Introduction

The corpus of the sacred writings of the Zoroastrians is called the Avesta. It is the principal repository of the beliefs of the ancient Iranians, from before the time of the Medes and Achaemenids (ca. 800–300 BCE) through the Sasanian period (224–651 CE). Avestan was the language of eastern Iran, roughly covering the areas of modern Afghanistan and the Central Asian Republics, in the second and first millennia BCE. Middle Persian (Pahlavi) was the language of western Iran (Persia) in the Sasanian period.

A part of the Avesta, called the *Widēwdād* (also spelled *Vidēvdād*), which literally means “the law (serving to keep) demons away,”1 is, for the most part, a catalog of rules and regulations that serves to prevent or reverse pollution through various rituals. The common name of the text in Middle Persian is *jud-dēw-dād*, “the law (for) keeping the demons separate.” The form *Vendidad* is used in Western literature and is thought to result from a misreading of the Pahlavi graph for *widēw-dād*.2

The overriding importance of determining what is clean and what is unclean reflects the dualistic nature of the Zoroastrian religion, according to which—as explained in the introductory chapter of the *Widēwdād*—God (Ohrmazd, the Good Spirit) and the devil (Ahriman, the Evil Spirit) took equal part in the creation process. Thus the world naturally contains both good and evil elements. The *Widēwdād* gives us a view of the practical consequences of a dualistic religious doctrine—the rules for how to behave in such a society. To break these rules was to incur punishments that carried varying degrees of severity. Particular attention is paid in the *Widēwdād* to the exposure of corpses, and the protection of earth, water, and fire from contamination by corpses, particularly those of human beings.

The most recent English translation of the Avestan version of this text is by Professor Prods Oktor Skjærvø of Harvard University.3 In addition he published

---

3 His translation of chapters 1, 2, 3, 5, 6, 7, 17, 18, 19, 20, 21, and 22 are available online in *Introduction to Zoroastrianism: Zoroastrian*. (For use in Early Iranian Civilizations 102; Divinity School no. 3663A, 2007). *Texts Part Two*, 120–155, at http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~iranian/Zoroastrianism/index.html.
in 2006 an analysis of the entire Widēwdād, its ritual, and mythical significance that has radically changed our understanding of this text.\(^4\) Earlier scholars have discussed the Widēwdād at some length, but the latest and the only full English translation of the Middle Persian version dates from 1949.\(^5\)

Western religions have been strongly influenced by the ancient Iranian religions, Zoroastrianism and Manichaeism, and Zoroastrianism is one of very few religions that originated millennia ago and is still practiced today. Yet we rarely see the tenets and concepts of Zoroastrianism discussed in any depth in wider debates about the historical role and function of religion in society, partly because its texts appear to be both inaccessible and palpably outdated. Modern critical editions of crucial works such as the Widēwdād will do much to remedy this situation.

The Widēwdād originally formed the nineteenth book, or nask, of the Sasanian Avesta and belonged to the dādīg, or legal group, that contained the Zoroastrian law books.\(^6\) In its present form it has twenty-two chapters (fragards/fargards). A list of the contents of the Widēwdād is given in the Dēnkard,\(^7\) a Middle Persian text compiled in the ninth century CE that includes, among other things, a summary of the Avesta as it was known in the Sasanian period and several Middle Persian commentaries on the Gāthās. From this list in the Dēnkard, it appears that the Widēwdād is the only text out of all twenty-one books of the Avesta that was preserved in its entirety, most likely because of its liturgical function. But beyond its use in liturgy, it represents the Zoroastrians’ code of law. The Zoroastrian community had to observe and apply its numerous practical regulations in everyday life. Most of these are purity laws concerned with driving away demons from any of Ohrmazd’s creations, persons, or objects that they may have polluted.

---


\(^7\) D.M. Madan, ed., The Complete Text of the Pahlavi Dinkard (Dēnkard), Book 8 (Bombay: Fort Printing Press, 1911), 777–784. All the chapters are mentioned except chapter 4; there are only a few words about chapters 10 and 11, and chapter 12 is completely missing.