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**FEDERATION OF ZOROASTRIAN
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THE LITERATURE OF THE MOST ANCIENT IRANIANS

By
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Introduction

The theme of our conference here in Houston, under the auspices of the local Zoroastrian Association -- *The Gāthās in the Next Millennium* -- evokes a number of questions, and, although my own main concern is developing methodologies for grappling with the translation and interpretation of the *Gāthās*, there are other important aspects as well.

Looking at how the *Gāthās* have been treated in the 20th-century my principal feeling is one of frustration, not only at the problems facing the *Gāthās* philologist, but at the way scholars of Iranian studies -- languages and religion -- have treated the texts.

The history of Iranian studies in general and Zoroastrian studies in particular did not really begin till toward the end of the last century and did not take flight until around the turn of the century, with the work of Christian Bartholomae. Although Bartholomae's work represented a major step forward compared to that of his predecessors, Iranian studies were still only in their teens, as it were, and had a long way to go to come of age. By now we have a good understanding of both grammar and vocabulary, but numerous problems remain, especially in the case of the Old Avestan texts.

Almost all of Avestan scholarship in the first half of this century and much of it in the second half has fundamentally been based upon Bartholomae's interpretation of the *Gāthās* and his concept of their author, Zarathustra. Bartholomae's assumption that the *Gāthās* were the work of an historical Zarathustra who as a prophet reformed the Iranian religions and taught his new religion through the *Gāthās* has been elevated to an axiom underlying all discussion in this field.

Yet, scholars who accept this premise tend to disagree widely about the details of Zarathustra's life and "teaching." These very discrepancies ought to warn us that the premises may be faulty. Indeed, I would like to quote here Leonard Muellner in his new book about the *Iliad* (p. 3), where he says that "[t]he extent of the disagreement among scholars points to a crisis in methodology." Clearly, like Muellner, we need "to make a fresh start."

v/s/ The major problem with the way the Old Iranian texts and religion have been studied in this century leaps to the eye. Western scholars, rather than adopting an objective scientific attitude and methodology, have made themselves champions of a religion and its prophet. That is, rather than doing their own job — their *xwēkārīh*— they have been doing the job of Zoroastrian theologians. And what about the Zoroastrian theologians? Well, they have made themselves pseudo-scholars by invoking Western scholarship to support their theology.

These attitudes and approaches are of course not new. To name just one example, the Catholic church for centuries required natural science to conform to the teachings of the Bible and the Church. Similarly, Christianity, especially groups which take the Bible as their principal or only guide in all worldly matters, will frequently invoke science to prove the reality of Biblical stories. Even more ridiculously, science has been invoked to disprove the Biblical stories.

In the same way, Zoroastrian theology must not be allowed to influence Avestan philology or the study of Iranian religion — although, of course, Zoroastrian theology may itself be the object of study — nor should Avestan philology and the study of Iranian history or religion be needed for Zoroastrian theologians to establish the tenets of the faith.

In short, objective science, to which the study of old texts and religions ought to belong, can not base itself upon a subjective scripture. If it does, it is no longer objective and for the sake of decency should admit as much.

This, then, is what I see as the most important task of our studies in the 20th century: scholars must liberate themselves from the axiomatic, theological approach and develop new, objective, methodologies to deal with Old Iranian languages, texts, and religion. Theologians should stay in their own field, which is theology.

But on the other hand, what about the common Zoroastrian man, woman, and youth, for whom this is their holy language and scriptures? If Iranian scholars experience such enormous difficulties in understanding the literal meaning, of the holy texts, what are they to do? Modern Zoroastrians as I have gotten to know them over the last years in New York and Boston have a very real problem. Being a small religion in a country which tends to efface religious differences by submerging old values beneath a flood of modern pseudo-values, they are clearly faced with the very real prospect of extinction. The young, people who are interested in

their religion are desperately seeking support in the scriptures, and specifically in the *Gāthās*, the words of their Prophet and the revelation of their God. But what do they find? First they have to choose between half-a-dozen 20th-century translations of the texts, and once they have found one, they cannot understand it.

To mention an example: the last time I spoke about the *Gāthās* at a meeting of Zoroastrians at Harvard I spoke with much enthusiasm about the power of some of the poetic images evoked in the *Gāthās*. Not long after, I attended one of their Sunday school meetings at Harvard. Here they expressed their frustration at not finding the elevated poetic and spiritual substance I had spoken about in the translations they were reading and asked me to show them how to find it!

I do not claim any expertise in saving minority religions, but I do think that part of the problem is the gulf separating the Zoroastrian theologians — with their kneefall to Western scholarship — and the Zoroastrian men and women who desperately try to discover the values of their culture and religion and thus bolster their religious identity in a society which favors homogeneity.

As a matter of fact, I have repeatedly suggested to Zoroastrians that instead of looking to Western scholarship for such support they should look at their own culture — after all their religion is one of the oldest in the world — and try to find there what it is that has permitted it to survive a millennium and a half of adversity and intense pressure from surrounding religions and cultures, after having, been a state religion for another millennium and a half.

More specifically, I have tried to emphasize that their religion and culture is not based exclusively upon the *Gāthās*, but contains nearly four millennia of human contributions in the form of religious thought and literary compositions. It is this heritage, embedded in what we refer to as the *Young Avesta*, as well as in the later Pahlavi, Persian, and Parsi literature, that constitute the fundamentals of the Zoroastrian cultural identity. Dismissing, it as not being the word of the Prophet and thus not worth consideration only courts disaster, because it leaves you with nothing but a set of obscure texts, the meaning, of which nobody agrees upon. This attitude is comparable to that of certain Christian sects, who dismiss everything that is not written in the Bible. It would be like denying that two millennia of European history and cultural achievements are not part of a Western identity.

Modern Western Scholars

Let me return to the history of Western scholarship. As you know, the two most important modern scholars to follow in Bartholomae's footsteps are Mary Boyce and Stanley Insler.

About Boyce's work -- from my point of view -- let it suffice to quote from a modern survey of Old Iranian religion (Julian Baldick, "Mazdaism (Zoroastrianism)," in S. Sutherland et al., eds., *The World's Religions*, Routledge, 1988, p. 556): "[Mary Boyce] is the first Western specialist to take Mazdean legend as a serious source for Zarathustra's life. Her method has been to project back into the past all later doctrine and practice, and then claim that she has shown the continuity of Mazdaism, which she has taken for granted as her starting point."

That this is not an entirely exaggerated appreciation is seen from statements in her own *A History of Zoroastrianism* (Leiden-Cologne, 1975) such as: "In dealing with this tradition it is necessary to distinguish between facts ... and the embroideries" (vol. I, p. 182); needless to say, it is Boyce herself who decides which is fact and which is embroidery. She characterizes Zarathustra's religion as "the teachings of Zoroaster himself ... enveloped in the *sublime obscurities* (my italics) of his great *zaotar* verses" (p. 20); nevertheless, their "sublime obscurity" does not prevent her from describing their message in great detail.

My friend Stanley Insler in his translation of the *Gāthās* (*The Gāthās of Zarathustra*, Acta Iranica 8, Tehran and Liege, 1975) perpetuates basically the same kind of attitude: "Zarathustra is a man haunted by a vision, which has pursued him relentlessly throughout his life, and his poetry is in as many ways the autobiography of an idea as much as it is the self-portrait of the prophet"; he refers to Zarathustra as "Zarathustra, who composed these exalted poems with all the craft of his admirable poetic art" and "Zarathustra, in his higher understanding, is preoccupied with intellectual qualities" (p. 327).

It is ironic that it was an outstanding Vedic, as well as Avestan, scholar who espoused this axiomatic approach to the *Gāthās* and who, while professing an objective philological approach: "our primary task is to interpret what the text itself says, not to project our interpretations into it" -- is clearly subjective in his practical approach: "I have tried to emphasize in these introductions [to the individual hymns] the moral and ethical character of Zarathustra's teaching, which, to my mind, has been seriously

neglected in the recent misplaced fascination with the ritualistic background of these exalted lyrics."

For his translation of some of the key terms Insler has chosen a very modern-sounding terminology, e.g. *mainiiēuš* ... *spəntahiia ašā* "the spirit virtuous through truth"; *ahuuā astuuatascā hiiatcā managhō* "both existences -- yes, of matter as well as of mind"; *ārmaiti* "piety (of the faithful)," *saošiiant-* "he who shall save." We may note that the same kind of reproach was leveled by Kellens even more strongly against the translation by Jacques Duchesne-Guillemin from 1948.

The danger of such "modernizing" terminology is obvious and is expressed very clearly by Leonard Muellner in the book I already cited: "One society may share some of its elaborate metaphors and moral rules with other societies, but there is no reason to assume that the metaphors, the rules, and therefore the emotions that they represent and that we tend to experience as inherent in human nature are actually universal."

Of course, criticizing the terminology of others does not resolve the problem of deciding what terminology to use when translating the *Gāthās*. Personally, I find that relatively "outlandish" terminology is preferable, because it draws attention to the problems inherent in the translation and forces the reader to think about what the words can possibly mean.

But let us continue:

The first Western scholar to break with the tradition of Bartholomae was, as you know, Helmut Humbach, who in his German edition of the *Gāthās* (1959), was the first to emphasize the importance of comparing the *Gāthās* with the Vedic hymns, as well as the fact that the poems were hymns of prayer serving the praise of God and the obtaining of gifts from his hand.

But the only scholar to challenge seriously the historical view of Zarathustra and the *Gāthās* was the French scholar Marijan Molé, who in the early 60s maintained that the Zarathustra legend was developed *before* the composition of the *Gāthās*. As this view went against most of the "common opinion," Molé's opinions were mostly smiled at as juvenile whims, and M. Boyce dismissed them as follows: "this belongs to that small part of the great French scholar's work which has found no general acceptance" (HZ, I, p. 182, n. 4).

Unfortunately Molé died before he could develop his ideas any further, and so the most radical break with the traditional approach to the *Gāthās* came much later. In his contribution to a colloquium on the Achaemenid religion in 1987, Jean Kellens stated his non-traditional position as follows: "The study of the Mazdean religion has everything to gain by ridding, itself of the image of a founder or a prophet ... The fact that the research, by postulating a founder, has not been able to articulate the various manifestations of Mazdeism in a coherent picture that might receive a relative consensus ought to make us extremely skeptical toward the premises."

This approach was developed in his and Eric Pirart's new edition of the Old Avestan texts (1988, 1990, 1991), in which they focused on the philological analysis and the ritualistic background of the hymns.

Since this edition, Kellens has developed and elaborated also in several booklets and articles on many points not fully discussed in the edition, while making crucial contributions to our understanding of Old Avestan terminology and ritual along the way. The most recent synthesis of his opinion of the relationship between the text and the ritual is found in his contribution to an article on the question of the ritual in ancient and Achaemenid Mazdaism (1994).

The Old Avestan poems

Kellens' research is thus focused on the ritual implications of the texts -- to what extent they reflect ritual actions. -- He may correct me if I am mistaken. -- This is of course a perfectly legitimate approach, since Humbach so clearly showed that they are ritual texts. My own approach, however, is different from this in that it focuses on the poems as literary compositions.

Once our perspective has been cleared of the distortions of a century of subjective and biased speculations about the texts, we are free to look at the poems afresh and ask ourselves the fundamental questions: What are they and what do they say?

First of all, the Old Avestan texts are poems belonging to a poetic tradition which reaches through Indo-Iranian times back into Indo-European times. This has been proved conclusively by the work of numerous scholars who have investigated the poetic techniques and formulas employed by the Avestan poets.

Second, they must have been composed orally, a fact that allows us to apply, at least to a certain extent, modern methodologies developed for analyzing oral poetry. Although this methodology was developed on the basis of epic poetry and so cannot be directly transferred to the type of religious poetry seen in the Old Avestan texts and the *Rigveda*, still many of its fundamental assumptions can be so applied. For one thing, I doubt whether these poems were necessarily composed/recomposed "in performance" the way oral epics were and still are, and although the poet performer may have improvised to some extent on the poems transmitted to him from his predecessors or composed by himself, yet I think that especially in the light of Martin Schwartz's work on the poetical techniques employed -- the original composition must have involved a slower and more introspective process -- which still needs to be investigated.

Let me here say something about the Old Avestan texts as a collection. This collection contains six poems or hymns -- in six different meters. The six poems are all addressed to Ahura Mazda, who, together with his creation, is praised in all of them. This is the whole story as far as the *Yasna Haptanḥāiti* is concerned. The contents of the *Gāthās*, on the other hand, is much more variegated. In particular, in addition to containing praises addressed to Ahura Mazda, they contain violent attacks against his divine and human opponents, the *daēuvas* in heaven and the followers of the Lie on earth.

The *Gāthās* and the *Yasna Haptanḥāiti* therefore represent two different types of poetry. The Gathic type is well described in the phrase of a Young Avestan poet, who characterizes Zarathustra as the first to praise Order (*aša*) and to blame the *daēuvas*. The *Gāthās* may accordingly be classified as combined praise and blame poetry. The *Yasna Haptanḥāiti* on the other hand may be classified as pure praise poetry. As a matter of fact, the Haptanghatic poet himself states this explicitly when he says: "We are praise singers, not blame singers."

The genres of praise and blame poetry are not an *ad hoc* construct. They are well known also elsewhere in Indo-European literature and have been discussed in detail for Greek by my Harvard colleague Gregory Nagy in one of his books.

But who could have made such a collection, and for what purpose? Objectively speaking, I think there are two possible answers: either the collection represents a sample of old poetry perhaps selected for teaching purposes, or it represents a collection of hymns used at specific ceremonies, for instance the New Year ritual. We may note that a similar situation

obtains in the case of the oldest hymns of the *Rigveda*, which, it has been hypothesized, may have served as "a textbook for the new year ritual" (Kuiper, "The Ancient Aryan Verbal Contest," *IJ* 4, 1960, p. 222).

The persons

Let me next say something about the people mentioned in the *Gāthās*.

One consequence of the non-historical approach to the *Gāthās* is the reconsideration of the characters mentioned by name in them, such as *Vištāspa*, and the others whom the later Zoroastrian tradition and most Western scholars regard as belonging to the circle of friends of Zarathustra. First of all, we may note that these characters are hardly described in the *Gāthās*, they are just mentioned. There is therefore no indication there of what their secular positions might be, and, especially, there is absolutely no basis for assuming that *Vištāspa* was a local king who was converted by Zarathustra and subsequently supported the propagation of the Zoroastrian religion. This is all part of the much later Zarathustra legend of the Pahlavi books. The whole notion of Zarathustra at the court of his patron and protector, King *Vištāspa*, is a romantic Western idea, as stressed by Kellens in his recent book on the Avestan pantheon.

In general, ancient literature abounds in names of persons, for instance the *Iliad* and the *Odyssey*. I doubt, however, if any of you would conclude from the fact that these are the oldest Greek poems known that all the characters in them must have been historical persons living at the time of the Trojan war. This is, however, what is done in Old Iranian studies.

If one looks at the problem objectively, one has to take into account that the persons mentioned in the *Gāthās* are actors in the Iranian epic known from the Young Avestan literature onward, and there is no reason to believe that the first attested mention of the characters in the *Gāthās* does not also refer to them as epic, legendary, or even mythical characters. As a matter of fact, as I came to realize during my work with the texts, the Gathic passages in which they are mentioned all seem to indicate that these characters are not relatives and neighbors of Zarathustra, but in fact belong to Ahura Mazda's entourage. This realization then led me to the conclusion that *Vištāspa* plays the same role in the *Gāthās* as the "kavis or *ršis* of old" in the *Rigveda*. The other characters may be the heroes of old, whose deeds are recounted in the epic tradition. Among these *Fraśaoštra* and *Djāmāspa* are said to be in communion with *aša*

"Order" (Y. 49.9-10), an expression that recalls the use of Av. *ašauuan-* and OPers. *artāvan-* to designate the dead who live with Ahura Mazda, as well as OInd. *ṛtāvan*, a term used specifically about the "kavi-poets of old."

The mentioning of *Kauui Vištāspa*, an epic figure, in a religious hymn need not surprise us. Such mythical or epic references are also seen for instance in the *Rigveda*. We may only think of the Vedic Kavi or Kāvya Uśanas, who is barely mentioned in the *Rigveda* but whose story is elaborated in the Indic epic, the *Mahābhārata*, and whose epic roots reach far back into Indo-Iranian times -- as his Iranian counterpart, *Kauui Usan*, the later *Kay Ka'us*, clearly shows -- and even farther back, into Indo-European times.

The poet-worshiper

But to return to the literary aspect of the hymns: What is the function of these mythic and epic characters in the Gathic poems? To answer this question we must consider the Gathic poet-worshiper himself and his function in the world in general and on earth in particular.

It has long been known that the Gathic poet, who calls himself Zarathustra, is cast in the mold of the Indo-Iranian and even Indo-European poet-worshiper. His ritual functions and the ritual nature of the poems themselves were noticed and elucidated by H. Humbach in the early fifties, and the Indo-Iranian vocabulary of the poet's salary was discussed by H. Lommel. That the poems are full of references to chariot races, winners and losers, and prizes -- as are the Vedic and many Greek poems -- is also well known.

What I think -- currently -- is the "set-up" in the poems is as follows: In the center of the Gathic universe, as it were, stands the poet-worshiper. The object of his praises and worship is Ahura Mazda. These constitute the two poles of the universe, around whom everything else is arranged.

Ahura Mazda is the god who in the beginning made or separated Order or Cosmos from Chaos, assigning their proper place and time to all objects in the ordered Cosmos. It was he who determined what would be good life and behavior for human beings. Chaos was not, however, removed from the world through Ahura Mazda's Cosmic or Cosmetic activities and periodically takes over. The Cosmos must therefore also be periodically reestablished, mainly every morning and every New Year. To reestablish Cosmos and Order, Ahura Mazda needs the assistance of his

creatures, specifically humans, among whom this function is of course assigned to the poet-worshiper. This is then a principal purpose of the rituals and of the Old Avestan poems.

But Chaos, too, has its own agents. Among the gods these are the *daēnuas*, among humans they are the followers of the Lie. Two additional tasks of the poet-worshiper are therefore to make sure that his praises and worship are addressed to and reach the proper gods and that the followers of the Lie do not usurp his functions. As reward the poet-worshiper obtains boons here and now, as well as promise of future good things. These and other functions of the ritual are very clearly described by Kellens in his 1994 article.

Thematic structure of the *Gāthās*

On this background we may briefly review what I think is the basic thematic structure of the *Gāthās*.

The basic *structures* of all the *Gāthās* (except the fifth and to some degree the first) are the same, although considerable variation is permitted within each *Gāthā*. The principal difference lies in the degree to which specific themes are elaborated. A theme that is spun out through several strophes in one, may be reduced to a mere allusion in another. *The framing structure*, however, is clear:

I. General introduction of praise and promise of mutual benefits: on one hand for the gods and the Cosmos, on the other for the poet-worshiper and his community.

II. Two things are needed for the ritual and the accompanying songs to be effective:

- 1) the poet-worshiper must prove himself worthy, and
- 2) some basic, correct knowledge is needed about the

following:

- a) the gods and the cosmos,
- b) the poet-worshiper and the human community.

To fulfill the first requirement a hearing seems to be staged, in part modeled after that of the final judgment; to fulfill the second the poet-worshiper proceeds to interrogate Ahura Mazda.

III. Having obtained the necessary knowledge -- which, as it turns out, he possessed all the time (he must have asked the same questions yesterday,

the day before yesterday, etc.) -- the poet-worshiper becomes like a god himself (*nar- spənta-*) and can announce to gods and men the facts of life:

1) those concerning the creation of the universe and how man can assist in destroying the Lie, and

2) the rituals and social relationships of good and bad men and how good men can get the better of the bad ones.

IV. Having done so -- to the best of his ability -- the poet-worshiper waits for the gods and other denizens of the other world (his critics) to pass judgment on his performance. Mostly, but not always, confident that he will win, having fulfilled his part of the bargain -- namely to provide the gods with what it takes to remake the initial Cosmos and make the new day/New Year reappear -- they must fulfill their part of the bargain, namely see to it that he is paid his fee -- preferably in cows -- which he expects to be commensurate with his own contribution.

Within this basic structure, the action moves on several chronological levels, namely the past, especially the beginning of the universe, the present, and the future, especially the end of the world.

We may therefore draw the following picture of the *action* in the *Gāthās*:

The poetic competition

The poet-worshiper, acting on behalf of the gods and their spiritual sphere as well as his own, material sphere, prepares his sacrifice and invites the gods to partake of it. The invitations are sent up to heaven in his praise songs, which take the shape of chariots with his tongue as charioteer. But the rival poet-worshipers prepare their own sacrifices and send their own praise songs with invitations. The competing praises therefore take the form of a horse and chariot race, in which the quality of the poems and the poets determine who will win the race.

This is not all, however. Once the poems have reached Ahura Mazda and his retinue, they have to be recited and judged. Judges are Ahura Mazda and the surrounding deities, as well as the poets and heroes of old, whom the poet-worshiper endeavors to emulate and extol, respectively.

The winner is finally applauded, while the losers are booed and ridiculed.

Once he has won the competition, the poet acquires enough creative power (*spən*) to provide Ahura Mazda with the required assistance in the form of bodily substance and life spirit to enable him to rejuvenate the Cosmos, that is, recreate the First day of Ordered existence.

Winning the race does not only qualify the winners for rewards here and now, however. Being an ally of Ahura Mazda also ensures that at death, represented poetically as the final turn in the final race, he will be allowed into the abode of Ahura Mazda, appropriately called the House of Songs, in which, no doubt, the poet-worshippers will for ever be singing the praises of Ahura Mazda and his creatures, in the manner of the *Yasna Haptanhāiti*.

The loser of the race is not only exposed to ridicule but is also deprived of the chance to join Ahura Mazda in the hereafter. Instead he will be consigned to the House of the Lie, to spend the rest of his existence in misery.

Human concerns

The sociological aspect of the *Gāthās* is also very important, however. The constant problem faced by Zarathustra and his people is the maldistribution of the means of production, to put it in Marxist terms. Zarathustra again and again stresses that the followers of Order lack the means of subsistence, while the followers of the Lie have plenty. This aspect of the *Gāthās* was, in fact, pointed out seventy years ago by the French linguist and Iranist Antoine Meillet, who maintained that Zarathustra preached for the poor, the oppressed cattle-tenders. You may want to note that this concern for society seems to be a novel feature in Indo-Iranian poetry.

The philosophical problem inherent in this situation, is that, by everything he has been told, the poet-worshiper knows that in the Order of things the cow and the pastures were made and assigned to the followers of Order. So what went wrong? Zarathustra does not attempt to answer this question, which has plagued religions ever since they were invented, namely the contradiction between God's power and his inability to help his worshipers. If there is an answer, it is to blame bad humans, but certainly not God himself. Zarathustra, like millions of devoted worshipers of all religions before and after him, just keeps worshipping Ahura Mazda, hoping that he will be rewarded with the things he needs.

The poet-worshiper's qualification

So what were the requirements for the poet-worshiper to win the competition? Obviously he must be an expert oral poet and know all the rules and regulations of his craft. One requirement of the poetic style seems to be the insertion of mythical and epic references, as I just mentioned. The myths are never told in detail or presented as narratives; it is part of the art of the poet that his allusions should suffice to show his intimate knowledge with the tradition. In the *Gāthās* such allusions are frequently indicated by the verb "has been heard of" or "as you have heard," as in the case of the references to the myths of the primeval twins or Yima.

But the most important things the poet-worshiper must possess is "good thought, good speech, good action." Anybody even marginally familiar with Zoroastrianism knows that this triad also constitutes the basis for the faith. My question is: what do these expressions signify in the Old Avestan poems?

We must discard any preconception to see in them any kind of Christian ethical system, or, for that matter, project into them any modern American ideas they might evoke. Above all we must guard against thinking of the opposites, "bad thought, bad speech, bad action," as morally bad, thinking "dirty" thoughts, saying "bad" words, and doing "bad things," especially with sexual implications.

Basically the expressions imply thinking and speaking about the world as the ordered Cosmos created by Ahura Mazda and to perform the acts required to maintain this ordered Cosmos. Sinning basically consists in thinking and saying things that disagree with the cosmic reality. Those who do this are Liars and thereby followers of the Lie.

In the microcosmos of the poet-worshiper, the terms clearly refer to his ritual activities. His "good speech" is that of uttering his poems of praise and blame correctly, and his "good actions" are those of performing the ritual actions correctly -- both crucial for his success.

But what about his "good thought"? This term is one of the most frequent expressions in all the *Gāthās* and is clearly at the center of the poet-worshiper's world. It of course implies thinking about Ahura Mazda and his ordered Cosmos, but could it also have a meaning in relation to his performance, as the terms "good speech" and "good actions"? If we think about what goes on in the thought of the poet-worshiper, we are bound to realize that the mind is clearly where all of the poet's knowledge is stored,

about the world, about the ritual, and about his poems, and, perhaps most importantly, the mind is necessarily where the oral poet composes his poems.

The connection between mind or thought and poetry is seen clearly in some Old Indic terms for poetry and poem, such as *mati*, which literally means "thinking," but is defined as follows by Grassmann: "Most frequently the word designates the production of holy thinking, the religious song, the uttered prayer." Note too OInd. *manman*, which also means both "thought" and "poem," and *mantra*, Av. *mąθra*- "poem, formula" literally "thought organ."

I think there can be little doubt that to the Avestan poet his thought was his most treasured asset. How appropriate that Ahura Mazda's abode, the House of Song, should also be called the House of Good Thought, that is, the House of those having the talent required to compose the songs that fill it!

Conclusions

Let me sum up:

In the absence of any evidence whatsoever that there was an historical Zarathustra, a prophet and a religious reformer, who at some point in history -- about which scholars differ to the extent of 1000 years -- told his followers that the *daēuuas* were bad, not good as they had thought, told them not to use the *haoma* for their worship, and invented the system of the entities, or Ahura Mazda's emanations, I and others now are of the opinion that one should proceed to analyze and interpret the Avestan literature unhindered by any such preconceptions and axioms.

Once that is done, the poems themselves force upon the attentive reader the central place of the poet-worshiper and his function, which is that of assisting God and his ordered Cosmos in his battle against the forces of Chaos. This action of assistance not only ensures Ahura Mazda's success, but also that of the poet-worshiper himself, who is rewarded for his participation. The poetry has to be composed according to the rules handed down by generations of poets before him, the same poets who will judge his own poetry when it arrives before Ahura Mazda to be auditioned. The rewards consist in material wealth, as well as absence of sickness and untimely death for the poet, as well as eternal bliss after death, but also for his family in the large sense.

Envoi

I think these two aspects of the *Gāthās* are a good starting-point for modern Zoroastrians to meditate upon: the poets concern for order and truth in the world and his -- at least in our eyes -- altruistic concern for fellow human beings. But as I said at the beginning, Zoroastrian culture is much more than the *Gāthās*. The *Gāthās* are just one small part of its legacy, and it is important that the young Zoroastrians should learn that they possess wonderful literary and even philosophical traditions, quite able to compete with those of other Western and Eastern cultures. Only, having grown-up Zoroastrian intellectuals and academicians telling them that these traditions are not genuine because they are not the Words of the Prophet is not going to help the survival of the faith.

My own little hope is that perhaps by exposing the literary merit of their ancient literature, as well as its place within the greater Indo-European tradition, I may contribute in a small way to making them not feel inferior to cultures who boast of Homer or the *Rigveda*, but proud of being Zoroastrians.