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Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review

Vol.01

№.04.2017



JORDAN CENTER  
FOR PERSIAN STUDIES

[www.dabirjournal.org](http://www.dabirjournal.org)

ISSN: 2470-4040





*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

Detail from above the entrance of Tehran's fire temple, 1286š/1917–18. Photo by © Shervin Farridnejad

## **The Digital Archive of Brief Notes & Iran Review (DABIR)**

ISSN: 2470-4040

[www.dabirjournal.org](http://www.dabirjournal.org)

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Digital Archive of Brief notes & Iran Review

**Vol.01**

**No.04.2017**

**ISSN: 2470 - 4040**

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University of California, Irvine

**Satnam K. Mendoza Forrest. *Witches, Whores, and Sorcerers. The Concept of Evil in Early Iran. Foreword and other contributions by Prods Oktor Skjærvø. Austin: University of Texas Press, 2011. 245 pages. \$55.00.***

*Shervin Farridnejad  
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In her illuminating study, SATNAM K. MENDOZA FORREST focuses particularly on the concept of evil, magic and exorcism, as well as related rituals, spells and curses in early Iran and mainly according to the Avestan texts. Using an anthropological method that is new in the field, she contextualizes the Avestan accounts of sorcery and magic in their Old Iranian background to shed light on a controversial, debated and challenging subject within early Zoroastrian tradition. Besides, it is a valuable encyclopaedic collection of all the most important accounts of evil in Young Avestan texts, in an up-to-date English translation.

The book begins with an initial chapter written by the leading scholar PRODS OKTOR SKJÆRVØ followed by a preface, acknowledgment and introduction. The main body of the volume consists of eleven chapters, and a conclusion.

In his short opening chapter “The Avesta and Its Translation”, SKJÆRVØ makes some remarks on the

Aveṣtan texts, their origin, dates, transmission and translation of the sacred texts of the Zoroāṣtrianism. The translations of the Aveṣtan passages in this book are taken from the new English translation by SKJÆRVØ, partly published recently in his *The Spirit of Zoroāṣtrianism*.<sup>1</sup> He points out also that the translations have been smoothed over either by leaving out discussions of problematic translations, or by marking uncertain or conjectural ones to avoid long stretches of translated text.

In her preface MENDOZA FORREST defines her understanding of “magic” and “religion” and presents a definition of “magic as a part of a religious process, not as opposed to it”. She reflects the relationship “Magic-Religion” in four categories: first, “magic consists of words and rites meant to produce a desired result by the coercion or supplication of forces beyond the realm of humans.” Second, “the realm of magic is predominantly practical, because the use of magic usually has a goal, especially for the aim of suppressing disease, misfortunes, and evil beings”. Third, “magical rituals are usually private or secret and carried out by specialists in nonpublic settings. The *manthras* (*mantras* in Sanskrit), or spells, to use a broad, although loaded term, are passed down through a line of priests thought to be kin somehow to Zarathuṣtra” and fourth, “magic revolves around a mantra or spell that uses special language and quite often contains mythological allusions. It is often simply the use of words from the Gāthās, which, by their antiquity, have acquired sacred status” (p. 3). Even though she tries to see “magic” as a part of “religious process”, her categorizations — at least in two points — do not really distinguish between a prayer or a ritual and so-called “magic”. Regarding her second point of distinction, the Zoroāṣtrian rituals do always have a practical function, asking the gods for a special or general favor, either in the present or in the future. The same is true for the third point, as the High Masses rituals, the so-called “inner liturgies” are always “secret”, in the sense of “non-public” and require special priestly qualifications.

The first three chapters present a historical and theoretical approach. In the first chapter “The Study of an Ancient Tradition”, which is a short introduction to the invention and development of Zoroāṣtrian theology regarding theodicy and the question of the manifestation of evil, as reflected in Aveṣtan and in Middle Persian (Pahlavi) Literature. MENDOZA FORREST discusses how the Zoroāṣtrian clergy in the ninth and early tenth centuries were faced with rapidly developing and flourishing Islamic theology, which approximately coincides with the period of the compilation and redaction of the majority of the Zoroāṣtrian theological works, the so-called Pahlavi literature. The author states that even from the beginning of the Islamisation of Iran, Zoroāṣtrian theologians shifted toward an approach that involved theological argumentation, while however not abandoning the older forms of religious expression, which consisted of an inherited apotropaic function of rituals to ward off evil, or exorcistic, to remove demons, for which the Gāthās were “the primary source for their spells and apotropaic or exorcistic instructions”. This notion builds the core of MENDOZA FORRESTS argumentation through her study, in her quest to find traces of magic as well as the “witches, whores and sorcerers” in early Iran. She also criticizes certain western scholarly approaches to the Gāthās as the sole genuine and rational core of Zoroāṣtrianism.

After a short survey on the early sources of Zoroāṣtrianism and a very brief history of the composition and transmission of the Aveṣtan Texts in the first chapter “The Iranians and Their Literature,” MENDOZA FORREST follows with a brief survey of the terminology and etymological evidence for “Magic and the Magi” in the third chapter, both in Aveṣtan and Old Persian texts as well as in the works of

1- C.f. SKJÆRVØ, Prods Oktor. *The Spirit of Zoroāṣtrianism*. New Haven; Conn: Yale University Press, 2011.

the classical authors. She comes then to conclusion that considering the image of Zoroastrians and Zaratuštra as magician(s) in Classical sources along with the magical practices of dream interpretation, divination, and soul travel, as reflected in the later Zoroastrian Middle Persian literature, one can assume an older popular tradition which includes witches and sorcerers as the “enemies” of the priests (p. 24). Her discussion includes also the role of magical language and ritual in early Iranian tradition. She indicates that the anti-evil rites—spells, curses, and exorcisms with their accompanying rituals—in the Avesta are strongly connected to the attempt to control evil and demons, and she assigns them as “the most common types of rituals in the Avesta” (p. 24).

In chapter four, “General Concepts of Evil in the Avesta,” MENDOZA FORREST puts forth a fresh opinion regarding the concept of evil in early Zoroastrian texts. She argues that in both Old and Young Avestan Texts, the concept of evil, represented as “transgression against or denial” of the order (Av. *aša-*), or “its absence” is to be found. Whereas in the Gāthās, the transgressors are pictured as demons (Av. *daēuua-*), i.e. mental forces, in the Young Avestan texts they are individualized as demons and “those possessed by the Lie”, i.e. as individuals (pp. 30–31). She shows that even though overlooked by most of the scholars, the curses are found in Gāthic texts too. Then she characterizes the different appearances of evil, namely the *daēuuas*, the supernatural variants of “sorcerers” and “witches,” as well as agents of sickness and death (p. 41ff.). The discussion goes ahead in the next chapter “‘Naturally’ occurring evils”, in which she examines both the further concepts related to evil such as old age, disease and death (pp. 44–57) or drought (57 ff.) as well as the spells and rituals used to fight against them, as reflected in the Young Avestan texts.

Chapter six “Sorcerers, Witches, Whores, and Menstruating Women,” is devoted to the most transgressive beings and “evil agents” in Avestan texts. She goes through the Zoroastrian concepts of male “sorcerer” (Av. *yātu-*, MP. *jādūg*) and his female counterpart, the “witch” (Av. *pairikā-*, MP. *parīg*), evil eye (MP. *duš-čašmīh*), “whore” or “prostitute” (Av. *jahī-/jahikā-*; MP. *jeh*), the poet-sacrificer’s rivals (Av. *kauui-* and *karapan-*), “villain” (Av. *mairiia-*), “obscurantist” (Av. *ašəmaoγa-*, MP. *ahlōmōy*), “sorcerers and sorceresses” (Av. *kaxʾarəda-/kaxʾarədi-*), “male and female magicians” (Av. *kaiiada-/kaiidiia-*), menstruation, and so forth. Even if the actual meaning of some of these terms are unknown, she succeeds in interpreting them by contextualizing the terms and concepts.

Chapter seven, “The Evil Eye, Corpse-Abusing Criminals, Demon Worshipers, and Friends,” begins with the examination of the concept of the “evil eye” homosexual intercourse???. MENDOZA FORREST argues that not only the eyes of the demons and evil or envious people, but even the eyes of the gods (Miθra, Tištriia, and Sraoša, in particular) could be dangerous and bring misfortune to evil people and to the demons (p. 85ff.). She discusses also some activities associated with dead matter and evil forces such as the “corpse cutter” (Av. *nasu.kərəta-*, MP. *nasā-karrēn*), “corpse-bearer” (Av. *nasu-kaša-*, MP. *nasā-keš*), and “corpse thrower” (Av. *nasuspā-*) (pp. 89–92). In the following she addresses two other subjects relating to demonic activities namely cannibalism (pp. 92–93), homosexuality (pp. 93–97), demon-worshiping (pp. 97–103) and robbers (p. 104). Concerning these matter, she mentions the most important passages of the concepts in the Young Avestan Texts and where needed includes evidence from Middle Persian (Pahlavi) literature. The chapter is concluded by discussing the Gods who help to combat against mischievous activities and the evildoers.

Chapter eight, “Exorcistic and Apotropaic Rituals,” is dedicated to healing processes and rituals according to Vīdēvdād 7, in which “surgery” is described at length. She discusses the passages where

“the use of magic in the form of exorcism was necessary after herbal healing and surgery failed to solve the problem” (p. 114). According to her, it is to be understood as the result of the fact that according to the Zoroastrian conception, the villainous Evil Spirit has “sickened” the creation of Ahura Mazdā by looking upon it, and thus this “illness” is to be cured by using the Sacred Word, including healing spells and curses of exorcism. She mentions that exorcist rituals in the Avestan texts are to be understood as a different activity than of those of the herbalist or the surgeon. However, as in the Avesta, the source of all diseases is evil possession, and so it is plausible that the exorcism rituals may have been reserved for the worst unknown cases (p. 120). MENDOZA FORREST tries also to follow up the traces of a “magic line” in some described purification rituals in the Vīdēvdād, e.g. in *barašnom*, as an exorcistic ritual (p. 122ff.). The disposal of hair and nails and the use of the feathers of a magical bird are other examples which she discusses as magic within the early Zoroastrian tradition (pp. 126-135).

In chapter nine, “Structure of Avestan Incantations,” MENDOZA FORREST reviews the forms and varieties of the spells and curses in the Young Avestan texts. She notes that contrary to the Atharvaveda, there are very few spells in Avesta that target specific diseases or conditions and there is hardly any trace of serious rituals or spells for performance by laypeople (pp. 137-138). She states that all three spell components, namely “made up of the phonetic elements that express emotional states”, “the use of commanding language especially with repetition”, and “mythical allusions recalling the origin of the magic” are found in the Avestan ritual texts (p. 139ff.). The author argues that spells and curses in the Avesta employ a specific language pattern, which aim to invoke the most effective gods to crack down on a certain evil. She goes on to examine some patterns of apotropaic or exorcistic spells against evil in Avestan texts, among them the typical structure of the expressing of the ongoing or desired action of the verbs, used in spells (p. 141 ff.) or the spells with a “performative” present, which “depict the desired action as actually taking place” (p. 144).

In chapter ten, “Uses for Avestan Incantations,” the author discusses the structure of invoking gods in spells. She determines that gods and goddesses are invoked in Avestan spells with the exception of the supreme god Ahura Mazdā who is never invoked. He appears rather as the instructor against demons and magicians (p. 151). She examines also the usage of the “holy names” as “potent magical words” (p. 154) and points to the two divine name lists of Ahura Mazdā and Vaiiu (invoked in *Yašts* 1 and 15), which could be specifically used for the purpose of supernatural protection and ward off different sorts of evil and asserts that those names “are spells in themselves, being known to those who have access to this special knowledge” (p. 155).

In the final chapter, “Exorcisms,” MENDOZA FORREST addresses the subject of “exorcistic spells and curses” in the Avestan texts. She indicates that knowing the proper formulas that follow the pattern of the spells for driving out the evil spirits was part of the requirement for being a qualified purifier. Among others, she refers to the Vīdēvdād 10 as “one of the finest examples of a complete exorcistic spell found in the Avesta” (p. 166), and presents also other examples from the Young Avestan corpus. She examines also other genres of exorcistic spells, i.e. the case of Vīdēvdād 20 which according to her are characterized by their “use of imperatives” to disperse the demon causing the illness or other misfortune (p. 176). She traces the exorcistic spells and curses to the Gāθās and sees Zaratuštra as “the first human to use the powerful magical formulas” and Ahura Mazdā as “the primeval magician” who instructed those formulas to the prophet (p. 186).

As MENDOZA FORREST indicates herself, she uses an anthropological model in her study of concept

of evil, to interpret and analyze the Avestan texts in a new approach rather than the interpretation of the texts have resulted by philologists and historians. Using this model, she does not refer to magic and religion as dichotomies, while she makes a distinction between the two. Presupposing that all religions employ magic to some extent, she acknowledges that religion and magic are two parts of the same religious system. She argues that the Zoroastrian attitude toward sorcery must be understood within the Old Iranian contradiction of good, which appears as Order, life, and growth, against evil, which is defined in turn as disorder, death, and destruction. In this manner, all destructive phenomena like death and disease, which are caused by demons and sorcerers, are to be combated by exorcistic rituals and magic. She traces this line through the Avestan texts, but also refers to both Old Indic as well as Middle Persian sources, when necessary.

MENDOZA FORREST'S monograph is the first full study of the concept of the evil in early Iran. It is a highly valuable contribution to the scholarly debate of the on exorcistic and apotropaic rituals as well as structure of the Avestan incantations in early Zoroastrian tradition. Without doubt the book deserves great scholarly attention and is useful for not only academics and students of the field, but also for the scholars of religious studies as well as a wider audience.

