



FEZANA Age-Appropriate Lesson Plan

Subject Category (circle one): Iranian Religion/Ceremony History Prayer Gathas
Comparative Religion Shahnameh

Age Group (circle one): PreK-K Grades 1-3 Grades 4-5 Grades 6-8 Grades 9-12

Lesson # (if applicable):

Subject of the Lesson:

Avesta

Background Knowledge for the Teacher:

Introduction:

We have Ashu Zarathushtra's teachings in a book called the Gathas. Many years after Zarathushtra, his followers and the Mobeds have gathered other prayers and texts which in totality are called the Avesta. Avesta is an important and large compilation of historical, religious, and cultural texts of the Iranians and Zoroastrians which includes the Gathas.

Script of the Avesta:

The script in which the Zoroastrians wrote their religious books is called Avestan or "Din Dabireh". Another script that was used during the Sassanid Empire is called "Pahlavi". Today Zoroastrians around the world use different scripts to write down the prayers.

Avesta:

Avesta is one of the oldest human and Zoroastrian texts. It is comprised of several books or sections. The word Avesta means knowledge, base, and foundation. Avesta contains prayers, texts, songs, and religious laws written in the span of hundreds of years. The collection suffered a disaster when Alexander of Macedonia invaded Persia in 321 BCE putting an end to the Achaemenid Empire and devastating the royal treasuries in which the Avesta was reportedly kept. During the Parthian Dynasty (250 BCE-224 CE) an effort was begun to collect what remained in the priestly memories and scattered records. The collection was screened, augmented, and canonized centuries later during the reign of the Sassanid King Khosrow I in about 560 CE.

The Avesta suffered a second disaster during the Islamic Arab invasion of Iran in 631 CE when religious and cultural books were burned and destroyed.

The Sassanid canon of the Avesta was divided into 21 volumes called nasks in the Pahlavi language. The nasks were put into three categories of seven each, divided by content.



1. Stoata Yesnya (Pahlavi: Stot Yasn) or Gathic-
Stoata means hymns and Yesnya means dedicated or revered. It includes Zarathushtra's Gathas (in the Old Avestan or Gathic language) and the Gathas' explanation (in Pahlavi language). In addition, it contains some subtle addenda of Zarathushtra's close companions, more or less in the same dialect. This was considered the core of the nasks.
2. *Hadha-mânthra*, meaning "other insightful thoughts" includes the manthras, prayers, and religious songs. Some of these songs are recited in various religious ceremonies.
3. Datik means "legal or legislative" part of the collection. This section of the Avesta is about justice and law as a guide for better living conditions of the people during the time it was written for.

Every piece of the Avestan text had a Pahlavi translation, commentary, and supplementary following. It was the Pahlavi renderings on which the latter priests relied to expound the religion, because Avesta had become an "unknown" and mystical divine language no more understood by the people, including the Sassanian and post-Sassanian priests.

The collapse of the theocratic Sassanian empire in 651 CE left the Zoroastrian church without its dominating supporters—the royals, government officials, and mobeds, who all highly valued and followed the religion. In addition, many of the Avestan and Pahlavi scriptures were lost. Nevertheless, much of the collection survived as late as the 10th century CE, a period during which many of the Pahlavi scriptures were written—also revised to suit the times—in a rather salvage operation. It is estimated that between one third to one fourth of the entire collection has been salvaged. The extant Avesta, mostly religious, has been reshaped, somewhat casually, sometimes after the 10th century, to make a little more than six books. They are:

1. Yasna

Yasna is comprised of 72 chapters or Haiti sections (the Avestan name for a chapter of the Yasna), 17 of which are the Gathas. Besides the Gathas, Haiti 27 is an important part of the Yasna which includes three of the most ancient Zoroastrian prayers, "Ashem Vohu", "Yatha Ahu", and "Yange Hatam". In addition, Haiti 35-41 is called Haptanhaiti (Haptanghaiti) or "Seven Yashts" which is the second oldest part of the Avesta after the Gathas. Gathas is in the form of songs, but Haptanhaiti is in form of prose (written in ordinary form without metric structure).

The word Yasna is from the root word "Yaz" meaning reverence or dedication. Yasna eventually evolved into yaz/yesi and later yazishn. This further evolved into jeshne/jashn/jashne, and then, Jashn which means to celebrate, such through an honoring or venerating.

2. Yashts

Before Zarathushtra, people worshiped many gods such as Anahita (goddess of water), Haoma (plant deity), Mithra (god of contract), Hvare (sun god), Tishtrya (god of rain), Verethraghna



(god of victory), Vayu (god of wind) and so on. Zarathushtra taught us that there is only one God named Ahura Mazda. In this new culture, the many gods became representatives that deserve reverence named Izads or Yazatas and the attributes of Ahura Mazda came to be known as Amesha Spentas (Bountiful Immortals). Izads are co-workers of Amesha Spentas. In the Berassad prayer Amesha Spentas are mentioned alongside Izads. Yashts consists of 21 chapters and the word Yasht means revered.

3. Vispered

Vispered's content is very close to that of Yasna. It is about the six Gahanbars or thanksgiving feasts corresponding to the climate and seasons of the Iranian plateau. During Gahanbars, Vispered is recited along with the Yasna. Vispered has 24 chapters and is older than the Yasna in content.

4. Khordeh Avesta

During the Sassanid Empire, the need for a smaller book of prayer was evident. Therefore, the prayers from different sections of the Avesta were chosen as a guide for the daily prayers. Khordeh Avesta means "Smaller Avesta or Chosen sections of the Avesta".

5. Vendidad

Vendidad is made of 22 "Fargard" or sections. Vendidad means "law against daevas or evil deities". Vendidad contains the thoughts of ancient people regarding the creation of the world, history, geography, health, etc. A section of this book is dedicated to purity laws that were important for the people of ancient times. Although the language of the Vendidad is younger than the Avesta, its contents are more like that of pre-Aryan Iran.

6. Herbadistan and Nirangistan is another section of the Avesta containing the Books of Priests and Rites. It guides people in learning to become a priest or priestess in performing and leading the rituals.

Lesson for students:

Objective: To gain the understanding that the Avesta is the Zoroastrians' religious book.

All the different religions have a book that contains their prophet's teachings, guidelines, and prayers. Our religious book is called Avesta. It contains the prayers Ashem Vohu and Yatha Ahu. The Avesta contains the Gathas which is Zarathushtra's message.



Activity for Students:

Make a mini prayer book:

- Print out Activity 1 or make one of your own (one printout per student)
- Cut the pages in half so you'll have a half page with the word Avesta, one half page containing Ashem Vohu prayer, one half page containing Yatha Ahu Prayer and a blank half sheet (this page is extra, so teacher can use it to their discretion-e.g., additional notes, pronunciations, real life applications, etc.).
- Have students color the cover page.
- Then staple all four pages to make a mini prayer book.
- Recite the prayers with the class and talk about their simple meanings.

Sources:

1. <https://www.heritageinstitute.com/zoroastrianism/scriptures/history.htm>
2. "Avesta An Introduction" by AA Jafarey
3. "Amoozesh e Din o Farhang e Zartoshti" "Payeh Hashtom" by "Gorooh-e Negaresh e Ketabhaye Darsey e Dini Zartoshti"
4. "Din Amooz" Grade 5 by "Gorooh-e Negaresh e Ketabhaye Darsey e Dini Zartoshti Doreh Dabestan"

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