

The Zoroastrian Priest in the Avesta^(a)

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Was Asho Zarathushtra Spitama, the Founder of the Good Religion, a priest by birth and profession? Did he perpetuate the priestly class in the new order? Was the priestly class a hereditary system before and after Zarathushtra? Is the present custom of hereditary priesthood a Zarathushtrian tradition? Is the initiation of a minor boy into priesthood an age-old custom? Does initiation into priesthood mean memorizing unintelligible recitations in Avesta and Pazend and learning how to perform equally unintelligible rituals? Is priesthood confined to the male gender only? The answers to these questions, and perhaps many more, may be found by examining the passages in the extant Avesta which deal with the priestly profession. Here is an attempt. It will, however, not go into detail to reconstruct the simple rituals performed in the Gathic age and the elaborate rites current during the later Avestan period, a subject partially presented in the author's book *Zarathushtrian Ceremonies, a reconstruction based on the Gathas*.

The Avesta remains the main source of our information. If not composed entirely by the priests, it has definitely been preserved by them alone. In fact, we owe the extant Avesta—as our ancestors did for what is extinct now—with its fair accuracy, to the sharp, faithful memory of the priests, and they deserve full credit for this. It should, therefore, speak about them more than any other professionals. However, we know that a part of the Avesta has been lost.¹ We shall refer, if necessary, to Pahlavi writings to find the missing clues. Fortunately, the *Denkard* in Pahlavi of 9th century CE has left us with a fairly good list of the contents of the Sassanian collection of the twenty-one Avestan *nasks*.² We have the Pahlavi commentaries of most of the Avestan passages which deal with the priestly class. In addition, the reports on Iranian priests left by Greek historians may also prove of some help.

The terms used in the Avesta which could be translated as “priest” are numerous. The main term is *âthravan* (Pahlavi *âsravan*, *âsron*, *âsrok*; Zoroastrian Persian *âsrûn*). *Aethrapaiti* (Pahlavi *erpat*, *herpad*; Persian *hîrbad*; Parsi Gujarati *ervad*), a ‘schoolmaster’, is used today to mean an ordained priest. Besides, *ahu* and *ratu* of the Gathas have been rendered in Pahlavi as *ahu* or *xvatây* (Persian *xodây* or *sardâr*, Sanskrit *swâmi*—meaning lord and master) and *dastvar* (Persian *dastûr*, Sanskrit *gurû*—meaning teacher, preceptor, leader, director). Although the Gathic *magavan*, member of the Zarathushtrian fellowship *Maga* (Song 6.7, 16.15³), has never been used in the Later Avesta, Old Persian *magu* (Greek *magoi*, English *magus*, plural *magi*) and the subsequent Pahlavi *magopat*, *mowbad*; Persian *mobad*, *mobed*) mean a member of the priestly class. There are eight functional terms: *zaotar*, *hâvanân*, *âtrevakhsh*, *frâberetar*, *âberet*, *âsnâtar*, *raethwishkara*, and *sraoshâvareza*.

In addition to the above-mentioned terms there is *Vâstar*, a term never used for “priest”. It occurs twice in the Avesta and that too in the Gathas alone—*Yatha Ahu* and Song 2.1. And

¹ Often quoted as approximately 75%, although my calculation puts it closer to 90%. – Caleb Goodfellow

² *Nask(a)* is the Avestan/Pahlavi word for ‘book’; it was supplanted by the Arabic *ketâb* in modern Persian. – C.G.

³ Yasna 33.7, 51.15

lastly, there is a Gathic term *mâñthran* which too has never been used for the function. We shall, in our study, briefly discuss each of them and see which word stands for “priest” and which does not. We shall begin with the Gathic and then refer to other parts of the Avesta.

Gathic References

The five Gathas, from *Yathâ Ahû* to *Â Airyemâ Ishyâ* (Songs 1–17⁴), are the only words of Asho Zarathushtra. Of the above terms, we have six only: *ahu*, *ratu*, *vâstar*, *mâñthran*, *magavan*, and *zaotar*.

Literally, *ahu* means “Being” and therefore a dignitary. It is the same word as “ahura” which, with an addition of the emphasizing suffix *ra*, means ‘the Being, Lord, God’. The main task of the *ahu*, according to the Gathas, is to cleanse the oppressed world from “fury, rapine, outrage, and aggression” and to “repel the fury of the wrongful” (S 2.1–2)⁵. It generally occurs with *ratu* and applies to Zarathushtra only. It is, therefore, discussed here along with *ratu*. As already said, it is rendered as ‘lord’ and ‘master’.

Although *ratu*, originally a “righteous and precise leader”, has not survived in its original meaning or as an exclusive term for priest, we shall discuss it also, because it has been, as already said, rendered as *dastavar/dastur* in Pahlavi/Zoroastrian Persian writings for a leading judge-priest. It has survived as *rad* in Pahlavi, meaning ‘spiritual chief, master, leader’, and in Persian, meaning “wise, scholar” and conventionally “brave, hero”.

The Gathic term *ratu* is derived from *eret*, meaning “to do right, to act properly”. It means the righteous **leader** who guides people with his constructive plans and programs, to peace, prosperity, happiness, and bliss. The term has been used six times in the Gathas. These instances describe the position and the functions of a *ratu*. “The leader of the living world ... offer[s] civilization, nourishment, and strength” and “acts with righteousness” (S 2.2, 2.6)⁶. “According to the Primal Principles of Life, the leader, with his actions, does full justice to the wrongful and to the righteous, as well as to the person whose falsity is combined with his probity (S 6.1)⁷.” A leader is a life-healer who inspires one “through good mind and protects [him or her] with[in] the divine dominion (S 9.16)⁸.” A “true leader of the lawful ... is a humble intellectual” and, as a settler, strengthens the world with righteousness by his proper actions (S 16.5⁹). He is chosen by a world groaning under “fury, rapine, outrage, and aggression” to render it rehabilitated and led to “true civilization”(Song 2)¹⁰.

To sum up the Gathic concept of a leader (*ratu*), he or she is a humble, yet inspiring intellectual who justly leads the righteous and wrongful as well as the intermediates to promote the living world to peace and prosperity, and ultimately to wholeness and immortality.

⁴ Yasna 27.13, 14; Yasnas 28–34, 43–51, 53; Yasna 54.1

⁵ Yasna 29.1–2

⁶ Yasna 29.2, 6

⁷ Yasna 34.1

⁸ Yasna 44.16

⁹ Yasna 51.5

¹⁰ Yasna 29

In a eulogy in honor of Zarathushtra in the Farvardin Yasht, it is poetically said that the very Primal Principles of Life he expounded in his songs wished him to be the lord, *ahu*, and leader, *ratu* (Yt 13.92). Other parts of the Avesta acknowledge Zarathushtra as the “first and foremost lord and leader of the material world, particularly human beings”... because it was he who conveyed “the entire thought-provoking message, the righteous teaching” to humanity.¹¹ In fact, “Zarathushtra is the lord and leader” of all the people whom “Ahura Mazda knows better for their veneration done in accordance with righteousness (Vp 16.3).” The Later Avesta forgets that the leader is to be “chosen” by the people and considers his leadership as an appointment by God (Yt 5.89; 8.44). It is a deviation from the Gathic concept of free will and choice, the first deviation noticed so far. Zarathushtra’s son Urvatad-nara is strangely mentioned as “lord and leader” of the legendary refuge of King Yima Khshaeta (Jamshid) in an out of context passage (V 2.43).

Vâstar, derived from *vas-* ‘to settle’ and its causative form of *vâs-* ‘to settle others’, literally means ‘one who settles and rehabilitates people’. In the *Yatha Ahu* formula and in Song 2, *Vâstar* stands for Zarathushtra alone; because, once chosen as the good lord and righteous leader of mankind, he rehabilitates the *drigu*, the oppressed, who are deprived of their rights. It, therefore, means ‘settler, rehabilitator’. *Vâstra*, the other derivative, which means ‘settlement’, is used by Zarathushtra for his movement aimed at settling the oppressed, displaced, unproductive, parasitical, or nomadic peoples in an activated world-promoting Fellowship of a settled life. *Vâstrya* means a ‘settled person, one belonging to *vâstra*’. But some translators, intentionally or unintentionally, have followed the Pahlavi rendering of *vâstar* and *vâstrya* as ‘shepherd’, and *vâstra* as ‘pasture’ to render Zarathushtra a shepherd who had risen to protect cattle from cruelty. Others have been more kind and have conventionally translated the three cognate terms as pastor, pasture, and pasturage with a spiritual tint and religious meaning and have elevated him to be a Shepherd of human sheep. Perhaps they have Jesus Christ, Christian pastors, and Krishna *Gopâl* in view.

With the exception of the above solitary and obviously dubious passage about Zarathushtra's son, Avestan and Pahlavi records do not state that any person other than Zarathushtra was chosen or appointed as the lord, *ahu*, and rehabilitator, *vâstar*. Perhaps, with the world well on its path of righteousness and the causes of evil and disorder expounded, there was no need to have one. As a chosen *ahu* and *vâstar*, Zarathushtra had shown the way to eliminating evil, rehabilitating the displaced and leading the world to civilization. And he alone deserves the two titles.

However, regarding *ratu*, the Avesta shows that the Gathic tradition of choosing the leader was kept alive for some time¹² and that, for practical reasons, the office was given five grades: The *ratu*s of the house, the settlement, the district, the country, and the world (Y 19.18). It, thus, covered all the basic units of the Zarathushtrian assembly. Each of three professions of priest, warrior and prospering settler had its own *ratu*. The *ratu* was the most competent and learned person in the respective unit. The post warranted a love for learning, practicing and teaching religious knowledge at all levels of society (Y 13.1–3).

¹¹ Yasht 13.41; 90–92, 152; Y 70.1; Vispered 2.4; 11.21; 16.3

¹² Brief summaries of the missing Avestan *Nask* Ratushtaiti (in the Persian Rivayats) suggest the Ratu kept its original role along with judicial, city building, and agricultural duties. – C.G.

Still later, we find that the title of *ratu* was superseded by *âthravan*, the title of the priests of the pre-Zarathushtrian cult. This was yet another deviation. It gave the now thriving community its professional priests in place of chosen leaders. They introduced their own eight categories of officiants. Now *ratu* was generalized to mean a priest (Nirangistan 82–83).

The Pahlavi rendering simply uses *rad*, the Middle Persian form of the term, and this does not help to understand the semantic change in its meaning. However, it sometimes uses the term of *dastur* and *herbad* to explain the position. The two are conveniently translated as ‘master’ and ‘judge’. The subtle meaning and the Gathic concept of the “chosen” *ratu* is lost. It is not strange that we find that the *âthravan* composer of the Mehr Yasht completely ignores Zarathushtra and makes Ahura Mazda appoint Mithra, the old god of contract, as the “lord and leader of the material world, particularly men (Yt 10.92)”! Perhaps this explains the recession of *ratu* into a priestly officer who applies penalties to “contract-breakers” (*Mithra-druj*, false-unto-Mithra) and wrongdoers, and leads the corpse-bearers to the funerary destination (V 5.25; 7.71; 8.11). It is because of this role as a penalizing officer that, with the Pahlavi tag of *dâdestân*, judgement and justice, some scholars feel more convinced that it stands for a “judge” in the Avesta. Whatever the changes in the meaning of the word and the functions of the position, one finds less and less of *ratu*, and more and more of the well-installed priests as *âthravan*, *magopat*, *mobed*, *dastavar*, and *dastûr*.

The Gathic texts have another term, *mânthran*, for Zarathushtra and his close companions. A *mânthran* is literally a thought-provoker or mentor (S 5.13, 15.5–6; Haptañhâti 7.5)¹³ who proclaims *mânthra*, the thought-provoking message, to mankind (S 1.5,7; 2.7; 4.6, 18; 8.14; 9.14, 17; 10.3; 16.8)¹⁴. The Ardibehesht Yasht has an interesting passage supplying us with more terms: Ahura Mazda calls Zarathushtra by the titles of *staotar* (praiser), *zaotar* (invoker), *zbâtar* (caller), *mânthran* (thought-provoker), *yashtar* (venerator), *âfritar* (blesser), and *aibi-jaretar* (chanter).¹⁵ The passage shows that all the words are ordinary adjectives and not professional terms, and this includes *zaotar* and *mânthran*.

Although *mânthra*, thought-provoking message is repeatedly mentioned in the Later Avesta, more as a potent, miraculous holy word than a mentoring message, the term *mânthran* is very strangely absent. The *âthravans* never used it for themselves. Perhaps they had lost the spirit of the manthric mission. Perhaps being eclipsed by the *âthravans*, people of a separate school, the manthrans, kept alive the pristine religion as long as they could and then dwindled to be lost and forgotten.

Maga has been mentioned six times in the Gathas (S 2.11, 11.14, 16.11, 16.16, 17. 7[twice])¹⁶. Although interpretations differ as to whether it means a ‘difficult task, enterprise’ (Kanga & Insler), or ‘gift and reward’, I, following Bartholomae and Taraporewala, derive it from *maz-/mah-* to mean ‘magnanimity’, the name Zarathushtra gave to his universal Fellowship. It is twice called *maz- maga-*, ‘Great Fellowship’, in the Gathas with a view emphasizing the

¹³ Yasna 32.13, 50.5–6 ; Yasna 41

¹⁴ Yasna 28.5,7; 29.7; 31.6,18; 43.14; 44.14,17; 45.3; 51.8

¹⁵ Yasht 3.2

¹⁶ Yasna 29.11, 46.14, 51.11, 51.16, 53.7

importance of the movement started by Zarathushtra.(S 2.11, 11.14)¹⁷ *Magavan* means ‘belonging to *Maga*’ and therefore a ‘companion of Zarathushtra, Zarathushtrian’(S 6.7, 16.15)¹⁸. In the Gathas, it does not give the meaning of a religious leader but a person belonging to the Great Fellowship.^(b)

Zaotar, Vedic *hotri*, is derived from *zav-/hve-*, meaning ‘to invoke’. The word literally means an ‘invoker’. Exhilarated by *haoma/soma* drink, the *zaotar* of pre-Zarathushtrians times invoked gods and goddesses before a fire by feeding it with animal and plant oblations that went up in smoke. It is against such a smoking ritual that Zarathushtra makes his contrasting statement:

“I shall invoke seraosha, Your Inspiring Voice, the greatest of all voices to reach my final goal. ... I am the straight invoker, who, through righteousness, perceive You with the best of mind. It is from such a mental favor that I wish to work as an adviser for the settled people. Therefore, Wise God, I am longing to have Your vision and communion.”
(S 6.5–6)¹⁹

This is the only occurrence of the word in the Gathas. The use shows that Zarathushtra was the true invoker who poured his love out to have a divine vision and that he was not a professional priest who fed the fire with oblations in an elaborate rite of “murmuring” incantations. In fact, he prayed with “a bow and uplifted arms” and could not handle ritual utensils used by institutional priests. The term *ustâna-zasta*, ‘raised hands, uplifted arms’, occurs thrice in the Avesta, all in the Gathas (S 1.1, 2.5, 15.8)²⁰.

Besides the above terms, the Gathas do not mention any formalized term which could in any way mean a professional or institutional “Zoroastrian” priest. This appears very odd by a person who was, we are made to believe, a priest by birth and promoted or even founded the priestly class. In fact, while repeatedly condemning superfluous rituals of the *karapans*, literally “mumbling” priests and the *kavis*, poet-princes of the old Aryan cult, the Gathas offer no substitutes at all to replace them. The Zarathushtrian Doctrine wants the whole system out. It has its own simple and sublime way of communicating with Mazda. The Aryan priestly office and its functions have no place in Asho Zarathushtra's sublime songs.

The *Haptañhâiti* (Y 35–41), *Fshûsho Mâñthra* (Y 58), and *Hadhaokhta* (or *Sarosh Hâdokht* —Y 56), three compositions in the Gathic dialect, come next in importance and chronological order after the Gathas. They have no word on priest and priesthood.

The *Fravarti* (Y 11.17–13.3), a late composition in the Gathic dialect, is the first to mention the three professions pursued by the Aryans. Two stanzas (Y 13.2 & 3) are, in fact, a prose complement to the preceding poetry of *Fravarânê* or the “Choice of Religion” formula (Y 12.8–9). It is interesting to note the order of the professions given by the two stanzas: (1) prospering settlers, *vâstrya-fshuyant*, (2) warriors, *rathaeshhtar*, and (3) priests, *âthravan*. However, it is at the end of stanza 3 that the usual order of placing the priestly class first and the settlers last is given. This is obviously a still later addition. These passages advocate that the most qualified

¹⁷ Y 29.11, 46.14

¹⁸ Y 33.7, 51.15

¹⁹ Y 33.5–6

²⁰ Y 28.1, 29.5, 50.8

person must lead his particular profession. It says that the leader (*ratu*) of the priests must be the most learned of them in the Mazdayasna religion. The passages consider members of all the three professions of priests, warriors, and prospering settlers to be the greatest strength of the Mazdayasna religion. This important statement of considering the three professions as the backbone of the religion has been repeated in Vispered 4.5.

Later Avestan References

The *Vispered*, the book for “All-the-Festivals”, is the first in chronological order of the later Avestan collection. Its third chapter, clearly a later addition not in line with the contexts of other parts of the *Vispered*, supplies us with the names of eight officiating priests. It also shows that *zaotar* first conducted a roll call of all participating officiants, leaders, and representatives of all the religious and social units of the society, and then, for the congregation, recited, declared, sang, and revered only the **Gathas** and no other part of the collection known later as the Avesta.

The *Nirangistân*, or Code of Rituals, describes the functions of each of the eight officiants.²¹ The *zaotar* (invoker) recited the Gathas and responded to the voice of the material world, most likely the congregation present on the occasion for whom he conducted the roll call; the *hâvanân* (pounder) pounded and prepared the haoma drink. The *âthrevakhsh* (fire-promoter) tended the fire, cleansed three sides of the fire vase, and responded to the *zaotar's* voice. The *frâberetar* (procurer) cleansed the fourth side of the base and laid *baresman* twigs. The *âsnâtar* (washer) washed and strained the haoma juice. The *raethwishkara* (mixer) mixed the juice with milk and dispensed it. The *âbere* (water-carrier) bore water. Finally, the *sraoshavarez* (discipline-worker) supervised the ritual.

If other officiants did not come or arrived late to take their positions, a *zaotar* could perform the entire ceremony alone, unless taken up by the late arrivals. The person who arrived first relieved the *zaotar* of his extra task and performed as *hâvanân*, the second as *âthrevakhsh*, and so on. The last person to arrive took up the position of *sraoshavarez*. Perhaps it is because of such relaxation that today the team of eight officiants, each responsible for a specific duty, has been reduced to two, and that the *raethwishkara* (now pronounced as *râspi*), the seventh officiant, has, for no apparent reason, taken over the functions of all the other six officiants. The *zaotar* (modern Persian *zût*, *zot*, Gujarati *joti*) remains the leading priest and the *raethwishkara* assists him during the performance of a ritual. The names of the eight priests are mentioned in Vendidad 5.57–58, and the *Ozirengâh*, the afternoon preparatory prayer (verse 5). Incidentally, the *zaotar* invokes by reciting the Gathas but, unlike Zarathushtra, without uplifted arms and a bow, a posture that would help concentrate on what one prays and meditate upon it. In fact, the Gathic term of *ustâna-zasta* (uplifted arms) is completely forgotten in the later Avesta.

The later Avestan priest is unable to lift his arms. He is too busy to do this, too busy to concentrate and meditate. He has *baresman* twigs, *zaothra* (water libation), and the *haoma* drink to handle, or is otherwise busy washing the four sides of the ceremonial base. Their hands are full because they are termed as *aêsmô-zasta* (firewood-in-hand), *baresmô-zasta* (baresman-in-hand)

²¹ Book II, Chapter XXVII

or *baresmô-stereti* (baresman-spreading), *hâvanô-zasta* (Mortar-in-hand), *barat-zaothra* (bearing-libation).²²

This explains why none of the assisting priests are mentioned as participants in the Gatha recital. It also explains why most of the non-Gathic Yasna chapters show the priest saying repeatedly either of the following statements: “I declare and perform”, “I wish to venerate with libation ... and ... baresman”, “with libation and baresman placed, I wish to venerate”, “I offer ... *Haoma*, milk, libation, spread baresman, water, firewood, and incense”, “I give milk, water, firewood, baresman, and *haoma* ...” In fact, with the exception of the Sections 9–11, 19–21, 27, 42, 52, 55, 57, 60–65, and 67, all the remaining 36 sections²³ are but different editions of a stereotyped theme of enumerating the *yazatas* to be venerated with the above-mentioned elements. They are more of a running commentary to tell the audience as to what the officiating priests are performing.

Âthrvan, the Fire Priest

Âthravans or *atharvans*, descendents of Atharvan, a legendary Indo-Iranian *rishi* who introduced the fire ritual and is the supposed author of *Atharva Veda*, are the fire-priests who performed the soma/haoma ritual in the Rig Vedic lore, and *athrvangiras* formed the sacerdotal class or race of men. This shows their pre-Zarathushtrian presence. However, the term has since declined in Hinduism. In Zoroastrianism, however, it has held the highest position. The term occurs almost 40 times in the later Avesta. It was the first of the four professions (Y 19.18). The Hom Yasht (Y 9–11) says that Keresâni (a legendary ruler), who stopped âthravans from operating in his land, was dethroned by *Haoma*, here personified for the purpose (Y 9.24). Paradoxically, Krshânu (Indic pronunciation of Keresani) of the Vedas is a guardian of soma in heaven. The two versions are a sign of Indo-Iranian schism in which the Iranian haoma priests seemed to have deposed the ruler of the original cult and to have established their supremacy.

Again, it was Haoma (yazata) which did not make a deadly empty-headed woman bear an âthrvan and good children because she plotted to cheat an âthrvan and Haoma by eating the offerings made to Haoma (cf Y 10.15). In fact, he who robbed Haoma of its offerings was cursed by Haoma not to have any of the three professionals born in his or her house. The community had enough pilferers to have Haoma personally curse them. The three references of the âthrvan in the Hom Yasht confirms the Vedic version of the close relation between the âthrvan and the haoma rite.

The Zoroastrian âthravans, we are told, went preaching around within their country, some outside the country, and some in far-flung lands, sometimes never to return home again.²⁴ The travelling preachers are called *homâya pairi-jathan*, meaning ‘savant itinerants’.

²² Y 62.1; Yt 5.30, 127; 10.30, 65, 91, 126; 13.26; 16.1. On how to spread baresman twigs and at which Gathic prayer, please refer to Niragistan, chapter xii, page 460.

²³ With the exception of these sections plus the Gathas and YH (Y 28-41, 43-51, 53). 36 stanzas being drawn from existing material and 36 invented for the ritual was likely done by design. – C.G.

²⁴ Vp 3.3; 9.2, Aiwisruthrem Gah 6, Y 42.6.

The Yashts reveal that there were two categories or schools of âthravans: the memorizing (*meremna*) and the guarding (*thrâyavan*) priests. It appears the “memorizing” one was the regular priest, and the “guarding” one belonged to an “occult” order (Yt 4.9, 5.86, 14.5). Occult formulas given in the Khordad, Aban and Bahram Yashts were not to be taught to any person other than one's son, full-blood brother, or a “guardian” âthraivan. While the *zaotar* of the regular order had an open congregation and no one was specifically barred from attending the prayers, the “guardian” priests of the yashtic lore were ordained not to give any part of the oblation, animal or otherwise, to an antagonist, whore, murderer, non-chanter-of-the-Gathas, anti-religion, deaf, dumb, dwarf, hunchback, and others considered physically deformed or mentally retarded. The Aban Yasht of Aredvi Sura Anahita, a female deity, even bars women from partaking the oblation! (Yt. 5.91–93, 8.59–60, 14.51–52)

The priests of the Mithra Yasht had a cult of their own. They had to undergo a penance of a three-day-and-night bathing rite and suffer twenty lashes in order to perform an oblation ritual of haoma drink and cattle or fowl sacrifice (Yt 10.120–122). It is strange that this practice of “self-torture” is not spoken about by any other part of the Avesta. The Pahlavi and Persian traditions are also completely silent on it. Therefore, we do not know why it was abandoned to such an extent that no one has ever paid any attention to a practice concerning the top yazata of the Zoroastrian lore!

This “Guarding” cult is, most probably, responsible for the re-entry of old Aryan gods as new “yazatas” and in doing so, their Yashts have Ahura Mazda introduce the relevant yazata to Zarathushtra (Aban Yasht, Tir Yasht, Mehr Yasht, Bahram Yasht) because he happens not to know them. In one instance, it is Zarathushtra who asks the yazata to introduce himself (Hom Yasht).²⁵ It is interesting that these introductions happened well after Zarathushtra had founded his new religion and as pointed out in Hom Yasht, after he had already composed his Gathas—and yet he did not know any of these important deities and the rituals performed in their honor.

But let us leave this interesting, yet hardly studied occult order and return to our regular priests. According to the *Aerpatistân* (Sacerdotal Code), which presents an older stage of Zoroastrianism, a priest was generally not a priest by occupation. He or she only officiated when called upon to do so. The Vendidad, a later composition, states that an ordinary professional priest led a simple life; he was easily satisfied, even with a piece of bread and was a contended person (V 13.45). A few, as already stated earlier, wandered teaching and preaching. Others fed themselves at the houses (V 13.22). Some rich homes had their own domestic priests (V 3.1). Members of a royal house were told to treat the priests as their own children and give them good food, a sign that some were not treated well (Yt 24.9). His usual implements for rituals were *ashtra* (whip), milk-bowl, *paitidâna* (mouth-veil), *khrafastraghna* (for killing noxious animals), *sraosho-charana* (flogging instrument), strainer, standard mortar, haoma cups, and baresman twigs (V 14.8). One may take a careful note of the absence of some of the implements used in modern rituals and vice versa.

Vendidad cautions that one should not recognize as an âthraivan a person who pretends to wear paitidâna, girdle a koshti ceremoniously, take a flog, hold baresman twigs, and carry a whip,

²⁵ Respectively, Yt 5, 8, 10, 14 and Y 9-11.

and who sleeps throughout the night without venerating and chanting and does not learn or teach anything. “He is a liar”(V 18.1). Fakes and frauds were busy too!

Teaching and Learning

The Gathas show that Zarathushtra was the first teacher who established a system to teach, preach, maintain, and promote his divine doctrine. The foremost persons he chose to train to teach at his school were Kavi Vishtâspa, brothers Ferashaotra and Jâmâspa, and his cousin Maidhyoimâha (Song 14.14–17)²⁶. He composed his message in five metric patterns, perhaps in as many or more tunes, and gave special training to Jamaspa in mastering the message and passing it on to others. Jamaspa, according to a tradition, later became his son-in-law and still later his successor. The purpose of condensing the Message in measured meters was to keep them compact and intact; keep them free from any possible interpolation; render them easy to be memorized; maintain their original pronunciations within the meters and tunes; present and preserve them in melodies which would encourage people to chant and sing them repeatedly—a very effective method of teaching the thought-provoking words. Time has proven that no one, until the invention of modern recording appliances, could devise a better way than that of the Indo-Iranians to “human-tape-record” the very words of the composer for a remote future. The Gathas are intact in Zarathushtra's own words and dialect. They were preserved, one must say, by the âthravans who spoke another dialect and later by the priests who did not know both—the Gathic dialect and the later Avestan variety. They spoke and wrote in Middle Persian languages of the Parthian and Sassanian periods.

Aethrapaiti, the Teacher

During the later part of the Gathic period, we see the *ratu* hold a new title—*aethrapaiti*. It means the master of an *aethra*, and therefore teacher. No satisfactory etymology has been found, but most likely, it is derived from *â + i*, to approach, to come near, with the agentive suffix of *-thra-*. Whatever the derivation, it means a school, a place of instruction. The term for the pupil is *aethrya*, belonging to school. The first person to carry this title is Saena son of Ahumstuta, the sixth celebrity mentioned after Zarathushtra in the Farvardin Yasht list.²⁷ It depicts his close association with the Prime Master Zarathushtra. *Aethrapaiti* literally means ‘schoolmaster, teacher, preceptor’. It is *herbad* in Pahlavi, *hirbad* and *hirbod* in Persian, and *ervad* in Gujarati. Saena is said to have trained “one hundred disciples who taught on this earth”, a proof of the universal missionary work of the early Gathic period after the passing away of Zarathushtra. It is, compared to today’s religious teachers, a fairly large number for a small growing community of the thinly populated world of those days.

Another person to carry the same title and with a new one, *hamidhpaiti*, head of the assembly, is Mânthravâk son of Samuzhi who is the 61st person in the list, a sign that he came two to three generations later. He is stated to have combated the heretics who chanted alien *gathas*, evidently songs dedicated to pre-Zarathushtrian deities who were being reinstated by certain authorities, and who had “no lord (*ahu*) and leader (*ratu*) among them.”²⁸ In other words, these were the

²⁶ Yasna 48.14–17

²⁷ Yasht 13.97

²⁸ Yasht 13.105

persons who had deviated from the true Gathic doctrine by adulterating the Good Religion with alien procedures and practices, and Manthravak combated them.

In the Avesta, an *aethrapaiti* is the teacher who teaches the Gathas and its philosophy only. The disciple, called *aethrya*, took at least three years to finish his or her education. He or she worked hard from before dawn till late morning and again in the afternoon till late in night, to learn the lesson.

Any Zarathushtrian could become a religious teacher. All it required was that the candidate be the “most aspirant” member of the family, that he or she did not deprive the family of its income, that he or she was unanimously chosen to become an *aethrapaiti*. Age did not matter. He or she could be the oldest or the youngest in the family. If he was a partner in a property with another person, he had to be chosen by the people concerned to take up the task. He could accept the new profession only if he did not harm the economics of the partnership. Both man and woman could assume the office of *zaotar* or any of the assistants. When called upon to perform a ritual, a husband and wife engaged in earning their livelihood from their regular occupation, had to decide which of the two could economically be spared to attend to the task. A wife, if required, could help another male officiant even without the consent of her husband. One could even take a competent child to assist one in the performance. A rare example of equality of sexes, a high regard for competency, and a great sense of priorities, indeed.²⁹

The Aerpaitistan calls the person thief, even a robber, who takes a woman to assist him in a ritual but with an ultimate intention of seducing her. Sexual harassment is nothing new. It also gives details on how far one can take a child without the consent of the parent, but it has no words on barring a woman from officiating during menses, pregnancy, or birth, or of a male becoming polluted through wet dream. In fact, with the exception of Vendidad, no other text speaks of such “pollutions”, not even the yashts which prohibit specific persons from partaking their oblations. Evidently, the non-Vendidad school did not consider these natural occurrences to be polluting.

When did the education start? The Aerpaitistan and Vendidad, as already seen, would welcome it at any age. However, the assistance of a competent child in a ritual shows that there were people who started early with their education. Greek sources on the education of the royal young say that it began at the age of seven and continued until the age of seventeen.³⁰ This could also be a clue for an early start. The teacher (*aethrapaiti*) or the pupil (*aethrya*) could be a male or female.³¹ The teacher was loved and respected.³²

A person had to study for three years under the guidance of a competent teacher in order to acquire the proper knowledge and understanding of the texts in order to become a priest. The pupil had to study hard during the first and last parts of the day, and again during the first and last parts of the night. He could only rest during the middle parts of the day and the night. He followed the routine “until he can say all the words which former teachers (*aethrapaitis*) have

²⁹ Aerpaitistan & Nirangistan 1–37; Vendidad 4.45

³⁰ Zoroastrian Civilization p.225

³¹ Aerpaitistan and Y 26.7–8, 68.12

³² FrD.4 (Fragment Darmesteter)

said (V 4.5).” The texts to learn thoroughly were the *Gathas* and the *Haptañhâiti*, They comprise only .069 (1/14th) of the bulk of the extant Avestan texts and .024 (1/41st) of the estimated bulk of the twenty-one nasks of the Sassanian canon.

It shows how long it took to master a short but very valuable volume. The teaching consisted of understanding, memorizing, reciting, chanting, singing, discussing, deliberating, and practicing the Gathic Message. The three-year time shows how deep one had to learn the thought-provoking Message of Zarathushtra. That is why Aban Yasht describes a competent priest as “a person of debate and discussion, thoughtful, artful, indeed the thought-provoking message personified (Yt. 5.91).” It may be kept in view that in those days, the Avestan language was the mother tongue of the teacher and the taught. The pupil fully understood what was taught and discussed. Furthermore, there was a question and answer period to encourage a pupil to be a debater.

The Avesta or the relevant Pahlavi commentaries have no data on the initiation of a pupil into a priest. But such an important task could not be completed without an initiation. There was definitely one, most probably a simple and solemn one performed between the teacher and the initiate/initiates. Unless one accepts the traditional initiation to be an elaborated form of a simpler ceremony, one should come down a number of centuries to turn to Greek sources to give us a description of the initiation of a west Iranian magi in the year 160 C.E.

It commenced, according to Lucian (Greek “Lukianos”) in Necymantia, on a new moon day and continued for full twenty-nine days. Each day, the initiate took a morning bath while the teacher, facing the rising sun, recited holy texts. He looked into the face of the pupil thrice during his recitation. The two ate nothing but fruit and drank nothing but milk, honey, and water. They slept outside in the open. The last bath was by the master in a running stream. The initiate was perfumed and then given the priestly robes.³³

I would refer the reader first to *The Persian Rivayats of Hormazdyar Framarz and Others* by B.J. Dhabhar, Dr. J.J. Modi's valuable book *The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsis*, and Mobed Ardeshir Azargoshasb's Persian *Marâsem-e Mazhabi va Âdâb-e Zartoshtiân* to judge how much this description resembles the present day initiation ceremonies in Iran and India. It does not resemble it much, either because it belonged to a different school of Zoroastrianism or the present forms in Iran and India have undergone many changes. The Iranian and Indian modes of initiation, in spite of the close contacts between the two, are quite different. These two also belong to different institutions.

Most probably, the initiation of an adolescent as an adult and ,where applicable, as a priest was simultaneously held at the age of fifteen years, the Avestan age of adulthood. The Parsi term of *Navjote* and the Iranian *Nowzûd*, derived from the Avestan **nava-zaotar*, ‘new zaotar’, may give a lead. While *Navjote* means the initiation of a child with *sadreh* and *koshti*, *Nowzud*, to the Iranians, means the ordainment as a priest. It is the same word with different denotations.

Ritual Prayers

³³ Aerpatastan and Nirangastan, Introduction page xxxi

The Gathas and their supplements in the same dialect have hardly any elaborate rituals. They show that the faithful, individually or collectively, faced a fire-altar and chanted from the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti in a devotional posture.^(c) As far as the Later Avesta is concerned, the only ritual mentioned in *Nirangistân* and alluded to in other parts is a prototype of the present “Yasna” ceremony of preparing the haoma drink along with its sacrificial meat and baresman twigs. The only difference is that then the prayer texts were the Gathas and Haptanghaiti and now we have the entire 72-sections of the Yasna and more.

The Gathas and Haptanghaiti were the only texts required for learning, teaching, and practicing as well as for prayers. The *Vispered* is explicit on this point for all the Gahanbar celebrations, and so is the *Nirangistân* on its ceremony. There is no trace of any other part of the Yasna collection of 72 sections nor is there any mention of the *Vispered* or the *Vendidad* as a ceremonial text. The *Yashts* recommend certain formulas to be recited at the time of addressing a favorite yazata to obtain certain boons and benefits, and here too *haoma* juice and other oblations are mentioned, but details of the rituals performed for the purpose are lacking. However, while there are the elaborate Yasna, *Vispered*, and *Vendidad* ceremonies, there exists no similar *Yasht* ceremony. It appears that *Yasht* ceremonies were abandoned after occult priests took over the job of performing non-occult ceremonies. This provided them with many more clients among the laity than they had before within the occult circle.

Although the *Vendidad* speaks in detail on purification baths and rites for pollutions through dead matter and the disposal of the dead, neither it, nor any other text, defines any ceremonies or the functions of a priest at birth, initiation, marriage, or death. Relevant Pahlavi commentaries also do not elaborate. Tradition is the only guide, and it surely has changed and changes with the passage of time.

The reason may be as simple as this: Other parts of prayers were either still not composed, or if composed (which is much more probable), were not incorporated into a formalized form of rituals. In fact, the Sassanian division of the Avestan Nasks places the *Vendidad* and the *Yashts*, some forming a part of daily prayers at present, in the Datic category of the administrative wing of the state.³⁴ The *Vispered* and non-Gathic parts of the Yasna were evidently parts of the Hadhmânthric category which contained supplements to the Gathic and Datic categories. This gives us a clue as to where other texts stood vis-a-vis the Gathic texts placed together in one *nask*, volume under the name of *Stot Yasn*.

A Hereditary Office?

There are no indications in the Avesta that show the office was hereditary and that people of other professions could not join this particular profession. Had it been so, there would have been a prohibition to accept a warrior or an agriculturist in the rigid circle. To draw a parallel, Hinduism is very explicit on this point. The very absence of a commandment making priesthood a closed circuit is proof enough to make the profession an open one. As already said in *Spenta's* previous issue, the commandment in the Khordad and Bahram *Yashts* not to teach the “spells” to any person other than a father or a full-blood brother or an occult priest applies only

³⁴ See Denkard Book 8, *Intro.* ‘verse’ 8 and Nask 14 ‘Bagn-Yasn’ where the *Yashts*, originally a type of prayer/ceremony, have the name *Bagn-Yasn*, ‘yasnas to the gods’. – C.G.

to the special category of priests who dealt with magical formulas and not to the priestly profession in general. However, there is little doubt that in those days—and still in many parts of the world—the general tendency of a child was to take up its parents' profession, and a priest parent preferred the children to take to priesthood.

There are a number of Avestan passages which show that one was free to choose to become a priest. The Vendidad says: Should a person of the same faith, friend or brother, approach another for goods, wife or knowledge, he should be given what he requests for. “Let him who wants knowledge, be taught the holy word ... (during regular parts of day and night) ... until he learns all the words taught by former teachers (*aethrapaitis*) (Vd 4.44–45).” As already cited in the previous issue from the *Aerpatistan*, the office was not confined to any sex or age. The only recommendation made was that the most aspiring person of a house become a priest and that too without jeopardizing the economic position of the house. Zarathushtra is shown in two late yashts as praying for King Vishtaspa, a warrior by profession, to have ten sons—three to become âthravans, three warriors, three prospering settlers, and only one to succeed the father as a king (*Âfarin-e Peighambar Zartosht.5* and *Vishtasp Yasht.3*). Haoma's curse on a fraudulent woman not to bear an âthraivan child makes the profession a general one. The Vendidad says that a person who chants certain Gathic stanzas early in the morning would eventually advance to know “the Gathas, the Haptanghaiti, and the discussions about them” and grow into a thoughtful and artful personification of the thought-provoking message, *mâñthra* (Vd 18.51), the very qualifications of a good teacher.

The Pahlavi commentaries, as well as the Denkard's description of the *Aerpatistan*, do not have any passages that would show the office was hereditary. The Pahlavi commentary of the Gathic line (S 6.6)³⁵ in which Zarathushtra calls himself a *zaotar*, adds a few more of the Farvardin Yasht celebrities to make a team. While Zarathushtra officiates as “the *Zaotar* of the entire world”, Vohuvasti, son of Snaoya, “from the happy countries of the Religion”, joins in as the *Havanan*; Isvant, son of Varaza, “from the countries of the Turanians”, joins as the *Atrevakhsh*; Saena, son of Ahumstut, “from the countries of Sainians”, joins as the *Fraberetar*; and Kavi Vishtaspa joins as the *Sraoshavarez*. The ritual would be aimed at immortally renovating the entire world.³⁶ The commentary clearly shows that the officiants belong to different countries, peoples, and professions. The absence of three officiants, including *raethwishkara*, the “Raspi”, the second priest in command at present, may be noted with interest.

The hereditary system sprang into being when the priests of the old cult joined the Good Religion and quite naturally helped in institutionalizing the order.^(d) It was, however, still an open field, and any aspiring person could enter it. Later, when the priests of occult science who guarded their secret formulas became powerful enough, the profession became, though still loosely, a family, or even a brotherhood affair. As we shall observe, the Medes of western Iran did have a priestly class. In my opinion, the transition to a rigid hereditary system happened in two main stages. The late Sassanian period when theocracy was at its peak of orthodoxy and learning had almost become a monopoly of the priests linked with the government, and again during the early Islamic occupation, when the priestly power was at its lowest ebb and the

³⁵ Yasna 34.6

³⁶ Denkard Book IX, Chpt XXXIII, paragraph 6

general condition of the Zoroastrians was getting from worse to abysmal, and strict measures had to be taken to preserve the tradition.

According to Greek sources, the Magi formed one of the six tribes of the Medes and were sacerdotal. They were the officiating priests at every (Zoroastrian) function in the Achaemenian empire. The sources also tell us about the simple and strict life the Magi led. Some practiced celibacy. Although no source speaks about the profession being hereditary among the Magi, Prof. Mary Boyce points out that “from 5th century B.C. it is thus in the west of Iran that the principle of a hereditary priesthood, exclusive in character, is first encountered.”³⁷ This could have partially contributed to making the profession hereditary. It may be pointed out that just as *magu*—definitely related to *magavan* of the Gathic *Maga Fellowship*—is absent in the Younger Avesta, the term *âthravan* is not mentioned by any of the sources on the Medes and Achaemenians—unless, of course, we take *maghu* used once in a derogatory tone in Vendidad 4.47 “the man who has a wife is far above a *maghu* (meaning a ‘celibate’)”—as the first instance, and *moghu-tbish* (Y 65.7), now translated to mean a “fellow-tormentor”, as the second possible instance.

Was Asho Zarathushtra a Priest?

The traditional life story, as told by two Pahlavi writings, Denkard Book VII and the Selections of Zadsparam, as well as the Persian *Zartosht-nameh* (composed by the Zoroastrian poet-mobed Bahram Pazhdu) do not state that he was from a priestly lineage. On the contrary, his father took the doubting child Zarathushtra to priests to have him convinced of the truth of the old Aryan cult, a task in which they miserably failed. If he were a priest, he would have handled his child himself. His mother, who, when still a maiden, was excommunicated and banished by the priests for her unorthodox views, sent her son outside to a teacher to learn the sciences of the day, a statement which may also supply the clue as to where Asho Zarathushtra developed his poetic talents, talents which some think could only be developed by a priestly boy.

The Avesta shows that Zarathushtra's father raised horses (Yt 23.4; 24.2)³⁸. The eulogy stating that Zarathushtra is the “foremost” *âthravan*, warrior, and prospering settler only shows his complete reformation of the three professions. The famous stanza of *Ushtâ nô zâthô âthrava yô Spitâmô Zarathushtrô* “Hail to us, for an *âthravan*, Spitama Zarathushtra, has been born” (Yt 13.94) only indicates that the composer of the eulogy was an *âthravan* who obviously preferred to hail Zarathushtra as the foremost “reformer” of his particular profession. Had it been composed by a warrior or an agriculturalist poet, Zarathushtra would have been hailed as the “foremost” warrior or settler. It may be noted that the second eulogy in Farvardin Yasht calls him *ahu*, *ratu*, and *paoiryô-tkaesha* (lord, leader, and foremost-in-doctrine) and uses several superlatives to praise him and yet does not make an *âthravan* of him. The solitary use of *zaotar* in the Gathas (Song 6.6) in which Zarathushtra, who repeatedly condemns the cultic rituals performed by *karapan* priests and *kavi* princes, calls himself the “straight” invoker who does not indulge in any of them, proves otherwise that he was not a ritualistic priest by

³⁷ A History of Zoroastrianism, Vol. I, p 10. See also History of Zoroastrianism, Dastur M. N. Dhalla, pp 136 & 295.

³⁸ The Yashts stop at 21. I am not sure what the intended reference is. – C.G.

profession and that he was only an invoker, a true invoker indeed. His Gathas stand the best testimony to his being non-ritualistic.

Above all, had Zarathushtra been of a priestly class, he would have definitely mentioned it in his Gathas. He did take enough care to give his full family name, *Spitâma Haechataspa*, on several occasions. He could have added the term *âthravan*, at least once. The three professions or classes of society—priests, warriors, and the prospering settlers—are absent in the Gathas and other Gathic texts. This does not mean that they did not exist in his days. The truth is that he did not believe in them as boundaries dividing human society into three water-tight compartments. The only profession he encouraged was the settlement of people in the fields of agriculture, animal husbandry, and crafts. He is the person who coined the term *vâstrya-fshuyant* ‘prospering settler’. We have no trace of it in pre-Zarathushtrian Avestan texts or the Vedas. That is why he is called the *Vâstâr*, meaning ‘settler, rehabilitator’ of the oppressed in the Ahunavar formula, the opening stanza of the Gathas.

Conclusion

Keeping in view all the above points, I come to the conclusion that:

1. Asho Zarathushtra was not a priest, *karapan*, *âthravan*, or one known by any other Indo-Iranian term.
2. Asho Zarathushtra and his dedicated companions went spreading the message as *mâñthrans*, thought-provokers.
3. They were also known as *Magavans*, belonging to *Maza Maga*, the Great Magnanimity, the Great World Fellowship founded by Zarathushtra. This term gave rise to *Magu* priests of a Median tribe.
4. The *âthravans*, professional priests of the Indo-Iranian Haoma/Soma cult, embraced the Good Religion of Zarathushtra and managed to maintain their leadership. It is they who put the *mâñthrans* into oblivion.
5. There was no institutionalized priestly profession during the Gathic period.
6. Even after its establishment as an institution, it was not necessarily a full-time profession. There were many part-time priests who attended to it only if their main occupation permitted them.
7. It was an acquired occupation and not a hereditary profession. The other two professions of warriors and prospering settlers were of equal importance.
8. Any aspiring person, young or old, male or female, could learn the knowledge to become a priest.
9. The candidate for priesthood had to go through a rigorous course of at least three years to attain the desired standard in Gathic studies alone.
10. The training school was established by Zarathushtra and promoted by his companions and their successors on a specific system.
11. The extent Avesta and Pahlavi books have no description of the initiation of candidate to priesthood, perhaps because of its simplicity or its usual synchronization with the initiation into adulthood.

12. The priest, far above being a “mumbler” of Avestan texts, was an expounder of the religion of Good Conscience, an interpreter of the Divine Doctrine, and a scholar of the sciences of his or her days.

The Zarathushtrian Assembly's Position

True to the Gathic tradition that every profession which promotes human society is good and noble, the Zarathushtrian Assembly does not entertain a priestly class or division. It has proficient persons who officiate at ceremonies; act as chief witnesses at, for instance, wedding solemnizations; lead congregational prayers; convey the Divine Message; and teach those who want to learn and spread that message. Any able person, male or female, may qualify to be *chosen* and recognized as a *ratu*, a leader, *aethrapaiti*, a teacher, or *hamidhpaiti*, an assembly head.

The Assembly direly needs such devoted, dedicated, learned, and wise leaders, teachers and heads of the assemblies for the promotion of its chapters with the aim of spreading the divine, thought-provoking message of Zarathushtra and guiding its members and friends. The Assembly has the training of *ratu*, *aethrapaiti*, and *hamidhpaiti* in its program. These classes have been introduced on a periodical basis and are running well.

* * * * *

Footnotes³⁹

Note: S = Song as it stands within the Gathas; Y = Yasna; Yt = Yasht; V = Vendidad; Vp = Vispered.

- (a) With the exception of the last two paragraphs added now, the above paper was read at “The Conference on Zoroastrian Doctrine, Culture & History” under the auspices of the World Zoroastrian Organization, London, hosted by the Zoroastrian Association of Metropolitan Chicago, Hinsdale, Illinois, November 26, 1987.
- (b) *Magu* in Old Persian, and its subsequent terms of *magus* (plural *magi*), *magian*, for members of the priestly tribe of Medes during Median and Achaemenian periods in Ancient Iran indicate that in later times, the word became related to a priest and the priestly class. Nonetheless, the Pahlavi *magog*, Persian *mogh*, Arabic *majûs* meaning “Zarathushtrian” and *magopat*, “head of *mago(g)*” and therefore a priest show that it continued to be applied to a member of the Zarathushtrian fellowship and not necessarily to “priest.” Furthermore, *maga* is rendered *magîh*, magianship with a gloss “pure goodness.” It is a generic term. It is *mobed* (*magopat*) which means “priest.”

³⁹ These are the footnotes of the original article. I used bottom of page footnotes for the simplification of references.
– C.G.

- (c) See *Zarathushtrian Ceremonies, a reconstruction*, by Ali A. Jafarey, Ushta Publications, Cypress, California, 1992) for the details of the Gathic rituals.
- (d) As already stated, the *âthravans* (Vedic Sanskrit *atharvans*) were descendents of **âthrava/atharva*, a legendary fire-priest of the Indo-Iranian lore. A study of the Gathic parts of the Avesta and the Vedas proves that the *âthravans/atharvans* were not connected with the Gathic parts and the three early Vedas—Rig, Sâman, and Yajur. The *atharvans* are said to be the composers of the *Atharvaveda*. While the three Vedas belong to the higher class of Indo-Aryans, the contents of the *Atharvaveda*, with their spells and charms, show that the *atharvans* belonged to the superstitious laity. The non-Gathic parts also show a fall in style and material. Here too the *âthra*van style is evident. "The *Atharvaveda* was treated as a late addition to the Veda *samhitas* because the sagacious successors of the *rishis*, serving the princes and other aristocrats, knew well that it was an alien collection, composed by the *atharvans*, the fire-priests. It was not their *shruti*. They accepted it reluctantly only when they felt the rising market for spells, charms, and superstitions among the ruling class, their patron princes. The relevant parts of the Avesta composed by the *âthravans* had better luck. These parts were accorded a high position because on the Iranian side, the *âthravans* had ascended to completely control the religion founded by Zarathushtra. Therefore much of the surviving Avesta, older or younger than the Gathic texts, is an "âthra"van composition. I shall, therefore, call the non-Gathic texts as the *Âthrava-Avesta*.

Here is my theory: Both the *Atharvaveda* and the *Âthrava-Avesta* are compositions of the *atharvans/âthravans*, the fire-priests serving the laity. In India, the *rishis* dominated their society and their compositions were *trayi*, the three *samhitas* of Rigveda and its Sâman and Yajur supplements. They were *trivedins* only, not *chaturvedins*. The *atharvans* were secondary in importance and their composition was not given the high place the *atharvans* wanted it to have. The *atharvans* did succeed in rising to a high position but at the cost of their very name. They had to give it up and be better known as *Brahmans* and to have their composition be also called *Bramanaveda*, a later name for the *Atharvaveda*.

In Iran, the conditions were very favorable. The *âthravans* rose, quietly replaced the *mâñthrans* and the *magavans*, and became the highest authority so much so that they even claimed Zarathushtra was an *âthra*van. This was not enough. They even put words into Ahura Mazda's mouth that he too was an *âthra*van, nay *âthravatema*, the supreme *âthra*van. The entire Avesta, including the Gathas and their supplements in the Gathic dialect, a dialect different from their own, was claimed to be the *âthra*van composition, the divine composition revealed by the supreme *âthra*van Ahura Mazda, to an ever-asking *âthra*van Zarathushtra." (The texts within quotes is an extract from "*Glimpses of the Atharvaveda in the Avesta*," a paper read by the author at "The *Atharvaveda* Conference, held by the International Foundation for Vedic Studies, U.S.A., Dag Hamarskold Auditorium, United Nations, New York; July 14–16, 1993.)

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