‘LIKE A SLAVE BEFORE HIS MASTER’ A PERSIAN GESTURE OF DEFERENCE IN SASANIAN JEWISH AND CHRISTIAN SOURCES

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Abstract
One of the means of expressing deference to a superior in the Parthian and Sasanian cultures was by crossing the arms over the chest and placing the hands under the shoulders. Known in Middle-Persian as *dastkash*, this gesture is well attested in visual art from the Iranian sphere, in Zoroastrian sources, and is recorded in post-Sasanian Persian and Arabic sources which reliably reflect the Sasanian practice.

This paper argues for the adoption of this gesture by Sasanian Jews and Christians. In addition to its use as an expression of deference towards mortals, Jews and Christians used it in prayer to God. The evidence is drawn from contemporary sources composed in the Sasanian Empire: the Babylonian Talmud, on the one hand, and eastern Syriac works on the other.

INTRODUCTION
In many religious traditions, prayer is preceded by various preparatory steps, and accompanied by certain bodily gestures. In this paper I wish to consider a prayer gesture that I believe was common to a number of religious communities of the Sasanian Empire. As such it can serve as a reflection of the common and shared religious and cultural language of the region, and perhaps reveal a degree of interreligious exchange. I shall start by presenting a Talmudic source that advocates a number of preparatory steps to be undertaken before prayer: tying the belt; putting on shoes; untying an upper garment, and a certain hand gesture – the latter being my main focus. These actions are unattested in the Palestinian Jewish tradition within the context of prayer but seem to have close parallels in the Zoroastrian tradition.

I. THE TALMUDIC EVIDENCE

In the Mishna, tractate Shabbat, 1:2 a series of activities is listed that should not be commenced close to the time when the Afternoon prayer may be said, lest one miss the designated prayer time. They include going to the barber, visiting the bathhouse, and commencing a banquet. If, however, as this law states, these activities have already begun, one need not stop them in order to pray. The Babylonian Talmud, on tractate Shabbat, folios 9b-10a now discusses how one defines the point at which a banquet has begun.

The textual witnesses for the Talmudic source divide neatly into two branches. One branch is reflected by two genizah fragments and the other by the manuscripts and printed editions of the Talmud. A third but less complete genizah fragment, Oxford Bodl. c. 17 (2661), contains elements from both branches. The two branches are as follows2:

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1 Some of the ideas in this paper were first presented before the Departmental Seminar of the Talmud Department, at Bar-Ilan University on November 15th, 2004 in a Hebrew lecture entitled ‘‘The Stable-master of Rabbi was richer than King Shābūr’’ – On Persian Literary Influences in the Babylonian Aggada’. I wish to thank my friend, Dr. Aharon Amit for extending to me an invitation to speak on that occasion.

2 This fragment reads as follows: ‘‘מתכונת בר רב ששת טריחותא למיסר המייניה ועוד ניקו הם הכי וליצלי משום נא’ הכון違反ת אלהיך ישר חא מצייזtą違反ת אלהיך ישראל רבא שארי גלימיה ופכר ידיה ומצלי אמ’ כעבדא קמי מריה כי ליכא ריתרבה בר רב הונא ראמי פזמקיה ומצלי אמ’ הכון違反ת נפשיה ומצלי א’ משום הכון違反ת אלהיך ישראל.’
When is the commencement of eating? Rav said: from when one washes the hands; and R. Hanina said: from when one unites the belt. And the two traditions are not in disagreement: One refers to us [i.e. Babylonia] and the other to them [i.e. Palestine]. Ze’iri said: [regarding] the Babylonian sages, for the one who rules that the Evening prayer is optional – once one has untied his belt, we do not trouble him, but behold the Afternoon prayer is obligatory and we have taught [in the Mishna] ‘if one started [the meal] one need not stop’ but R. Hanina ruled [the meals begins] when one unites the belt… Rav Sheshet challenged this: Does the belt determine [the law]? And besides, let him indeed stand up in this manner and pray! [However, this is not so] because it is said [in Scripture: Amos 4, 12]: ‘Prepare before your God, oh Israel!’ Rava bar Rav Huna fastened his belt and prayed. He said: It is on account of what is said [in Scripture]: ‘prepare before your God, Oh Israel!’ Rava would cast off his cloak and bind his hands together and pray, saying: ‘as a slave before his master’. Rav Ashi said: I saw Rav Kahana, when there is [Divine] anger in the world, bind his hands together and pray; and when there is not [Divine] anger he would

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5 This version is also reflected in MS Munich 95; and the printed edition of the Talmud.

6 The usage of the verbal root קָבָשׁ for a belt is hitherto unattested in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic. The accepted definition is, qua Sokoloff, ‘to put on shoes or sandals’. See Sokoloff, DJBA, 793. But see further below.


8 See further below.

9 See further below.
| dress himself up and pray on account of what is said [in Scripture] ‘prepare before your God, Oh Israel!’ | pray saying, ‘as a slave [before] his master’; when there is peace, dress and cover and enfold himself and pray, saying: ‘prepare before your God, Oh Israel!’ |

The Babylonian Talmud asks when the meal begins. Two answers are offered. Rav – a third century Babylonian rabbi states that it is from when one washes the hands; R. Hanina, an early Palestinian rabbi says it is from when one unties the belt. From the ensuing discussion it becomes evident that untying the belt is, in fact, the Babylonian custom. Rav Sheshet would be willing to allow prayer without tying the belt but the Talmud responds to his view that tying the belt before prayer is mandated by the scriptural verse from Amos 4, 12: ‘Prepare before your God, Oh Israel!’ This same verse supports putting on shoes before prayer according to the manuscripts branch. The other branch further supports tying the belt.10 This is now challenged by an alternative mode of behavior in the name of Rava. He would *loosen* his garment, (i.e. untie it), and place his hands in the manner of a slave standing before his master. This way of acting is contrary to the one portrayed earlier that tightened the garment with the belt. This contradiction, however, is resolved by the testimony of Rav Ashi, who describes two distinct ways of acting, each one in accordance with the differing circumstances. In times of Divine disfavor one prays as a slave; loosening the upper-garment,11 and with the distinctive hand gesture. At other times one covers oneself thoroughly – particularly if we follow the manuscripts version.12

This source brings together what appears to be two separate collections of traditions since the rabbis cited belong to two separate periods. Ze‘iri, Rav Sheshet and Rava bar Rav Huna belong to the late third century CE, whereas Rava, Rav Ashi and Rav Kahana, belong to the late fourth century CE. The divergence in opinion is displayed by the earlier generation of rabbis; the resolution by the later generation. I shall now take a closer look at each of the four steps described here, the belt, the shoes, the garment, and the hand gesture.

**BELT, SHOES, GARMENT, HANDS**

**Belt:** The rule concerning the belt as a sign for the commencement of the meal is attributed to a Palestinian rabbi, R. Hanina but is regarded as the ‘Babylonian’ custom. This might seem at first somewhat odd. However, a comparison with the deliberations on this topic in the Palestinian Talmud which addresses the same passage in the Mishna reveals clearly what has transpired. The previous clause in the Mishna concerns the bathhouse, and the Palestinian Talmud asks for the signs for the commencement of the bathhouse activity. Two answers are given: R. Hanina says it is when one unties the belt; and Rav, when one removes the shoes. For the sign of the commencement of the meal only one

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7 It should be נפשיה מ UITableViewDataSource. The phrase appears to be taken from *b. Berakhot*, 30b. I have derived the sense of ‘dress up’ from the context of *b. Berakhot*, 30b.

10 One might hypothesize that this version is a corruption of a version that had ממסניה in place of ממיניה. This would represent a ‘translation’ of ממסניה, with the appropriate verb for tying a shoe, followed by a corruption of ממיניה to ממיניה. The current version is also attested in MS Oxford Bodl. d. 45, a genizah fragment, but Oxford Bodl. c. 17, otherwise close to this branch, has here: ממיניה.

11 I read here the verb as *שארי* – to untie/loosen, and not *שדי*, that might be translated here as ‘to cast off’. The latter would seem to present some difficulties. Cf. Sokoloff, *DBA*, 908, who renders this source ‘put on the cloak’, clearly reads it as *שידי* but also as Rava ‘used to remove his cloak’ (ib., 1110). Cf. *b. Menahot*, 41a. But cf. *b. Menahot* 43a: *ולא שרי ליה לגלימיה כולי* יומא. As Naphthali Wieder observes, this reading with a *resh* is attested in the genizah fragment Oxford Bodl. C. 17 (2661). The ambiguity is explicit in the talmud commentary of R. Perakiah ben Nisim who offers both possibilities. He writes:邕י שארי ילップו קורשי בכלא הם זהו כולי אינצלו על עינו תוארין שרי רמי מ밀א מיכיון מילא [translation: Rava sharei his cloak – would untie the knots of the cover of his coat in order not to be encumbered; and there are (versions) that have *shadei* – meaning he cast off his coat from himself].

12 For a theory about the symbolism of covering up for prayer and other religious activities in the rabbinic tradition, see Admiel Kosman and Nissan Rubin, ‘The Clothing of the Primordial Adam as a Symbol of Apocalyptic Time in the Midrashic Sources’, *Harvard Theological Review*, 90/2 (1997), 155-174, 165-169. An expression of the importance of wearing a shirt when praying can be found in the Babylonian story in *b. Nedarim*, 49b.
sign is provided – washing hands. Now the Babylonian Talmud completely skips the question of the bathhouse – the underlying reason being perhaps the fact that Roman baths were not available in Babylonia. It then carries over the belt and hand washing to the next item on the Mishna’s list - the commencement of the meal, and whilst discussing the necessary dress code for prayer, includes shoes.

Wearing a belt is known to have had a particular significance in Persian society. The Zoroastrians also attributed a deep religious meaning to the activity of wearing the kustīg. Zoroastrian ritual mandates a rite of untying and retying the kustīg at set points in the day. These include upon rising in the morning; before reciting prayers; and before meals. It is noteworthy, then, that Babylonian Jewish culture (but not Palestinian!) also formulated a benediction for putting on the belt in the morning (and for putting on shoes); it is concerned with the belt in the context of prayer; and it discusses the belt as a sign for the commencement of the meal. In the Babylonian Jewish tradition the belt appears to occupy a middle position between the ritual and the cultural. Indeed, the rationale for tying the belt, as provided in the above source is treated as more than a cultural practice. It is given Divine mandate viewed as fulfilling a scriptural verse.

Shoes: The precedent of putting on footwear before prayer is interesting for two reasons. Praying barefoot appears to have been the Jewish practice in Palestine (and pre-Islamic Arabia). In Babylonia, however, all indications point to the Jews praying with their shoes on. This seems to tally broadly with the other Babylonian Jewish traditions which do not concern prayer but encourage wearing shoes. Such an attitude towards shoes corresponds with Zoroastrian approaches to wearing shoes, particularly in a ritual context. Zoroastrian priests also officiate shod.

Garment: According to the version that reads that he would ‘untie’ his garment before praying, the statement would seem to indicate loosening the belt. We seem to have an expression of self-abasement in the context of prayer. Zoroastrian priests also officiate shod.22

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13 Y. Shabbat, 1, 3c.
14 Cf. b. Yevamot 63b, Pseudo-Stylites, vol. LXXV.
16 See Jivanji J. Modi, The Religious Ceremonies and Customs of the Parsees (Bombay, 1937?), 177.
22 See, for instance, Shāyest ne-Shāyest, 10:12, (Tavadia, edition, p. 131). The precise details of the Zoroastrian prohibition of walking with one shoe (ēv-mōg-dvārīnīth) remain unclear.
Zoroastrian sin of wišād-dvārišnīh – going about open/untied\(^{23}\) broadly interpreted as being without the kustīg. Earlier, Rav Sheshet would concede praying in this condition if necessary. This concession also exists in the later Zoroastrian literature –the Pursišnīhā.\(^{24}\)

**Hands:** The two versions I have provided above appear to diverge in their depiction of the hand gesture. The genizah fragments give הושב ידיו / 'bound his hands together' whereas MS Vatican 127 has פכר ידיה / 'concealed his hands'. We shall first discuss the version in the genizah fragments and then turn to the version in MS Vatican 127.

Within the ancient Jewish prayer tradition this hand gesture is unique to the Babylonian branch. One of the more common representations of Jews praying, generally of Palestinian provenance, portrays them with outstretched hands.\(^{25}\) The expression used here is הושב ידיו. The root פכר is attested in the Aramaic dialects, Mandean,\(^{26}\) Syriac,\(^{27}\) and in Jewish Babylonian Aramaic with the meaning to bind, tie, and so on.\(^{28}\) Yet there has not been a satisfactory explanation of the precise activity depicted here by this expression.

The traditional medieval Talmud commentators explained the meaning of the expression in accord with the reality and customs in which they lived.\(^ {29}\) But their diverse explanations cannot be accepted as a reliable reflection of the original sense of this gesture. In modern scholarship on this gesture there has unfortunately been no true effort to advance beyond these medieval interpretations.\(^{30}\)

Although פכר is the predominant version, attested in many Talmud witnesses besides these genizah fragments, the alternative version provided in MS Vatican 127 is also attested in independent textual witnesses of the Talmud. The meaning of that expression is concealing the hands. This version is unlikely to be a mere scribal error since it actually appears twice in each the witnesses where it is found.\(^ {31}\) Naphthali Wieder summed up the issue as follows:

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\(^{23}\) Later Zoroastrian commentators explained that the kustīg reflects the sense of servitude to God, with the wordplay, band-bandagīth (belt-servitude), see Shaked, ‘No talking during a meal’, Stausberg, 'The Significance of the kust'. This however is probably a later development, perhaps responding to Muslim rhetoric of servitude to God. The image presented here distinguishes between the tied garment of the slave and the untied one of the slave.


\(^{25}\) See Gedalyahu Alon, ‘Perisat ezba’ot shel kohanim bi-nesi’at yadayim’, in Studies in Jewish History in the Times of the Second Temple, the Mishna and the Talmud, 1 (Tel-Aviv, 1957), 184, 184, (in Hebrew); Ehrlich, Nonverbal Language, 115-119. The custom of outstretched hands appears to have experienced a decline in the early centuries of the Common Era. See Ehrlich, ib.


\(^{29}\) The 11th century French commentator, Rashi, explains: הרבך ידיו ניתבניארי. This interpretation has entered modern Hebrew. Of the medieval oriental authors, the following selection should demonstrate the diversity of interpretation that has been applied to this expression. Of the Spanish and North-African medieval commentators, R Zachariah Aghamati, (MS London, British Library, 11361OR has this explanation: שאר ידהו חזר אל פרל משלך אrances דעלכם שלח ארא ממע毒品 פכר ידו. Maimonides (Mishneh Torah, Ahavah, Tefillah 5, 4), מוכת המק创新创业 עלפתחי הביא את ידיה ממע׳ צאן אלовое ערכים פכר ידו. The genizah fragments give הושב ידיו / ‘bound his hands together’ whereas MS Vatican 127 has פכר ידיה / ‘concealed his hands’. We shall first discuss the version in the genizah fragments and then turn to the version in MS Vatican 127.


\(^{31}\) Apart from MS Vatican 127, it also appears in the editio princeps, as well as in Rashi’s commentary in the editio princeps.
It would seem that the origins of this version is not in a scribal error through metathesis, but rather in the correction by a scribe: Through the covering up of the hands the corrector understood the custom of a ‘slave before his master’ for this was the way of the Arabs to cover their hands in the presence of an important person (see Lane, I, p. 53). Covering the hands as an expression of respect is also attested with the Romans and Christians …32

Wieder is absolutely correct in saying that this was a conscious scribal correction and not an error. Interestingly, there is yet another version. Rabbenu Ḥananel and apparently Isaac Alfasi, both 11th century North-African commentators, have here 'פכר ידיה' (cast off the cloak and cover the hands'). Since one of the basic meanings of the Arabic root קפּר is 'to cover', we may assume that the version that Rabbenu Ḥananel had before him was also written כפר. Thus he provides us with a translation gloss that replaced the version that had appeared in the Talmud text that lay before him. The original version in the Talmud was however, פכר, and this is confirmed by the Christian evidence that we shall now turn to examine.

II THE SYRIAC EVIDENCE

An expression akin to פכר ידיה is also attested in eastern Syriac works in the context of prayer. We find either the hands bound; or the hands bound explicitly over the breast. I shall bring three examples. In the first, Mar Yoḥanan bar Melki, an ascetic is visited by his mother. The source describes how he receives her with the aim of asking of her a special favour.

And when St. Yohanan saw his mother who had come to him he descended from that shelter where he had been dwelling. And he folded his hands and prostrated himself before her and said to her: I ask of you…33

In the second example Mar Augin seeks to bring back to life a young boy who has died:

The saint then picked the lad up in his arms and set him above the step of the κόγχη with his arms crossed above his chest. And the saint bent down (on his knees) in prayer and said thus: Oh! Lord Jesus Christ, good healer …35

In the third case, from a work entitled Mar Bassus and Shushan his sister, Persian martyrs, the two young potential martyrs meet a holy ascetic man and greet him. This scene is described as follows:

Les innocents agneaux joignirent les mains et se prosternant devant lui.36

34 The part of the church in which the holy service is performed and where the altar stands.
The gesture depicted in these sources also appears in the Christian liturgical context for medieval Nestorian and Monophysite practice. One might be tempted to apply a distinctive ‘Christian’ interpretation to this gesture when it appears in Syriac sources, assuming that it involves crossing the hands or in one way or another making the sign of the cross with the hands. This approach should be resisted, at least for some of the attestations, since it occurs for interaction between subordinates and superiors and not just to God. I suspect a Christian interpretation was applied to a pre-existing practice.

In view of the Jewish usage with the same language, and as we shall see, also the Persian usage, it seems not to be uniquely Christian.

### III IRANIAN LITERARY AND VISUAL ICONOGRAPHY

The Talmud source provides us with an important clue as to how this gesture was perceived. It imitates the gesture of a slave standing before his master.39 There are many images from the Parthian and Sasanian era that depict subordinates before their superiors. The iconography is rather consistent in depicting them acting with a single distinctive gesture.40

This gesture is known as *dastkash* / *dast pad kash* in which the arms are folded across the breast and the hands concealed under the shoulders.41 It is later described in Persian literary sources such as the *Shahname*42 but also in Middle Persian compositions. We find in *Arda Wiraz Nāmag*, for instance, that the hero, Ardā Wiraz, himself, stands before the religious elders in this stance whilst making a special request.43

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39 On the metaphor of slavery as reflecting the believer’s relationship with God, focusing on the Roman Empire during the rabbinic era, see Catherine Hezser, *Jewish Slavery in Antiquity* (Oxford University Press, 2005), especially 322-379.


IV THE ARABIC LITERATURE

In Arabic literature that deals with Persia there is a peculiar term for depicting the gesture of a slave before his master or before the king, whilst conveying a sense of honour and humility. The verb used is كَفْرٌ بَيْن يَدِيه, which is within the expression كَفْرٌ بَيْن يَدِيه. This expression has a particular application towards Persians.44 One example should suffice. Ṭabarī,45 in his colourful depiction of the ominous meeting between Asfadh Jushnasp, the representative of the usurpers and the deposed king, held under guard, this expression serves to describe the correct manner in which Asfadh stands before the king before relating to him the decision of the deposer concerning his fate. This way of standing conveys the relation of subordination towards the king. He first prostrates himself before the king, and when the king bids him to rise, he rises before him.46 That scene involves a certain irony between the true situation of the imprisoned king and the performance of royal ritual.

Aramaic פכר and Arabic كَفْر would seem to be related in meaning, with the metathesis of ככ and פ/פ.

CONCLUSION

We began by exploring a series of prayer gestures within one Talmudic source of Babylonian provenance. All the gestures outlined there may be compared with practices important to the Zoroastrian tradition, and the hand gesture explored is also attested in the eastern Christian tradition.

In the Sasanian empire religions as different as Judaism, Christianity and Zoroastrianism shared certain modes of deeply religious behavior.47 People shared a fashion of deference. They prayed with their belts fastened, their shoes on, arms crossed, and they regarded such behaviour as divinely mandated. We might envision a process of influence, but for the contemporaries there was no such awareness. This was just the way things were done – like a slave before his master.


46 Returning to the פכר variant in some of the Talmud witnesses, one might hypothesize the following development. Original פכר became כפר as used in Arabic in the unique sense of dastkash. Later Talmud readers, unfamiliar with dastkash read כפר in the sense of the more common Arabic usage – to cover. It was also read to reflect the custom of the day. And this is how Rabbenu Hananel and the Isaac Alfasi read this and hence translated Arabic kaffara into the same word with its more common valence – to cover.

47 One final issue remains: the relationship between the Persian gesture and Islamic prayer gesture known as takfir which seems to be related to the Persian gesture. Here, I shall defer to the experts.