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A Review of Zoroastrianism: An Introduction

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## A Review of *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction*

Shahin Aryamanesh<sup>1</sup> 

### Abstract

For years, various researchers, including theologians, cultural anthropologists, linguists, and archaeologists, have been studying the Zoroastrian religion. These studies provide valuable insights into this religion and those who believe in it. However, there are still researchers who are trying to shed light on the sometimes-unclear aspects of this religion. In the past, researchers focused solely on historical and religious texts to express their views on this subject. Today, archaeological excavations and previous researches assist in shedding new light on this religion. One of the most important books in this regard that uses historical and religious texts and archaeological findings is *Zoroastrianism: An Introduction* by Jenny Rose. This book was published in 2011 by I. B. Tauris Publisher.

**Keywords:** Zoroastrianism; Religion; Historical Records; Archeological Excavations.

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## Introduction

For decades, plenty of studies have been conducted on Zoroastrian religion by scholars of different fields, including theologians, linguists, and archaeologists. Although these studies provide us with valuable knowledge of this religion and its believers, there are still scholars who are trying to clarify the occasional, not very clear, cornerstones of this religion in different periods. Scholars spoke only on the basis of existing historical texts as well as the Zoroastrian texts not so long ago, and therefore, archaeological excavations and researches have now come to help the scholars shed light on this religion over time. Jenny Rose is a researcher of religion, and a research profile is indicative of her extensive research on the Iranian religion, and this work is proof of many years of her work on religion. As the name of the book indicates, it is an introduction to Zoroastrianism, so it is not comprehensive, and some criticisms were leveled against it.

The first chapter of the book begins with the question, "Who is a Zoroastrian?" In recent years, there have been at least two or more forms of Zoroastrianism, each considered authoritative. Different views also exist regarding theological issues such as translation and interpretation of texts, conversion, interfaith marriages, and burial practices.

In the chapter two, the author reviews some evidence related to the Zoroastrian religion during the Achaemenid period. She discusses the ups and downs of this religion and tries to determine whether the Achaemenids can be defined as Zoroastrians. While most historical texts do not attempt to define the religion of the Achaemenids, there is, however, a similarity between the Iranian worldview and the Avesta during the reign of Darius I. For example, although there is no reference to Zoroaster in Old Persian inscriptions, the religion of the Achaemenids has a close relationship with Old Avesta (Rose, 2011: 31-32).

The chapter three of the book is devoted to the presence of the Zoroastrian religion during the Parthian period, beginning with Alexander, who is referred to in texts as Gizistag.

The chapter four examines Zoroastrianism during the Sasanian era and discusses the ups and downs of this religion during this period.

In chapter five, Jenny Rose examines Zoroastrianism in Central Asia and notes that, unlike Iran, local rulers in these areas did not have a hierarchy among Zoroastrian priests, which can be seen among Zoroastrians in Sogdiana and other places in Central Asia.

After Transoxiana, the author turns to the Zoroastrian religion during the Islamic period in Iran and studies the life of Zoroastrians and their religion during this period. She then compares the practices and customs of Parsis, Iranian immigrants to India, with those of Iranian Zoroastrians.

The author examines the ups and downs of the Zoroastrian religion in various periods by organizing a coherent and logical structure. However, the author could have expanded some chapters and made them more informative by using archaeological findings to shed more light on the topic in different periods. For example, in chapter two, which reviews the Achaemenid period, the author discusses the limited archaee-

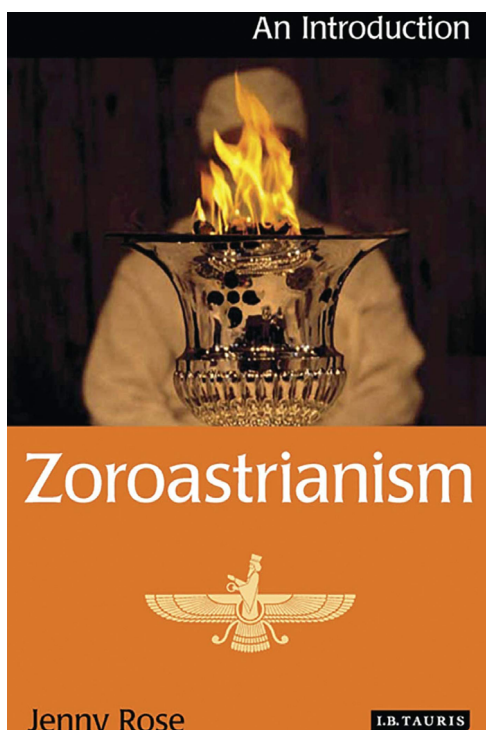
ological finds, such as the funerary stele in Daskyleion of Anatolia, that depicted two priests in front of a tomb (see Rose, 2011: Fig 7).

Similarly, in the chapter three, which is about Zoroastrianism during the Parthian period, the author only refers to a few archaeological finds, such as Ostraca from Nisa at Turkmenistan, Rock-reliefs of Khuzestan, and the Avroman Parchments of Kurdistan, and Sogdian fire temples. The author could have included other archaeological findings, such as Rhyton and sculpture from Nisa (Mason and Pugachenkova, 1982), and analyzed their connection with Zoroastrianism or other religions based on their iconography.

The author did not make much use of archaeological findings related to modern-day Iran in this book. Archaeological findings from ancient funerary structures like coffin burials in Sangshir-e Hamedan (Azarnoush, 1975), Dastowā of Shushtar (Sarfaraz, 1969), The Cemetery of Persepolis Spring (Schmidt, 1957: 117-157), Parthian Pithos-Burials at Germi of Moghan (Kambakhsh Fard, 1998) can help researchers understand the religion during the Parthian era, but unfortunately, the author did not refer to even those that have been published in English.

The same deficiency can be seen in the following chapter, where the author discusses Zoroastrianism during the Sassanian period and makes little reference to archaeological findings. Yet, in recent years, valuable archaeological evidence about Zoroastrianism during this period has been discovered, such as the ones found by Mehdi Rahbar in Bendian Dargaz Tepe of Khorasan (Rahbar, 2008). However, the author did not mention this topic. According to Rahbar's findings, alongside a private hall in the west, three lily bushes with five leaves each can be seen. A figure of a woman wearing a long-embroidered dress with sleeves that cover her wrists can be seen standing behind them, performing a religious ceremony in an ornate curtain-covered hall. She holds a jug and is pouring water onto the ground, undoubtedly representing the goddess Anāhitā.

An archaeological excavation was conducted in the Hajiabad Tepe of Fars, and some stucco figures were discovered (Azarnoush, 1994: 123-124). We know that Anāhitā is a high-ranking goddess in the Zoroastrian religion and has been mentioned and



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praised in Avestan and Pahlavi texts. In the *Vizīdagihā ī Zādisparamm* (Selections of Zadspram), Anāhitā is invoked by the epithets *Arədvī Sūrā Anāhitā* (*Vizīdagihā ī Zādisparam* 1987: 25 & Rose, 2011: 50).

Major changes occurred in the Zoroastrian religion during the Sasanian period, aimed at political goals and benefiting the Mobads and Shahs. During this period, the gods appeared in human forms to legitimize the Sasanian kings, and opposition to the pre-Zarathustrian gods was forgotten and replaced by the prominent presence of these gods as assistants to Ahura Mazdā in religious texts and other artistic objects such as Rock Reliefs. In addition to the high status of Anāhitā in the Sasanian period, which is mentioned in religious texts of that time, her position is so significant that she even awards the diadem to the Sasanian *Shāhanshāh* (the King of kings), while it is usually given to Ahura Mazdā. In fact, the use of archaeological findings greatly assists researchers in these areas.

Regarding the innovations of the book, we can refer to Chapter 5, in which the author discusses the Zoroastrian religion in Transoxiana and other lands that were part of Iran's political territory in different periods. Unlike some authors who are content with studying the Zoroastrian religion in present-day Iran, Rose has devoted a chapter to this territory and examines its archaeological findings.

## Conclusion

The book has logical coherence and examines the Zoroastrian religion from its beginning to the present day. The author analyzes the ups and downs of the Zoroastrian religion in various periods with a consistent and logical approach. However, the author could have expanded some chapters and used archaeological findings to discuss the Zoroastrian religion in different periods. In fact, the book does not use many of the archaeological findings related to present-day Iran. While archaeological findings can be a guide for researchers in understanding the religion in the absence of text, unfortunately, the author did not cite published archaeological sources much. One of the innovations of the book is its fifth chapter, where the author discusses the Zoroastrian religion in Transoxiana. In conclusion nutshell, although the book has some shortcomings and lacks valuable sources, especially in the field of archaeology, it is an important resource that researchers and non-researchers can benefit from and gain valuable insights on this particular religion and its believers.

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