



## DĒW

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**DĒW** (demon) in the Pahlavi books. The concept of the *dēw* (invariably written with the Aram. ideogram ŠDYA, more often in the pl. ŠDYA'n', often to be translated “demons” even in the sg.) was central to the theology and ritual of Zoroastrianism; as [Émile Benveniste](#) (p. 41) first observed, the term *vi.daēva-* (“rejecting the *daēvas*”) qualified the faithful Zoroastrian with the same force as *mazdayasna-* (“Mazdā worshiper”) and *zaraθuštri-* (Zoroastrian). Rejection of the *dēws* is linked to Zoroaster’s reform, and, as personifications of every imaginable evil, they are mentioned throughout Zoroastrian religious books.

*Dēws* play an important role in the cosmogonic drama (see [COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY i](#)). In the *Bundahišn*, for example, just after Ohrmazd’s creation of the *amahraspands* (see [AMĒŠA SPĒNTA](#)) the evil spirit Ahreman (see [AHRIMAN](#)), also known in Pahlavī as Gannāg Mēnōg, is said to have “miscreated” his *dēws*, the antitheses of the *amahraspands*, from the demonic essence (Pahl. *dēwān xwadīh*), by which Ahreman is said to “make himself worse.” For Zoroastrians there is a salutary irony in the very conception of demons, for Ahreman produced his creation in that form, and from that creation he became “useless” (Pahl. *akār*), owing to the ignorant and ultimately self-destructive nature of demons. The will of Ahreman and the demons is to smite, and they will ultimately turn their destructiveness upon themselves (see, e.g., de Menasce, chaps. 162, 203; Williams, 1990, chap. 48). In the simplest and most graphic representations, in the *Bundahišn* and similar mythological texts, the *dēws* are devils of varying powers, ranging from the six archdemons (*kamālīgān dēwān*) who oppose the *amahraspands* to myriad



minor and nameless demons who, when the sun sets, rush out from hell to destroy the world (Williams, 1990, chap. 9). They are responsible for all corruption and destructiveness, cosmic, climatic, corporeal, moral, and social. The present world is a mixture just because the *dēws* have entered it at every level; in the bodies of men they are present in the form of disease, pain, grief, and so on. They are sometimes objectified as having claws, faces, hair, and feet and as producing semen (e.g., Gignoux, chap. 70.2). There are even stories of *dēws* having had sexual intercourse with humans, as in the tale of Jam and his sister Jamag, who mated with a female and a male demon respectively, thus bringing noxious creatures into being (*Bundahišn*, tr. Anklesaria, 14B.1; Williams, 1990, chap. 8e). *Dēws* can also take the form of abstract notions (e.g., heresy, denial) or climatic disorders (e.g., whirlwinds, lightning, drought).

There is some question about how the ontological status of Ahreman and the *dēws* was understood, for, as all were said to be devoid of truth, even their existence was sometimes denied (Shaked, 1967). This line of thought is several times apparent in the philosophical third book of the *Dēnkard* but also in more “popular” texts like *Čīdag handarz ī pōryōtkēšān* (par. 3) and *Ardā Wirāz nāmāg* (5.7). Shaul Shaked (1967, pp. 228 ff.) suggests that reference to the nonexistence of demons reflects the doctrine that Ahreman and the demons have no physical (*gētīg*) form of their own; the presence of demons in physical form is thus entirely parasitic upon the forms created by Ohrmazd, and their reality in this world is a lie. Although they have no being (*astīh, stī*), they are nevertheless a force of evil will in the physical world, from which Shaked deduces that their presence in the world is not regarded as an ontological fact but “merely” as an anthropological or psychological phenomenon (1967, p 264). Like many other “anthropological and psychological” (religious?) phenomena, however, the *dēw* has many levels of meaning and function. For example, in the statement “Every day you should worship the sun three times and commit yourselves to the *yazads* (deities) and pronounce the existence and eternity of the *yazads* and the nonexistence and destruction of Ahreman and the *dēws*, (saying) that in the end they shall come to nonexistence and being smitten” (*abdom be ō anastīh ud zadagīh rasēnd*; Shaked, 1979, chap. E31c), the affirmation that the *yazads* exist and Ahreman and the *dēws* do not exist is not contradicted by the last phrase, in which the expectation of annihilation of the demons is proclaimed. Both affirmations express faith and determination, but the religious function, as well as the philosophical logic, of such expressions must be considered. Indeed, in texts like the *Vidēvdād*, *Šāyest nē šāyest*, and *Ardā Wirāz-nāmāg* the evil of Ahreman



and the *dēws* was taken as utterly real and producing catastrophic effects on the world if unrestrained.

Except in the *Ardā Wīrāz-nāmag* and similar texts consisting of admonitions and warnings of dire punishments to be meted out by *dēws* in hell, Zoroastrian writers did not refer to *dēws* simply to strike fear in the faithful. Their concern was more practical: *Dēws* are not simply a psychological or eschatological threat but rather a present reality in an embattled world. They can be smitten by the righteous kindling fire in the night, but it is easier for men to expel them from their bodies than for the *yazads* themselves to do so; cursing the demons (*nifrin kunišn*) is a religious act (de Menasce, chaps. 123, 225, 236). Man's daily duty and eschatological role are to smite demons through good action and prayer (Williams, 1990, chap. 48.79 ff.). Demons shrink from fire, which should therefore be kept burning in a house where there is a pregnant woman; it protected Zoroaster's own mother from the onslaught of 150 *dēws* trying to destroy the unborn prophet (Tavadia, chap. 10.4). *Dēws* are particularly attracted by the organic productions of human beings, from excretion, reproduction, sex, and death (Williams, 1989). Two of the most powerful *dēws* are the whore Jeh, who attacks men and women, and the *druj ī nasuš*, the demon of pollution; much of the *Vīdēvdād* is devoted to measures to be taken against the attacks of physical pollution. In the philosophical texts, where there are attempts at rationalization and analysis of religious values, it is, however, the *dēw Āz* who is said to be most dangerously opposed to true human nature, for it is capable of destroying the *asnhrad* "innate wisdom" of man (de Menasce, chap. 316). *Āz* is responsible for evil religion, heresy, and misunderstanding of Zoroastrian doctrines; it prevents men from knowing the Creator and, in their deviation, they see God as a demon and the demons as gods, the lie as true and the true as a lie (de Menasce, chap. 77). Death itself is demonized as *Astwihād*, who casts a noose of mortality around men's necks from birth. Although the *dēws* may win a temporary victory for Ahreman, at the end of time they will be utterly vanquished (see, e.g. Williams, 1990, chap. 48).

Despite all the strategies for counterattacking the *dēws*, the religion of the Pahlavi books is basically optimistic. In Zoroastrianism evil is not a creative force and is secondary in the cosmic order, implying the priority and ontological superiority of good (Shaked, 1967, p. 234). Man as a species thus stands between the *yazads* and the *dēws*; the former are immortal in essence and inseparable from their bodies (*mēnōg*), men are immortal in essence but



separable from their bodies (moving from *gētīg* to *mēnōg* condition), but *dēws* are mortal in essence and inseparable from their bodies, which may be destroyed (de Menasce, chap. 51).

See also [DAIVA](#).

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