

Spenta Mainyu and Good and Evil in the Gathas

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Almost all Zoroastrians and those who are well acquainted with Zoroastrianism know the term *Spenta Mainyu*, and since the days the Avesta was translated by the early Christian scholars—who happened to have the “Holy Ghost” and the “Holy Spirit” in mind—into English and other European languages, the term has conventionally come to mean “Holy Spirit”. The general notion about it is that it has an adversary Anghra Mainyu¹, the Evil Spirit pitched in a life-and-death battle against.

Spenta is derived by the majority of philologists from an Avestan/Sanskrit root *spi/shvi*, meaning ‘to fatten, expand, swell, increase’. It is, therefore, rendered by many into “incremental”. The Pahlavi rendering of *afzunik*², meaning ‘increasing’ clearly supports the translation. There are a few more renderings such as beneficent, bounteous, bountiful, virtuous, and even white. Yet the familiar and convenient Christian term of “Holy” has been taken for granted.

Mainyu is derived by every scholar from *man-* ‘to think’. Although many know that *-yu-* is an agentive and instrumental suffix, none has bothered to translate it as ‘an instrument, a way, a mode of thinking, mind, mentality’ and have taken the early rendering of “spirit” as quite suitable to their interpretation of a perpetual war between the so-called “twin spirits”. Many present Ahura Mazda as “Spenta Mainyu” and consequently elevate Anghra Mainyu to make “him” the adversary of the “God of Good” and thus create a continuous fight between the two. As a result, Zoroastrians have been characterized as people who believe in dualism.

The Gathas provide us with an entirely different picture:

Here the context shows that "*spenta*" means "incremental, increasing, expanding, progressing, and progressive." "*Mainyu*" means "means of thinking, faculty of thinking, mind, and mentality." The term "Spenta Mainyu" is an attribute of Mazda Ahura, literally "Super-wisdom Being". Mainyu stands for the divine intelligence with a continuous creative, sustaining, and promoting function.

The term “Spenta Mainyu” occurs for fifteen times in the Gathas and twice in the Hantanghaiti³. These seventeen references are the only instances in which the term “Spenta Mainyu” is mentioned in the entire Gathic text. And in them, there is no trace of any adversary of

¹ The spelling anghra appears in certain manuscripts (usually Pahlavi Yasna) and this spelling is closer to the original form of the word anghra /ahra/ coming from a similar origin as ahreman. – Caleb Goodfellow

² The Pahlavi word can also be spelled abzōnīg. – CG

³ Gathas Song 1.1; 6.12; 8.2, 8.6, 8.16; 9.7; 10.6; 12.1-6; 16.7; Haptanghaiti Song 2.1-2 (Yasna 28.1; 33.12; 43.2, 43.6, 43.16; 44.7; 47.1-6; 51.7; 36.1-2)

God, or any struggle, battle, or war between the so-called “good and evil forces”. The question of Good and Evil is NOT related to the divine “Spenta Mainyu”. It is a separate subject of human behavior and lies outside the scope of this subject.

The Gathas depict “Spenta Mainyu” as the subtle divine faculty of the continuous creation and expansion plan of God. Zarathushtra, in quest for truth, discovers that it is the “Spenta Mainyu” phase of the Super-wisdom Being that creates and promotes the universe, including our earth with its waters, plants, and living beings. God generated “spenta mainyu” so that the “joy-bringing world” is created. The entire quest yields to Zarathushtra that God is “spenta”, in fact, “*spenishta*”, the most progressive. That is why Zarathushtra also “chooses for himself” *spenishta* mainyu, the most progressive mentality, so that a new life is breathed into the physical body, serenity prevails throughout “the divine kingdom”, and perfection and immortality are achieved. It is the progressive mentality that separates the two parties of mankind on earth—the righteous who promote the world and the wrongful who retard their living. It is again the progressive mentality which “enlightens” the wrongful to seek truth and ultimately become righteous. This enlightenment is called fire, symbol of light, warmth, and energy, by the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti.

It is this light, this warmth, this energy that Zarathushtra prays that every benevolent person has it. He sings:

“Moreover, may the best of blessings come to the person
who gives blessings to others.
Wise One, may his knowledge grow,
throughout the days of his long life of joy,
through Your most progressive mentality,
the wondrous wisdom of good mind
You created by means of righteousness.”
(Song 8.3, Yasna 43.3)

Zarathushtra wants every person to be godlike, choose “Spenta Mainyu”, the enlightening light, the invigorating warmth, and the vitalizing energy, in fact the intuitive mind to be creative, promoter, and progressive in our joy-bringing world. “Spenta Mainyu” is, the Gathas tell us, the guiding inspiration, the enlightening intuition, the constructive promotion in our good lives. It is the divine spark in us. Let us maintain and brighten it more by joining Zarathushtra in a meditative prayer:

“Lord Wise, rise within me,
grant me courage through serenity,
good gifts of prayers through the most progressive mentality,
full vigor through righteousness,
and felicity through good mind.
To support me, Wide-watching Lord,
reveal to me the force of Your sovereignty,
the blessings of good mind.
Show me through progressive serenity, righteous conceptions.”

GOOD AND EVIL

Because of the sufferings in what appears to be a hostile world of natural disasters and human cruelties, the existence of “evil” has all along posed a perplexed problem. Intellectuals of all ages and lands have tried to solve it. Most of them have acknowledged it as a stubborn fact of life.

People's attitude towards evil ranges from optimism, pessimism, cynicism to skepticism. There are those who do not believe in evil and state that it does not exist; those who argue that just as darkness is nothing but the absence of light, evil darkens where good does not shine; those who say that one cannot fight evil and therefore should submit to it; those who want to escape evil and retire from the world by leaving behind all human wishes and desires; and those who acknowledge shortcomings and want to overcome them by facing them. People necessarily do not belong strictly to one of these broad classifications. Many share a little of each theory and have mixed philosophies, or express different ideas at different times.

People are divided again on the source of evil. Those who believe in a strict patriarchal/matriarchal divinity (or divinities) and see suffering as punishments for wrong deeds. Those who think that just as there are good and bad chiefs and kings, there are good and evil entities who bring happiness or misery. Those who believe that the gods have created human beings as their toys and enjoy playing around with them. Those who believe in a rebel divinity who is causing all the trouble. Those who are dualists and maintain that both good and evil are primal and co-existing. Those who see the two as positive and negative poles that meet to create energy and existence. Those who see the world as imperfect or in its infancy, and that its sufferings are the experiences toward perfection. All have their logic, philosophy, stories, legends, or myths to elaborate. Many believe that evil exists in the universe and many confine it, some in vague terms, to the human world.

Zarathushtra observes the universe as a good creation of God and sees no evil in it. It is a cosmos—an orderly harmonious system. However, there are indications that he sees the universe in its infancy, complete in every form but growing to perfection and immortality.

As regards good and evil, he confines both to the human mind, not outside, not in the cosmos. Man thinks and thinks constantly. His thoughts are either good or bad, beneficial or harmful. When translated in speech or action, they yield the result—good or bad.

The Gathic term for mentality or mind is “mainyu”. In his songs, he calls the good once “spanyo”, meaning ‘more increasing, more progressive’, and once “vahyo”, meaning ‘better’. He terms the evil once “angra”, meaning ‘retarding, twisting’, and once “aka”, meaning ‘bad’. The two represent the duality only in the human mind and within the human society. The dualism in the Gathas is pure ethical in nature.

The criterion for “better” or “more progressive” thought, word, and deed is the beneficial effect on the human society in particular and the world in general. If not, it is “bad” or “retarding”.

THE HUMAN SOCIETY

The Gathic dualism lies only in *asha* ‘righteousness’ and *druj* ‘harmful lie’. The human world is divided into two camps: the righteous, truthful and progressive, and the wrongful, retarding and destructive. The Gathas advocate a free, peaceful, prudent, and progressive society, both in spirit and matter. Spirituality makes people realize the divine in creation and conceive the force and order—the wisdom—behind it. It makes them conceive God. It promotes them to commune with God and be godlike. Materiality makes people understand their social environment and the living world. It teaches them the philosophy of living and letting others live, and of living in harmony with nature.

Only responsible men and women make the Gathic society. Carefree and parasitic people have no place in it. A person, be he or she wise, naive, strong, or weak, has his or her responsibilities in society. Zarathushtra stands for freedom of thought, word, and deed, and stands against suppression and exploitation. He condemns all “wrong done by evil power, deeds, words, conception, and mind”. He repeatedly reminds people that good has a good reward, and bad has a bad consequence. And to be good is to be selflessly good.

In a true Zarathushtrian society, all are free to work for a better world without harming others. Every person receives in reward what one does in renovating human life. Every task is undertaken by fully qualified persons, the better the qualifications, the higher the position. Society is led by the very wise. Men and women are equal, and their superiority lies in their wisdom and righteousness. The smallest unit in society is the family, then the community, next the fellowship, and last the world.

HEAVEN AND HELL

Zarathushtra speaks very little about a world from which no one has returned to tell us the tale. He never indulges in speculations. He does not thrive on speculations, but on conclusions from what one discovers and understands. He mentions certain terms which give one an idea of a higher and sublimer spiritual life. They are the “House of Song”, “House of Good Mind”, and the “Eternal Best Existence of Good Mind”. Only once, he uses the term “future existence”. It is where one lives with God. The language is so that one understands that such a sublime state is both mental and physical in this world, but only mental when the soul attains its perfection and immortality.

But if a person lives a life of “harmful lie” in a human society, promotes an evil and deceitful government, sows seeds of discord among people, disregards social rules and regulations, and takes pleasure in harming the living world, he or she suffers the consequences of his or her actions and teachings, and remains in the “House of Wrong”. He singles out bad rulers and evil priests as the foremost among such persons. Another term for this is the “House of the Worst Mind”. The soul of a wrongful person returns from the “sorting bridge” back into the world of

deceit. This bridge separates the righteous from the wrongful. The righteous progress but the wrongful remain in the world to perfect themselves. Does this mean reincarnation or that the soul lingers on without a physical body until it is perfected? Perhaps, but only a thought-provoking hint without any speculations.

This does not mean that there is no salvation for the wrongful. Their souls suffer the consequences of their words and deed until they realize the divine truth and choose to turn righteous and work for their own perfection and immortality. This life is but a refinery in which the souls are refined to perfection. To sum up, the pristine doctrine of Zarathushtra's "heaven and hell" is more of a mental bliss and torment than the two physical places reserved for ultimate sensual enjoyment or suffering.

The resurrection with all its details of how the dead would rise for the final judgment is again absent in the Gathas. The consequences of people's words and deeds in this world and the progress toward perfection and immortality are a continuous process. There are no pauses, no waiting.

God's creation moves forward and we, souls and bodies, are a part of it.

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