

CRITIQUE OF SKJAERVO'S PAPER "ZOROASTRIAN DUALISM" - PART II

Dr. Kersey Antia, Aug 10, 2020

As I could not complete my response in Part I, I am completing it here in Part II, with an apology for some unavoidable repetitions.

In a very scholarly paper, "Zoroastrian Dualism," pp. 55-57, Prods Oktor Skjaervo includes the ninth-tenth century Pahlavi texts in his treatise even though they were written about two millennia after the project's own Gathic theological construct for dualism, surprisingly on the understanding that they "encapsulate the orally transmitted knowledge of the priests of that time and so contain material that reaches far back into the history of Zoroastrianism." While this is true for the most part, as I have explained in my work "Acceptance in Zoroastrianism", 2011: these texts also contain alien influences and ideas to which Zoroastrians were exposed to different nationalities they came into contact with. Even so, it is quite encouraging to learn any positive remarks from Skjaervo in particular as he finds fault with the oral tradition in Zoroastrianism for more ancient times when writing was not much the vogue which led me to refute some of his remarks to be yet published.

Skjaervo sees two large bipartisans in Zoroastrian cosmology – cosmogonic dualism dealing with the contents of the material world along with how they were arranged by the two spirits and cosmic dualism dividing the world into the world of thought (generally regarded by others as the spiritual world) and the corporeal world.

In a footnote No. 28, he adds: "it is not clear whether they (the two spirits) are "creators" which establishes only Mazda as the "creator". (p. 62). He adds: "Although both these worlds were established and ordered by Ahura Mazda, they are now divided into camps of opposing good and evil powers" for completely annihilating the powers of evil. Like Kellens, he sees in the daily "sacrifice" (Yasna), "a ritual microcosmic model that will then contribute to the regeneration of the ordered macrocosm," though I must note Yasna is a much later creation. He also refutes the hitherto almost universally accepted view that Zarathushtra himself caused the fall of the Daevas as depicted in the Young Avesta. All the same he concedes: "In fact, the nature and origin of the Old Indra Devas and Asuras is also not quite clear until in post-Rigvedic times, where the two groups become increasingly hostile to one another, but with the Asuras as the bad gods," "each associated with certain high gods" (p. 65), which seems quite plausible, but from

the protean nature of the Rigvedic gods of the time which extended over a long period, on his own stipulation "until the post-Rigvedic times" meaning long after the post-Gathic period. This may render basing any judgment on a comparison between these two epochs rather problematic. What he observes in his footnote No. 40 about "Varuna, the lord of the universe" being "called both Daeva and Asura renders it even more problematic. He further observes that "the prominent position of Indra in the pantheon may have guaranteed that of the Devas at the expense of the Asuras, while that of Ahura Mazda in Iran guaranteed that of the Ahuras at the expense of the Daewas," which may raise more questions than it provides a definitive answer, as evinced by his use of the word "may".

Skjaervo regards the twin spirits (Mainyus) in Yasna 30.3 as twin "sleeps", "through sleep", which some scholars translate as "by means of a dream," or "in a dream vision," the dreamer being Zarathushtra himself and the dream vision according to them being a revelation of the nature of the origin of the world. He contends that here what is meant is "sleep" or "sleeping thing," which "can then easily refer to embryos or fetuses." In a footnote No. 49 he locates a similar concept in the ancient Indian scripture Manu-Smriti 1.5 "sleep" at the birth of the world before the waters awaken it and it was born.

Skjaervo traces the myth of the origin of the Evil Spirit in the Vedic myth of the obstruction of the rains, which is a prominent theme in Rigvedic cosmogony. It depicts Indra, when drunk on Soma, as smashing the obstructions that keep the heavenly waters from flowing forth. In the Young Avesta (Frawardin Yasht 13.77-78) it is the Evil Spirit that holds back the waters but the Good Thought and the Fire held him back. Skjaervo sees it as "a myth about the prevention and furthering of life and growth." In both myths birth occurs only when waters start flowing, thru drawing or fitting the myth of the twin embryo also into a birth scene. When a child is born, a pair is, always born, namely the living child and the dead afterbirth or placenta which indeed is called "the twin" in modern Persian language, (which I think may represent a conscious or unconscious continuation of this primordial concept or Jung's Archetype – Collective Memory/Consciousness.

In a footnote No. 59, he refers to the Vedic mythical figure, Martanda, the name translates as "the dead part of the egg". Similarly, the first man in the Zoroastrian texts is known as Gaya Martan (later Gayomard) which literally means "the life with the dead thing". Skjaervo also reviews the treatment of the afterbirth in many societies where it is generally regarded as brother, sister or double and is saved for various purposes and for various time periods. This is a highly brilliant observation and I think it may explain the basis for the

Zoroastrian practice of treating the afterbirth or placenta as unclean and therefore pertaining to Angra Mainyu's domain, also for conforming the concept of Angra Mainyu as representing "non-life" (Yasna 30.4).

Skjaervo notes that "Western scholars tend to downplay this Zoroastrian polytheism by not translating the Avestan term Yazata, which one normally would translate as "God." Yazata literally means "adorable" or "one who is worthy of praise," which has led other Western scholars, including Mary Boyce, to render the Yazatas as angels.

While dualism exculpated Ahuramazda from allowing evil to come into being, Skjaervo argues it neither explains why he allowed it to even enter his own good creation nor why he did not get rid of it sooner. He quotes the Pahlavi texts which date some two millennia after the prophet, something not quite conceivable when dealing with belief systems in other religions. As I have explained in my treatise on this subject, the answer is readily provided in the Gathas in Yasna 34.1, 44.18, 47.1, 48.1, 31.6, 39.4, etc.) as well as in the *Bundahishn* 3.23-24 – in short, God wants us to be perfect and completely free of evil as well as all shortcomings and like Him. Moreover, as Shaul Shaked and other scholars quoted by me already have observed, there were many versions of dualism prevalent throughout the post-Sasanian times which makes it difficult to establish any one being a really or authentic representative one. Moreover, as Shaked contends dualism and monotheism are logically inter-connected, Skjaervo's contention that under the Muslim and Christian propaganda the Parsis in India "went so far as to deny dualism and to view themselves as outright monotheists is not valid.

As I have explained in detail elsewhere, only a few educated Anglicized Parsis came into direct contact with Christianity and unlike the Portuguese, the English administrators played safe by not resorting to evangelizing the natives. Even the educated Parsis remained devoted Zoroastrians and undertook reforms to spurn out alien beliefs, mostly Hindu that had set in over the centuries. Up to the nineteenth century a majority of the Parsis had not yet migrated to Bombay and were quite untouched by Christianity. And like the Hindus they were hardly influenced by the Muslim beliefs for various reasons. Elsewhere I have quoted a highly educated Parsi, J.E. Sanjana, even writing a book, *Zoroaster and His World*, (Union Press, Bombay, 1947) so very vehemently commending Ernst Herzfeld's book bearing the same title for emphasizing dualism. As he notes, it was Parsis' fascination then with theosophy and Hindu Monism that veered them away from dualistic beliefs more than Christian or Muslim influence, but again their numbers were not enough to influence the whole community.

The same argument has been more or less made by Susan Maneck and I have refuted at length it and my treatise on dualism provides more refutations. Moreover, I have also shown that the Parsis were settled on the western coast of India during the Sasanian times competing with the Romans for the silk trade in Ceylon and in all likelihood were unaware and unaffected by the dualistic notions patent or prevalent in the post-Sasanian times. It is also questionable if these Pahlavi texts really represented the dualistic beliefs of the times as they were obviously prepared to over-emphasize the dualism in Zoroastrianism to undermine the absolute monotheism of their brutal rulers. To hold these texts as truly representing dualism in Zoroastrianism, as is unfortunately done as a rule, is, to say the least, rather misleading.