

A Choice Between Good and Evil

ZOROASTER, Gatha 30: Good Thoughts, Good Words, Good Deeds (ca.600 B.C.E.)

The Persian priest Zoroaster (zo-ro-ASS-tuhr), also known as Zarathustra (zar-uh-THUH-struh), reformed the religion of his people, separating the traditional deities into two groups. One group, led by Ahuramazda (ah-HOOR-uh-MAZ-duh), promoted goodness and ethical behavior; the other, led by Ahriman (AH-ree-mahn), was the force behind all evil. The names of the other gods were often personifications of an inner quality, such as Good Thought and Piety. Embraced by King Darius (dah-REE-uhs) (r. 521-486 s. C.E.), Zoroastrianism (zo-ro-ASS-tree-uh-nihz-uhm) remained a dominant belief in Persia for centuries. The passage below is Gatha 30, one of seventeen poems believed to be written by Zoroaster himself. The Gathas are part of a larger text known as the Yasna, which contains liturgical services, prayers, and hymns to the good gods.

Now will I proclaim to those who will hear the things that the understanding man should remember, for hymns unto Ahura and prayers to Good Thought; also, the joy that is with the heavenly lights, which through Right shall be beheld by him who wisely thinks. Hear with your ears the best things; look upon them with dear-seeing thought, for decision between the two Beliefs, each man for himself before the Great Consummation,¹ bethinking you that it be accomplished to our pleasure.

Now, the two primal Spirits, who revealed themselves in vision as Twins, are the Better and the Bad in thought, word, and action. And between these two, the wise once chose aright, the foolish not so. When these twin Spirits came together in the beginning, they established Life and Not-Life, and that at last, the Worst Existence shall be to the followers of the Lie,

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but the Best Thought shall be to him who follows Right.
Of these twin Spirits, he that followed the Lie chose doing the worst things; the holiest Spirit chose Right, he those clothes himself with the heavens as a garment. So likewise, they that are eager to please Ahura Mazda [choose] dutiful action
Between these two, the demons also chose not aright, for infatuation came upon them as they took counsel together so that they chose the Worst Thought. Then they rushed together to Violence, that they might enfeeble the world of man.
And to them [humans] came Dominion, Good Thought, and Right, and Piety gave continued life to their bodies and indestructibility...
So, when the punishment of these evil ones comes, then, O Mazda, at thy command, shall Good Thought establish the Dominion.

So may we be those who advance this world! O Mazda, and you other Ahuras, gather together the Assembly, that thoughts may meet where Wisdom is at home.
Then truly on the Lie shall come destruction [but those who choose good] shall be partakers in the promised reward in the fair abode of Good Thought, of Mazda, and of Right. If, O mortals, you follow those commandments that Mazda hath ordained- of happiness and pain, the long punishment for the liars, and blessings for the righteous- then hereafter shall ye have bliss.

READING QUESTIONS

1. How does Zoroaster explain the creation of all things that exist? What role do humans play in creation?
2. What are the attributes of the good and the evil gods?
3. How does a person become a follower of either the good gods or the bad gods? What happens to the good people and the evil people at the end of the world?

