

Zarathushtra as Victor in the Verbal Contest

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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."¹ 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."² 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'.³

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

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.

