

SURVIVAL OF ZOROASTRIANS IN ARMENIA DESPITE STRUGGLES BETWEEN ZOROASTRIANS AND ARMENIA

Dr. Kersey Antia, Jul 7, 2019; updated Sep 29, 2019

Solomon A. Nigosian finds the discovery of the ancient Zoroastrian fire temples situated under the existing cathedrals very revealing and asks: "But why are the discoveries of fire-altars any more significant than the numerous finds attesting to the influence of other ancient civilizations?" Besides showing that Zoroastrianism preceded Christianity as the religion of Armenia, it indicates that "in various parts of Armenia Zoroastrianism lingered on for several centuries even after the official adoption of Christianity," a fact that I find mostly ignored by historians. ("Zoroastrianism in fifth-century Armenia," *Sciences Religieuses/Studies in Religion*, 7/4, 1978, pp. 425-434). These fire-altars were preserved in some place representing a crawl-space beneath the floor of the Christian sanctuaries. In 301 A.D., Tiridates III, the vassal king of Armenia adopted Christianity and also declared it as the official or State religion of Armenia. Just a few years later the Roman Empire also adopted Christianity as the State religion, thus forming a close alliance with Armenia, thereby aggravating the rivalry between Persia and Rome over the control of strategically located Armenia. Christians in Armenia (as well as in Persia) often became politically suspect in the eyes of the Persian rulers, especially when they actually did or were suspected to assist or avow the Christian Rome. Such a situation led in 387 A.D. to the partition of Armenia, the Persian Armenia holding the major part of Armenia. However, the Christian discontent and opposition kept growing and culminated in a bloody uprising of the Christian Armenia on May 26, 451, which is popularly described as the 'Battle of Vartan's Day. Of the two reports of this battle, both very objective, Nigosian chooses the poetic one of Yeghisheh "His passion for patriotism and religious freedom is reflected throughout his writing" and yet Nigosian finds him well-informed and objective. However, he concedes that a number of modern critical historians doubt his work. Yeghisheh was born circa 415 and was an ordained celibate priest. He seems to be quite conversant with Zoroastrianism (and also Zurvanism), as is evident in his work, Vartan and the Armenian War. He describes in detail the Zoroastrians' critique of Christian beliefs vis-a-vis Christians' rejection of Zoroastrian beliefs, which may at times represent what is going on in our own times for those of us still residing in Iran. Incidentally, however, I wonder whether those revisionist historians such as Richard Payne and the like

will find Yeghisheh as objective as Nigosian does though he is indeed much more objective than the hagiographers, despite his close and total affiliation with Christi in this conflict. A revisionist historian therefore is quite likely to be critical of him as partial to his cause.

Yeghisheh reports that fire-altars were as widespread in Armenia as in Persia. He also reports that “in order to maintain their religious freedom Christian Armenians sporadically attacked and killed numerous maji, devastated many and then seized the furniture and fixtures of the fire-altars and placed them in their churches. Naturally the magi retaliated and before long the Armenian rulers and religious leaders, fifteen in number, were summoned to the royal palace in Ctesiphon.

According to Yeghisheh, King Yazdagird II threatened to persecute them if they did not profess the Sun-God (Meher) as God, which cannot be true as Ohrmazd was the quintessential Persian God. The Armenian delegation submitted to the king's proposal. “When they returned to Armenia, however, they exposed their pretense and reverted to Christianity,” reigniting their rebellious spirit and culminating in the uprising of May 26, 451. “From a military point of view,” comments Nigosian, “the Armenians were defeated” But after thirty years of mutual conflict and resentment they signed a treaty in 484 A.D. for ensuring religious freedom to the Armenians. However, Nigosian notes, “Once converted to Christianity, the Armenians were determined to stamp out Zoroastrianism from their province. The advent of Islam in the seventh century A.D. greatly helped them to pursue their plan. In time, Christian churches replaced the Zoroastrian fire-altars, but neither the Christian Armenians nor the Muslim Abbasid dynasty later on were able to obliterate Zoroastrianism. It survived despite the misfortunes of time. And fortunately so, because the indebtedness both of Christianity and Islam to Zoroastrianism is incalculable which is a subject I am interested in writing about since my teen-age years, but cannot finish it as forever I come across new materials about It. What Nigosian further observes as a non-Zoroastrian observer, is worth quoting at length: “The significance of the discoveries of the fire-altars is related to the final efforts of Christian Armenians to eradicate Zoroastrianism. It was suggested earlier that an explanation might be sought in the arena of the religious conflict of the fifth century

A.D. Indeed, looking at this event in retrospect, it is impossible not to recognize one of the main concerns of the Zoroastrian magi, vis-a-vis the attitude adopted by the Christians, especially with respect to the fire-altars. Consciously or unconsciously, Yeghisheh indicates how Christian Armenians were accused of neglecting to tend the fire. In fact, in pursuit of their aim to uproot Zoroastrianism and establish Christianity throughout their territory, Christian Armenians destroyed

numerous fire-temples. From a political point of view, this was a serious violation. From a religious point of view, however, it was a sacrilegious act. To my mind, the seriousness of this offense committed by Christians in the Persian empire parallels their offense in the Roman empire: their refusal to offer sacrifices to the Emperor.” However, I wonder what was the main motive behind destroying the fire-temples but not the fire-altars? Was it due to an important status it held in their psyche for millennia, or was it an attempt to appease or not rile up those who continued to be Zoroastrian or was it a declaration of victory by confining the fire-altars beneath the Christian sanctuaries just as the Perian King Shapur I trampled the Roman Emperor under his horse's hooves? Or is it because they found it hard to remove them for technical reasons. An answer to each one of them will be very revealing.

“That time has spared these fire-altars, the central symbols of Zoroastrianism, is in itself a remarkable state of affairs. Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that Zoroastrianism was the religion of pre-Christian Armenia. And if the archaeological finds of the fire-altars underneath the present cathedrals are seen in the light of the above context, then they may be considered as evidence of 'religious victory'. In fact no better evidence of the Christian victory could be demonstrated to future generations than the evidence of the most sacred element of Zoroastrianism – the fire altar.” However, can one say that if the reverse was the case, especially in view of the recent research I have extensively done about the Sasanians trying to treat Christians more or less fairly in Iran unless provoked or opposed to their regime or religion, despite the exaggerated and biased narratives of the Christian hagiographers? The answer comes directly from Nigosian: “So there they stand, silent symbols of religious victory, or perhaps, should they be considered symbols of religious rivalry – a disease that has plagued the world for thousands of years, fostering hatred, animosity, brutality, injustice and inhumanity.”

Here again a Zoroastrian can assert, as several scholars also have done, that the Persians throughout their long history have not tried to impose their religion on others by war or force for the most part but alas they ultimately became victim to such force. Moreover, Armenia had remained Zoroastrian for centuries until the Romans aspired to expand their empire into Asia and seeing Armenia as having strategic importance for that goal, secretly began to introduce Christianity there to wean it away from the Persians. There was peace in the region when Christians were treated as pagans in the Roman Empire. Indeed until then the Christians there were keen on migrating to Iran in order to escape persecution and Christians actually prospered in Iran as noted by me elsewhere until the Roman Empire adopted Christianity as its official religion.