

ALARMING TRENDS IN THE GATHIC STUDIES OF LATE

Dr. Kersey H. Antia, Feb 20, 2019; updated Apr 30, 2019

Most students of Zoroastrianism follow the great tradition set by James Darmesteter and then of Christian Bartholomae, (under whom my own teachers, Dr. J.M. Unvala and Dr. I.J.S. Taraporevala studied in Germany). The field of Avestan studies, however, disintegrated thereafter. However, a new school of Gathic research has recently emerged, led by the late Karl Hoffman, its main proponents now being Helmut Humbach, Johanna Narten, and, above all, Jean Kellens. They see great similarity between the Gathic and the Vedic texts and claim that every other Gathic verse has a Rigvedic parallel. Kellens¹ even maintain that the Gathic teachings “may have been something new” but there is such striking similarity between them and the Vedas that the Gathic text “is the eleventh Mandala of the Rigveda, only written in a slightly different dialect.”

Those scholars outside of this school disagree with it strongly. Even Stanley Insler whose expertise of the Vedic language greatly facilitated his translation of the Gathic dialect does not at all subscribe to this view and Shaul Shaked sees it as “deeply disturbing,”² because it concentrates on the rituals to the exclusion of other factors and overemphasizes the Indian parallels to them while it under-emphasizes the Iranian tradition, even making it rather irrelevant which will culminate in compromising a proper appraisal of the Gathas.

Shaked objects that by behavior Kellens means only ritual behavior in the Gathas which violates the clear meaning of the text and is apparently governed by “the author’s insistence on divesting the text of any cosmological or ontological sense.” Even though the word “Yema” means twins, Kellens strives hard to ensure that by “Yema” no personal metaphor like ‘twin’ could literally apply.”

An essential factor in deciding which version is reasonably acceptable is its “historical probability and cultural content” as far as it is possible for us to ascertain it. Although comparisons with the Vedas are important in ferreting out the linguistic meaning of the Gathic

1 Kellens, Jean, and Prods O. Skjærvø. *Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism*. Costa Mesa, Calif: Mazda Publishers, 2000, p. 45.

2 “‘Mind’ and ‘Power’ in the Gathas: Ritual Notions or Cosmic Entities?” in Cereti, Carlo G., Mauro Maggi, Elio Provasi, and Gherardo Gnoli. *Religious themes and texts of pre-Islamic Iran and Central Asia: studies in honour of Professor Gherardo Gnoli on the occasion of his 65th birthday on 6th December 2002*. Wiesbaden: Reichert, 2003.

verses (as both are rooted in the hoary past), neither of them are inherently preferable if “the internal Iranian diachronic correspondences” are fairly considered. However, Shaked finds that Kellens’ attempts “to exclude the notion of an autonomous spirit in the Gathas, or of any existence except a ritual one, though the Gathic text does not say so (or I may add, does not even imply so in any way), but it “resides primarily in” Kellens’ (and his co-author E. Periard’s) preconceived idea” as they expound it in “Les Textes vieil-avestiques” (Wiesbaden, Volume I, 1988-1991, p. 155). Even though the dualistic world-view pervades all the Zoroastrian texts, including the Gathas, even “by admission of Kellens himself,” it hardly makes good methodological sense to insist on reading away any dualism, even when, in plain reading, the idea is there.” If Kellen banishes dualism from the Gathas, Shaked expects him to explain when and how it showed up in post-Gathic literature (and I may even ask why?).

What Shaked finds “striking” in Kellens’ and Pirart’s texts is that they are “forced in a narrow direction, and are quite “hair-splitting” in their attempts at negating the Gathic ethics for connoting and affirming a ritually based ethics, can any one agree the two are interconnected and yet maintain the Gathas only deal with sacrificial rituals and nothing else? Shaked does not find Kellens’ hypothesis emanating naturally from the Gathas but rather from his own presuppositions. Kellens’ views “lead him further and further away from an understanding of the Gathic teachings as “a living religion somehow connected with later Zoroastrianism.” But “Kellens’ efforts have the apparent aim of obscuring any connection between the Gathas and later Zoroastrianism.”

Again, in 'Khshathra Kellens sees ritual power and not power, as held by most scholars, and in the word *Daa* he sees the meaning of merely “putting them in place” and not in the traditional sense of creating things since he holds that Ahura Mazda is not a creating God, which also happens to be the title of one of his articles in French in 1989. However, Shaked calls it “an unproven assertion” because the verbs *Daa* and *Tash* used in this context clearly imply that Mazda both creates as well as fashions them.

Since Kellens claims to be a strict philologist, Shaked wonders, (as I do when I read his texts in English), “why these ideological bias should pervade Kellens’ work (as also Humbach’s to some extent)” as if “the ancient Indo-Iranians had nothing on their mind except a concern with ritual, its precise operations and the right frame of mind which makes it possible for the ritual to be carried out. (As a Magian as well as a clinical psychologist, I see one’s native obsessive compulsive tendencies at work here, both in Kellens’ as well as among the Vedic priests who seem to have so impressed Kellens, though albeit the Vedics do not get too far

preoccupied with ritualism to neglect other salient aspects of religion and philosophy). Moreover, I wonder why Shaked allows, even as an apparent concession to Kellens or his school's assumption that the Gathas were composed to accompany the ritual, which is the Yasna, which Shaked knows is much younger than the Gathas and is composed in the Young Avesta and as many, if not most, scholars see the Gathas as a reaction against the Vedic religion, including its ritualism and none of its polytheistic beliefs enters the Gathas, or rather could possibly enter it as the Gathas seem to be a reaction to them despite Kellens, following Narten, seeing Amesha Spentas as "Gods" and other entities in the Gathas?

Shaked does, however recognize the merits of Kellens in the insights he provides for the linguistic understanding of the Gathas as well as in a very rigorous philological interpretation of the Gathas. Thus, he is indeed "the most conspicuous spokesman of the Vedicising trend in Gathic interpretation." But his zeal (amounting almost to an obsessive nature, in my humble clinical and Magian view) to interpret the Gathas in a highly consistent manner has led him "to impose an implausibly narrow framework on the religion and the conceptions of the Gathas." However, Shaked finds his own approach more or less in agreement with Gerardo Gnole's in *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland: a study in the origins of Mazdaism and related problems*, Naples 1980, pp. 181-198, which I myself found very illuminating except for the late date assigned to Zoroaster. Zoroastrians have excelled in various Western disciplines, at least in India, but they have produced few scholars that excel or equal Westerners in the study of their religion and therefore I hope the example of Western scholars will inspire them to make up for this glaring lacuna.

In his *Essays on Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism*, translated and edited by Prods Oktor Skjærvø, Mazda Publishers, Inc. 2000) which I find it necessary to include here in addition to Shaked's paper, as it supports Kellens' views further and quotes Kellens as saying: "The few arrangements I have made in favor of dualism and eschatology have not brought me to a reevaluation of the texts with less emphasis on the ritual aspect. Not only are all Mazdean concepts known to us through liturgical texts, but they are articulated together with the performance of the ritual which constantly stresses the dualist opposition or entails the eschatology. This is why I stress the fact that the old Mazdean ritual is speculative." So this has not led him to alter his views on dualism though in the same texts he admits his earlier "denial" of eschatology in Zoroastrianism was wrong, albeit "under the influence of Helmut Humbach's *Die Gathas des Zarathustra* (1959). It is surprising, however, that his profound and total emphasis on the ritual aspect of the seventeen chapters of the Gathas (which are but a small part of the

Yasna ceremony consisting of seventy-two chapters many of which, except Hapta Haaiti are from the Young Avesta and so replete with dualistic concepts. The Yasna ceremony also being a part of the Vendidad ceremony may be a different matter perhaps). While, on the one hand, Kellens, being an ardent philologist bases his findings solely on linguistic grounds at the exclusion of all other factors, which could be as important as the textual ones, such as history, culture, literature, myths, even the testimony by Greeks, etc. On the other hand, his findings do suggest an over-emphasis on ritualism among both the Iranians in the post-Gathic period and the Vedics. However, as most writers attribute this ritualistic tendency to the old Vedic notions dying hard, as it so often happens in such circumstance and resurfacing in Zoroastrianism despite the Reform brought by the prophet. However, the uncompromising, single-minded “narrow” emphasis on ritualism and texts do not enable Kellens to explain, as Shaked asks him, how and when did dualism then enter into Zoroastrianism to become its second nature and mantra. Any failure to answer this question convincingly will set at naught the very reason behind Zarathushtra’s Reform which was basically aimed at the prevailing Vedism.

Moreover, Kellens interprets the very important eschatological concept of Chinvat Pul as “the bridge of him who makes a heap/pile” and posits that “it contains no moral connotation, but a mythological memory” which may well be correct on philological grounds but so incorrect on all other grounds to a practicing Zoroastrian as well as to all those familiar with Zoroastrianism.

While almost all linguists see in Yasna 30.3 the origin of dualism, Kellens’ linguistic expertise prompts him to deny it: Stanza Yasna 30.3 does not propound a myth on the origin of good and evil – the verbs are not in the past tense; it outlines an analysis of human behavior perceived in the narrow context of ritual activity.” He insists: “It is not the term of dualism that we see in the Gathas, but the seed of a psychology, caught at the moment other idea of an “existence of thought” (ahu-manangha) is as yet impossible to conceive as separate from ritual activity.” He hastens to add: “Ahura Mazda enjoys incomparable prestige and is omnipresent in the text but is not the sole divine being,” but beside Him are the six Amesha Spentas. It is “significant that Western scholars are reluctant to call them gods, preferring ‘entities’ or by their indigenous name or as Archangels, ‘but nothing speaks for seeing the entities as aspects of Ahura Mazda. They are persons in their own right, who can claim, as does the great God (Ahura Mazda), the title of AHURA (Yasna 30.9 and Yasna 31.4).” Quoting Johanna Narten’s 1982 conclusion that the Gathas do not confine themselves to Amesha Spentas only but they “form a list that remains open. They can be recognized and counted only by carefully

nothing the elements of personification scattered throughout the Gathic text.” It is surprising, however, that the scholars could not detect it until 1982 or if they detected it, they did not perceive or interpret it as Narten did. While this subject pertains to the scholarly domain and debate, in my humble analysis, Western psyche is so zealously conditioned and programmed over millennia for perceiving God in its own strict uncompromising monotheistic mold, that it often constrains its ability or willingness, consciously or unconsciously, to comprehend the Eastern concept of perceiving the Supreme Being or, Brahma, to say very succinctly, in a very comprehensive way such as One in All or All in One as I have already noted on my discourse on Zoroastrian dualism.