



## AŠĒM VOHŪ

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**AŠĒM VOHŪ**, the second of the four great prayers of the Zoroastrians, the others being: Ahuna vairyō (Y. 27.13), Yeϑhē hātəm (Y. 27.15), and Airyə'mā išyō (Y. 54.1). The prayer is transmitted in Y. 27.14, but most of the manuscripts give only the first two words. The three important prayers in Y. 27.13-15 form the introduction to the *Gāθās* of Zarathustra. The language (formerly called the "Gāθā dialect," now "Old Avestan") is the same as in the *Gāθās*. The text occurs or is mentioned in the Avesta about 200 times. Its purpose is to invoke Aša "truth, true word, especially the truth which is represented by the Zoroastrian religion." While reciting the text of the Avesta one needs the help of truth and must concentrate on it. The Ašəm vohū, like the other great prayers, can be looked upon as a kind of interpunction marking off the chapters and sections of the texts and so revealing the structure intended by the Sasanian redactors (B. S. Schlerath, *Avesta-Wörterbuch* II, Wiesbaden, 1968, p. 26).

It is very likely that the Ašəm vohū was one of the prayers used from the earliest times by the Zoroastrians at the five daily services (times of prayer) they had to observe. The text of the prayer is as follows:

*ašəm vohu vahištəm astī*

*uštā astī uštā ahmāi*

*hyaϑ ašāi vahištāi ašəm.*



A number of difficulties are presented by its grammatical analysis. *Vohū* can be an adjective meaning “good” or a noun meaning “possession.” Thus, the first line may mean either: “Truth (is) good, it is best” or “Truth is the best possession.” In the second line *uštā* may be “at wish” (loc. sing. of *ušti-* “desire”) or “desires” (nom. plur. nt. of the past part. pass. of *vas-* “to wish”) while *ahmāi* may be interpreted by itself as “to him,” that is, “to the Zoroastrian,” or may be connected with the following words *hyaṭ ašāi*, in which case we have “to it which (is) the truth.” Others emend *ahmāi* to *\*ahmē* “to us.”

As a result of the above ambiguities we find several divergent translations in the specialist literature: (a) “Truth is good, is what-is-best. Desire is (= is really existing, will be realized), desire for that which is best truth, o truth” (H. L. Lommel, *Die Yāšt’s des Avesta*, Göttingen and Leipzig, 1927, p. 9 n. 2, partly following F. C. Andreas; for *uštā astī* see also P. Thieme, *Der Fremdling in Rigveda*, Leipzig, 1938, p. 26). (b) “Truth is the best possession. At wish belongs (at wish) to it, to the best truth, the truth” (H. Humbach, *Die Gathas des Zarathustra I*, Heidelberg, 1959, p. 30 n. 39). (c) “Good Aša (“Truth”) is what-is-best. In accordance with (its) wish, in accordance with (his) wish Aša belongs (lit. is) to him who is best towards Aša.” (I. Gershevitch, *BSOAS* 25, 1962, p. 369). (d) “Truth is the best possession: Spontaneously (*uštā*) Truth belongs at (his) wish (*uštā*) to him is best towards Truth” (idem, *IJ* 18, 1976, p. 81). (e) “Aša (is) good, it is best. According to wish it is, according to wish \*it shall be (*\*hyāṭ*) for us. Aša belongs to Aša Vahišta.” (Boyce, *Zoroastrianism I*, 1975, p. 62). These translations cannot be discussed here, but it should be noted that the last one is based on two emendations of the text.

An Old Sogdian version of the *Ašām vohū* prayer has been discovered in a Manichean Sogdian fragment (Gershevitch, *IJ* 18, 1976, p. 81). From the phonological peculiarities of the text Gershevitch infers that the Sogdians knew the prayer before they became converted to the religion of Zarathustra. Hence the prayer could have been (according Gershevitch) pan-Iranian and pre-Zoroastrian. Indeed the prayer does not convey “anything that could not have been said of *Ṛta* [= Avestan *Aša*] from the time *Ṛta* was first thought of, in the fifteenth century B.C. or earlier.”

See also [Aša](#).



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## BIBLIOGRAPHY

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For recent discussion of the prayer and its possible translations, see H. Humbach, "A Western Approach to Zarathushtra," *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute* 51, 1984, pp. 48-54.