

Zarathushti view of death and the afterlife

by Kersey H. Antia¹

*Exploring the Zarathushti view of life, death and afterlife,
as propounded in the Gathas and later Young Avestan
scriptures.*

Throughout the ages, mankind has viewed death with awe and sorrow, and devised rituals and practices based upon the prevailing beliefs and philosophical underpinnings of a particular people, to soften the blow of death.

The Avestan people were no exception. Rather, all available evidence suggests that they were among the first, if not the very first, people on the earth to think of the afterlife – ‘paradise’² being an Avestan and not a Hebrew word - and to see death as a continuum between life and after-life, until the ‘renovation’ (frashokereti) or resurrection takes place, when life becomes eternal and perfect.

Avestan view of Death

The Avesta does not see a natural death as evil. Rather, the Gatha [Ys. 30.4] says that those who choose the path of evil (*angra*) are dead in spirit (*ajyaaiti* = without life) even while living; but those who have chosen the progressive path of Spenta Mainyu (the progressive spirit that represents Ahura Mazda) are welcome in the House of Divine Song (*garothman*, OAv. *garo.demane*, YAv. *garo.nmana*, Phi. *garodman*, or ‘the house of heavenly music’) until the renovation takes place:

*atcha hyat ta hem mainyu jasatem
paourvim dazde gaemcha ajyaitim-cha;
yaotha cha anghahat apemem
angheush achishto dregvatam,
at ashaune vahisitem mano.*

And when together did these Spirits Twain,
Foregather at Creation’s early dawn,
Life did One make, the Other not-life;

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2 The word ‘paradise’ is an Avestan word, *pairidaeza*, literally meaning ‘raised platform,’ used by the Greeks to describe the beautiful gardens of the Persians all over Anatolia (modern Turkey), a truly heavenly sight according to many first-hand witnesses.

And thus Creation's purpose is achieved;
Dark is the mind of those that cling to False,
But brightly shines the Mind that holds to Truth.

[Ys. 30.4, tr. I. J. S. Taraporewala]

Reincarnation. This incidentally rules out *reincarnation* in Zoroastrian theology. We have but one life to make it to heaven, and we had better take it very seriously. The Gathas make it clear that evil was very rampant in Zarathushtra's times, and there was urgency about eradicating it then and there, in one generation. Therefore, we do not find any reference to reincarnation in the Gathas, or any word denoting reincarnation, though some theosophists see it in a phrase '*paiti yantu*' meaning 'coming back.' The idea of reincarnation, however, runs counter to the entire spectrum of Zoroastrian theology, though my own life-long study of the Gathas leads me to believe that Zarathushtra leaves the possibility, not of reincarnation per se – because after-death phenomena generally are beyond the conception of the human mind and imagination - but of some divine dispensation between the end of our physical existence and frashokereti when he asks Ahura Mazda [Ys. 44.19]:

This I ask Thee, Tell me truly O Ahura!
What shall be the *first* punishment for such a person (who
unjustly shortchanges another person or breaks his promise to
him). I know the *final* one which shall befall him.

Zarathushtra makes a similar inquiry of Ahura Mazda in Yasna 48.2 as well.

Death. The word for death in the Avesta is *merethyoo*. It is mentioned once in the Gathas [Ys. 53.8]: "Let murders and injuries be restrained. Let misery be restrained ... that person is the greatest who restrains death" brought on by violence.

Shyeitibyō vizhibyō iratu [ish] dvafsho,
Hvo dereza merethyaush, mazishto, moshu-cha astu.

May tribulations vanish evermore;
May He (Zarathushtra), the Greatest, lead us all again;
Greatest is He, for He hath conquered Death.

[Ys. 53.8, tr. I. J. S. Taraporewala]

The word *merethyoo* (death) is mentioned at least three times in the Avesta, while describing how Yima (King Jamshid) was able to remove thirst, hunger, extreme heat and cold, old age, and death, which is so suggestive of frashokereti [Yasna 9.5, Yasht 9.10, Yasht 15.16 and Vendidad 2.5].

The Avesta does not depict death as some form of disruption or disturbance on our way to eternity. It often portrays the soul *urvan* or *ravan* as pertaining to and embodied in the living person. Indeed, *urvan* receives guidance from the *fravashi* (*farohar*) the essence of Ahura Mazda in us all, for making the right choice in everything we conceive, speak or do.

Man's choices on earth govern destiny in the world beyond

The *Gathas* depict Ahura Mazda and His Holy Spirit (Spenta Mainyu) as uniformly and expressly acting in a spirit of benevolence and as governing humans on the basis of right or wrong choices made by them while on this earth. The *Gathas*, as well as *all* the later scriptures emphasize that only by good thoughts, words and deeds, can one ensure the triumph of Ahura Mazda over Angra Mainyu, nay, it is one's duty to do so:

*Ya-shyaothna, ya-vach.angha.ha, ya-yasna ameretatem,
Ashem-cha taeiby daongha,
Mazda, Khshathrem-cha haurvatato.*

Through deeds I do, also through words I speak,
Through meditation deep within myself,
I bring mankind eternal life and truth,
Strength through Perfection, Mazda, do I bring.

[Ys. 34.1, tr. I. J. S. Taraporewala]

The *Later Avesta* at times seems to deviate from this basic Gathic principle. For instance, *Verethragna* (the yazata who smites enemies – later known as *Behram Yazad*), the yazata of Victory, asks:

To whom in my mighty power shall I smite with disease and death?

Similarly *Mithra (Meher)* the yazata of Covenants and Friendship, when not feeling fulfilled and revered by his worshipers, ponders :

To whom shall I, in my might, impart disease and death?
To whom shall I impart poverty that brings misery?
Of whom shall I, at one stroke, cut off noble progeny?

[Yasht 10.110]

Here, death and human misery are brought on by the fiats and whims of two major yazatas and not by the undeviating and fundamental Gathic principle of choices made by humans on this earth, a principle that makes the Zoroastrian religion so modernistic and humanistic in its outlook.

However, the *Vendidad* (The Law Against the Demons) a later scripture, strongly asserts that death, disease and other calamities are brought on by heretics and all those who do not practice proper purification rituals [Vendidad 9.47, 51; 20.1, 3, 6, 7, 9,10; 21.2] and that death is evil and is brought on by Angra Mainyu (Ahriman), who is '*pouru-mahrka*' – full of death and the very cause of it.

At first sight this may appear to be in contrast with the Gathic teaching of humans making their own destiny by the choices they make. However, if we

make allowance for the fact that a full millennium and a half had intervened between these two beliefs, leading to some changes in people's critical understanding about the Gathas, in no small measure owing to the lack of knowledge about the Gathic language, we may well appreciate that Angra Mainyu may after all, represent the evil choices we make in life.

By not making the right choice we may be opposing Ahura Mazda, very much like Angra Mainyu does. We thus have a choice to be pro-Angra Mainyu or pro-Ahura Mazda.

Only an ethical dualism, however, pervades all through the Gathas where the problem of good and evil pertains itself only to human mentality. But even when, in later times, Angra Mainyu was somehow perceived to be directly in opposition to Ahura Mazda and not to Spenta Mainyu, as in the Gathas, the principle of making the right choice for right results was never abandoned or undermined in our scriptures – not even to this day.

Judgment upon death

For three days after death the soul (*urvan*) hovers around one's world and family. At dawn on the fourth day, the soul passes through **Chinvat Bridge** – the bridge that separates the good from the bad souls – which becomes narrower and narrower until it becomes as thin as a razor's edge.

This concept of the 'Judgment Bridge' is expressly enforced in the Gathas [Ys. 46.10-11 and 51.13] and may very likely even precede it.

The good souls have no problem crossing the Chinvat Bridge, and become one with their *fravashi*, as we pray at the end of the funeral and other prayers:

*Idha irristanam urvano yazamaide
Yaao ashaonam fravashaiyo.*

The bad souls sink into the bottomless pit of hell where they remain until the time of *frashokereti*.

Thus upon death, a person will always be judged on the basis of his choices on this earth. Though there is some conflict between Gathic thought and the later doctrines about death and Ahriman, there is some basic continuity of belief and doctrine as well, namely, man's choices alone govern his destiny in the world beyond.

Heaven and hell

The post-Gathic and Pahlavi literature make abundant reference to heaven and hell, but Zarathushtra also alludes to them in the Gathas, for example:

Foul food shall be for these, as they cry woe, when they shall be in hell. [Ys. 53.6, Stanley Insler]

He who is good will be blessed by God, but:

Worse-than-evil will accrue to that one who does not acknowledge Him when he reaches Judgment Day at the end of his life. [Ys.51.6]

The abodes (of the Good) are in Thy house (garothman),
O Ahura!" [Ys. 48.7]

However, when the souls of the wicked reach Chinvat Bridge:

Their souls will become guests in the house of druj (the lie) for all times to come. [Ys. 46.11]

While such pronouncements abound in the Gathas, perhaps the most obvious reference seems to be:

O Mazda, Thou maintain these (the faithful) in Thy house (*garothman*) ... But (as regards) the wicked with bad exercise (abuse) of his power, bad action, bad word, of bad conscience (religious precepts) and bad thought... The souls come to greet them with rotten food (in contrast to the food of one's choice offered in the Satum ceremony?); they will indeed end up becoming residents in the house of druj (the lie). [Ys. 49.10-11]

Yasna 43.20 reiterates this scenario and adds the words "a long lifetime of darkness and woe."

Post-Gathic literature paints a very graphic and detailed picture of heaven and hell, and describes different stages of heaven, culminating in *Arda Viraf Nameh* (which is reminiscent of Dante's work later on). One's belief in these later works is punctuated by one's own preconceptions and personal beliefs in the matter, many a one contending that heaven and hell exist in mind only.

It may be interesting to compare notes with people like Van Paragh [see page 36] without, of course, in any way abiding by it. He says [p. 86-87] hell "is a condition brought into existence by the thoughts, words and actions of those who have produced pain and suffering on earth. All of us will reap what we have sowed."

There is "a faint darkness ... an endless dance of restlessness. There is no safe refuge for a tormented soul when it is trying to flee from its own baseness. Spirits in such a dark realm harbor mental attitudes of hate, malice and the need for control over others ..." Their "dwellings are molded out of negative mental attitudes and the darkness of spiritual ignorance."

The concept of fravashi

Fravashi (Av.) *faroahar* or *fravahar* (Phi.) represents the divine essence in all living beings. It is invested with eternal light and works ceaselessly and

eternally for the eradication of all evil in this world by inspiring our *urvan* (soul) to choose right all the time. While *urvan* is attached to the body while one is alive, the *fravashi* is divine in its essence, and its abode is in heaven. Its principal mission is to guide the soul towards making the right choices.

Etymologically, ‘*fravashi*’ means an ideally perfect purpose pervading every living thing in this planet or the divine impulse that guides the evolution of the world, or the divine impulse to make the right choice all the time.

It is described as ‘*anamanthwao*’ or ‘inconceivable by the human mind.’ Each living object has its own *fravashi*, whose task is to lead every object (and not just humans) in God’s creation towards perfection. *Fravashi* may well be ‘the clothing of souls’ mentioned in Yasna 30.7. If we translate it as “the act of making a progressive choice,” it again fits well into the Gathic theology, even though somehow it is not mentioned there at all.

Fravardin Yasht [1, 17, 19, 28, 29, 71, and 78] suggests that the farohars assist Spenta Mainyu towards achieving the ultimate goal of perfection. Thus the farohars are engaged in the ceaseless cosmic battle for eradicating evil (and thus Angra Mainyu) from God’s creation and they inspire the *urvan* to do the same.

The word ‘*fravashi*’ occurs first in the Haptan Yasht [Ys. 37.3] which is quite Gathic in nature. Hadokht Nask [Yt. 22.39-40] says that *fravashi* emanated from Spenta Mainyu and Vohu Manah, which are the most unique of God’s divine abstractions in the Gathas.

The origin of *fravashis* thus lies in the Gathas, though its concept is more clearly described in Yasna 23 and 26 and in the Fravardin Yasht. Nowhere in the Avesta is it mentioned that Spenta Mainyu and *fravashis* are created. Fravardin Yasht [Yt. 13.80] mentions that Ahura Mazda has his own *fravashi*, but the Avesta does not mention any *fravashi* of Spenta Mainyu, which may very well be due to the fact that the concept of *fravashi* corresponds quite well with that of Spenta Mainyu.

It is not surprising that the *fravashis* of the living are regarded as more powerful and significant (because they still have the opportunity to do good while on earth) than those of the dead (who do not have such an opportunity any more, and may have even lost it).

Fravashis are the spiritual essence of Ahura Mazda in us all, but they lack *Haurvatat* (Perfection) and *Ameretat* (Immortality), which Ahura Mazda always had. According to *Bundahishn*, the ninth century Book of Primal Creation Ahura Mazda gave the *fravashis* a choice – either to go out to this earth to attain Perfection and Immortality by gaining intelligence and using it wisely to make right choices (a task they were not hitherto called upon to do) or continue to stay with Ahura Mazda without attaining intelligence and the twin rewards. The *fravashis* chose to come to this earth in order to be like Ahura Mazda completely. They readily responded to Ahura Mazda’s call to join Him in His

struggle against eradicating all evil from this world, and make it as fresh and holy as the spiritual world [*Bundahishn*, 3:23 - 24]:

Which seems more useful to you, that I should create you into material form, so that incarnate, you will battle the lie, and vanquish it, and that I should resurrect you perfect and immortal at the end, and re-create you in corporeal form, and that you become immortal, unaging, and without enemies forever; or is it necessary always to protect you from the adversary. The immortal souls of mankind saw, through their omniscient wisdom, that the evil from Angra Mainyu would arrive into the material world and [saw also] the final non-opposition of the adversary. They agreed to enter the material world to become perfect and immortal in the final body up to eternity and eternal progress.

Consequently, the mission of every Zarathushti is to align himself completely with the forces of Ahura Mazda and fight the forces of evil in everything they conceive, verbalize or undertake.

Present-day Zarathushtis regard as fravashi, a figure found often in Achaemenian architecture, hovering over the portrayal of kings, winged like a bird with a human face. While Fravardin Yasht [70] provides some clue for it when it says “the fravashis of the righteous come to the help of (righteous) rulers flying like a bird and shaped as a winged man,” it may be referring to the royal khwarnah [*FEZANA Journal*, Spring 1996] in my studied opinion, but most European scholars insist it represents Ahura Mazda.



This symbol is commonly believed by Zarathushtis to represent the farohar (or fravahar or fravashi), the essence of God that dwells in every living thing, and leads the soul on its journey towards the ultimate triumph of Good over Evil. To some, this symbol represents the royal khwarnah or divine glory. Persepolis, c. 500 BCE. Photo: Khurshed A. Patell

There are some similarities between the concept of fravashi and Plato’s suggestion that all things and beings in the universe have their ideal prototype in the spiritual world. Long before Plato, Zoroastrians saw such an ideal

pervading the universe in the form of fravashi. *Bundahishn* [IV: 4 & 5] even states that the fravashi of Asho Zarathushtra was known to the *Geush Urvan*, the soul of the universe, at the time of creation. It is quite likely that Plato was influenced by Zarathushti ideas, quite prevalent in Greece then.

The concept of fravashi is also somewhat similar to the Egyptian belief in ‘*kaa*,’ man’s higher double, the Hindu belief in ‘*param-atma*,’ or ‘*pitris*,’ the Roman belief in the ‘*manes*’ and the Chinese belief in ‘*Tao*,’ the origin of heaven and earth, the Ultimate Essence.

The final renovation (frashokereti)

At the time of *frashokereti*, not only all human beings, but also all living creatures, will become fresh (*frasha*) and pure by the grace of God, according to our Pahlavi scriptures.

Yasna 30.9 encourages us all to bring it about, on this earth,

May we be like those who strive to bring frashokereti on this earth

that is to make it as fresh and perfect as it was at the beginning, when it was unspoiled by evil – Angra, later Ahriman.

The material world was made in the image of the spiritual world by Ahura Mazda, but the introduction of evil polluted the material world with rage, greed, disease, violence, hatred, etc. The world will become *frasha* (fresh, renovated) again on their ultimate eradication. This is similar to the idea of **resurrection**. According to the Pahlavi tradition, the ultimate renovation will be brought about by a messiah born of a virgin mother. In the Gathas, there appears to be no break for the evil souls, even at the time of *frashokereti*, but the later Pahlavi writings uniformly make it explicit that all souls, even the evil souls, will be resurrected to a new, perfect life.

Near-death experiences

We are afraid of death because of the fear of the unknown. Little is known to us about what really happens when we die, but in our times many books have come out on this subject as a result of reports given by people going through near-death experiences and recalling them after being revived in hospital emergency rooms. I had the good fortune of having had many patients sharing such experiences with me.

A common thread runs through these experiences – going through a tunnel, meeting loved ones (who generally push them back into this world saying their time here is not over yet), seeing a bright light, a sense of utter peacefulness (except in cases of suicide), the sense that death is not the end-all of everything.

James van Praagh, author of the New York Times #1 bestseller writes [*Reaching to Heaven*, Signet, 1999, p. 80] that a good soul:

... would discover radiant, manicured gardens as far as the eye can see, with each flower bursting forth in brilliant color. The vivid colors in the spirit world are beyond our natural, earthly spectrum.

Many righteous souls hear divine music just before passing away. I know of a person, then a child, who heard it herself, as her dear brother was passing away.

Thus, from this earthly abode, a good soul passes on to the world of endless light (*anaghra raochao*, later *aneran*).

Van Praagh [ibid.] further observes:

Everything in this environment is literally 'lit up.' The light of the realm does not originate from any sun or star; it is known as the astral light... Because all things are harmoniously connected, you might think of this glowing effervescence as a reflection of the light that shines within each spirit.

Next you would notice is the scent... So often the spirits have said that they instantly possessed a heightened sensitivity to the exquisitely sweet smell of their environment.

Tending the fire with fragrant sandalwood and incense after a death occurs and thereafter for all the ceremonies for the departed, becomes thus all the more meaningful. We die in the body, only to inhabit in spirit a life much more splendid and peaceful than we can ever conceive as humans.

Presence of fravashis of the departed

Our scriptures tell us often that the *fravashis* of the holy and of our departed relatives come to greet us when we die, which is proven time and again by the accounts of those who were pronounced dead on arrival at the hospital but were later revived. They guide the soul of the departed immediately upon death and from thereon, especially during the last five days of the year. I had first-hand evidence of this when my best friend-cum-classmate at the Cama Athoman Institute in Mumbai lay dying in a hospital in 1953 and repeatedly said that he saw his step-mother and step-brothers, and that they had come to escort him to the other world, though they had died long before he was even born.

Almost all, if not all, books on life after death mention this phenomenon without fail, and many of my own patients who were declared dead but were later revived, have consistently confirmed it.

As a teenager I remember a custom that if a person died during the Muktaḍ,

the family would not observe the Muktd ceremony for other deceased relatives, presumably because the fravashis were already busy helping the recently departed soul. While there may have been some variations in this custom in different *panths* (priestly sections), its implication is clear: the souls of our departed relatives do come to greet us and instruct us into the ways of the other world.

Although we lose our body on death, the Avesta assures us that we do not forsake those who have passed on. Rather, the Avesta repeatedly asserts that the departed souls crave:

Who will praise us?
Who will venerate us?
Who will show love for us ... ?

[Afringan-i-Ardafravash]

Venerating departed souls

Fravardin Yasht and Yasna 26 exhort us to hold proper rituals in memory of departed souls, as also to venerate them collectively at the end of the year, leading to what we observe today as *Muktd* or *Panjeh*, similar to the observance of All Souls' Day among the Christians.

It is not surprising that our third most important prayer (after Ashem Vohu and Yatha Ahu Vairyo), Yenghahe Hatam relates to the veneration of all worthy souls, men or women (*'tascha taoscha'*).

The Gathas [Ys 51.22] also declare that those souls that have made the right choice while on this earth deserve our veneration:

*Yehya moi ashat hacha vahishtem yesne paiti
vaeda Mazdao Ahuro; yoi aonghare-cha henti-cha;
ta yazai khaish namenish, pairi-cha jasai vanta.*

That person indeed, who makes his every act
An act of worship, led by Asha's Law,
Is deemed as best by Mazda Ahura;
Each one of these, who have been and who are,
With reverence will I recall them individually by name,
and strive to emulate their holy deeds.

[Ys. 51.22, the Gatha verse of which the prayer
Yenghahe Hatam is a later paraphrase].

What Yasna 51.22 exhorts us has become a cardinal practice in the Zarathushti religion, as can be seen from the the Satum prayer [see page 75] for veneration of the worthy departed souls, the Jashan, Fravardin Yasht [see page 75] and other prayers.

Death ends life, only to start us into a life so spiritual and sublime. Life in the body dies, but not the life in spirit, which lives forever.

Death is but a beautiful beginning of life in a better world. Even so, as *Dadistan i Denik* [XXVII.3] aptly observes, at death the soul is utterly bewildered by the sudden change of environment, and seeks our solace and prayers. Various ceremonies were devised therefore, to make the passage to the other world smoother for the soul, as also to provide some comfort and solace to the grieving relatives and friends.

Death can conquer man only to be conquered in turn by his Asho Ravan. Death takes away our body but not our Ravan. No sooner does the light go out of the *tanu* (body), than the ravan goes on eternally in our spiritual journey upwards. Death in this world is just the beginning of eternal life in the world beyond. Death is but an entry into higher spiritual existence. *Yawaecha Yawaeta taecha* – forever and ever!

The human Constitution

The Avesta, especially Yasna 55.1, anatomises the human constitution into nine parts as follows:

The three physical parts are:

- (1) *Gaetha* - the organs.
- (2) *Tanu* - the skin and muscles.
- (3) *Azdi* - the bones and skeletal frame.

The three invisible physical parts are:

- (4) *Ushtan* - Breath, which keeps us alive and serves as the only link between the body, mind and spirit, leading to their separation upon death.
- (5) *Kehrp* - the etheric body, which leaves the body upon death.
- (6) *Tevishi* - Etheric energy, senses, the power needed to make choices.

The three spiritual parts are:

- (7) *Baodha* - Consciousness and intelligence ('buddhi') essential for functioning normally in life, and making intelligent decisions/choices for the benefit of the soul.
- (8) *Urvan* or *ravan* - the Soul, which is called upon to choose right while living, and departs from the body upon death. It will rise from the body at dawn on the fourth day, will be judged at the Chinwat Bridge, and go to heaven or hell (or purgatory) depending on his actions on earth.

- (9) *Fravashi* [see above] – God's divine spark in each of us, that veers us to

the right path (Path of Asha) all the time, and which rejoins heaven upon our death.

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