

Rituals in the Gathas

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*Mazda, Wise God, with a bow and uplifted arms,
I pray. First, I ask for support
through the “progressive mentality.”
Then, I pray that I perform all my actions,
based as they are on the wisdom of “good mind,”
precisely according to the laws of righteousness;
so that I please You and the living world.
(Song 1.1, Opening stanza of the Gathas)*

Prayer is an expression. It is either a request or a gratitude. When a person or an animal needs something from an elder, he makes a request. When granted, he thanks. Animals have their own ways to request and thank. Humans have their own.

A major requirement in life is security. Lack of it generates fear. Fear for life has been very instrumental in making requests and offering thanks, and consequently in shaping rituals. Going back thousands of years, we find the weakling of the primitive human being surrounded by hostile forces in the shape of ferocious animals and natural disasters. With his superior intellect and acquired skills, he could save himself and his kindred from animals. Natural disasters, which he could not understand, caused him to imagine them as the works of unknown superior powers, who, he thought, would listen to his entreaties and spare him the consequences. This led him to gods. Gods were far superior than his parents and elders. To them he ascribed his woes and weals. He pleaded them to help him enjoy happiness, and also thanked them for the good days he enjoyed his life.

His requests and thanks took certain forms. Further elaborated, they became institutionalized into rituals. In them, he was inspired by how he entreated his elders, and how he offered them his gratitude. Elaboration warrants specialization. Thus, the priestly class was born. The human being loves beauty. Beautifying colors kept on adding more color, consequently more intricacies to the rituals. The elaborate Aryan rituals with burning and smoking fire (Avesta *Âtar*, Sanskrit *Agni*), the instant intoxicating *Haoma/Soma* juice, milk and water libations, *baresman/barhis* twigs or grass, animal sacrifices, food offerings, and invocational or devotional songs addressed to favorite deities, speak for themselves.

Elaborate or intricate, ritualistic prayers gave eloquence to the tongue to communicate with, and wings to thoughts to fly to contact higher beings. Prayers led humans to God. He, in the sublimity of these prayers, discovered that God is above requests and thanks. It is man who needs to make the request and then feel overcome by love and say: Thanks!

This was a new turn in prayers. A prayer just for love's sake. A prayer without requesting or thanking a personal favor, a prayer just to communicate, just to serve. The Gathic prayers are

based on this principle. They are, however, more than devotional prayers. They act as the guide in life to the prayerful. They are both prayers to a loving and beloved God and guiding principles to righteous men and women in their mental and physical life.

Zarathushtra cleansed the human mind of illusions and superstitions and simplified the rituals to give them both the meaning and the power they had lost in their superfluity. Zarathushtra uses different words to express himself to his God. Zarathushtra uses different words to express himself to his God. Yasna (veneration), vahma (esteem), namah (bow), sravah (chant), staota (praise), yas (implore), zava (call, invoke), and gerez (cry) have been used as nouns and verbs for some 60 times, all addressed to God.

PRAYER

In his rituals, he sings ever-new songs to Mazda Ahura (Gathas: Song 1.3)¹. He bows and at the same time he lifts up his hands (S 1.1, S 15.8)². As against the old Indo-Iranian Zaotar/hotra priest, who “invoked” gods by offering sacrifices through fire and smoke, Zarathushtra, as a “straight INVOKER”, pays his homage to “Ahura Mazda’s fire”. He offers his thoughts on righteousness (S 8.9)³. Here the master-poet Zarathushtra beautifully portrays that he is not the ritual-ridden priest “zaotar”, (literally ‘invoker’) whose invocation and offerings go up in smoke but a true invoker whose invocation and offerings are simply subtle and sublime. The divine fire is strong through righteousness and its warmth gives one clear thinking and good mind (S 7.4, S 8.4, S 11.7)⁴. The divine fire is, furthermore, bright and related to the “progressive mentality” (S 4.3, S 4.49, S 12.6, S 16.9; Haptanghaiti Song 2.1-3)⁵. All Gathic texts make fire a center of mental concentration, a light for spiritual meditation. It symbolizes light, warmth and energy for clear thinking and better judgment. The Aryan priest poured butter or fat in fire while presenting his invocations (âzuiti/âhuti), but Zarathushtra unites his conscience with good mind through his “aspirations and invocations” (îzhâ châ âzuitish châ) (S 14.5, Y 49.5). While others before his era offered animal and agricultural sacrifices to their deities, he gives body, soul, and the first fruits of his good mind to God, and dedicates his deeds, words, attention, all the strength to righteousness (S 6.14, Y 33.14).

His simple prayers, if at all termed as a ritual, are so absorbing that they cannot be put into an elaborate ceremony that would divert one’s attention to making certain material preparations and performing some physical movements. Fire, as already said, provides an object of concentration. Also, other objects of nature, sun, moon, stars, wind, water, and trees inspire him to break into new songs in praise of the Wise One.

From Haptanghaiti, seven songs by his close companions who survived him, we gather that the people gathered in an enclosure and stood around the blazing fire, or in day time, faced the sun only to praise God alone (Song 2, Yasna 36). Incidentally, this is the first time we hear of *âthrê-verezena*, a fire enclosure, the prototype of the open altars of the Achaemenian times.

¹ Yasna 28.3

² Y 28.1, Y 50.8

³ Y 43.9

⁴ Y 34.4, Y 43.4, Y 46.7

⁵ Y 31.3, Y 31.19, Y 47.6, Y 51.9, Y 36.1-3

This supersedes the hearth fire invoked in Âtash Nyâish, a post-Gathic prayer. Fire temples did not exist during the Gathic period. They were adopted long after from aborigines—the Elamites, the neighboring Babylonians and other orders that coexisted during the Achaemenian period.

Therefore, the only prayer rituals mentioned in the Gathas and other texts in the Gathic dialect, are that a blazing fire was lighted within an enclosure, the prayerful stood around it, sang songs from the Gathas to God with bowed heads and uplifted hands. There was no priest who led the laity and there were no lay persons who were led. It was a collective prayer, a collective devotion.

This is beautifully attested by some of the reliefs left by the Medes and the Persians in the 6th century BCE and after. They show a fire altar, persons standing and praying with uplifted hands. They have also the sun and the moon as symbols of the divine light.

None of the texts in the Gathic dialect⁶ mention any of the objects and implements, liquid or solid, or the actions essentially required in performing rituals. This absolute lack of attention cannot be interpreted as accidental. Two terms, *mada* (intoxicant) and *duraosha* (death repeller), used for the *haoma* drink in the Younger Avesta, are found in a manner that shows complete rejection of the substance and as well as the cult connected to it. Haoma stands condemned in the Gathas (S 5.14, S 13.10)⁷. The priests who performed these elaborate and intricate ceremonies are all called *Karapans*, murmurers and moaners. Had there been an exception and had he and his “house” belonged to a special priestly order, such as the reported “Âthravans”, he would have mentioned it and would have praised them for their piety and purity. He knows no priests other than the Karapans.

The Gathas and other texts in the Gathic dialect are the only prayers specifically prescribed in the Younger Avesta⁸. No other prayer has been mentioned to be included in a Gathic ritual, a sign that the Gathic texts continued to be the only recital part of the institutionalized rituals long after Zarathushtra. Although we find an innovation of conveniently dividing the day and night into five “Gatha” times for chanting the five Gathas and Haptanghaiti, neither the Gathas nor any other text state that the Gathic prayers are to be chanted only in ceremonial prayers at specific times. On the contrary, the Nirangistan, the Avestan book of rituals, makes it clear: Any wise person man, woman, or minor, who has his or her girdle girded, may sing the Gathas and Haptanghaiti, whether the entire text or a line, while walking, running, standing, sitting, lying down, riding, driving, or tying the girdle at any time of the day and night, provided one puts his or her heart into it. The book recommends that if one hears a person or persons singing the sublime songs, he or she may join the chorus.

INITIATION

Fravarti or Conviction (Yasna 11.17 to 13) is the declaration of one’s choice of religion. It depicts the “initiation ceremonies” in which the adult initiates renounced their previous beliefs

⁶ Yasna 11.17 to 13.3; 14.1-2; 27.13-14; 56; 58; the Gathas; the Haptanghaiti; the Yenghe Hatam

⁷ Yasna 32.14, Y 48.10

⁸ Yasna 19.5,7,21; 20.5; 55.6-7; Vispered 13.1, 2, 3; 14.1, 4; 16.0, 4; 18.0, 3; 19.0, 3; 20.0, 3; 23.0, 2; 24.0, 2; Yasht 10.92, 122; Vendidad 10.4, 12; Nirangistan 19 to 51; etc.

and professions polytheism, superstitions, sorcery, arbitrariness, robbery, and other “mental and physical illnesses”, each for his or her self, and join the Zarathushtrian Fellowship. It must have been quite interesting to see persons of diverse beliefs and practices come to share with those present by telling them of their past and how sorry they were for it, and how glad they felt to give it up, only to choose the Good Religion which “overthrows yokes, sheaths swords, promotes self reliance and is righteous”. The main part of Fravarti which concerns the declaration of the choice of religion is also known as *Aastuye*, meaning “appreciation”. It is this initiation for adults that has been elaborated as well as contracted into the modern “navjote” for minors among Parsis. Among Iranian Zoroastrians, the age does not matter.

MARRIAGE

Gatha Vahishta Ishti gives a glimpse of the marriage of Pouruchista, the youngest daughter of Zarathushtra. The girl was given the freedom to choose her partner. She did it with the sole aim of serving the noble cause of the Good Religion. Tradition says, it was Jamaspa, the sage, who later succeeded Zarathushtra as the Teacher. Zarathushtra found the opportunity to immortalize his marriage sermon addressed to all uniting couples: “The reward of the Magnanimity Fellowship; shall be yours as long as you remain united in weal and woe with all your in wedlock. ... May each of you win the other through righteousness.”

BIRTH AND DEATH

The Gathic texts are silent over the birth ceremony. Similarly, they do not mention any rituals for the dead or prescribe any mode of disposal of corpses. Zarathushtra says, “The Wise God knows best every person of mine for his or her veneration done in accordance with righteousness. I shall, on my part, venerate such persons, passed away or living, by their names and shall lovingly encircle them” (S 16.22)⁹. This shows that he always remembered those who worked for the cause of righteousness. A sublime way to show respect to the dead and the living. It is this extraordinary respect and love shown by him that created the beautiful tradition of commemorating outstanding men and women for their services on the Memorial Day, the ten days at the end of the year, called *Farvardegan* in Persian and *Muktad* in Gujarati.

In fact, the Gathic texts, followed by many liturgical pieces in the Vispered and the Yasna, are not concerned with death. To them every righteous person is “progressive, eternal, ever gaining, and ever growing ... because he or she lives a life of good mind.” (Haptanghaiti Song 5)¹⁰. The texts speak of the soul as if it were in a living body and not of a departed person. Death does not scare or haunt the Gathic righteous. It appears that the Gathic texts have left the birth and death ceremonies to the discretion of the people to wisely act as time and place warrant.

Zarathushtra, enlightened and progressive as he was, did not present a **ritual-less** religion. He also did not give a **ritual-ridden** cult. As such, his Gathas focus on teaching us the Primal Principles of Life, and yet, as sublime songs, inspire us to offer our prayers to God and to begin every new turn in our life in a ceremonial way. They do offer adaptable guidelines to ceremonies, because, as beautifully put by the late Dastur Dr. Maneckjee N. Dhalla, the

⁹ Y 51.22

¹⁰ Y 39

Zarathushtrian sage of our times: “Ritual is not religion; but it is a powerful aid to religious life. It feeds the emotional nature of man which plays the most prominent part in religious life. It inspires devotional fervour and purity of thought.”

Rituals, in and of itself, are neither good nor bad. If our rituals are true to the teachings of Zarathushtra, if they are beautiful and inspiring, leading us to a deeper understanding of and commitment to the Good Religion, then they are good. But if they are unintelligible, if they are devoid of meaning, if they do not impart the truths of the religion to the faithful, if they are a monopolized performance by a certain class of privileged persons, and if the laity have to sit silent and understand nothing, then they are worse than useless.

The Gathas do not prescribe rigid rituals but show us the way to sublime ceremonies in every walk of our life, from birth to death; ceremonies which are flexible enough to undergo changes to suit times, climes, and cultures, and yet raise our souls to greater heights, give us the encouragement we need, and help us to enjoy the commitments we make.

The ceremonies performed by the Zarathushtrian Assembly are reconstructed on a Gathic basis. They have values and meanings that give joy, satisfaction, and above all, lasting inspiration. Many of the current ceremonies among the Zoroastrian community have some roots in the Gathic tradition. Therefore, with an eye to our long past, as much as possible of the traditional ceremonies have been retained without violating Gathic principles, and at the same time endeavoring to speak in a clear voice to a new generation and a new age. While the Gathas continue to be our Guide in all our thoughts, words, and deeds, the model ceremonies, Gathic and in the Gathic traditions, will maintain for us one more living link with the pristine past, the progressive present, and a fruitful future.

The Gathas and their supplements in the Gathic dialects depict plain prayer rituals, a sincere marriage ceremony, interesting initiation rites, and honoring the living for their services, and remembering the dead for their deeds. Above all, they impart a thought-provoking message, **Māñthra**, to humanity at large. Simple, sublime and suited to all times and climes!

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