

D G McIntyre - Harmony in Paradox – Part IV

The Paradox of Service and Rule [1]

No one knows for sure when Zarathustra lived. We have a lot of intelligent and educated speculation, but no direct evidence. Opinions range from 6,500 BC, to 1,700 BC, to 1,200 BC, to 1,000 BC, to 600 BC. But opinions, however well founded, are not facts.

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The Gathas of Zarathushtra are the only text that exists today in the Gathic language. And due to the passage of time and the depredations of Alexander the Macedonian[2], it became an unknown language in terms of its grammar and vocabulary, for more than 1,000 years. What little knowledge the Sassanians retained of Gathic was further decimated by the Arab invasion of Iran.

So how do we know today what the Gathas say. Late in the 18th century, linguists accidentally discovered the similarity between Gathic and Vedic. This started the long, slow, process of decoding the Gathas, based on Vedic and other ancient languages, using the principles of philology -- which include the comparative analysis of languages, and ascertaining some common ways (rules) which underlie how they change from culture to culture, and generation to generation.

Today, there is approximately 80% agreement among linguists and philologists on translations of Gathic words and grammar. Unfortunately, some of the most important words in the Gathas do not fall within this 80% on which there is agreement. Aramaiti is one of them.

We all agree that it is one of the amesha spenta, an attribute of Ahura Mazda himself, and (like the other amesha spenta) it is also an attribute of a good person. But there is substantial disagreement as to its meaning.

Aramaiti has been translated by linguists as rightmindedness;[3] divine wisdom;[4] piety or respect;[5] faith and devotion;[6] satisfying intention;[7] fittingness, submission and humility;[8] and serenity, stability, tranquility.[9]

As you can see, knowledge of linguistics alone has not solved the puzzle of the meaning of aramaiti. Could there be clues to the meaning of aramaiti based on a contextual analysis, i.e. the way in which Zarathushtra uses the word in the Gathas? Let's take a look.

In Y49.5 Zarathushtra describes a good thinking person as a person of aramaiti:

"... that man, Wise One, ... who has allied his conception [daena] with good thinking. Any such person of [aramaiti] ... " Y49.5.[10]

If a good thinking person is a person of aramaiti, it would be reasonable to conclude that good thinking (which includes rightmindedness) is included within the meaning of aramaiti.

In Y32 verses 1 and 2, we see aramaiti equated with persons who are the Wise Lord's messengers. Zarathushtra says that the family, the community and the clan all entreat the Wise Lord, saying: "... Let us be Thy messengers. ." Y32.1. The Wise Lord agrees, saying: "... We have chosen your good and [spenta aramaiti]. ." Y32.2.

To be a messenger, one has to have more than good thoughts or rightmindedness. One has to also use good words. If aramaiti is equated with being a messenger of the Wise Lord, it would be reasonable to conclude that its meaning also includes good words.

In Y30.7, Zarathushtra says:

"But to this world He came with the rule of good thinking and of truth, and (our) enduring [aramaiti] gave body and breath (to it). ." Y30.7.

How does one give "body and breath" to the rule of truth and good thinking? One cannot do so with rightmindedness and good words alone. Good actions also are required to make the rule of truth and good thinking real, give it "body and breath" i.e. give it life, give it substance.

Similarly, Zarathushtra says ". . . Through its actions, [aramaiti] gives substance to the truth [asha]. . ." Y44.6. He calls aramaiti ". . . [aramaiti] of good actions. . ." in Y45.4. And he tells us that a man expresses his aramaiti by actions stemming from good thinking: "By his action stemming from good thinking, a man of good determination has expressed his understanding and his [spenta aramaiti]..." Y34.10. These verses (and others) all indicate that actions are a part of the meaning of aramaiti -- a view with which Professor K. D. Irani concurs.[11]

Finally, in Y51.21 Zarathushtra shows us the full spectrum of what is included within the meaning of aramaiti. It includes understanding (i.e. thoughts), words, actions, and vision (another aspect of thought).

" Virtuous [spento] is the man of [aramaiti]. He is so by reason of his understanding, his words, his actions, his conception [daena]. . ." Y51.21.

If a man of aramaiti is spenta because of his understanding, his words, his actions, his vision [daena], then the meaning of aramaiti, of necessity, would have to include all these things.

It is interesting that Zarathushtra also teaches us that we serve and worship the Wise Lord with our thoughts, words and actions of truth, good thinking and good rule, in other words, with our aramaiti. So in a sense, piety and devotion are also included within the meaning of aramaiti.

" I who shall serve all of you, Wise Lord, with good thinking, . . ."Y28.2;

" Yes, praising, I shall always worship all of you, Wise Lord, with truth and the very best thinking and with their rule . . ." Y50.4;

" With hands outstretched, Wise One, I shall serve all of you . . . with truth . . . You, moreover, with the skillfulness of good thinking. Y50.8.

" I shall try to glorify Him for us with prayers of [aramaiti], . . ." Y45.10.

We see from these verses that the fragrance of a life well lived is the incense of worship -- prayers of aramaiti in the temple of life.

To summarize: From the way in which Zarathushtra uses aramaiti in the Gathas, it would be reasonable to conclude that aramaiti means making truth[12] (asha) a reality, giving it "body and breath", giving it "substance", with our thoughts, words and actions of asha -- the proverbial good thoughts, good words and good actions -- a foundation of Zarathushtrian belief..

This is how we serve truth. This is how we serve the Wise Lord. This is also how we serve all the living, and our world, because it is impossible to think a good thought, say a good word or do a good deed, without benefiting the people and the circumstances that are affected by such thoughts, words and actions.

It is difficult to find one word in English that captures the full meaning of aramaiti. "Service" to Mazda and to all the living, with our good thoughts, words and actions, comes close, based on a contextual analysis. But is this also linguistically valid? Well, although Professor Insler now prefers "respect" as the correct translation of aramaiti, he has also expressed the following opinion: "Vedic also frequently uses the expression aram kr 'to serve' whose underlying meaning was surely 'show respect'."[13]

But how does translating aramaiti as service, square with the fact that aramaiti is one of the amesha spenta, and as such, is a characteristic of Mazda Himself.

A God who serves?

Some teachers of Zoroastrianism teach that Mazda transcends the conflict between good and evil in our world, that He does not act or involve Himself in our world. But the Gathas show us a very different view of Mazda. It is true that He does not interfere with our freedom to choose (" . . . Him who left to our will (to choose between) the virtuous and the unvirtuous. . ."Y45.9), but in His own way (a way perhaps not always clear to us), the Gathas tell us that He actively works to promote the renovation of the world: --

With His thoughts: (" . . . Thy (good) thinking, through whose actions one has nourished the truth [asha]. . ." Y46.7);

With His words: ("...Thou art the Lord by reason of Thy tongue (which is) in harmony with truth [asha] and by reason of Thy words stemming from good thinking..." Y51.3);

And with His actions: ("... the truthful [ashavanem] Lord, virtuous [spenta] in His actions. ..." Y46.9; "Yes, those things which Thou hast brought to realization, as well as those things which Thou hast reached by Thy actions..." Y50.10);

This is not a Ruler who expects anything of us that He is not prepared to do Himself.

Let us next consider Rule. The conventional notion of rule and service, is that the Ruler rules, and his subjects serve.

In one sense, this conventional notion is reflected in the Gathas, because we often see references to Mazda as Ruler and to xshathra as His rule ("...Wise Ruler..." Y28.7; "... the Wise Lord who rules at will. ..." Y43.1; "...Thy rule that is in accord with truth [asha]..." Y43.14; "...By your rule, Lord, Thou shalt truly heal this world..." Y34.15).

And we are told that our part is to serve ("...May there be aramaiti under the rule of Him who has the appearance of the sun..." Y43.16; "...fame is to serve Thee and the truth, Wise One, under Thy rule." Y32.6).

But Zarathushtra's thinking is often unconventional, and never one-dimensional. He also tells us:

That rule belongs to service, and that service gives rule ("...Grant thou [aramaiti] your rule of good thinking ..." Y51.2);

That service gives power ("...Give thou, o [aramaiti] power to Vishtaspa and to me..." Y28.7);

And that to rule is to serve: ("Glorious Jamaspa Haugva (has displayed) this understanding of His power: 'One chooses that rule of good thinking allied with truth in order to serve...' " Y51.18; "...He [referring to man] serves truth during his rule, with good word and good action..." Y31.22).

An interesting paradox.

It makes us wonder: What is good rule? What does it consist of?

Good rule is frequently called "... the rule of truth [asha] and good thinking [vohu mano]..." Y29.10; "...the rule of good thinking and of truth..." Y30.7; "...the rule of good thinking..." Y30.8.

And it is also called the rule of aramaiti ("...Grant thou [aramaiti] your rule of good thinking ..." Y51.2). If aramaiti means giving asha substance with our thoughts, words and actions, then aramaiti's rule would necessarily be the rule of asha and its comprehension, vohu mano.

In addition, Zarathushtra's notion of good rule is a rule that is loving, caring. In Y28.7 he says:

"... do Thou give, Wise Ruler, that promise through which we may hear of your solicitude (for us)." Y28.7.

So we see that solicitude is a component of His rule -- the rule of asha and vohu mano, the rule of aramaiti. Thus His rule is both wise and loving.

It is amazing what a difference it makes to our quality of life, when those in authority use their power in a good way - be it in a corporation, or government, or academia, or a family, or an organization, or a committee, or any of the many large and small units of governance that exist in our society. How should those in authority exercise their power? With aramaiti: "Let those of good rule rule over us ... with actions stemming from good understanding, and with [aramaiti]" Y48.5.

But the notion of vohu xshathra, good rule, is not only for those in authority. We all have power over each other, -- power that we can use in a constructive or destructive way. If you can hurt someone, you have power over him. If you can help someone, you have power over him. We too need to exercise our power with aramaiti.

There is a lovely verse in Yasna 51, the Vohu Xshathra (Good Rule) Gatha, in which Zarathushtra, teaching through questions, spells out the components of good rule.

"Where shall there be protection instead of injury? Where shall mercy [merezhdika[14]] take place? Where truth [asha] which attains glory? Where [spenta aramaiti]? Where the very best thinking [mano vahishtem]? Where Wise One, through Thy rule?" Y51.4.

So we see that Mazda's rule offers solicitude. It offers protection instead of injury. It is a rule that is compassionate and wise, a rule that gives substance to truth (asha) with His thoughts, words and actions. His rule is the rule of aramaiti.

As with Him, so with us. We too should offer solicitude, protection instead of injury. We too should serve Mazda, each other, and our world, with our thoughts, words and actions of asha, i.e. with aramaiti. Such service is also how we worship Wisdom (Mazda). Such service creates good rule, (vohu xshathra) -- the rule of service (aramaiti).

Such service is how Mazda and we, as partners, heal our world and bring to life the good vision [vanghui daena] -- the vision of a world governed by truth and good thinking. The vision of a world governed by aramaiti.

". . .The Wise One in rule is Lord through [aramaiti]." Y47.1.

[1] This article also appeared in HAMA ZOR in 2006, and was posted on vohuman.org on August 18, 2006.

[2] A late Pahlavi manuscript, the Arda Viraz Namag, has this to say about the destruction of texts wrought by Alexander the Macedonian: "And that Religion, namely all the Avesta and Zand, which had been written with golden ink on prepared cowhide, and deposited in the Staxr I Pabagan in the National Archives, was taken away and burnt by Alexander the Roman, resident of Egypt, and many religious authorities and judges and herbeds and mowbeds and upholders of the religion and skilled and wise men were killed." In the Denkard, another late Pahlavi text, it is written: "And after destruction had come from the notorious, wicked, (and) wrathful Alexander, (even) so much was not recovered from (the ruins) of what had existed, as would be possible to be kept (in memory) by a religious authority." Both quotations are from Humbach, The Gathas of Zarathushtra and Other Old Avestan Texts, Heidelberg, 1991, Vol. 1, page 52. Words appearing in parentheses are words that Humbach has inserted into the text, to aid understanding.

[3] Humbach translates aramaiti as "rightmindedness", See Humbach, *ibid.*, page 13.

[4] Sethna translates aramaiti as divine wisdom, Sethna, The Teachings of Zarathushtra, (1978), page 17.

[5] Insler translated aramaiti as "piety", Insler, The Gathas of Zarathushtra, (Brill 1975), but more recently, he has expressed a preference for "respect". See Insler, Zarathushtra's Genetic System, which may be viewed on www.zarathushtra.com.

Hanns-Peter Schmidt states: "For armaiti and taremaiti I have substituted 'respect' and 'disrespect' for the awkward 'proper thought' and 'perverse thought' I used previously (1974). 'Respect' is less specialized than 'devotion' and 'humility' and lacks the overtones of the present day usage of 'piety' (Insler) and the negative connotations of 'conformity' (...Humbach)." Hanns-Peter Schmidt, The Form and Meaning of Yasna 33, (American Oriental Society, 1986), page 4.

Moulton translates aramaiti as "Piety", Moulton, Early Zoroastrianism, Lectures delivered at Oxford, 1912, AMS Press reprint, page 345.

[6] Taraporewala translates aramaiti as "Faith and Devotion". Taraporewala, The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra, (Hukhta Foundation, reprint, 1993), page 100.

[7] Thieme, rejecting such translations as "fittingness", "submission" and "humility", suggests that aramaiti means an attitude "characterized by satisfying intention." Thieme, Reflections on the Vocabulary of Zarathustra's Gathas, in Proceedings of the First Gatha Colloquium, 1993, (WZO, 1998), page 208, expressing the opinion that as an attribute of Ahura Mazda, it is characterized by care/solicitude, and as an attribute of man, by loyalty/devotion. (page 206).

[8] See Thieme's discussion, *ibid.*

[9] Jafarey translates the word as "serenity, stability, tranquility" Jafarey, The Gathas our Guide, (Ushta Publications 1989), page 116.

[10] All quotations from the Gathas in this paper are from the translation by Professor Insler in **The Gathas of Zarathushtra**, (Brill 1975), unless otherwise indicated, although Professor Insler may or may not agree with the inferences I draw from his translation. Round brackets () appearing in a quotation are in the original translation and indicate an insertion by Professor Insler, expressing his understanding. Square brackets [] in a quotation indicate an insertion by me, which are provided to show you applicable Gathic words (although without their grammatical variations) or by way of explanation. A string of dots in a quotation indicates a deletion from the original. Often a verse contains many strands of thought. Deleting from a quotation those strands of thought that are not relevant to the discussion at hand enables us to focus on the strand of thought that is under discussion.

[11] In his Introduction to his father's translation of the Gathas, Professor K. D. Irani describes the concept of aramaiti as follows: "The inspiration that leads to action is Spenta Armaity, translated in the religious context as Piety or Devotion, and in the moral context as Benevolence or Right-Mindedness. This spirit is another aspect of Divinity, it inclines us to move from right conceptions to right actions. We thereby, with courage and confidence put our well-thought-out and well formulated intentions into action. This is called good-deed. Here we can crystallize the oft-repeated trilogy of Zoroastrianism: Good-thoughts, Good-words, and Good-deeds." Irani, The Gathas, the Hymns of Zarathushtra, as edited by K.D. Irani, (1998).

[12] Asha means truth -- including physical (factual) truth, and also the truths of mind and spirit, i.e. what's right -- not a puritanical, judgmental rectitude, but a loving, generous one, including such things as goodness, beneficence, solicitude, friendship, compassion, justice -- all of the values that we consider to be "good" and "right". So when we see the word "truth" in connection with Zarathushtra's thought, we need to remember that it includes not just physical, factual, truth, but also the truths of mind and spirit -- all that is good and right.

[13] See An Introduction to the Gathas of Zarathushtra, Issue # 4, McIntyre, Making it Happen, Aramaiti, footnote # 7. This publication may be viewed at www.zarathushtra.com.

[14] Some scholars (Azargoshasb, Humbach, Irani, Taraporewala) translate "merezhdika" as compassion, rather than as mercy.