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SACRED BOOKS OF THE EAST
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SACRED BOOKS OF THE EAST

SACRED BOOKS OF THE EAST, general title of a set of 50 volumes published between 1879 and 1910, all translated into English by some of the leading scholars of the time under the supervision of Friederich Max Müller (1823-1900), a prominent Indologist and scholar of comparative religions. The set, as finally realized, is a collection of holy books belonging to the religion of the Brahmans, as well as to those of the followers of Buddha, Zarathustra, Confucius, Lao-Tze, Moḥammad, and Mahavira. The series was conceived by Müller and originally was projected to be published in twenty-four volumes in eight years (“Preface,” SBE I, 1879, p. xliv), although already at that time he expressed uncertainty regarding the time frame (ibid.) and recognized his dependence on the scholar translators (ibid., p. xlv).

Müller’s categorization of six sacred canons, “this library of the sacred books of the world” (1873, p. 116), does not count those of Christianity and Judaism or attempt to include more from India, whether from ancient Jainism or much later developments (such as Sikhism). The list is expounded in the first part of his second London lecture (1873, pp. 101-16); it is itemized more explicitly in an 1876 letter (G. M. Müller, ed., p. 10) and in the 1879 “Preface” (p. xli). However, by 1884, with publication of the first of two volumes, Jainism also was ranked as a canon, as Müller apparently had considered doing earlier (ibid., p. xliv; cf. 1873, p. 112)—making seven in all.

The overall concept of the series was to provide, for scholarly historical study, a set of easily accessible publications presenting the most important sacred texts of major world religions that have characterized and deeply influenced

the history of ideas and of humanity throughout the Asian continent. Christianity and Judaism, whose resources were readily available for comparative religious study, are completely left out, while the only book belonging to the third great Abrahamic religion to be included is the Qoʾrān in Edward Henry Palmer's translation. The lion's share of the series belongs to the Vedic-Brahmanic faith with twenty-one volumes, followed by Buddhism, Zoroastrism, Confucianism, then Jainism, Taoism, and Islam.

This selection may certainly have been suggested, at least in part, by the dimension of the different corpora, but it much more reflects both the editor's personal interests and fields of studies and the cultural milieu of imperial Great Britain, where the project was developed. It is not by chance that, except for the six volumes dedicated to the two main Southeast Asian religions, all others deal with religions either of Indian origin or else still practiced in the subcontinent. Moreover, at the turn of the 20th century, one of the focuses of European scientific interest was Indo-European historical linguistics and the studies of the related cultures and religions. Therefore, it is of no surprise that the great bulk of the set contains texts belonging to faiths of Indo-European origins.

The standard structure of the volumes reflects the nature of the series, which meant to provide access to the holy books of the different traditions also to the non-initiated. Each volume or set of volumes is provided with a lengthy and detailed introduction followed by the translation of the pertinent text or texts accompanied by copious notes and a detailed index. The volume of general index by Moriz Winternitz is very useful, to the extent of being considered a general summary of the Sacred Books of the East.

The series' great success and the role it played in establishing Oxford University's prestige in the field of Oriental Studies led it to being extended to "include all the most important works of the seven non-Christian religions that have exercised a profound influence on the civilization of the continent of Asia" (MacDonnell, 1910, p. vii). It was sponsored by Oxford University, but it could not have been realized without the co-operation of the distinguished scholars of the time who devoted their time and knowledge to an enterprise aimed at providing a trustworthy key to oriental religious literature. In Müller's own words: "I feel the less hesitation in fulfilling the duty of the true scholar, and placing before historians and philosophers accurate, complete and unembellished versions of some of the sacred books of the East. Such versions alone will enable them to form a true and just estimate of the real

development of early religious thought, so far as we can still gain a sight of it in literary works to which the highest human or even divine has been ascribed by the followers of the great religions of antiquity" (SBE I, p. xx).

Müller supervised the publication of the entire series, though he did not live to see the very last volumes published. Twenty of the leading specialists of the time variously contributed to the Sacred Books of the East; namely, Samuel Beal (1825-89), Maurice Bloomfield (1855-1928), Georg Bühler (1837-98), Edward Byles Cowell (1826-1903), James Darmesteter (1849-94), Thomas William Rhys Davids (1843-1922), Julius Eggeling (1842-1918), Viggo Fausböll (1821-1908), Hermann Jacobi (1849-1932), Julius Jolly (1850-1937), Hendrik Kern (1833-1917), James Legge (1815-97), Friederich Max Müller (1823-1900), Lawrence Heyworth Mills (1837-1918), Hermann Oldenberg (1854-1920), Edward Henry Palmer (1840-82), Junjiro Takakusu (1866-1945), Kâshinâth Trimbak Telang (1850-93), George Thibaut (1848-1914), and Edward William West (1824-1905).

THE ZOROASTRIAN SERIES

The translation of the Avesta by James Darmesteter and Lawrence Heyworth Mills is quite uneven, depending on the complexity of the text as well as on the skill of its translator. Understandably, the least gratifying part is in the translation of the *Gāthā*s and of the other Old Avestan texts, since the comparative method was only to be satisfactorily developed seven decades later by Karl Hoffman and the Erlangen school and then applied by a young Helmut Humbach to the *Gāthās*. Both Darmesteter and Mills based their translations on Niels Westergaard's pioneering edition (1852-54), an unavoidable choice for the former, less so for the latter, who, however, only had the chance to see Karl Geldner's authoritative text (1886-95) when his own translation was nearly completed. Darmester followed his English version by his publication of a translation of the whole Avesta in French only a few years later.

In the period bridging the years between the two works, Darmesteter progressively changed his mind on a number of fundamental issues. On the one hand, he increasingly laid less weight on the importance of mythology, and on the other, he relied more and more on the value of tradition. In his two earlier works (1875, 1877), Darmesteter counted heavily on Vedic comparison, while later, in his introduction to the first of the two volumes that he contributed to the Sacred Books of the East (SBE IV, 1880, pp. xxv-xxix, c-ci), he

argued in favor of using the comparative method side by side with the data obtained from Zoroastrian tradition, regarding the two as being complementary, although considering the latter more authoritative for the *Vendidad* (*Wīdēwdād*). On the contrary, because of the absence of any authoritative tradition, he mainly relied on the comparative method in his translation of the *Yašts*, *Sīrōzag*s, and *Niyāyišn* (SBE XXIII, p. ix).

Darmesteter finally, in his 1892-93 edition, completed shortly before his premature death, settled on a more radical position, markedly favoring tradition over the comparative method. This evolution was paralleled by his identification of the Aməša Spənta Vohu Manah with the Neoplatonic logos, which in its turn lead him to dating the composition of the *Gāthā*s to the 1st century CE and the rest of the Avesta to the next two or three centuries, though not entirely denying the possible preservation of older, pre-alexandrine, materials; this was an opinion on the time of the composition of the Avesta, which he substantially held already when writing for the Sacred Books of the East (SBE IV, pp. xxxvi-liv). This brought the Sacred Book of the Zoroastrians chronologically nearer to Middle and New Persian than to Vedic, thus justifying the preeminence given to indigenous tradition (cf. Kellens, pp. 44-45).

Though Darmesteter has certainly been much more innovative and influential in the history of Iranian studies than what Mills has ever been, the latter was certainly nearer to truth on some issues fundamental to this field of studies. Mills shared Darmesteter's method, advocating the advantages of using side by side the comparative methodology and the information found in the Pahlavi commentaries (SBE XXXI, p. x), but he differed from his predecessor on matters of interpretation and reconstruction of Zoroastrianism's history. Darmesteter (see Kellens, p. 46) argued in favor of a very late and western redaction of the Avesta, linking it more specifically with Media and the town of Raḡā (identified with present-day Ray on the southern outskirts of Tehran), but Mills preferred to place the original homeland of the Avesta in northeastern Iran and to date Zoroaster's composition of the *Gāthā*s to a period between 1500 and 800 BC (SBE XXXI, pp. xxvii-xxxvii).

An important aspect of Darmesteter's thought, coincident with that of many later scholars and being the prevailing one in recent years, is the accent that he lays on continuity in Zoroastrianism, and the lack of any need to hypothesize a breach in tradition, such as what one would have expected had there been a prophet preaching a revolutionary belief (SBE IV, p. lxxxi). A

second edition of the *Vendidad* volume by Darmester appeared posthumously in 1895. As mentioned in Edward West's short note prefaced to the translation, Darmesteter had already had the chance to revise the proof sheets of the new edition and left behind a complete manuscript of the Introduction and Fragments. The final revision was carried out by West, who did so according to the views expressed by Darmesteter in his French edition of the Avesta.

West, in the five volumes of Middle Persian, including a few New Persian, texts that he edited for the Sacred Books of the East, not only provided the translation of a number of very relevant works, which to the present day form the vaster collection of Pahlavi texts translated in any European language, but also an interesting presentation, supplemented with a detailed description of the manuscripts known in those days of each of the works that he published. The pioneering achievement of West in translating these volumes, the richness of the notes, and the extent of the introductions represent a very important step in promoting our knowledge of Zoroastrian Middle Persian Literature. What is more, the introductions to individual volumes, especially if taken together with West's contribution to the *Grundriss der iranischen Philologie*, form a sufficiently detailed description of Pahlavi literature that, though now quite dated, still provide interesting points of view.

The first volume (SBE V) contains the *Bundahišn* translated mainly following the Indian recension (K20), since West had access to the codex TD1 only at a very late stage. However, he quickly realized that TD1 represented a tradition corresponding to the one attested also in the surviving *Bundahišn* folios of K43, later to be known as the Iranian or Greater *Bundahišn*, a recension quite different from the one attested by K20 and M51, the only one known to that day. West used the new codex mainly to establish the text of chapters 28, 29, 31, 32 and 33, according to the numbering of his edition. Other books translated in the first volume of Pahlavi Texts are the *Selections of Zādsparam (Wīzīdagīhā ī Zādspram)*, written by Zādspram son of Juwānjam, brother of the High Priest Manuščihr, though only parts that treat the same subjects found in the *Bundahišn*, the *Zand ī Wahman Yasn,* and the *Šāyast nā-šāyast* have been translated.

The second volume of the Pahlavi Texts (SBE XVIII) contains the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* and the *Epistles of Manuščihr*, both composed by the High Priest Manuščihr, head of the Zoroastrian community of Fars and Kerman in the second half of the ninth century, whose literary style was particularly vague.

The third volume (SBE XIV) includes the didactical *Dādestān ī mēnōg ī xrad*, written, with some exception, in a very fluent Middle Persian; the apologetic and polemical treatise *Škand gumānīg wizār*, composed by Mardānfarrox ī Ohrmazddādān towards the end of the ninth century, which has come down to us in a Pāzand version; and the *Sad dar*, a late didactical book written in New Persian and nonetheless accepted as authoritative by the Zoroastrian community.

The fourth volume of the *Pahlavi Texts* (SBE XXXVII) contains the books that describe the contents of the *nask*s of the Sasanian Avesta. The lion's share goes to books eight and nine of the *Dēnkard*, the former containing a summary of the twenty-one *nask*s, though in varying detail, the latter presenting in some detail three gāthic *nask*s: the *Sūdgar*, the *Warštmānsar*, and the *Bay* (BAG NASK), together with their commentaries. The volume includes also a number of other selected passages bearing on the *nask*s, taken from further Pahlavi texts as well as from the New Persian *Revāyats*.

Finally, volume five of the Pahlavi Texts (SBE XLVII) presents the legendary life of Zoroaster and of the three future saviors as found in the seventh book of the *Dēnkard*, in part of the fifth book of this same encyclopedic work, and in chapters 12-23 of the *Selections of Zādspram*, all ultimately derived, according to West (SBE XLVII, p. ix), from the *Spand nask*. The most complete and coherent among these versions is the one contained in the seventh book of the *Dēnkard*. The *Dēnkard* texts were again translated, together with chapter 47 of the *Pahlavi rivāyat* and part of the *Wizīrgard ī dēnīg* by Marijan Molé in his posthumous work *La légende de Zoroastre*. Regarding the age in which Zoroaster lived, West cautiously writes that traditional chronology would indicate 660-583 BC as the most probable dates for when the prophet lived (SBE XLVII, p. xxxviii). Though stating that the Zoroastrian tradition is quite consistent in placing Zoroaster's activity about the end of the seventh century BC, he also cautions that "Avesta scholars" insist for a greater antiquity on different grounds, one of them being the similarity of the Avestan language to Vedic Sanskrit (SBE XLVII, p. xlii).

"TRANSLITERATION OF ORIENTAL ALPHABETS" (SBE I, p. xlviii)

The rationale of Müller's transliteration system, to be applied to all the languages represented in the SBE without attempting precision of actual pronunciation, is explained in SBE I, pp. xlviii-l, and the following tables are then presented. Subsequent volumes carried the tables at the end of the

volumes.

Figure 1. Transliteration of consonants, nos. 1-17 (SBE I, p. li).

Figure 2. Transliteration of consonants, nos. 18-37 (SBE I, p. lii).

Figure 3. Transliteration of consonants, nos. 38-59 (SBE I, p. liii).

Figure 4. Transliteration of vowels (SBE I, p. liv).

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