



HELL I. IN ZOROASTRIANISM

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Hell is not explicitly mentioned in the Gathas. There are only allusions made to it, if not in *Yasna* 31.20, at least in *Yasna* 46.11, where it is said that the soul and the *daēnā* (see [DĒN](#)) of the wicked arriving at the Činwad Bridge (Av. *čīnuuatō pərətu*; see [ČINWAD PUHL](#)) will be guests in the “house of falsehood” (Av. *drūjō dāmānā-*), and in *Yasna* 51.13. The word hell, literally bad existence (Av. *daožan̄ha-*, Pahl. *dušox*, Pers. *duzak*) only occurs in the later Avesta. In the *Zamyād Yašt* (19.44), Yima threatens to raise the Evil Spirit from the “roaring hell” (Hintze, 1995, pp. 232-35). The *Haδōxt nask* (2) describes the destiny of the just after death, then adds in a short third chapter the destiny of the wicked. According to Jean Kellens (1995, p. 40, note 50), the writer has created the account of the events at the death of the unrighteous (*druuant*), who has chosen the path of Falsehood, by transposition, in such a way as to mirror what befalls the just after crossing the very Činwad Bridge. Thus the damned should descend the three levels of Bad Thought, Bad Word, and Bad Deed, exactly as the just rise in Good Thought, Good Word, and Good Deed, which are represented (obviously not in conformity with astronomy) by the spheres of the stars, the moon, and the sun (Panaino, 1995). By the same token, the damned are subjected to despair instead of serenity and to a stinking wind instead of a scented one, and they will have poison for food. Besides, the *daēnā*, the peregrinating soul which accompanies the *ruwān* of the just in their post-mortem destiny, only appears in its wicked form in later Pahlavi



literature, especially in personification of bad actions, being often synonymous with the Pahlavi word *kunišn* “action.” This seems to indicate that the representation of hell or hells is rather a late development in Zoroastrian faith. In fact, the third-century high priest Kirdēr insists upon the necessity of believing in the existence of a paradise and a hell, without identifying their locations or their levels (Gignoux, 1991). In his account of his vision of paradise, he says that on passing the bridge his double sees in the well of hell all sorts of Ahrimanic animals, such as snakes, lizards, and other noxious creatures (*xrafstar*), but he does not visit hell. On the other hand, this is what happens to the soul of *Ardā Wirāz*, who devotes the major part of his account of his extra-terrestrial voyage (the *Ardā Wirāz-nāmag*) to the description of hell and the punishments inflicted on the damned. Alexander the Great himself is there for having destroyed the Iranian state and religion. Just as in paradise, there are four levels in hell: the soul of the wicked person descends to Bad Thought, Bad Word, Bad Deed and then to hell proper itself. Hell is described as a deep well, terrifying because it is dark, stinking, and extremely narrow. The smallest of the *xrafstars* are as big as mountains, and all devour and destroy the soul of the damned. Eighty chapters describe the most horrible punishments and tortures adapted to the sins committed by the damned. There is much emphasis on sexual crimes, but also on other actions disapproved of by Mazdean ethics. Michel Tardieu has shown that there is a probable influence of inter-testamentary apocalyptic writings in these descriptions (*Apocalypse of Peter and Paul*). Hell is firstly the residence of Ahriman, the demons, and the *druzes*. All atmospheric calamities are associated with it: snow, cold, hail, rain, burning heat, and so forth.

The *Mēnōg ī xrad* gives the same account as the *Ardā Wirāz-nāmag* of the fate of the souls of the just and the wicked. The latter (chap. 2, pp. 158-94), drawn by the demon *Wīzarš* (Av. *Vīzarəša-*), meets his *daēnā* in the form of a horrible woman who reproaches him for all his bad deeds. The damned soul takes three steps, successively in Bad Thought, Bad Word, and Bad Deed; and the fourth step brings him in front of the Evil Spirit and other demons, who mock him. The Evil Spirit orders the most loathsome food cooked in hell for him. He is also served poison, snake, scorpions, and other *xrafstars*, and he is doomed to eat this to eternity. In his *Wizīdagīhā*, *Zādspram* often deals with hell: from the cosmogonical point of view; he teaches (chap. 2.5) that the entrance to hell was built by Ahriman when he made his intrusion into the created world “like a snake coming out of its hole.” It is ignorance that leads to hell, and it is only the “corporal soul” (*ruwān ī tanīg*) that goes to hell, while the other souls, the



vital soul (*gyān*), the conscience (*bōy*), the *fravaši*, and the two other *ruwāns* turn away from it, but it is not said what becomes of them (chap. 30.44). Hell is also compared to a prison (chap. 30.51) and the damned to a stillborn fetus expelled from the body. From the eschatological point of view, Zādspram affirms that, in the end of the world, a net will be extended by the messenger Ērman in the underworld to get the damned out of hell. They will blame the blessed for not having warned them here on earth, just like the rich blaming the blessed Lazarus. But they are separated like black and white sheep, just as the sheep and goats are separated in Matthew (25.32-33). Then, each blessed person is given a branch and every damned person a root, but the just can climb the branches like a ladder to reach paradise, whereas the damned fall (back ?) to hell because of the movement of the branches. But Ērman will bring all the damned back to earth, where they will be forgiven. The divine compassion is stronger than its justice, as it is also confirmed in the intertestamentary apocalyptic writings, notably the Armenian version of the *Apocalypse of Paul* (see Bauckham). Here, hell is not eternal, as it is with Zādspram.

In the *Dādestān ī dēnīg* (chap. 26), Manuščihr enumerates the four infernal places, parallel with the four celestial places. His description conforms to all the Mazdean traditions: hell is very deep, darker than anywhere else, most terrifying, and the hideaway of all the demons and the *druzes*. It stinks and is full of dirt, pain, and unhappiness; wickedness is not mixed with goodness as in this world, and this makes it extremely awful. In hell, the soul of the damned (chap. 31) finds the demon that corresponds to its sins, as in the *Ardā Wirāz-nāmag*, which will torment it until the day of the final renovation (*frašegird*; see [FRAŠŌ.KERĒTI](#)). It has never enough of the filthy food which it is made to eat forever, and its punishment is related to its principal sin. In question 32, the author defines three infernal places: *hamēstagān*, hell (*dušox*) or “worst existence,” where poison grows, and *drujaskan* (Av. *drujas-kanā-*), which is at the bottom of darkness and where the chief demon resides. These places are even geographically situated at the north, the demoniac direction, under the earth; and the gate to hell is the “Arzur ridge” (see [ARZUR](#)), which is very famous for its demons and which is in the Alborz mountains (cf. *Bundahišn* 12.8; *Vendidad* 3.7). Manuščihr finally teaches that at the time of the final renovation the souls of the wicked go through the ordeal of molten metal for three days in order to be purified. Thereafter there shall be neither demon, nor punishment, nor hell. Thus, hell is not eternal.



In the *Bundahišn* (27.53), it is also said that in hell darkness is so thick that it can be held in one's hand, the stench is so strong that it can be cut by a knife, and loneliness is absolute. Hell is related to the seven planets, especially to Saturn (Kēwān), which is very cold, and to Mars (Wahrām), which is very hot. Finally, the *Dēnkard* V summarizes all these data: Hell is situated under the earth, it is dark, narrow, stinking and without bliss, and contains all wickedness.

See also [DUZAK](#); and [ESCHATOLOGY](#).

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