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Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

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Asatrian, Garnik S. & Viktoria Arakelova. 2014. *The religion of the Peacock Angel: the Yezidis and their spirit world. (Gnostica: Texts & Interpretations).* Durham, UK: Routledge. 157 pp., £63.00, ISBN 978-1-84465-761-2.

Vahé S. Boyajian

The book, as the authors themselves state in the Preface (p. x), is the result of their 14 years long research on one of the most interesting and least investigated peoples – the Yezidis, whose original ethnic habitat is in the northern part of Iraq (Sinjar region) including their spiritual centre in Lalish. This book is generally based on the Yezidi religious texts and fieldwork materials obtained in areas where today considerable Yezidi communities live – Armenia (45,000-50,000), Georgia (20,000-25,000), Russia (10,000-15,000), and Turkey (p. vii).

As a closed esoteric ethno-religious community, the Yezidis have always been of a great interest to travellers, missionaries, military officers, and, of course, to wider scholarly circles. There exists a number of various theories regarding the origins of the Yezidis and their religion, where much still remains disputed. This fact has caused different speculations on the subject ranging from ascribing a 4,000 years old history to attributing an Indian origin to the Yezidis, or, regarding their belief-system – from

considering them as devil-worshippers to assigning them a marker of a Kurdish sect.¹

The main objective of this contribution is defined by the authors as not “a mere presentation of the characters of Yezidi “pantheon”, but a thorough attempt to determine their domains, to define their main functions and features, to trace their genealogies, and, in short, to locate their niches in the system of the Yezidi faith” (p. ix-x).

Although the Yezidis possess two so-called holy books – *Kitēbā Jalwa* (“The Book of Revelation”) and *Mashafē Raš* (“The Black Book”), which mirror the genuine religious and folk tradition, however, they “are rather late forgeries” (p. viii). Thus, the investigation of the oral hymns, the *qawls*, as another source of the Yezidi faith, becomes essential. In this regard, the importance of this contribution is revealed by the fact that for the first time various *qawls* on the Yezidi spirit world and cosmic vision have been recorded and translated into English.

Part I, entitled “The One God”, in three separate chapters examines the constituents of the Yezidi faith triad: *Malak-Tāwūs*, as its leader, *Sheikh ‘Adi*, and *Sultan Ezid*.

According to the authors, a vital point in approaching the Yezidi belief is the necessity to a deep-seated review of the idea, which categorises the Yezidis as followers of polytheism. With a comparative analyses and references to the so-called Zoroastrian dualism, as well as pre-Christian or pagan Greek religion, it is stated that “a careful analysis of the Yezidi triad will show its component deities to be unambiguous manifestation of the one god worshiped by adherents” (p. 3).

In the chapter 1, dedicated to *Malak-Tāwūs*, the entire forty-four statements within the *Kitēbā Jalwa* are translated and supplemented with further analysis. *Malak-Tāwūs*, being the crucial character of the Yezidi Triad, features as a sort of demiurge. The authors here point to a phenomenon “when there is a complete transference of the features and functions of creator from one god to his chief representative” (p. 13). The chapter includes also examination of the genesis of the peacock image, manifesting in several environments, the angel of darkness and the fallen angel.

Regarding the name *Sharfadin*, used by the Yezidi Sheiks of Armenia to denote their ethnic and religious identity², the authors propose that “*Sharfadin* as the title of the Yezidi religion should be regarded as an allegory substituting the tabooed name of *Malak Tāwūs*... The Arabic name *Sharfadin* (*Šaraf ad-dīn*) means literally “the honour of religion”, which had been more likely than not one of the main epithets of the principal deity, *Malak-Tāwūs* himself...” (p. 30).

The other two representatives of the Yezidi Triad – *Sheikh ‘Adi* and *Sultan Ezid*, which are examined in the subsequent two chapters, unlike *Malak-Tāwūs*, are deified historical personalities.

Chapter 2 presents *Sheikh ‘Adi bin Musafir*, a historical personality, who has been one of the disciples of the great Sufi philosopher *Ahmad al-Ghazali*. Particularly his argument that “If Evil existed without the will of Allah most high, then Allah would be powerless, and a powerless one cannot be God, since it is impossible for anything to exist in his house that he does not will, just as nothing can exist in it that he does not know” (p. 38) could have influenced the whole Yezidi doctrine. Being buried in *Lalish*, *Sheikh ‘Adi*’s shrine has become a prominent pilgrimage centre for the Yezidis. His later deification –

1- Except the primitive statement that the Yezidis speak *Kurmanji* – a northern Kurdish dialect, no other well-sustained evidence exists to consider the Yezidis as a Kurdish “sect”. The Yezidis themselves call their mother tongue *Ēzdikî*.

2- *Milatē ma – Ēzīd, dīnē ma – Šarfadīn*, “Our nation – the Yezidis, our religion - *Sharfadin*”.

from incarnation of an angel and the divine incarnation is illustrated in Yezidi tradition.

The least significant figure of the Yezidi Triad is Sultan Ezid who usually features alongside Malak-Tāwūs and Sheikh 'Adi. In chapter 3, the authors point to a common error, according to which the name Ezid is connected with the Persian *īzad* "deity, god", and find the identification of Sultan Ezid with the Umayyad caliph Yazid bin-Mu'awiya the most convincing.

Part II of the book, entitled "The Yezidis' Pantheon and the Syncretic Features of Their Religion", comprises a short introduction and 3 other chapters, which give detailed examination of the Yezidi minor deities, saints and holy men (chapter 4), aspects of nature and celestial bodies in the Yezidi pantheon (chapter 5), and Yezidi religious syncretism (chapter 6).

It is noteworthy that for the comprehensive analysis of the figures in the Yezidi pantheon, the authors rely on the available first-hand materials – a significant corpus of Yezidi oral texts, which acquire a balanced approach and thorough knowledge of historical realities, as well as capabilities to deal with comparative religious, linguistic, and ethnographic matters. Only by that the presented material allows to form a so-called database of the Yezidi pantheon involving smaller deities, spirit guardians and saints. These include the deities of lightning, air and wind, the sun and the moon, the patroness of pregnant woman and infants, the patron of wayfarers, the spirits of the garment, the furrow, and the bedding, the lords of cattle, the earth, the graves, and the genies. An interesting deity of phallus, in fact the only example in all New Iranian Pantheon, is also examined within this context. All these detected characters and their systematic analysis allow "to approach the quintessence of the Yezidi cosmic vision" (p. 133).

By scrutinising the historical background, functional characteristics, and the scope of influence attributed to every single figure in the pantheon, and by comparing them with Gnostic and Sufi elements, as well as with heterodox Shi'a sects, the authors succeeded to demonstrate the syncretic nature of Yezidism and its place in the Near Eastern "heretic" milieu.

