

A Note on Parsi Islamology

by
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Although a mention of the late Gushtasp Nariman (1873-1933) does not evoke immediate familiarity as other stalwarts of Parsi scholarship, his writings merit closer attention than they have hitherto received.¹ Here I intend to elaborate on his views of the 'Ahd nāmehs published more than half a century ago and dedicate it to Professor Shaul Shaked, an *alumnus* of my university and a scholar whose penetrating and *paymānīg* researches into Iranian and Arabic sources have revolutionized our understanding of Late Antiquity Iran.

Nariman, like myself, considered the three 'Ahd nāmehs or covenants, putatively bestowed by the prophet of Islam, Abū'l-Qāsim Muḥammad b. 'Abd-Allāh b. 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib b. Hishām (c. 570-11/632), and his son-in-law and cousin, 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), as patently forged rescripts. Yet interest in them was revived some years ago by a reprint of Nariman's original work and a study by Mithoo Coorlawala, an independent researcher, upholding the veracity of these covenants.² Nariman as well as Coorlawala raise, I think, rather than resolve several queries; and because Zoroastrian-Islamic relations, within the context of *dhimmī* studies, have elicited little attention among Islamicists, it is imperative that the Mazdean dimension be properly addressed so as to gain a sounder understanding of the formative period of Muslim history.³

In 1925, Nariman brought to the attention of the Bombay Parsi community an English translation of certain covenants published earlier by S. J. Jeejebhoy in a Gujarati tract entitled, *Tuqviuti din i Mazdiasna [sic]* in 1851. The frontispiece of this Gujarati text states that it consists of a "mehzur [sic]" given by Muḥammad to Farrukh b. Shakshan, who supposedly was a brother of Salmān Fārsī or the apocryphal Dastūr Dīnyār. A second treaty was alleged to have been issued to a Behram-shad b. Khiradars and both documents have been bestowed to the Mazdean community *in perpetuum*.⁴ The myth of a Dastūr Dīnyār is a long cherished Parsi nostrum and has continued to retain unwarranted fascination among them in spite of being exposed by the scholar-priest and then secretary of this institute, the late Dr. Jamshed Unvala.⁵

Even prior to Nariman's 1925 study, the authenticity of these covenants was called into question in an *apologia* by a Muslim writer.⁶ Of the three 'Ahd nāmehs, two have been drawn up in Arabic, and the third in New Persian. Nariman expressed doubts about their genuineness when he exclaimed that, "neither the language of the original Arabic nor the Persian version, which is probably made in India, supports the assumption of their unquestioned authenticity."⁷ Upon observing the facsimile of the first Arabic 'Ahd nāmeḥ, I was disturbed to note that it was prepared in the *nasta'īlīq* script: a style which only came into effect much later since all epigraphic, numismatic and paleographic evidence of the first century of Islamic history is only

known to us in the Kufic script. It is true that Arab chronicles describe the Banu Tamīm as Arab Zoroastrians (whatever that could have been!), and that the Sasanian *marzubāns* of San‘ā’ and Hajar and some of their retinue became Muslim sometime after Mecca fell to Muḥammad in 8/630, and that the poll-tax was collected from them as well as the so-called *abnā’* garrison in Yemen, thereby establishing a sort of *de facto* precedent for considering them as one of the scriptuaries. Yet neither Nariman nor Coorlawala explain as to how could Muḥammad have come into contact with *Iranian* Zoroastrians and issue such a charter to an imaginary brother of Salmān even before the Arabs came into conflict with the Sāsānids on their western border in Asōristān. Unvala also states that a similar covenant sanctioned by the caliph ‘Alī to the Jewish community and housed in the National Library of Teheran is also dated to this period and prepared in the *nasta’liq* script! Richard Frye comments about the third new Persian covenant:

There exists an account of how the children of a famous *moad* of Fars, Adhurbad b. Marasfand, sought exemption from paying the *jizya* or capitation tax on the *dhimmi* or ‘people of the book’ on the grounds that the Caliph ‘Alī had granted them this right. The ruler of Fars, Samsan al-Daula (380-8/990-8), sent a letter to this group of Zoroastrians in 995 accepting their claim, which was obviously unhistorical.⁸

In the accompanying endnote he adds:

“This story is found in an anonymous, incomplete manuscript in private possession in Baghdad and this section is called *Nuskha manshur kutub li-majus [sic]...*”⁹

Moreover, there are serious stylistic weaknesses in these documents. Given the graveness of such an important charter, one would not expect misspellings in the Arabic or New Persian texts. (This will be delineated in a future study elsewhere). I might also add that Coorlawala cautiously (and correctly) declares that the third New Persian document could have been an “unauthorized Persian translation”.¹⁰ To contend that ‘Alī or Ḥusayn would have dictated this text in a language which neither spoke, brings to mind the question of the alleged marriage of Ḥusayn b. ‘Alī (d. 61/680), the prophet’s grandson, to Shahrbanū, the daughter of Yazdgird III (r. 632-51), which, of course, is the stuff of devotional lore.¹¹ But it is important to note how the Mazdean community and its leadership, now on the defensive, sought to preserve their security and dignity, and, moreover, how the mental universes of the weakening Mazdeans and burgeoning Muslims had altered in their religious moorings.

Both Coorlawala and Nariman should have also scrutinized the colophons of the Arabic versions wherein it states that they were issued in the year 39/660, namely, one year before ‘Alī’s murder by Khawāriji schismatists. The period between the Battle of Şiffin in 37/657 and his assassination in 40/661 was the most turbulent period of ‘Alī’s career as he was engaged in preserving unity as the caliph among dissenting tribal factions, both of Shi‘ī and Sunnī

allegiance. It is all too unlikely that 'Alī would have expended time during a period of civil war, an era in which the future of the nascent Islamic community was at stake, towards fulfilling socio-legal formalities. Over and above a never heard of nor historically attested brother of Salmān Fārsī with the eponym Farrukh b. Shakshan, we know next to nothing about from either Arabic or New Persian hagiography about Salmān's family. For that matter, the date of his death remains moot and Massignon places it anywhere between 20-8/641-49 which accords well with the attestation by Ibn Sa'd and Wāqidī as either at the end of 'Umar's reign or during the caliphate of 'Uthmān.¹² Subsequent Sunnī traditions fix his year of death to 36/657. While no actual date can be affixed to these covenants, Unvala settles for a date in the early half of the 'Abbāsīd era, and probably during the reign of caliph Ma'mūn (r. 198-218/813-33).¹³

R. W. Southern rightly observed that legal status is "the most deceptive of all standards of a people's well being".¹⁴ Placing these covenants into the larger framework of *dhimmi* studies, we must turn to the so-called Covenant or Pact of 'Umar, supposedly dated to the era of the second caliph, 'Umar b. Khaṭṭāb (r. 13-23/634-44). Complete versions of the covenant cannot be dated earlier than the tenth or eleventh century of our era.¹⁵ However, a forerunner of this Pact was the Constitution of Medina, a local treaty to the Christians of Najrān, which in later times was made out to be the "Prophet's edict to all the Christians", and then into the "Prophet's edict to all mankind" in two eastern Christian sources, namely, the anonymous Nestorian chronicle of *Si'irt* and the Jacobite Barhebraeus's *Ecclesiastical Chronicle*.¹⁶ Throughout the middle ages and well into modern times, monasteries and other Christian institutions claimed to possess genuine copies of these tracing their pedigree to the caliph 'Uthmān or the Nestorian Catholicos Ishō'yab II. The most audacious are those advanced by the monastery of St. Catherine's in Sinai, Egypt which boasts of a copy prepared in 1560 from the original and bequeathed to it by Süleyman the Magnificent; and in 1909 by the Armenian Catholic Patriarchate of Istanbul that the very original in its depository was written by 'Alī in 2/623 and attested by twenty-two companions of the prophet. This, Antoine Fattal notes, "a été jusqu'aux Indes où des Zoroastriens l'exploitent à leur bénéfice."¹⁷ Scholarly consensus considers these edicts as a fabrication by some Nestorian priest or monk.¹⁸

Inasmuch as A. S. Tritton of SOAS, London had always held reservations about the veracity of the Covenant of 'Umar, the late Albrecht Noth of Hamburg University revived the debate in recent times. His brief against this Pact lies in its literary weakness, as its epistolary style constituted the primitive basis of what was later to become an Arabic petition. It is rather odd to find the losers draw up a document promising their submission to the conquerors in lieu of protection (*aman, dhimma*); moreover, it need hardly be highlighted that upon the cessation of hostilities and submission, the original agreements must have been of an oral if not vague nature in an era marked by limited literacy on both sides, i.e., the Arabs and Persians, or in other cases, with Copts and Aramaeans. It must also be borne that the original letter did not contain the commercial, sartorial and religious disabilities in the Pact as we now possess.¹⁹

The details of Noth's arguments need not detain us here. Far from extending immunities as vouchsafed by these *'Ahd nāmehs*, I contend that the eventual incorporation of Zoroastrians into the category of *dhimmīs* was never unanimously agreed upon among Muslim jurists. Due to lack of a Qu'rānic precedent for treating them as one of the scriptuaries, 'Umar was in a fix as to "how to treat these people who are neither Arabs nor People of the Book."²⁰ However, they were grudgingly accepted based on a tradition preserved by 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. 'Awf that the prophet had accepted tribute from the Mazdeans of Hajar. Also, in a missive to Mundhir b. Sāwā, the ruler of Bahrain, he had permitted them to practice their religion upon payment of the *jizya*, and had declared, *sunnū bihim sunnata ahl al-kitāb* "treat them as you treat the people of the book", with the caveat that meat slaughtered by them or marriage to their women was forbidden for Muslims.²¹ The Zoroastrians, according to al-Rāzī, were placed between the *ahl al-kitāb* and the *mushrikūn* since it was not deemed to be a *religio licita*.²² Al-Shāfi'i declared that while Jews and Christians may receive half the price of a blood wit (*diyāh*), Zoroastrians were to receive only one-fifth of the award.²³

A telling record is preserved in the Cairo Geniza fragments wherein the caliph Mu'tadid (r. 279-90/892-902) offers to rescind the annual poll-tax of his Jewish subjects; but a notable of the community named Neṭira pleads with the sovereign that the collection of the *jizya* ought to be continued since exemption of the same might lead to forfeiture of life and property, especially for future generations during times of duress.²⁴

An ill-considered *ahl al-kitāb*, the Zoroastrians whittled to a wretched remnant in the rural fastnesses of Iran. The grimmest commentary on the irrelevance of these *'Ahd nāmehs* is evident in the observations of European researchers and travelers.²⁵ Their sheer survival, unlike Jews and Christians, who enriched and even briefly flourished in Moorish Spain and the Sublime Porte, is a sombre testimony of their fidelity.

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Notes

1. I have only incorporated an *apparatus criticus* to the original paper whose oral character has been largely retained. Diacritics employed are after the *Encyclopædia Iranica* with some modifications. The *Hijri* date is stated first followed by its Gregorian equivalent. This is work in progress and a complete study containing greater details will be prepared subsequently.
2. G. K. Nariman, *The Ahad Nameh* [hereafter *AN*] (Bombay 1925, repr. 1989); Mithoo Coorlawala, *Ahd-Namaha (Covenants of the Faith)* (Bombay 1991, rev. ed. 1995). I am grateful to the authoress for presenting me a complimentary copy of her work. Although my views do not concur with her, I owe this study to her encouragement and our discussions over hospitable visits in Bombay.
3. A limited albeit significant body of literature is available on Mazdean-Muslim interactions. Earlier writings have been concerned with parallels between Islam and Zoroastrian doctrines, and, in the main, filtration of influences from the latter to the former. Pioneering studies are in: Edgar Blochet, "Études sur l'histoire religieuse de l'Iran II : L'Ascension au ciel du prophète Mohammad", *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, xxx (1899): 1-25, 203-36; I. Goldziher, "Islam et Parsisme", *Revue de l'histoire des Religions*, xliii (1901): 1-29; Louis Gray, "Zoroastrian Elements in Muḥammedan Eschatology", *Le Muséon*, 3 (1902): 153-84; K. Inostrantsev, "Materialy iz arabskikh istochnikov dlja kulturnoy istorii Sasanidskoy Persii: Primety i poverja", *Zapiski Vostochnago Otdelenija Imperatorskago Russkago Arkheologicheskago Obshchestva*, 18 (1907-08): 113-232; S. P. Ostzern, "Zum Problem: Islam und Parsismus", *Archiv Orientalni*, 6 (1934): 150-60, 342-52; H. S. Nyberg, "Sassanid Mazdeism According to Moslem Sources", *Journal of the K. R. Cama Oriental Institute*, 39 (1958): 1-63; and Alessandro Bausani, *Persia Religiosa da Zaratustra a Bahâ'u'llâh* (Milan, 1959), 135-75. An expanded and translated edition is now in *idem*, *Religion in Iran: From Zoroaster to Baha'ullah*, tr. J. Marchesi (New York, 2000). Shaul Shaked's seminal papers are now collated in his *From Zoroastrian Iran to Islam: Studies in Religious History and Intercultural Contacts* (Aldershot, 1995), and more recently *idem*, "Some Islamic Reports Concerning Zoroastrianism". *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 17 (1994): 43-84. A learned summary but whose certain conclusions are circumspect is Michael Morony, *Iraq After the Muslim Conquest* (Princeton, 1984), 297-305. The sole monograph on this topic is Jamsheed Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society* (New York, 1997). Comprehensive overviews are in Mary Boyce, *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices* (London 1979, repr. 2000 [2001]), 145-62 and *eadem*, *Zoroastrianism: Its Antiquity and Constant Vigour* (Costa Mesa CA, 1992), 149-62. G. K. Nariman devoted a lifetime's study to Irano-Arab history but his writings are inaccessible in most Western libraries. See his translation of M. Inostrantsev, *Iranian Influence on Moslem Literature I: With Supplementary Appendices from Arabic Sources* by G. K. Nariman (Bombay, 1918) and R. B. Paymaster, *Writings of G. K. Nariman* (Bombay, n.d.). Michael Stausberg, "Konkurrenz, Kritik und Innovation: Zur islamischen Kritik an der Religion Zarathuštras", *Religionskritik in interkultureller und interreligiöser Sicht: Dokumentation des Symposiums des Graduiertenkollegs "Interkulturelle religiöse bzw. Religionsgeschichtliche Studien"*, ed. Heinz Schlette (Bonn, 1998), 116-40 is a fine assessment of how medieval Islamic theology was unable to accept Zoroastrians and their fundamentals as that of a credal faith. References to the important papers by Guy Monnot and Michael Morony should be obtained from *Index Islamicus*.

4. Nariman, *AN*, 1, 8.
5. Louis Massignon, *Salmān Pāk and the Spiritual Beginnings of Iranian Islām* tr. Jamshedji M. Unvala (Bombay, 1955), iv. My teacher, Herbert Mason, also published another translation in a chrestomathy entitled, *Testimonies and Reflections: Essays of Louis Massignon*, sel. and introd. Herbert Mason (Notre Dame IN, 1989), 93-110. For the original consult Louis Massignon, "Salman Pak et les Premices spirituelles de l'Islam Iranien", in *Louis Massignon Opera Minora I*, ed. Y. Moubarac (Beirut, 1963), 443-83.
6. Abdullah Al-Māmun Al-Suhrawardy, "Toleration in Islam: The Charter of the Prophet Muhammad to the Christians, And That of the Caliph Ali to the Parsees", *The Imperial and Asiatic Quarterly Review and Colonial Record*, 19 (1905): 157ff.
7. Nariman, *AN*, ix; Louis Massignon, "Nouvelles Recherches sur Salmān Pāk", in *A Locust's Leg: Studies in honour of S. H. Taqizadeh* ed. W. B. Henning and Ehsan Yarshater (London, 1962), 178;
8. Richard Frye, *The Golden Age of Persia: The Arabs in the East* (London 1975, repr. New York, 1996), 145.
9. *Ibid.*, 262.
10. Coorlawala, *op. cit.*, 19.
11. Mary Boyce, "Bībī Shahrbanū and the Lady of Pārs", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, [Fiftieth Anniversary Volume] XXX (1967): 30-44 is the best critical study so far on this topic.
12. Louis Massignon, *Opera Minora*, 458.
13. Unvala, *op. cit.*, ii with a correction to his date of death as 218 and not "AH 217".
14. Standard references are Abu Bakr Muḥammad b. al-Walīd al-Ṭurṭūshi, *Sirāj al-mulūk* (Cairo, 1935) and Abu'l-Qasīm 'Alī b. al-Ḥasan al-'Asākir, *Tā'rikh madīnat Dimashq* ed. S. Munajjid (Damascus, 1951).
15. R. W. Southern, *The Making of the Middle Ages* (New Haven, 1953), 75.
16. C. E. Bosworth, "The Concept of *Dhimma* in Early Islam", in *Christians and Jews in the Ottoman Empire: The Functioning of a Plural Society*, I ed. Benjamin Braude and Bernard Lewis (London and New York, 1982), 45.
17. Antoine Fattal, *Le statut légal des non-musulmanes en pays d'Islam* (Beirut 1958, repr. 1995), 31.
18. A. Baumstark, *Geschichte der syrischen Literatur*, 2 (Bonn, 1922), 312.
19. Albrecht Noth, "Abgrenzungsprobleme zwischen Muslimen und Nicht-Muslimen: Die "Bedingungen 'Umars (*aš-šurūt al-'ummariya*)" unter einem anderen Aspekt gelesen," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam*, 9 [M. J. Kister Festschrift] (1987) [1988]: 290-315; Mark Cohen, *Under Crescent and Cross: The Jews in the Middle Ages* (Princeton, 1994), 57f.
20. Abū Yūsuf, *Kitāb al-kharāj* (Cairo, 1934), 129-30; al-Balādhurī, *Futūḥ al-Buldān* ed. M. J. de Goeje (Leiden, 1886), 77, 267.

21. *Kitāb al-kharāj*, 131; Antoine Fattal, *op. cit.*, 13.
22. *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, second ed. s.v. "Madjūs" (M. G. Morony), 1110.
23. *Ibid.*
24. Mark Cohen, *op. cit.*, 71.
25. Napier Malcolm, *Five Years in a Persian Town* (London, 1905); Mary Boyce, *A Persian Stronghold of Zoroastrianism* (Oxford 1977, repr. Lanham MD, 1989). Almost any page will do.

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