Encyclopædia Iranica

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Published: December 15, 1994
Last Updated: September 25, 2013

DARMESTETER, JAMES

DARMESTETER, JAMES (b. Château-Salins, Alsace, 12 March 1849, d. Paris, 19 October 1894), the great Iranist, was the son of a Jewish bookbinder, who in 1852 moved to Paris to improve his children's educational opportunities. Through the prompting of his elder brother Arsène, himself a distinguished philologist specializing in medieval French, James (who was endowed with a superb intellect in a frail body), after a brilliant school career, enrolled at the École des Hautes Études, where he studied comparative gram-mar with Michel Bréal and Sanskrit with Abel Bergaigne and made his first contribution to Iranian studies in 1874 with "Notes de philologie iranienne" (*MSL* 4, pp. 300-17). A year later he submitted his prize-winning thesis, *Haurvatāt et Amərətāt. Essai sur la mythologie de l'Avesta*. With these two works he entered on what were to be his lifelong fields of study, Iranian philology and the Zoroastrian religion. Both he approached from a historical point of view, bring-ing his increasing erudition to bear on tracing connections and developments through attested usages. He read swiftly, mastering languages with ease, and his retentive memory and alert intelligence enabled him to store and use creatively a great mass of knowledge. In 1877 he received the degree of *docteur ès lettres* for his *Ormazd et Ahriman, leurs origines et leur histoire* (Paris, 1877; repr. Paris, 1971), a study of Iranian dualism. His conclusion, that dualism was the logical development of beliefs evolved in India, was bold and controversial but argued with characteristic lucidity and force. In the same year he was appointed to teach Avestan at the École des Hautes Études and, encouraged by Bréal, set himself the formidable task of making a new translation of the entire Avesta. His publications, which by then

included a number of other articles on Iranian subjects, had already earned him an international reputation, and Max Müller invited him to contribute an English translation of Avestan texts to the series Sacred Books of the East. His *The Zend Avesta* Part I. *The Vendīdād* appeared in 1880 as the fourth volume in the series, followed in 1883 by Part II. *The Sīrōzahs, Yasts, and Nyāyi*s, the twenty-third volume. In 1883 he also published the two volumes of his *Études iraniennes*, characterized by Karl Geldner as epoch-making. In the first volume, entitled *Grammaire historique du persan*, he established that Old Persian and Avestan were distinct languages, showed that the cradle of modern Persian was Fārs, isolated the Semitic element in Pahlavi, and established that Pārsīk (now more usually termed Pāzand) was only Pahlavi transcribed in Avestan characters. The second volume, called *Mélanges d'histoire et de littérature iranienne*, is a miscellany of brilliant short studies, for example, his masterly treatment (pp. 301-03) of Hadiš, Iranian divinity of the homestead, until then unrecognized by Western scholars. In the same year Darmesteter published a more general collection of articles, *Essais orientaux*, which included his "La légende d'Alexandre," articles on aspects of Judaism and Buddhism, a comparative study of elements in the *Māhābharata* and the *Šāh-nāma* (which he read extensively, both for its own sake and in connection with the Avestan *Yašt*s), and several articles relating to Afghanistan, the language and history of which greatly interested him.

He had been appointed joint director of the École des Hautes Études in 1880, and in 1882 he became honorary secretary of the Société Asiatique, a post that he held until his death. One of his most arduous duties as honorary secretary was the presentation of detailed annual reports on progress in Oriental studies in France, and his were masterpieces of comprehensiveness and lucidity, in which, it was said (Barbier de Meynard, p. 527), he sometimes surprised authors by bringing out points in their writings the implications of which they themselves had not fully appreciated. Although his own standards of scholarship were rigorous, he was generous in his judgment of others' work.

In 1885 Darmesteter was nominated for the chair of Persian language and literature at the Collège de France. A year earlier Müller had pressed him to complete his contributions to Sacred Books of the East by translating the *Yasna* and *Visperad*, but he had declined on the grounds that it was impossible to render these liturgical works adequately without knowledge of the rituals that they accompanied. In 1886-87 he therefore set out on an eleven-month "philological mission" to India, supported by the French Ministry of education.

He spent the first and longest part of this period in the northwest frontier area of the Punjab, April in Peshawar and May to September in Abbottabad. His purpose was to go beyond his few predecessors in the study of Pashto, who had relied mainly on literary texts, and to "provide the philologist and the historian with authentic and immediate specimens of the language and thought of the Afghan people." To this end he engaged two amanuenses, Pīr Moḥammad-ʿAlī at Peshawar and Mawlawī Moḥammad-Esmāʿīl Khan at Abbott-abad, to write down the texts of popular songs as dictated by professional singers and to help him with their interpretation. A few other texts of this sort he acquired from collections made by British amateurs of the subject. In a remarkably short time after his return from India he published a representative collection of more than a hundred of these songs in Pashto script, with annotated French translations, under the title *Chants populaires des Afghans* (Paris, 1888). The book contains more than its title suggests, for in the preface he included a thorough analysis of Pashto phonology and morphology, confirming that the language belongs to the Iranian family, as well as a sketch of Afghan literature and history. Almost simultaneously his lively *Lettres sur l'Inde. À la frontière afghane,* appeared; in its historical passages he used the texts of several ballads as illustrations.

Darmesteter also reaped a rich harvest in the still briefer time, a bare three months, that he spent among the Parsis, mostly in Bombay, with short visits to Navsari and other old Parsi centers in Gujarat. His fame as a foreign *dastūr* of their faith had preceded him, and the warmth of his reception contrasted strongly with the sustained hostility that had formerly greeted A. H. Anquetil-Duperron. In his work he benefited most from two friendships that he formed, one with the learned Tahmuras Dinshaw Anklesaria, the other with E. W. West, the scholarly English engineer who, initially inspired by Martin Haug, had by then spent some twenty years studying Pahlavi texts. Leading Parsi priests, notably Jivanji Jamshedji Modi, and the *dastūr*s of Bombay and Puna—Peshotanji Behramji Sanjana, Jamaspji Minochehr Jamasp-Asana, and Hoshangji Jamasp- Asana—readily showed him their manuscripts and gave him whatever information he sought; and he was formally welcomed at Navsari by a full assembly of the Bhagaria priests (Darmesteter, I, p. lviii). Accordingly he returned to Paris, in February 1887, with a mass of new information concerning the Avesta itself, the solemnization of Zoroastrian rituals, and the nature of living Zoroastrian beliefs and practices. Side by side with the publication of his Afghan materials he settled to completing his magnum opus, a French translation, richly furnished with notes and

commentaries, of the entire Avesta, including thitherto unpublished fragments that he had come to know in Bombay. This masterpiece of learning, the synthesis of some twenty years' labor, was published as *Le Zend-Avesta* in three massive tomes in the Annales du Musée Guimet (1892-93) and received instant acclaim. It did not become generally accessible, however, until 1960, when it was reprinted in three small volumes that could be on every scholar's shelves. The rich store of facts and penetrating and rational observations contained within it did not therefore benefit Zoroastrian studies, lending ballast and sobriety, as fully and speedily as they might have done. Knowledge of the Avestan language has now advanced so greatly that Darmesteter's translations themselves are outdated in many respects, but the notes and commentaries remain invaluable, as do the long introductions to the respective volumes.

The first of these introductions begins with a succinct survey of the knowledge of Zoroaster and his teachings in classical and medieval times, followed by an outline of academic studies of the Avesta down to his own day. Darmesteter then went on to describe the various aids available for an understanding of the sacred texts. He gave due recognition to the usefulness of Vedic but stressed the dangers of relying too much on similarities with Vedic words and on speculative etymologies, rather than on studying the actual usage of Avestan words in context. As an aid to this study he found great value in the Pahlavi *Zand* and in Pahlavi literature generally, looking to Iranian tradition to help illuminate these ancient Iranian texts. Concerning the content of the Avesta, Darmesteter stressed, here and in the introduction to Volume III, the great importance of the *Gatha*s, which, he showed, were cited, imitated, and invoked in every other part of the Avesta (see his detailed references, I, p. xcviii n. 3). He further maintained (I, p. cv) that, once the myths and legends are taken away, "Parsism" (by which he meant the religion of the Pahlavi books and later times) faithfully reproduces the theology and ethics of the *Gatha*s. The difficulties of these most sacred of texts he held to be in their form (I, p. cvii), rather than in their content, to which, he maintained, tradition furnishes a guide. Approaching the texts in this way, he encountered none of the artificial problems created by other Western scholars. That is, he saw the religion as a radical dualism, with Ahura Mazdā directly opposed to Angra Mainyu (see AHRIMAN) and, as creator of good, himself called Spənta Mainyu (III, pp. lxiv, lxvi). Darmesteter was the first to explain the number of the seven great Aməša Spəntas as corresponding to Ahura Mazdā's seven creative acts (III, p. lvi), and he considered the doctrine of the resurrection of the dead

as an essential component of the primitive faith, linked with those of an end of time and of rewards and punishments hereafter (III, pp. lxiv, lxvii).

The next section of the introduction to Volume I Darmesteter devoted to the Zoroastrian cult. He gave accounts of the Parsi priests and fire temples and of the ritual offerings and main ceremonies, supplying, as Anquetil had done before him, clear plans and drawings and good photographs. The accounts themselves furnish an admirably clear guide to the various main ceremonies. This first introduction concludes with an analysis of the texts and rituals of the *Yasna*. With the help of Anklesaria, Darmesteter established the existence of two distinct ritual traditions, Irani and Parsi, which vary in a number of mostly small details, whereas, as he pointed out (I, p. cx), there was only one version of the text, with all manuscripts going back to a single original. There follow, in the first volume, the texts of the *Yasna* and *Visperad*, accompanied throughout by ritual instructions. For these Darmesteter relied on two works (I, p. cxi), one (in Gujarati) for the Parsi, the other (in Pahlavi) for the old Irani rites, which he systematically distinguished. On obscure points he also consulted Anklesaria by letter. This was a work of immense and discerning labor and is one of the aspects of his masterpiece that is unlikely to be superseded.

The second, larger volume contains the *Vidēvdād*, *Sīrōza*s, *Yašt*s, and a selection of texts from the *Ḵorda Avesta*. It includes, that is, all the texts that Darmesteter had translated for Sacred Books of the East, but with renderings improved by intervening years of study and notes enriched by an abundance of new materials, especially for the *Vidēvdād*. His introduction to this much-discussed text is judicious and learned, and there are valuable appendices to particular sections, notably one dealing at length with the Zoroastrian funerary customs (derived largely from the work on this subject by J. J. Modi). The *Sīrōza*sand *Yašt*s are also richly annotated, with a wealth of background knowledge.

The third volume is devoted to the Avestan fragments, patiently collected and interpreted largely in the light of the Pahlavi texts in which most are embedded. At the end of them is set the Avestan *Nīrangestān*. The introduction includes one chapter devoted largely to the *Letter of Tansar*, the importance of which Darmesteter was the first to perceive; he subsequently published an edition, with translation and notes (*JA*, 1894). There is other matter in this introduction, however, that some scholars rejected instantly as unsound and that progress in knowledge has shown to be indeed unacceptable. Darmesteter

was one of the distinguished Iranists who gave credence to the spurious date for Zoroaster, “258 years before Alexander”; and he was perhaps the only one to make a serious attempt to understand the evolution of the *Avesta* in the light of this false chronology. The task was impossible, and grappling with it led him for once to wholly invalid conclusions. At that time the academic study of oral literature had not begun, and like everyone else Darmesteter thought that he was dealing with a written scripture. From the contents of the *Yašt*s and *Vidēvdād* he reasonably supposed that they were older than the *Gatha*s, and he thus deduced that the latter could not have been the work of Zoroaster himself but must have been composed later to enshrine the teachings of the faith. He held that the unknown author had used a deliberately elevated, archaizing language, knowledge of which he must have obtained from a lost Old Avestan written literature. Furthermore, the parallels that exist between Neoplatonism and Judaism on one hand and Zoroastrianism on the other are striking, and in the 19th century it was natural to suppose that influence had gone from west to east, rather than the other way about. Darmesteter accordingly thought that these similar elements were alien to primitive Zoroastrianism and had been absorbed by the Iranian religion after the time of its prophet. They then came to be interwoven by the putative author of the *Gatha*s with original doctrines. Darmesteter suggested that his date was probably in the 1st century C.E., at the time of the religious revival under “Valakš the Arsacid.” The basis of original doctrine was nevertheless suffiiciently strong, he maintained, for the religion to be able to absorb these alien elements without losing its own essential character; and he argued convincingly for its continuity as a living faith through Achaemenid, Seleucid, Parthian, Sasanian, and later times (III, pp. v, xxiii-xxvii, xcvii). This is only one of the points in this introduction where Darmesteter’s sound evaluation of historical evidence led him to just conclusions, which, had they gained a hearing at the time, would have saved Zoroastrian studies from much confusion and time-wasting debate. Unfortunately the third introduction has been generally neglected because of the assumption that it represented nothing but a major error, best forgotten, on the part of a great scholar, and so some of his most valuable observations went unregarded.

In 1892, the year in which he published the first two volumes of *Le Zend-Avesta*, Darmesteter became sole director of the École des Hautes Études, with added administrative burdens. He continued to write brilliantly on a whole diversity of subjects, literary and political, contributing to the *Revue critique*, the *Journal des débats*, and the newly launched *Revue de Paris*, the first and

last of which he also helped to edit. The range of his interests was remarkable; he was steeped among other things in English literature, on which he wrote perceptively. This interest led to his friendship and then happy marriage with the English poet Mary Robinson, to whom he dedicated *Le Zend-Avesta*.

The accumulation of scholarly, literary, teaching, and administrative activities demanded, however, too much "not of his vast intelligence but of his physical powers" (Barbier de Meynard, p. 532). In July 1894, anxious that the Société Asiatique, which he had served so well, should not think him in any way neglectful because of other calls on his time, he attended the annual general meeting and read a paper on what was to be his last piece of Iranian research, "Les Parthes à Jérusalem" (*JA*, 1894, pp. 43-54). Soon afterward he fell ill and died in October at the age of forty-five years. West, never given to overstatement, wrote of him: "It would be difficult to find a sounder scholar, a more brilliant writer, and a more estimable man, all united in the same individual" (cited by Benveniste), while in another obituary it was said: "In him was realized the perfect ideal of scholarship," a "happy blending of profound learning, daring originality and transparent clearness of expression" (cited by Cordier, p. 221).

Darmesteter's widow eventually married the director of the Pasteur Institute in Paris. When they both died, the Institute inherited Darmesteter's books, which gathered dust there for half a century until, through the efforts of Gilbert Lazard, they were transferred to the library of the Institut d'Études Iraniennes, renamed Bibliothèque James Darmesteter in tribute to him.

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