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*xšnaoθrahe ahurahe mazdā*

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

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**Part I**  
**Articles**

# Relieving monthly sexual needs: On Pahlavi *daštān-māh wizārdan*

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LIKE many religious traditions, classical Zoroastrianism considers menstruation to be impure and forbids sex during menstrual impurity. The sixteenth chapter of the Videvdad and a few other Young Avestan passages constitute the earliest, if incomplete, treatment of the topic in Zoroastrian literature. Middle Persian texts present a more comprehensive system of menstrual impurity which, like other spheres of Zoroastrian learning, evolved from the scholastic-exegetical discussions of late antique Zoroastrian priests. As is often the case, efforts to reconstruct this legal-ritual domain from the Pahlavi texts are hampered by serious terminological difficulties. In this note I offer a new interpretation of one such problematic Middle Persian construction – *daštān-māh wizārdan*. Apart from any potential philological contribution, I hope the note also sheds some light on late antique Iranian family law, physiology, sexuality, and religious history.<sup>1</sup>

## I

Some decades ago, Philip Kreyenbroek (1991:404) wrote that the expression *daštān-māh wizārdan* “is hardly problematic and means ‘observing (the rules for) menstruation.’” This is the meaning he adopts in his edition of the *Hērbedestān* (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 1992:1:35), and it has been widely accepted, present company included (Secunda 2008:255–262). Indeed, *daštān* is the standard Middle Persian word for “menstruation” (see Panaino 2009 for a discussion of the etymology), while *wizārdan* can refer to actions like “performing,” “fulfilling” and also “separating” and “discerning” (for a convenient etymological discussion, see Cheung 2007: 33–34), all which may relate to “observing the rules” or “separating during the course” of menstruation. Still, there are difficulties with this understanding, including the significance of the word *māh* (“month”) in the phrase. More problematically, in

<sup>1</sup>I am completing a monograph under (working title: *Like a Hedge of Lilies: Menstruation and Difference in the Babylonian Talmud and its Sasanian Context*) in which I pursue some of these matters further.

some passages the meaning “observing (the rules for) menstruation” is impossible to maintain.

An example is a ruling preserved in the Rivāyat attributed to Ādurfarrbay ī Farroxxādān concerning a bad and disobedient wife (*zan ēw ī wad ī a-burd-framān*). The passage states that if the husband wishes to maintain such a wife in order to keep her away from further sinning, he is allowed. Nevertheless, “*daštān-māh nē pādixšāy wizārdan*” – “it is not authorized to !observe (the rules of) the monthly menstruation!”<sup>2</sup> If the phrase really refers to observing the rules for menstruation, then the Rivāyat would bizarrely be recommending that the husband who is permitted to keep his sinful wife should *not* observe the rules of menstruation.

It has recently been suggested that *daštān-māh wizārdan* does not in fact refer to the observation of the menstrual taboo *per se*, rather “the marital obligation of a husband to sustain and nourish his wife, especially during the menstrual cycle at which time she is unable to provide for her own needs” (Kiel 2014:293). At first glance, there do seem to be passages that support this understanding. These include the following case cited in the Sasanian law-book:

*zan kē šōy pad \*adwadād daštān-māh wizārdan wināhgār ka duzz kunēd duzz nē zan bē šōy bawēd*

(Regarding) a woman whose husband is guilty of the sin of withholding maintenance (*adwadād*) during the observance of the monthly menstruation, if she commits a theft (*duzz kunēd*) then not the woman, rather the husband, is (deemed) a thief (*duzz*).<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup>RAF 29.2; The responsum appears in MS TD2= Mahyar, Nawabi, and Tavousi (1979: 341:12–342:10). Cf. Anklesaria (1969:1:19–20 [Pahlavi]; 1:110 [transcription]; 2:61–62 [translation]). I have greatly benefited by consulting a transcription from Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Yishai Kiel’s forthcoming edition. Note also the end of the passage: “*ka ziyānag az wināh bē patit bawēd daštān-māh pādixšāy wizārdan*” – “if the young woman is repentant from the sin, it is authorized to observe (the rules of) the monthly menstruation.”

<sup>3</sup>MHDA 35:7–9. See Macuch (1981:61 [transliteration]; 218 [translation]). This rendition is much informed by Macuch’s recent interpretation in Macuch (2012:257–8).

That said, there are other passages that cannot accept the sense of “providing maintenance during the menstrual month.” For example, another passage from the Rivāyat of Ādurfarrbay ī Farrozzādān states:

*ka šōy pad daštān-māh pad zanīh wizārdan ham-dādestān ud ziyānag nē ham-dādestān wināh ī daštān-māh ziyānag \*ō bun*

If the husband is in agreement to *daštān-māh...wizārdan* in marriage but the young woman is not in agreement, (then) the young woman incurs (*ō bun*) the sin of *daštān-māh*.<sup>4</sup>

It would be difficult to understand why a woman who refuses support during menstruation incurs a sin. Relatedly, a ruling in the Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašwahištān about when “the husband is allowed to divorce her from being his wife without the agreement of the spouse” includes in the list “not letting (him) *daštān-māh...wizārdan* with (her); going to her husband’s bed as a menstruant; and hiding (evidence of) menstruation.”<sup>5</sup> Even if we revert to the initial proposal that *daštān-māh wizārdan* refers to the observance of the rules of menstruation, the passage would be redundant in its reference both to the woman going to the husband’s bed as a menstruant and not letting him observe the laws of menstruation with her.

## II

Problematic terms in Pahlavi legal literature sometimes owe their peculiarity to an initial appearance in the *zand* – the Middle Persian rendition of the Avesta. Notably, *daštān-māh wizārdan* appears in a gloss in rendering a term of procreation in the Videvdad. The paragraph in which the phrase appears is interpreted by the *zand* to mean that proper nourishment is necessary to perform certain religious duties. These include having intercourse (literally, “seeking sons”: Pahlavi *pus xwāyīšnīg*; rending Avestan *puθrō.īštīm*), which is glossed as: “*kē daštān-māh abēr tuwān wizārdan ka nē xwarēd ā-š nē tuwān*” – Who is very able to *daštān-māh...wizārdan*. If he does not eat then he is not able (to).<sup>6</sup>

Based on the context, the term neither refers to observing the menstrual prohibitions nor maintaining one’s wife during menstruation, rather to procreation itself. But how could a term referring to menstruation

signify reproduction when Zoroastrian texts strongly prohibit menstrual sex? One possibility may be that the term refers to the fact that procreation is only permitted after properly discerning (*wizārdan*) that there is not menstrual impurity.<sup>7</sup> Still, it seems strange that a term used specifically to signify procreation would do so by emphasizing the avoidance of menstruation in order to legally procreate.

## III

I would like to suggest that in fact, our phrase signifies procreation not in terms of the need to avoid menstrual sex, but because of a close connection perceived between the menstrual cycle and procreative sex in Zoroastrian texts. For example, in an embryological discussion preserved in the fifteenth chapter of the Bundahišn, there is a link made between menstruation, procreation, and female desire.<sup>8</sup> The passage compares human menstruation to the bloody substance discharged by cattle in heat (*wardagīh*), and declares that like cattle, humans are most fertile following menstruation. Thus, procreation is best achieved as close as ritually permitted to the conclusion of the period (Bundahišn 15.1–2).<sup>9</sup> This relates to a belief that females produce a type of procreative seed, which is described as red and yellow and which, the text claims, reverts back to blood if unused in procreation (15.4–5). The Bundahišn seems to be, on the one hand, adopting a Galen-like approach to embryology where female seed plays an active role in human conception. At the same time, its approach is also vaguely reminiscent of aspects of Aristotle’s embryology which gives menstrual blood a role in procreation as well (for the Greek medical views, see Boylan 1984). Interestingly, similar ideas can be found in the Babylonian Talmud, which refers to a red female seed that looks quite similar to menstrual blood and is discharged due to sexual desire (Babylonian Talmud, Niddah 20b and 31b). It thus seems possible to render *daštān-māh wizārdan* as relating to the performing of – or better, relieving (*wizārdan*) of<sup>10</sup> – sexual desire that is associated with the menstrual cycle.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>7</sup>I am grateful to Yuhan Sohrab-Dinshaw Vevaina for this suggestion.

<sup>8</sup>See Adhami 2011 for a recent treatment, with bibliographical references to previous studies.

<sup>9</sup>The passage has been transcribed and translated on numerous occasions. Notably, Dēnkard 8.23.20 also refers to *daštān-māh wizārdan* in reference to cattle.

<sup>10</sup>See for example Dēnkard 6.146 (Shaked 1979:58–59): *driyōšan must nē wizārdan*. I am grateful to Prods Oktor Skjærvø for pointing out this passage to me.

<sup>11</sup>West (1880, 4:66, 84, 113) seems to have more or less correctly rendered the term as “to satisfy her menstrual excitement.” Similarly, on one occasion Anklesaria translates the term as “cause the menstruation month to be appeased.” See Anklesaria (1969: 2:62). However these renditions were not developed and more importantly, did not carry over into contemporary scholarship.

<sup>4</sup>RAF 12.2; The responsum can be found in MS TD2 327:15–328:12. Cf. Anklesaria (1969:1:6–7 [Pahlavi]; 1:104 (transcription); 2:52 (translation)).

<sup>5</sup>REA 7.5; MS TD 255:2–8. Cf. Safa-Isfahani (1980: 48–49). I have greatly benefited from consulting the transcription from a forthcoming edition by Prods Oktor Skjærvø and Yishai Kiel: *šōy abē-ham-dādestānih ī ziyānag az zanīh bē hišt pādixšāy...daštān-māh abāg wizārdan nē hišt. ayāb daštān ō wistarg ī šōy šud ayāb daštān nihān kerdan*.

<sup>6</sup>PV 3.33[D]. See Moazami (2014:88–9).



## IV

Understanding *dastān-māh wizārdan* as referring to procreation fits well with many of the texts previously cited. Thus, the first passage from the Rivāyat ī Ādurfarrbay ī Farrozzādān may now be understood to forbid a husband who legally maintains a “bad wife” from continuing to procreate with her (RAF 29:2); the other passage quoted from this Rivāyat would mean that a woman who does not agree to have sex when the husband agrees to, would be guilty of a sin relating to these sexual obligations (RAF 12:2); and the selection from the Rivāyat ī Ēmēd ī Ašwahištān can be read as allowing a husband to unilaterally divorce his wife if she does not let him have sex with her (REA 7:5). Simply put, *daštān-māh wizārdan* refers to a legal obligation to fulfill one’s “spousal duties.”

Interestingly, this requirement is not only incumbent upon the wife towards the husband, but also makes demands of the husband towards his wife. The summaries of the *zand* listed in book eight of the Dēnkard discuss “the quantity of ‘lit. offspring-seeking’ – that is, the measure of relieving the (desire associated with the) menstrual month – for the legally-possessed wife.”<sup>12</sup> Another passage preserved in book five of the Dēnkard suggests that for a non-*pādixšāy* wife – i.e., a wife without full rights – one must have sex at least once a month.<sup>13</sup> Even more surprisingly, the *Mādayān ī Hazar Dādestān* passage cited previously can now be understood to rule that if the husband fails to fulfill this duty then he – and not his wife – is blamed if she goes elsewhere to fulfill her sexual needs:

(Regarding) a woman whose husband is guilty of the sin of withholding the maintenance (of) procreating, if she commits adultery (*duzz kunēd*), (then) not the woman, but the husband is (regarded as) adulterer (*duzz*).<sup>14</sup>

According to Rivāyat ī Ādurfarrbay ī Farrozzādān, one even incurs a monthly penalty for not fulfilling a promise to wed one’s sister in *xwēdōdah* (“incestuous”) marriage.<sup>15</sup> A final text which might benefit from

<sup>12</sup>Dēnkard 8.36.12 [Madan (1911:748)]: *abar paymān ī zan dāstan fraزند xwāstan – paymān ī daštān-māh wizārdan.*

<sup>13</sup>Dēnkard 5.16.4 [MS DH 150; K 20; Madan 447; cf. Amouzgar and Tafazzoli 2000:54–5]: *čand šāyēd tuwān daštān-māh wizārdan – zan kē daštān-māh kunišn – ān ī pad rāh ī nē pādoxšāyih harw māh ēw bār.*

<sup>14</sup>The standard meaning of Pahlavi *duzz*, like its Aramaogram GNBA, is thief. However, a number of texts use the term specifically for the crime of adultery, including MHD 73.9 (Macuch 1993:492) and *Hērbedestān* 6.6 (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 1992:I:43).

<sup>15</sup>RAF 143.2; MS TD 399:3–5. Cf. Hjerrild (2003:182–3):

*ka az ān frāz čiyōn-iš xwēškārīh ud tuwān būd ud nē hamē rāyēnīd ā-š pas az 15-sālagīh ī ziyānag harw daštān-māh-ēw rāy dēnīgīhā andar-iš tōzišnōmand*

If from then on he did not keep acting according to

this interpretation is located in the third chapter of the Hērbedestān (Kotwal and Kreyenbroek 1992:1:34–35). The passage deals with conflicting obligations between priestly learning, guardianship of the property (*xwāstag sālārīh*), and *daštān-māh wizārdan*. While I and others previously assumed that the passage was about women who would not be able to properly observe the menstrual rules while traveling to pursue priestly studies (Elman 2006; Secunda 2008; cf. Kiel 2014), it now seems likely that the text refers to men neglecting their obligation to fulfill their wives sexual needs while away and engaging in priestly study.<sup>16</sup> In this way, it can be related to late antique discussions of the “married monk” – especially Sasanian Mesopotamian “rabbis” – who ignored family duties to pursue long-distance religious study (Boyarin 1993).

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his duty and ability, then after the young woman is fifteen years old, according to the Tradition (*dēn*) for every (procreative cycle connected with) a menstrual month (*daštān-māh-ēw*) he owes her atonement.

<sup>16</sup>Hērbedestān 3.3–4:

*yezica aēšaiia daēne. ānōh paydāg kū hērbedestān kardan weh kū daštān-māh wizārdan. yezica vāhrkō gāeōā ānōh paydāg kū daštān-māh wizārdan weh kū xwāstag-sālārīh kardan. pad āmār \*ēd kū daštān-māh frašn ī tan weh az harw tis-ēw.*

‘and if in search of the daēnā (quote in Avestan) ...’ – (From) there it is apparent that pursuing priestly studies is better than relieving (the sexual desire associated with) the menstrual month. ‘And if a wolf? the flocks (quote in Avestan)...’ – (From) there it is apparent that relieving (the sexual desire associated with) the menstrual month is better than guardianship of the property. By this reckoning, questioning (?) of the body (*frašn ī tan*) of the menstrual month is better than everything else.

Note that the phrase *frašn ī tan* is, based on its position, a kind of gloss to *daštān-māh wizārdan*. However, its meaning is not entirely clear.

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