

Honorable Mention of 2022 Essay Contest
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The Concept of God As seen through the Gathas

A few years ago, I entered the Apostolic Palace in the Vatican City. I was already mesmerized by the opulence, but nothing compared to the awe I experienced when I was introduced to the painting *The School of Athens*. “There,” said the guide, “holding a globe in the front is Zoroaster, an ancient Persian philosopher.” It was thrilling to hear this, but I didn’t remotely understand why the prophet of my small religion was on a painting of the world’s most influential thinkers and philosophers. As Zarathustra described in the Gathas, Zoroastrianism is a way to lead one’s life, the perfect way to achieve, well, perfection. When related to such a complex religion, the answer to a question, “can one believe in Zoroastrianism without a belief in God,” cannot be a simple yes or no, because it requires a deeper investigation of the very concept of “God.”

It is a marvel that Zoroastrianism, for 3000 years, has remained relevant and active but as all historical ideas are privy to change, Zoroastrianism’s concept of God, Ahura Mazda, has changed throughout its lifetime. At the start of the Achaemenid Empire, Zoroastrianism was already widespread throughout the kingdom. As Cyrus the Great, Darius I, and other kings modeled the core values of Zarathustra’s teachings - charity, equality and, above all, the mantra, “Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds” their message spread with their conquests, and the original form of Zoroastrianism reached its height. As Herodotus stated, “the Persians have no images of the gods, no temples nor altars, and consider the use of them a sign of folly. This comes, I think, from their not believing the gods to have the same nature with men, as the Greeks imagine.” According to the Gathas, this assumption is correct. In song 1.1, Yasna 28.1, the Gathas state that “*I pray that I may perform all my actions,/based as they are on the wisdom of good mind,/precisely according to the laws of righteousness (Asha)/ so that I please You and the soul of the Living World*”. Through this, it can be inferred that Zoroastrians thought of Ahura Mazda as on a different plane than themselves. This shows an intricacy of thought that is unparalleled in other world religions, such as Hellenism, at the time. According to the Gathas, a belief in one main God is necessary to being a true Zoroastrian, but Ahura Mazda’s main goal was to guide others to perfection, not to impose his will on his subjects.

In the Parthian and Sassanid dynasties though, the original version of Ahura Mazda as described by the Gathas became convoluted and corrupted, as Ahura Mazda was conflated with Zeus and a new version of Zoroastrianism, Zurvanism emerged. In the Gathas however, in song 4.19 and yasna 31.19, it is stated that “*One who listens and realizes the truth,/becomes a life-healing wise person./He controls his tongue/to express the right words when he wills./He, O Wise One through Your radiant light/proves good to both parties.*” A good Zoroastrian uses Ahura Mazda’s wisdom and teachings to become a good person, not to appease a punitive or vengeful God. But suddenly, in the Parthian dynasty, Zoroastrianism wasn’t about following Ahura Mazda to perfection, but was about worshipping him as though he had the power to change one’s life. In the Sassanid Empire, although Zoroastrianism was officialized, the unscrupulous Priests and Magis sought to use the mass’ belief in Ahura Mazda to their advantage. A new cult-

like version of Zoroastrianism called Zurvanism surfaced, which emphasized false mythology of Ahura Mazda and Ahriman (evil) being twins. This corrupted the teachings of Zarathustra and Ahura Mazda so much that it fragmented the empire, leading to the final downfall of the Persian empires. Even through these times, a stark belief in God, despite its many transformations, was necessary to be considered a Zoroastrian, perhaps even more so in these empires.

Acknowledging that the idea of Ahura Mazda has changed throughout history, I believe that a belief in God, as portrayed in the Gathas was, and still is a pivotal factor in one's identity as a Zoroastrian. But over the course of its lifetime, the Zoroastrian concept of God has deviated far from its original ideal. I know now that Zarathustra deserves a spot in the *School of Athens* because he visualized religion as a way of life in which God was never intended to be an all-powerful deity, but something to aspire to, a philosophical ideal. Believing in this ideal of righteousness (Asha), balance (Ushta), humata, hukhta, huvarshta and similar values necessary for a good life is the only way to truly realize the principle of Ahunavar, free will, that is at the core of our religion. Only then can we truly be Zoroastrian.