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The Spirit of Zoroastrianism. Translated and edited by PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ. The Sacred Literature Series. New Haven: YALE UNIVERSITY PRESS, 2011. Pp. xii + 270.

Those who have studied Zoroastrianism as coursework or have taught it have traditionally had two choices for textual sources. First is the *Textual Sources for the Study of Zoroastrianism* by the towering figure of the field in the twentieth century, Mary Boyce, published in 1984. This book in many ways presented what nowadays may be called the “traditional” view on the religion and history of Zoroastrianism. The second work, *An Introduction to Ancient Iranian Religion: Reading from the Avesta and the Achaemenid Inscriptions* by William W. Malandra, is more philologically oriented than that of Boyce, where many Avestan texts were translated in their entirety, rendering perhaps the best English translation of these hymns. Since Boyce’s book was far less keen on the translation of the Old Iranian texts and paid more attention to the Middle Persian texts, one can say that in a way she provided a Sasanian or a Late Antique Zoroastrian view of this religion. There are however, some translations of later Zoroastrian writings in the Persian language which are of value. On the other hand, Malandra’s work, as its title suggests, wholly concentrated on the Old Iranian texts, providing ample Old Persian and Avestan texts and a view of pre-Achaemenid and Achaemenid evidence of Zoroastrianism.

The present book by Prods Oktor Skjærvø is a new handbook on the study of Zoroastrianism, especially for those unfamiliar with this religious tradition. The book is composed of a ten-part introduction that sets the stage for the author’s translations of the relevant texts. It is of interest to note that Skjærvø begins by saying that he has refrained from using the traditional translation for terminologies that may be well known to the scholars in the field. He suggests that since Zoroastrianism as a religion has had a long life, the terminologies used for the religion would also have gone through changes, and it is best not to be given a fixed, academic terminology associated with other living religions.

The translation of Avestan, Old Persian, and Pahlavi material occupies the bulk of this book and is divided into ten sections: texts on sacred history; text on the creation of the world; text on the mythical history of the Zoroastrian tradition; texts on eschatology and the end of the world; texts on the body and the soul; texts on death, rewards, and punishment; texts on ethics; ritual texts; texts on kingship; and texts on doctrinal issues. From the very first text one encounters Skjærvø’s touch and interpretation of the important Zoroastrian terminology (for a complete glossary of terms see pp. 263–70). For example, Old Persian *dātā*, which is normally taken as ‘create’, is rendered as ‘set in place’ (in line with Kellens’ interpretation). Skjærvø’s approach to the ritualistic aspects of Zoroastrian texts, especially the Gāthās, is clear from the very first pages of the translation section; here Yasna 30.9 *atcā tōi vaēm xiiāmā yōi im fərašəm kərənaon ahūm* is translated “May we be (the men of ?) those who shall make this existence Juicy, . . .” Thus, *fəraša-* is rendered as ‘juicy’, while in his translation of the Old Persian passage of Darius it is rendered as ‘perfection’. The crucial term *Aša* is rendered as ‘Order’, rather than ‘Truth’. Thus, the older the hymns / text may be, the more abstract the word choice for key terminology in the Zoroastrian tradition.

Still, the difficulty for me and the students in using this book has been to understand the Gāthās as the early strand of Zoroastrian poetic tradition. Indeed, the Gāthās—whoever the composer/s might have been—get treated with the modern translator's own understanding of the text. In Skjærvø's case, the author provides a translation that is even more abstract than previous ones for students to grasp, and sometimes even for the educated reader for whom this book is intended. However, if one is privy to Skjærvø's interpretation of the Zoroastrian tradition, the readings become much more understandable.

Turning to the rest of the Avestan corpus, major portions of the Yasna and the Yashts are translated, sometimes long passages and at other times in shorter excerpts. Again, most are improvements upon previous translations, certainly for English-speaking readers. As is often the case in the study of Zoroastrianism, it seems that French and German are the languages of choice for scholarly endeavor. This is slowly changing, and Skjærvø's work greatly improves our understanding of and access to the Zoroastrian hymns/texts. That is no small task given the philological problems of the Avestan corpus, and the author should be lauded for it.

As for the Middle Persian translation, one should state that the work here by Skjærvø is a magnificent display of learning and understanding of the Middle Persian texts. While there is much that was translated or known before, the author has either significantly improved the reading of the texts or has given complete translations of texts that were in need of a new edition. There are complete translations of such short texts as the *On the Coming of Wahram the Miraculous (Abar madan ī wahrām ī warzāwand)* (p. 166) and *The Accursed Abalish (Gizāstag Abālīš)*; many passages from *Dēnkard III* (pp. 201–9), and more importantly, long sections from the history of sacred Zoroastrian tradition in *Dēnkard IV* (pp. 40–43), the life of Zoroaster in *Dēnkard VII* (138–56), and much more.

In conclusion, I would like to raise a methodological issue in regard to the work at hand. This has to do with the omission of Persian and Gujrati Zoroastrian texts from the volume. From the medieval period or eleventh century, that is for the past millennium, the bulk of Zoroastrian texts have been written in Persian, which became the language of the Zoroastrian religion, both in Iran and India. Also, texts in Gujarati, the language used for Zoroastrian writings in India in the past three or four centuries, are far less studied than even the Persian Zoroastrian texts. However important and central the Avestan, Old Persian, and Middle Persian texts are for the discipline, to understand the development of Zoroastrianism from remote antiquity to the present, it is important to examine and sample texts from Persian and Gujarati as well. Otherwise, we are faced with the traditional approach to the study of Zoroastrianism and Iranian Studies, where “Pre-Islamic” Iran (although some of the Middle Persian texts were redacted as late as tenth or eleventh century) and “Islamic” Iranian fields remain alien to one another and present a disjointed view of a cultural tradition. This of course is a historiographical and methodological issue and I believe in the modern period it needs serious attention if we are to study and understand the development of a religious tradition that spans three millennia. Indeed, Zoroastrianism as a religion has had a long life.

The last comment pertains to the disjunction between the purpose of the volume and the choice of the author of the book. Skjærvø is the leading figure in the study of Old and Middle Iranian philology and Iranian religions, and there is little doubt to this fact. Few if any in the world can match his knowledge of Iranian languages. However, the editor(s) of the series explicitly state that “the publishing program is planned so that each faith community articulates its own teachings with the intention of enhancing its self-understanding as well as the understanding of those of other faiths and those of no faith.” To anyone familiar with the great Norwegian Iranist, it will be clear that he is farthest away from such a choice for “Zoroastrians articulating their tradition,” as articulated by The Sacred Literature Series that commissioned the book.

However, no one would have had the ability to provide translations of such varied and at times difficult texts in a single volume for scholars and students of the field. It is a blessing that Skjærvø agreed to do the volume and I hope that he continues to produce more of this kind of translation, if Zoroastrian Studies is to survive.

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