

THE DECENT OF THE FRAVASHIS

Farrokh Vajifdar

Pre-Zoroastrian notions of the *fravashis* reach back in time to the Indo-Aryan period and, earlier, to a primitive moment when as spirits of the deceased they continued to exercise power over human affairs in life. Ancestor-worship and the cult of the dead have ever since played a major part in religious observances throughout human history. It was not so much respect for the spirits of the departed, as their dread, that made the essential rituals of appeasement so elaborate. Those spirits had to be especially remembered at certain times, usually anniversaries, or when not exactly recalled, then at fixed times during the seasonal year during which all the spirits of the dead were ritually summoned to partake of commemorative feasts where offerings were presented solemnly in their names.

That it was indeed fear based is borne out by the treatment accorded the newly deceased. Prayers were said for the *repose* of the soul, for its sustenance during its journey towards the gods beside whom it was hoped it would forever remain. A dread visitation by an unappeased spirit to its former earthly home to wreak its malevolence upon the living lay behind the child like precaution taken to foil such return. Before its preparation for disposal the body of the deceased was placed in an unused room set apart from the usually occupied living quarters. It was thence removed through a breach purposely made in an outside wall, the opening then being resealed to turn away the angry spirit from gaining re-entry into the home it had occupied during its incarnated existence.

In early Zoroastrianism such primitive beliefs were superseded by a more rational attitude towards the departed soul. It was recognized that vital elements, the breath-soul, of a person died when the body ceased to be a living form. The imperishable or immortal soul, or *urvan*, survived physical death and went on to meet with its *daena* or now disembodied Self, which had been shaped during the lifetime of the deceased. This post-mortem meeting with its *daena* was seen as the final encounter with its own good or bad deeds performed during life, just as during life it was being constantly beautified or disfigured according to those actions. During life it had been a mirror of the soul; in death that image would be presented to the *urvan* of the deceased starting out on its perilous journey over the Bridge of Judgement.

There was yet another spiritual element - one which pre-existed the physical entity and watched over it throughout its lifetime. This was the *fravashi*. Our early mythology, as best seen in the *Farvardin Yasht*, had taken up the ancient concept of ancestor-spirit and re-fashioned it to keep pace with the progressive thinking which has always characterized Zoroastrianism. How did Zarathushtra deal with the notion of this pre-existing guiding spirit which was supposed to watch over and protect the physical being? In the Gathas there is no mention of the *fravashi*: indeed it would have compromised the firm teaching on the individual responsibility for one's thoughts, words and works. That it was never far from the peoples' heart and minds may be confirmed by the rapidity with which the *fravashi*-concept re-entered their worship-in the *Yasna Haptanhaiti*, 37.3.

There Ahura Mazda is to be worshiped through the *fravashi* of all righteous men and women. There was no gender distinction. Ingrained fear from old had allowed in the dread aspect of unseen but ever-present spirits of the departed which, if not properly appeased, would exercise their malevolence upon the living. The time had come for the series of explanations that we see unfolding in Yasht 13, the Worship of the Fravashis.

The Farvardin Yasht

This Yasht fall into two main parts: Ch 1-84, and 85-158. The first part, comprising 23 smaller sections or chapters, present with minor discrepancies the six stages of creation, and proceeds to inform us that Ahura Mazda himself had recourse to the help of the *fravashi* in keeping the sky in its place around the tripartite earth. In the Gathas, Yasna 44.4, it is Ahura Mazda unaided who maintains this separation, and the earth in Yasna 32.3 has seven parts, Whether the later division is the older, we cannot determine, for the *Vidaevodata/Vendidad's* second chapter gives Yima/Jamshid's three stage colonization of the entire earth as taking place over three southward movement, and Yima, we know, had preceded Zarathushtra by a very considerable time. Where again in the Gathas, 34.5,7 we see only Ahura Mazda recognized as sole Deity, all-powerful and omniscient Creator of *everything*, the Farvardin Yasht describes a dual creation, only the good part of which was performed by Ahura Mazda *with the help of the fravashis*. The sun, moon and stars are said to be arranged in their motion by them; Yasna 44.3 attributes this only to Ahura Mazda. In Ch 57 is the listing, in order of distance from earth according to ancient belief, of stars, moon, sun and the Endless

Lights where Ahura Mazda dwells: here again the *fravashis* break the heavenly inertia and cause their movement along their proper courses! This good work will continue until the Renovation of this world.

Where we a change from the old ancestor-worship is in the innovative Ch17. There we encounter the *fravashi* of the *paoiryotkaesha* (those adherents of the primitive doctrine) who are often presented in later Avestic and Pahlavi texts as true adherents of Mazdayasna. There can be little doubt that Mazda-worship existed, among other cults, well before Zarathushtra's time: such worship is alluded to in the Gathas with our *mantran's* caveat that that veneration was considered by him improper and ineffective, and that the true Revelation came only to him directly from Ahura Mazda. It should be stressed that whilst Mazda-worship pre-existed Zarathushtra, his particular genius ensured that he placed Mazda above and beyond all others - He became the Founder's *only* Ahura. There was none other, and He had no opponent despite claims perversely and unconvincingly advanced by unprincipled dualist who have not faced up to the Gathas, but instead trifled with re-introduced deities from earlier nature-worship, Zurvanite speculation (taken up with zeal by the heretic Mani), and with later concoctions made to fit into what to them passes for Zoroastrianism.

The assimilation of this Yasht with Zarathushtra's system is through the simple procedure of making the Reformer one among the many Mazdayasnian *paoiryotkaeshas* who worshipped the *fravashis* through the earlier form of their special Yasht. This process can be seen in the first 25 sections whose first two chapters (*kardes*) use the expedient of making their teachings known to Zarathushtra by Ahura Mazda himself - one which was to be thoroughly exploited in the *Vidaevodata/Vendidad*. Particularly noteworthy is the clear assertion that the *fravashi of the LIVING righteous are MORE POWERFUL than those of the departed* - it in fact includes the *fravashi* of all righteous persons from the past through to the unborn Saoshyants or three millennial Saviours who will each progressively destroy evil from the earth until its perfection. We note the divergence from Zarathushtra's Gathic teachings where the Revelation declares that each and every one of mankind who has attained to the Good Mind (Vohu Manah) of Ahura Mazda is considered a *saoshyant!* The saving grace is, of course, that of all *fravashis*, past, present, and future, of all nations are to be piously invoked (Ch 21, to be repeated more fully in 143-144). Zarathushtra would, however, probably have relented just enough to allow that whilst the design was disagreeable, such compromising, sentiments did after all produce

results; the Great Reformer had humanity enough to recognize human frailty in others and, having repeatedly stressed free-will and choice in his Gathas, would have quickly seen that old ingrained superstitions are not readily relinquished.

The *fravashis* are depicted in militaristic mode: such representation can be seen in Chs.23,26-27, 31,33,35, (especially) 37-38,45 and 72 (where the arms and weaponry of the times are listed), 39,40, and 67. Pre-figuring the winged angels of the Abrahamic religions are the Zoroastrian external souls of righteous mankind who hasten to the help of beleaguered sovereigns, flying like well-winged birds (Ch70).

Fear of the return of disgruntled souls has left its trace in the Farvardin Yasht: Chs. 34,49-51, 63,73, where worshippers who properly prepare the expected welcome during the *fravashis'* ten days return are in turn blest with material rewards. Tame and wild animals (of these, at least those which do no harm, as says the Yasna Haptanhaiti, 39.2) have both imperishable *urvan*, pre-existent external souls- their *fravashis* (ch74).

The qualities of the *fravashis* are generosity, valour, beneficence, power, radiance, and steadfastness. Through them these qualities are transferred also to Ahura Mazda who has his own *Fravashi* as do his aspects, the seven (!) Amesha Sepantas, whose "father" he is. Ahura Mazda's soul, his *urvan*, is Bounteous Revelation, his *mantra spenta*. Just as human souls after death traverse the four celestial paradisiacal stations of stars, moon, sun, and the Endless Lights, so too do the Amesha Spentas "think" along the corresponding stages of Good thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds and the House of Songs (Ch. 83-84). Zarathushtra, it must be pointed out, had no such elaboration in his Gathas, the forgoing being a development necessary for the accommodation of pre-Zarathushtrian concepts with his own radical teachings.

Zarathushtra. With Ch.87, the Farvardin Yasht introduces Zarathushtra in its second part (Ch85-158). Here our Preceptor's *fravashi* is worshiped as that of the foremost *athravan*, the foremost *rathaeshhtar*, and foremost *vastrya-fshusho*- the tripartite societal divisions of priests, (chariot-borne) warriors, and pastoralists of ancient Indo-Aryan nations. More importantly, it is specified that he is regarded as messenger and teacher of the Revelation in all its aspects, one who revolted against *daevayasna* and instituted the proper worship of Ahura Mazda. He is both *ahu* and *ratu* - guide in both the spiritual and material worlds, the

declarer and praiser of Truth. Here the Anti-demonic Law (the proto-Vendidad?) is also taught by him - its dualism emerges in the opposition of Mazda's Good creation and the daevic one. His birth was proclaimed a blessing by the waters, plants and all the beneficent creations (this is repeated in Ashi Yasht, 18). He acknowledged as the bearer and disseminator of Mazda-worshipping Good Religion, the *vanhui daena mazdayasnish* among all the earth's seven regions.

The religious heroes of Ancient Iran are listed and their *fravashis* praised. Among them are Saena Ahum-stut, the first teacher-priest who appears with a hundred religious students; Zarathushtra's three sons who severally represented the priests, agriculturists, and the warriors; Vishtaspa; Frashaoshtra and Jamaspa with their sons. There are also listed those whose names are unknown elsewhere, each subsidiary list ending with the unborn saviour, the Saoshyant Astvat-ereta. Another set of ancient heroes (Ch 130-138) includes Yima (Jamshid). Thraetaona (Faridun) Aoshnara, and the Kavi list of eight illustrious rulers of eastern Iran. They are all said to have contributed to Ahura Mazda's Victory and Glory.

Karde 30 (Ch139-142) venerates the *fravashis* of the ancient religions heroines commencing with the three daughters of Zarathushtra, Freni, Thriti, and Pouruchista (this last made known to us in Yasna 53 as the youngest), and ending with the virgin mother of the three future millennial saviours. What follows is the clearest testimony (Ch 143-144) to the universalism of Zarathushtra's religion: here the *fravashis* of *all* righteous men and women from *all* lands, past, present, and future, are given the same worship as those from Ancient Iran. It is carefully emphasized that traveling priests had visited all the lands spreading the Good Religion.

The magnificent Yasht closes with the reverence accorded to the five spiritual elements - the *ahu*, *daena*, *baodha*, *urvan*, and the *fravashi* - of the *paoiryo-tkaeshas* (followers of the primitive doctrine) among whom Zarathushtra has been included to validate the pre-Zarathushtrian worship. May all the *fravashis* who visit at the time of their Ten Days' commemoration be welcomed and then take their departure after the due offerings have been properly made and accepted. May they not depart offended.

The Fravahar/Farohar symbol

Just as Fire symbolizes the Truth of Ahura Mazda, so does the well-known winged disc today commonly represent the *fravashi*. Here its symbolism raises some different possibilities, and one cannot be certain as to what the winged figure represented in the minds of those who originally adopted and adapted it from earlier Mesopotamian and Egyptian reliefs. The best-known examples are featured by the first Darius at Persepolis, Behistun and Nagsh -i-Rostam. But what did these actually represent? Was it Ahura Mazda depicted in Median dress? Was it His *fravashi*? Was it a priestly spiritual guide of religion - a *ratu*? Or was it the *fravashi* of the king himself? Was it therefore the seal of divine empowerment of the king's authority?

As external soul and protective spirit, it could have been used as authenticator of the king's legitimacy to rule and his earthly power conferred by the will and favour of Ahura Mazda. It could thus signify the *kharenah/farr-i-izadi*, the mysterious divine essence defined as Fortune, Glory, or Victorious Power. The Farvardin Yasht's Ch.133-134 could support this notion. As king's *fravashi* it could mean Ahura Mazda's approval. Could it be Ahura Mazda himself? Now, we know from the Gathas that Zarathushtra conceived of his one chosen Deity and His aspect in the abstract, i.e., He could not be "seen". When the *manthran* invoked their "visible" presence, he was merely saying that the Best Ones of Mazda, Asha and Vohu Manah should be "seen" as Wisdom, Truth and Good Mind manifested in this world (Yasna 33.7;34.6) by the good activity of all believers in Zarathushtrian Mazda-worship (Yasna 34.15). However that may be, it is still possible that the Great King wished to thus depict his sole heavenly sovereign Ahura Mazda hovering above the figure of the earthly ruler. On Behistun, the royal autobiographer details his political achievements; the religious content proper yields only an outline of his theological belief, but the hovering (wavy-) winged figure is ever-present and ever watchfully protective. Everything the Great King had achieved on earth was through "the will of Ahura Mazda". The extant reliefs at Persepolis show a formally preened winged disc. At Naqsh-I-Rostam, the sculptured relief on the Great King's rock tomb shows the monarch worshipping the Fire on an altar above which hovers the winged disc with its centrally place figure. To the left of the king is an inscription, which outline his perception of "Ahuramazda" by whose command and assistance he acquired the listed satrapies of his empire. He closes with a prayer to Ahuramazda for His *protection*. In the second inscription, around the doorway of his tomb, he details his *moral* qualities, and his

physical powers and skills- both are conferred upon him by Ahuramazda. They are reflexions of the qualities of the *fravashis* as noted in the Farvardin Yasht.

THE DECENT OF THE FRAVASHIS

We have noted the virtues and functions of the *fravashis*. How did they originally make themselves known to the Mazdayasnians who had but lately come away from the primitive fear-laden beliefs of their forebears? We have the early teachings of the Farvardin Yasht incorporated within the later - the Pahlavi - text, two of which elaborate on these reformed views: both Zadspram and Bundahishn give us these early and mediaeval beliefs. Truth being the focus of the Zoroastrian religion, it was but natural that the religious knowledge would be equated with the knowledge of the righteous ones, the *ashavans*. This knowledge, being spiritual, was deemed contained in the celestial fortress, which was manned by the *fravashis of the righteous* to protect the physical world from the assault of Evil.

The situation on earth demanded the assistance and protection of this pure knowledge, which resided with the militaristically depicted *fravashi* in their spiritual stronghold. Ahura Mazda / Ohrmazd, the embodiment of All Wisdom, reasoned with the spiritual beings who dwelt with him - they are the external souls of mankind - asking whether they would choose to descend among humanity to help expedite the vanquishing of evil on earth. Knowing the final outcome, and seeking to bring closer the final renewal of the world, the *frashokereti / frashgird*, when only goodness and purity would prevail, they agreed to come down into the physical sphere.

We can see how much Zoroastrianism has contributed towards the freedom from fear of malignant spirits, and how far we have come from primitive belief into the glorious world-view which our Founder Zarathushtra had intended for us to realize through knowledge, progress, and selfless humanitarian deeds. Those who wear the *fravahar/farohar* amulet about their person should now perhaps better understand what it truly symbolizes - their own individual moral responsibility for bringing about and maintaining a better world for all mankind.

HAMAZOR HAMA ASHO BEM!
