
Book Review

STAUSBERG, Michael. 2008. *Zarathustra and Zoroastrianism: A Short Introduction*. Trans. Margret Preisler-Weller. London: Equinox. viii + 128 pp. ISBN 978-1-84553-320-5 (pbk). £15.99.

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In the past few years, partly due to the post 9/11 spotlight on the region, general interest in the ancient cultures and religions of the Middle East has developed considerably, although funding for academic courses to support that interest has not always kept pace. The study of the Zoroastrian religion has become part of that burgeoning of curiosity, and several popular books have recently employed the religion and its eponymous “author,” Zoroaster, to frame narratives of modern-day travel across Iran.

Until now, however, those wanting to learn about Zoroastrianism from a more intellectually rigorous perspective have usually had to rely on a couple of stalwart texts (including Mary Boyce’s *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*), which do not address the nuanced approaches that are emerging alongside a more developed theoretical and methodological study of the religion. This recent translation of Michael Stausberg’s 2005 introduction to Zoroastrianism is all the more welcome as it is penned by a scholar of the religion, who has conducted his own field research amongst both Zardushtis in Iran and Parsis in India, and who has authored or edited several weighty volumes relating to things Zoroastrian. Much of the statistical information, the presentation of differing approaches to theology, and the discussion of current ritual and liturgical expression of the religion, derives from Stausberg’s own fieldwork or that of his students, but he also makes use of research conducted by other recognized scholars of Zoroastrianism, such as John Hinnells and Philip Kreyenbroek.

The history of the development of the religion spans over 3,000 years, and in that respect it is “transhistorical,” with roots in a common Indo-Iranian tradition, but then becoming established as part of an imperial ideology within an Ancient Near East (ANE) setting, and emerging in variant forms in Iran, Central Asia and India in late antiquity. The study of Zoroastrianism cannot therefore be assigned readily to one particular discipline, but its various elements relate to several different branches of learning such as: Indo-European poetry; Biblical Studies; Philosophy or History of Religion; Iranian Studies; ANE archaeology and art history; as well as Religious Studies. All these disciplines provide particular, valid approaches to the study of Zoroastrianism, and any author writing a book about the religion has to decide which methodology – or range of methodologies – to use to shape the material included.

Stausberg’s model for the body of the text is predominantly phenomenological, considering such themes as “Religious Concepts, Models and Narratives”; “Ethics, Purity and Gender”; ritual practices and infrastructures as they relate to the priesthood and the laity; rites of passage (“Transitions”) and community festivals. The ideological framework for contemporary forms of Zoroastrianism is discussed in the preliminary chapter. Most of the

material is not, then, presented as a chronological survey, although the second chapter raises the issue of the historicity of the religion in terms of its earliest oral “texts,” its mooted place and date of origin, and the elusive figure of Zarathushtra/Zoroaster. These foundational questions – and those relating to religious ideology in the introductory section – are still matters of debate for both scholars and adherents of the faith, which raises the issue as to whether it is possible – or desirable – to attempt to reconstruct the “original” (or, as some would maintain, “pure”) form of any religion. In this case, the religion is one which began in prehistory as an oral tradition, was committed to writing around two thousand years later, and continues as a living faith for an estimated 130,000–150,000 adherents. Given that this is, indeed, a short introduction, Stausberg handles such questions of origin and “foundational” ideology with finesse, providing a broad but succinct analysis of the various positions of Zoroastrian movements and academics. His tone is non-dogmatic and rational, which will appeal to the general public as well as Religious Studies specialists.

Stausberg’s stated emphasis is upon the elements that make Zoroastrianism “appear as an integrated whole in terms of a lived religion.” Coverage of the religion in its present and recent past (that is, the time of the Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts) is, therefore, fairly comprehensive, but there is no attempt to map the evolution of the religion during the thousand-year period of the three successive Iranian empires under which its early oral texts coalesced and were committed to writing. Some historians of religion may prefer an approach that starts at a discernible beginning and moves towards the present, in an attempt to provide a context for exploring both the development and continuity of certain teachings and practices. Such a chronological approach has its limits, however: it can be too linear in scope, and may not allow for alternating manifestations of the religion at given points in its history; or the focus may be too much on the past at the expense of presenting the religion as a living entity. For Stausberg’s declared purposes, this historical approach would not be viable, but it does become necessary in the last section of the book, which takes the form of a “Postscript” by Anders Hultgård on the “Zoroastrian Influences on Judaism, Christianity and Islam.” These “influences” can only be validated by determining the primacy – and consistency of development – of an idea, belief or practice within Zoroastrianism, and then by tracing places and moments of contact between that and other religions and cultures.

There are very few pocket-size non-devotional texts on Zoroastrianism in English, and Stausberg’s readable book fills a gap for those interested in finding out more about the religion, particularly as it is expressed within living communities in India and Iran.