

THE ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURES EXTANT

By NOSHIR HOMI DADRAWALA

Many Parsees today still harbour the erroneous belief, that the wonderful teachings of the great Prophet Zarathushtra, are enshrined ONLY IN THE "GATHAS" and that all the other so called ZOROASTRIAN SCRIPTURES (if we may be allowed to call them so) are the belated contributions of CRAFTY ZOROASTRIAN PRIESTS.

It is indeed fortunate that this unfounded, misleading belief is held only by a MINORITY of LAY PARSEES and that no TRUE SCHOLAR OF ZOROASTRIANISM has ever come to the conclusion arrived at by this "LAY MINORITY".

This misguided "LAY MINORITY" strongly believes that the Yasna, Visparad, Niyaishs, etc., have no place in the wonderful teachings of Zarathushtra and that they should be done away with altogether, or at best only selected (SUITABLE) portions should be retained and that too for HISTORICAL purposes ONLY (not religious mind you).

Not very long ago an aged Parsee Priest was confronted by a young Westernised student of Zoroastrian Theology. "You crafty priests have made a mess of the entire Zoroastrian religion" said the student, "you have converted the Prophet's simple teachings of Manashni, Gavashni, Kunashni (Good thoughts, Good words, Good deeds) into WITCH — CRAFT, replete with useless ceremonies and rituals."

The aged Priest without a moments hesitation replied, "But Manashni, Gavashni, Kunashni are Pazend words and surely Pazend is not the language of the Gathas. Besides, they mean only, thoughts, words and deeds". To this the student quickly retorted "Oh! I beg your pardon, I meant to say Humata, Hukhta, Hvarashta" (Avesta for good thought, good words, good deeds).

"Ah!" said the priest "much as Humata, Hukhta, Hvarashta may be Avestan words yet, THEY ARE NOT TO BE FOUND AT ALL IN THE GATHAS. This mandate is found in Avesta scriptures other than the Gathas, or to put it more correctly ONLY in those later portions inserted and conjured up by CRAFTY PRIESTS".

Indeed as the saying goes "Behind every argument there lies some one's IGNORANCE". In this particular case it was obviously that of the theologian. However, unfortunately in recent times, the number of such Parsee theologians have increased in geometric proportion and hence it become very necessary to set the record straight, in the interest of the Parsee community and the Zoroastrian religion at large.

To begin with, it is necessary to emphasise that the blessed Prophet Zarathushtra himself was the "Dynamo" behind the "Twenty one Nasks" (Volumes) containing the wisdom, truth and essence of "Ahura Mazda" (God). Each "Nask" was named after the twenty one words of the "Yatha-ahu-vairyo" and hence the first "Nask" containing 22 Chapters was called "Yatha" (Pahlavi :- Studgar), the second containing an equal number of chapters, — "Ahu" (Pahlavi :- Wahishta — maner) the third — "Vairyo" (Pahlavi — bag) containing 21 chapters, the fourth "Atha" (Pahlavi :- damdad) containing 32 chapters and so on upto the Twenty first Nask called "Vastarem" (Pahlavi : stud-yasn) containing 33 chapters. In all the twenty one Nasks contained Eight hundred and twenty five chapters.

We learn from the "Sharestan" that king Arjasp was the first to make an unholy attempt, to destroy the "Twenty one Nasks", by throwing them into a fire. However the "Sharestan" asserts that the books did not burn and hence no damage was incurred. It was only in 330 B.C.

(during the reign of Darius Codomanas, also known as Darius III) that Alexander managed to destroy some of the Volumes.

The Dinkard (Books 8 & 9) confirms that, even during the 9th century A.C., Twenty of the twenty one Nasks and Nineteen of their Pahlavi translations were intact. However, today the "Vendidad" is the only Nask that we have in its entirety. The Pahlavi Dinkard is merely a summary of the original 21 Nasks of Zarathushtra.

Now that we have glimpsed through the history of the Zoroastrian scriptures, we shall attempt to deal with the "LAY MINORITY'S" figment of imagination, regarding the Gathas being the only teachings of Prophet Zarathushtra.

The "LAY MINORITY" firmly believes (without any scriptural evidence) that since the Gathic dialect and meter differ from that of the remaining Avesta, the latter must have been the composition of crafty priests during the Post Zarathushtrian era. One of course begins to wonder as to how in spite of all their craftiness, the priests could not compose their unholy additions on par with the original Gathic dialect and meter. But be that as it may, scholars of Zoroastrianism have now discovered the Gathas themselves have NO UNIFORM meter and that the length of almost every Gathic line is unproportional to the other. Also almost every stanza has a rhyme and rhythm differing from the other.

In the light of the above only two possible conclusions can be drawn: (a) That either Prophet Zarathushtra was a BAD POET or (b) that the real teachings of Prophet Zarathushtra are contained only in a couple of Gathic stanzas (having uniform meter) and that the rest of the Gathas are once again the compositions of crafty Zoroastrian Priests.

Once a student of Zoroastrian Theology was confronted by a young Parsi Journalist. Said the Journalist, "what makes you feel that one who writes poetry cannot write prose. Look at me", he added with pride "as a profession I

undertake investigative reporting, but during my spare time I also compose poetry. Does this mean that since I report in prose, I cannot compose poetry or the vice versa? Gosh! if this trend continues, I feel that Two hundred years hence, when future students of literature and Journalism will scrutinize my works they will conclude that since I normally wrote poetry, therefore all those investigative reports which are on my file, (in prose) must be the write-ups of Journalists other than myself."

Indeed there was wisdom in the words of the journalist. The Lay minority has certainly been unable to substantiate evidence to prove that since Zarathushtra was a Poet, he could not write prose and therefore the remaining portions of the Avesta.

Dr. Maneckji N. Dhalla himself admits in his book "Zoroastrian Theology" that the composers of the Ram Yasht, Zamyad Yasht and Hom Yasht were POETS. As to how Dr. Dhalla managed to differentiate the poets of the Ram Yasht and the Zamyad Yasht from the POET of the Gathas (Zarathushtra) is not clear. However, Dr. Dhalla emphasised that since the "Yashts" were not part of the Gathas therefore they were the compositions of poets other than POET ZARATHUSHTRA (SIC) "O tempora.....!"

Also apart from anything else Dr. Dhalla was unable to identify the Poets of Ram Yasht, Zamyad Yasht and Hom Yasht by name or title, he merely concluded (without sufficient evidence) that they were POETS (Sic) other than Zarathushtra.

It is only when all other arguments fail, that the minority begins to contest its feeble case with the help of the dubious evidence, of linguistic differences between the Gathas and the so called younger Avesta. "Gathas have longer syllables and accents": says the lay minority "and therefore the Gathas were written during the Zarathushtrian era, — an age very much earlier to that of the Yashts". Once again as to why the Yashts could not have been written

during the PRE-Zarathushtrian era (on grounds of the linguistic difference) is not clear.

The Gujarati spoken by Parsis today is very much different to that spoken by the "Kathiwaris" and even the Gujarati spoken by the "Kathiawaris" differs from that spoken by the "Bohras". May be a couple of centuries later, Historians (in all probability imaginative Parsis) will conclude that Parsis dwelt in Bombay long before the "Kathiwari" traders and of course the "Bohras" came in very much later. All this can of course be verified from the linguistic differences between the SAME language — Gujarati.

"Oh tempora.....!"

Even the learned Dastur Darab Peshotan Sanjana has emphasised (on page 30 of his introduction to the Pahlavi Vendidad) that "Such is the history of Zoroastrian Scriptures, which is found in the earliest authority extant. It upholds the Zoroastrian belief that the 21 sacred books

ascribed to Zoroaster, had been produced in the reign of King Vistasp and invested with a pious and prophetic authority. AT THE SAME TIME IT SETS ASIDE THE IDEA OF PHILOLOGISTS THAT THE LANGUAGE OF THE AVESTA REPRESENTS 'SUCH CHANGES AS MAY HAVE BEEN BROUGHT ABOUT WITHIN THE SPACE OF ONE OR TWO CENTURIES'. THE DEVIATIONS IN THE GATHA DIALECT FROM THE ORDINARY PROSE AVESTA, AS REGARDS GRAMMATICAL FORMS, MIGHT BE CONSIDERED AS 'DIALECTICAL PECULIARITIES'. From the Zoroastrian point of view different sacred books were written in THE SAME AGE, IN METRICAL OR PROSAIC DIALECT, in the philosophical, religious or ordinary style, ACCORDING TO THE DIFFERENT REQUIREMENTS OR INTELLECTUAL POWERS OF THE HIGHER OR LOWER SECTIONS OF THE PEOPLE IN THE

VARIOUS SPHERES OF THEIR VOCATION. The changes in the grammatical inflections distinguished the sublimes poetry from the easy explanatory prose for the general use of the people”.

— And now here’s what the great oriental scholar Prof. James Darmesteter has to say in the fourth volume of the wonderful series “Sacred Books of the East” (Edited by Prof. Max Muller).

“That the extant sacred literature of Mazdeisnān was formerly much greater than it is now, appears not only from internal evidence, that is from the fragmentary character of the book, but is also proved from historical evidence..... We are no longer in the dark as to the character and the contents of that large literature of which our Avesta is a remnant; that literature is known to us, in its general outline, through a Pahlavi analysis..... West’s translation of that synopsis is the greatest service rendered in the last twenty years in the field of Avesta scholarship, and has for the first time rendered a history of Avesta literature possible..... We possess the Stot Yasht (Av. Staota Yacnya) in its entirety; **IT IS THE CORE OF THE AGGREGATE KNOWN AS THE YACNA, AND THE MOST HOLY PART OF THE AVESTA.** It contains thirty-three chapters, of which twenty-two are metrical and written in an archaic style, these being the Gathas, properly so called, and the three chief prayers (Ahuna Vairya, Ashem Vohu and Yenghe Hatam); eleven chapters are written in prose and in the common dialect..... The history of the formation of Avesta may be summed up thus :- **THE TWENTY-ONE NASKS WERE FORMED BY AHURA-MAZDA HIMSELF OUT OF THE TWENTY-ONE WORDS OF THE AHUNA VAIRYA. THEY WERE BROUGHT BY ZOROASTER TO KING VISTASP.** Two copies of the complete scriptures were written by order of the king; one was deposited in the treasury at Shapigan, the other in the Record office.”

A certain Hindu Philosopher once happened to ask a Parsi Priest, “But why are you Parsees so hell bent upon reducing the bulk of your wonderful scriptures? What do you propose to gain by cutting down your scriptures to merely a few stanzas of the Gathas?” To which the priest quickly retorted “Elementary my dear! All those evil practices, the minority desires to enforce upon the Parsees are strictly forbidden in the Avesta portions other than the Gathas. Take for example the “Vendidad”. It strongly forbids cremation and/or burial of dead bodies. But now it so happens that a wealthy minority and even their not so wealthy satellites are hell bent upon introducing the system, of burial and cremation amongst the Parsees, so now how best could they discard the present system of “Dokhmenashini” (recommended in the Vendidad) if not by discarding the Vendidad itself altogether?”

Indeed at this stage one is reminded of the words of the late Jehangirji Vimadalal, “one such pet theory of the self styled reformers is this: The Gathas constitute the earliest and most reliable latter that is not found in the Gathas may thus be challenged, if it **DOES NOT SUIT THE WHIMS OF THE HETERODOX.** It is very conveniently forgotten that the Gathas are a small portion of the Avesta literature containing hymns and **CANNOT THEREFORE BE EXPECTED TO EMBODY EITHER A COMPLETE PHILOSOPHY OR AN EXHAUSTIVE RITUAL; NAY BEING MERE HYMNS CANNOT LEGITIMATELY BE EXPECTED TO DEAL WITH THESE SUBJECTS AT ALL.**”

Certainly in order to find out the penalty for “Physical assault” one does not refer to “Keats” or “Shelley”. Indeed the wise one is expected to refer to the “Indian Penal Code”. Similarly the Gathas are devotional hymns and so if one desires to study Zoroastrian ethics, code of conduct and or penalty for sinful acts he is expected to refer to the “Vendidad”.

Now here's what the Great Oriental Scholar of Avesta and Pahlavi, Beheramgore T. Anklesaria had to say in reply to the Lay minoritie's figment of imagination: "Very few Iranist have ever carefully studied the question of the evolution of the later Zoroastrian thought in Post-Gathic literature, which emanated from the inspired hymns of the holy prophet Zarathushtra. The LEARNED ORIENTALISTS, PARSI OR NON-PARSI, BEING INNOCENT OF THE TRADITIONS EMBEDDED IN PHALAVI WRITINGS, HAVE NEVER BEEN ABLE TO CONCEIVE THE PROCESS OR UNFOLDMENT OF GATHIC THOUGHT IN THE LATER AVESTAN WRITINGS, WHEREIN THEY SEE NOTHING BUT A REBUSCITATION OF THE PRE-GATHIC MODE OF WORSHIP AND RELIGION. REINTRODUCING THE "DEVAS" OF THE VEDIC PANTHEON UNDER A NEW NAME, THE "YAZATAS", THIS IMMATURE JUDGMENT, HOWSOEVER INCORRECT IT COULD BE, HAS BEEN POUNCED UPON BY THE LEARNED AND THE UNLEARNED OF THE ZOROASTRIAN COMMUNITY, WHO HAVE BECOME DOCTORS OF ZOROASTRIAN THEOLOGY, WITHOUT EVER READING A PAGE OF THE ORIGINAL SACRED WRITINGS, TO PROVE THE DETERIORATION OF THE CREED OF ZARATHUSHTRA IN THE LATER AVESTAN WRITINGS".

Anklesaria then goes on further to state that, "NO HONEST SCHOLAR, SAVANT OR ORIENTALIST, CAN EVER PROVE THAT THE LATER POETS, WHILSTS OFFERING THEIR "YASNA", "FERVENT ESTEEM", TO THE "AMESHA SPENTAS" AND "YAZATAS", TO HOLY MEN AND WOMEN WORTHY OF REVERENCE, TO THE BENEFICENT ANIMALS, TO ALL THE GOOD CREATURES AND CREATIONS OF GOD, HAD LEFT OFF MONOTHEISM, BELIEF IN AHURA MAZDA, AS

THE CREATOR OF AMESHA SPENTAS AND THE YAZATAS, OF MEN AND ANIMALS, OF THE ENTIRE CREATION. THERE IS NOT ANY PLACE, ANY TEXT, ANY CHAPTER OF THE LATER AVESTAN TEXTS, WHERE WE DO NOT FIND MENTION OF AHURA MAZDA AS BEING THE CREATOR OF ALL AND SUNDRY, OF SPIRIT AND MATTER, OF THE WATERS, THE EARTH, THE TREES, OF THE BENEFICENT ANIMALS AND MEN, OF THE SKY, THE SUN, THE MOON AND THE STARS."

Baheramgers Anklesaria's statement proves beyond doubt that even as far as the philosophy and the message of the so called later Avesta is concerned it is in perfect proportion to and in keeping with the spirit of the so called ONLY teachings of the Prophet Zarathushtra, namely THE GATHAS.

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Of course today all that remains with the Parsee community as Avesta scriptures is:-

(a) The Khordeh Avesta : containing the Kusti prayer, sarosh baj, five Gahs, five Niyaishs and eleven Yashts. Except for a few Pazend passages here and there the composition of these prayers are mostly in Avesta language.

(b) The Yasna : contains seventy two chapters in Avesta out of which 17 consist of the five "Gathas".

(c) The Vispered : is once again a large Avestan composition running into about 23 chapters.

(d) The Vendidad : As explained earlier, is the only Nask which we have in its entirety. It has twenty two chapters.

"Pahlavi" was the official language of Iran mainly during the "Parthian" and "Sassanian" times (roughly between 250 B.C. to 641 A.C.). The Pahlavi writings comprise mainly of the summaries, commentaries and elaborations of the original Avesta writings. The "Dinkard" for example written during the Sassanian times is the most authoritative summary of the original twenty one Nasks of Zarathushtra.

Today some of the oldest and vitally important Avesta, Pahlavi, and Sanskrit manuscripts written by the Parsees after their advent in India, are scattered all over the various libraries in Europe. Of course the best collection is in Denmark with the University library of Copenhagen. The Manuscripts presently have become so brittle with age, that EACH FOLIO is now preserved between two glass plates. Sometimes one wonders whether Parsees themselves would have taken so much trouble and care, were the manuscripts at all destined to be in their possession.