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# Books

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## THE ETHOS OF A PEOPLE

By Dickran K. Kouymjian

*DAVID OF SASSOUN, THE ARMENIAN FOLK EPIC IN FOUR CYCLES.* Translated by Artin K. Shalian. Ohio University Press, Athens, 1964. 377 pages. \$10.00.

IN LESS than a century David of Sassoun (*Sasuntzi Dawit*) has traveled the mythopoeic way from an indigenous folktale(s) of the Lake Van region to the Armenian national epic. Today in Erevan there is a monumental equestrian statute of David and his fiery colt Jalali. Yet no classical Armenian source mentions either David or the other principal characters of the epic. Movses Khorenatzi has recorded fragments from earlier pagan Armenian literature which scholars have been quick to point to as similar to events in the Sassoun epic. However, these fragments are inconclusive evidence for establishing a genuine connection.

The town of Sassoun is about 30 miles due west of Lake Van; it borders on the old Armenian province of Vaspurakan with its main city Van. A native of Van, G. Sruanjtian (*Srvantzdiantz*), was first to write down and publish in 1874 an episode from the epic recited to him by a village bard in the dialect of Moush. The fragment was entitled "David of Sassoun or Mher's Door." Other variants followed: M. Abeghian, "David and Mher," 1889; G. Hovsepian, "The Foolhardies of Sassoun," 1892; and so forth. Later, the Armenian Academy of Science published all the known variants and fragments in three volumes (1936, 1944, 1951). As can be seen from the few titles above, the variants are not at all identical and often not even similar. At times episodes are the same and names different; other times the names are alike and episodes differ. The language is dialectical, mostly western Armenian from the areas bordering Lake Van, but there are also a few variants from the northeastern region of Ararat.

In the 1930's a committee of the Armenian Academy headed by H. Orbeli and including M. Abeghian, G. Abov, and A. Ghanalanian, using these variants published a synthesized "official rescension." Their intent was to preserve an epic unified in style and narrative, but without distorting or augmenting any part of the oral tradition. The result was *David of Sassoun, The Armenian Folk Epic* in four cycles (Erevan, 1939, 2nd ed., 1961). It is precisely this unified version that the late Artin Shalian endeavored to render faithfully into English.

The four cycles deal with successive generations of the folk heroes of Sassoun. Sanasar and Baghdasar are twins miraculously born of the virgin daughter of the King of Armenia. They later build the fortress city of Sassoun. Baghdasar dies childless, but Sanasar has three sons: Vergo, Hovan and Mher. Only the latter has the epic stature of his father and is the central figure in the second cycle, Mher the Great. Mher's son David gives his name to both the third cycle and the epic as a whole. David's son is Mher the Lesser; he unwittingly fights with his own father, David, who curses him to childlessness and deathlessness. The curse proves true and the heroic house comes to an end.

The cycles have these common features. All the heroes undergo an innocent, but accelerated childhood. They all ride the Pegasus-like talking colt Jalali and use the Lightning Sword, but only, except for Sanasar who found them, after reaching a certain degree of maturity. They all fight the neighboring enemies of Sassoun and Armenia, continually freeing the population from servitude and tribute paying. The heroes undergo superhuman tests to win their respective brides, who are all foreigners, unusually beautiful and courageous. The four cycles differ as follows. Sanasar and Baghdasar are of virgin birth; Mher the Lesser does not die, but disappears with Jalali in the famous Crow's Rock of Lake Van leaving no children. The rest are naturally born, have sons, and, except for David, naturally die. Though all fight the oppressive enemy, it is not always the same. For Sanasar and Baghdasar it is the Caliph of Baghdad, but Mher and David battle against Msrah Melik and his son, and Mher the Lesser seemingly against Byzantium and the descendants or successors of the Meliks. The heroes of the

first and fourth cycles are completely faithful to their wives; but both Mher and David have illicit affairs. The former with Ismil, wife of Msrah Melik, out of which union is born Msrah Melik II; David with Chmshkik Sultana who gives birth to a daughter destined to kill her father. In length the David cycle is twice as long as Sanasar and Baghdasar, which in turn is almost thrice as long as the two dealing with Mher and Lesser Mher.

MR. SHALIAN'S translation is exceedingly true to the text he follows. Cycle by cycle, section by section, and line by line one can exactly follow the Armenian text. The Erevan rescension is in a very free verse; Shalian's in a crisp, sparse prose, printed in stanzas matching the Armenian. Condensed description remains condensed,

In those days, the mightier king  
Took tribute from other kings.  
The Khalif of Baghdad, mighty and powerful,  
Gathered his army, attacked and plundered  
our land,  
Carried off vast booty, took many into cap-  
tivity,  
Slaughtered countless men, decimated our race.  
(Cycle I, p. 5);

action retains its vitality and movement,

Mher said no more. He sprang on his horse  
And rode on to Sev Sar  
Among the marshes at Sev Sar  
Mher came upon the black ox.  
He said his prayer, drew his Lightning Sword  
And pierced the belly of the black ox.  
The ox bellowed, rose on his hind legs,  
Tottered and fell dead. (Cycle II, p. 129);

humor, its zany quality,

The woman said:—I will not give you any  
[food]  
Until the priest comes and blesses the harissa.  
After the worshippers have all been fed,  
I will give you the leftovers; you can take it  
and eat it.  
David said:—Nana, the leftover is given to  
dogs.  
When he said this, the woman cursed, David  
got angry,  
He pulled the caldron to the edge of the  
tendour,  
Passed his staff through the bail of the caldron,  
And put the caldron on his shoulder,  
Took a pot and capped his head,

Took the crock of butter,  
Tucked under his arm all the bread they had  
baked,  
Grabbed seven ladles, saying:  
—These will serve as our spoons,  
May God accept your madagh.  
The woman then said to David:  
—Curse the madagh,  
What is there left to be accepted? (Cycle III,  
p. 206);

and, finally, the moralizing its poignancy,

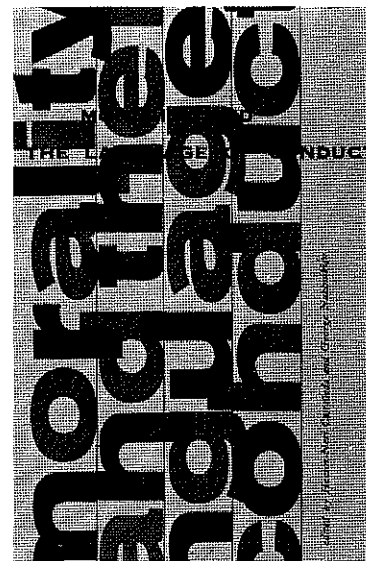
The shepherd asks:  
—Mher, when will you come out of this place?  
Mher replies:  
—If I come out of this place,  
The earth will not sustain me.  
I will not stay on earth  
While the world is wicked  
And the ground is false.  
When the wicked world is destroyed and  
rebuilt,  
When the wheat grows to the size of a rose-pod,  
When the barley grows to the size of a walnut,  
It is only then that  
I and my horse will be allowed to leave.  
As the shepherd leaves,  
The rock comes together. (Epilogue, p. 370-1).

The English is modern, sometimes colloquial, but never slang and, following the Erevan edition, never vulgar. A precise yet readable translation of this type requires the kind of skill and care that searches for the *mot juste*. It is just here that Shalian has excelled. Without verbosity or pedantry his English, except for the absence of regional dialect, reads very much like the Armenian.

In the introduction the author discusses epic form, contrasting *David of Sassoun* with other epics, particularly the Sumerian *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad* and *Odyssey*. One must proceed with caution when making such comparisons. *David of Sassoun* most certainly reflects the ethos of a people. The classic mythological cycle of the hero's birth and growth in a wicked world, his overcoming of its evil forces in order to reestablish order and harmony, his dissolution and, in the case at hand, rebirth, in the next generation, are clearly embodied in the epic. An Armenia or Sassoun perpetually caught between rival empires which force it into alternating vassalage, interrupted temporarily by local autonomy and even occasional independence, is the recurring

theme. This is a common feature between *David of Sassoun*, *Gilgamesh* and the *Iliad*. But on the broader, universal level does the analogy between the heroes of Sassoun and those of Sumer and Hellas hold? *Gilgamesh*, whose "discovery" only antedates *David* by a couple of decades, is important to world literature not just because it dates from the 3rd Millennium B.C., some 1500 years before the *Iliad*, but because it embraces just those qualities of Homer's epic which have caused scholars to regard it as the first work of literature, portraying human beings as they really are. Unlike other Middle Eastern epics—the Babylonian creation myth *Enuma Elish* being a good example—the Sumerian does not present a theocratic king, immortal and infallible, but Gilgamesh, a king of Sumer, who is not only mortal, but tragic. The characters of the *Iliad*, Achilles, Hektor, Paris, Priam, Agamemnon, Patroklos, though mighty warriors able to perform the most prodigious feats of valor, are still quite like other people—proud, petty, jealous, cowardly, compassionate, tender, fallible—human, painfully so, tragically so. The heroes of *David of Sassoun*, Sanasar and Baghdasar, Mher, David, Lesser Mher, are almost consistently only "good guys." The humanly dramatic moments are few: Baghdasar's jealousy and quarrel with his brother over a love letter; the jealousy of wives and an occasional seduction; the curse of David; Lesser Mher's lamentation over his father's death and his own deathless fate. The rest of the "human" traits of our epic heroes are either childish pranks or the mad capers of the foolhardies. They can be summed up as "boys will be boys." Their world vision is too much like an oppressed peasant's dream, untempered by philosophical speculation on the human condition. The obstacles they overcome are physical, seldom intellectual. Their aspirations seem to be no more universal than a good peasant's wish to be left alone with enough to live by.

These remarks are directed primarily at the Erevan rescension as we have it. They indirectly raise an important question about this authorized version. We are told that Abeghian & Company were judicious in their use of scissors and paste, unbiased in their selection and arrangement, but we see, for instance, that religion is (understandably for



a Soviet publication of 1939) played down, perhaps distorted. Mr. Shalian does not once question the selection or presentation of the material. Unfortunately, the three thick volumes of text are difficult to find, and, therefore, comparison is hard. With the scant critical scholarship devoted to the epic, it would seem a bit premature to canonize this rescension.

ARTIN SHALIAN labored on *David of Sassoun* for many years; by the time of its completion his life was thoroughly fused with it. In November of last year, while the book was in its final stages of printing, the author suddenly, unexpectedly was seized by a heart attack and died. He never saw the completed book. Therefore, it is difficult to point out some technical defects of the book, defects which probably would have been corrected had he lived. The transliteration from Armenian into English is inconsistent. Though the Hübschmann-Meillet system has been accepted by the majority of western scholars, some choose to use their own. However, any system demands its own inner consistency, otherwise foreign words cannot be properly reconstructed in the original language. The problem of modern Armenian with an eastern and a western pro-

nunciation does present problems, but not insuperable ones. Western speakers pronounce the voiced consonants (e.g. *b, g, d*) of the classical language as voiceless consonants (i.e. *p, k, t*), and vice versa. Therefore, in a system which is to be phonetically intelligible to western Armenians, the second letter of the alphabet is written *p* instead of *b*, and so forth. It is either Vaspurakan or Vasburagan, but never Vasb(o)urakan (p. xviii); either Tigran or Dikran, but not Digran (p. xv); King Gagik or Kakig, not Cakig (p. 5, *passim*). This disparity runs throughout the whole text and can lead to confusion in meaning. Parenthetical insertions are often unnecessary and, therefore, intrusive. "They fought. Many soldiers [in both armies] were killed" (p. 7); "We should rather die / Than give our maiden to a pagan king. / [He was upholding the national honor]" (p. 9); "One day the Khalif sent for two boys. / [They came.] / He took them to his chamber" (p. 16). The use of both consecutive numerals and asterisks for footnotes without any apparent distinction is confusing, and many notes giving the "the literal translation" could have been omitted: "Baghdasar had a touch of foolhardiness" with note, "The literal translation: 'Baghdasar had a vein of foolhardiness'" (p. 68), or, "Then we will see on whose side God will be" with note, literally "Let us see which one of us will God favor" (p. 130). There is not enough difference to merit a note, especially when none are given for more divergent departures from the text as: Shalian page 16—"She is right"; for the Armenian (1961 ed., p. 12)—"What can I do?" or, Shalian page 17—"What wrath of God those two brats are!" for the literal—"What wrath of God is this?" (Armenian, p. 13). Finally, why choose to harass the English reader with B'gh'ntze Kaghak, Ganatch Kaghak, Tzenov, Karsoun Jewgh, Sev Sar, Ajem, etc., instead of Copper City, Green City, Mighty-Voiced, Forty Braids, Black Mountain, Persian.

However, it must be emphasized that these are mechanical difficulties which in no way detract from the fineness of Mr. Shalian's translation. He has fashioned that rare creation, a precise, yet enjoyable, translation, accurate both in meaning and spirit to the original. Through the words and deeds of David of Sassoun, Artin Shalian continues to live.

## THE NATURE AND THE LANGUAGE OF MORALITY

By Y. H. Krikorian

*MORALITY AND THE LANGUAGE OF CONDUCT*. Edited by Hector-Neri Castañeda and George Nakhnikian, Wayne State University Press. 1963. 367 pages. \$9.75.

**M**ORALITY is a major concern of human beings. The general concept of morality and the more limited concepts of good and bad, right and wrong, duty and obligation are used in connection with everyday activities. Most of this usage is practical and conventional, yet from time to time everyone faces a crisis in life when he is puzzled and confused about the meaning and application of these concepts. When morality leaves the plane of convention, it is bound to be complex and in need of careful analysis.

In contemporary philosophy, the examination of moral concepts has been the main concern. The two World Wars, the recent developments in the sciences, especially in psychology, sociology and anthropology, and the new analytic tools of symbolic logic have forced philosophers to analyze and to re-evaluate the basic concepts of morality. On the whole, the continental philosophers, primarily in France and in Germany, have developed existentialist morality. Existentialists emphasize the role of individual decisions, decisions that are ultimately arbitrary and hardly open to reason, while in England and to a high degree in this country, the leading ethicists have been analysts and empiricists. All these varied approaches to morality have enriched its issues and ideas.

A recent book, *Morality and the Language of Conduct*, edited by Hector-Neri Castañeda and George Nakhnikian, is primarily in the trend of the Anglo-American analysts and empiricists. There are a few echoes of existentialism, but the essays on the whole are an analysis of the nature and the language of morality with some reference to its empirical setting.

The essays in the first part by William K. Frankena, W. D. Falk, H. D. Aiken and Rich-