



HĒRBED

HĒRBED (or Hērbad, Ērvad), a Zoroastrian priestly title, at present used for a “priest in minor orders,” that is, a man of priestly family who has undergone the initiatory *Nāwar* ceremony and is qualified to officiate at lower rituals.

The Middle Persian form *hērbed* derives from Av. *aēθrapaiti*, which denoted a priest who taught his students (*hāuuišta*, *aēθriia*) to recite the sacred texts (*Y.* 65.9; *Yt.* 10.116). The evidence of the Avestan part of the *Hērbedestān* (chaps. 12, 13, 14, 15) shows that a *hāuuišta* was expected to study for three years, ideally with three teachers (four if one of the first three proved unsatisfactory). The memory of the ancient *aēθrapaitis* was clearly revered (*Yt.* 13.105; *Vd.* 4.45), and their role was essential for the transmission of religious knowledge in a non-literate society. The teacher is said to be as responsible for faults in his pupil’s recitation as the student himself (*Hērbedestān* 14.5). A boy’s nearest kinsman had a religious duty to act as his teacher if asked to do so, and committed a sin if he refused (*Hērbedestān* 15.2).

In the Pahlavi books the word *hērbed* could also be used for one who teaches religious subjects. The Sasanian inscriptions show, however, that the high priest Kirdēr initially bore the title of *hērbed* (*kltyl ZY yhlpt*, “Kirdēr the *hērbed*”; Kirdēr’s inscription at Ka’ba-ye Zardošt, l. 8) when he already held an important position at court. This suggests that by early Sasanian times the word was no longer used exclusively to denote those who actually worked as priestly teachers, but had become a title for priests who were qualified to teach religious matters. This is confirmed by the *Dēnkard* (ed. Madan, I, p. 406, l. 6), which gives the early high priest Tansar the title of *hērbed*. There is some



evidence to suggest that a “Grand hērbed” (*hērbedān hērbed*) existed in later Sasanian times (Chaumont). In Sasanian, as in early post-Sasanian times, (see below), hērbeds were probably no longer responsible for teaching their pupils to recite Avesta (which may have been done at home by family members), but taught more advanced branches of religious learning, such as the Middle Persian translation of the Avestan texts (*Zand*), and the essentials of *exegesis*.

While in Sasanian times society was evidently wealthy enough to support a considerable group of hērbeds for the sake of their scholarship and teaching activities alone, the impoverished Zoroastrian community of later times found it increasingly difficult to do so. We learn from the 9th century *Dādestān ī dēnīg* that there was active rivalry between hērbeds and *hāwišts*, that is scholar-priests and ritual priests. The former group evidently supplemented their income by accepting commissions from laymen to have rituals performed, and arranged and directed religious ceremonies without necessarily taking part in their performance; some, it is said, could not perform even a single *nask* as chief priests in their own right (*Dādestān ī dēnīg* 65). The *hāwišts*, on the other hand, were ritual priests; their prestige was lower, but their experience of performing rituals was such that they felt capable of “cutting out the middleman,” at times accepting commissions for two ceremonies for the price of one (*Dādestān ī dēnīg* 87.3; see Kreyenbroek, 1987b, pp. 191-92). Manuščihr, the traditionalist author of the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, frowned on such practices and pointed out that the hērbeds’ status was higher; and, since they had knowledge of the *Zand*, they were better qualified to direct ceremonies.

While, in the 9th century, the difference between hērbeds and *hāwišts* was still clear to the high priest Manuščihr, ordinary Zoroastrians no longer understood this distinction and asked Manuščihr to explain it (*Dādestān ī dēnīg* 44). Elsewhere (*Dādestān ī dēnīg* 45), Manuščihr is asked if “a hērbed who cannot make a living from his activities as a hērbed may leave his profession and do other work . . .” The answer is that, if the faithful fail to provide for him, a hērbed may engage in such priestly activities as celebrating and arranging rituals. In practice, in other words, the community’s increasing poverty led to a blurring of the distinctions between scholar and ritual priests, forcing all priests to accept what work they could find.

In the *Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašawahištān*, which was written in the mid-10th century, less than a century after the *Dādestān ī dēnīg*, the term hērbed seems to have lost all associations of scholarship, the main task of a hērbed being



defined as “performing the ritual for God” (*yazišn ī yazdān kardan*; *Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašavahištān* 12.12). Generally speaking, the *Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašavahištān* divides the priesthood into two groups: priests who were in authority and those who were under authority; the latter group included the *hērbeds*.

For the centuries that followed, our main source of information is the *Rivāyat* literature, which is on the whole vague about the distinctions between *dasturs* and *hērbeds*: the same persons are all called *dastur* in one letter and *hērbed* in another (Dhabhar, pp. 603, 607; Kreyenbroek, 1987a, p. 164). In one *Rivāyat* it is said that a *hērbed* is a priest who knows the Avesta and has undergone the *Nāwar* ceremony, and it is implied that he is lower in rank than a *mōbad* or *dastur* (Dhabhar, p. 334). However, high ceremonies, which in modern Parsee practice can only be performed by more highly qualified priests, are repeatedly said to be carried out by *hērbeds* (Dhabhar, pp. 325, 397, 403).

It seems likely that the modern, more or less rigid distinction between *hērbed/ērvad*, *mōbad*, and *dastur* came into being when the *Vendīdād* ceremony was (re)introduced to the Parsee community at the insistence of the Iranian Zoroastrians, some time after the 16th century C.E. (Kreyenbroek, 1987a). A priest who was capable of performing this ceremony came to be known by the title of *mōbad*. As the number of fire temples of the highest status (*Ātaš Bahrām*) increased in India in the course of the late 18th and 19th centuries, the title of *dastur* came to be used predominantly for the directors of these temples. Thus the title of *hērbed*, which once denoted a learned priestly teacher, came to be used specifically for a priest of the lowest grade.

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