

ZOROASTRIAN POLEMICS AGAINST JEWS IN THE SASANIAN AND EARLY ISLAMIC PERIOD

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As Shaul Shaked comments in his article, “Zoroastrian Polemics Against Jews” (*Irano-Judaica II*, Jerusalem, 1990, pp. 85-88), there is such strong scholarly consensus about the dualistic character of Zoroastrianism that any one not in agreement with it can stand out as heretical. Nevertheless, he does not regard the unequivocal, almost aggressive, stand in favour of dualism as an original feature of Zoroastrianism, but it may have developed as such only when called upon to engage in the inter-religious polemics with the monotheistic traditions of Judaism and Christianity. Shaked sees no explicit reference to dualism in the Gathas, and finds little militant dualism in the younger Avesta. He contends that dualism as a slogan, as the one-word summary of the very essence of the Zoroastrianism, may not have existed in Iran before the first century A.D.

I found some support for this news from Albert De Jong (*Traditions of the Magi, Zoroastrianism in Greek and Latin Literature*, Brill, Leiden, 1997, p. 457), who claims there is no substantial trace of dualism in the classical Greek representations of the religious life of the Persians. This may not necessarily suggest its absence in Zoroastrian theology but it “can also reflect the limited importance of these theological options in the daily life of Zoroastrians.” However, this fact may enable us to see why dualism suddenly became such an evident and important factor in challenging the absolute monotheism of Islam in post-Sasanian times: it offered a valid logical reason to contend the claim for God being the author of both good and evil in the world as in absolute monotheism.

Shaked posits we really know dualism as the characteristic feature of the Zoroastrian religion only from the Sasanian period, and even so it does not figure very prominently even in such monuments of religious persuasion and activity as the inscriptions of Kirder. However, there is no question or ambiguity about Zoroastrianism having a striking dualistic tendency, a dualistic structure, most likely from its very foundation. But the self-awareness of its dualistic character emerged rather over a millennium later in the Sasanian period when it was exposed to other monotheistic religions. I may add that such self-awareness reached its peak when it was confronted by the theologians of absolute monotheism. Kellens, (1988, 26 FF) is also one of the recent writers who maintains that the Gathic religion is not dualistic. Shaked claims that polemical remarks against the Jews in the Pahlavi texts do

not represent direct or formal debates with the Jews except for the *Skand Gumanig Wizar*. Shaked challenges Jacob Neusner's views on this subject and adds: "In this it is no different from most of the rest of Neusner's scholarly output," etc. I am not in a position to take any side in this matter, but I am quoting Shaked here simply for supporting my rejection of the Sasanian persecution of Jews as claimed by Neusner and now rejected even by many Jewish historians, as detailed by me already.

Most of the Zoroastrian polemics against Judaism were apparently not composed with the aim of using it in the presence of Jews in a debate. They make references to Judaism by situating it within the conceptual and mythological framework of Zoroastrianism, but they are not at least primarily polemical although they depict some features of Judaism rather negatively while portraying them, curiously enough, as features of Zoroastrian myths.

Thus *Denkard* III 227 contains one of those allusions to Judaism, its main topic being *payman*, the idea of the Right Measure, which is described as a fundamental characteristic of Zoroastrianism. This theme is incorporated in Zoroastrian polemics for contrasting the Good against the Bad Religion thus pitting Azi Dahag, the wicked Zawahak against Yima, the good King Jamsheed as his mythical counterweight. While Yima represents the positive pole in these polemics as the originator of the principle of *Payman* (Right Measure), Dahag stands at the opposite pole and activates into the world the negation of that principle by introducing excess and deficiency in everything thereby negating or frustrating human efforts for achieving the Right Measure. For our purpose this should suffice to rule out any major religious conflict between the Jews and Zoroastrians during the Sasanian period.

Shaul Shaked further states that Zoroastrian polemics against other religions were written during the ninth and tenth centuries. What he observes about their nature and content about the Zoroastrian polemics against the Jews indicate little possibility of severe problems existing among both the races then.

It is rather inevitable that polemicist tend to maximally highlight differences between his own religion vis-a-vis that of his opponent despite the issues not being the essential or intrinsic core of either religion. This would naturally confound or distort the real issues as it tends to exaggerate or magnify religious issues that are not pivotal or even relevant because of the overzealous tendency of the polemicist to focus on the issues that have in his mind come to differentiate between the two so as to justify his own position and undermine his opponents.

Shaked therefore explicitly advises against concluding from such

polemics about the main concerns of these two religions. All the same, however, they may denote “the nuisance value of the existence of the other religion in the eyes of the polemicist.” As he informs us, “Polemical literature tends sometimes to perpetuate imaginary debates with non-existent rivals, rivals who are set up chiefly for the sake of symmetry or harmony in the presentation of various points of view.”

A typical polemical situation in this context is where one polemicist assumes he is debating with an imaginary opponent in a tone and a language his opponent will both understand and accept, resulting most likely in his conceding defeat or inferiority. “A polemicist makes the somewhat naive assumption that a good argument may convert members of the other party, or at least neutralize their opposition.”

Shaked provides various reasons that should desist us from reading too much historical importance to such polemical debates, which in turn should also desist us from reading serious discord in them. The doctrinal fault attributed to Judaism in these polemics is that it denies the existence of Satan or demonic beings independent of God and consigns evil to God Himself, resulting thus into the formation of dualism for pinpointing this illogicity in monotheistic faiths. However, the earlier Persian polemics against Judaism concentrated on idolatry and polytheism based on a made-up syncretism of Jewish and Iranian mythology which argues that Azi Dahak (Zohak), being the Tazik (Arab) “made the Torah, the fundamental book of Judaism, and built Jerusalem to keep (the Torah?) in it,” (*Denkard* 227:15), a tall claim indeed, but it well represents the point Shaked is making here.

Shaked reports that the Jews too assailed some of the Zoroastrian beliefs and practices in the Sasanian and Islamic period. However, “This criticism is mixed, it must be noted, with occasional expressions of admiration for certain Persian customs as dispersed in the Talmud” (some of which I have already mentioned elsewhere) “and in treatises of Halakchah, Aggadah, or exegesis, and later in the Gaonic literature,” a detailed discussion of which, notes Shaked, “should preferably be performed by people better qualified for this task than myself.” Naturally, admiration for Zoroastrians, cannot be found or expected too often in the polemical texts. Shaked attaches many selections from these polemical texts to his article which are quite informative but they do not seem to elicit any strong sense of bitterness or hostility against the Persians but mostly self-awareness or self-acclamation resulting from doctrinal differences between the two faiths. However, as there is marked similarity in their doctrines more than between any two major faiths, as already reviewed earlier, it naturally limits the scope of their doctrinal differences.