

The Question of Assyrian Influence on Zarathushtra's Teachings in the Light of Yasna 44

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The achievements of pre-historic Assyrian, Summerian, Akkadian and Babylonian civilizations are so fascinating. I have recently even written about the history and relation of Elam (ancient Persia) and Media with some of these nations.

So when I read about a University of Helsinki professor, Simo Parpola's treatise "The Originality of Teachings of Zarathustra in the light of Yasna 44,"¹ I naturally felt drawn to it. However, I remained unconvinced by Parpola's arguments.

"The Iranian prophet Zarathushtra has been hailed the world's *first* (italics mine) theologian and religious innovator," observes Parpola at the outset, which contradicts his thesis that Zarathushtra merely emulated the Assyrian beliefs and practices. His "teachings have had a profound influence on Greek philosophy, Judaism, and Christianity. Yet precious little of certainty is known about the man himself, and the origin of his ideas," which seems to afford him leeway to promulgate his own novel theory. "His teachings are preserved only in late sources."

Gathas represents his teachings and their archaic languages suggests a prehistoric date. If Parpola had considered the fact that this archaic language is universally acknowledged as an eastern Iranian dialect, it may have vitiated his thesis, which may be the reason why he does not mention it. But he "supports their attribution to the prophet (himself)": The Gathas (Yasna 46.1) according to him suggests that "Zarathushtra had to leave his homeland (which he arbitrarily and wrongly presumes to be in Western Iran) and escape persecution by migrating to northeastern Iran." From now on his thesis rests on this false assumption.

Yasna 44 Queries and Assyrian Queries

All but the twenty-first stanza of Gathic Yasna 44 introduce queries with, "What I ask you tell me truly O Lord!" These queries deal with cosmological and theological issues, reliability of followers, fighting enemies, remuneration

¹ In Cohen, Chaim, Avi Hurvitz, and Shalom M. Paul. *Sefer Moshe: the Moshe Weinfeld jubilee volume: studies in the Bible and the Ancient Near East, Qumran, and Post-Biblical Judaism*. Winona Lake: Eisenbrauns, 2004.

for services rendered, etc. Two other Gathas also contain formulaic phrases repeated in a similar manner but are not so systematically repeated as the former, he claims. But the later Avesta also frequently refers to Zarathushtra asking Ahura Mazda about various matters, which have nothing to do with extispicy.

Such systematic refrains as in Yasna 44 are hardly seen elsewhere in the Gathas: “There is thus every reason to believe that the formula had a special significance and should not be taken as a mere poetic or stylistic device,” asserts Parpola but ignores evidence to support such a personal presumption. Clearly, it was an integral and essentially important part of the queries themselves, (but he does not explain how), without which the latter would not have been complete or presentable to the godhead. (This defies the very definition of the godhead of Zarathushtra). As such, Parpola presupposes the existence of a tradition in which such a formula had a well-established and definite place, which is at best questionable and is only an assumption on his part, (and contradicts what Zarathushtra says in Yasna 32.1. “The consistent use of the formula implies that Zarathustra accepted the tradition behind it without reservations,” but Parpola does not explain these traditions of extispicy which, as shown later, were so very abhorrent and repulsive to what Yasna 44 stands for. Moreover, “the consistent use of formula” in one culture *per se* does not necessarily convey the same concept in another culture. Parpola only explains away how these two formulas from different times and climes with so little cultural and linguistic contacts between them, as explained in this paper, can be said to have a common source and common tradition.

Moreover, Yasna 44 formula is addressed to Ahura Mazda, while the Assyrian one is addressed to the sun-god. He acknowledges that “the formula goes back to a common Indo-European epic tradition” but quixotically finds such a parallel vague and distant, which is at best problematic as Zarathushtra belonged to this common Indo-European tradition and none else. But he finds “the introductory formulas of the Assyrian queries to the sun-god is ... word for word identical with the query formula of Yasna 44.” He assumes: “this parallel also perfectly matches the formula of Yasna 44 functionally and is found literally ‘next door’ to the prophet, whose Iranian homeland in the early first millennium B.C.E. was for many centuries under major Assyrian cultural influence.” Parpola’s main thesis is based on this hypothesis which is too far-fetched as Zarathushtra lived only in eastern Iran. Parpola’s assumption that Zarathushtra’s homeland was western Iran is not supported by most scholars. Rather, his Gathic renderings in the eastern Iranian language clearly reflect him as an eastern Iranian. Moreover, even western Iran was not under as much Assyrian cultural influence as Parpola presumes since many historians contend that Assyria did not penetrate mountainous eastern Iran and its distinct Elamite religion interacted for long with Persian religion, which is so evident from PF

(Persepolis Fortification) tablets. Linguistic similarities between the Rig Veda and the Gathas as well as their societal structure have led various authors such as Mary Boyce (1975, 1982), A. Shapur Shahbazi (1977), T. Burrow (1973), and G. Gnoli (1980) to place Zarathushtra in northeastern Iran or northern Central Asia during the twelfth or eleventh century B.C.²

Moreover if we take into account what Boyce so vehemently asserts about how unknown and unique Zoroaster's teachings were from any thing known at the time in the Near East, Parpola's hypothesis would fall short of any validity "Before the arrival of Zoroastrianism in the Near East," asserts Mary Boyce, "none of these individual (Zoroastrian) beliefs is to be found in any religion there, still less was anything like Zoroaster's coherent theological system known."³ This too goes against the very root of Parpola's thesis.

Qualitative and Theological Difference Between the Two Queries

He also draws numerous parallels with Assyrian Oracle queries with the formula preceding the sub-sections of Yasna 44. He also assumes considerable typological and stylistic parallels between them. "The religious and doctrinal queries of the former (Yasna 44.2-7) are to him paralleled by Assyrian kings." But translation of these and all other Yasna 44 verses by independent and prominent Gatha scholars such as Insler do not bear it out.

The question in Yasna 44.12-13 regarding the distinction between the righteous and the wicked, per Parpola have a parallel in the Assyrian appointment queries. "Even the queries" couched "in the first-person singular in Yasna 44.9, 14, 17 have parallels in the Assyrian material." Finally, he asserts "there is considerable agreement in the formulation of the queries in Yasna 44.4 and SAA 4, including entire phrases found in similar contexts. *All* (Parpola's italics) major types of queries represented in the Assyrian corpus are also represented in Yasna 44, and the complex phrasing of the individual queries, so typical of Yasna 44, is also characteristic of the Assyrian queries," which is, however, not borne out by nature of the queries – Yasna 44 queries pertain to spiritual and theological matters, whereas Assyrian queries do not.

He admits, "there are also differences between these two sets of queries, but considering the relatively small size of the sample in Yasna 44, the linguistic differences, and the long textual history of the Gathas," (nevertheless he finds) "the degree and range of similarity quite astounding." But these

2 See M. Boyce's *History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. I and II, Leiden, Brill, 1975, 1982 and T. Burrow, The "Proto-Indo Aryans," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*, 1973, pp. 123-140. See also G. Gnoli *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland*, Naples, Instituto Universitario Orientale, 1980.

3 *A History of Zoroastrianism*, Vol. III, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1991, p.364

similarities, if they can properly constitute similarities, are not sufficient to prove their commonality, nor do they deal with the same kind of spiritual content and issues as seen above.

He explains, “the queries of Yasna 44 as an *Iranian offshoot* (Parpola’s italics) of the Mesopotamian extispicy tradition exemplified by the Assyrian queries of SAA 4. while Parpola provides five examples of this parallelism, they do not suffice to support his claim, nor do these examples succeed in drawing parallels between the highly abstract and ethical concepts in Yasna 44 with the rather not so abstract or ethical content in the Assyrian queries. To put them both on the same level of spiritual content takes bold imagination. He regards “Yasna 44 ... as a collection of extispicy queries by which Zarathushtra, or his patron, Vishtaspa, like the Assyrian kings - - - had sought divine guidance in matters involving decisions of crucial importance,” such as compensation for prophetic services, which is referred to in Yasna 44.18.

However, Stanley Insler explains it as a metaphor for a devoted following of Zarathushtra’s teachings, and most probably Vishtaspa and his circle,⁴ and his translation of this verse is “How shall I win through truth this prize, namely ten mares together with their stallions and a camel, a prize which is to inspire completeness and immortality in me just as thou hast received these two for Thyself?” Insler further observes: “This seems not to be the payment for Zarathushtra’s priestly services, but a metaphor for a group of diverse adherents to the prophet’s message. - - - The pointed use of *Aspao* and *Ushtrēm* immediately suggests Vishtaspa, Jamaspa, Frashaoshtra, and Zarathushtra may well have intended to describe their families in this manner (pp. 251-2).” Further, Insler states that the Yasna 44 formula “is surely intended to reflect the persistence of Zarathushtra’s own determination and to clarify his own position regarding the issues under investigation. - - - But these questions are essentially rhetorical, for the prophet then admits that he has asked about all these things as a means to define himself for the role of Ahura Mazda as the creator of everything (p. 241),” which is a far cry from the rather mundane and rather primitive Assyrian extispicy formula. Since Insler is world renown for his expertise in Gathic as well as Rig-Vedic languages and literature, his interpretations render Parpola’s rather ridiculous and hyperbolic.

What is Extispicy?

I for one did not find any explanation for the word extispicy in the Parpolas (and the dictionary too is not of much help) but Ronate Rolle comes close to describing it though without using the word extispicy: “A Scythian asked the Assyrian King Asarhaddon for the hand of one of his daughters in marriage.” The Assyrian King, unsure whether the suitor would keep his word, and greatly

4 *The Gathas of Zarathushtra*, E.J. Brill, Leiden, 1975, p. 73.

fearing his military powers, turned to the god Samaa with an oracular question, as was the custom at the time. He wanted to know whether his future son-in-law would indeed do ‘everything’ which would benefit him (Asarhaddon). The god’s answer was ascertained by the Assyrians through the examination of animals’ entrails. This involved the opening up of an animal (usually a sheep) and the close scrutiny of the various features of the innards: how the intestines lay, what the kidneys were like (a missing kidney augered ill, a small kidney was important); the nature of the liver was crucial. Any peculiarity, for example, an unusual color, defects, disorders, hypertrophies, etc. were interpreted, even the relationship of the parts to each other.

“We do not know exactly how the story of the marriage between the Scythian King and the Assyrian Princess turned out – whether the gall bladder of the sacrificial sheep was in the correct position, or its intestines jerked at the right moment ... but we can assume that the Scythian did indeed receive his Assyrian lady in marriage, since he is mentioned as an ally of the Assyrian King.”⁵ The reader can now realize how alien is the practice of extispicy to the lofty teachings of Yasna 44 and all other Gathas.

Various Questionable Assumptions About Zarathushtra

“The extispicy hypothesis necessitated their reservation in written form, as answers to them, (he presumes), had great practical significance to the prophet,” per Parpola. However, all other sayings of Zarathushtra have been preserved too, though the Persians did not develop their own written script until the early Sasanian times, which he admits with a comment that then “the significance of their original function probably was no longer known.” However, he does not abrogate on or describe their original function from a Gathic context and relies again on probability, a very recurrent and conspicuous tendency in his thesis.

Parpola contends that these similarities necessarily imply that Zarathushtra must have been familiar with Assyrian culture, ... “especially in the seventh century, when Assyrian control over Iran was at its highest.” However, Zarathushtra lived long before 1000 B.C. at least, as per most scholars.

“Since the Assyrians did not control eastern Iran,” he admits, “exposure to Assyrian cultural influence was possible only in the western parts of Iran.” Thus, his thesis falls apart as he chooses to ignore the overwhelming evidence that Zarathushtra belonged to the eastern Iran. Here Parpola embraces the classical and Islamic writers who place Zarathushtra’s birthplace in western Iran, without refuting or even referring to all the historical and linguistic evidence that unquestionably places Zarathushtra’s birthplace in eastern Iran,

5 Rolle, Renate. *The World of the Scythians*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1989, p. 71.

as Mary Boyce and others have done. He rather chooses the now discredited evidence of the *Bundahishn* and relies only on authors that agree with him. The absence of any reference to the stalwart work of Mary Boyce in this context is puzzling. Such selectivity mars his otherwise trial blazing thesis. (See also Gherardo Gnoli's *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland, a Study of Mazdeism and related Problems*, Naples, Instituto Universatario Orientale, Seminario di Studi, Series Minor 7, which is surprisingly quoted by Parpola, albeit selectively.)

“But how could Zarathustra,” Parpola muses, “have gained knowledge of the Assyrian haruspical lore (*barutu*), a discipline that was jealously guarded from outsiders as the ‘secret of the god and king’ and thus was not even accessible to ordinary Assyrians?” If so, why was Zarathushtra initiated in it? Secretive cults are antithetical to the egalitarian spirit of Zoroastrians, which is at least in theory, a universal religion open to all.

“Either he received his training from an Assyrian or Assyrian trained haruspex as a vassal court, or, more likely, he was a Median or Mannean aristocrat who, like Daniel, had in his youth been deported to Assyria and been schooled in Mesopotamian religious and scientific lore as part of the imperial indoctrination program.” To presume Zarathushtra to be a Mannean aristocrat would be a very difficult task to say the least, next only to proving him to be a Median aristocrat.

Zarathushtra was not a Median but an eastern Iranian, speaking an eastern Iranian dialect that had long since been extinct when the Iranians occupied Media, nor was he an aristocrat, but a *Zaotar*, a priest. Above all, any discipline that was “the secret of the god and the king” was an anathema to Zarathushtra, who envisioned a universal and egalitarian faith that brooked no distinction between the king and the commoner as long as they followed Asha (truth), and, the evil and violent king (*Dushshathra*) had no place in his theology. The unprecedented brutality and inhumanity of Assyrian kings as is uniformly reported and condemned by Assyriologists themselves have no place in Zarathushtra's theology.

Views of the Prominent Assyriologists Different from Parpola's

According to Marc Van De Mierop, 300 Assyrian tablets containing omens to be used by diviners and exocists have been discovered so far. Omens occupied or governed every aspect of Assyrian life, including movements of birds, animals or physical characteristics of domesticated animals, per him as well as most other Assyriologists.

Anything unusual was even more ominous, “diviners would often cut open sheep to examine their livers and all discolorations, and anomalies were considered ominous.” If the left lobe of the sheep’s liver was covered with membrane and was abnormal they would divine that the king will die from illness. The patterns made by rising smoke, formations made when oil was poured on water, etc. would lead to interpretations.” The list of omens kept increasing. For instance, the color of a cat made a good or bad omen. If the moon eclipsed on a certain day, the crown prince would be taken from his palace in fetters, presumable to protect him from any harm coming from the eclipse. If omens were not propitious, efforts were made to change the god’s minds so that the king would not be harmed. Omens permeated every stratum of society and exorcists were hired to beseech the gods to remove evil or misfortune, comments Mieroop.

Mieroop adds that medical texts were based on the same format as the omen texts, as well as on the same concept that one’s observations governed the outcome of the disease, e.g., if the physician runs into a black dog or pig, the sick person will die. If he sees a white pig, the sick person will get well. The diagnosis was also based on factors considered medically relevant today, but also on factors such as the curl of the man’s chest hair.⁶

Even as he notes the high achievements of the Assyrians in astronomy and medicine, Georges Roux observes that they regarded illness as a “punishment from the gods for their sins,” or non-observance of taboos, minor errors in the performance of religious rites, etc. They lived in the fear of the offended gods striking them hard. The priests saw the role of gods in a patient’s illness with gods even letting demons possess the patient or attack whichever body part they prefer. The gods could even subject a person to the spells of a witch or sorcerer.⁷

A review of the “Ancient Near Eastern Texts” edited by James B. Pritchard⁸ can prove useful in deciphering and ascertaining the supreme status of Ashur as claimed by Parpola. Such a review, however fails to endorse his claim. Rather, it reflects the existence of a variety of deities too many to detail here. The interested reader, however, can refer to the following pages in this text to realize their numerousness (pp. 57, 62, 100, 205-6 – lists an usually long array of deities –, 275, 277, 282, 293, 294, 298-301, 312, 317, 450-1, 533, 538-41 – another long list of deities--, 537, 560, 573, 576-86, 605-6, 646-7, etc.) Some of the deities may be Babylonian but none is denoted or depicted as

6 Van de Mieroop, Marc. *A History of the Ancient Near East, ca. 3000-323 B.C.*, Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2004, pp. 245-7.

7 Roux, Georges, *Ancient Iraq*, Cleveland, The World Publishing Co. Cleveland, 1964, pp. 305-6.

8 Pritchard, James B: *Ancient Near Eastern Texts*, Princeton, N. J.: Princeton University Press, 1969, Third Edition, 710 pages.

being omnipotent as Parpola makes out Ashur to be. As Pritchard covers the entire ancient near eastern tradition relating to the Old Testament, we do not find there any concept even remotely comparable to Yahweh or Ahura Mazda.

Thorkild Jacobsen also observes that “The Gods who formed the assembly of the Assyrian gods were legion. It is not possible to characterize more than a few prominent ones.”⁹

Thus, the Zoroastrian belief system is apparently so different from the Assyrian one, that the two have nothing in common.

Zarathushtra As An Assyrian Haruspex Under Assyrian Tutelage

Parpola admits Zarathushtra was a priest per Yasna 33.16 but defines him as “a priest officiating in the ritual of sacrifice and thus de facto an equivalent of the Assyrian haruspex (*baru*)” which is misleading as Zarathushtra opposed ritual animal sacrifices per Insler and others, but also because he spiritualized the very meaning of ritual sacrifice. In order to interpret the “*exta*” (a *Baru*) had to master a vast amount of technical literature and receive initiation is esoteric haruspical lore, says Parpola.

Esoterism has no place in Yasna 44, or in the entire Gathas, and that itself should invalidate Parpola’s thesis. The presence of “*exta*” will invite impurity (*Reemany*) and forthright invalidate and vitiate the Yasna ceremony. There is no place at all for esoteric haruspical lore in any Zoroastrian ceremony.

Thus, there is little resemblance or compatibility between the two systems. This cult sounds so un-Zoroastrian as no sacrifice of the Assyrian type is offered in the Yasna ceremony except Haoma juice and milk. Yet Parpola persists: “If Zarathushtra was initiated in haruspical lore, he must have absorbed the esoteric ideas and doctrines underlying the system by which divine will was consulted through extispicy. And if he did inquire the divine will by means of extispicy, and found the answer thus obtained important enough to keep a record of the original queries he *must have deeply believed* in the fundamentals of his craft. Thus the doctrines proclaimed by Zarathushtra should bear the clear traces of Assyrian influence.” Again, a thesis based on “if’s,” “must have,” “should have,” and the like and not on forthright facts and evidence.

Parpola’s easy reliance on “if’s” to support his thesis is misleading, and esoteric ideas fathoming the divine will through extispicy have no place in Zarathushtra’s teachings in the Gathas; rather they literally run counter to them. Since he has based his thesis on the Gathic Yasna 44, the discussion here

9 Jacobsen, Thorkild. *The Treasure of Darkness: A History of Mesopotamian Religion*. New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1976, p. 95.

should basically relate to the Gathic teachings which denounce many of these Assyrian practices and expound monotheism as a highly intricate system based on free will, strong ethics, gender equality, after-life, resurrection, Saoshyants, etc., which are absent in the Assyrian system. Moreover, Parpola's elaborate attempt at depicting Assur as "the sum total of all the gods," and ancient Assyrian religion as monotheistic has been seriously questioned, rather strongly refuted, by Barbara N. Porter at great length in his own presence when he was an invitee speaker at a seminar she organized.¹⁰ So I do not see the need to elaborate upon it further here.

Comparing Assur with Ahura Mazda has not been suggested by other Assyriologists, which, however palpably purports to be a prominent Parpola preoccupation, perception or pet pursuit. There maybe some distant similarities between the two religious systems, but how profound and rooted in a highly spiritual, ethical and logical framework they were, is not brought out by Parpola. Parpola wonders: "If the real reason Zarathushtra was not accepted in his own country was his Assyrian background. As a foreign aristocrat (possibly son of a vassal king) raised at the Assyrian royal court, he would have in due course been returned to an influential position in his home country only to be subsequently rejected by his countrymen and in consequence, his Assyrian overlords as well." (Parpola does not explain why they possibly could turn against him after investing so much in him and relying on him to preach Assur worship to Medians). "After his expulsion he well could have found employment as a divine prophet at a royal court in eastern Iran where his Assyrian background was not an obstacle, and where his religious ideas stood far better chance of being accepted." (Parpola does not, however, explain why. What factors made it so? Why would the eastern Iranians accept him when the western ones did not when both were Iranian?)

How could a shaky reliance on the semantics of the queries from two cultures that had very little contact with each other except on occasional battle fronts could possibly hold up as Zarathushtra's "Assyrian background," especially when their content is poles apart in their theology?

A Very Hypothetical Thesis

There is too much reliance on Ifs, presumptions, guess-work, and conjectures. Zarathushtra was from a long line of priests. He had little reason to be involved with Assyrians who Parpola himself admits never penetrated his eastern homeland. See, among other works, *Zoroaster's Time and Homeland* by G. Gnoli, Naples 1980. As a priest he could not possibly freely involve

10 "The Anxiety of Multiplicity: Concepts of Divinity As One and Many in ancient Assyria," in *One God of Many: Concepts of Divinity In the Ancient World*, edited by Barbara N. Porter, Transactions of the Casco Bay Assyriological Institute, 2000 pages, pp. 211-271

himself with Assyrian people and practices if the Persian priestly rule is any guide.

Parpola's thesis is, in short full of Ifs, may's, may be's and conjectures and so fails to provide the solid evidence needed to compare these two very different systems. Since the Iranists are generally not as familiar, as Parpola is with Assyrian history and religion, such hypothetical views may come to be regarded as authentic, much to the detriment of what Zarathushtra stood for, especially as Zoroastrians today are far removed from their land and history.

As a Zoroastrian Magus, I felt obliged to refute the Parpola thesis since so little is known to us about the Assyrian culture which came to light to the modern world only in the 19th century, and since Assyriologists in general do not tend to be familiar with ancient Persia. The number of scholars among Zoroastrians have been dwindling along with their dwindling numbers, and therefore they may not always be able to retort wrong assumptions about their prophet, however well meaning and scholastic they may be. At the same time, such an effort demand more time and resources than I, as a life-long psychologist, can muster without any organizational support, and so it is placed henceforth in hands of those with better resources at their disposal.

In conclusion, as I have propounded in my writings on Free Will, free will provides a litmus test for evaluating a meaningful monotheism. The most cogent reason for denying Parpola's claim for Assyrian "monotheism" is the obvious absence there of free will which runs through as a binding thread from the beginning to the end of Zarathushtra's monotheism model, making man as well as woman its very basis and *sine qua non*. No other model could better explain monotheism and why there is evil in the world.

Asko Parpola's Thesis

Simo Parpola's views have been pursued and propagated by his erudite brother, Asko Parpola, also of Helsinki University, a prominent scholar of old Indo-Aryan languages.¹¹

Even the Indo-Iranian word 'Asura' (lord), signifying highest divinity, is regarded by him as influenced by the name of Assur (p. 90). Parpola also contends that personalized principles governing the human social life are completely missing from Herodotus' list of Scythian deities and therefore he surmises that they were adopted by the Scythians into the 'Proto-Indo-Aryan' pantheon from the Assyrians, but he does not explain how this "historical" development took place. First of all, Herodotus is not consistent when in IV.81 he states that they were many, and also that they were few. In his monumental

11 From "the Dialect of Old Indo-Aryan to Proto-Indo-Aryan and Proto- Iranian," in the *Proceedings of the British Academy*, 116, 43-102. The British Academy, 2002

work on the Scythians, Ellis H. Minns posits that Herodotus' "catalogue of Scythian gods has an Aryan even a distinctly Iranian look." As I stated in a paper presented at a seminar sponsored by the Zoroastrian Association of Chicago and the World Zoroastrian Organization in November, 2008: "The Scythian and the allied Iranian tribes enjoyed a common religious background with the pre-Zoroastrian Iranians which is quite visible in many of their religious practices such as the central place enjoyed by fire and hearths, ancestral worship, the great god and other deities, horse, and other animal sacrifices to deities, holy communion, holy/utensils/vases, the emblem of Khwareh/Farah, possible use of Barsom, worship of sun which they called Ormazd, Izaed (Avesta *Yazata*) as gods, Waejug (Avesta Vayu) as the god of wind, and Aert-Khuron (Fire, the son of the sun), Khucawy Ard (god's Asha)." They had their own word for Ahura Mazda, Armazi, to whom they raised a statue at Sairkhe in Lazika (Colchis) near Crimea. More in my forthcoming article on western Scythians.

Various Questionable Assumptions

Parpola contends, "In Achaemenid art, the winged solar disk, one of the principle symbols of Assur, is taken over by Ahura Mazda. The conception of Ahura Mazda as a monotheist god with the 'holy immortals' representing his qualities or powers is also strikingly similar to that of Assur. This conception was not a creation of Zarathushtra, as Mary Boyce puts it, "the mold was already old in which Zoroaster cast his new doctrines" "that divine attributes should be isolated and then invoked and then worshipped as independent being was a characteristic of the pagan Iranian religion as we have seen in the case of Mithra"¹² But Zoroaster rejected pagan gods and worship. Moreover, if the mold was old in which Zoroaster cast his new doctrines, not only this sounds rather contradictory but it also renders Zoroastrianism older than Zarathushtra himself.

Parpola's contentions are highly debatable at best. For instance, even though many western scholars regard the winged solar disc as Ahura Mazda, many scholars regard it only as *Khwareh*. This disc seems to be of Egyptian origin, where it represented their sun-god Horus. Asko Parpola does not explain how he arrived at the conclusion that "the conception of Ahura Mazda as a monotheistic god was not a creation of Zarathushtra" (p. 89): since few scholars would agree here with him, and Asko Parpola does not provide any references from Boyce's work to support it. See my *Argument for Acceptance* (2015) for Zarathushtra being the first one to assign a monotheist connotation to the word Mazda.

12 Boyce 1979, p. 23.

It is rather surprising to hear this specious claim based on guess-work from a scholar who is so well versed in Indo-Aryan languages because Asura/Ahura has linguistically, theologically and historically nothing in common with the Assyrian Ashura/Assura. As most Iranists are not familiar with the ancient Assyrian religion and history, which has come to light only in the last one hundred years or so, they face a great challenge from the Assyriologists bent on, however earnestly, on depicting the Iranian religion as an offshoot of Assura worship.

A Review of Asko Parpola's Propositions

- I. There are semantic and ideological differences between the two – the Assyrian belief system has little need for “a true yes” and is rhetorical. With his spiritual insight, however, the Iranian prophet already knows what is true. Therefore, the query here, and elsewhere, is resorted to only by the prophet in the whole of Avesta, which does not seem to be the case in the Assyrian extispy.
- II. “Zarathushtra,” he presumes, “*could have* learnt such a formula, and the esoteric monotheistic religion of the Assyrians that he tried to restore among the Iranians – *if* he was among the Median princes who were brought up by the Assyrians to train them for state service as high officials and brainwash them to loyalty to Assyria.”
- III. However, the “if” does not prove that the Assyrians actually did so and I for one have not found any evidence for it anywhere. However, if Parpola is right, Media would have turned to Ashur worship like other Assyrian vassals did, thanks to the efforts of other Median princes under Assyrian tutelage. And then why would Medians ultimately accept Zoroastrianism, if they were initially opposed to it? The fact is Zarathushtra never put his foot in Media – and Media as we know it did not even exist as Media in prehistoric times of Zarathushtra, when it was known only as Elam.
- IV. If this indeed was the case, it would most probably have taken place in the eight century B.C. If one compares Old Avesta linguistically with Old Rigvedic (ca. 1350 B.C.) on the one hand, and with the Old Persian (ca. 520 B.C.) on the other, this seems a reasonable dating. As the Gathic Avestan resembles closely the pre-Rigvedic Sanskrit written before the Indian Aryans reached India, and as it has much less similarity with the Old Persian than with Rigvedic Sanskrit, Asko Parpola's reasoning is questionable. Moreover, as Zarathushtra composed the Gathas in an archaic Avestan language very akin to the Rigvedic language, he certainly lived long before the times both Parpolas assigned to him.

My response to his contention albeit is the same as my response to Simo Parpola's, as he is only echoing the latter's reasoning, and adding little of substance to it himself. The Parpolas seem to have opened the gate wide for speculation for the originality of Zarathushtra's monotheistic concepts, at a time when the interest in Iranian studies is waning, and the interest in Assyriology is waxing. Therefore, it requires a prompt scholarly response, if not a rebuttal, if called for.