

## Death in the Gathas

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The general idea about death in the Zoroastrian religion is that it is evil and has been introduced in the divine cosmos by Anghra Mainyu<sup>1</sup>, the so-called “Evil Adversary of the Godhead”—and so are all those causes which bring death: disease, destruction, harm, pestilence, and many more harmful ills which plague the human society and its environment. This would mean that the Gathas of Zarathushtra, the fountainhead of the divine doctrine, should be plain and precise on death as an evil product. Let us see if it is so.

The root in Avesta and Sanskrit for death is *mar/mr* ‘to die’. The causative *mâr* means ‘to kill’. Derivatives include *merethyu/mrtyu*, death; *mareta* and *maretan*, ‘mortal’ and therefore, ‘man, human being’. The Avestan *mashya*, Old Persian *martya*, Sanskrit *martya*, Persian *mard* also mean ‘mortal’ and therefore ‘man’. A point to note for those who know Persian, *mard* and its derivatives meaning male, manly, stalwart, generous, etc. are all later and conventional meanings. Another cognate root is *marech/mrch* ‘to injure, inflict, destroy’. It supplies the abstract *maraka*, injury, destruction. In Pahlavi and Persian *marg* has come to mean ‘death’. *Mered/mrd* is yet another cognate root. It means ‘to crush, pound, ruin’.

Incidentally, the Gathas use all the above derivatives. We find the abstracts *merethyu* ‘death’; and *maraca* ‘destruction’; nouns *mareta* and *mashya* ‘mortals, mankind, human’; and verbs *marech* ‘to injure, destroy’ and *mered* ‘to crush, ruin’. The words for mankind are used five times. Good mind (*vohu manah*) is asked if it knew “any person who can help mortals” (Song 2.7 = Yasna 29.7). “Seekers of false gods ... afflicted the human existence” (S 3.6, Y 30.6). The distorters of the doctrine of good life “try to distract mortals from excellent deeds”: (S 5.12, Y 32.12). The divine word “is the best to be heard by the mortals” (S 10.5, Y 45.5). Zarathushtra blesses the person “among men who pleases him with care” (S 11.13, Y 46.13). These instances do not shed any light on death. They simply stand for the physically mortal man with no slighting sense attached to it. In fact, the human being called by any term, stands exalted in the Sublime Songs.

The verb *marech*, which means ‘to injure’ in Sanskrit, seems to have acquired a stronger notion — ‘to destroy’ in Avesta, or perhaps later in Pahlavi. The author is of the opinion that it means ‘to damage, to impair’ in the Gathas, but to lessen the chances of an argument, it is translated here as ‘to destroy’. Here are the quotations:

“Keeping the two principles (of good and evil) in mind, we shall teach the hitherto unheard words to those who destroy (*vi-merechaite*) the righteous world by their wrongful doctrines. No doubt, the two principles will prove the best to those who are devoted to the Wise One” (S 4.1, Y 31.1). “... Let not the evil teacher, the wrongful, with his evil choice and perverted tongue,

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<sup>1</sup> Dr Jafarey here uses the spelling *anghra* over the common *angra*. Linguistically, it is theorized that *angra* came from an early word: */ahra/*. With the ‘ng’ sound often appears before the ‘h’ in Avestan (*manah* → *manangho*), one can see evolution of the word history of *ahra* → *anghra* → *angra*; the spelling *anghra* does appear in certain manuscripts. – Caleb Goodfellow

destroy (*merânshyat*<sup>2</sup>) the life for a second time” (S 10.1, Y 45.1). “The priests and princes yoke people under duress to destroy (*meregeidyai*) life with their evil actions...” (S 11.11, Y 46.11). “Now, Wise One, the person who wants to destroy (*merekhshaite*) us, is indifferent to this doctrine...” (S 16.10, Y 51.10). “... With these (wrongful actions), you shall destroy (*merengedye*) your mental life” (S 17.6, Y 53.6). The Avestan word rendered as ‘life’ in the above passage is *ahu*, which, in the Gathic context, means ‘existence or life in this world’.

Two other derivations *maraka* and *marakhâr* are used only once each. “Therefore, let none of you listen to the messages and teachings of the wrongful, because he brings danger and destruction (*maraka*) to house, settlement, district, and land...” (S 4.18, Y 31.18). “It is because of such power (of wealth) that the destroyers (*marakhtâro*) of this life wish to gain their spoils in the house of worst mind...” (S 5.13, Y 32.13).

The Gathic *maraka* is pronounced *mahrka* in the Later Avesta. It has been used a number of times. In Yasna 57.25, Sraosha, intuition personified, is asked to “protect us for our lives, both in physical and mental existences, against wrongful death, wrongful wrath, against a wrongful army with uplifted bloody banners...”

But noteworthy are the two quotations from the Yashts. Mithra (Mehr), Yazata of Covenant, when offended and not satisfied, declares: “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 the noble progeny? (Yasht 10.110).” Verethraghna (Bahram), Yazata of Victory, who accompanies Mithra and Rashnu on a warpath against covenant-breakers, also wants to know “To whom, in my might, shall I impart disease and death?” Surprisingly enough, death and disease are given here, not by the so-called Evil Spirit, but by two major yazatas, both pre-Zarathushtrian deities, evidently, as a punishment for offenses against them.

Whatever the case, this is in contrast to the Gathic spirit of benevolence. Furthermore, contrary to the punishing actions of the two yazatas, the Vendidad says that death and disease, and other calamities, are brought by heretics and those who do not practice purification rites (9.47, 51; 20.1, 3, 6, 7, 9, 10; 21.2), and never by God. In fact, the Vendidad is explicit: Death is evil and Anghra Mainyu is *pouru-mahrka*, full-of-death, the very cause of it.

*Mered* ‘to crush, pound, ruin’ occurs four times in four consecutive stanzas in the Gathas: (1) “The evil teacher ruins with his teachings the doctrine of the wisdom of life...” (2) “Indeed, he ruins the doctrine who considers it the worst to look at the world and the sun with plain eyes, who sets the just against the wrongful, who devastates settlements, and who throws a deadly weapon at the righteous.” (3) “Also, they ruin life who highly regard the wrongful as lords and ladies, rob the people of their property, and try hard to distract the righteous from their best mind.” (4) “... They ruin worldly life in luxury. It is for this reason that the grabbing priests have chosen the wrong dominion of the wealthy instead of righteousness.” (S 5.9–12, Y 32.9–12).

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<sup>2</sup> This word is typically notated *merāshyat* (Hoff. *mərāšiiāt*) *ā* being nasalized as in French and, usually, representing an earlier ‘ân’ sound—being closer to how Zarathushtra likely pronounced it. Dr Jafarey chose to write this word as *merânshyat* (Hoff. *mərānšiiāt*) to illustrate how it is connected to other words with m-r-n sounds meaning death. – Caleb Goodfellow

*Merethyu*, the only word which truly means ‘death’, is used once in the Gathas: “Let ... killing and wounding be prevented and peace be brought to homes and settlements. Let affliction be gone. He is the greatest who restrains death (*merethyaosh*). And let it be soon!” (S 17.8, Y 53.8). Here, good control of violence brings about greatest restraint on death by violence. *Merethyu* occurs thrice in the Later Avesta, all concerning the legendary Yima Khshaeta (King Jamshid) who prays and consequently succeeds in removing cold, heat, thirst, hunger, old age, and death from the living world of fauna and flora during his ideal reign (Yasna 9.5, Yasht 9.10, Yashts 15.16, Vendidad 2.5). Here death, due to old age and other natural causes, obviously means a natural death.

But there remains the question of Gathic dualism (See *Good and Evil*—Ali A Jafarey). For the Gathas, it is an ethical dualism and the entire problem of good and evil does not exist outside the human mind and society. But what about the much-spoken creation of life and death by the so-called two “spirits”? The Gathic term *mainyu* actually means ‘mentality’. The only occurrence in the Gathas states: “When the two (mentalities, the better and the bad) got together, they created life (*gaya*) and ‘not-living’ (*ajayâiti*). Until the end of existence (*ahu*), the worst mind shall be for the wrongful, and the best mind shall be for the righteous.” (S 3.4). While *gaya* stands for ‘life, the vital force’, *gyâiti* and its variants mean ‘living, way of life, condition of being alive’.<sup>3</sup> Its negative *ajyâiti* is not death but a “lack of living”. In other words, it means a person who righteously does not live his life on this good earth. His or hers is a life wasted. That is what a bad mentality does.

We have given thirteen quotations from the Gathas and all of them speak of death and destruction through violence by the wrongfully powerful people- priests, princes, and pillagers. It is the destruction of human life on this earth by cruelty and brutality. Death as a natural process of human life is not mentioned. Zarathushtra does pray for a long and happy life, but he is not interested in a deathless life in this world. He wants strength, endurance, progress, perfection, immortality, and the final life with Ahura Mazda in the “House of Song” for himself and for all. But death does not occur as a disrupter in this course to finality. In fact, natural death does not hunt and haunt or scare and scar the people of the Avesta, whether they belong to the Gathic period or not. The life, in the Yasna, Vispered, Yashts, and other existing parts of the Avesta, with the exception of the Vendidad, a later priestly addition to Zoroastrian scriptures, is not interrupted by death.

It is the ills of society that challenge the Gathic people and make them determined to eradicate them all. What they aspire for and practice is a happy progressive life, both mental and physical or to use the current terms, spiritual and material, with Ahura Mazda, God Wise, as the final goal. To them every righteous person is “progressive, eternal, ever-gaining, and ever-growing ... because he or she lives a life of good mind” (Haptanghaiti 4<sup>4</sup>).

The Gathic and relevant Avestan texts speak of the soul as if it were in a living body and not of a departed person. Life is continuity. Perhaps that is the reason why the ancient Zarathushtrians celebrated their birthdays but did not mourn the death-days of their dear ones. The birthday of Zarathushtra is eulogized in the Farvardin Yasht (88–94). His death is not

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<sup>3</sup> Song 4.15, 5.5, 5.11-12, 5.15, 6.10, 11.8, 17.9 (Yasna 31.15, 32.5, 32.11-12, 32.15, 33.10, 46.4, 46.8, 53.9)

<sup>4</sup> Yasna 38

eulogized at all. The Gathas recommend one to extol persons during their lifetime and after (S 16.22<sup>5</sup>). The Avesta advises one to hold a memorial service for a departed person (Yasna 26) and also to collectively commemorate the dead for their services to the advancement of righteousness at the end of the year, the origin of the present-day *panjeh*, or *muktad* memorial rites (Farvardin Yasht).

Yasna 55, a fine eulogy, dedicated to the Gathas, puts it beautifully: "... The Gathas are our guardians and protectors. They are food for our minds, in fact, food and clothing for our souls. May they be, after the parting of the consciousness (*baodhah*) and the body, a good reward, much reward, true reward for the existence beyond." The parting of consciousness and body is repeated in the same phrasing in the Vendidad (8.81–96, 9.43). It is worth noting that instead of *gaya* 'vital force' or *ushtâna* 'glowing energy', two Gathic terms for life, or what one would have expected, the word of *urvan* 'soul'; another Gathic word meaning 'consciousness, awakening' (*baodhah*) has been used to denote the departure from the physical form.

The Gathas and the prayerful parts of the Avesta state that *\*fury\** (*aeshma*) is the root of all violence and that violence must be stopped in all its forms, mental and physical—attack, assault, injury, murder, injustice, suppression, subjugation, aggression, and annihilation, and this includes untimely death. At the same time, they assert that life does not part with death. It is indeed a continuity. And death, a natural process, is not evil but is surely a transitory passage, perhaps in an anesthetic state, to eternity, finality, to both *haurvatât* and *amaretât*: wholeness and immortality of soul.

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<sup>5</sup> Yasna 51.22