

Spenta Mainyu

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Enter Spenta Mainyu:

For as long as the simple Zoroastrian believed in God, Hormazd, and his adversary the evil one, Ahriman, there was no need or knowledge of Spenta Mainyu. The more learned said that it was an appellation of Hormazd. And long before them, in the days of the Vendidad, Ahura Mazda, the most Spenta Mainyu, had Anghra¹ Mainyu as his opponent. According to the Zurvanites—perhaps as old as the Achaemenians in the 6th century BC or as young as the authors of Bundahishn and Vichitakiha-i Zatsparam in the 9th century AD—good and evil were twins begotten by Zurvan Akarna, ‘Boundless Time’. So, the simple Zoroastrian was, more or less, following the tradition.

But with the advent of Zoroastrian studies, led and encouraged by Western scholars, a change set in. Studies of the Gathas and the later Avesta revealed that Spenta Mainyu was referred to as an entity. And since then, almost all Zoroastrians and those who are well acquainted with the Zarathushtrian religion know the term Spenta Mainyu. Because the Gathas and the later Avesta were translated into English and other European languages, mostly by Christian scholars who had the Holy Ghost or Holy Spirit in mind, the term has conventionally come to mean the Holy Spirit. The general notion about it is that it has an adversary, Anghra Mainyu, the evil spirit. The two are locked in a pitched life-and-death combat. The victory, of course, will go to the Holy Spirit.

Meaning:

Spenta is derived by many philologists from an Avestan/Sanskrit root *spi-/shvi-*, meaning ‘to expand, swell, increase’.² Many, therefore, render it as ‘incremental’. The Pahlavi rendering of *afzunik*³, meaning ‘increasing’, fully supports the translation. This is further strengthened by the later renderings *mahattama* (‘greatest’), *gurutama* (‘most important’), and particularly, *vridhhi* (‘increasing’) in Sanskrit, and *afzuni* in Persian. There are other scholars who prefer to derive it from *spit-/shvit-*, to be bright, to be white, and consequently connect it with holiness. The renderings by most of these scholars range between beneficent, bounteous, bountiful, incremental, holy, and virtuous. Each scholar has reasons for his/her rendering. While scholars have reason to differ, the familiar and convenient “holy” has been taken for granted to be the meaning so much so that fundamental Iranians, in their drive to purge Persian of all Arabic words, have replaced *moghaddas* with *sepanta*! “Holy” is in vogue, both with scholars and the laity.

¹ This spelling Dr. Jafarey chose is indicative of the etymology *anra-* and can be found in manuscripts like 0420. – CG

² Avestan root is *su-*, *suua-*; *span-/spən-* (from Indo-Iranian *swan-*) is tangentially related, may mean ‘to cause to grow’ with connotations of holy. – CG

³ Also written *abzōnīg*. – CG

I accept the traditional meaning on philological and contextual grounds. I render it as ‘progressive, promoting, promoter’. As we shall see, it reflects the Gathic concept better. The Gathas emphatically advocate progress and advancement.

Mainyu is, as far as I know, derived by every scholar, and Avesta/Sanskrit dictionaries, from *man-*, meaning ‘to think, contemplate, meditate’. Ervad Kanga gives ‘spirit, mind, brain’ and Bartholomae gives ‘Geist, als Sitz des Denkens und Wollens – spirit/mind, the seat of thoughts and intentions’. Even the Sanskrit dictionaries define it as ‘mind, zeal, spirit, mood, mettle’. And ‘spirit’ here only means ‘temper or disposition of mind’ and NOT ‘a supernatural being or essence’.

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’, and therefore ‘mind, mentality’. A few instances in the Gathas show that *mainyu-* and *manah-* are interchangeable (Song 6.6; S 7.2)⁴. Pahlavi and Persian do not help much because they have the same word as *menok* and *minu* except for a few times when *menishn*, ‘thinking’, has been used. The root for ‘think’ is *menidan*. The Pahlavi literature shows its connection with ‘mind’ and ‘mental’. Sanskrit renderings of *adrsyah*, *paralokih*, even *manasah*, and other synonyms point towards an “invisible, outer” entity. Whatever the earlier renderings, the scholars have taken the by-now-popular translation of “spirit” in the Christian sense as quite suitable to their interpretation of a perpetual war between the so-called twin spirits. It suits them better. A departure may well topple the dramatic dualistic theory.⁽¹⁾

Many conflate Ahura Mazda with Spenta Mainyu and therefore elevate Anghra Mainyu as an adversary of the God of Good and thus continue to write on the continuous fight between the two. As a result, Zoroastrians have been characterized by many as the people who believe in dualism.

As already pointed out, there was a time when the Zoroastrians believed in this dualistic “theology”. The Vendidad tells us this and so do the writings written by and/or ascribed to the Sassanians and to those who followed them. New light on the Gathas and the later Avesta has changed views among intellectuals. But we see again a recession, because with the coming into prominence of a new class of Zoroastrian scholars with their academic roots in the dualistic scholarship of the later Avesta, the theory of the dualism of Ahura Mazda and His adversary is reappearing in certain quarters.

Gathic Picture:

The Gathas provide us with an entirely different picture: The term *Spenta Mainyu* is used fifteen times in the Gathas⁵ and twice in Haptanghaiti⁶ (a later text composed in the Gathic dialect by a companion/s of Zarathushtra). In these writings, there is no trace of any adversary of God, or any struggle, combat, battle, or war between the so-called good and evil forces at the divine level. The Gathas do not mention Anghra Mainyu at all. In other words, Anghra Mainyu

⁴ Yasna 33.6; Y 34.2

⁵ Song 1.1; S 6.12; S 8.2, 3, 6, 16; S 9. 7; S 10.6; S 12.1–6; S 16.7 (Yasna 28.1; Y 33.12; Y 43.2, 3, 6, 16; Y 44.7; Y 45.6; Y 47.1–6; Y 51.7

⁶ Y 36.1–2

does not exist as a compound word, a formalized term, in any of the texts in the Gathic dialect—not in the five Gathas, composed by Zarathushtra, nor in the Haptanghaiti (Y 35–41), Sarosh Hadokht (Y56), Fshusho Manthra (Y58), Fravarti (Y11.17 to Y13.3), or Yenghe Hatam! The dualism of “Good and Evil”, highly dramatized in the later Avesta, is simply not related to the divine Spenta Mainyu. That dualism is a separate subject of human behavior on this earthly life and lies outside the scope of this article.

Subtle Faculty:

Let us see first where *spenta-*, *mainyu-*, *spenta- manyu-*, and similar words occur in the Gathas:

- *spenta-* (alone): Song 2.7; S 7.2; S 8.3–5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15; S 9.2; S 10.11; S 11.9; S 12.3–4; S 13.3,7; S 16.16, 21.⁷
- *mainyu-* (alone): Song 3.3–5; S 4.3, 7, 12, 21; S 6.9; S 9.2; S 10.2; S 17.7.⁸
- Spenta Mainyu: S 8.6; S 9.7; S 10.6; S 12.1, 5, 6.⁹
- Spenishta Mainyu: S 6.12; S 8.2; S 16.7.¹⁰
- Mainyu vohu: S 7.2 (Y 34.2).
- Mainyu spenta: S 1.1 (Y 8.1).
- Mainyu spenishta: S 3.5; S 8.16 (Y 30.5; Y 43.16).
- Manyu: S 1.11; S 4.9; S 5.9; S 9.11; S 12.8.¹¹
- Manyu vahishta: S 6.6 (Y 33.6).
- Manyu spenishta: S 12.2 (Y 47.2).

The above instances concern God, man, both, and occasionally *âramaiti* (‘serenity’). But, as already said, Spenta Mainyu is related directly or indirectly to God. One thing is evident: (a) Ahura Mazda is the establisher/creator/parent of *vohu manah* (‘good mind’), *asha* (‘righteousness’), *khshathra* (‘dominion’), and *âramaiti* (‘serenity’), and grants *haurvatât* (‘wholeness’), and *ameretât* (‘immortality’) to the person who truly observes these principles; and (b) Spenta Mainyu and *âtar* (fire) belong to Ahura Mazda. These two are so subtly abstract that they are not a separate entity to be established or created. They are two divine faculties, thinking and illuminating.

Should one take all these instances, both one by one and at the same time, as well as consider the adjoining stanzas and the relative song, one would realize that the Gathas depict Spenta Mainyu as the subtle divine faculty of the continuous creation of Ahura Mazda, an “expansion plan” so to say. Zarathushtra, in his quest for truth, discovers that it is the ‘Spenta Mainyu’ aspect of the Supreme Being that fashioned the joy-bringing world (S 12.3, Y 47.3). Above all, it was through *spenishta mainyu* (‘most progressive mentality’) that God “created the wondrous wisdom of good mind by means of righteousness” (S 8.2, Y 43.2). In fact, the entire quest enlightens Zarathushtra to realize that God is not simply *spenta* but *spenishta*, ‘the most

⁷ Y 29.7; Y 34.2; Y 43.3–5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15; Y 44.2; Y 45.11; Y46.9; 47.3–4; Y48.3, 7; Y 51.16, 21.

⁸ Y 30.3–5; Y 31.3, 7, 12, 21; Y 33.9; Y44.2; Y45.2; Y53.7.

⁹ Y 43.6; Y 44.7; Y 45.6; Y 47.1, 5, 6.

¹⁰ Y 33.12; Y 43.2; Y 51.7.

¹¹ Y 28.11; Y 31.9; Y 32.9; Y44.11; Y45.8.

progressive'.¹² It made him realize his own self (S 8.7, Y 43.7) and know that the purpose of his acquiring knowledge was in quest of righteousness (S 8.9, Y 43.9).

The progressive mentality plays a vital part in human progress. One may be “a person of very small means, a person of great strength” but if he is righteous, he has been promised the best. (S 12.4–5, Y47.4–5). God grants “good to both these parties through the progressive mentality by means of fire (enlightenment) because with the growth of serenity and righteousness, it shall convert many a seeker” (S 12.6, Y47.6). “He receives the best from the most progressive mentality who speaks words of good mind with his tongue and performs, with his own hands, deeds of serenity” (S 12.2, Y47.2). Wholeness and immortality are “the refreshing splendid goals achieved through the best mind” (S 6.8–9, Y33.8–9). “One whose soul is in accord with righteousness is a progressive person” (S 7.2, Y34.2). “The person who seeks the best life and prospers through righteousness is a great promoter and a treasure for all” (S9.2, Y 44.2) “One knowing the divine teachings is progressive and wise like the Wise One” (S 13.3, Y 48.3). A progressive person advocates putting down fury and checking violence and wishes to strengthen the promotion of good mentality's actions (S 13.7, Y48.7).

That is why Zarathushtra too “chooses for himself *spenishta mainyu*, the most progressive mentality of God, so that a new life is breathed into the physical body, serenity prevails throughout the divine dominion” (S 8.16, Y 43.16), and wholeness and immortality are achieved” (S 12.1, Y47.1). It is the progressive mentality that separates the two parties of mankind on earth—the righteous who promote their world and the wrongful who regress the living (S 12.5, Y47.5). It is again the progressive mentality, which “enlightens” the wrongful to seek truth and ultimately become righteous (S 12.6, Y 47.6).

This enlightenment is called fire, symbol of light, warmth, and energy, by the Gathas (S 11.7, Y46.7) and the Haptanghaiti (Y36.1, 3). It is this light, warmth, this energy that Zarathushtra prays that every benevolent person will have. 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 mentality through which You created the wondrous wisdom of good mind by means of righteousness.”
(S 8.2, Y43.2).

Asho Zarathushtra wants every person to be godlike ... to choose *Spenta Mainyu*, the enlightening light, the invigorating warmth, and the vitalizing energy, rather 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. Let us, like Asho Zarathushtra, choose for ourselves *Spenta Mainyu* to make our mission of propagating the *mâñthra*¹³ prevail in the “sun-bathed” dominion of God! Let us join him in a meditative prayer from the Gathas:

¹² S 8.4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15 (Y 43.4, 5, 7, 9, 11, 13, 15).

¹³ the thought-provoking message of the *Mâñthran* of Ahura Mazda, Zarathushtra Spitama

“Wise Lord, 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.

Now as a dedication, I Zarathushtra offer to the Wise One the very life-breath of myself and the first fruits of my good mind, deeds, and words, gained through righteousness, with my ear to the divine voice; in fact, my whole strength.”

(S 6.12–14, Y33. 12–14)

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(1) spirit - noun [ME, fr. OF or L; OF, fr. L spiritus, lit., breath, fr. spirare to blow, breathe] (13c)

1: an animating or vital principle held to give life to physical organisms

2: a supernatural being or essence: as

a cap: HOLY SPIRIT

b: SOUL

c: an often malevolent being that is bodiless but can become visible; specifically: GHOST

d: a malevolent being that enters and possesses a human being.

The above is the root and definition of “spirit” as given by the Merriam-Webster’s Dictionary. It is “the animating breath,” a Semitic theory. Such a definition is a far cry from “mainyu – the instrument of thinking.”

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*This article was received from an email chain in which the full article had been copied. I copied this into a word article and edited it on February 6th, 2025, uploaded it April 11th of the same year. – Caleb Goodfellow