

Welcome everyone. I hope that all of you are doing well. This is the 4th session of the California Zoroastrian Center's seminar "Liberating Zarathushtra's Relevance". The title of this session is:

Heaven, Hell, Chinvat, & Frashokereiti.¹

Be prepared for some surprises ! Let's start with some facts.

In the Gathas, there is no mention of any the following ideas:

- ~ no final judgment, ~ whether end of life or end of times ~ in which a soul is judged to determine its fate in the afterlife;
- ~ no place of reward to which a 'good' person is sent after death; and
- ~ no place of punitive tortures, to which a 'bad' person is sent after death.

These ideas are also absent from all other Avestan texts of which I am aware (that were composed during Avestan times). And, as you will see, there is no place for these ideas ~ they simply do not fit ~ in Zarathushtra's framework of thought.

Yet many translators ~ Zoroastrian and non-Zoroastrian ~ have interpretively read these ideas into the Gathas; and have announced (with pride!) that Zarathushtra invented the idea of 'heaven' and 'hell' as places of reward and punishment.

How did this happen? Let me show you.

The idea of a punitive hell of tortures, first appears in Pahlavi texts, all of which (so far as we know) were written after the Arab invasion of Iran. One of these texts complains that people were in doubt, and no longer believed in the elaborate rituals and purifications mandated by the priestly establishment (none of which are found in the Gathas).

So an assembly of priests was convened, which decided that a young priest ~ Viraf ~ would take a drug induced journey to the spirit world and bring back information that would address such doubts.

This text says,

" ... it is necessary ... [that] one of us may go, and bring intelligence from the spirits, that the people ... shall know whether these Yazishn and Drun and Afringan *ceremonies* and Nirang *prayers*, and ablution and purifications ... attain unto God, ... and come to the relief of our souls, or not." *Arda Viraf Namah*, Ch. 1 §§ 17 - 27, Haug & West translation (words in *italics* have been added by the translators as implied).

"And then those dasturs of the religion filled three golden cups with wine and the narcotic of Vishtasp, ... and he [Viraf] swallowed the wine ... and slept upon the carpet."
Arda Viraf Namah Ch. 2 §§ 29 - 31, Haug & West translation p. 151.

When Viraf woke up, he dictated to a scribe, that 2 angels had given him a guided tour of a place in which the souls of the 'wicked' were punished by tortures, and also a place of mostly material delights in which the souls of the 'good' were rewarded. The fact that 8 chapters describe the good rewards, and 82 chapters (full of incredibly cruel details, laid down like a code of law) describe the punishments, shows us their intent ~ control through fear.

Let us now look at Zarathushtra's ideas regarding the 'good' end(s) (which for convenience I will call 'heaven' or 'paradise'), and the 'bad' end(s) (which for convenience I will call 'hell').

We need to be aware of 3 important things, as you will see, that we have long forgotten.

First, Zarathushtra's notion of the 'good' and 'bad' ends are not places of reward and punishment. They are states of being.

Second, these states of being do not begin after death. They start in mortal existence. In the Gathas, the division is not between 'this life' and an 'afterlife'. The division is between an existence that is bound by mortality ~ the arena for the perfecting process ~ and one that is no longer bound by mortality ~ 'non-deathness' (*ameretat-*) ~ when the perfecting process is complete.

Third, in Avestan, there are no capital letters, and no articles 'the' or 'a'. But to make an English translation fluent, we have to add such words.

If we add 'the' good End, it implies one final good End. If we add 'a' good end, it implies one of many good ends. So which did Zarathushtra intend? Judge for yourself. But when, for convenience, I use 'the', please remember, it equally could be 'a'.

'Heaven'

Let's start with 'heaven'. He uses many terms for the good ends/End. Here, I will discuss just 3 of them. They are,

House of good thinking (*vangheush demana~ mananho*),

House of song (*garo demana-*), and

Most good existence (*ahu~ vahishta-*).

These are not 3 separate 'heavens'. They are 3 different ways of describing one state of being. Now you may object that 'house' is a place, not a state of being. But in the Gathas, 'house' and its related words, like 'dwelling place', 'dwells' etc., are often used as metaphors for a state of being. Here is one example (there are many more).

Zarathushtra says,

"...and there shall be yoked from the good dwelling place of good thinking the swiftest steeds,² which shall race ahead unto the good fame of [*mazda*- 'Wisdom'] and of truth." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 10, Insler translation 1975.

Now, **good thinking** is a quality, an activity. So the only **dwelling place** in which **good thinking** could exist, is in a living being that **houses** this quality or activity.

And does this heavenly state of being begin in an afterlife? In this verse (as in others), clearly not. It says, that those from the "**good dwelling place of good thinking**", "**shall race ahead unto the good fame of Wisdom and of truth**" ~ a race that is run in mortal existence.

These conclusions are consistent with other Gatha verses that we have seen in past sessions that show that we mortals have this Divine quality, **good thinking**, imperfectly, in our beings, and that for mortals, **good thinking** is the incremental comprehension of truth. Here is one example. Zarathushtra says,

"Truth, shall I see thee, as I continue to acquire ... good thinking ... " Gathas, Yasna 28, verse 5, Insler translation, 1975.

So **housing good thinking** in our beings, begins in mortal existence, where it continues to increase incrementally ~ many good ends of imperfect enlightenment ~ evolving into a state of being that eventually **houses** a complete, perfected (*haurvatat*-) understanding of truth ~ the ultimate good End, a completely enlightened state of being.

Similarly, I think Zarathushtra uses **house of song** as a metaphor for a state of being that **houses** the bliss, the 'high', we feel when we sing or listen to beautiful music, ~ a state of happiness which we experience (imperfectly), in mortal existence.

Which brings us to the 3d term for 'heaven'.

A '**most good existence** (*ahu- vahishta*-)' ~ clearly is a state of being, not a place.

What does Zarathushtra mean by a '**most good existence**'? Let's see what ancient Zoroastrians thought. In Avestan, the word *vahishta* 'most good' is the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness. In later Avestan texts a '**most good existence** (*ahu- vahishta*-)' is the most frequently used term for the good end/End, and is described as follows,

... *vahishtem ahum ashaonam yazamaide raochanghem, vispo.xvathrem,*³ ...

'the most-good existence of the truth-possessing, we celebrate,⁴ light, all-happiness,' my translation.

Here, (as in the Gathas), the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness, 'most good' (*vahishta*) describes those who personify the true (correct) order of existence (*asha*), and the enlightenment, the bliss, this brings. But in the Gathas, Zarathushtra takes us further. He uses 'most good' (*vahishta*) almost as a word of art, in rich, kaleidoscopic, multi-dimensional ways. Here I will just summarize.

In the Gathas,

- ~ 'most good' (*vahishta*) is a name for the Divine (who is truth personified),
- ~ 'most good' (*vahishta*) describes the qualities of the Divine ~ a beneficial way of being, which is the true (correct) order of existence ('truth'), its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule, (truth personified),
- ~ 'most good' (*vahishta*) describes Wisdom's teachings, as well as the thoughts, words and actions that implement them (the path of truth in mortal existence),
- ~ 'most good' (*vahishta*) describes the reward for taking this path (many incremental good 'ends' personifying truth imperfectly in mortal existence), and
- ~ 'most good' (*vahishta*) is the ultimate good End, which is truth personified completely; an enlightened, blissful state of being
- ~ each of these are 'a' or 'the' 'most good existence' (*ahu vahishta*) ~ Zarathushtra's paradise.

Looking at this summary we begin to understand that to Zarathushtra, truth ~ the true (correct) order of existence ~ is the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness (*asha- vahishta-*) ~ reflected in the later name for the religion, *din-i-behi* the 'religion of goodness'. And we see that the 'most good existence' (*ahu- vahishta-*) ~ which is Zarathushtra's paradise ~ is a state of being that starts in mortal existence ~ the path of truth. We create paradise ~ multiple good 'ends' ~ each time we make existence 'most good' with our thoughts, words and actions of truth, its comprehension, its embodiment, its rule ~ incrementally evolving to the ultimate good End ~ personifying truth completely, (*asha- vahishta-*) ~ which is the ultimate paradise, the 'most good existence' (*ahu- vahishta-*).

Zarathushtra also expresses the foregoing conclusions about the incremental, and ultimate, good ends/(End) in many verses in which each of the 7 divine qualities is what earns the reward, and is the reward itself.⁵

Here are a few examples.

First example: In the Gathas, salvation is not being saved from damnation and a hell of tortures. Salvation is being saved from untruth ~ from all that is false, wrong.

He says,

"... salvation for the truthful ..." Gathas, Yasna 30.11, Insler translation 1975.

"... let that salvation of yours be granted to us ~ truth allied with good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 51, verse 20,⁶ Insler translation 1975.

In the 1st quotation, being truthful is what earns salvation. In the 2d quotation, truth and its comprehension are salvation itself. So 'salvation' ~ being truthful, comprehending truth ~ consists of many good ends which start in mortal existence, and 'salvation' is also the ultimate good End ~ a completely enlightened state of being.

A second example. He says,

"... those whom Thou dost know, ... to be just and deserving in conformity with truth and good thinking, for them do Thou fulfill their longing with these attainments. ..." Gathas, Yasna 28, verse 10, Insler translation 1975.

Here, truth and good thinking, are what earn the reward, and they are the reward itself. And we see corroborating evidence in a later text. It is in Gathic Avestan, but not a part of the Gathas.

' To anyone among living beings
(who has) the desire to win the most good [vahishta-],
He has said, for both existences,
(it is) in the association of truth [asha-], [the path]
then in the union of truth [asha-].' [the end].
Yasna Haptanghaiti chapter 35, section 8, my translation.

Here, the good ends/End to be won, is the superlative degree of intrinsic goodness ~ the most good [vahishta-] ~ a state of being, which is equated with truth ~ both the path, and the ultimate good End. And here, winning the most-good (vahishta-), applies to both existences which in the Gathas are the existences of matter and mind (Y28:2, Y43:3).⁷ So good ends/(End) ~ truth personified ~ start, and are eventually completed, in mortal existence ~ a completeness (haurvatat-) which enables the transition to an existence no longer bound by mortality (ameretat-). In the Gathas, completeness (haurvatat-) and non-deathness (ameretat-), are qualities of the Divine which mortals are capable of attaining.

Finally, here are 2 bits of corroborating evidence from even later texts which are among my favorites. First, a word of explanation. In the Gathas, **truth**, its comprehension **good thinking**, and **Wisdom**, are linked with various forms of **light ~ sunlight, fire**.

Why sunlight? Well, truth and its comprehension, enlightens. Wisdom is a completely enlightened state of being. And sunlight was the strongest form of light in that time period (and our!).

But why fire? Well, *one* reason (out of many) may have been that in those days, fire was the only form of light that man could make.

With that, let us look at the corroborating evidence, which I think is so beautiful.

An Avestan Fragment describes our attainment of paradise,⁸ in metaphoric incremental steps, which are states of being. It says,

"The **first step** ... placed him in the **Good-Thought Paradise**.
The **second step** ... placed him in the **Good-Word Paradise**;
The **third step** ... placed him in the **Good-Deed Paradise**;
The **fourth step** ... placed him in the **Endless Lights**."
Avestan Fragment 22, § 15, Darmesteter translation.

And in the Pahlavi *Bundahishn* (Ch. 1, § 5; E. W. West translation):

The **Divine** is named '**Endless Light**'.

You well may question: Why does Zarathushtra cloak these ideas so enigmatically? I think for many reasons. But perhaps the most important has to do with human ego. To think that we can become divine, could be quite intoxicating to human ego, leading to arrogance, dictatorial behavior ~ the cause of so many problems, suffering, as well as retarding one of Zarathushtra's fundamental teachings (essential for the evolution of the soul) - the freedom to choose and the enlightenment that comes from experiencing the consequences of our choices.

Perhaps Zarathushtra had in mind the example of Yima (Jamshid),⁹ whose pride and arrogance were a sure sign that he had not yet attained the state of pure goodness that is completeness, truth personified. For in pure goodness, in completeness, there is no place for pride and arrogance. Yima's pride and arrogance were foolish. Pure goodness, truth personified, is wisdom/Wisdom (*mazda*).

Hell

Let us take a quick look at Zarathushtra's ideas about what we call 'hell'. True, his ideas include the darker, more painful, realities of our material existence. But they also include the seeds of salvation (from untruth). As such, they fit Zarathushtra's idea of an order of existence that is wholly good, beneficial.

He has many terms for 'bad' ends and their qualities ~ all of which are states of being.

These are,

'most-bad existence (*ahu- achishta-*)' ~ a state of being;

'house of worst thinking (*achishtaya demana- manangho*)' ~ a state of being that houses worst thinking;

'house of deceit/untruth' (*drujo demana-*) ~ a state of being that houses what is false, wrong, mistaken, ignorant.

'Unhappiness' ~ a quality of being.

And 2 metaphors,

'darkness' ~ for a state of being that lacks understanding, is in the dark, unenlightened; and

'foul food' ~ for the vices that poison our souls.

As you can see, all these states of being exist in mortal existence. But Zarathushtra takes us a step further. In the Gathas, these states of being exist *only* in mortal existence. These terms describe an unperfected state of being ~ wrong-headed, ignorant, mistaken. And in the Gathas, mortal existence is the arena for the perfecting process.

These 'hells' in mortal existence include, in part, the law of consequences ~ that we reap what we sow, that what we do ~ good and bad ~ comes back to us. To that extent, we create our own hells ~ here, in the material existence. But these 'hells' also include the many unearned calamities (including the wrongful choices of others!) that cause us grief, suffering. All these 'hells' ~ earned and unearned ~ are not for punishment. They are for enlightenment. They sculpt our souls. These hells ~ earned and unearned ~ together with our good experiences, and mutual, loving help between the Divine, man, and all the living) are necessary parts of the perfecting process, which occurs in mortal, existence.

So an unperfected being remains bound by mortality, until the perfecting process is complete, at which time it is pure goodness, pure light, truth personified, and makes the transition to, a state of being that is no longer bound by mortality non-deathness (*ameretat-*). This explains

why, in the Gathas and other Avestan texts (that were composed during Avestan times) there is a complete absence of 'hell' as a place of punishment in the afterlife. There simply is no place for it in Zarathushtra's framework of thought. Which brings us to Chinvat Bridge, and *frasho.kereiti*.

Chinvat Bridge.

Chinvat Bridge has been translated *interpretively* as the 'Bridge of the Judge', the 'Account Keeper's Bridge', the Bridge of the Separator, etc. ~ injecting into this Gatha term other religious paradigms in which 'God'

- ~ judges a person after death,
- ~ separates the 'good' from the 'bad' (as though any human being at death, is all good, or all bad)
- ~ sends the (so called) 'good' to 'heaven' and
- ~ throws the (so called) 'bad' into hell.

But if we give Chinvat Bridge its literal meaning, the problem disappears.

There is no dispute that *peretu* means 'bridge'.

As for *chinvato*, Insler (citing Bartholomae) says that it derives from *ci-* 'to discern, decide'.

So, *what* is discerned, decided, after a soul dies and arrives at this bridge? By whom? For what purpose? And is this a physical bridge?

Well, a (non-material) soul would not need a physical 'bridge' to make a crossing of any kind. So 'bridge' has to be a metaphor. I think it represents transition to a non-mortal existence ~ when the soul has become perfected. And I think what is '*discerned, decided*' at this metaphoric bridge, is a story-telling way of expressing exactly that ~ whether the soul has become perfected, and can make the transition (cross the bridge) to a non-mortal existence. And in the Gathas, and certain later texts, the soul itself is involved in this process of *discerning, deciding* ~ a notion of self-judgment, perhaps by the Divine within.

Which brings us to *frasho.kereiti*, a term we find in later Avestan texts for an idea that is expressly stated in the Gathas.

Frasho.kereiti

In Zarathushtra's thought, there are no rejects. Everyone will eventually make it to the ultimate good End ~ truth personified. This is not a feel-good palliative, to tame our fears of an unknown afterlife. Zarathushtra's paradigm of the assured, certain, good End,

combines the beauty of pure logic, and the spirituality of a divine order of existence that is wholly good (we will discuss this paradigm in the next Session). Here I will simply say that the certain, assured, good End was so foundational (as Zaehner confirms), that it is expressed even in later Avestan and Pahlavi texts ~ *frasho.kereiti* in later Avestan; *frashgard* in Pahlavi, ~ even though today, we have largely forgotten what these words mean.

Insler demonstrates that *frasho.kereiti* comes from a phrase in the Gathas. In essence, *frasho* means healing existence (from all that is false, wrong); and *kereiti* means making it happen. But I think there is a play on words here, which shows us how existence is so healed -- by forwarding (*fra*), existence to truth.¹⁰

I would like to leave you with a question. Place it on the back burner of your mind, and let your mind play over it.

Given the freedom to choose ~ a core teaching of Zarathushtra ~ how is it possible, for the good End to be inevitable? We will consider this paradox in the next session.

I welcome your questions.

¹ All references to my website, and its chapters and Parts, are to <https://gathasofzarathushtra.com>
Details and references are provided in the following chapters on my website:

[In Part One:](#)

Completeness & Non-Deathness, Haurvatat, Ameretat;
Zarathushtra's Paradise In This World & The Next; and
Buried Treasure In Ancient Stories;

[In Part Two:](#)

The Houses Of Paradise & Hell;
A Question of Reward & The Path; and
The Puzzle of the Most-Good, Vahishta;

[In Part Three:](#)

The Absence Of Damnation & Hell In Other Avestan Texts;
Heaven In Other Avestan Texts; (this includes a discussion of *frasho.kereiti* and its meaning)
Heaven & Hell In Pazand & Pahlavi Texts; and
Chinvat, The Bridge Of Discerning (with a very beautiful mini-puzzle towards the end of this chapter).

² The word '*steeds*' does not appear in the Gathic Avestan text of this verse. Insler has inserted it because he thinks it is implied (probably because of the chariot racing metaphor in this verse which uses '*yoked*' and '*race ahead*').

³ The Avestan word *vispo.xvathrem* 'all-happiness/enlightenment' has lovely, multi-dimensional meanings which it is impossible to translate into an English equivalent of one or two words. If you are interested, its meaning is explained in a footnote in the chapter *Heaven In Other Avestan Texts*, in *Part Three* of my website.

⁴ This popular description of a/the good end/End ~ '*most-good existence of the truthful ... light, all-happiness/enlightenment*', usually has *yazamaide* after the word *ashaonam* 'of (the) truthful'. In Avestan texts, *yaz-*

words are used for worship that is a celebration (detailed with many examples in a footnote in *Part Two: The Puzzle of Worship*, on my website). Thus, *vahisstem ahum ashaonam yazamaide raochanghem vispo.xvathrem* 'we celebrate the most-good existence of the truthful, light, all happiness/enlightenment.' (my translation).

The contexts in which this term appears are sometimes in mortal existence, sometimes in an afterlife, and sometimes it is difficult to say which. This phrase is the most popular description of 'most-good existence' in YAv. texts, appearing in the following texts. I give you these numbers, just to demonstrate its popularity (I may have missed a few) which conclusively establishes that in YAv. times, it was well understood that the good end/End is a state of being, not a place.

7 times in the Younger Avestan *Yasnas*;

2 times in the *Visperad*;

2 times in the *Sirozah*,

1 time in the main part of the *Rashn Yasht*,

1 time in the main part of the *Hormezd Yasht*,

1 time in the YAv. Fragment 23, § 8 (*Afrin Paighambar Zartusht*),

1 time in the YAv. Fragment 24, § 5;

21 times ~ as a conclusion in all 21 Yashts (according to Darmesteter), and

1 time in the last line of the *Ahmai Raeshcha* prayer (which is a quotation of Yy68.11). As such it is also recited each time the *Ahmai Raeshcha* prayer is required to be recited during (or at the ends of) other various Avestan chants.

⁵ Detailed with many examples in *Part Two: A Question Of Reward & The Path*.

⁶ I agree with the Insler translation of this verse ~ that salvation is truth and good thinking. But in the 2d line of this verse, I respectfully disagree with his separating *aramaiti-* from truth and good thinking as the definition of 'salvation', by adding a period (full stop) punctuation mark after "truth allied with good thinking", and then adding words (which are not in the GAv. text) before *aramaiti-* (which immediately follows) in order to make it part of a separate sentence ~ probably because in 1975 he translated *aramaiti-* as 'piety'. But as Thieme (Insler's teacher has pointed out) *aramaiti* is a quality of the Divine, and the notion of 'piety' is irrelevant to the Divine (which clearly cannot be pious towards Itself). This verse is detailed on my website in *Part Six: Yasna 51:20*, and the meaning of *aramaiti-* is detailed in *Part One: Embodied Truth, Aramaiti*.

⁷ In the Gathas, 'both existences' are described as the existences of matter and mind. Applicable quotations from the Gathas are given in a chapter on my website, in *Part One: Truth, Asha*.

⁸ The Avestan term which Darmesteter translates as 'paradise' is *ahu vahishta-* 'most-good existence', which in Younger Avestan texts became a standard term for the ultimate good End (which in our times is called 'paradise').

⁹ We know that the legendary figure Yima (Jamshid) existed before Zarathushtra's time because Zarathushtra mentions Yima in a Gatha verse (Y32:8), and also because Avestan "Yima son of Vivanghvat", was Vedic "Yama son of Vivasvat" in Indic texts. So Yima/Yama was an Indo-Iranian legendary figure, when the peoples of the Avesta and the Vedas were one tribe ~ before they split into 2 tribes, the Indic and the Iranian (detailed in *Part Four: Ancient Origins & Homelands*). Now, the Avestan legend of Yima mentions Ahura Mazda, which has caused some people to think that the worship of Ahura Mazda predated Zarathushtra. But this is not so. In the Gathas Zarathushtra rejected the deities of his culture. He says nothing about 'reforming' them. And we know that the Avestan story of Yima was 'Zoroastrianized' (to include Ahura Mazda) because there is no mention of Ahura Mazda in the Vedic accounts of

Yama. As Thieme (Insler's teacher) has pointed out, there was no Vedic deity called Mazda. In the Vedas, there is only the Vedic fem. noun *medhas* 'wisdom' (discussed in *Part One: The Nature Of The Divine*).

¹⁰ In Avestan, the prefix *fra-* / *frā-* is frequently used in the sense of 'forth', or 'forwarding'; Skjaervo (2006) shows the following,

fra.aēš- under *aēš-* he shows 'to set in motion', and with *frā-* 'to send forth';

fra.dax š- under *dax š-* he shows 'to *hit the mark(?)', and with *frā* 'to launch';

fra.mrao- under *mrao-* 'to say, to speak', and with *frā-* 'to proclaim' [i.e. 'speak forth'];

fra.par- under *par-* 'to cross', and with *frā* 'to cross (over)';

fra.vat- under *vat-* 'to inspire(?)', and with *frā* 'to make known'.

Insler thinks that YAv. *frasho.kereiti* derived from certain Avestan terms used in the Gathas. His explanation is detailed in *Part Three: Heaven In Other Avestan Texts*.