

The Achaemenians: Zoroastrians in Transition

Ali A. Jafarey

The Achaemenians ruled over the empire built by Cyrus the Great, and expanded later by others, for 228 years, from 559 to 331 BCE. Before the empire, their ancestors had ruled over Pârsa (Persia) proper for over 140 years. The Median rule north of Persia was established sometime earlier. The Medes had their professional priests, Magu (Magus/Magi). They were also Zoroastrians, more institutionalized than the Achaemenians, but since this essay concerns the Achaemenians, we shall not deal with the Medes.

There have been a number of arguments that the Achaemenians were not Zoroastrians and that like their kin Iranians, the Medes, they followed a school of Indo-Iranian beliefs and practices. Their bas-reliefs do not ever mention Zarathushtra, they do not call themselves Mazdayasni, they worshiped gods of other nations, and a few more points.

Records by the Achaemenians are few, and their contents, generally in multiple languages, are political.¹ Brief mention of the divine favor and other relevant matters do not describe the religion professed by these tolerant and benevolent rulers of a first-time multinational empire. Reports by the Greeks and Hebrews are the statements and narrations by third persons, some relying on further third-person sayings.

A look through history presents similar examples. Many Christian and Muslim royal monuments, from the earliest to modern times, have shown that brief political records by benevolent rulers of multinational empires have hardly touched religious matters. The above-mentioned arguments are, therefore, not strong enough to declare the Achaemenians as none-Zoroastrians. Perhaps the very scanty evidence may prove the case otherwise. Let us go through them.

Achaemenian Names: The earliest evidence comes from the very name of their House, *Hakhâ-manish* (Companion of Wisdom), as well as their personal names. Here is an alphabetical list of the names Median and Persian names mentioned in the bas-reliefs and a few gold tablets and their meanings in English: *Ardumanish* ('Upright-minded'), *Arshâma* ('Right Power'), *Arshaka* ('Righteous'), *Artakhshathra* ('Right-rule', Artaxerxes), *Artavardiya* ('Right-worker'), *Aryâramna*, ('Aryan-peace', great grandfather of Darius), *Aspachana* ('Horse-lover'), *Âthrina* ('Possessing Fire' ?), *Bagabigna* ('God-granted' ?), *Bagabukhsha* ('God-freed'), *Bardiya* ('Exalted', Smerdis brother of Cambyses), *Chithra-takhma* ('Lineage-strong'), *Dâraya-vahu* ('Holder of Good', Darius), *Frâda* ('Increase'), *Fravarti* ('Religious Choice', Conviction), *Kambujiya* ('Desire-enjoying', Cambyses), *Khshathrita* ('Ruling'), *Khshayârshâ* ('Royal Rectitude', Xerxes), *Thukhra* ('Red'), *Upadarma* ('Right-conduct'), *Utâna* ('Good Posterity'), *Uvakhshatra* ('Good-rule'), *Vahauka* ('Good'), *Vahumisa* ('Good Covenant'), *Vahyazdâta* ('Better-law'), *Vindafarna* ('Glory-finder'), *Vindarna* ('Support'), *Vishtâspa* ('Active Horse', father of Darius), and *Vivâna* ('Winner').

¹ Economic records, such as the Persepolis Fortification Tablets, are extremely numerous, although they stop after the transition to parchment, of which very few, such as the Khalili Bactrian letters, have survived. – CG

While old names depicting the pastoral society—*Aspachana*, *Âryaramna*, and *Vishtâspa* (‘Horse-lover’, ‘Aryan Peace’, and ‘Active Horse’)—are retained, the majority of the names reveal their closeness to the Farvardin Yasht (stanzas 87–128 and 139–142) in which 261 men and women—*Pourutkaesha* and *Nabânazdishta*, the foremost converts to the Good Religion and their children who served to spread the Divine Message of Zarathushtra—have each been revered by name. The names show the revolutionary change introduced by Zarathushtra alone. All those names, which were inspired by the natural environment of the pastoral days—names after animals, plants, and daily living—were retained. Names showing attachment to pre-Zarathushtrian Indo-Iranian deities, such as Mithra and Tishtrya, are not found. “Meaningful” names that reflect the “Divine Message” make the majority in both the Farvardin and Achaemenian lists.

Fire Altars: The next evidence is seen in the ruins. Firstly, Pasargadae, the capital of Cyrus the Great, served as religious center for the coronation of Achaemenian kings despite the fact that places like Persepolis held greater political importance. It was a vast park of gardens and buildings and was surrounded by a thick wall, a feature which gave it the name of *paridaisa* or *pairidaeza*, the origin of the term “paradise” (Persian *pardîs* and Arabic *ferdows*).

The sacred precinct of Pasargadae has two limestone plinths, one 7 feet high and 8 feet squared and the other 6 feet 10 inches high and 9 feet squared. They were twin fire altars. Fragments of stone fire vases have been found in Pasargadae and elsewhere. Bas-reliefs by Darius the Great and his successors as well as other contemporary monuments show the use of the plinth. Fire blazes forth on the altar and the persons stand before it with hands raised up in prayer. This is exactly how we see Zarathushtra praying in the Gathas—facing a blazing fire with hands raised in prayers. The Haptanghâiti tells us that the praying congregation stood around the altar. This is the Gathic way of praying.

Towers: There are two towers. One in ruins in Pasargadae, now called Zendân-e Soleimân (Prison of Solomon), is a quadrangle of 2000 feet with a height of 43 feet. The other, 36 feet high, called Ka’beh-ye Zartosht (Cube of Zarathushtra), is at Naqsh-e Rostam. Although opinions differ, the most likely possibility of their function is that they were repositories of royal archives. Perhaps the copy of the original Avestan collection, reported by the Denkard, was one of those.

Winged Figure: The much-debated winged figure, popularly known as Fravashi, Farohar or Fravahar, is now generally accepted to represent the “Royal Glory” hovering over the king. It does not have a religious significance but shows that the Achaemenians believed that they were protected by a divine glory. That reminds us of *Airyanem Khvarenô*, the ‘Aryan Glory’ and *Kavaem Khvarenô*, the ‘Kayanian Glory’, of the Avesta particularly the Zamyad Yasht, a late post-Gathic composition.

Non-Gathic Haoma Cult: About 300 mortars, pestles, and plates of green stone have been found in the Persepolis Treasury. They date from the reigns of Xerxes and Artaxerxes I (479–435 BCE). Some of them bear Aramaic inscriptions, which provide the names of the donors. Although not used but stored, they remind one of the non-Gathic Haoma cult. Some of the names, like Dâta-Mithra, point to pre-Zarathushtrian divinity names. Their presence shows the increasing penetration of the Later Avestan rituals. It may be added that there is not a single Haoma bowl or mortar and pestle among the large quantity of gold, silver, and stone vessels found in the Achaemenian ruins, and that, although some gold plaques and seals show persons

standing with a barsom bundle or a flower in hand and facing the fire-altar, no signs have been seen to show a Haoma pounding or drinking ceremony.

Inscriptions: Lastly, we come to the inscriptions on the bas-reliefs and tablets found in and around Pasargadae, Persepolis, Naqsh-e Rostam, Hamadan, and Susa, all in southwestern Iran. The oldest is the famous “Cyrus Cylinder” in the Babylonian language. It depicts Cyrus the Great as a benevolent conqueror who enters a city without bloodshed, frees and rehabilitates captives, restores temples and pays respects to the gods of the subject nations. The inscription, meant for Babylonians, is strengthened by Isaiah (44.28–45.1-7) in which we see that although Cyrus did not know the Hebrew God, he was to deliver the Hebrews from the Babylonian captivity and rehabilitate them.

The inscriptions, from Darius the Great to Artaxerxes II, call God by the name of *Auramazdâ* (‘Ahura Mazdâ’). Xerxes’ inscription shows that they knew that the term was made of two components—Ahura and Mazdâ. Ahura Mazdâ is a “great God”, in fact, the “greatest of gods”, because there are “other gods” also. Ahura Mazdâ is the god who “created this earth, that sky, mankind, and happiness for mankind”. He granted Darius [the Great] wisdom and activity. Prayers for protection are asked from Ahura Mazdâ and in a few instances also from “the gods of the house”.

Artaxerxes II is the first to mention Anâhita and Mithra, two of the Later Avestan Yazatas, in his inscriptions alongside Ahura Mazdâ and ask for their protection. In fact, in one inscription, he asks Mithra alone for protection.

The word used for “god” is *baga* meaning ‘one who dispenses, portions or distributes, dispenser’ and not *ahura* (‘the Being, the Essence’) or *yazata* (‘the Venerated’). While used frequently for “god” in Sanskrit, it rarely occurs in the Avesta. Zarathushtra uses it once and that too to express his denunciation of Yima (King Jamshid) who is “reported to have called himself the ‘baga’ of our world.” There are three more instances of *bagha* in the Later Avesta, one for Ahura Mazdâ, another for Mithra as the “wisest” of them, and another for the moon. The word clearly means ‘dispenser’ of certain favors and not ‘god’ or ‘deity’, the Creator, Maintainer, and Promoter, as some like to interpret. It stands for “god” in its secondary meaning.

Against Ahura Mazdâ, we have the daiva inscription of Xerxes. He says that there was one place out of the 32 countries in his empire where previously *daivas*, ‘false gods’, were worshipped. Furthermore, he says, “Afterwards, by the will of Ahura Mazdâ, I destroyed the *daivadâna* (‘sanctuary of daivas’) and I made proclamation: ‘The daivas shall not be worshipped!’ Where previously daivas were worshipped, there I worshipped Ahura Mazdâ through righteousness (*arta—asha*) with reverence.” The message is quite clear. He recognizes Ahura Mazdâ only.

Darius calls Ahura Mazdâ as friend; this recalls the Gathic concept of being a friend of Ahura Mazdâ.

The Gathic terms used by the Achaemenians—Darius to Artaxerxes II—are *Ahura Mazdâ* (‘Lord Wise’), *arta* (Gathic *asha* ‘righteousness’), *artavan* (Gathic *ashavan* ‘righteous’), *drauga* (Gathic *druj* ‘lie, wrong’), *draujana* (Gathic *dregvant* ‘liar, wrongful’), *vashna* (Gathic *vasna* ‘divine wish’), *frash* (Gathic *feresha* ‘fresh, new, renovated’).

Note the absence of “Anghra Mainyu” or any adversary of Ahura Mazdâ.

Darius and his successors owe their renovating and progressive development to Ahura Mazdâ. Darius is mentally awake and physically strong. He is a righteous and just ruler who is the friend of the righteous and an adversary of the wrongful. He rewards well the good and punishes the evil. He treats the strong and weak on equal terms and only believes in what is rightly proved. He is a tolerant and benevolent ruler of many nations. His empire is the uniting factor of diverse cultures.

The Old Persian root *yad* (Avestan *yaz*) has been used for veneration and worship. It has also given the words *ayadâna* for the ‘place of veneration’, *Âthriyadi*, ‘Month of Fire-Veneration’ (November/December), and *Bagayâdi*, ‘Month of Dispensor-Veneration’ (September/October).

Calendar: This brings us to the Achaemenian Calendar. The names of the months used by Darius are:

1. *Adukanaisha* (‘Food-digging’ (?); Farvardin, March/April),
2. *Thûravâhara* (‘Full-spring’; Ardibehesht, April/May),
3. *Thâigarchish* (‘Garlic-collecting’ (?); Khordad, May/June),
4. *Garmapada* (‘Heat-step’; Tir, June/July),
[the names of the 5th and 6th months, equaling Amordad and Shahrivar (July/September) are not given in Old Persian],
7. *Bâgayâdish* (‘Dispensor-Veneration’; Mehr, September/October),
8. *Varkazana* (‘Wolf-birth’; Aban, October/November),
9. *Âthriyâdiya* (‘Fire-Veneration’; Azar, November/December),
10. *Anâmakâ* (‘No-name’; Dey, December/January),
[name of the 11th month, equaling Bahman (January/February) not mentioned in Old Persian]
12. *Vîyaxna* (‘Ice-Melt’; Esfand, February/March).

They remind one of the Gathic Gâhânâbâr and the Vedic Calendar festivals and months, all named after seasonal activities. They are far from the Later Avestan Calendar in which days and months are named after yazatas and which is quite a late innovation.

A considerate look at the entire picture portrayed by the inscription shows that:

1. Ahura Mazdâ is the Creator of the universe.
2. There are other minor gods—alien and akin—respected by the emperors.
3. There are fire plinths for open congregational worship.
4. One prays, standing before a blazing fire altar, with raised hands.
5. Gathic dualism of ethic “Right and Wrong” as against the Later Avestan “cosmic” dualism of Ahura Mazdâ/Spenta Mainyu versus Anghra Mainyu.
6. The emperor treats his subjects, who belong to different races and creeds, equally and kindly.
7. Mortars and pestles of the Haoma cult, presented by persons with the names of Later Avestan deities, are received, ceremoniously not used and stored in the Royal Treasury when Xerxes and Artaxerxes I were reigning.
8. The emperor is an impartial judge who rewards the rightful and punishes the wrongful.
9. Two Later Avestan deities, Anâhita and Mithra, come in during the closing time of the Achaemenians.

10. Absence of the Later Avestan calendar, elaborate rituals and the terms of *amesha spenta* and *yazata*.

The picture that emerges from the above, indicates that the earlier Achaemenians were more Gathic in their beliefs and practices than their successors, and that with the passage of time and the increasing contacts and mingling with Iranians of the Later Avestan background, they turned more and more to an evolving form of the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism that had its culmination during the Sassanian period (224–652 CE). The gradual clouding of the pristine purity of the Divine Doctrine of the Gathas by pre- and post-Gathic beliefs and practices began during the melting period of the Achaemenians.

Note from Vohuman.org: The preceding is a digest of the essay *Hakhâmaneshiân Zartoshti Budand Va Bas*: “Achaemenians Were Zoroastrians and Nothing Else” in Persian. It was published in *Rahâvard*, Los Angeles, of Spring 1998. It discussed archeological and lingual aspects as well as the Avestan, Babylonian, biblical, Egyptian, Greek, Pahlavi, Parthian, and other sources to ascertain that the Achaemenians were Zoroastrians and that originally closer to the Gathic Doctrine, their growing contacts with other Zoroastrian schools gradually brought them nearer and nearer to the Institutionalized Zoroastrianism of the Later Avesta. The digest here covers only the Achaemenian bas-reliefs and inscriptions. References and the Bibliography are given in the original Persian version.