


REVIEW

**The Prince and the Sufi: The Judeo-Persian Rendition of the Buddha Biographies, Dalia Yasharpour (Leiden, Boston: Brill, 2021). 317 pp. € 146.59. ISBN: 978-90-04-44274-0.**

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In *The Prince and the Sufi: The Judeo-Persian Rendition of the Buddha Biographies* (hereafter *The Prince and the Sufi*), Dalia Yasharpour discusses a 17th-century versified narrative of the life of a prince who comes to converse with a Sufi, a wise man. The narrative is a translation from a Hebrew *Vorlage* into Judeo-Persian (New Persian written in Hebrew script) by Elisha<sup>c</sup> Ben Shmūel. In this narrative, labeled by Yasharpour as “the Buddha biographies,” the prince is identified as the Buddha.

Yasharpour’s book consists of two main parts. The first part, titled “Introduction” (p. 1–55), includes the analytical part of the work, in which Yasharpour meticulously introduces the historical and textual contexts that gave rise to *The Prince and the Sufi*’s Judeo-Persian versified version. The introduction, written in a clear and effective style, deals with several aspects of the narrative, e.g., its content, context, and transmission. It is a well-structured and organized piece of work, consisting of ten transparently defined sections. The sections follow a logical progression, facilitating the reader’s navigation of the author’s arguments and analysis.

The main aim of Yasharpour’s introduction is to discuss the historical and textual factors that shaped the narrative in Ben Shmūel’s version. To do so, she chronologically studies Jewish and non-Jewish sources that affected the text’s transmission, whether directly or indirectly. Subsequently, the introduction provides an explanation for how, over centuries, a work that originated in ancient India found its way into various cultural environments, how the narrative adapted itself to different communities of faith and different ideologies, and how Jews received and transmitted the narrative as a manifestation of universal human values.

The use of primary and secondary sources for *The Prince and the Sufi*’s analytical passages is largely adequate, further enhancing the book’s credibility. The footnotes provide supplementary information, and the bibliography and index of used manuscripts, added at the end, are particularly helpful for further investigations. Yasharpour’s introduction significantly contributes to our knowledge of the literary culture of 17th-century Iranian Jewry, which is little known. In particular, the introduction successfully shows how material from various genres and different origins, e.g., local liturgical compositions or Hebrew literature produced in Spain, left their impact on *The Prince and the Sufi*.

Researchers of Iran’s social and literary history, as well as those interested in Persian Jewish literature of the time, will find the introduction useful. As I discuss below, however, Yasharpour’s work is less inviting and informative to those interested in the study of Persian Sufi and mystic literature in its Islamic context. Indeed, given the narrative’s terminological and linguistic features, it could be well placed and studied as a work that emerged in the Islamic world.

The second part of the book includes an edition of the text (p. 60–158) and an annotated translation of the edition (p. 159–293). Although Yasharpour does not add explicit information regarding her methodology for the collation of manuscripts and preparation of the edition, variations between her main manuscript, designated MS A, and the other five are well presented in the footnotes. The fluent translation is of great help for readers who may be unable to read the text in its prepared edition. Comments that accompany the translation include further lateral information from various perspectives.

A critical point regards Yasharpour's view of the history of Jews in Iran, which subsequently affects the methodology and content of her work. In her view, the history of Iranian Jewry is divided into two dichotomous periods: pre-Islamic and Islamic. She portrays the time of Persia's pre-Islamic rulers as an absolute period of comfort and prosperity for their Jewish subjects. Her sources on the history of Jews in this period, however, are legends with scant historicity. She excludes historically reliable sources on the persecution of the Jews under Sassanids from her historiography. Yasharpour, on the other hand, then presents the entire Islamic period as an out-and-out dark time for Jewish communities. Such a dichotomic view influences her arguments. Although she does not neglect Islamic influences on *The Prince and the Sufi*, her references to Islamic material are passing and meager. Instead, between "Hebrew" and "Islamic-Persian" influences, she recognizes (in her terminology) an "Iranian" background for *The Prince and the Sufi* (p. 17, 19, 22, and 37). She does not provide any compelling argument to explain how the text is rooted in an "Iranian" background differentiated from the "Islamic-Persian" one. To make her point, however, she compares *The Prince and the Sufi* with a Middle Persian work without offering any systematic study of this comparison (ff. 34). In another place, she refers to a third person's opinion, someone who wrote a preface for *The Prince and the Sufi*. The preface's author could be the scribe of one of the copies of the text. According to the preface's author, *The Prince and the Sufi* is comparable with *Kalila wa Dimna* (p. 37). Yasharpour projects this statement as evidence of the narrative's Indian and Iranian background, although it is more likely that the preface's author only knew *Kalila wa Dimna* in its Islamic context.

Another issue in Yasharpour's work concerns the manuscripts of *The Prince and the Sufi* that she used for this edition and translation of the text (p. 53–54). Yasharpour states, "For the present edition and translation, I have consulted and collated six MSS." She provides informative data regarding the content and physical features of these manuscripts. The case of manuscript 1 in her list, designated as MS A, which comes from a private collection, is particularly remarkable. In her opinion, a couple of couplets after the manuscript's colophon "indicate that at some point Ben Shmūel's younger contemporary, Benyamin ben Mishā'el (pen-named, Aminā) edited the work." Immediately, she continues, "I relied extensively on the preface and text of this MS." Here, a number of crucial issues remain untouched: What is Yasharpour's methodology in collating the six manuscripts? Which convictions does she follow in her translation of the verses? Why should a manuscript considered as already edited by a third person (and therefore differing from Ben Shmūel's original text) be extensively relied on?

In the book's lack of any expressed methodology behind the translation it provides, and despite Yasharpour's thorough effort to render an adequate translation for her edition, some word choices in this part of the book might be misleading. For instance, the term פֶּאַרְסִי *fārsī*, meaning "Persian," is translated by Yasharpour as "JP," which stands for "Judeo-Persian." In the translation's footnote, she writes "In JP works, *Fārsī*, 'Persian,' refers to JP" (p. 61 and 159). The translation and footnote may disturb the professional readership. The footnote implicitly suggests that the term "Persian" was understood by Persian-speaking Jews as "Judeo-Persian" and not the broader sense of the term, e.g. Persian also used by Muslims or Christians. Yasharpour does not provide evidence for her statement.

Having said all the above, Yasharpour's work is the result of years of research on the characteristics of the text under question and the outcome of painstaking preparation for an (overall) adequate edition and translation of the text. Judeo-Persian materials are among

the least studied texts written in the Persian language. Unfortunately, knowledge of the history of (New) Persian literature entirely regards works composed by Muslim authors. Works written by Persian-writing Jews, Christians, and others barely find their way into historiographies of Persian literature. Books such as *The Prince and the Sufi* by Yasharpour are of great value to remembering the neglected part of Persian literary heritage.