availability and a dearth of arable land with clean water sources accounted for the very deliberate catalogue of offences against man and nature. Whereas in the *Gathas* it is the pastoral life that is primarily promoted, here in the *Vendidad* it is the agricultural.

Among its more striking chapters, despite their arid style, is one (20) that has gripped the imagination of the Western scholars who immersed themselves in study of its eirenic contents – it is a farmer's charter, exhortations to farming communities in scattered rural areas. A typical scene depicts a farmstead with a pious, industrious family, with wife, children, dogs, good herds of cattle, and a resident priest (!). Among their praiseworthy duties are the sowing



of grain and grass, the planting of fruit, and increase of flocks and herds. Maintenance of arable and grazing land is of the greatest importance: mindlessly caused pollution and the ensuing danger of contagion arising through buried dead matter, specifically human and animal corpses, is much dreaded. Marshy terrain is to be drained and arid land carefully irrigated for cultivation.

It was precisely because of concern for the living that the Zoroastrian method of disposal of the dead was strongly inculcated: the remains of the deceased were to be exposed to the sun and the elements within open-topped funerary towers located well away from human habitation and activity. The sun-bleached bones were gathered up from time to time and placed within ossuaries. The initial process, 'khwarshed nigerishni', or exposure to the sun, was once rigorously observed. The priority given in ancient times to environmental concerns for uncontaminated arable land, clean water, and conservation of precious fuel stocks has lessons for us to this day.

Here are some rural priestly perspectives:

He who would till the earth with the left arm and the right, with the right arm and the left, to him will the earth bring forth plenty, like a loving bride on her bed unto her beloved. The bride will bring forth children, the earth will bear fruit aplenty. (21)

...He who sows grain, sows holiness! (22)

...Unhappy remains the land that has long lain fallow, without seeding for lack of a good husbandman, like a well-shapen maiden who has long gone childless and yearns for a good husband! (23)

...No one who does not eat has the strength to do works of holiness, strength to do works of husbandry, strength to beget children. By eating, every material creature lives; by not eating, it wastes away! (24)

The Zoroastrian view of the wholesome life allowed neither excess nor deficiency, but one guided by the over-arching principle of 'paiman', moderation, the Mean. Life was ever abounding, but the shadow of death loomed always. Such pessimism as emerged was to be actively overcome – the same texts are clear on this.

Mazda's good creation followed the logically periodic sequence of Sky, Water, Earth, Plants, Animals, and Man. Each of these six periods culminated with five rest days, a scheme which translates into unequal seasonal intervals suited to agro-pastoral activities. They form a calendar of feasts with names betokening Mid-spring, Mid-summer, Hay-making, Return of Cattle (from summer pastures), Mid-year (calculated from a Spring beginning), Time of Bestirment (preparation for springtime farming duties). Ancient Zoroastrian time-reckoning was constructed around a shepherds' calendar and, as with all farming communities everywhere, it was seasonally regulated by a duties roster for a fully functioning eco-system (25).

To explain the imbalance in Nature through man's neglect or omission, the compilers of this sanitary code had recourse to a dark symmetry: all that was disruptive and destructive of the environment was attributed to that agent of Evil, 'Angra Mainyu' and his cohorts. Counter-measures were inculcated through awareness of unseen but very real dangers, and by rigorous observance of purity laws of both mind and body. That these could be onerous for hard-labouring field workers was evident: the penalties for infringement were severe, indeed disproportionate, and it has been plausibly suggested that they were commuted into cash fines.

Through such agronomic treatises, Zoroastrianism demonstrated the real need for the careful nurture and management of nature. They had, furthermore, addressed existentialist concerns



through little-understood and much misrepresented socio-religious filters. They forthrightly provide us with principles, guidelines and working models for the future, and despite their great age and seemingly primitive background, they remain timeless for mapping out timely duties to aid our endeavours for the protection and prospering of our environment, and for social cohesion and ultimate betterment.

It may be asked how an ancient system geared to agro-pastoralist requirements could apply to modern-day Zoroastrians settled in widely dispersed lands with different cultures where their occupations have nothing to do with their ancestral vocations. We refer these questioners to the wise precepts of Zarathushtra who looked deeply into the human psyche, and, transcending his time and place, utilized the everyday scenes of his own milieu as timeless metaphors to sow the seed of humanitarian good purpose for all the foreseeable future. For then would a truly evolved human act responsibly and fully accountably towards himself, his family, his clan, his country, and indeed towards all nations. Despite modern-day perceptions and the pressures of daily life within occupations far removed from the pursuits and cares of our industrious forebears, human nature itself has little changed. Given private space to reflect on the essentials of the past to shape an ever-nearing future, the Zoroastrian religious aspect, always lightly worn, reminds us of the Mazda-given ethical responsibility of Man towards the restitution and care of our precious environment for the betterment of this world:

May we be those who will revitalize this world! O Wisdom, with your lordly helpmeets,
be of support to us with Truth so that we remain steadfast even when our
understanding is weak! (26)

Notes

- (1) The Avestic words in this paragraph within quotation marks appear in his sacred verses which occupy Yasna Chs.28-34; 43-46; 47-50; 51. These are commonly designated as Yasnas (Ys., Yss.).
- (2) The locus classicus is in Ys.46.10: "Whosoever, man or woman ..."
- (3) Ys.44.16, etc.
- (4) Ys.46.11
- (5) Ys.32.12-15
- (6) These are the *Yashts*, or hymns to pre-Zarathushtrian nature-deities.
- (7) Ys.32.3
- (8) Ys.34.5,7
- (9) Yss.43.4,9; 46.7
- (10) Ys.45.2
- (11) Ys.30.4-5
- (12) Ys.31.9-10
- (13) Ys.48.5
- (14) *Haptanhaiti*, Ys.41.2
- (15) Based on Procopius' *Secret History*; also, the *Shah-namagh*, the epic *Book of Kings*.
- (16) Ys.29, 'The Plaint of the Kine-soul'.
- (17) *Haptanhaiti*, Ys.37.1
- (18) *Haptanhaiti*, Ys.39.2
- (19) Yss.28.2; 43.1,3
- (20) *Vendidad* [Vd.], Ch.III
- (21) Vd.III.25
- (22) Vd.III.31
- (23) Vd.III.24
- (24) Vd.III.33
- (25) *Bundahishn* (9th century Middle Persian (Pahlavi) text): Chs.I; XXV.
- (26) Ys.30.9.



Useful resources

Boyce, Mary (ed. and tr.) (1984) *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism*, Manchester University Press; covers a useful range of textual extracts from the earliest period down to modern-day productions.

Boyce, Mary (1979) *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*, London: Routledge & Kegan Paul; a popular history in 14 chapters, with important bibliographies.

Insler, Stanley (1975) *The Gathas of Zarathustra* ('Acta Iranica' 8), Leiden: E. J. Brill; the best known English translation, conforming to the highest philological standards – invaluable commentary, technical, yet accessible.

Moulton, James Hope (1917) *The Treasure of the Magi*, Oxford University Press; a treasure which repays frequent consultation, distinguishes Magi from Prophet.

Olmstead, Albert (1948). *History of the Persian Empire*, Phoenix Books, University of Chicago Press; deals with the first Persian (Achaemenid) Empire, relying mainly on Classical sources. Interesting chapters on early science and religion, dated but good.

Sacred Books of the East, vols. 4, 23, 31 (1880s et seq.), Oxford; contain pioneering English translations of Avestic texts by late 19th century scholars, some completely unserviceable, others still useful. Well worth serious browsing, nevertheless.

Zaehner, Robert Charles (1961) *The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson; an individualistic study by one of the finest scholars to devote careful insights through textual references, including the all-important Pahlavi (Middle Persian) literature; a scholar for whom there was no Zoroastrian high-noon!

Zaehner, Robert Charles (1956, 1975) *The Teachings of the Magi: A Compendium of Zoroastrian Beliefs*, London: George Allen & Unwin, repr. London: Sheldon Press; brilliant original translations of extracts from mainly Pahlavi texts dealing with aspects of Sasanian Zoroastrianism. Indispensable.