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“Kinship, community, and religious change in Zoroastrian legal sources from the Islamic period”

3) The Pahlavi *Rivāyat* Accompanying the *Dādestān ī Dēnīg*¹

On the origins and merits of next-of-kin marriage (Pahl. *xwēdōdah*)

*[Next-of-kin marriage is among the most distinctive – and to modern eyes, strangest – features of ancient Zoroastrianism. It was considered virtuous for fathers and daughters, mothers and sons, and brothers and sisters to marry one another and reproduce. This was thought to mirror the pattern of relations among the gods in heaven and between the first man and woman on earth. The following excerpts come from the longest discussion of *xwēdōdah* in Pahlavi literature. Among other things, it refers to the expectation that converts to Zoroastrianism – possibly meaning returnees who reneged on their adoptive faith, such as Islam – would practice *xwēdōdah* as a sign of their new commitments. It also describes the origins of the institution in the primordial past, its usefulness for combatting evil, the various tiers of incestuous relationships, and finally, a rebuttal to naysayers who critiqued *xwēdōdah*.*

*Early Muslims were disgusted by *xwēdōdah* and lampooned it widely; indeed, it became one of the stock insults leveled against Persian Muslims during the famous *Shu’ūbiyya* Controversy. Scholars have debated the extent to which *xwēdōdah* was ever widely practiced in Zoroastrian society. Judging from the various Pahlavi *rivāyats*, it seems that priests placed added emphasis on *xwēdōdah* after the Arab conquest, as Islam reconfigured family life across the Iranian world, and Zoroastrians were forced to differentiate themselves from their Muslim neighbors, often in dramatic ways.]*

As for an infidel (*ag-dēn*), it is a great deed when he converts (*āyēd*) from the law of unbelief (*dād ī ag-dēnīh*) to Zoroastrianism (*weh-dēn*), and after that, as a Zoroastrian, when he performs the *yašt*.² Another great deed is when he performs *xwēdōdah*, for on account of *xwēdōdah*, which is so valuable and worthy and exceptionally great, the smashing of demons [shall take place].

Concerning Ohrmazd on performing *xwēdōdah*, it is revealed that when Zarduxšt sat before Ohrmazd with Wahman, Ardawahišt, Šahrewar, Hordād, Amurdād, and Spandarmad also sitting around Ohrmazd, Spandarmād was seated on the edge. She placed her hand on his neck. Zarduxšt then asked Ohrmazd: “Who is the one sitting to your side with whom you are so friendly, and who is so friendly to you?” [...]³

¹ Translation by Christian C. Sahner. Transcription and transliteration: A.V. Williams, ed. *The Pahlavi Rivāyat Accompanying the Dādestān ī Dēnīg*. 2 vols. Copenhagen: Munksgaard, 1990, Vol. 1, 48-61; for translation, see Vol. 2, 10-17.

² The Yasna, the primary religious service of the Zoroastrians

³ Ohrmazd, or Ahura-Mazda, supreme god of the Zoroastrian pantheon; Zarduxšt, or Zarathustra, eponymous prophet of the Zoroastrian religion; Wahman, Ardawahišt, Šahrēwar, Hordād, Amurdād, and

And Ohrmazd said: “This Spandarmad is my daughter, the queen of heaven, and the mother of creation. [...]

“Therefore, just as Mašiy and Mašyānīy performed *xwēdōdah*, so mankind should do likewise.⁴ [That way] all men would know their lineage and stock. A brother would never be left out of the love of his brother’s own, and a sister would never be left out of the love of her sister’s own.

“Because of all poverty, hatred of parents, and unlovingness which have come upon mankind from that scoundrel (= Ahrimen, the Devil?), they came from alien lands, provinces, and towns. They took wives and carried them away. Their fathers and mothers were left crying because of this, saying: ‘They are carrying away our daughters into captivity forever!’”⁵

Xwēdōdah is so marvelous because it has the power to save from Hell anyone who has committed the gravest sin, such as sorcery, which is a *margarzān* sin. [...]

And *xwēdōdah* is such a miracle [that it is] an affront to Ahrimen, the demons, and the wicked men, through the power of Ohrmazd and the gods. Every time the demons perform sodomy (*kūn-marz*)⁶ with each other, hunger, danger, thirst, old age, sickness, illness, desolation, the enmity of the *xrafstars*,⁷ and all other evils which are in the world increase. [...]

Therefore, because much evil [arises] from sodomy, when Sōšāns⁸ appears, all men shall perform *xwēdōdah* and every lie demon shall be destroyed by the miraculous power of *xwēdōdah*.

This, too, has been revealed, that a man practices *xwēdōdah* – one kind, with [his] mother; another kind, with his daughter. The one with his mother is superior to the other. They claim this because the one who has come from her body is closer. [...]

[Practicing *xwēdōdah*] with one’s daughter is superior to practicing it with another. [It is likewise true for] he who has practiced it with his sister, but who is not his own child.

As for a daughter born of [his own] mother, when a father performs (*xwēdōdah*) with that daughter who was born of his sexual union [with his mother], that shall be better than if he were not her brother.⁹

Spandarmad, the six Amahrspands, the highest gods of the Zoroastrian pantheon. According to Zoroastrian lore, Ohrmazd instituted *xwēdōdah* by marrying his daughter, Spandarmad

⁴ Mašiy and Mašyānīy, brother and sister, the first man and woman of creation; “the Zoroastrian Adam and Eve”

⁵ An allusion to waves of foreign invasions of Iran throughout history, including the Arab conquest

⁶ Sodomy was considered the opposite of *xwēdōdah*, the least virtuous form of human sexuality, in contrast to *xwēdōdah*, which was seen as the most

⁷ In the Zoroastrian worldview, *xrafstars* are evil animals, including reptiles, amphibians, many insects, wolves, etc.

⁸ Sōšāns, a savior figure who will redeem the world at the end of time

⁹ That is, a doubly incestuous kind of relationship, in which a father has sex with a daughter he produced by having sex with his own mother

As for a sister and a brother, if they have the same father but different mothers, then it shall be [the same] for them; and if they have the same mothers and different fathers, it shall be the same for them. [...]

For it is revealed that the first time [a man] has intercourse [through *xwēdōdah*], a thousand demons shall perish, along with two-thousand sorcerers and witches. The second time he has intercourse, two thousand demons shall perish, along with four-thousand sorcerers and witches. The third time he has intercourse, three thousand demons shall perish, along with six-thousand sorcerers and witches. The fourth time he has intercourse, evidently, man and women shall be righteous. [...]

Zarduxšt also asked Ohrmazd about those who hold men back from *xwēdōdah* and thus, do not perform it on account of their words. Then what is their sin? "Their place is in hell."¹⁰

¹⁰ Possibly an allusion to critics of the practice of *xwēdōdah*, whether inside or outside the Zoroastrian community