



BAR SOM

BAR SOM (Av. *barəsman*), sacred twigs that form an important part of the Zoroastrian liturgical apparatus. The word *barsom* is the Middle Persian form of the Avestan *barəsman*, which is derived from the root *barəz*, Sanskrit *bṛh* “to grow high.” The *barəsman* twigs were twigs of the *haoma* plant or the pomegranate used in certain ceremonies. They are first laid out and then tied up in bundles. The number varies according to the ceremony to be performed. Today brass or silver wires are used in place of twigs. These are about 9 inches long and one-eighth of an inch in diameter. Each such wire is called a *tāe*. The Avestan phrase *barəsman star* recalls the *barhiṣṣ stru* of the Vedas; probably these are historically related (see Mayrhofer, *Dictionary* II, pp.415-16). Some writers have identified the *barəsman* with the *kusha* grass, but this is not correct, because the *barəsman* is never used as a seat for the divine beings (cf. Modi, p. 265).

In Zoroastrianism as in Brahmanism the number of these twigs varies according to the ceremony. The *Šāyest-nē šāyest* (chap. 14.2) enjoins that neither more nor less than the requisite number should be used. The celebration of the Yasna requires 23 twigs of which 21 form a bundle. One twig is placed on the foot of the *māh-rūy*, i.e., the moon-faced or the crescent-like stand, which is otherwise known as the *barsomdān*. This twig is called *zorno tāe*, i.e., the twig of the saucer containing the *zōhr* or *zaoθra* water. The other, i.e., the twenty-third, twig is placed on the saucer containing the *jīvām*, i.e., the mixture of water and milk. The celebration of the Vendidad or Vidēvdāt ceremony requires 35 twigs of which 33 form a bundle and the other two are



used as above. The celebration of the Vispered requires 35 twigs, that of the Yazišn or Yasna of the Rapiθwin on Rōz Ordībehešt, Māh Fravardīn 15 twigs. The celebration of the *bāj* in honor of the departed souls uses 5 twigs. In the case of the ceremony of Nāvar, i.e., the initiation into priesthood, the recital of the *Mīnō Nāvarbāj* requires 7 twigs.

According to the *Nirangistan* (*Avesta*, tr. Darmesteter, III, p. 137) the minimum number to be used in the ritual is three, the minimum thickness of each twig is to be equal to that of a hair, the maximum length to be one *aēša* and the maximum breadth one *yava*. The *Vendidad* (19.19) also gives the length of one *aēša* and the breadth of one *yava*. Darmesteter takes *aēša* to be the length of a plowshare and the *yava* to be the breadth of a barley-corn (II, p. 265 n. 43). In the rituals the *barsom* twigs or brass or silver wires are placed on the above-mentioned two crescent-shaped metallic stands, known as *barsomdān*.

The second *hād* of the *Yasna* shows that the *barsom* was considered to be an essential requisite in the liturgical service of the *Yasna*. The *Vendidad* (14.8) speaks of it as one of the requisites of an *Āθravan*. The *barsom* is so sacred that the very tree whose twigs are used is an object of praise. All the religious rites of the inner liturgical service of the Zoroastrians are celebrated with the *barsom*.

In the longest grace before meals, wherein certain chapters of the *Yasna* are recited, the *barsom* is a requisite. But it seems that in ancient times the *barsom* was absolutely required even in the simple forms of grace recited before meals. The reciter held it in his hand during these recitals. We learn from Ferdowsī that the last Sasanian king, Yazdegerd, when he hid himself in the house of a miller during his flight, asked for the *barsom* to say his grace before the meals. This gave a hint to the enemy searching for Yazdegerd, and he was treacherously assassinated by his general Māhōy Sūrī (*Šāh-nāma*, Moscow, IX, p. 353).

The object of holding the *barsom* and repeating prayers is to praise the Creator for the support accorded by nature and for the gift of the produce of the earth, which supplies the means of existence to the human and the animal world. The object of selecting the *barsom* from the twigs of a tree is to take it as a representative of the whole vegetable kingdom, for which benedictions and thanks to the Creator are offered, and there is further proof to show that the performance of the *barsom* ritual is intended to express gratitude to the Creator for His boundless gifts. Thus the *Vendidad* (19.17-18) says, “Zaraθuštra



asked Ahura Mazdā: O Divine Creator! In what way may I praise Thee? Ahura Mazdā replied: O Spitama Zaraθuštra! Go near a tree grown out of the earth and repeat thus: Homage unto thee, O beautiful, flourishing, strong and Mazdā-created tree.” (In the next paragraph a reference to the method of cutting the *barsom* twig by a holy person is given.) This quotation shows that the *barsom* represents the vegetable creation of God and that the *barsom* ceremony is meant as a means of celebrating the praise of God for the vegetable kingdom. The ceremonial practice of keeping the *barsom* under water for a time (*Āb-Zōhr*), thus bending its strength through moisture, reminds us of rainfall, the growth of crops, watering of plants, gathering of produce, and fertility of the soil, as Darmesteter has clearly pointed out (I, p. lxxxv). Further, we read in history that during the Sasanian period people used to hold the *barsom* in the hand, prior to saying grace and taking meals, and on this occasion they used to render thanks for His blessings.

According to the *Mēnōg ī xrad* (chap. 57.28), the celebration of the ceremony which symbolizes the act of praising Ohrmazd for His creation destroys the power of the demons or the evil influence. According to the *Dēnkard* (book VIII, chap. 26.24; Madan, II, pp. 731-32) the celebration of the praise of Ohrmazd with this ceremonial on a day of battle helps the soldiers and is like throwing a well-aimed arrow.

According to the old method, a Yōšdāsr̥gar priest who had performed the *xūb* ceremony, performed the ritual of preparing the *barsom*. He had to draw water from a well in the fire temple and purify a water pot by means of it. With this pure water collected in a ceremoniously purified pot, he went before the tree whose twigs were to be used in the ritual and washed with his right hand the twig to be cut. Then holding the *barsomčīn* knife in the right hand and the pot of pure water in the left, he took the *bāj* with the *xšnūman* (propitiatory formula) for *urvara* “plants, trees”—*frasastayaēča urvarā vanhuyā Mazda-’ātayā ašaonyā*—“for the glorification of the tree, good, created by Mazdā and holy,” and he cut off the twig for the ritual with the recitation of an *Ašəm vohū*. With the word *ašəm* he cut off and rejected the partly dried tip of the end. With the word *vohū* he touched the stem, and with the word *vahištəm* he cut it off. At the end of the recital he paid his homage to the good vegetable creation of Ahura Mazdā thus: *nəmō urvairē vanjuhī Mazda-dāte ašaone* “homage unto thee, O good holy tree, created by Mazdā!” With the cutting of each twig the above ritual is repeated. He then goes to the *yazišngāh*.

Today, a Yōšdāsr̥gar priest with the *xūb* makes the brass or silver wires pure,



together with all the metallic utensils required for the Yazišn ceremony. He then holds the requisite number of wires, all but one, in his hand. Then, holding the remaining *tāe* in his hand, with the usual recital of three *Ašəm vohūsand* a *Fravarānē*, he takes the *bāj* with the *xšnūman* of *Šahrevar*, the *Amašaspad*, who presides over metals. Then, during the recital of the *Ašəm vohū*, touching both the ends of the bundle of wires in his left hand, with the *āb-zōhr* wire in his right hand, he finishes the *bāj*. While finishing the *bāj* he touches again both the ends of the bundle of *barsom* wires in his left hand with the *zōhr* wire in his right hand.

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Idem, *Zoroastrianism* I, p.167; II (see index).

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