

SKJAERVO'S DOUBTS ABOUT ZARATHUSHTRA ON ACADEMIC GROUNDS

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 11, 2019; updated Jan 16, 2020

What Prod. Skjaervo observes at length in *Light Against Darkness* (edited by A. Lange, E.M. Meyers, B.H. Reynolds III and R. Stayers, Vanderock and Ruprecht, pp. 76-90) begs our attention: "Two questions need to be asked: was there a Zarathustra who said or did things? And, if there was, how do we know that this is what he said and did? As I shall suggest briefly in the following, the question whether there was such a Zarathustra is never seriously asked and, by the standards of modern historiography, the answer is likely to be no. If, for the moment, we assume there was such a person, we shall see that the questions of what Zarathustra thought, said, and did have approximately as many answers as there are scholars who insist he was a real person.

Thus there are serious problems with the use of assumed Zoroastrian features in the context of the history of Near Eastern religions. A practical problem faced by most scholars of other fields who want to orient themselves in Zoroastrianism is the absence of a generally recognized and accepted reliable history and description of early Zoroastrianism.

Skjaervo finds it hard to establish that Zoroastrianism is a founded religion (rather than one that grew organically from its Indo-Aryan roots) and sees it as a seventeenth century opinion of European writers which tended to interpret its texts as reflecting Christian-type ethics. It takes a full-fledged academician like him to analyze his views and so I could only offer my comments as a Magian for what is worth (or not), but it clearly indicates the urgent need for promoting our own religious scholars. First, I wonder why Zoroastrianism could not be a founded religion subsequent to or in addition to its origin in Indo-Aryan roots as it ultimately became Irano-Aryan in its essence. Moreover, there have been attempts to compare its ethical precepts with Christian ones – although, I must add, it may not always be valid. However, as not only Mary Boyce but many other "Christian" scholars have found profound similarities between their basic beliefs, (which I have also often enumerated), the latest one I found I am appending here, there should be at least some basis to it.

As I have addressed his views on the limitations of orality earlier, I can only add that orality cannot be possibly avoided for a prehistoric faith and even those faiths that are fortunate to have written texts end up having more or less the same genre of confusion or lack of clarity he

attributes to Zoroastrianism.

As Christ Hedges observes in *American Fascists*, (Free Press, New York, 2006, p. 3): “The four Gospels, we understood, were filled with factual contradictions, two Gospels saying Jesus was baptized by John the Baptist, while Luke asserted that John was already in prison. Mark and John give little importance to the birth of Jesus, while Matthew and Luke give differing accounts. There are three separate and different versions of the 10 commandments (Exodus 20, Exodus 34 and Deuteronomy 5). As for the question of God’s true nature there are many substantive contradictions. Is God a loving or vengeful God? In some sections of the Bible, vicious acts of vengeance, including the genocidal extermination of opposing tribes and nations, appear to be blessed by God.” Similar observations have been made by several writers, too numerous to quote.

Skjaervo cites “little concern for historical facts” even during the Sasanian period”, but after extensively reviewing the Arab rule in Iran, it may be hard to ascertain if it is really true or an outcome of the Arab insistence on interpreting things in terms of their own texts and beliefs. Indeed it is a miracle that *Shah-nama* survived and became so popular among the Iranians even in the post-Sasanian times, though its author, Firdausi, incurred wrath of the fanatics who even denied him the conventional burial in the community.

Skjaervo notes: “In spite of the pretense of unchangeability” (for which however he does not provide a reference or source), “the Gathic texts were “edited” in various ways, changing their phonetic and grammatical form”, which is but inevitable over a period of 3-1/2 millennia. I am at present reading *The Story of French*, by Jean-Benoit Nadeau and Julie Barlow, (St. Martin’s Press, New York, 2006). The authors state” “All languages have three parts: phonetic (pronunciation), grammar and a lexicon (vocabulary) and each part changes constantly. The lexicon changes the most quickly because of exposure to other languages and because of erosion (words tend to lose sounds or syllables, while pronunciation and grammar evolve more slowly.” This being a universal phenomenon, Avesta was not exempt from it, but is surprising that it survived millennia in the form we find it now and various philologists were still able to find it worthwhile to study.

As “historical information is notoriously lacking” in Zoroastrian texts, he notes, scholars “have picked and chosen” from Pahlavi text in order to “give the prophet a mind set worthy of a modern religious personality steeped in the Judeo-Christian ethical tradition.” If this is done almost uniformly, these scholars may have their own reasons for doing so – a broad mind-set that transcends a rigid outlook and perceives things in a broader context, especially if they are exposed to more than one field of study. The more exposure one has to other

disciplines besides one's own, the more valid one's conclusions may get.

Skjaervo further notes: "Extolling Zarathus(h)tra's superiority of thought and throwing in an unfavorable comparison with Near Eastern religiosity, Henning concludes that "to appreciate Zoroaster, we should see him against the background of his time---far less advanced than the people of the Near East, whom he (Zarathustra) nevertheless surpassed in thought." Skjaervo comments: "aside from a few etymologies, this was Henning's only contribution to the study of the Old Avesta," namely, the date of Zoroaster, which not only Skjaervo but most scholars disregard, but almost all scholars very likely would agree with Henning's above remark. Skjaervo's remark is in keeping with the *Zeitgeist* and in all likelihood may, for better or worse, be heralding a future trend deserving our attention and understanding in this age of industrial technology and quantitative analysis, though not yet seen in that light. The quantitative facts of the yesteryears may not suffice for the fact-based, quantitative data demanded in the coming years, for good or bad. However, it will always be a challenge to establish factual data and agreement for events and personalities so prehistoric or ancient. Consequently, we may be left with no choice but to accept a compromise between the two methods at least when no firm conclusion is available from either method.

Zarathushtra as he emerges from Western studies is conceived by Skjaervo as the Western Zarathushtra. He contends that "a case still needs to be made that the poet "who composed the Gathas, "was Zarathustra and that this Zarathustra was as Western scholarship has made him out to be." But to quote Hedges again, the Bible was also a book written by a series of ancient writers", certainly fallible and at times at odds with each other." (p.2). Skjaervo considers what is often stated by Western scholars as facts is "in reality personal theories and points out the different interpretations of Fravashi primarily as the souls of the dead, or as "birth assistants" and as protecting the world as it was coming into existence against the forces of evil. But all these functions stem from the concept of Fravashi as helping God to help mankind or so. It seems to me this confusion may have partly stemmed from the fact, as well expounded by Mary Boyce, that the first Gahanbar fell on the last day of the year during its daylight hours and the Fravashis arrived at sunset and were bidden a ritual farewell at the dawn of Nowruz. But the addition in later years of five days at the end of the year led people to presume they were at this residence for all five additional days which came to be designated in Pahlavi as *Roza* Fravardigan, the days of the Fravashis.

As seen already Skjaervo seems to represent a different breed of scholars who do not blindly follow the scholars of the old school and raise some important issues that may enable the future researchers to

avoid the mistakes of the past. While the old school criticizes philologists for “ignoring complex traditions and the living faith” while relying exclusively on the texts and nothing else” per Boyce, Skjaervo contends: “But how can Zarathustra’s thought be known other than by studying the texts?” and quotes Kellens and Pirart as also emphasizing that “the meaning of a word can only be understood in “the light of the “system of thought in which it participates” and the philologist needs to take this last step of analysis, because, if he or she does not, then who will understand the text?” This well depicts the latter’s zeal for their mission. Unfortunately, however, for all I know the text of Yasna they rely on (and the ritual accompanying it) are of much later vintage than the Gathas and the Gathic links with the Rigveda (or any Veda) is not so enthusiastically hailed (if not challenged), by most scholars as the latter group does who are seen as over-reading their ritual aspect as the Reform of Zarathushtra actually rose in protest of it, as I have shown we need to address these critics in order to get closer to the truth. Hopefully, we will ultimately arrive at it thanks in part to their criticism so our progeny will not be misguided by such critics.