

KHAETVADATHA AND THE BABYLONIAN RABBINIC CULTURE

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Non-Zoroastrian writers generally were not aware of the non-Avestan and non-sexual basis for Khaetvadatha and therefore tended to criticize, reject or ridicule this custom. Such negative criticism is found in Greek, Latin and Syriac Christian sources, classical literature, Islamic, Indian and Chinese Buddhist accounts, which have been well chronicled by Yaakov Elman, Antonio Panaino, Geoffrey Herman, Shaul Shaked, Dan Shapira, Sai Secunda, Yishak Kiel, etc., whom I have so often quoted in this regard and who have provided ample references for them, sparing me the need to do so.

In 484, the synod convened by Barsauma of Nisibis condemned the Christians who initiated this Magian custom. The Syria patriarch Mar Aba evinced intimate familiarity about this custom as did several hagiographers. Several Armenian and Syrian writers, especially Eznik of Kolb, even attributed this custom to the influence of demonic forces.

Despite the custom of Khaetvadatha being held in high esteem by the priestly authorities in Sasanian times, the Pahlavi Rivayat (801-3) depicts even Zarathushtra being very skeptical about this custom, nay even Ohrmazd himself expressed doubts about it. *Denkard* 7.4.5-8 echoes the same sentiment. As a clinical psychologist I discern here an attempt by the author of the Rivayat to cover up his own lack of justification for it by referring it to Zarathustra and even to Ohrmazd. However, an attempt is made by *Denkard* 3.80, 3.999 and *Selections of Zadsparam* 26.3 to emphasize this custom for the preservation of one's *Tokhma* (*Tohmag*). The word *Tokhma* is generally translated as seed but its real meaning is much broader than that of a seed and includes even psychological and spiritual dimensions of inheritance and it is a word still in use by the Parsis in India with the same connotation. Some Jewish writers find that it accords well with the Jewish belief in a "holy seed" which required the Jews not to intermingle with the non-Jews through intermarriage. Intermarriages are also denounced by *Denkard* 3.80, 26-28, and Pahlavi Rivayat 8a8 and 8a9, but they praised kin marriages as promoting love, which has prompted some writers to reinterpret the Jewish narrative of mythical incest between Cain and his sister as an act of devotion akin to this Zoroastrian rhetoric.

However, the Pahlavi Rivayat seems to stray 180 degrees from the Gathic insistence on bringing about Frashokereti by one's deeds alone there being no miraculous power except that of one's own deeds as

repeatedly exhorted by the Gathas. (cf. Yasna 34.1, etc.) when it says “every demon will be destroyed through the miraculous power of Xvedodah”. The same applies to the *Denkard* 3.80 which maintains that every act of Xvedodah reminds the demons of mythical performance of Xvedodah, and “diminishes their power, and they have less reason to oppose humans and cause them damage.” Here we find the Gathic insistence on man's choice and action being solely responsible for their redemption turned topsy-turvy, to say the least, all the more so when referring to demonic powers as it is so antithetical to the Gathic message. This same rhetoric is variously narrated in the Pahlavi Rivayat 8f3 and 8e10, *Denkard* 5.9.13-14, Shayist-ne-Shayist 2.107-108 and 8.18, Pahlavi Rivayat 8b1, Pahlavi Rivayat 8aI, etc., and is quite in contradiction to the original teachings of the *Avesta* in general and of the Gathic precepts of the prophet in particular. Moreover, what the Rivayat of Emed, son of Ashavahish claims that the merit of Xvedodah accrues in full even when there is no hope at all of it resulting in having offspring goes against the very grain of the pivotal position of procreation in Zoroastrian theology, though this may be a ploy to secure family estate or similar fiscal gain. The same Rivayat suggests in so many ways that the mere intent of performing Xvedodah even when one is incapable of carrying it out qualifies one for at least some of the merits of performing it, “because he had (done it) mentally, it becomes a great help for the soul in the usual way.” Some writers, including Shaul Shaked, perceive a similarity here with rabbinic literature which regards intentions as meritorious or sinful in and of themselves even if it is not followed by any action as is so evident in the belief of “thought being akin to action” (Hirhur ke-ma'ase). The same Rivayat (2.2) also declares that a person can qualify for the merit of Xvedodah by finding a substitute to perform it and “the merit of performing the act of Xvedodah belongs to the two of them in full,” which some writers find as similar to the rabbinic notion of Shelihut (agency) in the performance of religious obligations, though it may be tantamount to going against the Gathic emphasis on individual responsibility and the like. What this Rivayat contends that the milk and sweetness of the divine Xvedodah will hold Hell away from him like a beam and a stockade around the soul of him who has performed Xvedodah with his own body” and will have a surplus (of merit) in the other world” clearly flies against the basic tenets of the religion and therefore is a much later development in Zoroastrianism, to say the least, and therefore, is replete with contradictions and unrepresentative of the original Zoroastrian doctrines.

It is interesting to note that the Pahlavi texts adhering to the Gathic principle of free will (Yasna 30.2, 45.2, etc.) make the performance of Xvedodah optional and not obligatory, though if one decides to perform it, he is obliged to carry it out.

Researchers find that their long time residence in the Zoroastrian territories led the Babylonian Jews differing in their practices and views at least in some ways from the Palestinian practices and views. For example, the Babylonian practice of long term marital separation by Moses and the rabbis for the study of Torah apparently due to Zoroastrian “influence according to some scholars, was strongly condemned by the Palestinian rabbis. But the Babylonian Talmud defends this practice by ascribing a distinctly Zoroastrian practice of justifying separation from one's life only after fulfilling all the obligations of marriage just as Zarathushtra chose to fulfill all the obligations required of marriage and procreation before seeking spiritual attainment and obtaining and attaining immortality by secluding himself for ten years for this noble pursuit.

There are some themes in the Babylonian rabbinic literature that clearly appear to be informed by Zoroastrian mythology. While the sexual union between Adam and Eve can be easily explained by the ancient Jewish tradition of the marriage of Adam to Lilith rather than by the Iranian myth about Jam and Jamag's marriage to demons, and similarly while Adam suffering hunger as a consequence of his sin can be located in the Judeo-Christian tradition of the Life of Adam and Eve, the Babylonian rabbinic account reveal three novel elements derived from Zoroastrian creation myths, namely, (1) Adam engendered demons by the unwitting emission of his semen which is reminiscent of Gayomard, the Adam of Zoroastrianism, engendering demonic forces by his seminal emission; (2) the penance of Adam by fasting, covering with fig leaves and avoiding sex is also highly reminiscent of the Zoroastrian myth about Mashi and Mashyani on the similar ground; and, (3) Adams's extraordinary piousness quite matches Gayomard's. However, each tradition is distinct. Thus, Adam's deprivation results from his ascetic and self -inflicted penance which is an anathema to the Zoroastrian mind-set, while Mashi and Mashyani's deprivation was a consequence of their sins. Thus, the Babylonian rabbis adopted many of the Zoroastrian themes they regularly encountered in Babylonia but they first retouched and redefined them and then represented them in terms of their own tradition.

It seems that the incest story of Cain and his sisters as also of Lot and his daughter in the Babylonian rabbinic culture is quite reminiscent of the incest story of Mashi and Mashyani as also of Jam and Jamag. Moreover, unlike the Palestinian tradition, the Babylonian and Sasanian tradition tried to establish a continuum between law and narrative in which the incest stories act as an important basic component of the legal framework.

The remarkably bifurcated view of sexuality in Babylonian rabbinic writing is often situated in terms of Zoroastrian ambiguity about

sexuality. Despite the Pahlavi texts depicting a very positive view of sexuality it also evinces ambivalence about sexual desire and associates it with demonic sphere, which makes it rather difficult to generalize about this subject. I have expressed my own views on this ambivalence in the Pahlavi texts in my thesis on Dualism in Zoroastrianism. In short, this subject is quite complex and obviously this ambivalence in the Pahlavi texts reflects Manichaean, Zurvanite, and Gnostic views rather than the original Zoroastrian view. Nevertheless, obviously as long as such ambivalence about sex did exist in the Sasanian times, the Babylonian rabbis could not possibly remain unaware of it. Moreover, such ambivalence, as distinct from ambiguity, stems from the fundamental Zoroastrian principle that one's choice and not one's gender determines good or bad behavior, a fact rarely noted in this regard. Such a view may justify Zaehner's attempt at excluding negative views about sex from the realm of mainstream Zoroastrianism and assign it to the vestiges of the "Zurvanite" lore or whatever.