



WOMEN II. IN THE AVESTA

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The egalitarian ideals of Zoroastrianism—in particular, the recognition of women as “men’s partners in the common struggle against evil” (Boyce, 1972, p. 308, fn. 83) have long served to protect the dignified status of women within the Mazdayasnian community. Such notions of gender parity are firmly rooted in the teachings of the Avesta and reflect the character of early Iranian society (Schwartz, p. 4) as well as bestow “a modern appearance on this ancient religion” (Hintze, 2003, p. 403).

Gender and the language of the Avesta. On a stylistic level, this message of equality is articulated through the use of explicitly inclusive formulae. Four times in the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* the words *nar-* “man” and *nāirī-* “woman” are collocated: twice as part of the fixed expression *nā vā nāirī vā* “a man or a woman” (Y. 35.6, 41.2), and twice as *narəmcā nāirinəmcā* “of men and women” (Y. 37.3, 39.2). In the *Gāθās*, an alternative word for “woman,” *jaini-*, is juxtaposed with the usual word for “man” (*nar-*) in the phrase *iθā ... narō aθā jānaiiō* “thus ... men, so also women” (Y. 53.6). Additionally, both the *Yasna Haptaṅhāiti* and the *Gāθās* attest the use of the word *gəṇā-*. In its sole *Gāθic* occurrence, the term *gəṇā-* “noblewoman” occurs beside *nar-* “man” in the expression *vā ... nā gəṇā vā* (Y. 46.10). Most interpreters translate this as “a man or a noblewoman” and take the word *gəṇā-* to refer to human females (see Humbach, p. 183; Kellens and Pirart, p. 239; Narten, p. 193). By contrast,



the two instances of *gənā-* in Y. 38.1 do not stand in combination with a word for “man” and appear to refer instead to abstract principles or entities anthropomorphized as *divine* females (cf. Hintze, 2007, pp. 196-209, who, however, argues that *gənā-* refers to female divine entities also in the *Gāθic* passage).

Women and the Zoroastrian community. The Avesta testifies to the concept that women were accorded moral and religious agency equal to that of men. In the *Gāθās*, both males and females are addressed in Y. 53.6 (quoted above), and Mazdayasnians pray the *ā.airiiāmā išiiō* prayer (Y. 54.1), which implores [Airyaman](#) to come to the assistance “of the men and women of Zaraθuštra” (*nərəbiiascā nāiribiiascā zaraθuštrahe*). So too in the Younger Avestan fragment FrD.3, both sexes are explicitly cautioned: “He has not won anything who has not won (anything) for his soul. She has not won anything who has not won (anything) for her soul” (*nōiṭ cahmi zazuua yō nōiṭ urune zazuua. nōiṭ cahmi zazuši yā nōiṭ urune zazuši*) (see Hoffmann, p. 288).

The belief in the essential parity between the religious status of women and that of men in Zoroastrianism is further reflected in the Avestan texts’ frequent praise and veneration of its righteous adherents, irrespective of their gender. In Y. 39.2 it is said: “And we worship now the souls (*urunō*) of truthful men and women, wherever they may have been born” (*ašāunqm āat urunō yazamaidē kudō.zātanqmcīt narqmcā nāirinqmcā*). In Y. 37.3 it is males’ and females’ *frauuašis* “(moral) choices” which are lauded: “Him (= Ahura Mazdā) we worship in the choices of the truthful ones—of men and of women” (*tām ašāunqm frauuašiš narqmcā nāirinqmcā*). In the Younger Avesta, this sentiment is most clearly echoed in *Yt.* 13, which devotes verses 139-42 to the worship of the *frauuašis* of various venerable women, and verses 143-44 to the worship of the *frauuašis* “of truthful women” (*ašaoninqm*) and “of truthful men” (*ašaonqm*) in the various lands. Beside these two gender-specific, genitive plural forms of the adjective *ašauuan-* “truthful [one]”, the Avesta also attests a third genitive plural form, OAv. and YAv. *ašāunqm* (usually in coordination with *frauuaši-*, e.g., Y. 4.2, 4.6, 24.11, 65.12, etc.), which E. Tichy has argued should be interpreted as a *genus commune* meaning “of [the male and female] righteous ones” (see Tichy, p. 102).

As a practical corollary to this outlook, both girls and boys were initiated into the Zoroastrian religion through the investiture of the sacred shirt and girdle. *Vīdēvdād* 18.54 thus declares it a sin “when a man (*nā*) or evil woman (*jahika*) beyond fifteen years of age goes about without wearing the sacred thread or



shirt” (*yaṭ nā jahika pasca pañcadasīm sarəδəm frapataiti anaiβiiāsta vā anabdātō vā*) (however, cf. H.-P. Schmidt, p. 26, fn. 17, who believes that the word *jahika* is an interpolation and therefore initiation was originally only for Zoroastrian males).

Women and education. The Avesta also makes clear that women, like men, were recipients of religious education. This fact is evidenced in *Y.* 26.7, wherein are worshipped the “choices” (*frauuašis*) “of teachers, of students—male [and] female” (*aēθrapaitinąm aēθriianąm narąm nāirinąm*). Further, in *Vr.* 3.4 (and *Gāh* 4.9) the express desire to appoint a “woman” (*nāirikā-*) who is *huš.hąm.sāsta-* “well educated” (see Hintze, 2007, p. 199, with fn. 10, against Bartholomae, col. 1842, s.v. *huš.hąm.sāsta-* “gut zurechtzuweisen, lenksam”) is paralleled in the same verse by the wish to appoint a “man” (*nar-*) who is *vistō.fraoraiti-* “knowing of the Confession.”

Elsewhere, in the *Hērbedestān*, the topic of who is eligible to receive education for the activity of *aθauruna-* “priestly service” is taken up. The text assures that either the lady (*nāirikā-*) or the lord of the house (*nmānō.paiti-*) may go forth for this—the chosen party being the one who has the “highest esteem for truth” (*ašāi bərajiqstəmō*, *H.* 1.2) and is less needed for managing the household (*H.* 5.1-5; see Hintze, 2009, p. 188). This implies women’s education in the period of the Avesta extended beyond mere preparations for the “housewifely role” as assumed by some commentators (see Gould, p. 150, after Sanjana, pp. 17-19). Besides being educated, women (as well as men) were also expected to take part in disseminating the teachings of Zoroastrianism: *Y.* 35.6 encourages “a man or a woman” (*nā vā nāirī vā*) who “knows what is real” (*vaēdā haiθīm*) and “what is really good” (*haṭ vohū*) to “make this known to those who will thus practice it” (*fracā vātōiiōtū iṭ aēbiō yōi iṭ aθā vərəziiąn*). This imperative for proselytizing fits also with M. Boyce’s view that those women and men engaged in *aθauruna-* were acting as Zoroastrian missionaries (Boyce, 1989, pp. 16-17; Hintze, 2009, p. 179).

Women and ritual. Although the Zoroastrian priestly class is today comprised exclusively of males, evidence from the Avesta suggests women too once played an active role in conducting rituals. The assertion on the part of the *Hērbedestān* (*H.* 5, see above) that women could qualify as an *aθauruuan-*, being the general office of ‘priest’ is complemented by a passage in the *Nērangestān* (*N.* 22.2 [= *N.* 40]) which permits “any male ... or female or minor” (*kahiiāciṭ nā ... nāirikaiiāsciṭ apərənāiiūkahecit*) who knows the sacred texts to act as a *zaotar-*, that is, a specialized priest in charge of pouring the libations.



In their legendary narrations, the *Yašts* also provide ample evidence of women commissioning sacrifices. For example, Hutaosa is recorded sacrificing to Vāiiu (*Yt.* 15.35), as are a group of virginal girls (*kainīnō*, *Yt.* 15.39). Huuōuuī is said to have sacrificed to the goddess Cistā (*Yt.* 16.15), and Ahura Mazdā commands Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā to descend from the stars in order that virginal girls may “beg [of her] a strong husband” (*jaiḍiiāṅte taxməmca nmānō.paitīm*, *Yt.* 5.87).

Moreover, the ritual injunctions specific to the worship of each deity make clear that women, as a class, were not excluded from participating in sacrificial rites. Thus does Aši (*Yt.* 17.54) prohibit from making sacrifices to her only “menopausal [women]” (*para.daxšta*) and “virginal girls who have not had intercourse with men” (*kainina anupaēta mamašiiānqəm*). As a mark of equality however, the verse also bars “andropausal men” (*narō pairišta.xšuḍrō*) and “juvenile boys” (*apərənāiiu tauruna*). Similarly, Tištriia (*Yt.* 8,59) bans both the “evil man” (*mairiiō*) and the “evil woman” (*jahika*) from partaking of his sacrifice. Arəduuī Sūrā Anāhitā (*Yt.* 5.93) meanwhile, forbids such disabled women as are “blind, deaf, dwarfed, stupid” (*aṅdāsca karənāsca druuāsca mūrāsca*), etc. from drinking of her libation.

Additional roles of women. It has been suggested that the early Zoroastrian texts accorded women limited positive roles beyond procreation and domesticity (see, e.g., Gould, p. 149). However, in addition to the range of opportunities already discussed, the Avesta also envisages females filling a number of important social positions. In *Y.* 41.2, for example, it is prayed “May a good ruler, a man or a woman (*nā vā nāirī vā*), rule us, in both existences” (*huxšaθrastū nē nā vā nāirī vā xšaētā ubōiiō aṅhuuō*). Evidently, women, as much as men, were considered capable of being leaders in both the corporeal and spiritual planes of being. Several scholars have also identified *Y.* 46.10 (referred to above) as promoting gender equality: in this stanza, Zaraθuštra states he will cross the “Account-keeper’s bridge” (*cinnuatō pərətūm*) with “the man or noblewoman” (*vā ... nā gənā vā*) who would give to him “the reward for truth and rule by good thought” (*ašīm ašāi vohū xšaθrəm manāḅhā*). M. Schwartz (p. 2) interprets this as a plea for patronage and has concluded that in Zaraθuštra’s society, women were eligible to be patrons, thus implying that they possessed considerable wealth and status. A number of modern interpreters (e.g., Gould, p. 145) have pointed to the verse as evidence that Zaraθuštra preached the reward of heaven for his female as well as male adherents (cf. Hintze, 2007, pp. 197-209).



Women and purity. As well as following the purity laws common to both sexes (e.g., the correct disposal of hair- and nail-clippings, see *Vd.* 17), Zoroastrian females were subject to supplementary regulations concerned mainly with their procreative functions. Thus, during her period of menstruation, a lady was to be sequestered in a special building which, according to *Vd.* 16.4, had to be located “fifteen paces from the fire, fifteen paces from the water, fifteen paces from the *barəsmān* which is to be strewn, three paces from the truthful men” (*paṇca.dasa.gāim haca āθraṭ, paṇca.dasa.gāim haca apaṭ, paṇca.dasa.gāim haca barəsmān frastairiīāt, θrigāim haca nərəbiiō ašauuabiiō*). Further, she was permitted to drink only from a vessel “made of iron or lead—the two lowest-value metals” (*aiiaṇhaēnəm vā srum vā nitəma xšaθra.vairiia, Vd.* 16.6), and had to eat a restricted diet (see *Vd.* 16.7).

Since all externalized bodily fluids, and especially dead matter, were considered polluting, a woman who had experienced a stillbirth was viewed as being in a state of especial impurity. In such instances, *Vīdēvdād* 5.48-56 prescribes that the Mazdayasnian community “must build an enclosure” (**pairi.daēzq pairi.daēzaiiqn*) for her at a remove of “thirty paces” (*θrisata.gāim*). Here the woman was to remain for three nights, after which “she should wash her body and clothes with cow urine and water by the nine holes” (*us tanūm snaiiaēta us vastrāṭ gəuš maēsmana apāca nauua upa maγəm*). Following this, a further nine nights’ seclusion was required before her re-entry into society was permitted. Boyce considered such restrictions as “humiliating” (Boyce, 1972, p. 308), whilst J. Choksy cites these “arduous rites” and the attendant “psychological distress” as reasons why some Mazdayasnian women converted in later times to Islam (Choksy, pp. 97-98). It is worth noting, though, that men too were bound by gender-specific purity laws, and in the case, for example, of nocturnal emission, were also required to undergo ritual purification (see *Vd.* 18.46).

Excepting of such codes, the only Avestan passage that potentially advocates the differential treatment of men and women is found in *Vīdēvdād* 7.41-22, which stipulates a physician’s fees. Accordingly, a doctor was to heal: a “lord of the house” (*nmānahe nmāno.paitīm*) for the cost of a “lowest value ox” (*nitəməm staorəm*), but his “wife” (*nmānahe nmāno.paitīm nāirikəm*) for the cost of a “female ass” (*kaθβa daēnu*); a “lord of the town” (*vīsō vīspaitīm*) for the cost of a “middling value ox” (*maδəməm staorem*), but his wife for the cost of a “female cow” (*gauua daēnu*); a “lord of the tribe” (*zaṇtəuš zaṇtupaitīm*) for the cost of a “highest value ox” (*ayrīm staorəm*) but his wife for the cost of a



“female horse” (*aspa daēnu*); a “lord of the province” (*dañhəuš dañhupaitīm*) for the cost of a “cart with four draught animals” (*vāšəm caθru.yuxtəm*), but his wife for the cost of a “female camel” (*uštra daēnu*). Whilst these listings are clearly hierarchical—ascending from the lowest value to the highest value—it is, however, not possible to say whether a given item in *Vd.* 7.42 was considered to be of greater, lesser, or equal worth than its correspondent in *Vd.* 7.41.

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