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A Southwest Asian Voice in the *Daodejing*?

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A Southwest Asian Voice in the Daodejing?

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I. The Eastern End of the Trail

It was proposed several years ago, to a resounding silence, that "the entire philosophical, religious, and physiological foundations of Taoism, but not its social and political components," were "foreshadow[ed]" by "the thirteen classical Upanishads (c. 700–300 B.C.) ...attached to the Vedas, India's most ancient body of knowledge" (Mair 1990a, 157, 156). Further, Mair argued for the specific priority of the [Indian] Bhagavad Gita over the [Chinese] Daodejing (Laozi), pointing out that "the enigmatic concept of 'nonaction' [wu-wei] that is so prominent" in the Daodejing is the subject of "an exceedingly elaborate analysis" in the Bhagavad Gita (*Ibid.*, 142). He enumerated major concerns shared by the works (being/nonbeing, wisdom/ignorance, birth-survival-death, etc.), key terms of mutual concern (e.g., return, tranquillity) and concluded that "entire stanzas of the Bhagavad Gita read like miniature foreshadowings" of the Daodejing (*Ibid.*, 144). His candidate for the most telling textual link was Bhagavad Gita 8.12:

Having shut all the body's doors and confined his mind in his heart, having installed his vital breath in his head, a man is fixed in yogic concentration (trans. Johnson 1994, 38).

This is repetitively echoed in Daodejing 15 and 19 (traditional numbering 52, 56):

[15] Block the openings [= the senses],
Shut the doors [= the intelligence],
And all your life you will not run dry.

[19] Block the openings;

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Shut the doors.
Blunt the sharpness;
Untangle the knots;
Soften the glare;
Let your wheels move only along old ruts.

(trans. Lau 1963, 113, 117)

Mair's explanation for the relationship is that

the Bhagavad Gita was transmitted to China . . . by word of mouth. Particularly memorable images and powerful expressions would have been transferred virtually verbatim. In most instances, however, what the founders of Taoism absorbed from Yoga were radically new ideas concerning man and his place in the universe and a complementary physiological regimen (Mair 1990a, 145).

Returning to this issue in a more scholarly publication, Mair argued on primarily philological grounds for seeing the Daodejing as embedded in an even broader Eurasian cultural matrix:

Since all three words of the title *TTC* [=Daodejing], while conceptually linked to Indian notions such as Brahman or marga, karma or atman, and sutra, appear to be etymologically more closely related to European terms, it is conceivable that both China and India may have received the ideas they represent from some such Europoids as the Tocharians or their predecessors who lived in Central Asia and that China may have received them more directly than did India (Mair 1990b, 26).

II. The Western End of the Trail

The story of the discovery of the so-called Coptic Gnostic Library has been told many times. In December, 1945, a peasant named Muhammad 'Ali al-Samman, while digging up nitrate-bearing soil for fertilizer with his brother at the foot of Jabal al-Tarif, near Naj Hammadi in Upper Egypt, came upon a red earthenware jar containing what

proved to be fifty-two tractates, with their origins in Hellenistic gnostic sects, preserved in Coptic translations on papyrus dating to the fourth century C.E. (Robinson 1988, 22-25; Pagels 1979, xiii-xiv).

One of these manuscripts (Codex VI, Tractate 2), puzzlingly titled The Thunder: Perfect Mind (hereafter *TPM*), has resisted explanation. The translator of the standard English version described it as "virtually unique . . . and very unusual," "difficult to classify. . . . contain[ing] no distinctively Christian, Jewish, or gnostic allusions" (MacRae 1988, 295-296). Casting about for parallel texts, he pointed to Bhagavad Gita 9.16-19, with its "contradictory assertions . . . made of the Deity . . . in the 'I am' form (*Ibid.*, 295):

I am the ritual, I am the sacrifice . . .

I am the father of this world, the mother . . .

I am immortality, and death,

I am the existent and the non-existent . . .

(trans. Johnson 1994, 42)

This may be compared with such lines in *TPM* as:

I am the honored one and the scorned one.

I am the bride and the bridegroom,

I am the one whom they call Life,
and you have called Death.

I am the substance and the one who has no substance.

(trans. MacRae 1988, 297, 299, 301)

Bentley Layton, characterizing *TPM* as "this most bizarre of all works from the Nag Hammadi corpus," has argued that "the true exegetical crux of our text," the combination of self-predication and paradox, is to be explained by positing a fusion of an older wisdom text tradition with the rhetoric of the Greek riddle in a new genre that he calls "the Riddle

Gospel" (Layton 1986, 38, 39, 37). The sole identified exemplar of this genre, surviving only in quotations, is a Gospel of Eve (Euaggelion Euas) described in the Panarion of Epiphanius. Epiphanius criticizes its rhetoric of self-contradictory predication, and explains it as a tale of the fleshly Eve ascending a mountain (=Paradise?) and hearing the heavenly Eve, or female spiritual principle, speaking in the voice of the thunder (Ibid., 48-49). Layton argues that this "indelible persona belonging to the main feminine character of the gnostic Sethian spiritual drama" underlies and energizes not only the lost Gospel of Eve, but also the Nag Hammadi tractates The Hypostasis of the Archons (NHC II, 4 [possibly to be identified with what Epiphanius calls the Book of Norea (=daughter of Eve) (Bullard 1988, 162)] and On the Origin of the World (the modern, hypothetical title assigned to NHC II, 5 and XIII, 2), as well as providing the solution to the riddle of TPM's title (the perfect mind, speaking in the thunder, is that of the heavenly Eve) (Ibid., 51).

III. Driving the Golden Spike...

To recapitulate briefly the argument to this point:

a) [Mair] There is a voice in the Daodejing that, although based in an even deeper Eurasian cultural stratum, is reminiscent of the Bhagavad Gita.

b) [MacRae/Layton] There is a voice in the Nag Hammadi tractate The Thunder: Perfect Mind that, while reminiscent of the Bhagavad Gita, is more properly referred to a conception of a heavenly female spiritual principle (=Eve).

My modest suggestion is that we consider what consequences would flow from an identification of Eve with the female principle in the Daodejing.

IV. ...into Quicksand

It would be encouraging to find Eve, speaking out of the thunder in TPM, sounding like the Daodejing. There are tantalizing wisps, but nothing compelling:

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I am the speech that cannot be grasped.

I am the name of the sound
and the sound of the name.

(*TPM* 31-34; MacRae 1988, 302)

is not really the same as the traditional opening of the Daodejing:

As for the Way,

the Way that can be spoken of is not the constant Way;

As for names,

the name that can be named is not the constant name.

(Henricks 1989, 188)

And it requires a wild leap to find a comment on the thunder's voice in Daodejing 68 [traditional numbering 23], where the emphasis is on the silence, not the weather:

To rarely speak—such is [the way of] Nature.

Fierce winds don't last the whole morning;

Torrential rains don't last the whole day.

(Henricks 1989, 234)

To make matters worse, there is nothing in The Hypostasis of the Archons or On the Origin of the World that resembles the Daodejing.

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