
THE EVOLUTION OF ZOROASTRIANISM

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The teachings of Zarathushtra over the last 3700 years have been through some very rough times. They have been one of the main casualties in the two major upheavals that their adherents were subjected to. As a result, the A-Vesta that is in hand today is a fraction of what it used to be. The little that has survived is enough to change the paradigm but it has been the victim of mistranslation and misinterpretation. Here we will see how the initial translations were done which have thereafter become the Holy Grail, followed, quoted, copied and paraphrased by later translators and scholars to this day.

Quotes ¹ are in lighter fonts and can be considered footnotes.

Hermippus the Greek grammarian of the 3rd century BCE has attributed twenty thousand verses to Zarathushtra ² and two million verses to the Magis.³ With these, the Persian culture was shaped and the Persian Empire thrived and ruled benevolently over its varied subjects. Multi-culture and Multi-religion were the accepted features of the Empire. The Bible and the Thora vouch for it and the clay tablets, the Bas Reliefs at Persepolis and the Cylinder of Human Rights confirm it. Even when they fought wars it was mostly to relieve people from the clutches of tyrant rulers, for we often see that those defeated rulers who agreed to change their ways were reinstated.

The Greeks saw them as a rival culture. The Greeks had a god for every element in nature.⁴ They had 3142 gods and goddesses.⁵ When Alexander came, he came to destroy the Zarathushti way of life, which he did.⁶ He had been instigated by his tutor Aristotle to destroy the Persian Culture. Aristotle said: *“If you destroy the Persians you will destroy one of the pillars of civilization and we will rule the world”*. Aristotle believed the Greeks were a ruling class and the rest of the world were barbarians who need to be ruled over.⁷ Alexander burnt down Persepolis, not in a drunken frenzy but in a well-planned move to destroy the symbol of Persian culture and greatness. It is said he burned one of the two copies of the Avesta and sent the other to Rome. As a result today the world is based on the Greek culture of believing what you hear.

The first act of Alexander after his victory was to refurbish the disused Babylonian temples and reintroduce the ancient religions including Mithraism. But it backfired, for the Roman soldiers and traders soon fell in love with Mithra and took it with them to Europe. Mithra flourished in Europe for centuries till Mithra the ‘Sun God’ was replaced by Jesus the ‘Son of God’, by the very Romans who three centuries earlier had crucified him.

The next step Alexander took was to send 30 thousand Persian youth to Rome, train them in Roman culture and send them back among the Persians. His efforts were not in vain the Persian culture was diluted and is today immersed in the Greek culture.

The Greek culture advocates the use of only one Sense, the ‘Sense of Hearing’. You believe what you hear. You believe in Tooth Fairies and Flying Reindeers without thinking or questioning. Knowledge is in the realm of the gods. In Genesis, we see that Adam and Eve are forbidden to eat from the Tree of Knowledge. While Zarathustra advocates the use of ‘All Senses that too with Wisdom’.⁸ The pursuit of knowledge by studying Asha Vahista and achieving Wholeness - Haurvatat is to be the endeavour in life.

SASSANIAN ERA

After a lapse of over 500 years, the Sassanians collected the scattered manuscripts and assigned Mobed Tansar, Adurbad Mehrespand and Kartir to edit and compile them. With what they had managed to collect they reconstructed Zoroastrianism which became the state religion of the Sassanians.

In this period the language of the people had evolved to Pahlavi.⁹ Their culture had likewise changed due to all that the Romans had imposed on them. The culture of believing what you hear is evident in the Sassanian era additions. The Pahlavi documents depict the understanding of the period based on the changes that the five centuries had inevitably brought about.

When we see what is being done to the Gathas of Zarathustra in the last two centuries of modern history it can give us an idea of what they must have undergone during the Sassanians period. Not to mention the influence of the silk road.

“After the five centuries of obscurity, and probable anarchy, which followed the death of Alexander, when we next meet with the vernacular language of Western Iran, it has assumed the form of Pahlavi, the name generally applied to the language of the inscriptions of the Sasanian dynasty, whether on rocks or coins.”¹⁰

During the four hundred years of Sassanian rule although Zoroastrianism was the state religion, prophets like Mani (274 CE) and Mazdak (524 CE) had ventured to introduce their thoughts. The fact that they could do such a thing shows that the Sassanians were generally liberal in their attitude towards religion. This is more in line with the freedom of thoughts advocated by the teachings of Zarathustra. The fact that Mani and Mazdak were killed does not affect the freedom of religion, they were killed when they tried to bring about political and social changes.

There is no doubt that the teachings of Mani and Mazdak have left a lasting effect on the religion and culture of Iran. The Dualism and Zurvanisam that we see in Pahlavi manuscripts are the additions of that period.

Similarly, during the Achaemenian era, there is no evidence of any Fire temple. The Faravahar is to be found all over Persepolis but no sign of fire. Herodotus also mentions that the Persians “erect no altar and kindle no fire.” In the Gathas, Fire is mentioned eight times and none of them refers to the physical fire. ¹¹

Fire gains prominence on the back of Parthian coins by replacing the queen in and around 1 BCE.¹² Parthians were followers of Mehr–Mithra and many of the kings had Mehr as part of their name. Their temples were called Dar E Mehr. Fire represented the Sun God on earth. The Sassanians continued and developed an elaborate system of rituals around it and built many famous Fire Temples.¹³ A Fire has great qualities. Concentration on a Fire while praying has a mesmerising effect and helps in meditation, it raises the brain to the Alpha level where the mind can solve complex problems.

During the Sassanian period, science and all the arts flourished, and academies were established. The famous Academy of Gondishapur was one of the three Sassanian centres of education. It offered education and training in medicine, philosophy, theology and science. The faculty were versed in Persian traditions. According to *The Cambridge History of Iran*, it was the most important medical centre of the ancient world during the 6th and 7th centuries.^[2] Scholars and seekers of knowledge from all over assembled here to study and exchange ideas.

In what has remained of the Yasht we see science sandwiched among prayers. For example, the Mah Yasht says the best time to sow a seed in spring is with the appearance of the crescent of the moon. Farvardin Yasht talks about the circulatory system and the function of the blood. Mehr Yasht pinpoints the location of the Natural Meridian of the Earth from where the sun shines over the entire hemisphere etc.

THE ISLAMIC INVASION

Then came the final straw, the Islamic invasion of 636 CE. In the centuries that followed the invasion, Zoroastrians and Zoroastrianism were steadily wiped out in a Genocide that has been forgotten because there were not many left to tell the story. The Cultural Genocide began right from day one for the Arabs considered themselves ‘Helpers of God’¹⁴ and therefore superior in all respects, while illiteracy was the hallmark of Arab Nobility¹⁵ and they could not distinguish the difference between camphor and salt.¹⁶ When the Arabs came upon libraries they asked Umar the Khalifa if they should distribute the books as booties of war. Umar replied: “If what is in those books is good Allah has given us better than them in the Quran and if they are bad we don’t want them. So, in either case, burn them or dump them in the river”.¹⁷

As per the instruction of Umar the second Khalifa of Islam, all books were either burnt or thrown in the river and the libraries were converted into mosques. The trend continued, later any manuscripts that were in the possession of the people were collected in lieu of the Jizyah tax and destroyed. This in turn created fear and those who had a manuscript must have hid it even from their children. We see this void when just a couple of generations later Iranian Freedom fighters had not enough knowledge of Zoroastrianism to revive the religion, and instead, they declared themselves prophets and tried to invent new religions. Most of them tried to improve on Islam with very little input from Zoroastrian doctrines.

We see that some Mobeds who had managed to survive wrote books like Dinkard and Dadestan-i Denig trying to make it palatable to the Islamic rulers. Today not a single Avesta manuscript from the Sassanian period is available. The oldest manuscript in hand ¹⁸ is from 1323 CE copied 680 years after the invasion. These manuscripts were first translated in the 18th Century.¹⁹

The modern understanding of the Zoroastrian religion by its adherents and scholars is mainly based on the trend set around the 18 and 19th Centuries by western scholars who deciphered the Avesta language. Therefore the understanding of the process and history of how it was deciphered is very important. Also, a brief history of the Zoroastrians during that period will give us a perspective of the knowledge and understanding of the religion by its adherents before such translations were undertaken.

Zoroastrians in India are reported to have lost their ability to speak and read Pahlavi which was now limited to a few scholarly Mobed. There are reports of the Protestant missionary Sir John Wilson taking advantage of this lack of religious knowledge among the Parsees, to convert them to Christianity, which ended up in the courts of British India.

The Zoroastrians in Iran were in a dire state, living as infidels and untouchables at the mercy of the tax collectors. Their manuscripts were confiscated in lieu of the Jizya tax and burnt by the tax collector. When Maneckji Limji Hatavia found them in 1854 CE their numbers were around 7711.²⁰ Despite that, they were the ones that answered the religion-related questions of the Zoroastrians in India. The various Rivayats are proof of that. The questions were mostly Vandidad related. Pahlavi was still read and understood by many of the Iranian Mobeds. The rest of the population was forbidden by the Islamic rulers to learn the art of reading and writing and if discovered were severely punished.

Western scholars who got interested in the Zoroastrian religion in the 17 and 18 hundreds first referred their questions to the adherents who had taken refuge in India. When they did not find satisfactory answers they referred to

ancient writings of all those who had come in contact with the Zoroastrians in ancient times.

According to Professor Martin Haug ²¹, the ancient writings of the Greeks, Romans, Armenians and Mohammadians were the initial source of knowledge on Zoroastrianism for the translators. With that as their base, Western Scholars deciphered the Avesta language, formulated the concepts and carried out their research into the teachings of Zarathushtra. It is important to note that none of their ancient sources was friendly with the Persians.

The work of the Western Scholars is what has shaped the Zoroastrian religion as is followed today in the 21st century. Today the adherents swear by these translations made by Western Scholars and are not ready to see the obvious flaws in them. Although it has to be acknowledged that without the work of these Western Scholars Zoroastrianism would have been lost.

Here are some examples of what the Greeks and others have conveyed, as narrated by none other than Professor Martin Haug in 1878 CE. He has tried to argue against the work of the initial translators, those before him, but the very same arguments stand true against him and others after him. All quotes below are from his book published in 1878 CE. ²²

What the Greeks have conveyed has been incorporated by these scholars through their translations, under the guise of grammar and rhyme and rhythm. The personification of Ahri Mana, Ahura Mazda and the Amsha Spantas has also been derived by translators from Greek philosophers. Although the historian Herodotus very clearly states that the ‘God of the Persians is NOT anthropomorphic like that of the Greeks’.

“The two chief sources whence the Greeks and Romans derived information about the religion of the Magi were Theopompos's eighth book of the history of King Philip of Macedonia, which was entitled "On Miraculous Things," and specially treated the doctrine of the Magi; and Hermippos, who wrote a separate book "On the Magi." We are left without information whether or not Theopompos derived his statements on the lore of the Magi from his interaction with the Persian priests themselves; but Hermippos, who composed, besides his work on the Zoroastrian doctrine, biographies of lawgivers, the seven sages of Greece, &c., is reported by Pliny (Historia Naturalis, xxx. 2) to have made very laborious investigations in all the Zoroastrian books, which were said to comprise two millions of verses, and to have stated the contents of each book separately. He therefore really seems to have had some knowledge of the sacred language and texts of the Magi, for which reason the loss of his work is greatly to be regretted.”

“According to Diogenes of Laerte (Pro-oemium, chap, vi.), EUDOXOS and Aristotle stated that in the doctrine of the Magi there were two powers opposed to each other, one representing the good god, called Zeus and Oromasdes (Ahuramazda, Hormazd), and the other representing the devil, whose name was Hades and Areimanios (Angromainyush, Ahriman). Of this chief doctrine of the Magi, Theopompos had given a further illustration, Plutarch (De Iside et Osiride) and Diogenes of Laerte (Pro-oemium, chap, ix.), reported that Oromasdes ruled for three thousand years alone, and Areimanios for three thousand more. After this period of six thousand years had elapsed they began to wage war against each other, one

attempting to destroy the other, but finally (he says) Areimanios is to perish, mankind is to enjoy a blessed state of life; men will neither be any more in need of food, nor will they cast shadows; the dead are to rise again, men will be immortal, and everything is to exist in consequence of their prayers."

A brief but full account of Zoroaster's doctrine is to be found in Plutarch's book " On Isis and Osiris (chap, xlvii., xlviii.), which being in detail, seems to have been borrowed from a writer who was actually acquainted with the original texts. The philosopher Hermippos, abovementioned, was the only scholar of antiquity. can be supposed, with sufficient reason, to have had a real knowledge of the sacred language of the Zend-Avesta, we may regard him as the author of Plutarch's statements. These are as follows:

*For they (the Persians) formerly worshipped Zeus and Kronos, and all other gods celebrated by the Greeks, only under other ' names, for example, they call Zeus, **Bel**, Heracles, Sandes, Aphrodite, Anaitis, and the others otherwise, as is reported by Berossos the Babylonian, and Athe-' NOKLES and Simakos, who wrote on the most ancient ' history of the Assyrians and Medes.' (pg12)*

NOTE: Bel, was the chief god of the Babylonians, and entirely unknown, to the Avesta.

From the above, we can see that Haug and other western scholars got the idea of dualism from no other than Aristotle. Then they inserted it in their translations like in Gathas Ha 30.2 where although the word 'two' does not exist they have translated the word "choices"²³ as "Two Paths" and justified it by way of imagined grammar. Some have even added the words Good and Evil although it does not exist in the Avesta text.

In reality, Zarathushtra in 30.2 talks of – the innumerable choices (professions) available to humans, to choose from and achieve perfection in them and progress towards Wholeness - Hurvatata. By becoming an accomplished Astronomer, Cook, Doctor, Engineer, Farmer etc. and leaving behind a legacy for which they would be remembered (Ameretat).

The Western World View is based on Greek philosophy so western scholars have great respect for what the Greeks have said, but when the Greeks could not transmit proper names ²⁴ in their original form how can one expect that they could understand and transmit the Persian concepts in their original form?

The Armenian writer Eznik and Elisieus mentioned by Haug were the ones who also wrote about the war with the Persians and not only were biased but could not have had friendly contact with the Persians to be able to learn from them directly. ²⁵

When it comes to Muslim writers they are usually the later generations of the forced Persian converts to Islam. From what Masudi has said (quoted below) it is clear, that he has no understanding of the subject he has commented on. Because he attributes Zand and Pazand to the time of Zarathushtra.

“Passing on to Mohammedan writers, who lived after the conquest of Persia by the Mohammedans a.d. 650, we may notice some interesting passages.

***Masudi**, the celebrated Arabian historian and traveller (a.d. 950), has preserved to us the following notice of the sacred books of the Parsis. ' The first book, made by ' Zeradusht, was Avesta. The Persians, not being able to understand it, Zeradusht made a commentary, which they called Zend; further, he made a commentary to this commentary and called it Pazend. After Zeradusht's death, the Persians made a commentary of the commentary, and an explanation of all the books just mentioned and called it Yazdah". (pg 14)²⁶*

As for ‘Shahrastani’ and the likes of him, they have as Persians tried to legitimize Zoroastrianism to the Muslim rulers by connecting it to Abraham and Abrahamic religions, for they saw the comparative leniency afforded to the Jews and Christians as ‘People of the Book’. The quotes below ²⁷ very clearly show the trend and Martin Haug also recognizes it.

*“**Shahrastani** brings them under the same head as Jews, Christians, and Musalmans, or those whose creed is founded on revealed books” (pg15)*

“In several Mohammedan writings, especially in vernacular Persian dictionaries, we find Zoroaster, or, as he is there called, Zaradusht, identified with Abraham, the patriarch. The Magi are said to have called their religion Kesh-i-Ebrahimi, i.e., the creed of Abraham, whom they considered as their prophet and the reformer of their religion. They traced their religious books to Abraham, who was believed to have brought them from heaven. “ (pg16)

“This was altogether untrue, but the Magi, or Parsi priests, invented it to escape the persecutions of the Mohammedans, and that they might be tolerated to a certain extent; for only those creeds were tolerated by the Mohammedans, the followers of which were able to convince them of their possession of sacred books, connected in any way with the Jewish religion, whose prophets had been acknowledged by Mohammed.” (pg16)

This trend has continued to this day and Mobeds in Iran endeavour at every opportunity to equate Zoroastrianism to Islam. So did Maneckji Limji Hataria, when meeting the Shah to request the abolition of the Jaziye tax.

The Shah asked, “What are the main directives of your religion?”

Hataria responded, “The main directives are similar to the Shariat of Islam. There is some difference in the prayers. But in essence, both are the same.” ²⁸

Gathas Yasna Ha 29 seems to be one such attempt. Where Zarathushtra is dramatically appointed by the anthropomorphic Ahura Mazda in consultation with the anthropomorphic VohuMana. Where the all-knowing Ahura Mazda does not know of the existence of Zarathushtra and is advised by VohuMana of his qualities being worthy of a Prophet. The very personification of Ahura Mazda and VohuMana and the dialogue between them is clue enough of its Greek/Abrahamic nature and that it was inserted during later times to legitimize Zarathushtra as equal to other Prophets. Otherwise, the concept of the Prophet did not exist at the time of Zarathushtra over 3760 years ago. Similar to the Hindu culture and religion, where Prophets do not exist.

When it comes to European scholars in their zeal to decipher the language of an ancient religion whose adherents were of very little help. They referred to the foreign sources and set a trend for most future scholars. The study of the rituals performed by the Mobeds convinced the scholars of the lack of philosophy in the religion. That also cemented the relation of the Magis with Magic. It also legitimized the relation of the name of Zarathushtra to camels and they, therefore, based Zarathustra's worldview on animal husbandry. An example is the word "Geush" which has been translated as Cow and where it does not make sense, they try to legitimise it under the guise of metaphor.

*"The first who attempted to give a complete description of the doctrines of the Magi was the celebrated Oxford scholar, Hyde. In his very learned work, " Historia religionis veterum Persarum eorumque Magorum," the first edition of which was published in the year 1700, he displays a vast deal of information on the Parsi religion, derived from **all the sources which were accessible to him; from Greek and Roman, as well as from Arabian and Persian** writers; and tries his utmost to throw light on the religion of the Magi, so famous in antiquity. but being utterly unable to read the original texts of the Zend-Avesta, though he was in possession of several manuscripts of them, he could not succeed in furnishing his readers with a real insight into that ancient creed. **His work acted, however, as a stimulus to others** to take more interest in the matter." (pg 16-17)*

*"The first scholar who made Europeans acquainted with the contents of the sacred books of the Parsis, was the celebrated Frenchman, Anquetil Duperron. He published his work (in 1771), as the fruit of his indefatigable zeal. But the philosophers found themselves soon greatly disappointed. Kant, the great German philosopher, said, after a careful perusal of the whole work, that throughout the whole Zend-Avesta **not the slightest trace of philosophical ideas could be discovered.**" (Pg 19)*

*"The celebrated Oriental scholar. Sir William Jones, published in 1771 a letter in French addressed to Anquetil Duperron (W.Jones's Works, vol. X. pp. 403-99), where he tried to prove that the works translated by that scholar could not be considered as the composition of the celebrated Zoroaster. The chief reason alleged by him was, that their **contents grossly contradicted common sense and all sound reasoning.** (pg20)*

At the same time, some other scholars adopted and expanded on those flawed studies.

A renowned German scholar, Kleuker, not only admitted the authenticity of Anquetil's work, but translated the whole of it into German, and added several appendices, containing passages from ancient writers on the religion of the Magi. In advocating the authenticity of Anquetil's Zend-Avesta, he relied chiefly on the accordance of the reports of classical writers with those contained in these books. (Pg20)

The lack of knowledge of the Avesta language among the Mobeds in India and Iran made them rely on the Pahlavi manuscripts that had been copied during the Islamic era. This knowledge was transferred to western scholars who in turn used it to decipher the Avesta language and concepts.

Now that what was deciphered based on these above-mentioned methods becomes the Holy Grail. What western scholars had misinterpreted became

the book of reference for the laity and the Mobeds. Future scholars who used the work of these scholars as a reference crossed checked it with the practices of the community. Lo and behold it matched. Not realising that it matched because the community was following those translations, not the original Avesta text. All these gave legitimacy to the translation. Some scholars like Martin Haug found flaws in the Pahlavi text but not all of it.

*“These high-priests of the Parsi community, who are the only preservers of the religious traditions, and their interpreters, derive all their information about their religion not from the original Avesta texts themselves, but from the Pahlavi translation made of them at the time of the Sasanians. Considering that even this translation is not quite correct and, moreover, that it is not understood by the Dasturs in a critical and philological way, how can Anquetil be expected to have furnished us with an accurate translation? In many instances also Anquetil misunderstood the Dasturs; so that his translation was tinged with **errors of three kinds**, viz., those of **the Pahlavi translations**, those of **the Dasturs**, and those of **his own misunderstandings**. (pg25)*

*“Anquetil's work was regarded afterwards as a kind of authority by the Dasturs themselves. As, for instance, the high-priest of the Parsis in Bombay, Edalji Darabji Rustamji, who passed for the most learned priest of his time in India, quotes in his Gujrati work "Mujizat-i-Zartosht" * (the Miracles of Zoroaster), p. 10, Anquetil as an authority in order to countenance his strange and quite erroneous explanation of the word Stehrpaesanhem (decorated with stars), as meaning Sadarah, "the shirt" worn by the Parsis, an interpretation which contradicts the tradition as well as the contexts of the passages, and was consequently not acknowledged by other Dasturs. (pg25 notes) [*Mujizat is an Arabic word].*

Some of the manuscripts were fake and were created for financial benefits by Mobeds who lacked knowledge.

*“In 1864, Bleeck published an English translation of the Avesta, at the request of Seth Muncherjee Hormusjee Cama. This was merely a translation from the German of Spiegel. (pg 44) At Nawsari he found two copies (one in Avesta and the other in Avesta with Pahlavi) of a book called the Vaetha Nask, from its beginning with the word Vaetha; and other copies of it were seen elsewhere. **Both its Avesta and Pahlavi were full of grammatical errors, and there is reason to believe that this work was fabricated by some Dastur more than a century ago**, for the purpose of settling the inheritance of the children of a non-Zoroastrian wife, which it fixes at one-half the property, while the widow is to receive the other half. “(pg 46)*

Some scholars produced questionable works and these were used by others as a reference in their research, the repeated use of which gave validity to the misleading information and established itself as the truth. This trend has continued and is still being followed. Especially in the case of the Gathas where the translators have paraphrased some previous translations without even having seen the Avesta text.

*Turning back to Europe, we find a young and industrious scholar, Justi, of Marburg, publishing a "Handbook of the Zend Language" (Leipzig, 1864), containing a dictionary (Avesta and German) of all words in the texts published by Westergaard, a grammar, and selections for reading, all printed in Roman type. This dictionary is a very useful compilation in a handy form, and, so far as the arrangement is concerned, it leaves little to be desired; **but having been prepared with too little study of the texts, it is***

often incorrect in its definitions, and is therefore likely to perplex the careful student, and mislead the unwary, unless it is used rather as a handy index than a complete dictionary.

Some concepts have been simplified leading to misinterpretation. A good example is what has happened to the Bible with the term ‘Maggio or Magi’. The tribe, nationality and occupation of the Magis are well known but because it was translated as ‘Wise Men’ it has given rise to speculation as to their profession and nationality. Today they speculate that the Wise Men were kings and even an African king is included among the depictions. Further, it is important to note that the Bible does not state the number of Magi it only states the number of gifts to be three. But the common misnomer is ‘Three Wise Men’. Even the Bible is open to misunderstanding due to the mistranslation of a term. Such questions would not arise if Magi was left untranslated.

Martin Haug rightly believes that grammar was not uppermost in the mind of the speakers of the Avesta language therefore depending on grammar to translate Avesta does not seem to have worked. When grammar does not rule over a language the common man's colloquial rendering takes over. Noticeably, today all the controversial parts of the translations are justified under the guise of such invented grammar.

“Had the study of grammar, as a separate science, flourished among the ancient Mobads and Dasturs, as was the case with Sanskrit grammar among the ancient Brahmans, and had Iran produced men like Panini, Katyayana, and Patanjali, who became lawgivers of the classical Sanskrit language, we should have less ground to complain of the bad condition of the texts, and have found fewer difficulties in explaining them, than we have now to encounter.” (pg. 76)

Over the millennium that the Avesta language was dead, the Avesta text was preserved by the Mobeds by memorizing them. It had its advantages and disadvantages. The advantage was that not knowing the meaning avoided any significant changes in them and we still have the original rendering of it. The disadvantage was, that due to the change in the local dialect of the reciter the sound of words changed,²⁹ some words got combined into one, sometimes full words, sometimes half words. Like - Khash-Nood-Ta-Ra-Ahura-Mazda has become two words Khasnoodtra-Ahuramazda or Vohu Mana and Ahri Mana have become one word each and personified. Due to the lack of knowledge of the Avesta language, some Mobeds have promoted the belief that Avesta prayers are “Mantra Vani” whose vibration is important and knowing the meaning is not necessary.

“When the language of the Zoroastrian books had become dead, there was no means for the priests, who cared more for the mere mechanical recital of the sacred texts than for real knowledge of their meaning, to prevent corruptions of the texts. Ignorant of anything like grammar, they copied them mechanically, like the monks of Europe in the Middle Ages, or wrote them from memory, and, of course, full of blunders and mistakes. On this account, we find the copies now used by Mobads and Dasturs in a most deplorable condition as regards grammar; the terminations are often written as separate words, and vowels inserted

where they ought to be omitted, in accordance with the wrong pronunciation of the writer. The best text, comparatively speaking, is to be found in the oldest copies. (pg. 77)

After the five centuries of obscurity, and probable anarchy, which followed the death of Alexander, when we next meet with the vernacular language of Western Iran, it has assumed the form of Pahlavi, the name generally applied to the language of the inscriptions of the Sasanian dynasty, whether on rocks or coins. (pg78)

The Sassanian era writings left behind were in Pahlavi. The Arab invasion and the forcing of the Arabic language on the people of Iran, limited Pahlavi to religious texts. When the Iranians reclaimed their language with inspiration from people like Ferdowsi it took the modern form, with the Arabic world freely intermingled with modern Persian.

Ibn Hauqal, a geographer of the tenth century, when describing the province of Pars, the ancient Persian, states that three languages were used there, viz. (a) the Farsi (Persian), spoken by the natives when conversing with one another, which was spread all over Persia, and understood everywhere ; (b) the Pahlavi, which was the language of the ancient Persians, in which the Magi wrote their historical records, but which in the writer's time could not be understood by the inhabitants of the province without a translation ; (c) the Arabic, which was used for all official documents. (pg80)

Today “The Avesta” as scripture is inclusive of all languages that are not understood by the reciter. It includes Avesta, Pahlavi, Pazand, Persian and even Arabic. The Khordeh Avesta is a good example of what can happen. There are quite a substantial number of Arabic words incorporated into it and even many of the priests are not aware of it. ‘Monajat’ is the title given to some prayers not knowing that Monajat is Arabic. For example in the Tandorosti prayers, the word “Alam” (*Khodavand Alam ra hame Anjuman ra*) is Arabic and there are many such words.

Avesta was originally confined to the sacred texts ascribed to Zarathuslitra and his immediate disciples; but over time this term has been gradually extended to all later explanations of those texts written in the same language, till at present it includes all writings in that language, whatever their age. All these writings, having become unintelligible to the majority of the Zoroastrians, came to be regarded as equally sacred.

The word Avesta does not occur in the sacred texts themselves with the meaning now attached to it, and it must not be confounded with the Sasanian Apistan, engraved on gems in the phrase Apistan Val Yazdan, as this phrase is also found in the Pahlavi texts, with the meaning of "prayers to God," whereas the Pahlavi Apistak, or Avistak (Avesta), is a distinct word, never used in that sense, which, indeed, would be inapplicable to nine-tenths of the Avesta. (pg121)

All of these have had a damaging effect on the understanding of the teaching of Zarathustra in the Gathas. Luckily the original Avesta rendering of the Gathas seems to have remained intact, for the language can still be recognized as an older version of the Avesta language and the meters and its form gives confidence in its authenticity.

Dr, Irach Tarporewala recognizes that the Avesta terms have acquired a different meaning than what they originally meant and warns that:

“The Gathas must be judged by themselves and in light of their own contents. In other words, it would not be correct to understand a word from the Gathas in the sense it has acquired in Later Zoroastrian Literature. And it would, of course, be utterly wrong to read the ideas of Later Zoroastrian Theology into the Gathas.”³⁰

I would like to record my appreciation of what the western scholars have done, for had it not been for their curiosity Zoroastrianism would have been lost long back and by presenting it as an Abrahamic religion they have helped it survive the otherwise alienation.

I would conclude by saying that the Gathas are the teachings of Zarathushtra and not prayers. That what has survived is full of Wisdom and needs to be translated keeping in mind the fact that the ancient Avestan culture was to Seek not to Believe and required the use of All senses with WISDOM”.



¹ Quotes not referenced are mainly from Martin Haug - Essays on “The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis”
EDITED BY E. W. WEST, PhD. LONDON: TEUBNER & CO., LUDGATE HILL. 1878.

² Hermippus, who has written cautiously on everything relative to magic, explained twenty thousand verses composed by Zoroaster. (Pg 245
The Book of the Magis by Francis Barrett, F.R.S. 1801 CE)

³ Iranica online

⁴ <https://greektravelers.com/blog/the-greek-gods>

⁵ <https://mythology.stackexchange.com/questions/1622/how-many-gods-goddesses-are-there-in-total-in-greek-mythology#:~:text=3142%20gods%2Fgodesses,and%20including%20Titans%20as%20gods.>

⁶ Izads, Yazatas, Amshaspantas, 30 names a days each venerated like did the Greek their 3142 gods and goddesses.

⁷ Aristotle’s Politics

⁸ Gatha Yasna 44:18 “Dasa Aspa Arsana Vaitis Ustrem Ca Hyat Moi Mazda”. “Ten Senses leading to Illumination through my Wisdom.” Ten stands for the 5 organs and the 5 senses.

⁹ http://ahura.homestead.com/files/IranZaminEight/Fariborz_HISTORY_OF_PERSIAN_LANGUAGE_E8.pdf

¹⁰ The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis. By Martin Haug. Pg 78

¹¹ Ha.31.3 "Maino Athra" "Mental blaze"

آتش ذهن

Ha.31.19 "Athra Sukhra Mazda" "Radiant fire of Wisdom"

آتش تابناک خرد

Ha.34.4 "Athram Ahura" "Fire of Creation"

آتش آفرینش

Ha.43.4 "Garma Athrav Asha" "Warmth of the Fire of Asha"

گرمای آتش اشا

Ha.43.9 "Thwahmai Athre" "Your Inner Flame"

آتش درونی

Ha.46.7 "Thwamat Athras cha Managhas" "The Fire of your thoughts"

آتش اندیشه

Ha.47.6 "Athra Vangha ranoibya" "Fire benefits all"

آتش سود رسان به همه

Ha.51.9 "Athra Sukhra Mazda" "Radiant Fire of Wisdom"

آتش تابناک خرد

¹² The oldest identified remains of a fire-temple in Iran are those on the Kūh-e K'āja in Sīstān where a stone fire altar is present. Only traces survive of the ground-plan of the oldest building, which has been assigned tentatively to Seleucid or early Parthian times. This temple was rebuilt later in the Parthian period, and further enlarged and remodeled in the Sasanian epoch. (Iranica.org - ĀTĀŠKĀDA)

¹³ <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/593711.pdf>

¹⁴ "That he may make it [Islam] triumph over all religion. God is the One who grants victory to His religion, *strengthens His helper* and commits to His people of the inheritances of the nations. Where are the righteous worshippers of God?" ¹⁴Tabari 2160

¹⁵ Chapter 3 sec 32 /11.6 Mugadama ibn Khaldum vol2

¹⁶ History by Tabari

¹⁷ Mugadama by Ibn Khaldum

¹⁸ The 1323 CE copy of the Vandidad was made from an earlier 1185 CE copy which is not available.

¹⁹ **A.-H. Anquetil-Duperron**, in full **Abraham-Hyacinthe Anquetil-Duperron**, (born Dec. 7, 1731, [Paris](#), France—died Jan. 17, 1805, Paris), scholar and linguist who was generally [credited](#) with supplying the first translation of the Avesta (Zoroastrian scripture) into a modern European [language](#)

²⁰ History of Zoroastrians after the Sassanians by Rashid Shahmardan in Persian pg 202

²¹ The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis. By Martin Haug, Ph.d.

Late professor of sanskrit and comparative philology at the University of Munich. 1878 CE

²² The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis. By Martin Haug, Ph.d.

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²³ A-var-ena = Sanskrit a VAR = to choose

²⁴ Ardeshir is converted to Atraxersis, Kurosh as Cyrus, Khashayar as Xerxes etc.

²⁵ "EZNIK, who wrote a book against heretical opinions, and from ELISIEUS, who compiled a history of Vartan, and the wars waged by the Armenians against the Persians". Pg 13 of The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis. By Martin Haug

²⁶ Page 14 of The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis. By Martin Haug.

²⁷ Quotes are all from The sacred language, writings, and religion of the Parsis. By Martin Haug.

²⁸ History of the Parsis 1884 Dorabji Faramji Karaka Vol 1 chap. 11. Interviews with the shah. Pg.75

²⁹ Example, In Tandorosti Prayers the Mobeds in India pronounce Zandehgani as Jendegani Jendeh is a Prostitute and also the word Koneshni as Kuneshni Kun means Bum in Persian.

³⁰ The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra Dr. I J S Taraporewala (introduction pg 18)

At one time the Parsis in India believed that 'copies of their ancient books, which they did not possess, could be furnished to them by their co-religionists in Persia ; but this was soon shown to be a delusion. The accounts of their condition given by European travellers, by the Parsis who had gone to Persia to obtain information connected with their religion, and also by the Iranis who have visited India in our time, set all expectations at rest on that point. They showed that, instead of being in a position to impart knowledge, the Zoroastrians of the fatherland needed advice and instruction from those in India. They have still, it is true, their fire-temples (thirty -four of them, both great and small, are situated in Yezd and its vicinity), but they possess no ancient liturgical books except those in the possession of their brethren in India. Professor Westergaard of Copenhagen, who visited Persia in the year 1843, wrote to his friend, the late Dr. Wilson of Bombay, as follows on jthis subject : " I stopped at Yezd eleven days, and though I often went out among them, I did not see more than sixteen or seventeen books in all ; two or three copies of the Veridad Sade and the Izeshine (which they call Yofna), and six or seven of the Khorde Avesta, of which I got two and part of a third. These, besides part of the Bwndesh and part of another Pehlevi book, were all I could get, though I tried hard to obtain more, especially part of the Izeshine with a Pehlevi, or as they say, Pazand translation, of which there is only one copy in Europe—at Copenhagen." History of the Parsis –Dorabji Faramji Page 60