

STANLEY INSLER'S NON-RITUALISTIC INTERPRETATION OF THE GATHAS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

Stanley Insler sent me a typed article, "Abstract levels of Ritual in the Gathas of Zarathustra" many years ago which I find so profoundly scholarly that I do not think it proper to change a word in it. However, not knowing now if (and where) it was published, as it richly merits publication, I prefer to provide just a succinct summary of it here as it provided an equally scholarly response to Kellens and his followers.

Insler at first sympathizes with those scholars like Kellens and Skjærvø who emphasized the ritualistic aspect of the Gathas as Zarathushtra declares himself as a Zaotar (priest) and manthran (possessor of sacred words or mantra). The verbs *yaz* 'to worship,' and *stu* 'to praise' and the word *yasna* 'worship' (Sanskrit *yajna*) the verb *kshnu*, Vedic *jush* 'to gratify with refreshment', the ever present noun *namah*, 'reverence', the oblation of butter *aazuite*, 'milk offering' *eezaa*, 'sacrificial cake' *draonah*, all of which are incorporated into the cover-term *myazda* 'ritual offering', Vedic *miyedha*, etc., all conjure up a background of Vedic hymns. The Gathic vocabulary, meter, elliptical style, etc., is so very characteristic of the Rigvedic Hotar poetry. Moreover, the Gathas were (later on) placed in the center of the Yasna ceremony, which understandably led some scholars such as Mary Boyce and me to view them as the center piece of the Yasna ritual. (However, what puzzles me is the fact that philologically Gathas are more ancient than the rest of the Yasna. However, there is no mention of Haoma in the Gathas and the lone mention of *Dooroaasha* does not refer to Haoma. So it is so drastically strange that Haoma is not even once mentioned in the Gathas whereas one of its usual admixture *eczaa* 'milk' is mentioned often. Insler views Boyce, despite being a historian, (and I may add unquestionably a great one at that) as adopting an unhistorical view of significant continuity between the Gathic faith and the present-day one. (To me, this now also does not seem to tally with Patricia Crone's assertion that change sets in every religion after three generations, as observed by me elsewhere.)

Above all, the Soma sacrifice, the Vedic equivalent of the Haoma sacrifice was performed only once a year and as a matter of fact in its most simple format as the *jyotishtoma* it was performed over several days. This rules out a daily performance of the Haoma ritual, especially so if Zarathushtra belonged to a semi-nomadic period of Iranian history per Boyce which required moving from one grazing land to another, leaving no time for the complicated preparation for it. The Yasna ritual

thus seems to be a secondary development within the Iranian religion perhaps comparable to the Vedic *Agnihotra* performed every day.

If Zarathustra's Gathas embodies all the essential features of the Vedic religion as the Kellen's school contends, why then did he become the founder of a religion? Lommel's answer is clearly a typical one, namely Zarathustra prohibited the Haoma ritual and cattle sacrifice.

While Zarathustra inveighs against every evil person and activity, why does he not inveigh against Haoma and the supposed ritual slaughter of kine? Insler does not seem to believe Zarathustra prohibited Haoma ritual because if he did, it would not have gained prominence so rapidly in Zoroastrianism. He also finds cows to be too valuable in an arid region, (unlike in the Gantetic plain), to be sacrificed and the same could be true of even goats and sheep. Moreover, animal sacrifice, *Pashubandha*, for the stately Soma sacrifice was performed only once a year. Animal sacrifice does not (as a rule) reappear because, unlike Haoma ritual, it was never a regular practice.

So what did Zarathustra preach that entitles him to be a prophet? He indeed introduced a theretofore new way to define relationship between man and God. For example, the only reference to Draona occurs in Yasna 33.8 which defines it as perfect health (*Hauvataat*) and immortality (*Ameretaat*). Zarathustra saw correspondence between the spiritual (*Menog*) world and corporeal (*Getig*) world, in the words of Zarathustra between the worlds of mind and matter. Thus, *Haurvataat* represents vegetation and *Ameretaat* represents water, thus bread is conceived at a higher level, which Insler considers to be the first level of abstraction. In Yasna 34.11 we find the notion that *Armaiti* (piety) of the person steadfastly following *Asha* (Truth) and Good Thinking corresponds to worshipping Mazda.

Insler finds Yasna 31.6 most informative; one can increase Mazda's rule for Him through Good Thinking. Zarathustra thus emphasizes enactment of Truth and Good Thinking in place of more transient ritual offering of physical objects since it offers more enduring worship and strength to God. Insler views this as a second level of abstraction in the Gathas.

Both in Yasna 50.8-9 and 49.5, Insler illustrates in detail how the person allying with Good Thinking (as such) represents the milk and butter offerings for Mazda and thereby substitutes the traditional ritual offering to Mazda. Yasna 49.5 emphasizes indeed such a person acquires the very same lineage as *Asha* (Truth) and all other spiritual entities that constitute the very essence of Mazda. Thus, one can significantly serve Mazda in a highly abstract manner, each material ritual offering really representing the Amesha Spenta it represents such as *Vohu Mana* for cow and milk. Thus, when Yasna 51.1 declares that

good fortune and along with milk libation (*Euzaachit*) will follow the person choosing the Good Rule, Insler sees it as the masked allusion to the cow and Good Thinking, a complex technique which Zarathustra applies often to impart his precepts.

Insler believes Zarathustra could only use the language and practices known to his semi-nomadic people but gave them a higher, spiritual notion but had to let them adhere to the older ones in case this was somehow not attainable.

Following Lemmel, Insler sees correspondence between the Amesha Spentas and material creations in the Gathas. Thus, there exists a given relationship between Good Thinking and Cow, Truth and fire, desirable rule and metal, respect and earth, health and plants, immortal life and waters.

Insler also discerns quite a homologous relationship between the common spiritual elements and the more abstract methods of sacrifice. Thus ritual praise in almost every verse stands adjacent to Good Thinking. Words offered in worship always represent Truth. Worship (*Yasna*), while often associated with action, basically stands for the ritual equivalent of Good Rule because the properly performed sacrifice ushers into prosperity in the same manner that actions of Good Rule lead to the same result – abundance. In the same way *Nemah* (reverence) is actually a particularized form of *Aarmaiti* (respect). Zarathushtra believed that whatever system produced success in the spiritual sphere also governed the system that ushered into prosperity in the material world, thus rendering these two spheres homologous as well as governed by a single design of nature in which man and God were but two aspects of the same being, unlike in the previous tradition. The most significant result of this theology is the power which God possesses has also the possibility of residing in man if he ever chooses to follow those beneficent powers of Ahura Mazda.

Ahura Mazda's great achievement is what later came to be known as Amesha Spentas. Insler believes that their traditional order in the Avesta represents their proper arrangement as each one of them in turn can exist only by the predication of the preceding element. Good thinking, for example, is the primal constituent since without its existence Truth cannot be comprehended. Also, Good Rule cannot come into being in the absence of Truth, just as good government requires the existence of good laws.

Yasna 34.11 mentions all Amesha spentas in the exact order. In the Gathas one can discern a system of correspondences between mental (or spiritual) and physical objects that play an equally important function.

Zarathushtra's contributions as a religious thinker and prophet laid in realizing (first time in the human history) that there was mutuality and correspondence between the physical and mental (or spiritual) spheres on one hand, as well as the physical and mental components of sacrificial or ritual activity. The spiritual and physical spheres were thus interlinked as well as structured as parallel and organic systems. (I, for one, wonder why Yasna 34.1 is not referred to here as I find it to be very clearly revealing the Gathic essence. Man has to emulate God and be God-like in every way, a message also expressed in 44.18, 47.1 and 50.6-8). But what Insler presents here is more than sufficient to rule out any ritualistic basis or ideology of the Gathas.