

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism

Edited by

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and

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with the assistance of Anna Tessmann

WILEY Blackwell

This edition first published 2015
© 2015 John Wiley & Sons, Ltd.

Registered Office

John Wiley & Sons, Ltd, The Atrium, Southern Gate, Chichester, West Sussex, PO19 8SQ, UK

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350 Main Street, Malden, MA 02148-5020, USA

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

The Wiley Blackwell Companion to Zoroastrianism / Edited by Michael Stausberg and Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina.

pages cm

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4443-3135-6 (cloth)

I. Zoroastrianism. I. Stausberg, Michael, editor. II. Vevaina, Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw, editor.

III. Title: Companion to Zoroastrianism.

BL1572.W55 2015

295-dc23

2014044819

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Cover image: Temple door at Chak Chak, Yazd, Iran. Photo © Jamshid Varza

Set in 10/12.5pt Photina by SPi Publisher Services, Pondicherry, India

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CHAPTER 3C

Dimensions of the *Gāthās* as Poetry

Martin Schwartz

This chapter shall adduce and address striking poetic aspects of the seventeen Old Avestan religious hymns comprising the five poems called the *Gāthās*, whose authorship is here accepted as that of the historical Zarathustra (for his historicity, see Schwartz 2007: 54–56). Hitherto the poetic nature of the *Gāthās* has been generally regarded in terms of doctrine cast into prosodic forms. The following paragraph will serve as an account close to a rough consensus as to the contents of this doctrine:

The godhead is *Mazdā Ahura* ‘Wisdom/Wise Lord’, whose main accompanying aspects are *Vohu Manah* ‘Good Mind’ and *Aša (Vahišta)* ‘(Best) Rightness’. There are two primordial spirits, one holy (and productive), the other wicked (and destructive). These irreconcilably opposed spirits choose respectively *Aša* ‘Rightness’ and *Druj* ‘Wrongness’. Between these two principles humans also choose, with a resulting afterlife respectively of paradise or hell, following a judgment at an alternatively expansive or contractive ‘Bridge of the Selector’ (*Av. činuuatō pārətu-*). Finally, evil will be eliminated through a universal trial by fire and molten metal, and the world will be restored to its pristine splendor. Zarathustra is represented as *Mazdā*’s spokesman in revealing these matters to humankind.

As if only a “container” of this doctrine, the poetry has sometimes been thought to impart merely a decorative, rhetorical, or vatic quality. However, as I shall try to show, Gathic poetic style and structure is nonetheless inextricably connected with the texts’ message, to whose meaning it lends a variety of important extra dimensions. This is clearest where the poetry is the vehicle of various strategies of stylistic crypticism, but also holds for some fundamentals of Gathic composition.

Complex ring-composition, a systematic pairing (concatenation) of words and themes across concentrically related stanzas, is found, in various schemes of intricacy, in every Gathic poem. Complex ring-compositions also occur *within* completed semantically and/or formally concatenative poems, revealing a first stage of composition (Schwartz

2006a). For present purposes, the thematic (rather than lexical) aspect of ring-composition will be illustrated for Y 30, a poem which provides a good introduction and point of departure for examining the Gathic world:

Y 30.1: “I shall now speak, you (all) who seek, the things to be understood – indeed for the knower – with praise for the Very Intelligent Lord and for Rightness, and with Good Mind’s worship – the things in bliss visible amidst the lights.”

Y 30.2: “Hear the Best Things with (your) ears; look with a lucid mind at the two options of decision, understanding them for (your) declaration before the big race.”

Y 30.3: “The two twinned Spirits – a better one and a bad one, opposite in mind, word, and deed – were heard in a dream. Of these two, the beneficent one chose (decided) rightly, not the maleficent one.”

Stanzas 4–8 state (apart from details on Mazdā to be discussed below) that the opposing choices made primordially by the two Spirits determined the rewards and punishments, life and death, for future choice between Right and Wrong, the Wicked Spirit misleads the *daēuuas* (demons, the term Zarathustra uses for false gods) to choose wrongly, and the *daēuuas*, in turn, make mortals go wrong and ruin existence. Against this, there stand the world-restorers, through whom the final disposition will come about:

Y 30.9: “But we will be those who render existence splendid ...”

Y 30.10: “For then the breakage of Wrongness’ chariot-pole-attachment will occur, but they, who are swiftest, will remain yoked at the House of Good Mind, Wisdom, and Rightness, and will win in good fame.”

Y 30.11: “When you, O mortals, have learned the ordinances which Mazdā gives mortals as to impasse and easy passage, wherein there is long ruin for the wrongsomeness and boons for the righteous, and all will be as wished.”

In accord with the ring-compositional structure, there are correspondences in Y 30 between the first stanzas (the paired st. 1–2), the middle stanza (st. 6), and the last stanzas (the paired st. 11–12). Stanzas 1–2 address the very basic theme of the choice between Right and Wrong. This theme is illustrated poetically via an extended metaphor, that of a race between two chariots, a figure whose origin, as is seen from Vedic Sanskrit and from Greek poetry, is Indo-European, including the metaphor of a chariot of Rightness. Only the righteous team survives the race, as that chariot, remaining firmly yoked at the finish, enters the divine paradisiac abode in abiding fame, while the pole of the chariot of Wrongness (under what must be assumed as the pressure it undergoes at the last turn in the course, as preceded by recorded real situations) snaps with fatal results. The race motif is distributed ring-compositionally in the first and last stanza-pairs, while in the middle stanza it is hinted at by reference to the helter-skelter running of the demonic entities.

In the reported dream, the Spirits are heard, rather than seen, because the Spirits are invisible. It is out of this immateriality that (Y 30.6b), “The Holiest Spirit ... clothed Himself in the hardest stones,” i.e., became manifest in materiality. (This image may go back to the pre-Zarathustrian concept of heaven made of stone, *as(m)an-*). Mazdā thus becomes tangibly worshippable by mortals (Y 30.5) “who gratify (Him) the Lord – with

real actions – Mazdā.” This idea continues at Y 30.7, “Through (His) ruling power He came to this (existence), with Good Mind and Rightness,” whereby He received “body and breath, so that through the retributions via the metal for those (violations), (this existence) will be for Thee (as the) first.” The ensuing motif of a trial by (molten) metal reasserts the material realm through which Mazdā is manifested to bring eschatological justice. This justice is elaborated at Y 30.8: “So when there is punishment for those violations, dominion (ruling power) will be allotted to Thee, O Mazdā, as proclamation to those who will hand Wrongness over to Rightness (i.e., the redeemers).” Thus, ‘metal’ concludes the theme of Mazdā’s action within materiality.

The consequence of these last verses (st. 7–8) is that Mazdā, as an emanation of the Holy Spirit, and thus unconnected with Wicked Spirit, is not at all responsible for the origin of evil, unlike the god of “Abrahamic” monotheism, who is the ultimate creator of everything.

Linguistic encryption is set within the poem’s opening and closing stanzas: In Y 30.1–2, both meditative visualization and hearing of the revelatory message revealed are called for. These are recommended ‘to the knower’, which signals to the attuned audience the presence of esotericism. What the knower-initiate should hear is not only the message of the good tidings, that is, ‘the best things’, specifically the rewards of the afterlife (whence NP *behešt* ‘paradise’), but the *sounds* of /WAHIŠTĀ/ ‘best things’, scrambled compactly in any order within other nearby words and phrases, via an ancient and durable technique of Indo-European cryptic stylistics. The phenomenon occurs in the poem’s opening words, /at TĀ WaxŠyĀ IŠAnTAH/ ‘Now, O you who seek, I shall proclaim’, and in ring-composition to the first two stanzas, Y 30.10 /ĀsIŠTĀ ... WAHĀu sraWAHI/ ‘the swiftest ... into good fame’ (where the last two words concatenate with their cognates in the phrase at Y 30.2 /srauta wahištā/ ‘hear the best things’, and the targeted word is also repetitively embedded in the finale of Y 30.11, on obedience to Mazdā’s ordinances, /saWĀca artaWAbyaAH at ApI TĀIŠ AHati uŠTĀ/ ‘boons for the righteous, and, thereby, all will be as wished’. (Throughout this chapter, the *textus receptus*, i.e., the received text is put in italics, while the phonetic reconstructions are in /roman/. Upper case indicates the sounds of the encrypted word.)

The same kind of encryption is found at Y 31.1, which resumes the latter stanza: “Keeping account of those Your ordinances, we proclaim words unheard /AguŠTĀ WAcāh sanhamAHI/ by those who with words of Wrongness harm Rightness’ realms, but are the ‘Best Things’ for those who will be faithful to Mazdā.” (Further on this mode of encryption in the *Gāthās* and other Indo-European literature, see Schwartz 2003a: 379–384).

The themes of Zarathustra’s revelatory experience, the protological (i.e., original) establishments of eschatological (final) reciprocities, and chariot-race imagery are collocated in Y 43.5:

“Holy did I think Thee, O Lord Mazdā, when I saw Thee first at the birth of existence, when Thou didst establish words and deeds as having payments, evil for evil, good reward for good, through Thy skill at the final (race-course) turn of existence.”

After Zarathustra requests of Mazdā that He impart correct discernment/choice (Y 49.6), two actual patrons, brothers, are addressed in terms of Right and Wrong as choices with their reciprocities, including bliss.

Y 49.7c–d: “Which tribe, which family would be with the laws, and will bring the community good reputation?”

Y 49.8: “For Frašaoštra establish the most blissful co-union with Rightness in Thy good Dominion; for that I entreat Thee, O Lord Mazdā, and for me, too. Forever let us be Thy envoys!”

Y 49.9b–d: “He whose speech is true does not make a connection/union with a wrongsome person, since the ones yoked up for the best prize are those yoked (conjoined) to Rightness in the race, O Djāmāspa!”

The latter name, having *-aspa-* ‘horse’ occurs in a word-play with ‘race,’ as again at Y 46.14a–c, where Zarathustra’s chief patron is named, again in a context of eschatological reward (and, as in Y 30.11, abiding fame): “Zarathustra, who is thy righteous ally with regard to great patronage? Or who wants to be famed? That’s Vīštāspa in the race!” Here we also have a simple example of the institution of reciprocity, which characterizes the Old Iranian relationship between poet-priest and patron.

The next example illustrates a more complex word-play, set within a most intricate example of encoded linguistic crypticism. The passage shows its compositional relationship to Y 49.7 by containing a form of the key root */wrāz-/* ‘be blissful’, which figured at Y 30; the terms ‘family, community, and tribe’, the word ‘to entreat’; and the word indicating ‘connection/union’.

Y 32.1: “And of Him the family, of Him community with tribe, demons upon my urging entreat for the bliss of Him, the Lord Mazdā: ‘Let us be thy messengers, holding those who are Your enemies.’”

Y 32.2: “Mazdā the Lord answers them from His dominion, He Who is connected/united with Good Mind, and is the close partner of sunny Rightness: ‘We choose your Harmonious Thought; it/She will be Ours.’”

The first enigmatic issue of Y 32.1 is how the word for ‘demons’ (*daēuuas*) functions grammatically. Rather than the *daēuuas* being an object of address, their syntactic occurrence after ‘of Him’ indicates that, like the nouns ‘family’ and ‘community (with tribe)’ which follow ‘of Him’, ‘demons’ are said to entreat Mazdā for his bliss, and likewise declare that they will be messengers (*dūta-*) against the enemies. This solution entails a second enigma: How can the *daēuuas* (and their supporters) make such a declaration, when they are themselves Mazdā’s enemies? This clue is found at Y 32.3a: The *daēuuas*-party is ‘duplicitous’, i.e., their speech consists of doubleness. When they say they will be *dūta-* for Mazdā, they use the word in its sense of ‘smoke’, rather than ‘messenger’; furthermore, the word for ‘hold’ (root *dar-*) in its meaning ‘hold onto, embrace’ rather than ‘hold back’. Thus, as against triad of the righteous family, community, and tribe, the demonic entourage, using the same words, intend to co-opt Mazdā’s bliss through both social and linguistic obfuscation, whereby they would make indiscriminating persons to do their bidding.

These conclusions are borne out by the rest of the poem, which also shows that Zarathustra’s rivals were trying to coopt his poetry as though it was in line with their traditional polytheistic cult. This would have come about at a time when Zarathustra was gaining success with his Mazdaism, whereas earlier (Y 46.1–2) family, community, and tribe had excluded him. (For the analysis of the entirety of Y 32, see Schwartz 2006a: 460–471, 475–483, 2006b, 2006c.)

Another enigmatic aspect of Y 32.1 is found in the simultaneous address to the divinity as a singularity ('Thy') and a plurality ('Your'). See also Y 32.6b–c: "With Best Mind, O Mazda, proclamation is made to You and (= including) Rightness in Thy Dominion." In both instances we have a reflection of the doctrine that Mazda is the foremost Being in a divine triad, in which Good/Best Mind and (Best) Rightness share Mazda's divine nature.

In fact, Y 32.1 ("And") resumes Y 28.8: "Thee, the Best (One), O Lord, Who are of the same disposition (= nature, inclination) as Best Rightness, do I entreat for the Best Things ... for an eternity of Good Mind." It should be noted that every stanza of Y 28 mentions the three entities of the divine triad.

This divine triadic coequality is encrypted in the last four words of Y 32.1a ("of Him community with tribe") and the last four words of Y 32.1b ("urging, the Lord's bliss, Mazda's"), which echoically overlap as to initial and internal sounds:

/ ahya wrzanam mat aryamnā
mnai ahurahya wrāzma mazda'ah/

Here the initials, respectively, /a w m a/ and /m a w m/, may be grouped interconnectedly (overlappingly) as a double representation of the initials of *Mazdā Ahura* 'Mazdā the Lord', *Arta [Aša] Wahišta (Vahišta)* 'Best Rightness', and *Wahu Manah (Vohu Manah)* 'Good Mind':

/(a w), (w m), (m a)/, and
/(m a), (a w), (w m)/.

The interconnection between the three divine entities in the Dominion is then stated explicitly in Y 32.2 (*Mazdā Ahura*, who is connected with Good Mind and is the companion/associate of Rightness).

Taken with the compositionally closely related Y 49.7–8 (above), it is clear that Y 32.1–2 encrypts a doctrine of ties in paradise between the divine entities, ties that are joined by the souls of the righteous, in a state of bliss. The heavenly bonds of the righteous contrast with the ties to hell incurred by the wicked, as per Y 32.13. At Y 32.12 Mazda is said to reject those who deceptively make an 'oath for bliss', which alludes back to the *daēuua*-party's duplicitously ambiguous statement at Y 32.1. The encrypted initials /m- w-/ or /w- m-/ for /Manah Wahu/ (Manah Vohu) or /Vahu Manah/ (*Vohu Manah*) 'Good Mind' and /a- w-/ for /Arta Wahišta/ (*Aša Wahišta*) 'Best Rightness' are made clear in other Gathic verses. (For various phrases in which the phrasal initials /w- m-/ and /m- w-/ symbolize /Wahu Manah/ or /Manah Wahu/ (respectively = *Vohu Manah*, *Manah Vohu*) 'Good Mind', see Schwartz 2003a: 385–386.) An especially interesting example for /m- w-/ is found in Y 45.3. First, the larger context: Y 45.1–2 is a variant of the text from which we proceeded, Y 30.1–2:

Y 45.1a–c: "I shall speak out, now listen and here you who seek from near and far. Now understand this for it is thoroughly clear."

Y 45.2: "Now I shall speak out about the Two Spirits of existence at the beginning, when the Holier One was to inform the Wicked One: 'Neither our minds nor

proclamations, nor our intellects, nor our desires nor words nor deeds nor envisionments nor souls are in accord.”

The ‘this’ (*im*; *m.*) of Y 45.1 is the *mąθra*, the mnemonic poetic formulation found in Y 43.3: “I shall speak out about the first things of this existence, this (*mąθra*) which Mazdā, the Knower, told me: Whoever do not enact this *mąθra* just as I think it and say it, ‘woe’ will be the last thing of their existence.” The four phrases with symbolic /*m- w-*/ are seen in the original text:

- Y 45.3: a: /at fra waxšyā ahauš ahya parwiyam
 b: yam **mai** widwāh **mazdā** waucat ahura
 c: yai im WAH nait iθā MANθram waršanti
 d: yaθā imam **manāi**-ca **waucā**-ca
 e: aibyah ahauš awai ahat apamam/

Enclosed iconically between the line which ends with ‘first thing’ and its thematically echoic and alliterative closure, which ends with ‘last thing’, we have four phrases with initials *m- w-*, and, in the central line 45.3c, /WAH ... MANθram/, making clearer the symbolism /*m- w-*/ (= /*w- m-*/) = /manah wahu/ = /wahu manah/. The symbolism is decrypted in the next stanza:

(it is) Wisdom, I know, who created this,
 (He), the Father of efficacious *Good Mind*.

For the initials of /*Arta Wahišta*/ ‘Best Rightness’, note Y 33.3, where again the three societal groupings figure formulaically:

Y 33.3: /yah **artāunai** **wahištah** hwaitū **wā at wā** wrzanyah
aryamnā wā ahurā **widans wā** θwaxšahā gawai
at hau **artahya ahat** **wahaušca wā**strai manahah/

“Whoever is best to the righteous person through family or as community member, or Lord, through tribe, or diligently providing for the cow, he will be on the pasture of Rightness and Good Mind.”

This stanza continues Y 33.2, which, with regard to the persons who oppose the evil-doer and act hospitably, states the reward:

Y 33.3c: /tai **warāi** **rādanti** ahurahya **zaušai** **mazda**’ah/

“They will achieve the Lord Mazdā’s desire and be in His favor/(good) disposition/inclination.” Here we have an oral acrostic of the word /*wrāzma*/ ‘bliss’, which is the overt focus of Y 32.1. Further, the word /*zauša-*/ ‘favor, disposition, inclination’ recalls Y 28.8 /*hazauša-*/ ‘having the same disposition/nature’, referring to the shared quality of

the three chief divine entities; Y 33.3c accordingly implies that the righteous person in the afterlife will share in the blissful divine nature.

It is hoped that from the few examples treated here it will be seen how the poetic aspects of the *Gāthās* enhance and make dramatic and poignant the ethical, theological, and eschatological content of the text, and use enigmatic style to set forth the mysteries which Zarathustra claimed have been revealed to him. Through this intellectual intricacy of poetic style Zarathustra provides an exemplar for this process of discernment which unfolds throughout the seventeen hymns of the *Gāthās*, and thus betokens the quality of Intelligence which is the essence of Mazdā. These remarkable poetic traits, I submit, were what, in the competition with routine traditionalist poet-priests, attracted a decisively prestigious patronage to Zarathustra.

What is distinct about the *Gāthās*, compared, e.g., to the *Vedas* and the post-Gathic *Avesta*, is the exclusion of mythological material, as well as similes, and, complementarily, a focus on the mind's necessity to understand, discriminate, and choose between Right and Wrong, with concomitant consequences for the fate of the individual soul and for the perfection of the world.

As part of this focus on intellect is the theological centrality of Mazdā Ahura, the Lord Wisdom or the Comprehending Lord, who is further characterized by divinized abstractions which represent aspects of Mazdā, chief among them Good Mind and Best Rightness, and all of them also *Ahuras*, i.e., 'Lords'. In accord with the emphasis on intellect, this theology (and eschatology) is revealed not only overtly but cryptically though a variety of intellectually challenging stylistic intricacies, which also have the purpose of showing Zarathustra as a divinely inspired revealer of mysteries.

The theology thus set forth shows the godhead as both singular (*Mazdā Ahura*) and simultaneously plural (*Mazdā* and the other *Ahuras*), indexed, among other ways, by verses with simultaneous address to Thou and You. Given the concomitant fact that, unlike Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, the *Gāthās* contain no proclamation of the oneness of the divinity, the question of whether Gathic religion is monotheistic (a question itself conditioned by the assumptions of the declaredly monotheistic background of scholars) is invalid. In addition, as we have seen, Gathic theology absolves the ultimate divinity from the origin of evil.

In conclusion, both the contents and the style of the poems which constitute the Gathic corpus render them a thoroughly unique document in the literature of religions.

Further Reading

For Gathic prosody, see Schwartz (2006a: 459–460), and for other Old Avestan poetry, Schwartz (2006a: *passim*). For Gathic ring-composition and more remarkable aspects of Gathic composition, see Schwartz (2006c), and further Schwartz (2000 [2003], 2003b [2007], 2009, 2010), and compare Schwartz (2007). For the racing terminology of Y 30, see Schwartz (2003a: 365–368). For Zarathustra's *revelatory experience* as the basis of his theology, eschatology, and iconic simulations via poetic form, see Schwartz (2000 [2003]: 13–15). For

Zarathustra's relationship to the older cult, as personified by the god Haoma, and Zarathustra's parodic treatment of the reconstructable old hymn to Haoma, see Schwartz (2006b, 2006c), and for his integration of such

old divinities as *Aramati as abstractions or hypostases, see Schwartz (2000 [2003]: 13–15). For the origin of the doctrine of the Two Spirits, see Schwartz (2000 [2003]: 15–16).