

Mazdak Movement: "Mazdakism" by Prof. Ehsan Yarshater

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The most authoritative book of history about the Sassanid is entitled, "The Cambridge History of Iran," Volume 3, *The Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Period*," edited by Ehsan Yarshater, Parts 1 and 2, Cambridge University Press, 1983.

The Chapter 27 (a) of the book is entitled "Manichaeism and its Iranian Background." The following chapter, Chapter 27(b), is entitled "Mazdakism," and is written by Prof. Yarshater, pages 991-1024.

Prof. Yarshater begins the chapter by some general comments, then elaborates on the sources for studying the movement, then divides the movement into "the Early Stage of Mazdakism," "the Second Stage of Mazdakism," and "the Third stage of Mazdakism." He then describes the doctrine of the movement in detail, followed by the conclusion section.

The following is the beginning of the "Conclusion" section (page 1018):

We may then chart the course of the Mazdakite movement as follows. Sometime in the course of the 5th century, presumably during or soon after the reign of Bahram V, Zardusht Khurragaan, a mobad or possibly a chief mobad of Fasa, began reform movement in Zoroastrian religion; he claimed to offer a correct interpretation of the Avesta. It is also possible that, claiming, to be an incarnation of an earlier leader, he only renewed and elaborated a movement begun previously by one Bundos, who had resided in Rome for a while and who had come under the influence of some gnostic religions there. The assigning of inner meaning to Zoroastrian scriptures early branded the followers of the movement as Zandiks.

Zardusht's interpretation of the Avesta disguised a set of beliefs, widely spread in late antiquity, which postulated a remote supreme deity and attributed the creation and management of the world to two demiurges. [The rest of this paragraph is about the religious belief of the said interpretation].

[Page 1019] We do not know how the movement fared between its inception and the time of Kavaad. We may assume that it continued to attract followers through quiet missionary work, which prefigured the Baatini da'wa. During Peerooz's reign Iran was afflicted with a number of disasters, and when he was killed in 484, during a catastrophic war with the Hephthalites, Iran was facing formidable social, economic and political problems. The country had been weakened by successive wars and heavy taxation, and now was subjected to the humiliation of having to pay tribute to the Hephthalites, while territory was lost to the victors and much of the army destroyed.

About this time the leadership of the sect passed to Mazdak son of Baamdaad, a man of charisma and revolutionary temper, deeply committed to the notion of social justice and the welfare of the poor. Under his leadership the movement assumed a pronounced social coloring. Capitalizing on popular discontent, Mazdak questioned the enormous privileges of the noble classes and the clergy. He not only envisaged an egalitarian society, but as a man of action also planned to carry out his

communistic ideas. The peasants, the artisans and the "have-nots", in general, welcomed his teachings and flocked to his side. His movement was called that of "justice". (However, he did not include the slaves in his scheme, else our sources would not have missed the point as grounds for further invectives against him; cf. below, p. 1024).

Whether any outside influence affected the formulation or the spread of the Mazdakite revolutionary attitude is hard to say; our sources are silent on that. [The rest of this paragraph discusses this outside influence possibility].

[Page 1020] Kavaad, a capable and ambitious king, but also a man of liberal tendencies and with a passion for justice, who resented the restricting power of the nobles and the Church, sided with Mazdak and accepted the movement's interpretation of the good religion. He promulgated a number of laws curtailing the privileges of the nobles and introducing unprecedented social reforms. The king's support gave heart to the sectarians, and disturbances resulted from the Mazdakite mob attacking granaries, storehouses, and the mansions of the affluent and their harems. The nobles reacted sharply and Kavaad was deposed.

When Kavaad returned to the throne with the help of the Hephthalites and the assistance of some of the nobles inclined to Mazdakism, he had been somewhat sobered and acted more cautiously; but there is no reason to believe that he had undergone a drastic change of heart. His acceptance of Mazdakism must have been based on religious grounds, as much as anything else, and he presumably continued his faith, even though the Mazdakites' excesses drove him gradually to agree to their restriction and finally to their suppression.

Mazdak's end and the downfall and massacre of the Mazdakites have been recounted with some element of fiction and fantasy. The Mazdakites were trying to ensure the succession of Kaavus, the elder son of Kavaad and a sympathizer, against Khusrau, Kavaad's younger and favorite son. Khusrau, who was supported by the Zoroastrian priesthood and anti-Mazdakite nobles, eventually persuaded the king to give in to his plans for putting down the sect. By this time the Mazdakite disruptions and possibly also Mazdakite mismanagement of common properties must have alienated many of their earlier supporters, and the desire for a return to law and order was probably spreading. Khusrau arranged for a typical religious debate in which the Mazdakite leader was foredoomed. Most sources mention a massacre of the Mazdakites in Ctesiphon, which apparently took place under Kavaad in about 528 but was directed by Khusrau, who was now assuming de facto royal powers. The massacre must have been followed by a wave of persecutions in the provinces, repeated again at the beginning of Khusrau's reign. The sect lost much of its following and strength, particularly since Khusrau combined his suppression of the Mazdakites with far-reaching social, administrative, and fiscal reforms, carried out with an iron hand. The sect went underground, but survived, particularly outside urban centers.

Pages 1022-1024 discusses the Mazdakite movement, and its influence on uprising against moslem invaders after the fall of the Sassanids upon the arab conquest. The most interesting statement is on page 1022, first paragraph:

With the Muslim conquest and the fall of the Sasanian state the Mazdakites resumed their activities. In the period of sever persecution under the late Sasanians the Mazdakites seem to have developed or refined a system of beliefs which we find later adopted also by the extremist Shi'is.

Thus, the research of Prof. Yarshater comes to a conclusion exactly the same as Dehkhodaa's. That due to certain conditions in Iran, internal and external, both the Sassanid kings and the early Madzak movement promoted reforms. Then, Mazdakites took a reactionary direction, leading to people

demanding and supporting their suppression. In fact, their behavior was like the reactionary, fundamentalist, extremist Shi'ites. Mazdak movement was dangerous!

Another note. Nowhere in the book there is a mention of polygamy by the kings, nobles, or the commoners during the Sassanid period. When Prof. Yarshater refers to "harem" above, that's not meant to be the indication of polygamy, but a section of the house of nobles where women were kept: the wife, daughters, and female servants. There is also no evidence to dispute that concubines were not held by nobles - most probably they did hold concubines, the same as in Rome.

Also, this entire chapter includes numerous references in the form of footnotes. None of the references includes the book written by Morteza Ravandi. Since Ravandi's book was written in 1968, 1969, or 1976, it predates this book of Prof. Yarshater which was written in 1983. Apparently, Prof. Yarshater did not find a value in the content of that book as a reference...

Here's the complete elaboration of "Annooshiravaan" by Ali Akbar Dehkhodaa, in Loghatnaameh-ye Dehkhodaa, Harf-e Alef, page 464:

علی اکبر دهخدا
لغتنامه دهخدا حرف الف
انوشیروان (اخ) (بمعنی جاوید، جاویدان، دارای روان جاوید)
مادر وی دختری دهقان بود. قباد در نیشابور او را بزنی گرفت. لقب وی کسری است. پس از قباد بر سر پادشاهی با برادران خود کیوس و جام به ستیزه برخاست و بیاری مهیود وزیر پادشاهی رسید. حمدالله مستفوی نویسد: انوشیروان عادت و آیین و شمایل نیکو داشت و عدل و داد نیکو نهاد. ترتیب خراج ملک و ضبط لشکر داد و دفتر عرض و عارض، او پیدا کرد. کتاب کللیه و دمنه در عهد او از هند به ایران آوردند (رجوع شود به باب برزویه طبیب مقدمه کللیه) (تاریخ گزیده ص 119 به بعد). ظهور خسرو اول که در تاریخ بلقب انوشروان (انوشک روان یعنی جاویدان روان) معروف است، مطلع درخشانترین دوره عهد ساسانی است. فرقه **خطرناک** مزدکی مغلوب و سرکوبی شده بود در داخله صلح و سلم حکمفرما بود. در روایات شرقی خسرو اول نمونه دادگستری و جوانمردی و رحمت است و مولفان عرب و ایرانی حکایات بسیار در وصف جد و جهد او برای حفظ عدالت نقل کرده اند. مشهورترین بنایی که پادشاهان ساسانی ساخته اند قصری است که ایرانیان طاق کسری یا ایوان کسری مینامند و هنوز ویرانه آن در محله اسپانبر موجب حیرت است. ساختمان این بنا را به خسرو اول انوشیروان نسبت داده اند. عهد بزرگ تمدن ادبی و فلسفی ایران با سلطنت خسرو انوشیروان آغاز میشود. ایران در زمان انوشیروان چنان عظمتی یافت که حتی از عهد شاهپوران بزرگ نیز درگذشت و توسعه ادبیات و تربیت معنوی این عهد را کیفیت مخصوص بخشید. (از ایران در زمان ساسانیان).

My translation:

Anooshiravaan - Immortal; Immortality; Having an immortal spirit. The Son of Ghobaad, who was the Son of Firooz. His mother was a peasant girl. Ghobaad married her in Ney-shaapoor. His title is Kasraa. After Ghobaad, for the thrown, he fought his brothers Kaaboos and Jaam, and won the thrown with the help of a Court Minister Mahbood.

Hamdoolaah Moustoufi writes: Anooshiravaan had fine (pleasant) habits, conduct, and appearance, and instituted fine justice and machinery [note: my translation of "nikoo" is "fine." There could be a better English word.] He organized the monetary affairs of the country, as well as recruiting for the army, and founded the office of plaintiff and the defendant [note: I could be wrong on my translation of "'arz o 'aarez." That could mean a Treasury Office]. The book "Kelileh o Demneh" was brought to Iran from India in his era (refer to the section Borzoo-ye-ye Tabib (Medical Doctor), the preface of

Kelileh). The coming of Khosrow the First, who is known in history as Anooshiravaan (Anooshak Ravaan, meaning Immortal Spirit) is considered the height of the Sassanid era. The **dangerous** sect of Mazdaki was put down and defeated.

Inside the country, peace and tranquility was spread. In the Eastern fables (stories), Khosrow the First is the symbol of justice, kindness (Javaanmardi, there could be a better word for this than "kindness"), and forgiveness (Rahmat, again there could be a better word for this than "forgiveness"), and the Arab and Iranian writers have many stories about his insistence and endeavor for maintaining the justice. The most reknown building by the Sassanid kings is a palace that Iranians call it "The Kasraa Roof" or "The Kasraa Court", and until this day its ruins exist in a place named Espanir, which is an amazing site. The building of this structure is attributed to Khosrow the First Anooshiravaan.

The era of the great literary and philosophical civilization starts with the time of Anooshiravaan. Iran in the era of Anooshiravaan reached such a height that it even surpassed the era of the Great Shahpoors (more than one king), and it brought a special expansion of literature and humanities, and gave it a special quality.

By J

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