

Fravahar & Gatha

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Humans use spoken or written words in order to convey their thoughts and feelings. They use idioms and metaphors and abbreviations. UN - UNESCO - UNICEF are abbreviation, which today are clear as to what they represent but down the road in the turmoil of history they may lose their meaning, like many of us do not know what a U Boat stands for. Apart from words humans use symbols, badges, insignia and trademarks, some of which may have no meaning incorporated into the design, but due to common usage and intent they have acquired a recognizable meaning. Others have meanings in every line of the design and are recognized by the people; but people tend to forget their meaning with the advent of time. For example some older Christian churches have statues of the eagle, lions and the oxen, some may think that the early Christians worshiped animals and birds. Today most Christians do not know what they represent.

The eagle, lion and oxen are the symbols used by the Assyrians and then the Persians adopted it at Takht e Jamshid (Persepolis). The famous figure with the head of a human, body of a lion, wings of the eagle and the legs of a bull found at the entrance of the hall of nations at Takht e Jamshid represent the four signs of the Zodiac and was used as a welcome sign to all nations from the four corners of the world. For these constellations covered the four corners of the night sky. For the Egyptians they were the four sons of Horus the sun god. Thus we see that it was an international symbol of the ancient civilizations denoting internationality.

The human mind also perceives things, which it cannot explain and sometimes symbolizes them; divinity is a quality which is not within the reach of the human senses but in spite of it the human mind likes to explain divinity in the form of stories and even symbolized it with statues and worship them.

The Assyrians believed in a divinity they called Ashur, this god they symbolized with a statute of a man with wings holding a bow and arrow. In contrast their neighbours the Persians did not believe in statutes. According to Herodotus; " The erection of statutes, temples and alters is not accepted practice amongst the Persians, and anyone who does such a thing is considered a fool, because, presumably, the Persians religion is not anthropomorphic like the Greek."

In 550 BCE when the Persians conquered Assyria, in every Assyrian home there was a statute of the winged god Ashur. It is well known that the Persian did not persecute any people for their religious beliefs, even though they believed that such people were misguided and their beliefs were wrong.

The Persian strongly believed that by increasing the knowledge of these people they could be guided towards the truth. This was based on the wisdom, the great sage Zarathushtra, their guide and teacher, had given them.

Knowledge when you gain
With minds good use
Having realized wisdom
The path to righteousness
The ultimate message of Wisdom
Through words excellent
We shall turn (convert)
Those who do not know
By speaking
Zarathushtra- Gatha- Yasna HA 28.5 (FR)

So instead of destroying the statue of Ashur they adopted the design in symbolizing their thoughts and used it as a personal emblem. In Takht e Jamshid (Persepolis) we see different forms of this emblem, which we call Fravahar. The one above the head of Daryush (Darius) is a winged man with his right hand pointing forward and in his left hand, at wing level, holding to lotus or something like a scroll, there are six layers of wings, the bottom layer has 72 feathers 36 on each side, the next layer has 29 feathers on each side and the third has 21 while the top three have 16 on each side. The tail has three layers with twelve feathers each.

A few meters away is another Fravahar with a different design, where in the human figure also has his right hand pointing forward but in the left

hand he holds a circle commonly known as the circle of contract. The waist and the hands are a little above the wings compared to the other Fravahar. The feather counts in the wings are also different; it has only 21 feathers on each side of the bottom row of its wings.

Each of these figures has its own significance, 72 stands for the parts of Avesta and 21 for the volumes of Avesta. So each King had put his thought in the design and made it unique for himself, just like they did with the design of their crown.

The common use of the Fravahar in seals and stamps, served a more important purpose. For the Assyrian subjects it brought home the reality and very soon the statue of Ashur lost its godliness. So without force and persecution they were able to do away with the idea of worshiping statues.

FRAVASHI

Fravashi has become the theory behind this symbol named Fravahar. It is said to represent the spirit of the dead. The worship of the dead was initiated in the ancient past not out of respect but mostly out of fear of the spirit and the possibility of its interference in the life of the living. The fear of the unknown and also the attachment to earthly life plays an important role in the spirit theory. If after death the story were to end, life for many would be meaningless. *Reincarnation, Salvation, Heaven and Hell* have given the mind room to fantasize and dream of achieving what it has failed to achieve in life. Religion has promoted the idea for it helped in filling up its coffers. It has also been successfully used to organize human life on earth whenever truth and logic were not understood.

Fravashi is a pre and post-Gathic concept and in the Gathas there is no mention of either the Fravashi or the Fravahar. There is complete agreement among scholars regarding this matter.

Zarathushtra talks of a perfect life on earth and how it can be achieved; he sees no chance of returning to complete the unfinished work or of a life after death where there are rewards and punishments. He sees and shows the road to Perfection (Hurvata), which can be achieved in the short life on earth and talks of the *earthly heaven and hell*, which is created and lived in by us before dying.

The "Bridge of Judgment" "Chinavad Pole" the narrow bridge to be crossed is not after death but it is in the mind during the last moments of ones life just before the body breathes its last. Either one dies in peace and tranquility for the good life one has lead or dies with turmoil remembering the bad things one has done. One dies with peace the other in turmoil, while lying helpless in the last few moments of ones life, for the bridge is said to be very narrow, in fact as thin as a hair.

The writers of Avesta have used metaphor in most of their writings if we take them literally we get lost in our own world of dreams, but if we read it in terms of its metaphoric connotation we will be able to see the truth. To elaborate, if we say - he is a "NUT" - we do not mean the person is a Nut as in nut and bolt, similarly when there is talk of "Chinavad Pole" or the "Fravashi" it is in a metaphoric connotation. The Fravashi is not an external being hovering above our head and living after we are dead. It is our conscious located in our mind, with whose guidance we make decisions good or bad, it's those deeds so performed that remain after ones death. A person after his death is remembered for his deeds good or bad, so when we see the "Cylinder of Human Rights" we praise the Fravashi of Kurosh (Cyrus) the Great, it is for the good he did for humanity and when we sees the ruins of Takht e Jamshid we remember the Fravashi of Alexander, it is for putting humanity back on the wrong track, for having undone what Kurosh and his kind did.

The existence of the *Arda Viraf Nameh* supports the claim, that there was no mention in ancient Zarathushti literature of life after death and the system of rewards and punishments after death, in heaven and hell. So the priest Arda Viraf was commissioned to fill in the void by going to heaven and hell and giving a report of his visit, which he did it with great artistry. This imaginary story became the inspiration for *Dante* to write his "*Divine Comedy*".

Ancient thinkers who understood human nature often used mythology to guide the general public. The stories were imprinted into the mind of the child and in life when they faced a situation the moral of the stories replayed in their mind and helped them in making decisions. Some of these mythologies have become words of God, and cannot be changed although they may have outlived their purpose in society. In technologically advanced countries the children find it difficult to believe what their grand parents believed. If you ask a Japanese youth about his religion, the common answer is, "I have no religion but I believe in God".

To avoid such a situation, religion is generally against science and progress. Some cultures try to keep their followers in a primitive stage, knowledge is limited to knowing the mythologies and progress is limited to the bare necessities, all other information is shunned as evil. For sure evil it is, because in an advanced society the child will no longer be able to relate the ancient mythologies to the situation that arise and slowly the mythologies will lose their importance.

Zarathushtra in the Gathas does not tell any story. He talks of the plain truth and how everyone should go in search of it. He breaks the cycle of having to believe what others believed by talking of the freedom of choice that each human should exercise.

Listen with your ears to the supreme facts
Consider with open mind
Between the paths before deciding
Person by person for his own self
Before greatness of this message
Is truly spread understand each one
Zarathushtra - Gatha - Yasna Ha 30.2

The real story is about the human mind. The realm of reality and the realm of the mind are of two different levels, the realm of the mind may not be feasible in reality but is the one that has more followers. While the realm of reality, which is in existence and active all around us is not believed in by the human mind. This complex organ controls the person and determines its fate, and the fate of all things within reach of the person.

The human mind is inquisitive, it wants to know everything but at the same time it is lazy. So if it is given a ready-made answer it will except it and very soon believe and defend it with all its might. That is why Zarathushtra first of all wishes to seek the perfectness of the mind.

This I seek with reverence
With uplifted hands
The perfect-ness of the mind, Wisdom
The first good rule to Asha is
All should aspire to make
Good use of the wisdom in the mind

Thus bringing harmony to the universe
As-well as the spirit
Zarathushtra - Gatha - Yasna HA 28.1 (FR)

Today Fravahar is part of the cultural legacy of every Iranian and they identify themselves with it. Fravahar has become the symbol of the Iranians and Zarathushtis, a symbol full of positive meanings, and it does not matter if the interpretations are different by different scholars or the drawings are different depending on the thoughts of the artists. The fact is that all of them are positive and good and the Fravahar continues to live today as a national symbol of Iran.
