



ŠĀYEST NĒ ŠĀYEST

ŠĀYEST NĒ ŠĀYEST (Proper and Improper; abbrev. *Šnš*), a work in the Middle Persian/Pahlavi language dealing with Zoroastrian jurisprudence and containing miscellaneous laws concerning sins, purity, and impurity. It also contains the description of religious rituals and ceremonies pertaining to each sin and the ways to compensate for it. As is the case with most of the Pahlavi manuscripts, the work lacks the name of its author(s) or editor(s) and was originally called *Rivāyat* “narrative.” Its present name was given to it by the Zoroastrian priests and scholars of the 19th century and probably is derived from the frequent repetition in the text of the two imperative forms of the verb *šāyestan* “to be proper, suitable, permissible”: that is, *šāyest* (it is proper or permissible) and its antonym, *nē šāyest* (it is improper or impermissible). In the view of the text’s editor, J. C. Tavadia, the name was bestowed, rather, because of the familiarity of the phrase *šāyest nē šāyest* already, in the *Rivāyat* tradition (for example, in Dhabhar, ed., pp. 1, 69; discussed in Tavadia, 1930, Introduction, p. 1).

The book is a collection of texts from different Zoroastrian works. Among the main sources are the Pahlavi commentaries (called *zand*) of the Avestan *nasks* (see [AVESTA](#), Table 1), especially those pertaining to the laws (*dād*). The other sources are the works from different schools of religious jurists. Some are referred to by their names and the names of the preceding commentators, for example, what has been said by Gōguš(n)asp from the teachings of Ādur-Ohrmazd, and by Sōšyāns from the teachings of Ādurfarnbag Narseh, and by Mēdyōmāh from the teachings of Gōguš(n)asp, and by Abarg from the



teachings of Sōšyāns (Šnš I.3). Other group of sources are given in vague terms such as *dastūrān* (religious authorities; see [DASTUR](#)) or *pōryōtkēšān* (teachers and wise authorities of the past) (Šnš X, 30; XII, 1, 19; XIII, 2).

Parallels can be found between parts of this book and other Pahlavi works, such as [Hērbedestān](#), *Nērangestān*, *Pahlavi Rivāyats*, [Vidēvdād](#) and *Sad dar*. But the text of *Šāyest nē šāyest* is more descriptive and contains more detailed information about the daily duties and the religious instructions. The text is probably collected by the same authors who edited the final versions of *Nērangestān* and the commentary (*zand*) on the *Vidēvdād* (Tafažžoli, 1376 Š./1997, p. 281).

There is no date indicating the age of the book. However, because of its comparatively clear and more correct language, in contrast to that of the Pahlavi works composed in the 9th and 10th centuries, we can conclude that the book was written in the late Sasanian period, probably after 623 CE (Tavadia, 1930, Introduction, p. 1; Boyce, p. 1988, 40; Tafažžoli, p. 280). The only religious groups, which are mentioned in the book are *zandīgs*, *tarsāgs*, and *jahūds* (Manicheans, Christians, and Jews) (Šnš VI, 7). The fact that there is no mention of the Arabs or the difficulties encountering the Zoroastrian community after the coming of Islam to Iran, which is common in some Pahlavi books written during the Islamic period, could indicate that the book was edited in the Sasanian period.

The first English translation of the text was published in 1881 by E. W. West in the [Sacred Books of the East](#) series. West also divided the text into three parts with different chapters according to the subjects. The main part or *Šāyest nē šāyest* proper has ten chapters (I-X). The second part, which West called the Supplementary Treatise, has more coherent text and consists of chapters XI-XIV. The third part (XV-XXIII), consisting of a number of short and apparently independent pieces, was called by West the Appendix. This part lacks the coherence of the texts of the former parts of the book. This arrangement has been adopted by the later scholars who have published newer translations of this work.

Most copies of the book seem to have two main MSS as sources: K 20 (at the Royal Library of Copenhagen) and M 51 (belonging to the State Library of Munich; see [CODICES HAFNIENSES](#)). Another copy, F 33, seems to be copied from an unknown source and is kept at Meherji-Rana Library of Navsari, India (Kotwal, 1969, p. 7). For general remarks on different MSS of the text in



different collections see: Tavadia, pp. 2-5; Kotwal, pp. 5-10 and West, pp. lxv-lxvii.

The style, language, and contents of *Šāyest nē šāyest* can be discussed in three parts.

Part one: the main part or Šāyest nē šāyest proper (Chap. I-X). The importance of cleanliness in the Zoroastrian religion and avoidance of ‘unclean’ or polluted matter, whether a corpse, dead matter, or any kind of impurity, cannot be exaggerated (see [CLEANSING i. In Zoroastrianism](#)). Therefore the book contains a great number of points regarding various impurities, and laws and rituals pertaining to cleanliness. The book is also of interest because of its abundant vocabulary related to dressing, rituals, animals, and other subjects. A short description of each chapter is given below. (For a more detailed description of the chapters, see Tavadia, pp. 18-25; West, pp. lx-lxii.)

Chapter I deals with the 8 degrees (*pāyag*) of sin and the price (*tāwān*, sum to be paid) for each committed sin to counter-balance it. It also contains the names of different commentators of *Vidēvdād*.

Chapter II is about *sag-dīd* (glance of a dog, a ritual which forms an essential part of a Zoroastrian funeral ceremony; see [DOG ii. In Zoroastrianism](#)) and the precautions to be observed regarding the pollution caused by corpses, especially when carrying it to the *daxmag* (a building where corpses are exposed; see [CORPSE](#)). It includes rules about menstruating women and about pollutions caused by serpents and carcasses in water.

Chapter III deals solely with menstruating women and the rules women should observe in that period; precautions with respect to her dish, her seat, her food, her cushion, and the like.

Chapter IV is about the *kustīg* (sacred thread-girdle) and *sudra* (shirt)—of what material they should be made, the size, and the manner of wearing. The merits of wearing them even in sleep and the sins of not wearing them are given in detail. The sins of consuming food while chattering (see Tavadia, p. 91, 5.1, nn. 3-4) and of walking (or running) with one shoe (*ēw-mōg-dwārišnīh*) also are discussed.

Chapter V is about the sins of chattering while eating food. Specific sins for different age groups are given.



Chapter VI is about sin and the performance of good deeds and the best and the worst of different creeds. The best are the Zoroastrians, and the worst are the Manicheans, Jews, and Christians, and others of the same sort.

Chapter VII is about religious homage to the sun (thrice a day), moon, and the fire, and the sins resulted from extinguishing the fire.

Chapter VIII is about repentance and atonement for the most severe sins—‘capital’ (*marg-arzān*, lit. “worthy of death”) offenses. The means of expiation include reparations to be paid in the form of money.

Chapter IX contains miscellaneous subjects, such as: the divisions of the day; priests (*hērbeds*) passing away in foreign country; religious discussion with the priests; ceremonies done wrongly in the fire temple; throwing a corpse into the sea when someone dies in a ship; the evil of eating in the dark; the four kinds of worship; the rules of invoking the angels in worship.

Chapter X, the longest section of the book, also contains miscellaneous subjects, such as: the proper size of the *kustīg*, religious ceremonies for those who die during *farwardīgān* (the last ten days of the year); avoidance of unlawful slaughtering of certain animals; some laws on purification; the sin of celibacy; maintaining a fire where a woman is pregnant; providing a tank for ablutions; the *Gāthās* not to be recited over the dead; food and drink not to be thrown away towards the north at night; how the corpse of a pregnant woman should be carried; forgiveness of trespasses; evil of walking without shoes; breaking the spell of an inward prayer; ten women to be present at the childbirth, and how the infant is to be treated; sin of beating an innocent person; evil of a false judgment; a toothpick must be free from bark; legitimizing the children of a maidservant; advantage of offspring and of excess in almsgiving; prayer when going to bed and getting up; the Avesta not to be mumbled; doubtful deeds to be avoided or consulted about; evil of laughing during prayer; crowing of a hen; treatment of a hedgehog; after a violent death, corruption (of the body) does not set in immediately; necessity of *sag-dīd*, a dog’s gaze; putrid meat butter unfit for ceremonies; when a woman can do priestly duty.

Part two: the supplementary treatise (chaps. XI-XIV). The *Šāyest nē šāyest* proper and the Supplementary Treatise are of the same age. According to West, they were compiled by two different persons who had access to nearly the same sources. This is evident because of the repetition with slight



alterations of certain chapters (see West, p. lx).

Chapter XI is on degrees (*pāyag*) of sins and the portion of reparation (*tāwān*, money to be paid) for each committed sin; and on different parts of the body of the sacrificial sheep and to which *yazad* each part should be dedicated.

Chapter XII is on the rituals and ordinances concerning the performance of *yasna* prayer; moral conducts at home or in the society; keeping the fire at home properly and the rules regarding it; not drawing water from the well at night.

Chapter XIII is on the importance of the recitation of the *Gāthās* and analysis the power and significance inherent in reciting it.

Chapter XIV is concerned with details of rituals and the calculation of the beginning and the end of each *gāh* (division) of the day. This is repeated in chapter XXI.

Part three: the appendix (chaps. XV-XXIII). The content of Appendix is of a very varied character, with no inherent unity; and here there are repetitions, which suggest more than one author or compiler (Kotwal, 1969, p. 3). Although related to the Sasanian period, it is probable that a part of it was compiled in the 9th century CE. The last chapters might be even of later date, but not later than 1397 CE, the date of the oldest manuscript of the book (M 51) (Tafazzoli, p. 282).

Chapter XV is a conversation between Zoroaster and Ohrmazd (see *AHURA MAZDĀ*), in which Zoroaster asks Ohrmazd how He and the *Amēšāspands* (seven bountiful immortals) are to be worshipped when they are not visible in the material world.

Chapter XVI repeats, with minor differences, the content of chapter XI about sins. The final paragraph is on the merits of certain ceremonies which are to be performed for the reparation of sins.

Chapter XVII is a conversation between Zoroaster and Ohrmazd on the rituals which should be observed after someone dies; on some moral issues; and the question of from where men will rise up on the day of resurrection.

Chapter XVIII is on the merits and virtues of *gāhāmbārs* (six seasonal festivities), *myazd* (fruits offered up during the *stūm*, *āfrīnagān*, and *bāj*



ceremonies; hence one of these ceremonies itself); and [xwēdōdah](#) (kin-marriage; see [MARRIAGE ii. Next-Of-Kin Marriage In Zoroastrianism](#)).

Chapter XIX is on the number of recitations of the prayer [Ahunwar](#) on different occasions.

Chapter XX is admonishments on the necessity of going to the Abode of Fire (*mān ī ātaxšān*), and observing moral teachings and religious deeds. This part is almost identical with a section of [Dēnkard](#) VI.

Chapter XXI is on how to measure the daylight *gāhs* according to the shadow of the sun at midday and in the afternoon.

Chapter XXII pronounces a benediction and blessing, in the name of each of the *Amēšāspands* and *yazads* whose names correspond to the 30 days of the month, invoking an appropriate gift to be bestowed by each.

Chapter XXIII is on the qualities and virtues of each of the 30 *Amēšāspands* and *yazads* mentioned in chapter XXII.

For the detailed description of the contents of different chapters of *Šnš* proper and *The Supplementary Texts*, see West, pp. lix-lxvii; Tavadia, pp. 18-25; and Kotwal, pp. 3-5. For different editions of the work, see the Bibliography.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Mary Boyce, *History of Zoroastrianism* I, Leiden, 1975.

B. N. Dhabhar, *Saddar Nasr and Saddar Bundehehsh*, Bombay, 1909.

F. M. Kotwal, *The Supplementary Text to the Šāyest nē-šāyest*, Det Kongelige Danske Videnskabernes Selskab. Historisk-filosofisk Meddelelser 44,2, Copenhagen, 1969.

K. Mazdapour, *Šāyest nā-šāyest, matnī be zabān-e pārsī-ye miyāne*, Tehran, 1369 Š./1990.

A. Tafazzoli, *Tārīḡ-e adabīyāt-e Irān pīš az Islām*, Tehran 1376 Š./1997, pp. 279-83.

J. C. Tavadia, *Šāyast nē šāyast, A Pahlavi Text on Religious Customs*, Hamburg, 1930 (reviewed by H. W. Bailey in *Journal of The Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and Ireland*, No. 4, 1932, pp. 973-74; and in *BSOS* 7/3, 1934, pp. 705-6).

E. W. West, "Shāyast Lā-Shāyast," in *Pahlavi Texts Part 1, Sacred Books of the East V*, Oxford, 1880, pp. lix-lxvii and 237-406.