



DEATH (1)

DEATH among Zoroastrians. At death among Zoroastrians the body is swiftly disposed of (see **CORPSE**), but rites for the soul are prolonged. They are also complex, partly because, although Zoroastrianism is a salvation faith, offering hope of heaven and threat of hell, it maintains rites that, as Brahmanic parallels show, are an inheritance from very ancient, pre-Zoroastrian, times and belong with quite different beliefs. These beliefs were that the soul, after lingering on earth for three days (a belief retained in Zoroastrianism), needed before its departure consecrated offerings to provide for it in the underworld kingdom of the dead; and that it required such offerings again on the thirtieth day after death, the first anniversary day, and then annually for thirty years, or roughly a generation. Thereafter it was held to have been fully accepted into the ranks of departed souls, who received such offerings collectively only once a year, at the festival of Hamaspathmaēdaya.

Presumably in the early days of the faith converts clung so strongly to these age-old observances that the religious authorities were forced to allow them to be continued, “zoroastrianizing” them as far as possible and blending them with new ones that had the wholly different intention of helping the soul to attain heaven above, after which it should have no further need of anything. Indeed, according to Zoroaster’s teaching, the soul’s fate depends solely on the sum of the individual’s thoughts, words, and acts, the good being weighed against the bad, so that no observances should avail it in any way. But human weakness (including the force of natural affections) and human illogicality enabled his followers to maintain this doctrine while at the same time



performing many rites for the departed soul's benefit.

The oldest attestation of the rites of Hama-spathmaēdaya is in *Yašt* 13.49-52. Those for the individual soul during the three days after death, termed comprehensively in Pahlavi *sedōš* (*stwš*), were apparently referred to in the lost *Huspārām Nask*, or more probably in its Pahlavi commentary, according to a citation in the *Nērangestān*. They are known in more detail from texts set down in post-Sasanian times (notably the supplement to the *Šāyest nē šāyest*, the *Pahlavi Rivāyat*, the *Saddars*, and the *Persian Rivāyats*) and from living usage. They are a mixture of “inner” and “outer” rituals and (unlike the necessarily more public funerary rites) attracted little attention in the past from foreign observers. There are some imprecise allusions by Greek writers in Achaemenid times, but the first detailed account by a non-Zoroastrian was given by A. H. Anquetil du Perron (II, pp. 585-87). This was amplified by Delphine Menant (pp. 195-204), whose description was further expanded by J. J. Modi (pp. 72-82). Details in which Irani usages differed from those of the Parsis were later recorded by Ardašīr Ādargōšasp and Ardeshir Khodadadian.

The *sedōš* rite which was regarded as the most important (Anquetil du Perron, II, p. 587), having apparently the most ancient component, is that solemnized in the last watch (*ušahin gāh*) of the third night. This, called by the Iranis the *yašt-e šavgīre*, approximately the “dawn service,” consists of a set of *yašt-e keh*, the “lesser service” (to the Iranis a *drōn* service, to the Parsis *bāj-e panj-tāy*; see Boyce and Kotwal, pp. 63-65). The last of these has the dedication (*kšnūman*) for the “*fravašis* of the just,” *ašaonqm fravašayo* (Pahlavi *ardā frawaš* or *fraward*), and during it food and clothing are consecrated so that their essence may sustain and clothe the newly departed soul in the hereafter. The clothing is called by the Iranis *sedra* (because it includes the sacred shirt) or *šavgīre* after the service (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 154), by the Parsis *šīav* or simply *jāme* (*Persian Rivayats*, tr. Dhabhar, p. 422 n. 3; Modi, p. 81). “New clothes, newly washed” are required (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 152.19; tr. Dhabhar, p. 168; Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 154), and these belong thereafter to the celebrant priest; hence they were also called *jāme-ye ašōdād* (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, II, p. 41.7; tr. Dhabhar, p. 422). He may keep them, share them with the family, or give them to the poor. All kinds of food may be consecrated except meat, from which the bereaved family abstains for the three days. The *gōšodā*, or sacrificial offering, is therefore represented by eggs (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 153.1; tr. Dhabhar, p. 168). The special Avestan text for the consecration is the *Staomi*, that is, *Yasna* 26 (so called from its first



word, “I praise”). This consists of praise and worship of the *fravašis*, among them those “of all near relatives who have died in this house” (Y. 26.7). In the Yazdi region among the objects consecrated is a coin or piece of silver, a custom going back conceivably to Seleucid times and reflecting the Greek one of placing Charon’s obol with the dead (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 155; Boyce and Grenet, *Zoroastrianism*, pp. 66, 191).

Two other *yašt-e keh* are solemnized before that to Ardā Fravaš. The first is dedicated jointly to Rašnu, who holds the scales of justice, and Aštād (q.v.), *yazata* of justice itself. This part of the service is thus linked with the specifically Zoroastrian belief that the departing soul is about to face judgment. The second *yašt-e keh* is dedicated to the “good Vayu,” of whom it is said “When the soul of a just person passes over the Činwad way, the good Vayu takes (its) hand and bears it to its own place” (*ruwān ī ašawān ka pad *čīnwad widarag widērēd, Wāy ī weh dast abar gīrēd ud ō ān ī xwēš gāh barēd; Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, chap. 26.29). These three short acts of worship made up the *yašt-e šavgīre* according to the oldest sources (*Šāyest nē šāyest*, suppl. 17.4; *Dādestān ī dēnīg* 21.2; *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag* 128.2; *Saddar Naṭr* 87.2; see Kreyenbroek, p. 152 n. 51). The earliest authority for the current practice of solemnizing a fourth *yašt-e keh* dedicated to Sraoša after that to Vayu is the *Persian Rivāyat of Kāma Bohra*, dated A.Y. 896 (=1525-26; *Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, II, p. 41.6; tr. Dhabhar, p. 422). It is noteworthy that still in this late development the *yašt-e keh* dedicated to Ardā Fravaš is kept as the last, that is, the one nearest to dawn and the soul’s departure.

The addition of this fourth service was remarkable, for three is the dominant number in Zoroastrian observances, but it was in the spirit of the declaration that “during three days all worship should be performed for Srōš, because for three days Srōš can save his (the dead man’s) soul from the grasp of demons” (*andar 3 rōz hamāg yazišn ī srōš abāyēd kardan ēd rāy čē ruwān az dast ī dēwān 3 rōz srōš be tuwān buxtan; Šāyest nē šāyest*, suppl. 17.3). The oldest source, the *Nērangestān*, refers only to “a *Yasna* (being performed) three times during the *sedōš*” (*pad sedōš se bār yašt-ē*; ms. HJ, ed. Sanjana, fol. 70r l. 5; tr., p. 155). In known usage these *Yasnas* all have the *ḵšnūman* of Srōš, as do the five *yašt-e keh* performed daily, one in each of the five watches (*gāhs*). The last “inner” ritual to be added to the *sedōš* was a *Vīdēvdād* with the *ḵšnūman* of Srōš, solemnized in the *ušahin gāh* (midnight to dawn). This observance is mentioned in the 9th-century *Pahlavi Rivāyat of Āturfarnbag* (chap. 144), where it is said that for the *sedōš* the *Vīdēvdād* is “very proper” (**šāyēndadar*;



ed. Anklesaria, 1969, I, pp. 80/146; II, p. 122). In the Persian *rivāyat* of Kāma Bohrathree *Vīdēvdāds* are enjoined (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 155.5; tr. Dhabhar, p. 169 and glossary, p. 656, s.v. “Vendidad of Sarosh”). For modern times Menant (p. 198, followed by Modi, p. 76) says only that the three *Vīdēvdāds* were “sometimes” solemnized, and latterly this usage has been abandoned (*Šāyest nē šāyest*, suppl., p. 109 n. 3).

The “outer” observances of the *sedōš* are performed usually at the home of the deceased. On each of the three days in the *ēvsrūsrīm gāh*, just after sunset, priests recite the *Srōš Yašt sar-e šab* (Y. 57), solemnize an *Āfrīnagān* of *Srōš*, and say the *Patēt ī Vidardagān*, the formal confession of sins on behalf of the dead. In the *uśahin gāh*, the *Māh Niyāyeš* is recited, with *Srōš Yašt Hadōxt* (Yt. 11), and again the *Patēt*. A number of other prayers are said daily by priests and members of the family (*Šāyest nē šāyest*, suppl., p. 109 n. 3), with all the obligatory prayers uttered twice, the repetition being on behalf of the departed soul. Throughout the three days food used to be given regularly for the soul’s sake to a dog (q.v. ii). In the third *gāh* of the third day priests, relatives, and friends gather for what the Iranis call the *Yašt-i sevvom* “service of the third (day),” the Parsis *ūthamnā* “Last (of the outer observances).” They recite the *gāh* prayers, *Srōš Yašt Hadōxt*, and *Patēt*. A Pāzand prayer is said imploring Sraoša’s protection for the departed soul, and either now or at the *čahārom* “(service of the) fourth (day)” those present undertake to perform meritorious acts on behalf of the soul. Among the Iranis these take the form of saying specific numbers of Avestan prayers (Khudayar Dastur Sheriyar, p. 433), among the Parsis of gifts to charities or pious foundations (Modi, p. 76). In the small hours of the third night an animal was sacrificed (in latter-day usage a sheep or goat), and fat from it was offered at dawn on the soul’s behalf to a sacred fire. This act is referred to in the *Nērangestān* and later works as the Hōm *drōn*, the sacrifice being consecrated by a *drōn* service with the *kšnūman* of Haoma (Boyce, pp. 77-78 with n. 107). So much importance was given to this offering that Dastur Nōshervān Kermānī, writing to the Parsis in A.Y. 967 (=1596-97) declared that, if it were not made, all previous ceremonies performed for the soul were useless (*Persian Rivayats*, ed. Unvala, I, p. 75.14-15; tr. Dhabhar, p. 70).

The *čahārom* service was held just after sunrise on the fourth day, its distinctive element being an *Āfrīnagān ī Dahmān* (see [DAHM YAZAD](#)), solemnized as a blessing for the soul at its moment of judgment. Afterward those attending shared the meat of the sacrifice, thus marking the end of the



period of abstinence. In Persia blood sacrifices came to be offered again for the departed soul on the thirtieth and anniversary days, *sīrōza* and *sālrōz* (Boyce, *Stronghold*, p. 157), the *šavgīre* and food offerings being consecrated then also. But only the *čahārom* sacrifice is enjoined in the *Persian Rivayats*. On the two latter occasions, and on the tenth day after death, the Iranis solemnize an *Āfrīnagān ī Dahmān* just after sunset in the *ēvsrūsrimgāh*, whereas the Parsis celebrate an *Āfrīnagan* of Ardā Fravaš then. The rites of the *sālrōz* are then maintained for thirty years as fully as family means allow or piety suggests, and are sometimes continued long beyond this obligatory term.

There are references in the *Persian Rivayats* to reciting the *Staomi* on commemorative days for the dead, presumably that is, to what Parsis call the Satum rite. This is a domestic one, and consists of consecrating, by recital of *Yasna* 26, ritually pure food for the soul's sake, a share being set aside for the dog (Modi, pp. 402-04). In pious Parsi families this rite was performed thrice daily (at mealtimes) during the first month, and monthly thereafter, and was then continued in conjunction with the anniversary ceremonies. The observance appears to have been alluded to by Theopompus in the 4th century B.C.E. (cf. Athenaeus, *Deip-nosophistae* 6.60.252; Clemen, 1920a, p. 25; idem, 1920b, p. 131). The Farokši ceremony was also regularly performed for the departed. With the accumulation of family rites, pious individuals could thus devote an immense amount of time to the service of the dead, but in duty and affection, not grief, which, unduly indulged in, is a sin for Zoroastrians.

Pahlavi and Persian texts give yet other observances that it is good to perform for the soul's benefit: founding a *gahāmbār*, paying for the *barašnom-e nō šabe* (the purification of nine nights) to be undergone vicariously, or the performance of the *getī-kaṛīd* (lit., "world purchased"). The first two are still frequently carried out by traditionalists, the former chiefly among Iranis, but the soul ceremonies generally are greatly curtailed by reformers in both communities.



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