



By Almut Hintze

## Avestan Literature

According to tradition the great Iranian prophet Zarathushtra, or Zoroaster, as he is usually known in Western literature, inaugurated the religion later known after him as the Zoroastrian religion. The sacred texts of the followers of that religion are collected in a body of literature called the “Avesta”. The term “Avesta” derives from the word *avastāk* in Pāzand, which designates the writing of Middle Persian in Avestan script. The underlying Middle Persian word is written *’p(y)st’k* in Pahlavi script. It has been interpreted in different ways, the most plausible of which is to transcribe it as *abestāg* and derive it from Avestan *upa-stāyaka-* ‘praise’.

The language of the Avesta is simply called “Avestan” because nothing of it has survived outside the Avestan corpus. The Avesta comprises not only the texts in Avestan, but also their Middle Persian translations and commentaries, the “Zand”. Although the older parts of the Avesta were presumably composed in southern Central Asia, or more precisely in northeastern Iran, the dialectal identification of the Avestan language is problematic. It is safe to say only that Avestan is a non-Persian dialect. Together with the southwest Iranian language known as Old Persian and a few indirectly attested dialects, Avestan represents the Old Iranian language. Being closely related to Old Indic of the Vedas, Old Iranian is a descendant of the Indo-Iranian or Aryan branch of the Indo-European language family.

The Avesta is by no means a uniform corpus. It includes texts dating from different periods and belonging to different literary genres. With respect to language and content, there are two basic divisions: the first consists of texts composed in a more archaic idiom commonly called “Old Avestan”. The second, usually called “Young Avestan”, is slightly different dialectally, and even more different with respect to its underlying religious system. The Old Avestan texts comprise not only the Gathas but also the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* and two of the sacred prayers *Ahuna Vairya* (Y 27.13) and the *Aryaman Ishya* (Y 54.1). *Ashəm Vohū* (Y 27.14) could be Old Avestan. The rest are in Young Avestan, although some of the texts such as *Yehhē Hātqm* (Y 27.15) imitate Old Avestan and are therefore called “pseudo-Old Avestan”.

From the point of view of its use, Avestan literature may be divided into two major groups: (i) ritual and (ii) devotional. Ritual texts are recited by priests during the religious ceremonies in the fire-temple, devotional texts by priests and lay people in any place. The ritual texts include the *Yasna* (‘worship’, abbreviated: Y), the *Visperad* (from Av. *Višpe ratavō* ‘all the Ratus’, abbr.: Vr) and the *Vendidad* or *Vīdēvdād* (from Av. *Vīdaēva data* ‘law of those who reject the demons’, abbr.: Vd). The devotional texts consist of the *Yashts* (‘worship’, abbr.: Yt) and prayers and benedictions collected in the “Little” or *Khorde Avesta*. All the Old Avestan texts form part of the *Yasna*. In addition, there is a small corpus of Avestan literature which has been transmitted outside the canon of the Avesta, mainly as part of Pahlavi texts.



## Yasna

The *Yasna* consist of 72 chapters (*hā* or *hāiti*). The number 72 is represented symbolically by the 72 threads used in weaving the sacred girdle of the Zoroastrians, the *kusti*. These 72 chapters fall into three major divisions: *Y* 1-27, *Y* 28-54, *Y* 55-72. Between chapters 27 and 55, i.e. at its centre, the *Yasna* includes all the Old Avestan texts which represent the most ancient part of Zoroastrian literature. They consist of the Gathas (Av. *gāθā-* 'hymn, verse') which in turn are arranged around the 'worship of seven chapters', the *Yasna Haptañhāiti* (abbr.: *YH*).

### Gathas

The oldest surviving texts of the Zoroastrian religion have always been known as the "Gathas of Zarathushtra". With regard to both composition and content, the Gathas are among the most intricate and dense pieces of literature ever composed. Within the extant Avesta, the five Gathas form the central textual part of the *Yasna* ritual, together with the 'Seven-Part *Yasna*', the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*, which comprises chapters 35–41 of the *Yasna*.

The first and longest Gatha is the Ahunauvaitī Gatha. It consists of seven hymns and consists of *Yasna* 28-34. The remaining four Gathas are recited after the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*. The second, the Uštaiuaitī Gatha, and the third, the Spəntamainiiu Gatha, consist of four hymns each and include *Yasna* 43-46 and 47-50. *Yasna* 51 contains the fourth, the Vohuxšaθra, Gatha, which is the longest at 22 verses. The fifth, the Vahištōišti Gatha, follows as *Yasna* 53.

The Avestan word *gāθā-* actually refers to a metre in a specific stanza form. Five such stanza forms survive, and accordingly the seventeen surviving Old Avestan hymns are distributed across five Gathas. What is characteristic of the metre of the Gathas is that a line of verse (A-) consists of a certain number of syllables.

The role of the Gathas in the history of the Zoroastrian religion can hardly be overstated. This is not only because indigenous tradition attributes them to Zarathushtra, but also because, together with the *Yasna Haptañhāiti*, they represent the core of Zoroastrian religion and ritual. The appeal of the Gathas for scholarship lies both in their highly archaic language and in their content. The figure of Zarathustra, who is mentioned by name sixteen times in the hymns, is the focus.

As an advocate for the poor (Av. *drigu-*) and for their domestic animals (*gauu-*), he has a close relationship with his god, Ahura Mazdā, with whom he is in dialogue in the Gathas. Ahura Mazdā is the 'father' of truth and cosmic order (*aša-*), and through his 'life-giving power' (*spəntamainiiu-*) he brings into being the ordered material world. Two types of existence are distinguished: the spiritual (*mainiiuua-*) and the material (*gaēiθiia-*). All people, men and women, who adhere to Ahura Mazdā and support Zarathushtra are 'truthful' (*ašauuan-*). Zarathushtra's special concern is protection from and resistance against deceitful people (*drəguuant-*) and their false gods (*daēuua-*), who are the cultic adversaries and competitors of Ahura Mazdā.



The texts speak, for the first time in Iranian intellectual history, of the immortal soul (*uruuan-*), which after death must cross a bridge where its fate is decided. Depending on the verdict, the soul goes either to Ahura Mazdā's 'House of Welcome' (*garō dāmāna-*) or to the 'House of Deceit' (*drūjō dāmāna-*). At the end of each of the first three Gathas, the wish is made that the material world (*gaēθā-*) be made perfect (*frašəm kar*). This perfection is achieved at the end of time and is anticipated by the ritual.

## **Yasna Haptaŋhāiti**

In the corpus of Avestan literature, the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti* (YH), or “Worship in Seven Chapters”, has come down to the present as the central part of a larger text of 72 chapters, also called “Yasna”. Of this larger Yasna, the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti* forms chapters 35 to 41 and is embedded in the Gathas, the seventeen hymns traditionally attributed to Zarathushtra, the founder of the Zoroastrian religion. Together with the *Ahuna Vairya* (Y 27.13) and *Aryaman Ishya* (Y 54) prayers, the YH and *Gathas* form the central portion of the larger text. They constitute the Older Avesta, the earlier surviving document in any Iranian language, presumably dating from late second millennium BCE. Preceding and following this Old Avestan kernel are chapters 1-27 and 55-72, which were added at a later time. Their language and content suggest that chronologically they are more recent compositions in a dialectically slightly different idiom, called Younger Avestan.

We cannot be sure about the original pragmatic function of the *Gathas*, but there is no doubt that the *Yasna Haptaŋhāiti* is a liturgy intended to be recited during a religious ceremony. References in the text itself to the actual situation indicate that a group of people is assembled around a ritual fire, *ātar-*, for the purpose of worshipping their god, Ahura Mazdā, or ‘Wise Lord’. The worshippers usually speak in the first person plural ‘we’, but on probably three occasions an individual, ‘I’, emerges. This could suggest that the text, or parts of it, is recited by one person on behalf of the group.

The classification of the YH as poetry is in agreement with the views of the indigenous Iranian tradition, for in the Younger Avestan period the YH was considered to represent the same type of composition as the *Gathas*.

### ***The Composition of the Yasna Haptaŋhāiti***

In the manuscripts, the seven chapters, or *hāiti*, of the YH are clearly demarcated. Each has its own theme and internal structure. It has long been recognized that the YH consists of three major sections, a beginning (Y35-36), a middle (Y37-39) and an end (Y 40-41).

In Y 35, the first chapter of the YH, the worshippers express their commitment to good thoughts, words, and deeds, as well as to providing peace and pasture for the cow (35.2-4). They attribute all power to the one whose rule is best, i.e. to Ahura Mazdā, and urge every person, whether male or female, to practice and proclaim what is good (5-6). They recognize that what is best is the



vereneration (*yasnəmçā vahməmçā*) of Ahura Mazdā, on the one hand, and the care of the cow, on the other. To the best of their ability they intend to practice it and make it known to others (7). An individual voice ('I') urges each and every human being to pursue their livelihood on both the spiritual and the material plane in 'union' (*sar-*) and 'community' with truth (8). Ahura Mazdā is declared to be both teacher and receiver of the words which are being uttered. On the basis of truth, good mind and good rule, there will be never-ending praises for him (9-10). The second chapter, Y 36, begins with the affirmation that the worshippers approach the ritual fire (36.1). This is followed in stanza two by an invitation to Ahura Mazdā's heavenly fire to come down and merge with the ritual fire. Such a fusion of the heavenly and earthly fires must take place between the recitation of both Ahura Mazdā's heavenly fire and his most bounteous spirit. From that moment on, the worshippers consider themselves to be in the presence of Ahura Mazdā, now present in the fire, with good thoughts, words, and deeds and that they bring him honour and strengthening. Finally, the worshippers declare that the sunlight is Ahura Mazdā's most beautiful manifestation (36.6).

The middle part of the YH, extending from Y 37-39, contains the 'we worship' formulae. The praises begin in chapter three (Y 37) and are addressed to Ahura Mazdā and his spiritual creations, the Bounteous Immortals. The deity is worshipped as the creator both of spiritual beings such as truth and of material ones such as the cow, water, plants, light, the earth and all that is good (37.1). The four times repeated clause 'him... we worship' emphasizes that it is Ahura Mazdā whom the worshippers venerate with their highest worship and all their existence (2-3). Praise continues in stanzas four and five with that of truth, addressed as 'bounteous immortal', and of other spiritual beings, including 'good thought', 'good rule' and 'good belief'.

The central chapter of the middle section, Y 38, begins with the praise of the earth, which is worshipped together with Ahura Mazdā's 'noblewomen'. The latter are identified as powers active during the ritual and include 'refreshment' (*īzā-*), 'vitalization' (*yaoshti-*), 'perfection' (*frashti-*) and 'right-mindedness' (*ārmaiti-*). While *yaoshti-* and *frashti-* occur only here, *īzhā-* and *ārmaiti-* are old ritual terms also found in the *Gathas* and inherited from the Indo-Iranian parent language. Together with *āzūiti-* 'liberation', they denote the 'strengthening' experienced by Ahura Mazdā as a result of human veneration. Other female powers, associated with these 'noblewomen', are also praised, in particular 'reward' (*ashi-*), 'strength' (*ish-*), 'libation' (*āzūiti-*), 'glory' (*frasasti-*) and 'abundance' (*parēndi-*, 38.1-2). Subsequently the waters are worshipped using the names given to them by Ahura Mazdā. Rain water is described as moving swiftly through the air and sustaining the life of both flora and fauna. It is also addressed in the terms of an ancient Indo-Iranian metaphor according to which the milch or milk producing cow is an image for the enlivening rain. Moreover, earthly water, such as that in rivers and lakes, is praised for providing amenities for human life by flowing smoothly, by affording good crossings and bathing places and by supplying drink for everyone, especially for the needy (38.3-5).

The last chapter of the central section, Y 39, praises the cow's soul and maker. Furthermore, the worshippers worship their 'own' souls as well as those of animals, both



domestic and harmless wild ones. They also praise the souls of all truthful human beings, both men and women, wherever they may have been good male and female Amesha Spentas (3) and finally, of Ahura Mazda himself. The worshippers emphasize that they attribute all that is good to him and that they worship him to the extent that he is its source (4). They also stress that their commitment to truth (*asha-*), joy (*fsératū-*) and right-mindedness (*ārmaiti-*) is as strong and inalienable as the blood relationships within a family and that it is in the light of such a bond that they approach Ahura Mazda (5).

The third and final part of the YH contains in chapter six, Y 40, requests for reward. Ahura Mazda is addressed and asked to exercise his 'wisdom and wealth' (*mazdāmcā būiricā*) and to give the 'prize' (*mīzda-*) which he has allocated for 'someone like me' (*mauuaiθīm*), namely everlasting 'fellowship' (*haxəman-*) with himself and with Truth (40.1-2). The nature of the 'prize' and 'fellowship' is subsequently specified: the worshippers ask for truthful, truth-desiring, cattle-breeding men, families and communities so that they may live their lives in a strong and stable 'fellowship'. This wish is also extended to other 'fellowships' which the worshippers may join (3-4). The last chapter, Y 41, begins with the dedication of all praise to Ahura Mazda and to best Truth (41.1). The worshippers desire to experience Ahura Mazda's good rule and a good human overlord, man or woman, in both their spiritual and material lives (2). In Ahura Mazda they recognize the goodness of the powerful, invigorating 'venerable one' (*yazata-*), who 'is' their own bodily life and pervades their whole existence (3). The worshippers desire to obtain his life-long support (*rafənah-*) and, by virtue of the latter, be strong and powerful (4). They declare themselves to be those who know the hymns and formulae to praise him. Finally, they resume the request for the 'prize' and ask for everlasting 'union' (*sar-*) with both Ahura Mazda and Truth (5-6).

For the complete translation by Almut Hintze of the *Yasna*, available as subtitles for the Multimedia Yasna film visit:

<https://muva-film.soas.hasdai.org/yasna/>