

Preface

Itaque quae philosophia fuit, facta philologia est.
“Thus what was philosophy has been turned into philology.”
SENECA, *Letters* 108.30

Since the completion of my dissertation, *Studies in Zoroastrian Exegesis and Hermeneutics with a Critical Edition of the Sūdgar Nask of Dēnkard Book 9* in 2007, I have published a number of articles on *Dēnkard* Book 9 in particular that attempt to address questions related to Zoroastrian hermeneutics in Pahlavi literature more generally. Summarizing them here would do little to capture their perhaps needless complexity. This work does not supersede them (except with regard to improved translations and superior manuscript readings in places) so much as it provides interested readers the full textual complement for re-evaluating the individual parts of *my* hermeneutic project on *their* hermeneutic project in Late Antiquity. Nonetheless, a brief enumeration — loosely in chronological order of publication — of the contents of my relevant articles, *à la Dēnkard* Book 9, might prove useful to readers of this *Commentary* and its companion *Text* given that many of the concepts and much of the critical idiom I deploy here were developed in those articles published between 2009 and 2021.

In my first published article, “Resurrecting the Resurrection: Eschatology and Exegesis in Late Antique Zoroastrianism,” fittingly in the *Festschrift for Prods Oktor Skjærvø*, in the *Bulletin of the Asia Institute*,¹ I explored the intimate relationship between myth, cosmology, and ritual performance in Zoroastrianism by demonstrating that the performance of the Old Avestan liturgy is isomorphic with the unfolding of human history as understood by the Pahlavi hermeneutical tradition (a point discussed extensively in MOLÉ 1963) and that the late antique hermeneuts used a numerological form of scriptural interpretation to support their views on the Resurrection (*rist-āxēz*) of humanity at the end of the world. The historiographical implications are manifold, not least of which is the fact that their hermeneutical structures homologize aspects of their ‘thoughtworld’ which we often tend to disaggregate.

In my article, “Relentless Allusion: Intertextuality and the Reading of Zoroastrian Interpretive Literature,” in a conference volume titled: *The Talmud in Its Iranian Context*,² I was the first person in our field to formally discuss an

1 VEVAINA 2005 [2009].

2 VEVAINA 2010c.

‘intertextual’ approach to reading Pahlavi literature. I drew upon various literary approaches to the question of authors, readers, and hermeneutical agency, in order to engage broader methodological and theoretical approaches long used in allied fields, such as Jewish Studies and Classics. I also demonstrated that the ‘creative hermeneutics’ in Dk 9 cannot simply be explained away by the commonly held philological belief that the Pahlavi translators no longer understood Avestan grammar precisely, and, hence, were free to produce fanciful interpretations. We have allegorical readings of the *Kamnāmaēza Hāiti* (*Yasna* 46.1–19) in §9.16 that are already found in *Hādōxt Nask* 2 in a Young Avestan (re)interpretation of the opening line of the Old Avestan *hāiti*, testifying to an archaic tradition of allegoresis that expanded the referential scope of the *Gāthās* as sacred texts, just as we find in our three *nasks* in *Dēnkard* Book 9.

In my article, “‘Enumerating the *Dēn*’: Textual Taxonomies, Cosmological Deixis, and Numerological Speculations in Zoroastrianism,” in *History of Religions*,³ I engaged with debates in Religious studies on the oft-discussed question of hermeneutical imagination in the processes of canon formation. I attempted to show just how the Zoroastrian hermeneuts were engaging in a conscious epistemo-hermeneutic project that equated textual taxonomies of scripture to social hierarchies through complex and fascinating forms of numerical analyses just like their Indian counterparts producing the Brāhmaṇa commentarial literature, thus strongly suggesting an ancient, inherited, Indo-Iranian element in Zoroastrian hermeneutics in Avestan which survived into Pahlavi literature. These forms of *Listenwissenschaft* are fundamentally enumerative and correlative in nature and, in my opinion, serve as the building blocks of tradition building. As such, they represent one of the most promising areas of potential research in both Zoroastrian philosophy and philology but, we must be mindful not to occlude the challenges of the former to the exigencies of the latter, as SENECA’s quote above implicitly cautions.

In my article “Hubris and Himmelfahrt: The Narrative Logic of Kay Us’ Ascent to Heaven in Pahlavi Literature,”⁴ I provided a detailed narratological analysis of a *fragard* in Dk 9 on the failed ascent of Kay Us to the heavens, which is the prototype for the much better-known version in FERDOWSĪ’s *Šāhnāme*. This article will be of value to those interested in the nexus between myth, epic, and hermeneutics between the Pahlavi corpus and Classical Persian literature and culture. In this article I also first suggested a major didactic/rhetorical strategy found in many of the other *fragards* of the *Sūdgar Nask*, namely, the use of negative counter-exemplars from the mythoeptic tradition, such as the hubris of Jam or Kay Us or the political evil of Až (ī) Dahāg, in order to suggest that the Old Avestan corpus is a perfect textual collection encoding all of Zoroastrian cosmology, norms, and praxes.

3 VEVAINA 2010a.

4 VEVAINA 2010d.

In my article in a conference volume on Religious traditions of Late Antiquity, “Miscegenation, ‘Mixture,’ and ‘Mixed Iron’: The Hermeneutics, Historiography, and Cultural Poesis of the ‘Four Ages’ in Zoroastrianism,”⁵ I attempted to historicize the use of the chronotope⁶ of the ‘Four Ages,’ as found in Hesiod, the Book of Daniel, and elsewhere, as representative of the traumatic social, cultural, and religious changes underway in early Islamic Iran with the age of ‘Mixed Metal’ serving as a metaphor for the ethnic and cultural miscegenation between Zoroastrian Iran and Arab Islam. I argued that the Pahlavi texts, while employing inherited — late antique/Sasanian — literary forms and norms, must be understood as dynamic social projects that were in equal measures redacted and produced in the Islamic period as bulwarks against a loss of cultural capital and increasing apostasy to Islam. This raises an important but often overlooked point regarding the ‘distantiation of authorial intent,’ as the late antique referents in our texts, say the Manichaeans, Christians or Mazdakites known generically as “heretics” (*ahlomōγān*) might well have been re-read as Zoroastrian apostates to Islam in the early Islamic centuries when our Pahlavi texts were finally redacted. The Book of Daniel is a perfect illustration of this process as generations of later readers have found their then contemporary enemies — the British in colonial America for instance — encoded in this ancient apocalyptic text.

In “Scripture Versus Contemporary (Interpretive) Needs: Towards a Mapping of the Hermeneutic Contours of Zoroastrianism,” in: *Shoshannat Yaakov: Jewish and Iranian Studies in Honor of Yaakov Elman*,⁷ I showcased some of the salient interpretive modes and techniques of the Zoroastrian hermeneuts from Late Antiquity, and I suggested that, like their Jewish counterparts writing

5 VEVAINA 2011.

6 MIKHAIL BAKHTIN defines the ‘chronotope’ as follows: “We will give the name chronotope (literally, ‘time space’) to the intrinsic connectedness of temporal and spatial relationships that are artistically expressed in literature. This term [space-time] is employed in mathematics, and was introduced as part of Einstein’s Theory of Relativity. The special meaning it has in relativity theory is not important for our purposes; we are borrowing it for literary criticism almost as a metaphor (almost, but not entirely). What counts for us is the fact that it expresses the inseparability of space and time (time as the fourth dimension of space). We understand the chronotope as a formally constitutive category of literature ... These generic forms, at first productive, were then reinforced by tradition; in their subsequent development they continued stubbornly to exist, up to and beyond the point at which they had lost any meaning that was productive in actuality or adequate to later historical situations. This explains the simultaneous existence in literature of phenomena taken from widely separate periods of time, which greatly complicates the historico-literary process” (1981, pp. 84–85). See BAKHTIN *ibid.*, pp. 84–258, and in particular pp. 146–151 on ‘historical inversion’ in the context of eschatology. For this *fragard* and this trope in particular, see VEVAINA 2011, pp. 252–266, though note that I did not use BAKHTIN’s concept in print then.

7 VEVAINA 2012.

midrash, they appear to be using a hermeneutical strategy of ‘Omnisignificance,’⁸ a term first articulated by JAMES KUGEL and subsequently developed by ELMAN, which rests on the idea that every word of scripture is sacred and meaningful and, hence, potentially in need of sustained textual and hermeneutical exploration and explication. What makes this article particularly relevant is that it represented my first attempt at a mapping of Zoroastrian reading strategies as found in Pahlavi literature.

In “‘The Ground Well Trodden But the Shah Not Found ...’: Orality and Textuality in the ‘Book of Kings’ and the Zoroastrian Mythoepic Tradition” in a conference volume on *Orality and Textuality* held in Jerusalem in December of 2008,⁹ I attempted to grapple with the primary historiographical challenges of studying the relationship of the late antique-derived Pahlavi texts with their early Islamic Perso-Arabic intertexts. By surveying a cluster of eschatological tropes associated with the occlusion of the figure of Kauui Haosrauuah/Kay Husrōy/Kay Khusraw, I attempted to showcase the intertextual connections between Avestan, Pahlavi, Arabic and Classical Persian mythoepic materials focusing on their cross-generic intertextual relationships across the oral-written continuum, thus challenging the still-commonly held and common-sense notion that the Pahlavi corpus simply preceded the Perso-Arabic historians.

In “A Father, a Daughter and a Son-in-Law in Zoroastrian Hermeneutics” in the *Bahari Lecture Series at the Oxford University* in June 2014,¹⁰ I problematized the relationship between the so-called ‘comparative’ and ‘traditional’ approaches to the study of early Zoroastrianism by arguing for the inclusion of the Pahlavi hermeneutical tradition in Dk 9 in our scholarship on the ‘cluster of traditional intersignifications’ associated with the *dramatis personae* found in the ‘Old Avesta.’ It is precisely ‘intersignification’ that proves so challenging for us to grapple with in the textual study of early Zoroastrianism, as our texts suggest and imply notions that often violate the ‘plain sense’ of meaning or our root-etymological methodologies.

In “The Hermeneutics of Political Violence in Sasanian Iran: The Death of Mani and the Seizure of Manichaean Property,”¹¹ in the inaugural volume of *Sasanian Studies/Sasanidische Studien*, I attempt to historicize the eisegetical hermeneutics of the Zoroastrian hermeneuts in the Sasanian period as they read the death of Mani into the *Gāθās* in the *Warštmānsr Nask*. I argue that both the Zoroastrian producers of *Zand* and their Manichaean counterparts — the *Zandīg* — were intimately aware of the interpretive efforts of the other, engaging in a pitched hermeneutic war with the *Gāθās* serving as the field of battle and the ultimate prize being the rightful heirs to Zaratustra’s legacy.

8 For discussions of the concept, see KUGEL 1981 and 1997; ELMAN 2003 and 2015; and see the accompanying *Text*.

9 VEVAINA 2015b.

10 VEVAINA 2018.

11 VEVAINA 2022a.

In all my writings I have always consciously attempted to showcase the hermeneutic dynamism that pervades Zoroastrian knowledge and cultural production in Late Antiquity. It is my fervent hope that this work allows hermeneutics to find its pride of place amongst the panoply of approaches to better understanding one pivotal moment within the four millennia of Zoroastrian literature, philosophy, and history.¹²

Oxford, September 2021

12 See STAUSBERG 2008 and STAUSBERG/VEVAINA 2015 for broad surveys of the various methods and approaches to the study of Zoroastrianism.