

Winner of 2022 Essay Contest
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Based On The Gathas, Can One Be A Zoroastrian Without A Belief In God?

The Gathas, a judicious guidebook of seventeen songs (hâitis) and two-hundred-forty-one stanzas, conveys far-sighted messages written by the prophet of the Zoroastrian faith, Ashavan Zarathustra Spitama. They are regarded as ‘thought-provokers,’ in a faith where wisdom is paramount. The Gathas aim is to “stimulate one’s thinking faculty and guide it on to the track to think precisely¹,” stirring us to “move on a clear, straight road²” towards righteousness. They guide our moral compass and are an eternal pillar of our faith, steering us towards ‘Daênâ Vanguhi’ (Good Conscience), a reflective way of living in which ‘Vohu Manah’ (Good Mind) reigns supreme.

We can study the Gathas in order to ascertain its stance on whether a follower of Zarathustra must believe in ‘God.’ The illustrious scripture’s perception of ‘God’ varies from the definition in other faiths. While some religions refer to the realization of a saintly lord through an angel from the heavens, or an inexplicable miracle, Zoroastrianism defers from this notion. Zarathustra comprehended Ahura Mazda’s existence by consciously using his ‘Good Mind,’ connecting with a unifying force as a follower of ‘good thoughts,’ which result in ‘good words’ and ‘good deeds.’

Some faiths state that one must show their devotion to ‘God,’ and only then will be rewarded by him and considered a proper devotee. In contrast, the Zoroastrian way of life is to focus on perfecting our deeds using ‘Vohu Manah,’ where “the reward of actions [are]...given through good mind³,” not through pleasing a celestial being. Zarathustra outlined his opinion that “all superstitious beliefs in false gods, goddesses and similar imaginary beings, and in the performance of rituals to appease them should be abandoned⁴” in Song 5 of the Gathas. Therefore, Zoroastrian disciples are only encouraged to “unite with righteousness and with the Wise One... [and] consult him with your wisdom⁵.”

By choosing ‘Daênâ Vanguhi’ and creating ‘asha vahista’ (the holistic order of existence), we are in accordance with the preaching of the Gathas. Zarathustra “does not see the divine as multiple spiritual essences of multiple material things⁶.” Rather, he views it as “one spiritual essence of all existence which is wholly beneficial, wholly good⁶.”

In the Gathas, our erudite prophet most often refers to ‘Mazda’ (Supreme Wisdom), as a name for ‘God,’ leading some to conclude that our religion does not worship a ‘God’ or otherworldly being, but rather the reverence and veneration of wisdom. Zoroastrianism assents to a dogma of personal choice: We have been given the “power of thought, word, and deed, thus leaving us free to *choose our faith* at our own will⁷,” by hearing “the best with your ears and ponder[ing] with a bright mind⁸.”

A faithful devotee to ‘Mazda Yasna’ has the ability to hearken themselves “to these best counsels, reflect upon them with illumined judgment... [and] choose his creed with that freedom of choice each must have at great events⁹.” We are reminded that even at turning points in our life, we are not required to consult with ‘God,’ but use our informed judgement and independent mind to approach verdicts, in addition to the principles of ‘Humata, Hukhta, and Huvarshta.’

One can be a good Zoroastrian simply by performing “his duties best in thoughts, words, and deeds in accordance with righteousness [granting him] wholeness and immortality through sovereignty and serenity¹⁰.”

Zarathustra explains that we can aspire to harness ‘Spenta Mainyu’ (the divine spark and ‘invigorating warmth’ within us) and rise upwards through the ‘Amesha Spentas,’ from ‘Vohu Manah’ to ‘Ameretat.’ By working towards ksharathara (the divine dominion), one “earns the choice reward -- the reward of righteousness -- a wish regarded by the Wise God¹¹,” and “union with good mind¹².”

Through the Gathas, we learn that “one who promotes and develops a house, settlement, district or land with righteousness becomes godlike. In fact, as a progressive teacher, he is godlike¹³.” This shows that one can become a person with ‘Vohu Manah’ if they develop their world with virtue and rectitude. As a mortal being, “Zarathustra is in communion with God as any other person can rise to be. It is the inner voice, seraosha, that leads to God, the ultimate goal¹⁴,” leading one to surmise that offering faith to the Wise Lord is to live by the principles laid out in the Gathas “strengthen[ing] the promotion of good mind through righteousness¹⁵.”

If one believes in Zarathustra’s teachings, such as rejecting druj (evil), love, equality, living with asha (the natural world), and the vitalness of wisdom, but not in an all-knowing deity, they are still a virtuous Zoroastrian. After all, as our prophet has said himself, we shall only aspire to “master the life which belongs to good mind¹⁶,” and pray to perform our actions, “based as they are on the wisdom of good mind, precisely according to the laws of righteousness¹⁷.”

References:

¹Zoroastrian.Org Article 'The Gathas – A Glance.'

²Zoroastrian.Org Article 'The Message Of Zarathustra Part 5 – The Gathas.'

³Song 8.16 Of The Gathas

⁴Zoroastrian.Org Article 'The Salient Points Of The Gathas.'

⁵Song 17.3 Of The Gathas.

⁶GathasOfZarathustra.Com Article By Dina McIntyre.

⁷Song 4.11 Of The Gathas.

⁸Song 3.2 Of The Gathas.

⁹Song 3.2 Of The Gathas.

¹⁰Song 12.1 Of The Gathas.

¹¹Song 17.10 (Closing Stanza) Of The Gathas.

¹²Song 14.3 Of The Gathas

¹³Zoroastrian.Org Article 'God In The Gathas.'

¹⁴Zoroastrian.Org Article 'God In The Gathas.'

¹⁵Song 13.7 Of The Gathas.

¹⁶Song 17.5 Of The Gathas.

¹⁷Song 1.1 Of The Gathas.

