

The Love of Truth in Ancient Iran



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Herodotus, the Greek historian who was a contemporary of the great King Darius of ancient Iran, wrote in his remarkable history that the Persians esteemed the truth above all things. He went on to say, speaking with great respect, that the Persians hold it unlawful to speak of anything which is unlawful to do, and according to their thinking, the most disgraceful thing in the world is to tell a lie. This veneration of the truth among the ancient Iranians was indeed their most noteworthy feature, and throughout the history of the land, there was not a single foreigner who came to visit or to live among them who was not strikingly impressed by the love and respect of truth in that country. Through the passage of centuries, in the works of Greeks, Chinese, Indians and Arabs, this love and respect for the truth is mentioned endless times as perhaps the remarkable trait of all Iranians.

What these foreign visitors wrote was no myth, no embroidery upon hearsay or rumor, no pipe dream of their own arising from the lack of ethic or moral inventories and their distribution. There are some 1,500 such names contained in the tablets -- names not of kings or princes, nor priests and judges: simply names of minor officials and clerks who oversaw the wares in the storehouses.

Herein lies their importance: they give us a glimpse into the social constituency of the common people, much as the names contained in the old records of towns and villages allow us to see the composition and character of the society of early communities.

Remarkably, more than 75 of these names contain the word truth. We encounter men called 'Protector of truth' (artapana), 'Lover of truth' (artakama), 'truth-minded' (artamanah), 'Possessing the splendor of truth' (artafarnah), 'Delighting in truth' (artazusta), 'Pillar of truth' (artastuna), 'Prospering the truth' (artafrida), 'Having the nobility of truth' (artahunara), in addition to a variety of others of similar composition. When we look further and find other fellows are named 'Strong as a horse' (aspaugra), 'Sweet smelling' (hubaodi), 'Little hero' (viraka), 'Having good fame'

(usavah), 'Winning a good prize' (humizda), and the like we realize at once how singular are the names containing the word truth.

By this I intend the following. If the majority of other names are built with elements signifying horses, heroes, fame, wealth, prizes, good fortune and all those other desirable things which parents wish for their children when they are born, then the great many truth-names show us that there were many parents who believed it was more important for their children to love the truth, uphold the truth, prosper the truth, delight in the truth, and so forth, rather than to simply seek after material benefits in this world.

The name chosen by parents for their children often expresses a wish, and the predominance of truth-names among the Old Persian officials reveals how deep-seated was the wish and respect for truth over all things even among families of humble origins.

But it was not only the common man who so dearly esteemed the truth among the ancient Persians. It was also the great Achaemenid kings themselves who expressed their love and admiration for the truth and their thorough despising of lie and deceit, exactly as Herodotus informs us. On the great inscription of Behistun, the magnificent King Darius incised the following words with imposing solemnity:

The Lie made these provinces rebellious, so that they deceived the people. But afterwards Ahura Mazda placed them into my hand... Thou who shalt be king hereafter, protect thyself vigorously from Deceit. Punish well the man who shall lie and deceive, if thou shalt hope to keep the country secure... Know that I did this by the favor of Ahura Mazda, who bore me assistance because I was not aggressive, because I was not a follower of deceit, because I was not a doer of wrong - neither I nor my family. I conducted myself as befits the truth. Neither to the weaker nor to the powerful did I do wrong... Thou who shalt be king hereafter, do not be a friend to the follower of deceit nor to the doer of wrong. Punish them well.

Similarly on another of his inscriptions stand these noble words:

By the grace of Ahura Mazda I delight in what is right; I do not delight in what is false. It is not my desire that the weak should be mistreated by the mighty, nor that the mighty be treated wrongly by the weak. What is right and truthful is my desire.

Lastly, let us quote the following statement in an inscription of King Xerxes:

If you wish to be happy when living and blessed when dead, have respect for the law established by Ahura Mazda and worship him and truth reverently. The man who has respect for the law established by Ahura Mazda and worships him and the truth reverently, such a man becomes happy while living and blessed when he is dead.

These solemn words of the Old Persian kings are but an echo of the teachings of the more ancient prophet Zarathushtra. In his stirring works called the Gathas, we find the important thought that

If a man be rich or poor, he should be a friend to the truthful person but an enemy to the follower of deceit and lies. Y47:4

There too we learn that heavenliness and immortality shall be the future possession of those who support the truthful in this world, but that a lifetime of darkness and a woeful existence shall be the final reward of the deceitful person. Further, Zarathushtra tells us, that a man who is good to

the truthful person and serves the laws of *Ahura Mazda* shall himself reach the pastures of truth and good thinking, and save his family and his village and his country from destruction. In fact, when we read through the great words of the prophet, we realize that truth lies at the center of his whole moral and ethical system, so it therefore seems necessary to briefly describe the position of truth in Zarathustra's teachings.

First and foremost we see in the prophet's work that there is an intimate relationship between god and truth. Not only does Ahura Mazda dwell in the heights of truth and in the paths which follow the straight ways of truth, but he is also of the same temperament as truth, sharing the same likes and dislikes. But the relationship between god and truth is deeper --so Zarathushtra informs us-- because Ahura Mazda is both the creator and companion of truth. Further, we are told, that the spirit of god himself, the spenta mainyu, became beneficent and virtuous through the effects of truth and that Ahura Mazda learned to distinguish between what is just and unjust through the help of truth. Truth, then, according to the prophet's view, is the most essential component in the world of god because it motivated him to create what is salutary and good, and it taught him to discern between right and wrong. It is through truth, therefore, that god achieved his nobility and his higher wisdom which characterize his very name Ahura Mazda, the Wise Lord.

Similarly, truth plays a dominant role in the life of man. It is truth which prospers the creatures and makes the plants and waters increase, It is through the quest for truth that good understanding arises in the spirit of man, an understanding that teaches him to further the principles of god in good thoughts, in good words and in good actions. It is truth which also teaches man to discern between what is right and wrong. It is man's adherence to truth which gives full meaning to the existence of god and grants strength and enduring life to him as well. Can the ethical principles god created have any life of their own if they find no support in the world of mankind?

Herein lies one of the great contributions of the prophet Zarathushtra. By placing truth at the center of existence of both god and man, he taught us that a meaningful life is not possible without truth, because truth is the ultimate source of all good insight, all good action, all good discernment and all good achievement.

To know is essential to acting correctly and justly; and the origin of all correct knowledge derives from the grasp of the truth. This is an astonishing doctrine in terms of the early intellectual history of the world, but it is a doctrine that is so powerful and persuasive, so vigorous and positive, that it became the central idea of all early Iranian thought. It is not possible to think of the history of old Iran without thinking of the veneration of truth among its people, and it is Zarathushtra who first conceived and formulated the central role which truth holds in all of existence.

But we may well ask why Zarathushtra was so preoccupied with the position of truth in the life of both god and man. He lived in a very remote age, long before there was a settled society in any modern sense of the term, and certainly long before the development of rich and powerful kingdoms where priests or philosophers could gather in peace and quiet in order to discuss the chief questions of existence and the nature of both god and man.

To find an answer to this question we must once again look into the works of the prophet and search his own words for clues to the problems Zarathushtra himself faced problems which caused him to meditate upon the nature of human behavior and its results upon the human condition. Once we do this, we find certain disturbing facts about the times in which he lived.

First, let us note, that Zarathushtra informs us that some of the nobles have been stealing the possessions of the true inheritors, and that in their greed, some of the priests have assisted them in this deceitful and dishonest activity. He informs us as well that even the old gods have ordained and hence permitted their followers to perform actions that result in dismal consequences for the rest of mankind. They have been destroying the pasture lands of the

truthful persons, they have threatened them as well, and there has arisen a rift among the peoples, one which has caused strife and destruction in family, clans and provinces. In short, the world seems to be torn in two by conflicting forces, and deceit and destruction seem rampant.

It is exactly under such troubled circumstances, when the world seems to be caught in the upheaval of contrary forces, when the past seems unfortunate and the future ever so dim, that a man of great insight like Zarathushtra wonders about what is right and wrong, what is just and unjust, and how the way to salvation might occur. It is exactly under such vexing conditions that he saw that the way for mankind to survive and create a good kingdom here on earth was to follow the principles which *Ahura Mazda*, in his higher wisdom, had created in harmony with truth.

Although millennia separate us today from the time of the prophet Zarathushtra, the problems of existence still persist. We are torn each day by conflict, sometimes in our family, sometimes in our profession, sometimes in our country and sometimes in the world at large.

We see deception, theft, pointless destruction present all over the face of the globe. Which way should we act? We often ask, looking for the way to resolve the problem, to end the anguish. What should we believe? we also ask, looking for guidance in the face of trouble and woes. Sometimes the answer lies within our power; most often there is no solution available to us on an individual basis. Nonetheless, we should follow the teachings of Zarathushtra and strive after the truth, giving life to it through our good thoughts, our good words and our good actions. Even though immediate solutions may elude us, the force of truth must persist. For one day the truth shall certainly prevail.

Thus in conclusion, I would like to paraphrase the words of Zarathushtra. What the prophet stated some 3,000 years ago is equally appropriate for all of us today.

Do persevere, for he shall grant to you the firm foundation of good thinking and the alliance of truth and wisdom. Come to terms with your reason, and bring to realization the most virtuous and blessed acts. If you are truthful, the Wise Lord shall grant to you the sun-like gain of good thinking for your whole lifetime. I tell these words to you: bear them in mind. Through the correct conception acquire for yourselves and your people an existence of good thinking. Let each of you try to win the other with truth, for This shall be of good gain for each of you. Y53:3-5

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