

# OMNIPOTENCE OF AHURA MAZDA

## *As Depicted in the Gathas*

By Dr. Kersey H. Antia

The Gathas leave no doubt in one's mind about the omnipotence of Ahura Mazda. Y.28.9c adores Him as the mighty one to whom belongs the powers and mastery. Y.29.4c declares: "He is the decisive Lord. As He shall wish it, so shall it be for us." Y.31.8c describes Him as "the Lord of existence in Thy actions." Y.31.21a talks about "His abounding authority of rule over completeness and immortality and our Asha." Y.33.11a calls him "The Mightiest Lord." Y.34.5 implies that "Mazda has the Mastery, (and He) has the power, for the act to protect your needy dependents" and "You are above all others, be they fierce Gods (or we can say Ahriman) or mortals." Y.33.7 clearly states that Mazda "makes even immoral decrees and painful legacies disappear," and therefore Ahriman is no match for Him at any given time, especially as Y.34.11c adds that "Thou dost terrorize the enemy," i.e. Ahriman, being the one pitted against Him by the Sasanians. Y.34.13c mentions Him as the only source of giving us the prize of earthly and heavenly salvation.

Y.43.1a addresses Mazda as "ruling at will." In Y.43.5 Zarathushtra sees Him as "the First One at the creation of the world" and as the One who "didst determine" the consequences of our actions and the Final Judgment. While the later Pahlavi literature refers to Ahriman trying to deceive God, Y.43.6c refers to Mazda as "Thou whom no one is able to deceive." In Y.43.8d, Zarathushtra again eulogizes Him as the One "who rules at his will."

Y.44 in general dispels any notion that Ahura Mazda is not omnipotent. In a very poetic style Zarathushtra implies that the creator of the whole universe is none other than Ahura Mazda who "fixed the course of the sun and stars" and "made the moon wax and then wane." (44.3c, d), who "upholds the earth below and the heavens (above) from falling," "who (created) the waters and the plants" and "the winds and the clouds" (Y.44.4b, c, d), "who created light and darkness, and both sleep and activity" (Y.45.b, c, d), "who fashioned Armaiti and Kshathra (Shehrevan)." By these questions Zarathushtra discerns Thee (Mazda) to be the creator of everything" (Y.44.7b, d, e). Y.44.12 & 14 make it clear that evil resides in man and not in Ahriman, as believed later on in Sasanian times, and 44.15b,c also make it clear that Mazda has "the (necessary) mastery to protect the world" from evil. Y.16c, e describes Him as "the world healer who bestows Good Mind to him whomsoever Thou Dost

wish him to be.” If so, how can Ahriman attack any soul against His wish or plans.

Y.45.4e states that the “All-viewing (God) is not to be deceived,” thus effectively rejecting any later notion of Ahriman trying to deceive Mazda whom Y.45.6a calls “the Greatest One” (or “the Greatest of All”) and Y.46.9b calls Him “The Most Mighty One.” Mazda is the Father of Spenta Mainyu, who is in opposition to Angra Mainyu, whereas the Pahlavi literature places Ohrmazd versus Angra Mainyu, thus setting the stage for cosmic dualism. Y.50.11c describes Mazda as “the Creator of existence,” and hence Ahriman is of no consequence to Ohrmazd.

Good rule first belonged to Mazda who is “the Mighty one” per Y.51.2. Y.51.3 describes Mazda as “the foremost revealer.”

## FREE WILL AND GOD’S OMNIPOTENCE

The above citations from Zarathushtra’s own words in the Gathas should leave no one in doubt about the omnipotence of Ahura Mazda, despite the later Pahlavi scriptures contradicting it, apparently because of misconstruing Zarathushtra’s Gathic precept of only Spenta Mainyu opposing Angra (Ahriman), and wrongly conceiving Ahura Mazda as opposing Angra Mainyu, as by then the knowledge of the Gathic language had faded.

If God is omnipotent, omniscient, and omnipresent as the Gathas reveal, then how can we explain why evil exists in the world, and why God is often not able to prevent it? The Gathas provides the answer: God in his wisdom and love for mankind granted us unconditional power of exercising free will in everything we think, say, and do, even before he fashioned the earth as well as the religious beliefs and conceptions – Y.33.11. In Y.30.2, Zarathushtra exhorts everyone, “man by man – for himself” – to think with the light of his/her own mind in order to choose between good and evil. Free will thus occupies a very pivotal position in Zarathushtra’s theology, and bears immense theological and philosophical implications. Without free will there can be no individual responsibility. There will be no need for evil if God made us or the world perfect. Such ready-made perfection would make us automated robots and not genuine human beings who have to exercise their *Khratu* (intelligence and will) to choose between right and wrong. Angra Mainyu reflects our own susceptibility to making choices that will lead us to evil. Angra Mainyu could exist only as long as we would make wrong choices that will lead to evil in the world. It represents our own propensity to making wrong choices despite the negative consequences they inherently and invariably invite.

Zarathushtra’s insistence on every one making an enlightened choice can be seen reflected in the *Bundahishn* (3:23-24) even as it pits Ahura Mazda

against Angra Mainyu when it says that Ahura Mazda offered a choice to the immortal souls of mankind before creating the material world for battling the evil in this world themselves or depending upon Him for ever to protect them from the adversary (Ahriman) and they agreed to entering the material world to become perfect, which is tantamount to their making good (Spenta) choices.

Nowhere, however, is this concept made as explicit and prominent as in Y.34.1: “By whichever action, by whichever word, by whichever worship, O Mazda, Thou didst receive for Thyself, Immortality, Asha and Khashtra (mastery/power) and Perfection, *let these very things be given by us to Thee, O Ahura, in the greatest number.*” Y.34.2 elaborates this golden rule further: “Moreover, *all these things have been granted to Thee* by the (correct) thinking stemming from Spenta Mainyu (Beneficent/Holy Spirit) *by the action of the virtuous man* whose soul is in alliance with Asha.” In Y.34.11 Zarathushtra tells Mazda, “Yes. Both completeness and immortality are for Thy sustenance.” (“That is,” comments Insler, “completeness and immortality created by the faith and devotion of the truthful is the only sustenance which Ahura Mazda requires.”) “Together with the rule of Vohu Mana allied with Asha, *(our) piety has increased these two enduring powers (for Thee).*”

In Y.44.2 Zarathushtra declares that a virtuous man following Asha is “a world healer and Thy ally in spirit, Mazda.” As verse 16 in the same Y.44 addresses Mazda as “world healer,” thus ascribing the same title to a virtuous man says a lot about God’s dependence on man for the successful completion of His mission on earth. It is not surprising, therefore, that Zarathushtra himself yearns for ‘striving’ for alliance with completeness and immortality, for God and for Himself in Y.44.17 A 18.

In Y.45.5 Zarathushtra reveals: “Now, I shall speak of what the most virtuous one (Spenta Mainyu) told me, that word which is to be heard as the best for men. Those of you who shall give obedience and regard to this (Lord) of mine, they shall reach completeness and immortality. The Wise One (Mazda) is Lord (Ahura) through such options (enacted among the faithful) stemming from good spirit.” In Y.45.11 Zarathushtra even says a virtuous person is following Daena (conscience, religion), “an ally, a brother, or a father (of Thee), Wise Lord, the Master of the house who shall save (us).” Insler comments: Any man in this world who acts under the motivation of his own virtuous spirit is himself of the very nature of God.”

Y.47.1 corroborates what is expounded in Y.34.1: “Through Spenta Mainyu and best of Vohu Mana, through both the action and the word befitting Asha, they shall grant completeness and immortality to him.” Y.48.3 declares: “Through the determination of his Vohu Mana, he shall be someone like Thee, Mazda.” “The virtuous man indeed is Vohu Mana’s companion,” adds Y.48.7.

The Gathas thus establish a clear and profound relationship between God and man. As God created man and his world through His Spenta Mainyu (Beneficent Spirit) that is, He made us in His own image in order to ultimately inspire man to be like Him in every way. His divine mission on this earth necessarily had to depend upon man exercising his free will to further His cause in every way he can and emulate God's own Spenta Mainyu unceasingly while alive. It is so important for man to use his free will to bring about the Kingdom of God (Khathra Vairya) on earth, that it is addressed and acclaimed as a precept of God in Y.31.6. And the man who furthers the cause of God on earth is of the very essence of God. But those who follow Angra Mainyu (Evil Spirit) and indulge in evil deeds and not only exercise their free will rightly "ruin the intention of life, and rob the esteemed power which really belongs to Vohu Mana." (Y.32.9)

It is not surprising therefore, that Insler perceives here "the nature of a pact between God and man in the profound realization that only by the mutual support of God and man can either one survive." (p. 114). "Man also must intercede to preserve the existence of God, for the power of God derives its strength from the enactment of his essence and principles in the world of man." (p. 179). "The man who has realized that a better world can exist with good thinking (Vohu Mana), such a man advances the power of the God of truth (Asha) and his principles on earth, while he reveals himself of the same essence as the Wise One (Mazda) who created these lofty values." (p. 294)

Sasanian dualism wrongly interpreted the twin spirits, Spenta Mainyu and Angra Mainyu delineated in Y.30,5 as "Ohrmazd and Ahriman" as is evident from the first chapter of the *Bundahishn* and the Pahlavi commentary on these verses. As a consequence of this regressive development within Zoroastrian theology in later times, the moral value and dignity and freedom of man, as Gershevitch observes in *Zoroaster's Own Contribution*, (Chicago: University Press, 1964, p. 31), was significantly compromised and Zoroastrian teachings were not substantially the same ever since. While the dualism of the Gathas places Ahura Mazda above everyone and everything else, and assigns a very special role, therefore, to man who is His representative on earth and whose role is to choose between the two opposite Spirits, the later Pahlavi dualism equates Ohrmazd with Ahriman at least during the time of *Gumazishn* which denotes the time when there will be a mixture of good and evil in the world. There is absolutely nothing in the Gathas to support it.

What is so unique about Zarathushtra's theology is not his ethical dualism so much as his emphasis on wo(man) being the principal arbiter between good and evil. Ethical dualism rather provides us a vehicle to exercise our free will. Some primitive forms of dualism may have existed before Zarathushtra's times but not the concept of Free Will in any form whatsoever. So profound was his insistence on Free Will that it is not totally absent even in the corrupted form of

Sasanian dualism, though there it becomes an end in itself rather than a means of inspiring us to realize Godhood through the proper exercise of Free Will. Man made all the difference for Zarathushtra. In the Gathas, Zarathushtra says the good is its own reward and that happiness and suffering were mere consequences of our choices (Yasna 30.8, 33.2, 33.3, 43.5, 46.7, 46.11, 49.11, and 51.14). Mazda will grant perfection and immortality (Yasna 31.21, 32.13, 32.15, 34.1,44.18,45.7, 51.15, 36.1) and enable us to be perfect and immortal like Him. For more on this subject, see my paper, "Philosophical justification of the Concept of free Will As Taught by Zarathushtra," presented at the Second International Gatha Congress held in Los Angeles in 1992.

Zaehner asserts, Sasanian dualism "was however, not accepted by the whole Zoroastrian community even after the overthrow of the Good Religion by Islam." He quotes Al-Baghdadi, who died in A.D. 1037, and Shahristani as testifying to the existence of non-dualist beliefs among the Irani Zoroastrians there. (*The Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, London: Weidenfield and Nicolson, 1961, pp.178-192). Zaehner observes that "under him (Kartir) Zoroastrianism appears for the first time as a fanatical and persecuting religion. Every effort was made to extirpate all non-Zoroastrian religions. Uniformity of belief was, then, certainly enforced. It was, however, only during the reign of the last (Yazdigird II) that he seems to have embarked on a career of religious prose ... in which the particular objection of his attention was Christian Armenia. (In Sasanian times) Ohrmazd, it is true, no longer had any serious rival on his own side, but his position vis-a-vis his eternal enemy (Ahriman) was very much weaker than it had ever been in the Prophet's mind. (The Sasanian theologies) failed in the long run because they lost sight of the transcendent majority of God which was central in Zoroaster's thought," but I regret to say, not central in Mary Boyce's thought, which should not however matter as the Prophet's views should hold precedence here. Since the two spirits came into being as a result of their choices, their nature derives from the choice made explicitly by them, and not vice versa, e.g. their choice does not derive from their nature. Choice made by them is the only governing factor here and Ahura Mazda allowed the two spirits to make the choice but the cosmic dualism of later times made Ohrmazd one of the two spirits which is in antithesis to what the Gathas propound. The need to bring out only the goodness of God as required by the concept of cosmic dualism vis-a-vis the concept of God as the Creator of both the good and the evil in this world inherent in the strict monotheism may have led in the post-Sasanian times to an over-emphasis of cosmic dualism. J. Choksy seems to be the only historian I know who seems to have realized this reality. Those scholars not realizing the Magi's imperative need for combating the imposition of a strict monotheism on them by Arab conquerors by overemphasizing various aspects of cosmic dualism have missed this historical reality. The Zoroastrian Magi (Mobeds) did their best to defend their ancient faith from the newly-risen Islam by asserting

the superiority of their belief in an All-Good God who was not responsible for the evil in the world even when they had forgotten the Gathic precept that God had given free will to man, who is responsible for contributing to evil in the world when he makes wrong choices, which they unwittingly, it seems, wrapped up in the form of the ominous Ahriman.

The Gathas reveal Zarathushtra himself making a clear choice to follow Ahura Mazda, e.g. Y.29.10, 29.11, 31.3, 32.1, 32.13, 32.16, 33.4, 33.7, 33.12, 33.14, 34.15, 43.8, 43.9 to 16, and many more.

Even Ahura Mazda announces His choice when Zarathushtra volunteers to be His messenger: “We have CHOSEN (*Varemaidī*) your good and virtuous piety (Armaiti). It shall be Ours.” (Y.32.2). By making *our* piety (Armaiti) *His* choice, Mazda is not giving up His Omnipotence but out of His love for us, and out of His desire to make us in His image, He readily shares it with us for making us responsible for making our own choices.

## **SASANIAN DUALISM AT VARIANCE WITH THE GATHAS**

The Gathas propagate a very subtle idea – perhaps too subtle for its times – that when (wo)man will make all the right choices, s/he will not only realize the essence of God, but will also augment and increase His powers. This is so clearly stated in the Gathas, but it has not received the attention it deserves. Thus 31.6 states: “Such is the rule of the Wise One that one shall increase it for Him through (developing) Vohu Mana (Good Mind).” Y.31.21 follows up on it: “Ahura Mazda, in consequence of His abounding authority of rule over Haurvatat (Perfection) and Ameretat (Immortality) and over Asha (The cosmic rule that eternally governs the universe), shall grant the permanence of Vohu Mana’s (Good Mind’s) alliance to him, the one who is His ally in spirit and actions.” Y.31.7 makes it further explicit: “Through this spirit (of Asha and Vohu Mana), *O Mazda! Thou art to grow. Thou who, up to now indeed, has been the same. O Ahura.*” In Y.32.2, as we have already seen, Ahura Mazda instructs his followers: “We have chosen your good Spenta Armaiti (Beneficent Right-Mindedness). It shall be Ours.” Thus, God makes his true followers’ ‘Spenta Armaiti’ His very own, just as they make His Spenta Armaiti their very own. All those who oppose the evil and promote goodness among others “will bring success to His desire,” (y.33.2). Vohu Mana and Armaiti of His true followers strengthen Mazda’s own Perfection and Immortality (Y.33.8). A person with Vohu Mana supports the very spirit of Mazda’s companions, (Y.33.9). “Grow Thyself, O Mazda! in breath and body through the rule of Vohumana and Asha.” (Y.33.10). In Y.33.12 one prays: “Rise up to me, Ahura! Along with Thy Spenta Mainyu (Beneficent Mentality/Spirit), O Mazda, receive force through (our) Armaiti, strength through (every)

good requital, powerful might through Asha, protection through (our) Vohu Mana.” “Zarathushtra even gives the breath of his own person as a gift, in order that there be for Mazda predominance of Vohu Mana.” (Y.33.14). Thus, our own right choice not only turn us towards God, but also enhances God’s own powers and predominance. God loves us too much to grow in strength without helping us to be like Him.

However, even in the Sasanian Dualism, Hormazd is omniscient and omnipresent and eternal, but Ahriman is ignorant and limited in time and power. His evil and destructive attributes will last only until Frashokereti materializes, when he and his entire evil retinue will be totally destroyed.