

This is the accepted version of a book review published by Cambridge University Press in the *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 75 (1), pp. 177-179. Published version available from:

<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X11001030>

Accepted version downloaded from: <http://eprints.soas.ac.uk/24776/>

**Jenny Rose: *Zoroastrianism, An Introduction*, London, NY, I.B. Tauris, 2011.**

**Sarah Stewart, SOAS University of London**

Every account of this ancient religion must, sooner or later, wrestle with the conundrum presented by the paucity of its extant holy texts. In her introductory *Zoroastrians: their religious beliefs and practices*, as well as three volumes dedicated to the history of Zoroastrianism, Mary Boyce tackled this question through finding continuities in the doctrines, rituals and observances of the faith from the time of the prophet Zarathustra, c. 1200 BCE, to the modern era. She was the first to give a convincing explanation of the nature of oral texts as an adequate substitute for the written record. Authors of subsequent introductions to Zoroastrianism have applied Boyce's orality thesis to their own understanding of the religion (Peter Clarke, 1998; Michael Stausberg, 2008). Both accounts focus on the religion rather than its historical context. In the absence of any socio-religious records for the early period, the historian must ask: has it survived because of its importance, or is it important because it has survived?

Dr Jenny Rose, in her vibrant and exciting *Introduction*, treats this question as part of an even more fundamental one: what is a Zoroastrian? Is s/he defined, or limited, by time and place? Or by ritual? Or self-defined by the exclusionary doctrine of inheritance? Indeed, does the term 'Zoroastrianism' itself have any meaning save as shorthand used by Western academics to describe a discipline they themselves have created? It is a beguiling strength of her analysis that Rose does not directly provide answers to these and other questions raised, but rather leads the reader constantly to reassess the value of the sources to which she refers and therefore the weight to be given to any conclusion based upon them.

The tone of the book is a refreshing departure from more traditional models. Rose speaks with three distinct voices: the personal, the narrator, the philologist. At its best, the fusion of the three leads to profound insight, lyrically expressed. But on occasion, the philologist dominates. Some readers may puzzle over sentences which include references to 'hippophoric', 'onomastic' or 'epagomenal'. The biologist may misconstrue the intended use of 'endogamous', just as the geneticist may wonder at the inclusion of 'memetic migration' as a description of the geographical and cultural reach of Zoroastrianism during the Parthian period.

Following Chapter 1 - a mapping of the main tenets of the religion - the structure is essentially narrative. From Chapter 2, 'The Ancient Persians', through to Chapter 7, 'Parispanu: Zoroastrians in India', the reader is led through two and half millennia of well-trodden history. But Rose surprises as she informs. Whether it be likening, from a historiographic perspective, Cyrus the Great to Robin of Loxley, or lamenting the outbreak of pseudepigrapha around the beginning of the Christian era, or commenting upon the significance of Sogdian graffiti, Rose does not allow the swift accretion of fact-on-fact to dominate.

Chapter 5 contains material of significant importance to the study of Zoroastrianism. Digesting the work of contemporary scholars who have explored the reach of Zoroastrianism into Central Asia and China, Rose focuses on the Chorasmians and Sogdians during the

period of Achaemenid hegemony. Her section on Sogdian Zoroastrianism, which describes the fires, mourning rituals, narrative themes and religious motifs is particularly illuminating. Sogdian trade routes to northern China via what is now Xinjiang province reveal a wealth of Zoroastrian material - including a Sogdian version of the ancient *Ashem Vohu* prayer - testament to an oral tradition that had survived from the Achaemenid period seemingly without reference to the Sasanian canon of the Avesta. Rose continues with an account of Zoroastrianism in China noting that the construction of fire temples had continued, in spite of proscription, into the 13<sup>th</sup> century CE.

In a characteristic end-note to this chapter, Rose observes that Ferdowsi, an iconic figure born three centuries after the Arab conquests of Iran, was seen in his time as a co-religionist by Zoroastrians. An ancient and glorious Iranian past, as depicted by the author of the *Shahname*, reminds Zoroastrians to this day of their own contribution to that history.

The decline of Zoroastrianism following the Arab invasions of Iran in 650 CE do not receive the same close attention as earlier periods, perhaps because, as Rose expresses it, a 'flickering flame' can do little but sustain itself. None the less, Zoroastrian influence upon Sufi poetry, and through it, the wider sense of Iranian identity is well explored. Interesting parallels are noted; for example, that the annual Shi'a enactment of the death of Husayn in the form of the *ta'ziyeh* or ritual 'passion play' may derive from an earlier Zoroastrian precedent, the epic *Ayadgar-i Zareran*.

Parsi India has its own chapter. Rose succinctly sets out the competing arguments surrounding the history or myth of the first settlement, observing:

*That the first act upon settlement in the new land is recorded as the consecration of the sacred fire tells us as much about late sixteenth-century Parsi self-definition as the perceived religiosity of the early... settlers.*

As the reader is taken towards the present day, Rose does not flinch from a close examination of the fissures or fault-lines that bedevil modern Zoroastrianism, prominent of which is the question of conversion. In her penultimate chapter, Rose sets out the consequences of a strictly endogamous doctrine:

*Numerically the self-destruct button has been pressed, in that the number of deaths exceeds the number of births.*

None the less, in a return to the 'personal' voice of her introduction, Rose explains why there is still such optimism amongst her fellow-Zoroastrians noting that the communities that survive in Iran 'act as an axial link between the past development of the religion and its modern expressions and components'.

In her last chapter, Rose returns to Zarathustra himself, as a prophet, icon, myth and man. It is in these passages that the three voices of the book most elegantly fuse into one. The appendices are useful, in particular the textual and historical timelines as well as the tables outlining five *Gathas* and the priestly *Yasna*.

*Sarah Stewart*