



Disclaimer: The aim of our book reviews is to provide insight and opinion on recently published scholarly books. All opinions are the authors own. The opinions expressed in the below review belong solely to the author and do not reflect the views of the journal.

Rev Dr Razvan Tatu

Greek Orthodox Archdiocese of Johannesburg and Pretoria, South Africa

Philip G. Kreyenbroek, *Early Zoroastrianism and Orality*, Göttinger Orientforschungen, III. Reihe: Iranica, Neue Folge 20, Herausgegeben von Philip G. Kreyenbroek, Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, 2023, ISBN 978-3-447-11424-0, 309pp.

On this occasion, I am humbly grateful for the opportunity offered by the author of this fascinating study, who gave me permission to write this review. Professor Philip G. Kreyenbroek, who used to teach at the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), London, and Göttingen University, has dedicated his latest book to the oral tradition in early Zoroastrianism. Actually, decades before, he made a lot of contributions in both fields of Zoroastrianism and Kurdish religious culture, especially Yezidism. He is one of the main authorities who keep frequently contact with the Zoroastrian community at present. For a long time, he has been preoccupied with the question of orality and discourse analysis in Zoroastrianism in its early stages, pointing out that this tradition has been transmitted orally for centuries, a theory which seems to be widely accepted by scholars nowadays. Methodological approaches, methods of memorizing, history of the transmission process, extensive translations of the Gaṇas, Yasnas and Yašts, fundamental scriptures for this religious tradition can be found in his book *Early Zoroastrianism and Orality*, published by Harrassowitz Verlag, Wiesbaden, in 2023, being part of the series entitled Göttinger Orientforschungen. III. Reihe: Iranica, Neue Folge 20, herausgegeben von Philip G. Kreyenbroek.

The volume consists of an introduction followed by ten chapters, and several recent translations of the fundamental old Avestan texts, Pre-Gathic, Gathic, Late Gathic and Post-Gathic, as the scholar categorizes them (p.90). It is the result of a very long and extensive research that Prof. Kreyenbroek has done on field. Going back to the Vedic period, when the Indo-Aryan and Iranian ethnicities used to live together, the author highlights the common elements of the two traditions, after a time the two communities splitting and creating their own religious discourse and texts. In more chapters, we are taken through the early history of Zoroastrian scripture which went through several transformations and additions, the idea of Zarathustra's historicity, the "Zoroastrianisation" of former elements inherited from the common Indo-Iranian linguistic and doctrinal milieu ("texts praising the early Indo-Iranian divinities had existed before Zarathustra and (...) the Gathic and Yast traditions co-existed for a time before they merged", p.138), which gave birth to the main teachings professed by the Zoroastrian religion. He concludes that the historicity of the prophet is still disputed, that this ancient Iranian religion reveals a dualist



cosmogony with a monotheistic tendency, in the eschatological perspective. From a theological point of view, considering the existence of several pre-Zoroastrian deities coexisting alongside Ahura Mazda, venerated by the adherents as the main divine entity, this system can be technically qualified as more of a henotheistic structure (contrary to the conclusion of another scholar in Zoroastrian studies, Prof. Jean Kellens: “If I had really to choose between the two, I would emphasize the historical perspective and suggest that Old Avestan Mazdaism be defined as an unstable polytheism”, see J. Kellens, Characters of Ancient Mazdaism, in “History and Anthropology”3:1, 239-262, DOI:10.1080/02757206.1987.9960786, p. 258). The book is a demanding one, which necessitates a strong expertise in the field of comparative philology, without falling in the extreme of “philologising” the substance of this religious system. It is true that for a very long time, the aspect of orality was not explored enough or almost not at all by the classic specialists in the field. The Gaṇas are still one of the most confusing and heterogeneous religious texts for the comparative study of religion. Regarding one absolutely essential aspect of orality, we are reminded that, usually, Zoroastrian adherents were expected to learn the sacred texts by heart and a great deal of the special preparations for the ones who wished to become priests is focused on memorizing the liturgical texts written in Avestan, a language which is not spoken any longer.

An interesting fact, shown by the author, among many others, is the one about the two spheres of existence, the spiritual one, governed by several divinities, opposed to the corporeal or ephemeral one from this world, which exposes it as a mixed world. There is a permanent interaction between these two spheres, due to the transcendent and immanent aspect of the various divinities (pp.55-56). Through various rituals, the three important principles: good thoughts, good words and good deeds, priests and faithful can contribute to the salvation of the world, that is the return to primeval state. Prof. Kreyenbroek takes the reader through accurate explanations of the entire Zoroastrian terminology, which makes his book an invaluable and indispensable source of research for any scholar interested in ancient Mazdaism (another denomination for Zoroastrianism). Actually, due to the fact that so much debate about the prophet Zarathustra’s historicity goes on, the more precise description seems to be Mazdaism, following the old Avestan expression-concept *denymazdayasna*.

Rev Dr R Tatu (May 2024)