

WAS EARLY ZOROASTRIANISM A SCRIPTURAL RELIGION?

Dr. Kersey Antia, Apr 20, 2019

What Albert de Jong observes, may however, in a different context tend to support Stausberg's argument: "All too frequently, up to the most recent scholarship on these matters, scholars seem to assume that the Avesta is somehow similar to the Bible in Christianity or the Qur'an in Islam: that is, a source of guidance and inspiration, of imagery and propaganda; if not a holy book, then at least a holy text." He denies that there is any "reliable evidence at all for the use of the Avasta as a source of iconography or of narrative traditions before the last Sasanian period, that is before the fifth century A.D." He adds: "This is actually not limited to the pre-Islam history of Zoroastrians. The cognitive role of the Avesta, let us say, the use of the Avesta as a source of wisdom, guidance, stories and quotations, is rarely found among living Zoroastrians, who may cherish the concept of the Avesta (the Avesta as fact), its sounds and its performance in ritual. The *Pandnamag I Zarduxst*, a Middle Persian catechism, famously opens with a series of questions every Zoroastrian must be able to answer when he or she has reached the age of 15. These are questions like Who am I? Where did I Come from? Were the gods there before me or not?, etc." The answers to these questions fortunately follow, for it would be exceptionally difficult for even the most talented priest of the period to find those answers in the Avesta." *The World of Achaemenid Persia*, (eds.) John Curtis and Sr. John Simpson, I. B. Tauris, London and New York, 2010, pp. 86-87). de Jong makes Stausburg's argument easy for a lay person to comprehend. Philip G. Kreyenbroeck also holds that "unlike Christianity and Islam, early Zoroastrianism was not a scriptural faith. The sacred texts of Zoroastrianism were probably transmitted without the use of writing until well into the Sasanian period. Scriptural religions tend to regard the truth found in their sacred books as absolute, unique and exclusive." On the other hand, he maintains, non-scriptural religions tend to be "inclusive" rather than "exclusive". (Curtis and Simpson, *op. cit.*, p. 104). He employs this reasoning to demonstrate that "the basic assumptions (of Zoroastrianism) allowed it to admit newcomers on a large scale," especially as there is "a conspicuous lack of evidence of religious confrontation (with other religions) in the Achaemenid times." (p. 104). However, the same reasoning could be extended to explain alien influences in the Pahlavi texts.

While the Torah presents a picture of a monotheistic and aniconic

Yahwism, Detlef Jericke's archaeological findings for the period of 880-720 B.C. Revealed small images of goddesses in private homes and even a wife for Yahweh. He also makes a convincing case on page 182 that Yahweh's rise to supremacy (accompanied by his companion Ashera) was a result of the prior territorial expansion of Judah/Jerusalem during the last quarter of the eighth century. (See *Regionale Kult and localer Kult*, Wiesbaden, Harrassowitz Verlag, 2010). In his review of this book, Gary Beckman of the University of Michigan comments: "I would add my opinion that from this base, monotheism developed with the yet more cosmopolitan cultural environment of the exile and Persian periods, (*Journal of the American Oriental Society* 131.4) 2011, p. 692) which highlights the possibility of Persian contribution too to the development of monotheism.

Sven S. Hartman has devoted an entire paper to revealing the hesitancy of the Pahlavi authors, obviously for the fear of reprisal, for mentioning the name of Islam while writing critically about it. He quotes Dr. West coming to the same conclusion long ago regarding the author of the *Shkand-gumanig Vizar* (aka *šak-ud-gumanih-vizar*) as he does mention the Muslim Mu'tazila sect in chapters X and XII. Hartman provides various instances from the later Parsi Rivayats to show that this tendency survived among the Parsis too, (though it seems to me that the Parsis may have left Iran before the *Shkand-gumanig Vizar* was written). He notes that this tendency "was not always and not only a defense, but sometimes also an obligation dictated by the Muslims. The conditions of the Dhimmis were at times such that they were obliged to conceal their religion. Thus in Islamic towns they were not allowed to exhibit the cross, manifest their polytheism, building churches or other houses for prayer, etc." (*Islam And Its Culture Divergence*, (eds.) G. L. Tikku, University of Illinois Press, Urbana, pp. 63-73). Even today Zoroastrians are not allowed to build new places of worship in their ancestral land of Iran, though they have never ever experienced any such restrictions in their land of refuge, India.