

# Zarathushtra as Victor in the Verbal Contest

DALE L. BISHOP  
Columbia University

In a long note to his translation of the Canaanite Poem of Baal, Professor Gaster emphasized the significance of the exchange of curses and taunts as a "standard element of the Ritual Combat."<sup>1</sup> Scholars of the Indo-Iranian religion have long debated the importance of the verbal contest in the Aryan tradition. In the *Indo-Iranian Journal* of 1960 F. B. J. Kuiper presented a summation of the textual evidence supporting his argument that the verbal contest was a central component of the whole series of ritual battles celebrating the Aryan New Year. Although the bulk of the evidence for Kuiper's thesis was drawn from the Rig Veda, he also cited several Avestan texts which, he felt, praise the virtues of the eloquent warrior in the verbal contest. Most of these citations are from the Yashts, which might be expected to reflect pre-Zarathushtrian concepts later introduced into "catholic Zoroastrianism."<sup>2</sup> Kuiper thus did not examine in detail the early Gathic evidence for the verbal contest because he felt that Zarathushtra had modified the old Aryan concept to bring it into accord with his own ideas about eschatology. Nor did Kuiper bring into consideration the post-Yasht Videvdad material or the Middle Persian evidence because both lack the complex of terms derived from his hypothetical Aryan verb root \*yāk(b)- 'to proclaim solemnly'.<sup>3</sup>

We will examine here the opening section of Fargard 19 of the Videvdad and the Middle Persian Denkard's account of the prophetic predecessors of Zarathushtra from the point of view of the significance of the verbal dispute in these texts. The discussion will conclude with some speculation about Zarathushtra's own view of the verbal contest.

Fargard 19, despite its value as an Avestan source for the legend of the birth of Zarathushtra has received relatively little attention as an independent composition. Rather, its verses have been cited separately as underpinnings for various theories about such diverse subjects as the role of Zurvan in the ancient Iranian religion, or the role of Mithra as creator

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1 *Thespis* (New York, 1961), 153-55 n. IV.

2 For the distinction between Zarathushtrianism and "catholic Zoroastrianism" see I. Gershevitch, *Avestan Hymn to Mithra*, 8-26.

3 F. B. J. Kuiper, "The Ancient Aryan Verbal Contest," *Indo-Iranian Journal* 4 (1960), 257-59.

in the non- or pre-Zoroastrian religion.<sup>4</sup> It is also an important source for ancient Iranian demonology.

Perhaps one reason for the neglect of the Fargard is the lateness of its composition, and further, its faulty grammar which can drive into despair the scholar reasonably expecting such niceties as agreement of nouns and adjectives or subjects and verbs and consistent case usage. In verse 13, for example, Zarathushtra is instructed to invoke entities which are in the accusative, genitive, and the nominative. There are also the customary lesser transgressions which one anticipates in the Videvdad such as declension transfers, analogical formations, and case attractions. Another problem is the large number of words whose meanings are unknown or disputed, including several *hapax legomena*.

It may be more satisfying, however, to approach the text not so much from the negative standpoint of the author's ignorance of Avestan grammar, as from the more positive: one of his knowledge by rote of earlier Avestan passages. Clearly we are dealing with a composite text, one patched together with Avestan quotations which frequently do not fit if one goes by normal Avestan syntax, but which do fit if one is following Middle Iranian word order. We may cite an example from verse 13:

*nizbayaṇuḥā tū zaraθuštra avaēn aməša spəntā avi baptō.karsvairīm zəm*

Invoke, O Zarathushtra, the Amesha Spentas will descend upon the earth, which consists of seven climes.

The verse really makes no sense. The Pahlavi version seems equally confused. The verb form *avaēn* 'they will descend' is out of place and is finally taken by the Pahlavi commentator as an adjective *awēn* 'invisible'. He suggests that "though they (the Amesha Spentas) are invisible, they should be worshipped."

The problem, however, is solved when one discovers that the entire phrase has been lifted from Yasna 57.23, a profession of faith in the yazata Sraosha.

*yeṇhe amača vərəθraγnača avāin aməša spəntā aoi baptō.karsvairīm zəm.*

Through whose strength and victory the Amesha Spentas will descend upon the earth.

In this context the Pahlavi commentary shows a clear understanding of the Avestan as *avāin* is translated by *abar rawēnd*. Though such analyses cannot explain all the anomalous forms in this fargard, they point to the futility of making new grammatical "rules" to allow for the strange usages in the Videvdad.

The abundance of quotations from other sections of the Avesta in this fargard<sup>5</sup> suggests that it was the author's intention to bring together diverse elements from the Zoroastrian tradition

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4 See Ilya Gershevitch, *The Avestan Hymn to Mithra* (Cambridge, 1957), 210–11, for a discussion of the problems arising from the invocation lists in Vd. 19. 13–15, 35.

5 See also Bernfried Schlerath, *Avesta-Wörterbuch*, Borarbeiten II (Wiesbaden, 1968), 104–5, for a concordance, albeit incomplete, for Vd. 19.

in order to emphasize the centrality of the events he is describing. For, unlike many Avestan compositions and certainly most fargards of the Videvdad, Fargard 19 is a narrative which follows an established chronology and centers about a definite theme: the birth of Zarathushtra, its significance, and the unsuccessful efforts of the *daevas* to destroy him. The fargard begins with the aggression of the *daevas* and Zarathushtra's recitation of the sacred Ahuna Vairya prayer, the potent prayer which stuns and puts the *daevas* to flight. After a verbal exchange with the Evil Spirit, Zarathushtra appeals to Ahura Mazda for instruction as to how to defeat the *daevas*. He is instructed to invoke several deities and sacred entities and then as first priest is given instructions about the proper methods of purification. There follows a brief description of the rewards to be allotted to the souls of the righteous and the punishment in store for the wicked. Zarathushtra then resumes his invocations, and the fargard concludes with the disarray and retreat of the *daevas*. As Darmesteter suggested long ago, the nineteenth fargard is "the framework of the Videvdad: the first part shows the fiend's struggles to prevent the revelation and the third shows the effects of it; the second being, as it were, an abstract of the law, an abridged Videvdad."<sup>6</sup>

Since Zarathushtra's birth is perceived to be a bold initiative, a creative stroke by Ahura Mazda in his strategy to make evil powerless, it is perhaps not surprising that the story of Zarathushtra's birth contains many elements in common with the cosmogonical myth. The same motivation which impels Ahura Mazda to create the world impels him to create Zarathushtra as the protector of that world: both actions are efforts to repulse the aggression of the *daevas*. Just as Angra Mainyu assaulted Ahura Mazda's world, so he attacks the new creation, the first priest, Zarathushtra; the weapon which stuns and confuses the fiend is the same in both confrontations: the sacred Ahuna Vairya Prayer.

In Iran as elsewhere in the ancient Near East, words were considered to be potent forces. Certainly the virtue of eloquence is highly praised throughout Avestan literature. In the prayer to Fire (Yasna 62), Son of Ahura Mazda, and the traditional source of inspiration for the Aryan poet, the poet prays for a quick tongue and eloquent progeny. "Eloquent" here is the translation of *vyāxana*, probably derived from *yāb*, the verbal contest.<sup>7</sup> Eloquence is also associated with martial prowess, for words are effective weapons and sacred words are described as being potent, victorious, and healing. Of particular potency are the words of the Ahuna Vairya prayer, first uttered by Ahura Mazda at the time of creation to make the Evil Spirit helpless. Yasht 11.3 states that "the Ahuna Vairya prayer is the most victorious of utterances (*vərəθrajestama*), correctly spoken it is the most victorious utterance in the *yab*."

The features of the cosmic verbal contest, which first takes place at the beginning of the creation of the world, are clearly present in the renewal of that combat at the time of Zarathushtra's birth as recounted in the Videvdad. In verse 3 of Fargard 19, the Buiti *daeua* expresses his frustration at not being able to defeat the fortune (*x<sup>w</sup>arenab*)-endowed

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6 J. Darmesteter, *The Vendidad*, SBE vol. 4: 203-4.

7 Kuiper abandoned his original etymology of *yāb* (*IJ* 17 [1973], 186) in favor of a derivation from the verb root *yā-* 'to race' as proposed by H. P. Schmidt (*Pratidānam* 178). The concept of contest, however, is left intact with this interpretation. Recently, S. Insler (*The Gāthas of Zarathustra*, 163-65) has proposed derivation from *yā-* 'to make payment, redress'. This interpretation does not take into account the derived forms *vyāxana* 'eloquent' (victorious in verbal contest), or *yāskərət* 'effective in the verbal contest'.

Zarathushtra. Zarathushtra in the meantime observes that the *daevas* are conspiring (*hqm.pərəsante*) against him. Verse 4 brings to light the verbal nature of the combat. At the beginning we have the simple sentence *usəhištāt zaraθuštro* “Zarathushtra arose.” (The standing position is the posture of the warrior.) He is “unbroken by the difficulty of the hostile riddles of Evil Mind” (*asarətō aka manayba xruždya tbaēšō.parstanəm*). The compound *tbaēšō.-paršta* is found also in Yasht 5 where the great riddle-solver Yoishta Fryana approaches the goddess Anahita:

Then he (Yoishta) implored her: “Grant me this boon, that I may become victorious (*aiwi.vanyā*) over the malicious, dark Axtya, that I might answer his questions, the ninety-nine difficult hostile riddles which . . . Axtya asks me.”<sup>8</sup>

Zarathushtra approaches bearing in his hands “stones the size of a house.” At first sight this might seem to refute the suggestion that the contest is a verbal one, but a closer examination of the evidence suggests that the reference to stones is really a metaphorical allusion to the words of the Ahuna Vairya prayer. In Yasht 17.19–20 we read:

(We worship Zarathushtra) because of whose birth Angra Mainyu rushed away from the wide, round earth, whose limits are far apart. Thus spoke Angra Mainyu, the malicious death-dealing one: “The venerable ones (*yazatas*) were not able to drag me away against my will. But Zarathushtra overcomes me against my will. He smites me with the Ahuna Vairya, a weapon as great as stones the size of a house. He burns me with the Best Truth like molten metal.

The Pahlavi Videvdad version confirms the metaphor: the stones are “stony stones, the spiritual Yaθā Ahū Vairyō.”

Thus, Zarathushtra emerges victorious from the verbal combat. He is, after all, eloquent and a speaker of the truth. The evil Angra Mainyu on the other hand by his very nature cannot tell the truth and hence suffers defeat. He is burned by Asha Vahishta, the Best Truth, which burns in the ordeal all those who choose the way of the lie.

The concept of the hero who either before or at his birth is able to answer the hostile riddles of evil adversaries finds its way into the *Denkard* account of the conveying of the sacred Word (*waxš*) to the forerunners of Zarathushtra. One of these is Frēdōn, the renowned slayer of Dahāk, the three-headed serpent known in the Avesta as Aži Dahāka.

*ud mad andar any awām az dādār framān ō Frēdōn i Āswyānān rad būd andar burdār uruswar az wāstryōšib bahr i dēn pēšag pad baxšišn i az ān i Yam xwarrah;ud padiš perōzkarībast ud Frēdōn pad ān pērōzkarībastan passoxtuftār būd Dahak az burdār uruswar uš dardēnid ud stantēnid ān was oz drūj* (Dk. 7.1.25–26).

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<sup>8</sup> The story of this riddle contest in its fullest extant form is found in the Middle Persian text *Madiyan-i: Yost-i Friyan*, published by H. Jamaspji-Asa and M. Haug, *The Book of Arda Viraf*. . . and an appendix containing the texts and translations of the Gosht-i Fryanao (Bombay-London, 1872).

And (the Word) came at another time by order of the Creator to Frēdōn, lord of the Āswyāns, while he was still in his mother's womb according to the husbandmen's function of the religion according to the dispensation of Yam. And through it (the Word) he triumphed. Frēdōn in his triumph answered the questions of Dahāk while still in his mother's womb. He wounded and stunned the very powerful lie.<sup>9</sup>

Similarly Manuchihr, king of Iran, is said to be the answerer of the riddles put to him by the non-Aryan lands (*passoxguftār bud frašnān i Anēr deb*) in Denkard 7.1.30. Another account of riddle answering is associated with Ošnar, minister of Kai Us. He answers the riddles of Fračya, a worshipper of the demons, again while in his mother's womb. (Dk. 7.1. 36).

When we turn to Zarathushtra's own view of the significance of the verbal dispute, we come up against the same problems associated with any attempt to interpret the Gathas: the complexity of Gathic Avestan grammar and the presence of many *hapax legomena* is compounded with uncertainty as to whether Zarathushtra remained faithful to pre-Zarathushtrian concepts or whether he radically reinterpreted them. In addition the contexts in which the word *yāb* appears tell us little about the meaning of the term in Zarathushtra's system. We may speculate, however, that the use of the adjective *maz* 'great' with *yāb* in Yasna 30.2, as with the significant term *maṣa*, and the association of *yāb* with *mižda* 'reward' in Yasna 49.9 suggests that Zarathushtra saw the *yāb* as the ultimate truth ordeal that determines the fate of every individual soul. Just as Zarathushtra endured an ordeal to prove that his words were true and those of his enemies untrue, so each soul will have to confront the powers of evil with the eloquence that can only accompany the true word.

To summarize, we may conclude that the concept of the verbal contest, so well attested in the Rig Veda, remains an important feature of the Iranian religion. The ideal of the eloquent warrior is met by Zarathushtra himself, who with the sacred potent words of the Ahuna Vairya prayer answers the riddles posed to him by Angra Mainyu in the verbal contest. In so doing Zarathushtra sets the example for all the priests who follow him.

There is an interesting continuity here with what Zarathushtra says of himself in Yasna 29.8, that he will protect the primal cattle couple with sweetness of speech, *budamēm vaxəδrahyā*. But while Zarathushtra saw his eloquence in creative terms, his priestly followers equated eloquence with correct recitation of holy words. Quite properly, the riddle-solving abilities possessed by Zarathushtra in the late Videvdad account are shared by some of his most significant forebears, the kings and heroes of ancient Iran.

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9 For text and translation see M. Mole, *La Légende de Zoroastre* (Paris, 1967), 6–11.