

MONOTHEISM OR DUALISM

Dr. Kersey Antia, April 20, 2019; updated September 29, 2019

Mary Boyce and her adherents contend that under the influence of Western ideas the Parsis asserted that they were monotheist and not dualist. While this may well be true in some cases, not only those among them well-versed in their lore, such as B.T. Anklesaria, were able to quote the Pahlavi texts for arguing against dualism, but also laymen such as S.A. Kapadia, a barrister-at-law did so. That was long before Anklesaria, in a manner quite reminiscent of Shaul Shaked almost a century later, except that he sees the two “opposing” spirits as also playing a part in man’s role “as a free agent”. The struggle between the two spirits, he warns is not to be confused with the idea of dualism. The Evil Spirit is not endowed with any of the attributes of the Almighty; neither is he placed in opposition to, or made a rival of, God. I have carefully read the exhaustive comments made by Western scholars on this subject, some in favour, and the majority of them against the theory of dualism.

As a great deal of controversy has been raised on the doctrine of two rival spirits, I think it necessary to quote from the Avesta, and also from the later Pahlavi text, to prove that dualism is not one of the doctrines preached by Zoroaster.

“Ahura-Mazda, through omniscience, knew that Ahriman exists...”

“The Evil Spirit, on account of backward knowledge, was not aware of the existence of Ahura-Mazda....”

“He [Ahura-Mazda] sets the vault into which the Evil Spirit fled, in that metal; he brings the land of hell back for the enlargement of the world, the renovation arises in the universe by his will, and the world is immortal for ever and everlasting....”

“...So it is declared that Ahura-Mazda is supreme in omniscience and goodness, and UNRIVALLED in splendour.

“Revelation is the explanation of both spirits together: one is he who is independent of unlimited time, because Ahura-Mazda and the region, religion, and time of Ahura-Mazda were and are and ever will be; while Ahriman in darkness, with backward understanding and desire for destruction, was in the abyss, and it is he who *will not be*.”

Kapadia quotes Dr. West to support his stand: “The reader will search in vain for any confirmation of the foreign notion that Mazda-worship is decidedly more dualistic than Christianity is usually shown to be by orthodox writers, or for any allusion to the descent of the good and evil spirits from a personification of ‘boundless time’ as asserted by strangers to the faith. (Dr. E. W. West, Introduction to *The Sacred*

Books of the East, Vol. 18.)

“The evils (are) employed by Angro Mainyus to retard the progress of, and if possible, destroy mankind. It is quite evident, that the sole aim of Zoroaster’s teachings is to raise God’s best and fairest work – man – to that level of human perfection by good words, good thoughts and good deeds, so as to enlist the services of the Good Spirit.” (*The Teachings of Zoroaster and the Philosophy of the Parsi Religion*, Kessinger Publishing, LLC, The Orient Press, London, 1908, pp. 26-28).

Kapadia does not miss the Gathic message underlying with Pahlavi texts: “A good portion of the Zoroastrian theology is directed towards protecting mankind in his efforts to fight against Angro Mainyus and his wicked accomplices.

“That one wish which Ahura-Mazda, the Lord, contemplates, as regards men, is this, that ‘Ye shall fully understand Me; for every one who fully understands Me comes after Me and strives for My satisfaction.’” *Dina-i Mainog-i Khirad* (p. 31).

A PROPER UNDERSTANDING OF ZOROASTRIAN DUALISM

As Shaul Shaked has shown, the Sasanians were generally not “self-conscious dualists”. He sees “very little by way of dualistic assertion” in Sasanian texts nor is dualism mentioned in any Sasanian inscriptions or in any Christian polemics against Zoroastrians. (Dualism in Transformation: Varieties of Religion in Sasanian Iran, School of Oriental and African Studies, University of London, 1994, p. 5.) After reviewing various accounts about this subject, Shaked reaches a “straightforward” conclusion that there were too many varieties of dualism to figure out which one was the standard or official one. (p. 20). As a result of his study he arrives at the conclusion that ethical dualism cannot allow a symmetry of the two powers as the difference between God and the devil is too great to allow them the same rank (p. 22), as I have noted earlier at length. He also adds that the conflict between the two powers is neither very significant in the Gathas or in much of the later Avesta except in the Vendidad which may be the last text composed in Avesta during the early Parthian or late Achaemenid period.

He therefore declares that “the assertion that dualism is the only satisfactory form of religion, may have come about at the end of a long period of contacts and polemics with Jews and later with Christians” and Manicheans who rivaled with Zoroastrians in propagating dualism. He quotes W.B. Henning as maintaining that “the dualism of Zoroaster as the only logical answer to the problems of the universe, more

satisfying to the thinking mind than the one given by the author of the Book of Job.” (Henning 1951, p. 46). He adds Henning himself held that “dualism is by no means a conception of a symmetrical opposition of two powers.” His investigations leads Shaked to uphold that dualism can provide different modes of solution to the problem of evil. (Indeed, Shaked found many different dualistic versions prevalent in Sasanian Iran). His conclusion is worth noting and it seems to support my views expressed as a Magian in my paper on this subject: “Typologically, dualism cannot be considered a separate category of religion. Its kinship with monotheism is so close as to make it necessary to assume that dualism comes into existence only as an intensification of a trait inherent in every monotheism. Monotheism, by its concentration of the cosmic power in the figure of a single divine entity, has to grapple with the problem of evil much more acutely than a polytheistic system, and it must provide an answer which places evil somewhere along the line that leads from God to the cosmos. Every monotheism is, in this sense, a dualism. Every dualism, by the fact that it tends to place evil on a somewhat lower level than God, is, in reality, a monotheism. The difference between them is one of degree, of intensity, of emphasis, not of substance.

“Dualism in its historical manifestation appears to be a complex phenomenon, not merely a juxtaposition of two powers set in opposition to each other. It may come as a disappointment to notice that it contains some ambiguities, but on the other hand it may give us satisfaction to understand it not as an abstract philosophical system, but as a three dimensional historical reality, with all the inconsistencies and uncertainties that this may be expected to entail.” (p. 26).

Since I noted these very same views prior to reading Shaked’s, I was very much gratified to read them as any views countering dualism only invited rejection in view of the firmly entrenched position of the proponents of dualism in our time.