



JEH

JEH, name of a female demon in a small number of Zoroastrian Middle Persian texts. The name of Jeh is commonly, but with little justification, translated as “whore.” It is the Middle Persian rendering of Avestan *jahī-* (or *jahikā-*). That word is used in a number of different meanings, but it appears to have originally meant “woman” and can still be recognized in this meaning in many Avestan passages. The fact that it originally must have been a neutral term for “woman” can also be substantiated by the Khotanese word *jsicā-*, “girl,” which goes back to Old Iranian *jahi-* (Emmerick). In the Avesta it occurs, for example, in the expression *nā jahika*, “man or woman” (*Vd.* 18.54), or in lists of humans and other creatures, where its purported negative meaning is nowhere obvious (*Yt.* 17.54; *Pursišnīhā* 9). Such a neutral meaning can even still be observed in *Dēnkard* 7.3.2, undoubtedly a piece of *Zand*, where “seven women” who were present at Zarathushtra’s birth are said to have been frightened by the miracle of his laughter upon being born (*az ōy be tarsīd hēnd; haft jeh ī-š pērāmōn nišast hēnd*; Molé’s emendation of the clearly legible word *jeh* to *+dāyag* “wetnurse” is to be rejected).

In other passages, however, the word *jahī-/jahikā-* is used in a pejorative sense, to denote women who are somehow flawed. In some cases, the word is used to denote women who do not (or no longer) produce children (*Yt.* 17.54, *Yt.* 17.58); in others it refers specifically to adulterous women, who present children to their husbands who were not fathered by them (*Yt.* 17.59, *Vd.* 18.61-65). This theme of adultery, in addition to the theme of sorcery attributed to the *jahikā-* (*Y.* 9.32, *Yt.* 3.9, *Vd.* 21.17) was apparently understood



as its basic meaning, when Zoroastrian scholars in the Sasanian period began to study and interpret the whole body of Avestan texts.

Middle Persian *jeh* is not an inherited part of Persian vocabulary, but a learned word taken from Avestan. It did not survive in New Persian, where it is only attested in Zoroastrian texts that are based on Middle Persian traditions (e.g., *Sad Dar Nasr* 59, 67). The word was therefore clearly in need of definition, and several such definitions have been preserved: these stress the fact that *jeh* should be used for adulterous women, who sleep with different men, and—by extension—for women who run the risk of such behavior, for example, by dressing inappropriately or by behaving immodestly. The majority of Pahlavi passages in which the word is used, use it to refer to this kind of immoral women.

A small number of passages, however, speak of a demoness named Jeh, who was made famous as Jeh, the Primal Whore by R. C. Zaehner (esp. pp. 183-92). In the fourth chapter of the *Bundahišn* (q.v.), the story is told of the initial stages of the struggle between Ohrmazd (see [AHURA MAZDĀ](#)) and Ahriman (q.v.). When they had sealed the pact that bound them to battle, Ahriman realized that his efforts would be fruitless because of Ohrmazd's creation of the Righteous Man. This brought him into a state of unconsciousness that lasted 3,000 years. One by one, his demons told him of their wicked plans, in order to awaken their lord, but this did not work, until Jeh came and told him of her plan to attack the good creation by perverting the righteous man. This restored Ahriman to consciousness, and he rewarded Jeh by kissing her on her forehead, which caused her to menstruate (the “mark” [*daxšta-*] passed on to mortal women since), and by promising to give her whatever she wanted. At that moment, she was shown (presumably by Ohrmazd) the image of a young man, and she chose as her reward the love of men, which Ahriman grudgingly granted her.

A largely parallel story has been preserved by the Syrian theologian Theodore Bar Koni (Benveniste; see [BAR KŌNAY](#)), with one dramatic difference: in his version of the story, it is not a demoness who is rewarded by Ahriman, but it is women themselves, who were created by Ohrmazd, but defected to the Evil Spirit. By combining these two passages, from the *Bundahišn* and from Bar Koni, Zaehner believed he could prove that in Zurvanism (a purported “heretical” variety of Zoroastrianism), women were seen as creatures of Ahriman. He attempted to support this striking idea by collecting various Zoroastrian passages which spoke about women in negative terms and then



simply claiming them to be Zurvanite. These suggestions were picked up and elaborated upon by Geo Widengren and others, but they have since been shown to be unsoundly based (De Jong).

A more likely background to the myth of Jeh can be found in two aspects of her personality: the fact that she is Ahriman's wife, daughter, and Queen of Hell and the fact that she threatens the Righteous Man, Ohrmazd's chief aide in the battle against evil. These aspects are the exact inversion of the most important characteristics of the goddess Spandārmad in Middle Persian literature, who is described as Ohrmazd's queen, daughter, and wife. This imagery appears to have developed fairly late in the Zoroastrian tradition and in being thus elevated to the position of "mother of creation," Spandārmad appears to have usurped various aspects of other goddesses (Aši [q.v.] and Anāhitā [see [ANĀHĪD](#)]), especially as an image of the desirable behavior of married women. In such a context, where Ohrmazd and Spandārmad embodied and patronized the ideal of good men and women, united in marriage and dedicated to virtue, it is understandable that Ahriman also needed a wife, who would embody those aspects of female behavior that were considered most damaging to the cause of good. Since the word *jeh* was obviously in use for adulterous women who engaged in sorcery, a hypostatized Jeh eminently fitted the profile. But the development was late and remained confined to two texts: the *Bundahišn* and *Zādspram*. It did not develop into a fixed part of Zoroastrian cosmogonical myths and did not eclipse the use of the word *jeh* in its technical, human meaning.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

E. Benveniste, 'Le témoignage de Théodore bar Kônay sur le zoroastrisme,' *Le Monde Oriental* 26-27, 1932-33, pp. 170-215.

J. K. Choksy, *Evil, Good, and Gender. Facets of the Feminine in Zoroastrian Religious History*, New York, 2002.



R. E. Emmerick, “Boys” and ‘Girls’ in Khotanese,” *BAI*, N.S. 7, 1993, pp. 51-54.

A. de Jong, “Jeh the Primal Whore? Observations on Zoroastrian Misogyny,” in R. Kloppenborg and W. J. Hanegraaff, eds., *Female Stereotypes in Religious Traditions*, Leiden, 1995, pp. 15-41.

G. König, ‘Zur Figur des “Wahrhaftigen Menschen” (*mard ī ahlaw*) in der zoroastrischen Literatur,” *ZDMG* 155, 2005, pp. 161-88.

G. Widengren, ‘Primordial Man and Prostitute: A Zervanite Myth in the Sassanid Avesta,” in *Studies in Mysticism presented to Gershom G. Scholem*, Jerusalem, 1967, pp. 227-34. R. C. Zaehner, *Zurvan. A Zoroastrian Dilemma*, Oxford, 1955.