

## WHAT DOES *KHVAETVADATHA* MEAN?

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The word *khvaetvadatha* occurs only six times in the entire Avestan text:

- (1) Yasna 12.9. It is within a well-known phrase of the Koshti prayers. It says *âstuyê daênâm vanguhîm mâzdayasnîm fraspâyaokhedhrâm nidhâsnaethishem khvaetvadathâm ashaonîm* .... The phrase praises the Mazdayasni Good Religion because it is, verbatim, “throwing-off-yoke, putting-down-weapon, *khvaetvadatha*, and righteous.”
- (2) Vispered 3.1-4. After calling his seven officiating companion priests—*hâvanân* (pounder) *âthrevakhsh* (fire-promoter), *fraberetar* (procurer), *âsnatar* (washer), *raethwishkara* (mixer) *âberet* (watercarrier), and *sraoshavarez* (discipline-worker)—to their duty, the *zaotar* (invoker) calls other representatives of the congregation and wishes them to be prepared for the congregational ceremony. They are an *athravan* (professional priest), a warrior, a prosperous settler, a house chief, a settlement chief, a district chief, and a country chief, and then (verbatim) “I want a good-thinking, good-speaking, good-working young man to stand by; I want a word-speaking (speaker), *khvaetvadatha*, country-traveling young man to stand by; [and] I want a genius itinerant to stand by.” He then continues: “I want the mistress of the house to stand by; I want a woman good in thoughts, good in words, good in deeds, well-educated, authority on religious affairs, progressively serene like the women who belong to you, Wise God, and righteous to stand by; [and] I want a man righteous, good in thoughts, good in words, good in deeds, knowing well the religion he has chosen, and not a blind follower to stand by.” He concludes his call: “It is these people who, with their actions, promote the world though righteousness.” The congregational ceremony begins with the invoker reciting the Gathas and the people join the prayer.
- (3) Aiwisruthrem Gâh 7-9 repeats the above list from *athravan* onwards by venerating the same personalities instead of calling them to stand by.
- (4) Yasht 24.16-17 has the above paraphrased from the *havanan* to ‘the wandering priest.’
- (5) And the sixth reference is Vendidad 8.12-13: “O Creator of the Material, O Righteous, with which urine should the corpse-bearers wash their hair and body—the urine of a sheep, bull, man or woman?” Ahura Mazda replied, “The urine of sheep or bull, and not of a man or woman, [even/unless(?)] he is *khvaetvadatha* (masculine) and she is *khvaetvadathi* (feminine).”

The word *khvaetvadatha* has been derived in two ways:

- (1) By Western scholars from *khvaetu-*, meaning ‘family, next-of-kin’ and *vadatha-*, meaning ‘marriage’. It should have been *khvaetuvadatha*. It means ‘next-of-kin marriage, consanguineous marriage’. *Khvaetvadatha* should, therefore, be taken as its contracted form. All these Western scholars, and now a few Zoroastrians, take it to mean ‘a marriage within a family’, amounting to a matrimony between father and daughter, mother and son, brother and sister, and between two cousins. They quote a few historical instances in which members of royal families are shown as practicing the custom. It may be mentioned that the word *vadatha* also does not occur in any Avestan text and does not

have its Sanskrit form in the vast Sanskrit literature. It has been artificially ‘construed’ by a Western scholar from the last letter *u* or *v* of *khvaetu* plus *v* of the supposed *vadatha*. The basis for the derivation has been the reported meaning it has taken in Pahlavi *khvedodah/khvetokdas*. It may be noted that if we grammatically combine *khvaetu* and the so-said *vadatha*, it should be either *khvaetu-vadatha* or *khvaetush-vadatha*. And, if we take it to be combination of *khvaetva* and *vadatha*, then it should be *khvaetva-vadatha*. We have ‘*khvaetvadatha*’ instead. Keeping this very point in mind, one simply cannot easily accept the Western interpretation.<sup>1</sup>

- (2) By Zoroastrian scholars from *khvaetu-* meaning ‘relative, relationship’ and *datha-* meaning ‘giving’. It means ‘giving relationship, family connection’ and also ‘self-devoted’. (Ervad K.E. Kanga). For these scholars, it is *khvaetva-datha*, and not *khvaetva-vadhatha*. The grammatical construction by Zoroastrian scholars is easier and clearer.

Since all scholars agree that the first part of the compound is *khvaetu* or *khvaetva*, let us look at it in its contexts:

*Khvaetu/khvaetva-* is derived by all scholars from *khva-* (Sanskrit *sva-*) meaning ‘own, self’. The Sanskrit equivalent is *svetu* and it means ‘self-reliant, self-supporting, independent’. Dr. Irach J.S. Taraporewala finds *svatava*, meaning ‘self-powered’ as the Sanskrit form of ‘khaetva’ and presents his theory that the ‘Self-reliant’ were the “the first or highest grade of the Disciples of Zarathushtra.” (The Divine Songs of Zarathushtra, pg. 252). The Haptanghaiti has *khvaetât* meaning ‘family tie’ (Y 39.5) and Sanskrit has *svatâ* meaning ‘ownership’.

*Khvaetu* occurs, with two exceptions, in the Gathic texts only. It is not a later Avestan term. It is mentioned eight times in the Gathas: Song 5.1 (Yasna 32.1), 6.3–4 (33.3–4), 8.4 (43.4), 11.1 (46.1), 11.5 (46.5), 14.7 (49.7), and 17.4 (53.4). Twice in the Haptanghaiti: Song 6.5 (Y 39.5) and 7.4 (40.4). Twice outside the Gathic texts as *hvaetu-*: Yasna 20.1 and Vishtâsp Yasht 44.

Zarathushtra divides human society on geographical basis. They are *demâna*, meaning ‘house’, *vis* meaning ‘settlement’, *shoithra* meaning ‘district’, *dakhyu* meaning ‘land’, and *gâo* or *bûmi* meaning the earth. House is inhabited by *khvaetu* to form the first and smallest ‘independent, self-supporting’ human unit, the FAMILY. *Verezena* are those who are ‘enclosed’ within larger settlements of *vis*, *shoithra*, and *dakhyu*. *Airyaman*, literally ‘close companionship’ makes up the world fellowship within any of the above-mentioned geographical units. *Geush vâstra* (‘world settler’) or *vâstrya-fshuyant* (‘prospering-settler’) also denotes the useful inhabitants on the earth at large.

The geographical classification is of great significance. It is a unique way of eliminating professional and racial superiority and acknowledging equality between all humans. It is the Zarathushtrian way of equality of those who make this good earth of our prosperous and worth living. It is this very geographical division, which was destroyed when the priests and princes, who penetrated the Fellowship, gained control. They re-introduced their age-old Indo-Iranian

<sup>1</sup> The Avestan *v* was pronounced like English *w*, hence the *u* becoming “*v*”. In the Avestan script, it is written as: 𐬕𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬕𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬰𐬭𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀 ‘Khvaetuuadatha’ or 𐬕𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬕𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬯𐬀𐬎𐬀𐬎𐬀 ‘Khvaetuu-datha’. – CG

custom of professional classification and its resulting caste system in later days. The price the Zarathushtrian Fellowship paid was the loss of freedom and equality by both men and women. The priests became the ‘spiritual’ seniors and the princes the ‘material’ superiors—both to feed free on the products produced by the third and fourth in rank, the prospering settlers (vâstrya-fshuyants) and the roving artisans (huiti)—the very parasitic practice Zarathushtra had risen to eliminate by teaching them to settle.

Khvaetu literally meaning ‘self-supporting’, stands for ‘family’ in the Gathas. Most of the scholars agree on this point. The reason is that a person, by him/herself, is not self-supporting. It is the family, which is the first and foremost unit of society that supports itself. It consisted in an ancient Iranian family—and still consists in rural Iran—of parents, children and their wives, and grandchildren. They are blood related next-of-kin. Should we take that *khvaetvadatha*, a term absent in the Gathas and the Haptanghaiti, is made of the Gathic *khvaetu* and the artificially improvised *vadhatha*, it would mean marriage within a family, between blood related next-of-kin members. Then the Western scholars and those Zoroastrians who follow them are right in rendering it as ‘consanguineous marriage’, and that ‘in the medieval [Sassanian and post-Sassanian] period it became the technical term for incestuous matrimony’.<sup>2</sup>

The only difficulty lies that it does not fit into any of the above five Avestan references. It stands clearly out of context. Even Prof. Mary Boyce, who supplies ample evidence concerning incestuous marriages among Zoroastrian rulers and priests, doubts its inclusion in the Koshti prayers (Yasna 12.9) (A History of Zoroastrianism, Vol. I, Leiden, 1975, page 254, note 24).

The reason I have not tried to translate it and have left it as *khvaetvadatha* in my above translation of the pieces in which the word occurs, has been to leave it for the reader to see cited texts and decide for him or herself, whether it fits context or not.

It may be emphatically pointed out here that the Koshti prayers are not only daily prayers but are to be done every time of the day one stands to pray. Were *khvaetvadatha* to mean ‘next-of-kind marriage’, it would have become the order of the day and every person would have carried it out. It should have become the most popular way of marriage, so much so that it would have been on every lip—the Zoroastrians taking pride and their antagonists condemning them for their “incestuous” sin/crime. History shows that it has not been so, and that is one of the main reasons to look for an alternative meaning.

The other alternative is to take *khvaetva* as ‘independent’ or ‘independence’, the way it has been used in Sanskrit and add *datha* meaning ‘giving’. The Pahlavi transliteration of the word in its archaic form is *khvetuk-das* and that shows that whatever the notion the Zoroastrians of the medieval period held about the term, they thought the Avestan compound to be *khvaetu-datha* and not *khvaetva-vadhatha*. It should, therefore, be rendered as ‘independence-giving, rendering one self-supporting, helping one to become self-reliant’. Let us now replace *khvaetvadatha* with ‘giving-self-reliance’ and read the entire phrase of the Koshti prayer:

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<sup>2</sup> Dr. Jamsheed K. Choksy in ‘Purity and Pollution in Zoroastrianism, Triumph over Evil’, University of Texas Press, Austin, 1989, 89 & 140.

“... throwing-off-yoke, putting-down-weapon, **self-reliance-giving**, and righteous.” The phrase in Vispered 3.3 should read: “I want a good-thinking, good-speaking, good-working youth to stand by; I want a word-speaking, **self-reliance-giving**, country-traveling youth to stand by; [and] I want a genius itinerant”. The same applies to Aiwisruthrem Gah and Yasht 24.17. The reading runs much smoother and has a fitting meaning.

The context of the Vispered, Aiwisruthrem Gah, and the Visthasp Yasht 24 shows that a *khvaetvadatha* youth was a special active member of the society. He was eloquent in speech and traveled much. He appears to be a ‘preacher’ more than anyone else mentioned in the list. He then is the person who taught others to ‘choose’ the Good Religion because it is this religion, which helps one to “throw off the enslaving yoke, keep down war weapons, become **self-reliant** and free from dependence, and be a righteous person.” My translation runs: “I appreciate the Good Religion of worshiping the Wise One, which overthrows yokes yet sheaths swords, teaches **self-reliance** and is righteous.”<sup>3</sup>

The passage in the Vendidad would then show that there were men and women who had learned self-reliance and that they were held high for purification rights. Otherwise, the Vendidad passage should be translated to mean that the poor corpse bears (*khandhias* in Parsi Gujarati) had to be purified by the urine of their next-of-kin spouses!

Let us examine the question from another angle. If the next-of-kin marriage was a meritorious deed, then Zarathushtra and his companions should have set the best example. But Avesta and Pahlavi writings do not show any consanguineous marriages among them. Parents of Zarathushtra belonged to two different far-flung families. Zarathushtra had no blood relation with his wife Hvovi. Their daughter Pouruchista married a not-related Jamaspa. Vishtaspa married Hutaosa who had ‘many brothers’ and belonged to Naotari clan. In the entire Farvardin Yasht of some 300 foremost ‘Zoroastrians-by-Choice’, none are shown as married within their families. There is not a single trace of within family or within community marriage in the Avesta. Above all, there is no commandment in the Gathas and/or other any Avestan writing that encourages within family or within community marriages and/or prohibiting outside family or community marriages. *Khvaetvadatha* does NOT play any part in marriage. That is the reason it is absent in the marriage passages in the Avesta.

The Avestan/Sanskrit root for marriage is *vaz-/vah-* or *vad-/vadh-*. The word means to ‘conduct, carry (in a carriage)’ because the bride was ‘conveyed’ from her parental house to a new house, usually the house of parents-in-law. The Hindu custom of making sure that there is no consanguineous link between the bride and bridegroom stems from this practice. The practice of the bride leaving her parental house for the house of her spouse is still widespread throughout the vast Indo-Iranian territory among Hindus and Muslims of a common cultural heritage. It provides a sad scene to see her leave her birth and youth place and next-of-kin parents, brothers and sisters—and in case of Hindus, every blood related person—or a new strange home.

The Gatha has both *vaz-* and *vad-*. It occurs in the famous marriage sermon of Zarathushtra at the wedding of his daughter Pouruchista., where he says:

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<sup>3</sup> Fravarane, I Choose for Myself The Zoroastrian Religion, California Zoroastrian Center, Westminster, 1988.

“These words I speak to the charming brides, and to you, bridegrooms ...”

The word is *vazyamnâbyo* qualifying *kainibyō*. It has been translated by all as ‘marrying maidens, charming brides, nubile maidens’ or equivalent. For the bridegroom the word comes from the root *vad*—*vademno*. (Song 17.5 = 53.5).

Yasht 17.59 has *vad*-. The third time Ashi Vanguhi (Post-Gathic Female Yazata of Good Reward) greatly cries: “The worst deed that tyrant men do is to keep maidens for long without marrying (*uzvadayeinti*) them and making them pregnant.”

The Vendidad has two instances, both from *vad*-. “Should a person of the same faith, brother or friend, approach another, seeking goods, a young woman, or knowledge ... he who has come for a young woman, should be wed (*vadhayaeti*) to her. ...” (4.44) “...What is the punishment for the person who hits an otter ... so hard that life departs its body? ... He must righteously and piously conduct in marriage (*vadhayaeti*), for righteous men, virgin girls ... his sisters or daughters of over 15 years of age who have earrings in ear.” (14.1, 14.15)

All the above-mentioned instances carry the inherent thought of the wife being married to a person outside the girl’s family and that she was conveyed (*vaz*- or *vad*- to conduct, convey) out of her parental house. Had there been a family and relative affair, the statements would have been different. They would have reflected a happening within the house, and no one to be conveyed from one house to another. Leave alone next-of-kin wedlock within the family, arranged marriages, especially between near relatives—cousins or even further—are as old as the Indo-Iranian days and well beyond. But marriage within family is not Indo-Iranian for sure. The question of next-of-kin marriage is absent in the Avesta—the Gathas or the earlier and later parts.

As far as the Pahlavi term of *khvedodah* is concerned, I would expect those who are better scholars—or claim to be better scholars—in the Pahlavi lore than I am, to come forward and solve the problem. To me the Gathas and those parts of the Avesta, which follow the Gathic teachings, are efficient enough to solve each and every problem I face.

While the Western scholars have provided us with instances of royal incestuous marriages from Greek and Christian sources, they have not ventured into the Islamic world to pull out any evidence. If at all, this was a widely practiced custom among Zoroastrians, Arab and Iranian Muslims writers, especially the Iranians who were converts from Zoroastrianism to Islam, would not have spared their former co-religionists. They would have written volumes on the subject with usual exaggeration. They have not, simply because it was not a practice.

If this was the custom, then one should ask why Yadi Rana of the famous Qisseh-ye Sanjan did not make this a condition for granting the Zoroastrians the refuge they were requesting? Why did he insist on a trifle matter instead—the marriage ceremony be performed in the evening and not earlier? Were not the Zoroastrians of the Sassanian period known for the reported consanguineous marriage by their next-door neighbors, the Hindus? Or was the practice so confined to a small high circle of Sassanian aristocrats that it was not known by

outsiders? Hindus are very sensitive about marriage between consanguineous relatives. Yadi Rana could not be an exception.

This, however, does not mean that marriages among relatives did not take place. It did, and still does, among Iranians. Also, marriage between two Zoroastrians was definitely preferred to the one marrying outside the religious circle. These were and are natural tendencies and a prevailing custom among many peoples, no matter to what religion they belong. At the same time, there is no evidence at all that one should not marry a non-Zoroastrian, especially one who would join his or spouse to choose the Good Religion. Mixed marriages among Sassanian princes and princesses, as reported by historians, were quite common. Right now many mixed marriages, handled with wisdom, among Zoroastrians have won non-Zoroastrian spouses to this side, or at least have the children be raised as Zoroastrians. In certain religions, especially the very missionary ones, mixed marriages are a good means of ‘conversion’.

To conclude, *khvaetvadatha* in the Avestan context and concept cannot mean ‘consanguineous marriage’. It cannot mean ‘marriage within the religious community’ either because *khvaetu* is not community but is well defined to mean only ‘family’. It is far-fetched to have it as *khvaetu-vadatha*. The only meaning that fits the contexts is ‘self-reliance-giving’, or any synonymous term. It fits well the Koshti prayers and it fits well the people who were called upon to take an active part in the congregational ceremony. Although used only once in a late Gathic supplementary text (Yasna 12.9) and again four times in the later Avesta, it carries a noble meaning of liberty and confidence, a noble meaning that has given it a placid place in the daily Koshti prayers—to remind one of *haithyâ vareshtâm hyat vasnâ ferashotemem* piece from the Gathas in which one declares: “I am, Wise One, Your praiser and shall continue to regard myself so, as long as I have the strength and the will through righteousness. This shall promote the laws of life through good mind, for 'true actions make life most renovated as god wishes.” It is a daily reminder to continue to work for maintaining the life on earth ever fresh, ever new, ever good, ever subtle, ever sublime. It is this spirit which promotes one to become *khvaetvadatha*, a promoter of self-reliance.

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