

**The Continuity of Zoroastrian Beliefs in Iran
as Expressed in the *Shahnameh*,
Epic of the Kings**

And the Relation of Shahnameh to Other Traditions

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Introduction

Ferdowsy (ca. 940-1020 AD), one of the great poets of Iran, has produced a timeless body of epic poetry in Persian, the *Shahnamah* (Šāhnāmeḥ). It is often referred to as *the Epic of the Kings* or just *Book of Kings* in the English-speaking world.

The Shahnameh is vast. It took me a year to read. The focus of the present work is to show the strong links of the Shahnameh to pre-Islamic Iran and Zoroastrianism and, where relevant, describe the relation and connection of the Shahnameh to other traditions and literatures. The series is not intended to be a review of prior criticism on the subject.

The Shahnameh may be regarded as a historical expression of the national character of Iran over the course of its existence which span millennia, to the time of the fall of the last Iranian dynasty to Islam (ca. 650 AD). The earliest portions bespeak of a part of humanity that when man from prehistory vied to civilize the world around them. The process occurred at different times and different places for different parts of humanity, but the stream that has produced present-day civilization has its roots in the Near East. Ferdowsy was from of the city of Tus in northeastern Iran. He composed the Shahnameh around the turn of the millennium, based on all the lore and ancient records of pre-Islamic Iran, oral and written, then extant. It is believed to have taken some thirty years to come into being, and was completed around 1010 AD. It is evident from the verses of later great poets, such as Khayyam and Hafez, that they were influenced by the national Epic. There is a general consensus that the period of classical poetry in Modern Persian ends with Hafez (early 1300s). After some six centuries there is the rise of poetry in the modern era. The greatest modern poet of Iran in the modern era, Bahar (1884-1951), who has been given the honorific “prince of Poets”, characterized the Shahnameh as the “Bible of the Persians”:

شاهنامه هست بی اغراق قرآن عجم رتبه دانای طوسی رتبه پیغمبری

The Shahnameh in truth is the Bible of the Persians

The rank of the sage of Tus, the rank of prophets¹

Modern Persian (ca. 900 AD to the present) possesses a rich body of literature. Greatness has many criteria and dimensions to it, some of which can be subjective. Others have referred to Rumi’s works as the Bible of the Persians². Thus while there is Rumi (mid 1200s AD) and Hafez (early 1300s AD) who could be judged using other criteria, more favorable to their genre, calling any of the Persian classical poets, including Ferdowsy, as the greatest would lead to competition among their admirers and something they did not wish us to do. Rather, they exist in different sectors of spiritual space, which unlike physical space is not limited to its dimensions. Thus putting them on a linear scale for judgment would be tantamount to comparing apples and oranges.

The Shahnameh is still very much readable by modern day Iranians. In the aftermath of the Arab invasion of Iran, its bloody and forcible conversion to Islam, and the emergence in due course of what is now referred to as Modern Persian, many Arabic words had entered the Persian language. The Shahnameh, written in the purest Persian, contains less than 0.2% Arabic words³. It is believed that due to the influence of the Shahnameh on the Iranian people, and upon subsequent poets, the Persian language has changed little over the course of the past millennium.

The Shahnameh contains timeless pieces of moral philosophy. They occur naturally in the course of events and are intertwined with stories and with the verse, and the music the verse produces in citation, of the great poet. Since Ferdowsy was recounting events of history or legends, he did not devote sections exclusively to moral philosophy like the odes of Rumi, Hafez or the quatrains of Khayyam which contain concisely in one place the philosophical thought of the poet.

At various points throughout the Shahnameh Ferdowsy makes it quite clear that he is the poet of those stories, not the original author. He is the poet who put the accounts from history and from lore into verse. His main source text was *Khoday-Nameh*, a work which has not survived. It was a book of history commissioned by the kings of Iran during the Sasanian period (ca. 225-650 AD). Yet the meaning of the stories and events seem so closely tied with Ferdowsy's verse and style that for the readership the authorship of the stories tends to be identified with Ferdowsy.

The Shahnameh has often been quoted for its tragedies, its graphic description of battles, of sunrise, nature and - not least – classic scenes of romance. To take a digression and cite an example of the latter, the figure Rapunzel in the West, whose lover climbs up to see her by the locks of her hair has its forbear in *Roodabeh* in the Shahnameh. It occurs at the beginning of the Iranian heroic age, where she lowers her locks of hair for Zaal, her lover who climbs up a tower to see her. In that age there were also women knights and warriors. It exemplifies the first occurrence of love and marriage between the Aryans and non-Aryans. Zaal, son of a hero of Iran, is described as fair and having been born with white hair, whereas Roodabeh is described as having pitch black hair. In an age

where there were no photos, and meetings between members of different tribes far from each other took much effort, their love begins when messengers give descriptions of each side to the other. There is opposition from the families of both. But they overcome that opposition. Their son Rostam is born ruddy, with red hair, and becomes the greatest hero of Iran in the *Shahnameh*. Likewise the offspring of marriages between the fair Norsemen and dark-haired inhabitants of Ireland produced red hair. We also have similar occurrences among Jews. When a figure reaches that status, he is famed by not only his own deed but anonymous tales get woven around him also, as in Moses in the Pentateuch.

Broadly speaking, the *Shahnamah* may be divided into three sections, each with numerous subdivisions. The first section is a legendary history of Iran and the Aryanⁱ people. In this instance I use Aryan in the broader definition of the word, including Indo-European society before recorded history. The eponymous figure *Jamsheed* in the *Shahnamah* is Yima in the Avesta, the holy books of the pre-Islamic religion of Iran. Yima occurs in the Vedic tradition as Yama. He is the same character as Ymir in Scandinavian and Irish mythology. He evolved to the twain Remus and Romulus, the eponymous ancestors of Rome. These correspondences were first noted by Bruce Lincoln⁴, and there are more.

After the mythological section we enter the Iranian heroic age, though there is a grey region in between, that being the reign of Manoochehr and the appearance of Zaal, who fell in love with Roodabeh, predecessor of Rapunzel. There is of course no reliable way to establish the dates of the figures and events in either the mythological or heroic age for Iran or any tradition.

After the heroic age finally comes the historical age, dating from shortly before Alexander, whose events correspond to recorded history, as from the Babylonian, Greek, Roman, Armenian, Syriac and other accounts. This third section, clearly delineated from the first two by its correspondence to recorded history, recounts events to the Arab invasions of Iran (ca. 635-650 AD). Ferdowsy's accounts of the Sasanian period (ca. 225-

650 AD) in some places closely parallel that of Roman historians, such as in the graphic description of battle scenes that closely resemble that given by Ammianus Marcellinus in his *History of the Later Roman Empire* (ca. 375 AD). Both the verse of Ferdowsy and the prose of Ammianus have the effect of at times of taking the reader live to the scene.

The best known representative story in the Shahnamah, whether in or outside Iran, has been the tragedy of its greatest hero, Rostam and his son Sohrab, who knew not his father until being slain in combat at his hands for the sake of preservation of the statehood of Iran. Often it is tales that are recited from the Shahnameh, much like the Thousand and One Nights. But the whole poem has a moral tone to it that transcends the meaning of the words and the subject of the story being told. Interspersed throughout the Shahnamah are jewels of moral philosophy. In recitals of the Shahnameh these are overshadowed by the dramatic descriptions of scenes of battle, heroism, kingship and succession, overt praise of God and God's nature.

The Shahnameh is comprised of about fifty thousand couplets nearly all in perfect meter and rhyme, which have withstood the vicissitudes of time in coming down to us from Ferdowsy. Based on his own estimate of sixty thousand, the remaining ten thousand have not reached us through the vicissitudes of time, perhaps due to political adversaries and scribes under their influence who may have tampered with them. Much of the classical literature of Iran can be seen as being rooted in its pre-Islamic beliefs, values and culture. Thus the transmission or survival of such works through the ages by scribes was dependent overall on the balance of how well the works were received by the public and how much opposition they drew from the Islamic clergy and their followers. The Shahnameh survived through the centuries as it was found to be the closest expression of national character for Iranians. It has an appeal not only in what is today Iran, within its present borders, but well beyond, such as in Tajikistan. Sir John Malcolm, British Ambassador to Persia ca. 1810, later author of the first comprehensive history of Persia in English, reports how he would see Persian tribesmen lay bare their soul when reciting the Shahnameh.

¹ *Arya* means *noble* in ancient Persian, without any physical or racial connotations whatsoever. Its congenates from East to West, mean the same, *Arya* in Sanskrit and *eire* in Old Irish, both meaning *noble*.

In composing the Shahnameh, Ferdowsy, based on his own account, was preceded by another poet, Daqiqyⁱⁱ, who composed the first few thousand couplets, but died before he could take the undertaking close to completion. There is but a very slight and hardly perceptible difference between the verse and style of Daqiqy and of Ferdowsy, such that if we did not have Ferdowsy's statement to the inclusion of a thousand verses from Daqiqy, the difference is hardly noticeable. But the portion composed by Daqiqy, small though it is, is highly significant, because it tells of the rise of Zoroaster, the great prophet of ancient Iran. Zoroaster enunciates the religion of *Good* and *Righteousness*. Daqiqy' tells of how Zoroaster managed to convert the king to the faith. Zoroaster asks the king to learn the tenets of the *Good Religion*, arguing to him how it is unseemly to rule arbitrarily, without *din*, without ethics. The word *din* in Modern Persian, meaning religion, faith etc., derives from Avestan *daena*, meaning conscience and spiritual identity of the righteous human being. A term of similar pronunciation occurs in Arabic also, but in Arabic it means law, imposed from without, vis a vis its connotation in Persian, inculcated or developed within.

Although my experience with the Shahnamah goes back to an early age, it was in the 1980s that I first began to seriously read the Shahnamah. School children in Iran prior to the Islamic Revolution received lessons in the Shahnameh. But mostly, this was the tragedy of Rostam and his son Sohrab and what was impressed on the mind of the child was often the gross physical struggle, not the timeless jewels of moral philosophy. From the outset it was clear no mere single course would suffice to read and comprehend the Shahnameh, over even two semesters. Such a course during a regular academic term at any institution has to be limited to selected tracts. It took me a year, in the 1980s, to read the Shahnameh for the first time, Thereafter I went through selected passages I had marked multiple times. Over the years as my knowledge grew I became aware of its relations to other literary and cultural traditions. My first copy got worn out in the process of reading, its pages coming apart at the seam. I was found a duplicate, and later on various other editions.

It was after its re-adoption in Europe in the 1800s that, in time, it acquired such connotations.

ⁱⁱ Variant : *Daqiqi*. The q is a fricative, elsewhere written as gh.

There are a number of English translations of the Shahnameh, ranging from some of the oldest by the Warner Brothers (long predating the movie house of same name) to the latest by Dick Davis of Ohio State University. Among other European languages, its translation in Italian is known to come close to conveying the original.

Sir William Jones and Indo-European Society

In 1786 with the publication of his seminal work showing the languages of India, Iran and Europe to have evolved from one source, now extinct, Sir William Jones began a branch of inquiry that continues to the present day. In the Shahnameh *Salm* is the eponymous ancestor of Rome, a veiled reference to the Europeans of the time, and *Toor* is the eponymous ancestor likely of Northern peoples, later to be known as Norsemen and Vikings. *Iraj*, young brother of Salm and Toor, is the eponymous ancestor of Iran. On this basis there may be exist an equivalence between Toor and Thor in the Eddas and Sagas of Scandinavia. Ferdowsy quotes a great king of Iran Khosrow Parviz (ca. 600 AD) in his peace treaty with the Emperor Maurice of Rome, as saying

به خویشی چنانم کنون با تو من که بود از نخست آن بزرگ انجمن

In bonds of kinship I feel such with you
That was, that Great Society from the start

That seems to refer to the Indo-Europeans. Since there was no such great society described in the time of Salm and Toor and their brother Iraj, it seems to indicate a knowledge of Indo-European society independent of that stream of mythology.

Likewise we find Omar Khayyam describing the monarchs of Iran and Rome as of the same lineage, having one origin, in his book *Norooz-Nameh*. Norooz is the new year celebrated on the first day of spring by about a hundred million Persian speaking people, and nameh as in Shahnameh, means book.

The Nart Saga and King Arthur

Themes in the Shahnameh closely parallel those in the Nart Saga of the Ossettes. The Ossettes are a people of the Caucasus. They are descended from the *Alans*, an Iranian tribe related to the Sarmatians, also an Iranian tribe. The Ossettes are detached from Iran as a result of treaties between Russian and Iran in the 1800s and thereafter. Scott Littleton and colleagues have shown that themes in the Arthurian legends, such as sword in the stone, are traceable to the legends of the Osettes, as recorded in the Nart Saga⁵. They have established the link in history, in that as a result of a peace treaty between Rome and an Iranian tribe closely related and identified with the *Alans*, *Sarmatians*, several thousand of their cavalry are sent into exile in Britain. They carried with them their history and legends, which then became the core of the Arthurian legends. Then for the next two thousand years Celtic legends blended and woven with this core of Arthurian legends. Another detachment of the *Alans* and *Sarmatians* settle among the Germans and form part of the ethnogenesis of the German nation. Yet others are may have gone to Ireland.

From the Prolegomena to the Shahnameh

Ferdowsy begins with praise of the Wise Lord, lord infinite-wisdom, of which man inherits a part and can nurture and develop that wisdom.

به نام خداوند جان و خرد کزین برتر اندیشه برنگذرد
خداوند نام و خداوند جای خداوند روزی ده رهنمای

In the name of God of wisdom who bestowed life
Whom the thoughts of man cannot reach higher

The God of fame and of place
The guide and God of daily bread

From the Discourse on Creation and Evolution

Then Ferdowsy goes on to the beliefs regarding creation of the universe, the big bang, the four elements, fire, water, earth and air, the heavens one after another, the Earth, the sun, the emergence of plants and animals, and man. There appears to be a precursor to Darwin's theory of evolution in that Ferdowsy does not explicitly state that man was created, but clearly states that in the course of the evolution of the universe as described, following the plants and animals, upright man came into being, and [with his intelligence] became the key to these riddles.

چو زین بگذری مردم آمد پدید شد این بندها را سراسر کلید
سرش راست بر شد چو سرو بلند به گفتار خوب و خرد کاربند

And after these people came into being
And became the key to all these riddles

He raised his head up like the tall cypress
Uttered good words and enacted wise deeds

His reference below to twain worlds, is to *gaiti* and *mainyu*, the material world and the spiritual world respectively in ancient Persian thought. Man has appeared after undergoing a course of ‘upbringing’ in both. He concludes his discourse on creation addressing the very last in creation, man:

ترا از دو گیتی برآورده‌اند به چندین میانجی پرورده‌اند
نخستین فطرت پسین شمار تویی خویشان را به بازی مدار

From twain worlds hast thou been formed.
Through many an intermediary has thou been raised.
The zenith of Creation, the last in succession
Art thou; care that thou not waste thy life

Ferdowsy's Postscript, Critical of the Sultan

O Mahmud, shah and conqueror. Though you fear men not, have fear of God. Before you many a righteous kings ruled over the world. It was justice that they instituted for the under-privileged. They sought from this world naught but good renown, and from that renown eventual salvation. Those kings who were bound to money, had no respect among the wise.

The great knights and heroes of whom I have spoken, all dead long ago, their names revived through my words. Alike Jesus, I have raised the dead in name. Service I have rendered, O King, that shall remain behind of you. Great edifices fall into ruin, from rain and the heat of the sun. I have erected an edifice that cannot be harmed by the elements . . . Yet greatness does not all lie in words. Two hundred words aren't worth but half a deed.

Elsewhere in relation to the above Ferdowsy says :

بماناد تا هست گردون به پای مراین داستان همایون به جای

So long as the cosmos may revolve
This, my august epic will survive

From the Start of the Mythological Age

The actual story of kings in the Epic starts with the first king, being synonymous with the first mortal, *Kiumars*, whose name derives from *Gayo Maretan* in the pre-Islamic

scriptures of Iran. The equivalent of Adam in the biblical tradition, but mainly in the sense of being the first human beingⁱⁱⁱ. *Gayo* is life, that which is live and hence fleeting and perishable. *Maretan* means mortal and is a cognate of mortal in English. The Persian word for man, *mard*, derives from the same, n=meaning he who is susceptible one day of dying.

Reign of Tahmoores

Tahmoores battles, defeats and chains a people perceived as "devils". At a primitive stage in the development of the Aryan people, when for the first time they came across pother ethnic groups, they experienced culture shock. They could not learn and understand each other's language and culture in time and hostilities had a way of breaking out sooner. This we may surmise because after Tahmoores overcomes the so-called devils they teach the Aryans how to read and write, not only in one script, but multiple. The bounds in time based on present knowledge very approximately fall in line with what is known of the birth of writing today, and of the Sumerian achievements in this regard having seen their course of evolution from earlier systems. The Indo-Europeans are postulated by a consensus of scholarship to have lived around the Caspian, , ca. 5000 BC and by many other scholars in various other areas in Europe. That is before they began to disperse in waves and significant differentiation in language began to occur. Thus the people whom the primitive Aryans impulsively saw as "devils" are likely to have been among the proto-Sumerians or other Caucasians, founders of the earliest civilizations, who were literate, thus neither Semitic nor Indo-European.

Reign of Jamsheed, or Yima Khshaeta

After Tahmoores we come to Ferdowsy's account of the long reign of Jamsheed. His name derives from *Yima Khshaeta* in the Avesta, meaning shiny-faced Yima. His

ⁱⁱⁱ It seems in both stories the fact is glossed over that you cannot have a man without a woman. That issue is better covered in Rumi's poetry.

equivalents in Sanskrit, in Scandinavian and Irish lore, and in Roman mythology, has been mentioned above.

He creates, or there come into being, the functional classes of society, those of priests, warriors and farmers/tradesmen/craftsmen. These and their parallels in other Indo-European traditions form the basis of a tripartite ideology put forth by Georges Dumézil in the mid twentieth century. The class of farmers later comes to include craftsmen, tradesmen and professionals. There is no conception of money changers, or 'bankers', for there was as yet no money - only barter.

Jamsheed is also the enunciator of the Persian new year, celebrated or observed from his time to our present day on the first day of spring - today by over a hundred million people in the Persian-speaking world.

But when Jamsheed begins to think of himself too highly, the *farr* (from Avestan *khvarenah*), or spirit of kingship, that makes men righteous leaders, and no longer subject to their own desires and whims, departs from him. The now soul-less king and hence the country then fall prey to *Zahhak*. The name *Zahhak* derives from *azhi dahak*, meaning dragon, in Modern Persian *ezhdeha*, meaning dragon, the term being cognate of English dragon.

Reign of Fereydoun

After a period of criminal rule by *Zahhak*, *Fereydoun* becomes the savior of Iran. Avestan *tharaetaona*, denoting 'of three *tan*', or three bodies, which may be interpreted to refer to his three sons. *Thrae*, meaning three, is cognate of English *three* and the root of Modern Persian *seh*, meaning three. Fereydoun defeats *Zahhak*, but rather than killing him chains him to Mt Demavand, the tallest of Iran's mountains.

Fereydoun was a shape-changer, a quality we find also in Freyr in Scandinavian mythology. Fereydoun was father of Salm, Toor and Iraj, the latter meaning *Arya*. Iraj

was the eponymous ancestor of the Aryans, in the narrow definition of the term, who branched off from the main body of Indo-Europeans and gave their name to Iran, a modern contraction in Persian of Avestan *Airyaana Vaeja*, "Land of the Aryans".

Ferdowsy by way of example of Fereydoun dissociates the spiritual qualities from the base self and body:

Good and Evil shall not remain constant. Treasures and high towers shall not remain behind of one when dead. It is words that shall remain. Freydoun was not an angel, made of heavenly material. Through righteousness and magnanimity he gained renown. You enact righteousness and magnanimity; you be Fereydoun.⁶

Reign of Manoochehr

The World is akin to a farm full of colors and scents. Harvest time is the time of our death, the flowing water our life, and the crops our selves. We are at our station, yet constantly riding the crest of night and day. As a caravan that passes from this city to the next. Some ahead, others behind, each reaching their destination in turn.

Reign of Goshtasb. The Rise of Zoroaster

God summons Zoroaster to the realm of the spirit, minoo (Avestan *mainyu*). Zoroaster, inspired by God, teaches a new religion and succeeds in converting the king. His message would serve to slay Ahriman (Avestan *Angra Mainyu*), the Evil Spirit. Zoroaster says to the king, that "I come as a prophet, to guide you in the path of God. Hearken to his messenger, and heed his ways. Adopt the *Good Religion* (Persian metaphor for Zoroastrianism), for without conscience and ethics it is unseemly to rule".

The divine glory appears, cleanses all hearts and all seeds from impurity. Those who would not follow the precepts of Zoroaster, shall not enter paradise

The news reaches the traditional enemies of Iran, Turanians, who then decide to make war anew on Iran. Zoroaster claims to have come from heaven, from the sole God of the universe. He has seen God in heaven, and received the Avesta from Him. Zoroaster also visits hell, wherein he sees Ahriman, later to become the prototype of Satan in the Judaeo-Christian tradition. But Zoroaster does not hang around Ahriman (Ahriman's *piramoon*, cognate of English perimeter). His visit, i.e., his spirit hovering over and about hell, forms the prototype for *Ardaviraf-nameh*, a work dated to about 600 AD, where Ardaviraf visits hell and brings back news of it. In turn, centuries later, *Ardaviraf-nameh* provides a precursor for Dante's Divine Comedy. Although the provenance has not been established, we know that in the ancient world the spoken word travelled more widely and faster than the written word.

The Death of Rostam

The death of Rostam, Iran's greatest hero of legend, is a story not frequently recited in the Shahnameh. Ferdowsy relates of an old sage in the city of Marv in the northeast, by name *Azad-Sarv* ("free cypress") who had a copy of *Nameye Khosravan*, or the book of kings, the main source for the Shahnameh, that Ferdowsy put in verse. His lineage went back to *Sam*, grandfather of Rostam, and through the oral tradition recollected Rostam's battles. Rostam's half-brother *Shoghad* in exile conspires with the king of Kabul to murder Rostam by inviting him to Kabul and laying in his path ditches camouflaged with vegetation in which spears with poison tips pointing up awaited the victim.

Ferdowsy describes how the hearts and minds of human being, which can be hidden from one another, being in the spiritual domain, are plain to God. At his death Rostam gives thanks to God, and begs forgiveness for his sins. The sins are not explicitly stated, but would be his slaying of his son Sohrab, to protect Iran:

“Your prophet and your faith, I accepted, and so I have no fear now, should life leave my body. Take up then my soul to heaven. My heart and mind plain to you.”

There is much more in the Shahnameh that expresses what are Zoroastrian concepts and shows the presence of pre-Islamic Iranian thought. The foregoing suffices as a representative set.

References

¹ I use the term Bible in place of Qur'an, for it conveys the meaning and connotations in English.

² See Nagel's *Iran*, 1977, p. 52. The author is not listed by I have a recollection it is Phillip Gignoux.

³ Based on there occurring 800-900 Arabic words by various counts in the Shahnamah, an average 10 words per couplet, and 50,000 couplets extant. The count of Arabic words is given as 984 in Arthur Upham Pope's *Introducing Persian Architecture*, 1976 p 49. Other sources give counts in the 800s.

⁴ See Bruce Lincoln, *The Indo-European Myth of Creation*, History of Religions, Vol. 15, 1975.

⁵ See the works of C. Scott Littleton, including:

From swords in the earth to the sword in the stone, : A possible reflection on an Alano-Sarmatians rite of passage in the Arthurian tradition. Journal of Indo-European Studies, Homage to Georges Dumezil, 1983, p. 53-67

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Renditions to English by the Author