

Introduction.

I would like to start with a brief Introduction which applies to all 7 sessions of this seminar. First: Why do I think Zarathushtra's teachings need to be "liberated"? Liberated from what? Well, for more than a 1,000 years, Zoroastrians have lived under various dominant cultures, languages, and religions. And these influences have molded our thinking in ways that often are very different from the Gathas, and even from some later texts. So in these 7 sessions, I would like to explore with you a few of these areas, in order to liberate Zarathushtra's teachings from these later influences, because I think you will find that they make a real difference in the way we live our lives, and view other people, other life forms, and the environment.

In these sessions, I will give you only a few highlights. But I will also give you quotations from Zarathushtra's own words, and from some later texts, so that you decide for yourself, whether or not you agree with my conclusions. If you want more references and details, they are laid out in various chapters on my website, <https://gathasofzarathushtra>, which are footnoted in the written copies of these talks.

The translation of the Gathas that I will be using is mostly that of the late Professor Insler of Yale University. But now that I have been studying the Avestan language for some years, I realize that Insler, like many translators, *sometimes* translates a given word, or phrase, in an interpretive way, injecting his own mind-set, ideas, and other religious paradigms, into a given verse in ways that are not consistent with Zarathushtra's thought.¹ So in a quotation from the Gathas, I may put, in square brackets and black font, my own translation of an Avestan word (based on linguistically defensible standards). And most of the time, I show Avestan words in stem form, because most people are not familiar with their grammatical inflections.

Finally, I have arranged the order of these 7 sessions so that the ideas in the earlier sessions will be helpful in understanding the ideas in later sessions ~ how they all fall into place like the pieces of a jigsaw puzzle. The title of this first Session is:

Gender Equality & Social Justice.²

The Gathas contain specific evidence of both gender equality and what today we call 'social justice'. This evidence is corroborated,

- ~ by later Avestan texts,
- ~ by archeological evidence, as well as
- ~ by the legends of ancient Iran recounted in the Shahnameh.

In the Gathas, there are many instances in which Zarathushtra specifically addresses men and women together. For example, he says,

"These things are exactly true, men; exactly women..." Gathas, Yasna 53, verse 6, Insler 1975,

indicating that men and women ~ at the same time ~ were present in his audiences, and were his followers, which is corroborated in the Younger Avestan *Farvardin Yasht* which identifies the names of both men and women disciples of Zarathushtra.

And he advises his youngest daughter Pouruchista,

"Do thou persevere, Pouruchista ... To thee shall He grant the firm foundation of good thinking (*vohu- ... manah*), ... of truth (*asha-*) and of wisdom (*mazda-*)..." Gathas, Yasna 53, verse 3, Insler translation 1975.

To Zarathushtra, 'good thinking', 'truth', 'wisdom' are qualities that the Divine personifies, which he thought a woman capable of attaining.

According to tradition, this last Gatha was composed for his daughter's wedding. In those days, many brides and grooms got married at one time. And Zarathushtra gives some advice to those brides and grooms who were getting married on that day, on how they should treat each other for a successful married life. He does not tell the brides to be obedient to their husbands (although some later texts do).

He says instead:

"Let each of you try to win the other with truth [*asha-*] and this shall be of good gain for each ..." Gathas, Yasna 53, verse 5, Insler translation 1975,

expressing the notion that the marriage relationship is one of partnership, with each spouse having to make the same effort to win the love and respect of the other with all the values that comprise *asha-* 'the true, (correct) order of existence' which in the Gathas includes the truths of mind/heart/spirit ~ qualities such as goodness, what's right, honesty, generosity, friendship, lovingkindness, compassion, being just, (as in being fair) etc.³

But this advice applies ~ not only to the relationship between husband and wife. It applies to all our relationships. If each of us would try to win others with all these good qualities that are implicit in the true (good) order of existence (*asha-*), it would solve a lot of the problems that plague our societies. Of course, we should use common sense in protecting ourselves from those who are not well intentioned. But a later text tells us that even to enemies, we should be just (as in being fair). In the *Ashirwad* portion of the Zoroastrian Wedding Ceremony, the priest gives advice to the couples getting married on how to live their lives, and treat other people, in accordance with the teachings of the religion.

And one of these bits of advice says,

"... Deal with your enemies according to justice, ..." *Ashirwad*, translation by Shahin Bekhradnia.

Think about that for a moment. If we are required to be just, fair, even to our enemies, how much more should we be just, to all living things regardless of whether or not they are members of our family, our community, friends, strangers, people of different cultures, different nations, and other life forms. An inclusive social justice.

But as valuable as justice is, Zarathushtra requires that we go a step further. He requires that we give a hand up. He describes a person who makes the right choices ~ not as 'just'. Not even as 'righteous'.

He says, "... the beneficent have correctly chosen ...", Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 3, Insler translation 1975.

'Beneficence' means a bountiful generosity that springs from active goodness, lovingkindness, care, concern.

We all have power. In the concept of 'good rule' (*vohu- xshathra-*) power is a trust, to be used for the benefit of everyone, all the living, our world.⁴ A step beyond 'social justice'.

A very late Avestan text, (written after Avestan times) recounts an ancient legend which states that the Lord Wisdom asked a legendary figure Yima (later called Jamshid) to be the teacher of His law. But Yima turned

down this invitation, stating that he was not born to be a preacher, nor taught to be one. Did the Lord Wisdom hurl a thunderbolt at him, or otherwise punish him for his disobedience and independence? Not at all. He not only respected Yima's freedom to choose, He offered him another way of doing good.

This text (in a story telling way) has the Lord Wisdom saying.

"4. Then I, Ahura Mazda, said thus unto him ...,
'Since thou wantest not to be the preacher and the bearer of my law, then make thou my worlds thrive, make my worlds increase: undertake thou to nourish, [to rule](#), and to watch over my world.' *Vendidad*, Ch. 2, § 4, Darmesteter translation.

This makes it clear that a good ruler should rule for the benefit of the ruled, ~ not for his own aggrandizement, not by ignoring their needs, or marginalizing them, or exploiting them, or being untruthful with them. In fact, in the Avestan *Zamyad Yasht* we are told that when Yima (Jamshid) became arrogant, and turned to lies, the kingly divine glory ~ his authority to rule ~ left him.

If we can reclaim this teaching of generosity, of lovingkindness, nurturing each other, being fair ~ make it an active part of our lives ~ what a force for good we could be. An intelligent generosity to those who are disadvantaged, enables equal opportunity. And equal opportunity, is a foundation of social justice. So too is the freedom to speak. But let's be clear about one thing. In law, the freedom to speak has never included the freedom to lie. As the late Mr. Justice Holmes once wrote, no one has the freedom to falsely cry "Fire" in a theatre.⁵ According to Zarathushtra, our freedoms include corresponding responsibilities.

All of the values that we cherish - the freedom to think, speak, make choices, values such as justice, truth, generosity, goodness, lovingkindness, friendship, compassion, - all of these values are implicit in the notion of *asha*- 'the true (correct, good) order of existence'. These are not things we can take for granted. These are qualities we have to create, and re-create, give substance to, over and over, with our choices in thought, word and action, as long as we have life. Because if we don't, we lose them. They cease to have reality in our societies, in our lives, in our beings. It's that simple.

In Avestan texts other than the Gathas, we see many instances of gender equality.

The *Yasna Haptanghaiti* says,

"... [May a good ruler, man or woman, thus assume rule over us ...](#)" *Yasna (Haptanghaiti) 41, section 2*, Humbach 1991 translation.

This prayer takes it for granted that women could be good rulers, so the history of those times must have included good women rulers.

This gender equality extended even to rituals and the priesthood. The *Aerpatastan and Nirangistan*, was an administrative text written for the guidance of the priesthood. So it likely represented the dominant views of the religious establishment of that time,⁶ which included having women priests. Here are just 2 examples.

The author(s) state that women priests are deemed fit for the guardianship of even the highest fires,

" [even where the Varharan Fire \[atash bahram\] is enthroned](#)". *Aerpatastan & Nirangistan chapter 3*, p. 18, S. J. Bulsara translation, 1915 (published by the Bombay Parsee Punchayat Funds and Properties Trust in 1915).

This text states that whenever priestly duties require a priest to travel, as between two priests who are married to each other, if both have control over property and can manage wealth, then either one may travel to perform priestly duties. Surprisingly, it also states, that if only the woman priest has control over property and can manage wealth, then her husband should travel to perform priestly duties (so that the financial interests of the family would not suffer by the woman's absence), indicating not only that women were priests, but that women had independent control over property, even after marriage, which has since been confirmed by archeological evidence.

In the early 1900s, an archeological dig in Persepolis, discovered hundreds of clay tablets.

The discovery of these tablets must have come as quite a shock to that generation of archeologists who, in the early 1900s, themselves had no conception of gender equality as we understand it. These scholars also believed that the Achaemenian kings used slave labor.

But these tablets include numerous and meticulous payroll records which show that the workers who built Persepolis were paid employees ~ not slaves ~ and that the numbers of male and female workers were well balanced. Women were employed as both workers and supervisors. They received the same rates of pay in wine, beer, grain or silver, as their male colleagues. And these tablets show that women enjoyed economic independence, even after marriage. They

- ~ owned large estates and properties throughout the empire,
- ~ disposed of their rents and income,
- ~ engaged in their own grain and wine businesses,
- ~ employed work forces, and
- ~ paid taxes.

They had their own personal seals, under which they issued orders to their own stewards, and they participated in the social life of the Court.

Even after the fall of the Achaemenian Empire, this ancient tradition of gender equality did not entirely disappear in outlying areas ~ at least for a few centuries. Moulton writes of a foreign diplomat, Tchang K'ien, who in 128 BCE described certain communities in Khorassan and Bactria as follows:

"... there is no supreme ruler, each city and town electing its own chief. They pay great deference to their women, the husbands being guided by them in their decisions."⁷

Ancient Iranian legends described in the Shahnameh, speak of women warriors.

Banoogoshasp, the eldest daughter of the hero Rustam, was a warrior. So also was Gordafried, the daughter of a garrison commander. She is described as unrivalled in the arts of warfare. When Sohrab laid siege to their castle, she challenged him to single combat, during which the tip of his lance caught her helmet, and her long hair streamed out as she rode, which (according to Firdausi) caused Sohrab to wonder in astonishment: if the women of Iran are so valiant, what must their men be like (not exactly a statement of gender equality! but at least giving credit where due).

These legendary stories of women warriors are echoed factually in the Cambridge History of Iran, which mentions that the women warriors of a Persian satrap, were introduced to Alexander at a banquet. The

Greeks were shocked. The women of their families were not permitted even to attend private feasts, let alone fight as warriors.

In that time period, gender equality was not a part of Greek culture.

Yet, it is ironic, (is it not?) that for many generations the academicians of our times have considered the ancient Greeks to be the founders of democratic values and freedoms, and the ancient Persian culture to be devoid of these qualities. Of course, the Achaemenian kings were not elected rulers (unlike the early Median kings and Iranian tribal traditions of elected rulers). And Xerxes did his utmost to conquer the independent Greek states ~ depriving them of their freedom to choose entirely ~ which may have influenced these academic opinions.

But here, let us take a moment to remember something important. It is one thing to look at history with an impartial eye. It is another thing entirely, to keep alive ancestral grudges against anyone, or any peoples, today. Zarathushtra teaches individual responsibility. Each person is responsible for his own choices. So we should not condemn, or feel hostility towards, anyone today, for what their ancestors may have done.

Unfortunately, after the destruction of the Achaemenian Empire, and even more so, after the Arab invasion of Iran and the migrations of many Zoroastrians to India, gender equality took a hard hit in Zoroastrian thought in both Iran and India. Yet, many Zoroastrians, even those who themselves were denied social justice and equality, did indeed continue to extend truthfulness, and generosity, to others.

This brings us to an interesting question. Does gender affect Zarathushtra's perception of the Divine ?

We will discuss his perception of the Divine in 2 future sessions, because they are among his most beautiful, and unusual, ideas ~ largely forgotten under the influence of other religious paradigms. So here, I will address only how 'gender' does, or does not, come into it.

In Avestan, (as in Spanish and French) all nouns and adjectives have gender ~ masc. fem. or neuter. But unless the meaning of a noun is intrinsically male, like 'son', etc., or intrinsically female, like 'daughter' etc., the genders of nouns, and adjectives, are purely grammatical. They have no other function.

Now you may object that *ahura*- 'lord' is an intrinsically masculine noun. But in Zarathushtra's time period, since both men and women could be rulers, the concept of 'lordship' would have had to apply to both men and women, ~ just as more than 300 years ago, Queen Elizabeth I, in England was sometimes called the 'lord' of her subjects.

And in the Gathas, Zarathushtra uses *ahura*- 'lord' ~ repeatedly ~ in a rather lovely way to which gender is not relevant.

He uses *ahura* as one who has 'lordship' over the qualities that make a being divine (which as we have seen, Zarathushtra thought his daughter capable of attaining). He speaks of the Divine as,

"... the very Wise Master [*ahura*- 'lord'] of good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

"... Lord [*ahura*-] of the word and deed stemming from [*vohu mainyu*- '(a) good way of being'] ..." Gathas, Yasna 45, verse 8, Insler translation 1975;

"... Thou art the Lord [*ahura-*] by reason of Thy tongue (which is) in harmony with truth, and by reason of Thy words stemming from good thinking ..." Gathas, Yasna 51, verse 3; Insler translation 1975;

"... [*mazda-* 'Wisdom'] in rule [*xshathra-*] is Lord [*ahura-*] through [*aramaiti-* 'embodied truth']." Gathas, Yasna 47, verse 1, Insler translation 1975.

We will get into the meanings of *spenta- mainyu-* and *spenta- aramaiti-* in the next session.

Now, it is true that in the Gathas, the Divine is called the 'father' of truth, good thinking, and *aramaiti-* ~ a 'father' who is said to have birthed existence. But fathers don't give birth. So I think Zarathushtra deliberately used "father" and "birthed" together to ensure that his listeners understood that these words were being used allegorically, to express the idea of a creation by emanation.⁸

Now, in Avestan (as in English), even intrinsically masc. nouns, like 'man' sometimes are used generically, to include all the sexes.

For example, in English we have *mankind* ~ a generic use of 'man' which includes all humans. In the Gathas the word *nar-* 'man' is also used generically, to include all sexes. For example, Zarathushtra says, "... Reflect with a clear mind ~ man by man [*narem narem*] for himself ~ ..." Gathas, Yasna 30, verse 2, Insler translation 1975.

Here we know that 'man by man' is generic, because we have seen that he specifically includes both men and women as practitioners of his teachings.

Zarathushtra also uses masculine pronouns for the Divine. But in Avestan (as in English), masculine pronouns also, are used generically.

If Zarathushtra specifically wanted a pronoun for the Divine that would have universal application, the generic masculine would have been the only option available to him in the language of his culture.

Gender is a function of our physical shells. If, as the Gathas and later texts imply, the Divine is a part of all that exists ~ that would include the physical, and all genders. But the Divine is not limited to the physical. It transcends the physical. Gender is irrelevant to the Divine.

I welcome your questions.

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¹ Examples are provided in my website in the following chapters.

Part One: Does The Devil Exist?; and in the following 2 chapters in *Part Three: Is Wisdom a 'God' of Wrath, Enmity?*; and *Ashavan & Dregvant*.

² References and more details are on my website in *Part One: Gender Equality*.

³ The meaning of *asha-* is detailrd in *Part One: Truth, Asha*.

⁴ More details in *Part One: Good Rule, Vohu Xshathra & Power*.

⁵ Mr. Justice Holmes, writing for the Supreme Court of the United States, said, "The most stringent protection of free speech would not protect a man in falsely shouting fire in a theatre ..." *Schenck v. United States*, 249 U.S. 47, 52 (1919).

⁶ This text, with meticulous honesty, discloses the opinions of a few priests, who hedged a bit on women priests; detailed in a footnote in *Part One: Gender Equality*, on my website.

⁷ Moulton 1912 *Early Zoroastrianism*, pp. 85 ~ 86.

⁸ Detailed in *Part Two: The Puzzle of Creation*.