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SHAUL SHAKED

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Foreword

The present volume is based on lectures delivered at a symposium organized by the Israel Academy of Sciences and Humanities on the occasion of the eightieth birthday of Professor Shaul Shaked, who became a Member of the Academy in 1986. The editors are grateful to the participants for their innovative contributions to the event and to the ensuing book.

Special thanks are due to Gila Brand for her first round of editing, to Deborah Greniman, Senior Editor of English-Language Publications at the Academy, for her painstaking, dedicated and professional editorial work, to Irit Nahum for her expert typesetting and to Yehuda Greenbaum of the Academy's Publications Department for overseeing the book's production.

Yohanan Friedmann
Etan Kohlberg
Jerusalem, December 2018

The Scholarly Oeuvre of Shaul Shaked, 1

Shaul Shaked and the Study of Zoroastrianism

Michael Shenkar

Notwithstanding the unusually broad scope of Shaul Shaked's research interests, the *Schwerpunkt* of his scholarly efforts since his doctoral dissertation has been his dedication to the study of Zoroastrianism. His studies of Middle Persian Zoroastrian literature, exegesis, Zoroastrian mythology, cosmogony, eschatology and ethics, and, above all, his analysis of the authors' ways of thinking and the problems that bothered them, revolutionized the scholarly understanding of Sasanian Zoroastrianism and put it on a completely new ground. This is by no means an appreciative student's respectful exaggeration, but an accurate description of the influence that Shaked has had on the field.

Given the limited scope of this introductory essay, I shall focus on just a few of the major directions of research established by Shaked that have had a decisive and formative impact on the study of Sasanian Zoroastrianism. In his 1994 book *Dualism in Transformation*, Shaked demonstrated that the definitions of Zoroastrian orthodoxy and what is to be excluded from it were probably formulated only in the post-Sasanian period.¹ This position, though it was passionately criticized by his teacher Mary Boyce, is now widely accepted, notwithstanding the state-supported attempts by the Zoroastrian clergy, apparent already in the third-century inscriptions of the Sasanian high-priest Kartīr, to define what is the 'correct' *Mazdayasnian Tradition* and what is to be considered 'heresy' and legally excluded from the approved religious practices.

Shaked insisted on the rich diversity of religious life in the Sasanian empire and was reluctant to treat the Sasanian kings as ardent champi-

1 Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation* [no. 6], p. 98. The bracketed numbers in the notes refer to the list of the Principal Publications of Shaul Shaked, in this volume.

ons of orthodox Zoroastrianism; as he observed, the Sasanian king's 'involvement in the affairs of the Zoroastrian church is not much deeper than in those of the other religious communities of the kingdom.'² This assessment paved the way to the numerous studies that have appeared in the past two decades exploring the place of Jewish, Christian and other religious communities in the Sasanian empire, not as tolerated or persecuted religious minorities, but as important and integral components of the empire's social fabric.

The conclusions Shaked reached about so-called 'Zurvanism' are now almost universally accepted. Most earlier scholars had argued for the existence in the Sasanian period of a separate Zurvanite 'sect' or 'movement,' or even a 'Zurvanite Church' centered on the worship of the god of time, Zurvān. Shaked, however, showed that the Zurvanite myth, in which Zurvān played a major role in the act of Creation, was only one of the numerous accepted variants of Zoroastrian cosmogony in the Sasanian period,³ and that '[t]here is no reason to suppose that Zurvanism was an organized body of religion, comprising, besides mythology, also theology, ritual, or a church structure.'⁴

The main focus of Shaked's attention has been the elucidation and interpretation of Zoroastrianism in the Sasanian period and the transmission of Zoroastrian notions and ideas into Islam.⁵ However, he has not shied away from expressing his opinion on some of the fundamental and exhaustively debated problems of Zoroastrian studies and of the broader study of Indo-Iranian religions. His approach to the Avesta, and to the *Gathas* in particular, is a masterly attempt to find a middle course between the two 'extreme' positions – that of Mary Boyce, who, in what Shaked called '... almost an act of faith that carries the reader with it,'⁶ was deeply convinced that Old Avestan texts could soundly be interpreted on the basis of the much later Zoroastrian tradition, and that represented by Jean Kellens and Éric Pirart, among others, which was characterized by 'excessive reliance on the linguistic data of the R̥gveda.'⁷ Elsewhere, Shaked described these two approaches as 'on the one hand, regarding the *Gathas* as provincial Vedic texts, and, on the other,

2 *Ibid.*, p. 112.

3 *Ibid.*, pp. 20–21.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 54.

5 See his selected papers on these subjects, in Shaked, *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam* [no. 9].

6 Shaked, 'Review of Mary Boyce' [no. 121], p. 375.

7 Shaked, 'Zoroastrian Origins' [no. 161], p. 189.

reading the whole of later Zoroastrianism into them.’⁸ Not coincidentally, Shaked’s treatment of this thorny subject corresponds to the Zoroastrian concept of *paymān* – ‘the right measure’ – to whose elucidation he himself has made a decisive contribution.⁹ Shaked successfully demonstrated that between Boyce’s insistence on the conservatism, continuity and orthodoxy of the Zoroastrian tradition, on the one hand, and the narrow ritualistic interpretations of the Avestan hymns, on the other, lies a vibrant, constantly changing, manifold world, full of mystical, esoteric and spiritual meanings and open to many possibilities, influences and interpretations. Approached with ‘the right measure’ of criticism and belief, based on breadth of knowledge and absolute command of the primary sources, the Avesta can be shown to contain the basics of what is today called ‘Zoroastrianism.’ According to Shaked, Zoroastrianism was never stagnant, but ‘a living and changing tradition, while never betraying its essence.’¹⁰

This careful method characterizes Shaked’s treatment of the entire corpus of the Zoroastrian written sources. As is well known, the ancient Iranians transmitted their religious literature orally for hundreds of years before starting to commit texts to writing at the end of the Sasanian period, and the Zoroastrian literature that has come down to us underwent processes of editing and compilation in the Abbasid period. Studying the history of the Zoroastrian religion in the pre-Islamic period from these multi-layered texts thus presents a serious scholarly challenge. Here, too, Shaked provides us with important methodological observations:

Iranian literature suffered in the course of its history terrible devastation and loss, and appears to us like a table-cloth full of holes. At the same time, however, it shows a high degree of consistency and harmony. ... [T]here seems to be a hard core which is recognizable as Iranian in all of the different manifestations of this literature. Each one of the chronological phases has to be studied on its own, each genre formulation has some flavour which distinguishes it from the others, and yet there is an internal affinity among them.¹¹

8 Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation* [no. 6], p. 27, note 1.

9 Shaked, ‘Paymān’ [no. 81].

10 Shaked, ‘Zoroastrian Origins’ [no. 161], p. 378.

11 Shaked, ‘The Iranian Canon’ [no. 172], p. 23.

Shaked's balanced and exemplary discussion of the question of 'Zoroaster's Time,' which has tormented scholars for over two centuries, is yet another example of his *paymān*. His dating of Zoroaster's life to the ninth or eighth century BCE is well placed between the extreme points that have been suggested and has the merit of not contradicting any of the few established facts about the prophet of Zoroastrianism.¹²

Shaked's studies always concentrate on a specific and well-defined notion or problem in the Middle Persian literature, but his thorough knowledge of every aspect of this complex and heterogeneous corpus allows him to see the 'big picture' in the small detail and to gain insight into the very essence of Zoroastrianism as a religious system. For example, in his important discussion of whether it is possible to categorize Zoroastrianism as either 'dualism' or 'monotheism,' Shaked shows that such narrow definitions fail to fully grasp all the possibilities and aspects of Zoroastrian cosmogony and eschatology.¹³

In addition to his editions of Middle Persian texts and his expositions of the notions contained in them, Shaked has made important contributions to Middle Persian epigraphy with his publication and deciphering of inscriptions on seals, amulets and vessels. For example, his readings and publications of Jewish-Sasanian seals are essential for scholars interested in the material culture of Sasanian Jewry.¹⁴ He has also introduced entirely new sources into scholarly use. His publication, with the late Joseph Naveh, of the documents from the archive of the Achaemenid satrap of Bactria, written in Aramaic, sheds a completely new light on the history and culture of the eastern provinces of the Achaemenid empire as well as providing us with the earliest attestation of the employment of the Zoroastrian calendar.¹⁵ The importance of this material to settling the long-debated question of whether or not the Achaemenids were Zoroastrians cannot be overstated. After years of repetitive and inconclusive discussions based on the same exhausted evidence, this stalemate, if not completely shattered, has at least been significantly shaken.

In recent years Shaked has been directing the Middle Persian Dictio-

12 Shaked, 'Zoroastrian Origins' [no. 161], pp. 188–189.

13 Shaked, *Dualism in Transformation* [no. 6], pp. 5–27.

14 Shaked, 'Jewish and Christian Seals' [no. 55]; 'Epigraphica Judaeo-Iranica' [no. 62]; 'Jewish Sasanian Sigillography' [no. 118].

15 Naveh and Shaked, *Aramaic Documents* [no. 17]; Shaked, 'The Zoroastrian Calendar' [no. 197].

nary Project, which yields an invaluable tool for studies and students of Zoroastrianism. The project's Text Preparation Utility, now available online (to authenticated users), already contains many Middle Persian texts, greatly facilitating investigation of and searches within the extant corpus of the Zoroastrian literature.¹⁶

Knowledge of Semitic languages and deep acquaintance with Judaism allows Shaked easily to traverse the gap between Iranian and Semitic studies, which remains unbridgeable for many specialists in each field. This puts him in a unique position to comment upon the contacts between Judaism and Zoroastrianism and to evaluate possible influences and transmission of ideas between these two ancient religious traditions. Apparent similarities between some elements of Zoroastrianism and Second Temple Judaism had been noted early on, but the late dating of the Zoroastrian literature where these ideas are expressed gave rise to ill-founded speculations and presented a serious obstacle to any attempt to understand in which religious tradition the elements in question had originated. In his 1984 article 'Iranian Influence on Judaism: First Century B.C.E. to Second Century C.E.,' Shaked advanced the thesis that such elements should be examined in their respective contexts to determine whether they form a 'structure and coherence' within one religious tradition, 'while the overriding structure is lacking' in the other.¹⁷ Using this method, he concluded, for example, that certain eschatological motifs found in both Judaism and Zoroastrianism originate in Iran and were borrowed in Jewish religion. In Iran, he argued, they were 'an organic development of a system' and 'formed part of a larger conception,' while in Judaism the same elements were present only 'in a more or less haphazard manner.'¹⁸ Again, only deep and thorough knowledge of both traditions allowed him to reach such results. It comes as no surprise that despite a growing stream of studies on this subject in recent years, Shaked's article has not been superseded and remains an

16 See the Middle Persian Dictionary Project website: <http://mpdp.mpdic.com/>.

17 Shaked, 'Iranian Influences in Judaism' [no. 68], pp. 322–323. As he formulates the same approach in a later work: 'If these themes are more at home in Zoroastrianism than in Judaism, as seems to be the case, it is natural to assume that the parallel development reflects the impact of Zoroastrianism on Judaism.' See Shaked, 'Zoroastrianism and Judaism' [no. 148], pp. 203–206.

18 Shaked, 'Iranian Influences in Judaism' [no. 68], p. 323. See also Shaked, 'Zoroastrianism and Judaism' [no. 148], pp. 206–208, where he writes: 'the lack of a clearly defined structure within Jewish eschatology stands in contrast to the fact that Iranian eschatology can be viewed as a structural unity.'

essential, authoritative point of reference for any enquiry into the question of possible influences of Iranian religion on Judaism.

Certain priests in Sasanian Iran possessed the title *Ohrmazd mowbed* (Priest of Ohrmazd), attributing to them an extraordinary ability to see into the non-material, non-sensual world of *mēnōg* (*mēnōg-wēnišnīh*), which is unperceivable by the ordinary senses of the common people. Thus, many Zoroastrian spiritual entities that are invisible in *gētīg* (the tangible, visible world in which we live) or are believed to be manifested in *gētīg* by non-figural entities, such as natural elements, only reveal their true anthropomorphic form and appearance in *mēnōg*.¹⁹ Shaul Shaked's abilities to discern the 'true appearance' of complex and vaguely expressed notions in the Middle Persian texts, and to perceive, via the senses and the knowledge that only he possesses, a remarkably full and vivid picture in the 'table-cloth full of holes' of the Zoroastrian literature, have made him the *Ohrmazd mowbed* of Zoroastrian studies.

19 Shaked elucidated the notions of *mēnōg* and *gētīg* and their importance in the Zoroastrian worldview and mythology in his 1971 article 'The Notions Mēnōg and Gētīg' [no. 42].