

### Tradition & the Menses.

The idea of whether or not menstruating women are spiritually unclean in the Zoroastrian religion has been the subject of much discussion in which historical facts are conspicuous by their absence. We have a lot of opinions, a lot of ancient-sounding words thrown about (many of which are not Avestan) but few facts in support of this tradition. Yes, we have such a tradition in Zoroastrianism. But it is alien to the Gathas. And no one seems to have examined when and why this idea came into being in the long history of the religion.

Over the centuries, the underlying idea has resulted in many different practices in dealing with the menses. Today, in 'orthodox' and Ilm-i-khshnoom circles,<sup>1</sup> a menstruating woman cannot attend religious ceremonies (because she is a spiritual pollutant). In 'liberal' circles, she may attend a ceremony ~ so long as she does not touch anything of religious significance (because she is a spiritual pollutant) ~ she cannot go up to the fire urn (afargan) to add sandalwood and incense to the fire, or touch its instruments or the ashes, or do any one of the things others are encouraged to do ~ which naturally signals her 'condition' to everyone present.

Many are embarrassed to publically discuss this tradition, (while still enforcing it). But we can no longer ignore this ten ton elephant in the room. We cannot continue to teach this tradition to our children and enforce it ~ however quietly ~ without alienating them, hurting them (and ourselves), and failing to follow the path of the truth. We need to look it in the eye, and decide.

Are menstruating women a source of spiritual pollution?

I would like to show you ~ with the best available evidence ~ when this tradition arose, and on what it was based, so that you can make an informed decision on whether or not it is part of Zarathushtra's spiritual philosophy (or indeed his 'religion'), rather than a (much later) cultural tradition from a particular area in ancient Iran.

The most ancient Zoroastrian texts are the Avestan texts ~ the oldest being the Gathas and later the Yasna Haptanghaiti (both composed in Old Avestan), then the other Yasnas, the Visperad, Yashts, Nyaisheh, Gahs and Afrigans and some Fragment texts, composed in Younger Avestan (YAv.),<sup>2</sup> ~ just as today's English is different from older versions. None of these Avestan texts (that were written during Avestan times), say anything about a menstruating woman being spiritually unclean. Nor does any such text prescribe exclusionary rules governing such women.

So far as I am aware, the first mention of this idea occurs in the *Vendidat* (*Videvdat*), a text composed in what purports to be YAv. But scholars (who are linguists) have long since concluded that its Avestan is full of grammatical errors. It therefore could only have been written long after Avestan times, when Zoroastrian priests were no longer fluent in the Avestan language.

Zaehner speaks of "the appalling grammatical confusion that characterizes that ... work."<sup>3</sup> Humbach/Faiss 2010 mention in passing "...the well-known fact that the grammatical endings found in the *Videvdat* are notoriously doubtful..."<sup>4</sup> Hintze thinks the *Videvdat* was composed in the post-Achaemenian period.<sup>5</sup>

I agree. The Achaemenian kings would never have tolerated giving priests so much power to rule, punish, and accumulate wealth and power as they have in the *Vendidad*.

I realize that Ilm-ikhshnoom (and others) claim the Avestan language was not a language for everyday life, but was created and used solely for rituals (and therefore would not have such mundane things as grammar). This is not true. One has only to study the Avestan texts to see that the language was for everyday use (and was also used for rituals). The Avestan texts describes many non-ritual things ~ the ringlets of a bludgeon bearing warrior;<sup>6</sup> the 99 hard riddles that an enemy maliciously asks, the square earrings and fur clothing of a 'goddess', the way beaver skins are worked,<sup>7</sup> ~ to give you just a few examples. In addition, linguistic evidence has established beyond doubt that Avestan is in the Indo-European family of languages (would you believe, the English word 'star' ~ in the sky ~ is Avestan *star-*, but pronounced with a short *a* ), and Avestan is very similar in vocabulary and grammar to Vedic Sanskrit, so the Avestan language is an integral part of the fabric of family of ancient Indo-European languages. It could not have been invented solely for ritual purposes.

So where does the *Vendidad* fit (time-wise), in the history of the Zoroastrian religion?

Zarathushtra's date is not precisely known. Estimates range from the earliest, around 6,480 BCE to the latest around 589 BCE. Some linguists and writers think he lived around 1,000 BCE or 1,700 BCE or earlier. What is not in dispute is that from Zarathushtra's date, down through the centuries of the Younger Avestan texts (which were composed during YAv. times, and which even then regarded Zarathushtra as very ancient), through the fall of the Achaemenian Empire around 331 BCE, we have a period of several centuries, probably more than a thousand years.<sup>8</sup> During all those many centuries, there is no textual or other evidence that the religion considered menstruating women as spiritual pollutants, or practiced related exclusionary traditions. So for the first several centuries of the religion's existence, there is no evidence ~ none ~ that the exclusionary traditions of the *Vendidad* were observed or existed as part of the religion.

How then did this idea came into being? How did it enter the religion?

Well, in some *much later* texts, we see the idea of cosmic dualism ~ two uncreated Entities ~ an all good God, in conflict with an all evil Devil (there is no Devil in the Gathas, except for interpretations personal to the translator).<sup>9</sup> The Pahlavi text *Sikand Gumanig Vijar*, explains that if Ahura Mazda is all good (as He is in the Gathas), he cannot have created anything evil (which is true). Therefore (the ancients reasoned), there would have to be another creator of everything evil. And thus was born the idea of the Devil ~ an all evil Entity ~ who created all the evil in the world. This conclusion is premised on an idea of the Divine as a separate being, who "created" the world and the other life forms in it ~ all separate from the "creator" ~ an idea of the Divine that is very different from Zarathushtra's ideas in the Gathas, but was/is well established in religions which were dominant when the Pahlavi texts were composed. By then, Avestan was no longer understood, the destruction of texts and killing of the learned resulted in devastating loss of knowledge, and Zarathushtra's own thoughts on these particular issues (logical, mystical, beautiful),<sup>10</sup> were no longer understood.

In the Gathas, the only spiritual pollutants are wrongful choices, such as lies, cruelty, violence, anger, hatred, tyranny, bondage, murder, theft, harming, injuring, etc. ~ all intrinsically 'bad', 'evil'.<sup>11</sup> In later Avestan texts, what is 'evil' was extended to include many things that were not intrinsically 'bad', including (among other things) anything that was harmful to man ~ wolves, disease, sickness, etc. and these 'evil' things were considered the creation of the all bad Entity ~ the Devil. At the time of the *Vendidad*, the cause of menses was not understood, but in their experience bleeding was caused by harming someone, and the Devil was the source of all harm. So menstruation (which could not otherwise be explained) was thought to be caused by the Devil (harming the woman). How do I know this? Because the *Vendidad* and ancient commentaries say so. The following references to the *Vendidad* are from Darmesteter's translation.<sup>12</sup> In Fargard 16.7, the question is asked, how much food should be brought to a menstruating woman (who is in isolation). The answer is that she should not be fed too much, because any strength she might gain from the food would strengthen the Devil (who was causing her to bleed).

"How much food shall he bring to her? How much bread shall he bring?  
(Only) two danares of long bread, and one danare of milk pap, lest she should gather strength." Fargard 16.7.

The Pahlavi Commentary explains,

"Soshyos says: For three nights cooked meat is not allowed to her, lest the issue shall grow stronger.' As the fiend is in her, any strength she may gain accrues to Ahriman." Darmesteter ft. 4.

These ideas (including cosmic dualism) are not in the Gathas. Indeed, one of the things that keeps Zarathushtra's teachings perennially relevant, is that he does not give us fact-specific do-s and dont-s to obey, ~ ideas that are embalmed in the perceptions of over 1,000 years BCE. Instead, one of his foundational teachings is the search for truth ~ on-going,<sup>13</sup> ~ scientific truth, social truth, emotional truth, spiritual truth ~ truth in every aspect of existence. In fact, there is a Gatha verse in which, after expressing his anguish to the Divine about whether anyone will ever listen to his attempts to explain Wisdom's teachings, he in effect comforts himself with his understanding of Wisdom's response, (to his anguish), a response that reassures him that he has already taken the necessary first step.

"...when I was first instructed by your words, painful seemed to me my faith in men to bring to realization that which ye told me is the best [*vahishta* 'most good'] ..." Y43:11 Insler 1975.

"But then You said to me, '*you have come to truth for instruction, ...*' Y43:12 my translation.<sup>14</sup>

Coming to truth for instruction, means wanting truth to be his teacher, wanting to learn from truth. So here again we have the on-going search for truth, the desire to comprehend it, which is a fundament of Wisdom's teaching (as conveyed by Zarathushtra in the Gathas).<sup>15</sup> Indeed, there is a very lovely Avestan maxim repeated in Younger Avestan texts. It does not appear in SBE translations, but appears (in Avestan script), in Geldner.<sup>16</sup>

*"aēvō pantā yō ašahe vīspe anyaešqm apantqm."*  
'(There is) one path, that of truth, all others (are) non-paths',  
my translation.

Under this teaching, a 'tradition' is nothing ~ a non-path ~ if it is not in accord with truth. The idea that menstrual bleeding is caused by the Devil is untruth. A non-path. Today, we know that the menses is just the lining of the uterus, which is enriched to nourish the fetus, and is sloughed off (as menstrual bleeding) if no fetus attaches to it. That is truth.

Mr. Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes, late of the United States Supreme Court observed (in another context), in his book on the Common Law,

"A very common phenomenon, and one very familiar to the students of history, is this. The customs, beliefs, or needs of a time establish a rule or formula. In the course of centuries the custom, belief or necessity disappears, but the rule remains. The reason which gave rise to the rule has been forgotten, and ingenious minds set themselves to inquire how it is to be accounted for. Some ground of policy is thought of, which seems to explain it and reconcile it with the present state of things; and then the rule adapts itself to the new reasons which have been found for it, and enters on a new career."<sup>17</sup>

The *Vendidad's* idea that the Devil harming a woman was the cause of menstrual bleeding is no longer remembered (even by those who revere, but have never read, the *Vendidad*). And many new reasons have been proposed to justify the exclusion of menstruating women by people unaware of the original reason. One is that it allows women to rest. Kindly, but not supported by any text. Then there are the ideas that the auras of menstruating women snatch power from a man or his aura, (an Ilm-i-khshnoomi idea), or that the touch of such a woman draws power from a man, or sours milk, or makes pickles turn out badly. None of these ideas are found in any ancient Avestan text. These are all fear-driven (or control-driven) superstitions that have neither a factual, nor textual, basis.

The idea that menstrual bleeding is caused by the Devil is the *only* textual basis for the idea that women are spiritually impure during their menses. If menstrual bleeding were indeed caused by the Devil, we should ask: Who vanquishes the Devil every month like clock work? Women do. So are women spiritually superior to men? Of course not. Spirituality has nothing to do with physical, material, phenomena such as gender, or menstruation. In Avestan texts (which were composed during Av. times), men and women are treated as equals. Indeed, according to the *Aerpatastan & Nirangistan* (believed to be part of the lost Avestan *Husparam Nask*, although it is full of grammatical errors), both men and women were priests.<sup>18</sup>

What is significant, is that those ancient Zoroastrians who wrote the menstrual traditions in the *Vendidad* were not afraid to use their minds to arrive at conclusions (although faulty), based on then available knowledge (although incorrect) ~ conclusions that they believed to be the truth. Do we have their courage? If the menses is not caused by the Devil we should stop practicing any exclusionary traditions against such women. If we believe that the menses is caused by the Devil, then we should practice *all* of the *Vendidad's* exclusionary mandates. Anything else is hypocritical. I will summarize these mandates here (in addition to feeding such women only a little bread and milk) ~ all of which are ignored today, even by the most traditional, orthodox Zoroastrians. The *Vendidad* mandates,

~ that menstruating women be kept in a separate building:

"...and they shall erect a building there, higher than the house by a half, or a third, or a fourth, or a fifth part, lest her look should fall upon the fire." And that she should be kept "Fifteen paces from the fire, fifteen paces from the water, fifteen paces from the consecrated bundles of baresma, three paces from the faithful." §§ 2, 4;

~ that a person bringing her food should keep his distance:

"Three paces from her shall he stay, who brings food to a woman who has an issue of blood, either out of the ordinary course or at the usual period."; that her food should be brought "in vessels of brass, or of lead, or of any common metal." §§ 5 - 6;

~ that "... If a child has just touched her, they shall first wash his hands and then his body." § 7 last para. (footnote 5: including a "child whom she suckles"); ~ imagine washing a new baby's hands and body every 2 to 4 hours (each time s/he nurses) ~ definitely a rule made by a man with no hands on experience in the care of babies;

~ and that after the woman's "infirmity" is over, she must undergo a purification ritual in which 3 holes are dug, and she is washed by gomez in two holes, and by water in the third §§ 8 - 12.

No Zoroastrian community today ~ not even Ilm-i-Khshnoom ~ follows any of these mandates. Yet the *Vendidad* is clear that it is not just a such a woman who is spiritually impure, her spiritual pollution is infectious ~ to everything ~ it infects the space around her, what her glance falls upon, and any person or thing she touches. So if the *Vendidad* is true, then the whole Zoroastrian community today (in fact the whole world!) is spiritually polluted because at home and outside it, such women live, cook, eat, sleep, go to work, shop, look upon and touch people and things in 1,001 ways ~ in total disregard of the *Vendidad*.

Why? Because it is convenient for everyone, including the guys in her life. Yet such women are still excluded from touching religious things, or attending religious ceremonies. Why? Because that does not inconvenience anyone else (except young girls and women). Is this not beyond hypocrisy?

The *Vendidad* classifies many things as spiritual pollutants ~ worse than menstruating women! ~ which today, are totally ignored. For example, hair and nails (once cut) were spiritual pollutants. The following references are to Fargard 17, Darmesteter translation.<sup>19</sup> Allowing a person's hair and nails to fall into the earth without protective rituals (the *Vendidad* says) produces Daevas (demons) on earth, and causes corn in the fields, and "clothes in the wardrobe" to be eaten up by insects. To prevent such dire consequences, hair and nails were required to be buried in the earth at a depth of 10 fingers if the earth is hard, or 12 fingers if the earth is soft, while performing various detailed ritual actions, recitals and dedications (§§ 2 - 10). Those who failed to follow these rules, were sinners.

"All such sinners, embodiments of the Druj, are scornors of the law; all scornors of the law are rebels against the Lord; all rebels against the Lord are ungodly men; and any ungodly man shall pay for it with his life." § 11.

Today, we regard hair and nails as just material rubbish which, with common sense and basic cleanliness, we dispose of in the garbage without protective rituals. Yet in the *Vendidad*, hair and nails are a source of

spiritual pollution worse than menstruating women in that such women must be kept only 15 paces away from sacred things (16.4), whereas,

"...whenever ... thou shalt comb thy hair, or shave it off, or pare off thy nails thou shalt take them away twenty paces from the fire, thirty paces from the water, fifty paces from the consecrated bundles of baresma..." Fargard 17.4,

Why do we still believe that menstruating girls and women are spiritual pollutants, when we have stopped believing that cut hair and nails are spiritual pollutants? Could it be that if everyone menstruated, the *Vendidad's* ideas would have long since gone the way of hair and nails?

Menstruation is part of the process that generates the miracle of new life. If we believe in 'God', then we believe that the process which creates new life was designed (or set in motion) by Him. Can anything He designs (or sets in motion) be a spiritual pollutant? To see any *material* thing as a source of *spiritual* pollution is a contradiction in terms ~ an oxymoron. The evidence is clear and irrefutable. The rules regarding menstruating women are a late cultural 'tradition' (courageously rationalized, but based on ignorance and a false premise) that does not appear in any religious text during the first several centuries of the religion's existence, a tradition which definitely first appeared long after Avestan times, and probably after the fall of the Achaemenian empire. It is founded on an idea that has no basis in truth ~ an idea that has long since been forgotten but which (unreasoning and controlling) minds have perpetuated for a wide variety of new reasons ~ none of which are in accord with truth (*ašātcīt hacā*).<sup>20</sup>

So the question we need to ask ourselves is this: Do we have the courage, the integrity, to make our choices in accord with truth? Or will we continue to perpetuate a falsehood ~ one that alienates any thinking person, is so harmful, so grief-causing, to young girls and women, a makes the Zoroastrian religion an object of mockery. If we are followers of Zarathushtra's teachings, the answer is clear.

'(There is) one path, that of truth, all others (are) non-paths.'

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<sup>1</sup> The Ilm-i-khshnoom is a sect which did not exist until around the late 1920s and was started by a person called Behramshah Shroff, a Parsi from India, who claimed that he had been instructed in the true (if secret) Zoroastrian religion by invisible people in Mt. Demavand, in Iran.

<sup>2</sup> The designation 'Younger Avestan texts' includes a few texts that have been composed in an archaic form of Younger Avestan. All YAv. texts have been translated in SBE 31, and 23; and with the exception of some YAv. Fragment texts, they all have been published (in Avestan script) in Geldner's *Avesta*. We have no hard evidence ~ only the estimates of linguists ~ regarding the date(s) of these YAv. texts. See *Part Five: The Younger Avestan Texts*.

<sup>3</sup> Zaehner 1961, *Dawn and Twilight of Zoroastrianism*, (Phoenix Press reprint 2003) p. 162.

<sup>4</sup> Humbach & Faiss, *Zarathushtra & His Antagonists*, (Wiesbaden 2010) p. 31.

<sup>5</sup> Hintze *Zamyad Yasht*, (Wiesbaden 1994) p. 9.

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<sup>6</sup> From a YAv. Yasna,

"... Keresaspa, ... a youth of great ascendant, ringlet-headed, bludgeon-bearing..." Yy9.10; Mills translation, SBE 31, pp. 233 - 234;

Parenthetically, *aspā-* means a female horse, mare (Skjaervo 2006); and Zarathushtra's father's name ~ Pourushaspa - means '(having) many mares'.

<sup>7</sup> Referring to Ardvi Sura Anahita, the spiritual essence of the waters,

§ 81 - 82 "To her did Yoista, one of the Fryanas, offer up a sacrifice with a hundred male horses, a thousand oxen, and ten thousand lambs ... He begged of her a boon, saying: 'Grant me this, ...that I may overcome the evil-doing Akhtya, ... that I may answer the ninety-nine hard riddles that he asks me maliciously...!'"

*Aban Yasht*, Yt. 5; SBE 23, pp. 72 - 73.

§ 127 "...she wears square golden earrings on her ears ... and a golden necklace around her beautiful neck ..."

§ 129 "She is clothed with garments of beaver, ... for the skin of the beaver that lives in water is the finest-colored of all skins, and when at the right time it shines to the eye with full sheen of silver and gold."

*Aban Yasht*, Yt. 5; SBE 23, p. 83. (Presumably the "right time" was when the animal's winter fur was thick, rather than when it started shedding).

<sup>8</sup> Detailed in *Part Four: Zarathushtra's Date & Place*.

<sup>9</sup> Detailed in *Part One: Does the Devil Exist?*

<sup>10</sup> Detailed in *Part One: in*

*The Nature of the Divine;*

*The Identity of the Divine;* and

*Does the 'Devil' Exist?*

And in *Part Two: in*

*Asha & the Checkmate Solution,*

*A Question Of Reward & The Path,*

*The Puzzle of Creation,* and

*A Question of Immanence.*

<sup>11</sup> See *Part One: Good & Evil*.

<sup>12</sup> SBE 4, pp. 181 - 184.

<sup>13</sup> Detailed in *Part One: The Search For Truth*.

<sup>14</sup> This lovely verse is translated and discussed in *Part Six: Yasna 43:12*, a chapter which also illustrates how even the most excellent linguists have read into their translations/interpretations of this Gatha verse, ideas from much later religious paradigms which are inconsistent with (and alien to) Zarathushtra's thought (and even the thought in later Avestan texts).

<sup>15</sup> Detailed in *Part One: The Search For Truth;* and *The Freedom To Choose*.

<sup>16</sup> In Geldner 1P p. 239 (for Yy72.11), and 2P p. 31 (for *Visperad* 24.3); and 3P p. 139 (in the concluding paragraph of the *Vendidad*).

<sup>17</sup> Holmes (1881), *The Common Law*, (Little, Brown & Co., from its forty-ninth reprinting), page 5.

<sup>18</sup> *Aerpatastan & Nirangistan* translated by S. J. Bulsara, published by the Bombay Parsi Panchayat in 1915, pp. 17 - 23.

<sup>19</sup> SBE Vol. 4, pp. 185 - 189.

<sup>20</sup> From the Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyō); discussed in *Part One: The Manthra of Choices Ahuna Vairya (Yatha Ahu Vairyō)*.