
In a number of substantial books and papers, the philologist Jean Kellens from the Collège de France has brought about a revision of the current interpretation of the Old Avestan texts and the early history of Zoroastrianism or Mazdaism.¹

One of the leading experts in Avestan grammar,² Kellens adheres methodologically to what he labels a ‘strict philology’. This is an approach to the Avesta which relies exclusively on the linguistic (etymological, grammatical, etc.) analysis of the texts and denies the validity of the (later) Zoroastrian tradition of the Pahlavi documents (commentaries to the Avestan texts, theological treatises) and other historical sources (e.g., archaeology).

Although the implications of this methodology from a hermeneutical point of view may appear rather naive, Kellens’ results are astonishing. By means of his ‘strict philology’, Kellens was able to dismantle some of the basic assumptions of the conventional interpretation of the Old Avestan texts and to unmask the traditional view of Zarathuštra and his religious reform as an untenable speculation.

According to the traditional view of the early history of Zoroastrianism (or, to use a term invented by Ilya Gershevitch, ‘Zarathuštrianism’³), Zarōaster (= Zarathuštra) reformed the polytheistic religion of his time into a monotheistic faith which is deeply rooted in a dualistic conception of the universe.⁴ According to the traditional theory, Zarathuštra’s monotheistic reform went along with the condemnation of the daēiuas, that is the old Indo-Aryan gods.⁵ The daēiuas therefore appear in the post-Zarathuštrian Iranian religious tradition no longer as gods, but as demons.

Having already criticized the idea of Zarathuštra’s monotheism in previous publications,⁶ in *Le pantheon de l’Avesta ancien* Jean Kellens examines this traditional daēiuas-hypothesis.⁷

Kellens builds several arguments against the traditional theory which claims that the daēiuas rejected by Zarathuštra should be identified with the old Indo-Aryan gods. The following are just a few of his arguments: According to the Younger Avesta, the battle against the daēiuas did not begin with Zarathuštra but with the heros of the mythical age; there is no authentic record of an original word *dāīya-* (‘god’) in any Iranian language; on the contrary, the general Iranian term for ‘god’ is *baga*.
In opposition to the conventional daēūa-hypothesis, Kellens argues that there has never been a demonisation of the daēūas. According to Kellens, beginning with their separation from the Indians (or Indo-Iranians) the Iranians gave a pejorative connotation to the word deiyó- and used instead the word *bhégyo- to define the divinity. Thus conclusion is at the same time convincing and speculative.

As a matter of fact, the bagas are to a large extend absent from the theological terminology of the Avesta. That’s why Kellens’ investigation turns into a search of what has become of the bagas in the Avesta. As a result, Kellens is convinced to have discovered some ‘new’ categories or titles of divine beings which hitherto had never been identified as such:

[a] In the Gāhās the isānt (“they who try to come”) are divine beings who come to the place where the ritual activity is occurring. Thus the sacrificing priest has to select which divine beings are worthy of taking part in the ritual and which aren’t. This ritual selection (le tri rituel) functions according to the dualistic ideology. Those divine beings who are considered as unworthy of receiving cultic honours and who have to be rejected are to be identified with the daēūas, that is, the demons.

[b] In the other long Old Avestan text, the Yasna Haptarhaiti, the title hant (“they who are”) designates all the (good and bad) elements of the divine universe: the daēūas, the gods or entities who are commonly called Amōša Spontas and Ahura Mazdā. The hant are the same as the bagas.

According to Kellens, the main religious innovation of the Old Avestan texts lies in a hierarchisation in the ritual theology. The old Indo-Aryan deities were therefore neither denied nor rejected but subordinated to Ahura Mazdā. Ahura Mazdās preeminence is articulated in cosmogonic, ritual and eschatological terms. The preeminence of Ahura Mazdā was out of discussion within the Zoroastrian tradition, ever since.

As usual, Kellens’ book is full of learned discussions of philological data and contains many stimulating observations and suggestions (e.g., regarding the relations between the Gāhās and the Yasna Haptarhaiti or the relations between the Avestan and Vedic texts). In its attempt to dismantle the traditional theory the book makes sense; however, Kellens own theory at first is tempting but ultimately fails to convince the reader. One thing is for certain,