



Zarathushtra in the Gathas: A Brief Overview

By Rebecca DesPrez

Zarathushtra lived so long ago that his life is veiled in myth and legend. Medieval sources such as the *Denkard* and *Zadspram* recount dramatic tales of demons attempting to kill his pregnant mother by poisoning her or sending violent storms. At birth, his miraculous laughter supposedly terrified the forces of darkness, prompting sorcerers and demons to try to destroy him. Some stories tell of him being thrown into a pit of fire or abandoned in a wolf's den—yet always surviving.

But beyond these legends, what do we really know about the historical Zarathushtra?

The only authentic source that offers a glimpse into his life is his own sacred hymns, the *Gathas*. While these hymns do not narrate his biography, they preserve traces of his personal life, revealing the names of a few close friends and family members whom he immortalized in verse.

In the second song of the *Gathas*—considered by Dr. Ali Jafarey to be perhaps the first Indo-Iranian and even the first Indo-European play in existence—we witness the lamentation of the living world as it pleads with Ahura Mazda for a reformer and rehabilitator.

Ahura Mazda ultimately chooses Zarathushtra as the Leader of the World. However, the living world protests, questioning, “*Am I to accept a powerless man with a feeble voice as my caretaker?*” (Song 2.9). This passage suggests that Zarathushtra was not a figure of physical strength or imposing stature—certainly no Arnold Schwarzenegger—but rather a man chosen for his wisdom and truthfulness, not his physical might.

Despite his perceived weakness, Zarathushtra's teachings gained powerful allies, the most significant of whom was King Vishtaspa. Mentioned four times in the *Gathas*, Vishtaspa played a crucial role in the spread of the Good Religion. According to tradition, Zarathushtra met him at the age of 42 and convinced both the king and his wife to embrace his teachings. In his hymns, Zarathushtra refers to Vishtaspa as his “*righteous companion*” (Song 11.14), prays for his wishes to be fulfilled (Song 1.7), and promises him and his followers a place in the House of Song (Song 16.16). By the final song of the *Gathas* (Song 17.2), Zarathushtra, pleased with the success of his mission, entrusts its continuation to Vishtaspa and another devoted follower, Ferashaoshtra—securing the future of his faith.

Ferashaoshtra Hvagva, mentioned five times in the *Gathas*, is another close ally. In Song 1.8, Zarathushtra prays that Ahura Mazda grants his friend a good mind. In Song 14.8, he asks the divine to bless Ferashaoshtra with “the best happy union with righteousness.” Later, in Song 11.16, he prays for Ferashaoshtra to attain “radiant happiness, serenity, and good mind.”



Ferashaoshtra's brother, Jamaspa Hvagva, is mentioned three times (Songs 11.17, 14.9, 16.18). Tradition identifies Jamaspa as King Vishtaspa's advisor and Zarathushtra's son-in-law, believed to have married Zarathushtra's youngest daughter, Pourchista. However, I personally find this unlikely due to their probable age difference. I speculate that Pourchista's husband perhaps could have been Jamaspa the Younger mentioned in the Farvardin Yasht 127.

Song 11.17 suggests that Jamaspa was an eager student of Zarathushtra's teachings, learning his wisdom through poetry to aid its transmission. Zarathushtra praises Jamaspa for his pursuit of enlightenment and his dedication to a good mind. (Song 16.18)

Interestingly, Zarathushtra also praises the "powerful children and grandchildren of the Turanian Fryana, who have risen to promote their world through serenity with zeal" (Song 11.12). The Turanians likely belonged to an enemy clan, yet because they accepted Zarathushtra's teachings, he honored them in his hymns.

One of Zarathushtra's most famous family members is Maidyoi-Maha Spitama, whom tradition identifies as his cousin and the first convert to his religion. Despite this, he is mentioned only once in the *Gathas* (Song 16.19), where Zarathushtra commends him for not just thinking and speaking about divine principles, but living them through action. Medieval sources also reference Maidyoi-Maha—*Zadspram* (Chapter 23) describes how he accepted Zarathushtra's message after ten years, during a conversation in a reed forest where boars were hunted.

Pourchista, Zarathushtra's youngest daughter, is the only woman named in the *Gathas*. Her marriage is celebrated in Song 17, but curiously, the groom's name is omitted. Dr. Martin Schwartz, in his *Pouruchista's Gathic Wedding and the Teleological Composition of the Gathas* speculate that this omission suggests the poem was composed before the actual wedding. Interestingly, medieval Zoroastrian texts mention other daughters—Freni and Thriti—who, along with Maidyoi-Maha's son, are described as being "renowned for their religion" (*Zadspram*, Chapter 23).

Beyond honoring his friends and family, Zarathushtra strongly criticizes his adversaries. He condemns the Karapans, Kavis, Usigs, and Barbarians—who were probably the northern raiders who terrorized peaceful farmers, burning settlements and destroying lives.

Zarathushtra predicts the eventual downfall of the Karapans and Kavis at the hands of the righteous (Song 5.15) and he denounces the Usigs for plunging the world into chaos through their lust and greed (Song 9.20). He portrays the Kavis as stubborn obstructionists who hinder the prosperity of farmers. In Song 16.14, he rejects the Karapans, accusing them of delighting in the destruction of the world and warning that their actions will lead them to the House of Wrong.



Meanwhile he expresses hope that he can persuade the barbarians to follow the right path (Song 1.5), and in Song 7.5, he explicitly renounces false gods and their barbarian worshippers.

Among Zarathushtra's named enemies is Bendva, whom he mentions twice. Bendva, likely a Karapan, actively sought to obstruct Zarathushtra's mission. Zarathushtra expresses his frustration with Bendva, lamenting his lack of a good mind (Song 14.2).

The *Gathas* also reveal Zarathushtra's personal struggles—his disappointment, frustration, sadness, and even loneliness. In Song 11.2, he confesses to Ahura Mazda: “Wise One, I am powerless. I have few cattle and also few men,” while he mourns his isolation: “To what land should I turn? Where should I go? They hold me back from my people and friends” (Song 11.1).

Despite these disappointments and obstacles, Zarathushtra perseveres, never wavering in his commitment to spreading truth and wisdom.

Amid these hardships, the *Gathas* also convey moments of love, joy, and triumph especially when Zarathushtra expresses deep affection for his followers, saying he would “encircle them”—a gesture of love and protection still recognized in Iranian culture today (Song 16.22). His elation is palpable in Song 17.1, where he rejoices in his mission's success: “The Wise Lord has, on account of my righteousness, granted me blessings, both mental and material, and a good life forever.”

Through these hymns, we see Zarathushtra not as a mythical figure but as a historical person—one who endured struggles, celebrated victories, and remained unwavering in his devotion to truth and righteousness. Despite formidable opposition, he never gives up. And in the end, he triumphs.

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