

Avesta

An Introduction

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Indo-European Languages are the most widely spoken family of languages in the world. Some 1.6 billion people speak it. Alphabetically, they contain the following subfamilies: Albanian, Anatolian, Armenian, Baltic, Celtic, Germanic, Greek, Indo-Iranian, Italic, Slavic, and Tocharic. They consist of hundreds of languages and dialects. From the point of “nativeness”, they include “Bengali” spoken in Bangladesh in the Bay of Bengal in south-east Asia and Icelandic in extreme north-west of Europe. In simpler words it spans Eurasia. English, Spanish, French and a few other languages have spread far beyond their native borders through European colonization during the last four centuries. English, Spanish, and, to a lesser extent, French are the dominant languages in the Americas. Once Persian was the dominant cultural language from Turkey on the Mediterranean Sea to the Chinese borders in Central Asia and the Indian Sub-continent. Political setbacks have shrunk its borders to present Iran, Afghanistan, and Tajikistan.

Indo-Iranian Subfamily

The Indo-Iranian subfamily, also known by the name “Aryan”, has two branches—Iranian and Indic (also known as Indo-Aryan). Its living languages are spoken by 500 million people in and around the Iranian Plateau and the Indian Sub-continent.

The ancient Indo-Iranian language had twin dialects: Avesta and Vedic. These two have the oldest literature of the Indo-European languages on record. In fact, the Gathas of Zarathushtra are the most archaic form of the family. On written record, their antiquity is superseded by the Hittite branch of the Anatolian subfamily. Hittite texts in cuneiform date from 3600 years ago.

The original country of the Indo-Iranian language was somewhere east of the Volga on the steppes. Subsequent southward migrations took the tribes to what is now known as Central Asia, with further migrations splitting the family into two. What are known as Indics began their trek down travelling through present-day Afghanistan to the Indus Valley and then into the entire Indian sub-continent. The Iranians remained only to spread all over what is called the Iranian Plateau. Traditionally the ancient migratory waves took the Indo-Iranian 1500 years to settle in Central Asia. This happened after the ice age cold spell of at least 8000 years ago. Historical and archeological evidence also gives almost the same time period for these waves of migration but places it about 4000 years ago. This brings it close to the Hittite period.

Avesta

Avesta is name given to the most ancient language of the Iranian branch. The word “Avesta” is written in Pahlavi as *apistâk* or *apastâk*. If the assumption is correct that the word is *avistâk*, then, like the Indic “Veda”, it could be derived from *vid* ‘to know’. That is why some opine that it

should mean “wisdom, knowledge”. That makes the Pahlavi term of *avistâk u zand* mean the “Knowledge and Commentary”.

Looking to the fact that Avesta was a dead language by the Parthian period and that it was only explained by priests through *zand* and the mysticism that surrounded the text and still surrounds all sacred scriptures, I render the word to be “a” (negative prefix) + “vista” (known) = *Avistâ* ‘unknown, mysterious sacred text explained only through *zand* commentary’. For similar examples one should turn to the claims by Christian, Gnostic, Hindu, Jewish, and Muslim masters who say only they and their relevant predecessors could “unlock” and explain the mysterious, hidden, unknown meanings of their scriptures. I render *avistâk u zand* to mean “The Occult and the Commentary”.

The Avesta Literature

The general belief prevailing among common people, Zoroastrians or not, is that the Avesta constitutes the “Sacred Books of the Zoroastrians”. Looking at the sacred scriptures of other living religions, it should be so. Baha’ism, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, Judaism, and Sikhism have their relevant sacred books. A closer look would, however, reveal that the conscious or unconscious founder of each religion or order had his or her inspired or thought-out message conveyed in person. Later, the successors added much around the nucleus of the founding message and consequently produced a collection of writings, some of them in a different dialect or language. Still later, the followers of the successors canonized the collection—duly collated, edited, and even translated to suit the times—to form their sacred scriptures. Some went even further. They ascribed the entire collection to a single author: the revelatory founder, enlightened promulgator, inspiring gods, or God of Revelation!

The same holds true about the Avesta: “the Sacred Books of the Zoroastrians”. A linguistical and historical scrutiny of the collection, however, will reveal several layers of literature which could not but have taken almost a thousand years to materialize into an oral literature—oral because, like most of the sacred books of other religions, it was precisely and meticulously memorized and passed on by word of mouth through generations until its final reduction in writing. Tradition says that it was put in writing in the very earliest times. But from what we know of the scripts among the Iranians, it could have been done during the Achaemenian period (550–330 BCE) when the Iranians learned how to read and write.

The collection suffered a disaster when Alexander of Macedonia invaded Iran 2317 years ago in 321 BCE, put an end to the Achaemenian empire, and devastated the royal treasuries in which the Avesta was reportedly kept. An effort was begun during the Parthian period (250 BCE-224 CE) to collect what remained in priestly memories and scattered records. The arduous task was completed, and the collection was collated, screened, augmented, and canonized centuries later during the reign of the Sassanian King Chosroes I (Khosrow Anushiravan) in about 560 CE.

It may be noted that during the entire period of collecting, collating, and canonizing of the Avesta, Jews and Christians were also engaged in a similar move, and the present forms and orders of all sacred scriptures are the result of meticulous labor over centuries. Yet critical studies of them all continue to find new and sometimes startling points about their original texts, volumes,

languages, styles, and the hands of those who have edited, at times interpolated, adulterated, added, and deducted to give the final forms to the scriptures before their canonizations.

The Sassanian 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. The first category, called Gathic, had the first nask named after two Gathic terms: *Staota Yesnya* (Pahlavi *Stot Yasn*), meaning “Reverential Praises.” It consisted of the seventeen songs of the Gathas of Zarathushtra and certain subtle addenda of his close companions—a total of 33 sections, all in, more or less, the same dialect. This was considered the core, the foremost of the nasks. The remaining six nasks of this category, in a slightly different dialect now conventionally called the “Younger” or “Later” Avesta, perhaps the dialect spoken by the priests in control, were later commentaries and supplementaries concerning the first nask. This category is recognized as the “spiritual” in Pahlavi books.

The second category is *Dâtik*, meaning the “legislative” part of the collection. It had rules and regulations for socio-religious matters. It is called “material” by the Pahlavi writings.

The third, *Hadha-mânthra*, meaning “With the Thought-provoking [Words]” was a mixture of both, a kind of miscellanea. This encyclopedic collection covered the then known subjects, Avestan as well as alien, on religion, mythology, epic, history, geography, astronomy, hygiene, healing, medicine, agriculture, judicial law, government, and development.

Every piece of 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, as the name “a+vista” reveals, 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 royal support, and the whole system, including the Avestan and Pahlavi scriptures, began to fall apart. 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* (literally “Reverence”): It has 72 chapters, each called a *hâiti*, meaning “section”. It has the Gathic *Staota Yesnya* intact, placed, a little haphazardly, in the middle of the Yasna. Every priest, literate or not, modest or great, had it well memorized. It could not be lost! The Gathas have, therefore, very miraculously suffered no loss. We have the entire divine message of Zarathushtra—fresh and inspiring—in the very words of the Teacher, **a feature none of the other ancient religions can boast of.**

Besides the *Staota Yesnya*, the remaining 42 haitis, most probably salvaged, from the *Hadhamanthra* nasks, are, more or less, monotonous and repetitive praises of the Creator and the created. Many of the haitis are but different versions of a single section. Some are mere announcements about what the priest is doing or going to perform. They have been obviously put before and after the *Staota Yesnya* because the priests used them as preparatory or complementary

parts of their Gathic rituals. This explains why the bulk of the Gathic texts are placed in the middle of the 72 chapter Yasna.

Let it be emphasized again that the present form and order of the Yasna of the 72 chapters is not the Sassanian canon, and in all its probabilities, is a reshaped order after most of the nasks were lost, sometime after the 9th century CE.

One more point. There are four haitis, 9th to 11th, known as the *Hom Yasht*, dedicated to the deity of the Haoma plant and its intoxicating juice used by the pre-Zarathushtrian priests in their rituals, and 57th, called *Sarosh Yasht*, in honor of Seraosha, the Gathic abstract for the “guiding divine voice” personified by the latter priesthood. They should not have been included in this collection because of their context and style, and should have gone to the Yasht collection, but for obvious reasons better known to the priestly authorities, they have been included in the Yasna collection. The Yasna has approximately 24,000 words, about 7,600 of them in the Gathic dialect, the Staota Yesnya core.

2. *Vispered* (All-Festivals) is related to the original seasonal occasions and the intercalary days at the end of the then lunisolar year of the earliest Zarathushtrian calendar. Called *Gahanbars* in Pahlavi and Persian, they are thanksgiving ceremonies and feasts at the close of each agricultural season corresponding to the climate of the Iranian Plateau. *Vispered* is definitely older than its corresponding Yasna section, because the non-Gathic Yasna speaks about a purely solar calendar. *Vispered* has 24 *fragards*, a later Pahlavi term meaning “chapter” and approximately 4,000 words. (see *Spenta* No.1–2 for *Gahanbars*).

3. *Yashts* (Revered) are either fully poetical or prose-poetry pieces in praise of deities. They fall into two categories: (1) The martial in honor of pre-Zarathushtrian Aryan gods—water goddess Anahita, plant deity Haoma, contract god Mithra, sun god Hvare, rain god Tishtrya, victory god Verethraghna, wind god Vayu and a few others who were reintroduced or deified later under the new term of *yazatas* (venerable). They have an epical air about them. They sing of the heroic feats of the deities who grant boons only to their relevant sacrificing devotees. (2) The clerical ones are composed by post-Zarathushtrian temple priests in honor of Ahura Mazda and certain Gathic concepts personified to form, along with the reintroduced deities, a divine pantheon. They are incantational in nature. The number of *Yashts* varies from 21 to 30 according to various reckonings. Originally more in number, they belonged to the Datic (legislative) category because being non-Gathic, epical in nature and easy to chant, they were more popular among the people attached to the ruling class. The *Yashts* have a total of about 35,800 words. They constitute a highly interesting part of the Avesta.

4. *Vendidad* (*Vi-Daeva Dâta* = Law against the Daevas [evil deities]) has mostly rules and regulations governing pollution and purification in a remote age of primitive and crude hygiene and few disinfectants. Although of very late composition in the Avestan language, the contents show that it might well have its roots in pre-Aryan Iran of the temple-cult of priests and priestesses. Its laws are harsh, laborious, intricate, and time-consuming. It does not correspond with what we know about the free and buoyant ancient Indo-Iranians. In addition to its main subject of pollution and purification, it has a few chapters on spells, religion, legends, history, geography, and animals. It is an important source of ancient anthropology. It has 22 *fragards* and a total of 19,000 words.

5. *Herbadistan and Nirangistan*, Books of Priests and Rites, guide people in learning to become a priest or priestess and in performing and/or leading rituals. The contents show that the books were compiled at an early age when the Staota Yesnya constituted the only “canon”, rituals were not fully institutionalized, priesthood constituted only a part-time profession, and the priestly class had not become powerful or hereditary. The two, as twins, have, in their salvaged shape, 17 brief parts and approximately 3,000 words. They have an elaborate Pahlavi commentary which reflects the gradual ascendancy of the hereditary priestly class.

6. Miscellaneous consists of pieces and fragments of varying lengths, some in good condition and some mutilated, that make a total of approximately 4,900 words.

Khordeh Avesta (Smaller Avesta), the popular book of daily prayers since the printing press came into vogue, is neither an independent book, nor a salvage of the wrecked nasks, nor a standard scripture of specific chapters and length. Each manuscript and printed edition has its own number of contents. It has not been mentioned in any of the Pahlavi writings which supply us with the names and contents of the Avestan scriptures. It is a digest of selected prayers from the nasks, mostly outside the Staota Yesnya—evidently meant to serve as an easy and handy supplement to the Gathas and their associate prayers.

However, its gradual popularity, especially among the simple folks, has made it the only prayer book; so much so that many of the faithful believe it to be the Avesta as revealed to Zarathushtra! Originally consisting of no more than 4,000 words, it may, in its augmented editions, contain as many as 20,000 words. But whether it has less than 4,000 or more than 20,000 words, all it has are 183 words from the Gathas of 6,000 words! It is, indeed, a very non-Gathic selection from the Avesta. *Ashem Vohu* and *Yatha Ahu* are repeated so often that one loses their dynamic, thought-provoking message. Moreover, the *Khordeh Avesta* has many of its Avestan prayers supplemented by late Middle Persian pieces. It is, therefore, a bilingual prayer book and of a recent compilation.

The extant Avesta has a round total of 98,000 words. As already said, it is estimated to be less than one third of the original collection of twenty-one nasks of the Sassanian theocracy.

It may be pointed out that only the Staota Yesnya, the part in the Gathic dialect, has been mentioned in the Avesta. Staota Yesnya as well as its 33 components have been revered by name. Other parts of the Avesta are either mentioned in Pahlavi writings or are recognized by their Pahlavi/Persian titles in their respective manuscripts. That is why their names are in the Pahlavi style. Furthermore, the Staota Yesnya proper—the Gathas and the *Haptanghaiti* (Seven Chapters)—are the **only** prayers prescribed by the Avesta, whether performed individually, collectively, ritually, or casually.

The Zarathushtrian Assembly holds the Gathas to be the only doctrinal documents and other parts of the Staota Yesnya to be supplements of explanatory and devotional importance. The remaining parts of the extant Avesta and Pahlavi writings (as already stated in *Spenta* 1–2 of July–August 1991) have their ethical, historical, geographical, and anthropological values. They are, nevertheless, of significant help in better understanding the Staota Yesnya from philological and sometimes philosophical points of view.

This does not mean that the Assembly advocates the often-heard slogan of “Back to the Gathas”. The Gathas are not the past to go back to; they are the **guide** and, as such, they are the present and the future. The slogan or motto, if any, should be: “Forward with the Gathas!”

What, therefore, is needed is neither revision nor modification nor reformation, but restoration. We must resort to the Gathas, so far unconsciously kept above the reach of people, in order to restore ourselves to the Good Conscience, the true Zarathushtrian religion. The restoration of the pure and pristine Gathic principles in every wake of life—both mental and physical—would automatically mean modernization, rather continuous modernizing process. It shall keep us always abreast of time, abreast with foresight.

“May we learn, understand, comprehend, practice, teach, and preach” the inspiring message of the divinely inspired Mâñthran, the thought-provoking Teacher Zarathushtra, because according to Yasna 55, the Gathas, Our Guide are “the Primal Principles of Life ... [and] we wish to maintain our lives fresh as is the will of God Wise.”

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