

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

And the Relation of the 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 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 in ancient times as man was emerging from pre-history vied to civilize the world around them. The process occurred at different times and different places for different parts of humanity. 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 and available to him. He is believed to have taken some thirty years to complete it, around 1010 AD. It is evident from the verses of the later great poets, such as Khayyam and Hafez, that they were influenced by Ferdowsy. There is some consensus that the period of classical poetry in Modern Persian ends with Hafez (early 1300s). After about 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. The great poets were in reality prophets as well as philosophers, In the top tier of rank, given most any criteria, would be included Ferdowsy, Rumi, Sa'di and Hafez. Among scholars of Persian literature others have referred to Rumi's works as the *Bible of the Persians*². 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 one 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, we may view the concepts in their poetry as existing in different sectors of spiritual space, which unlike physical space is not

limited in its dimensions to three or four. Forcing them on a uni-dimensional 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 in the early 600s AD, 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 and how it was received by the Iranian people that the Persian language has changed little over the course of the past millennium.

Withal, there can be little doubt as to which of the great poets represents the spirit and identity of the nation as a whole. Former Prime Minister of Iran, Mohammad-Ali Foroughy, himself a Shahnameh scholar, describes the place of the Shahnameh vis a vis the national ethos in his introduction to a national edition of the Shahnameh:

“As a person, Ferdowsy is a consummate Iranian, the archetype of what constitutes being an Iranian, an embodiment of our national values. So much so, that if you were to seek his sentiments, feelings and character in what he has left behind, it would be as though you sought the Iranian nation itself.”⁴

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. Since Ferdowsy was recounting events of history or legends, he generally did not devote whole 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 oral and prose 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 author 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 Roodabeh, in a tower, lowers her locks of hair for Zaal, her lover, who climbs up to see her. In that age there were also women knights and warriors. The romance and wedding of Zaal and Roodabeh exemplify the first occurrence of love and marriage between different cultures and ethnicities in the experience of the Iranians: between the Aryans and non-Aryans. Zaal⁵, son of a hero of Iran, is described as fair and having been born with white hair, as an albino, whereas Roodabeh is described as having pitch black hair. *Aryan*, which the name *Iran* derives from, had no physical connotation; it meant noble. 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. When a figure reaches a status such as Rostam, he is famed by not only his own deeds but slowly anonymous tales get woven around him, as with Moses in the Bible. In private circles, the other great knights in the Shahnameh deride Rostam for being of poor blood. By comparison, the offspring of marriages between the fair Norsemen and dark-haired inhabitants of Ireland often had red hair. We also have similar occurrences among Jews.

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 *Aryan* is used in the broader definition of the word, including Indo-European society postulated before recorded history. The eponymous figure

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

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 Lincoln⁶.

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 so old. As one point of reference, which due to lack of further data remaining from the past cannot be conclusively proven right or wrong, Aristotle and other classical authors put Zoroaster the prophet of ancient Iran, whose rise post-dates the figures we have spoken of so far, at about 6,000 years before Plato. Others place him 5000-7000 years before Plato.

After the heroic age, 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. The third section of the Shahnameh, 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 parallels that of Roman historians, such as the graphic description of battle scenes that resemble those 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 virtually 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, 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 various scribes, perhaps due to political adversaries who may have influenced and tampered with the work of scribes.

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 the works drew from the Islamic clergy and their followers. The Shahnameh survived through the centuries because of having that balance favorable to it. 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.

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 account to the inclusion of about a thousand verses from Daqiqy, the difference would be hardly noticeable by anyone. But the portion composed by Daqiqy, though small, is highly significant, because it tells of the rise of Zoroaster, the great prophet of ancient Iran.

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

Zoroaster enunciates the religion of *Good* and *Righteousness*. Daqiqy' tells of how Zoroaster managed to convert the reigning 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, versus its connotation in Persian, spiritual precepts 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 that 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 found a near duplicate, and later on various other editions. 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 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 از پیش بود آن بزرگ انجمن

In bonds of kinship I feel such with you

That was that Great Society from the start ⁷

That seems to refer to the Indo-Europeans. Fereydoun had just overthrown Zahhak. The ‘Great Society’ had not yet formed (unless we regard what is depicted as his reign in the *Shahnameh* as an age, and by extension the lives of his three sons, Salm, Toor and Iraj as ages). Thus it may 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 origin⁸, in his book *Norooz-Nameh*. Norooz is the new year celebrated on the first day of spring. Founded by Jamsheed in the *Shahnameh*, today Norooz is celebrated by about a hundred million Persian speaking people. *Nameh* as in *Shahnameh*, refers to book. *Nam* in Persian is cognate of English *name*. The notion of books likely evolved from letters carried by messengers bearing names. Thus *nam* evolved to *nameh*, the word for letter in Modern Persian.

The Nart Saga and King Arthur

Themes in the *Shahnameh* closely parallel those in the Nart Saga of the Ossetes. The Ossetes are a people of the Caucasus. They are descended from the *Alans*, an Iranian tribe related to the Sarmatians, also an Iranian tribe. The Ossetes became politically detached from Iran in the course of Iran’s borders shrinking over the centuries. 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 Saga⁹. 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 among them may have gone to Ireland.

From Ferdowsy's 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.

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 higher reach

The God of fame and of place
Who enables our livelihood and provides guidance¹⁰

From Ferdowsy's 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 describes that in the course of the evolution of the universe as

described, following the emergence of 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, man came into being
And became the key to all these riddles

Man raised his head up like a tall cypress
Uttered good words and enacted wise deeds¹¹

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

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

From twain worlds hast thou been formed.
Through many an intermediary hast thou been raised.

The zenith of Creation, the last in succession
Art thou; care that thou not wasteth thy life¹²

Ferdowsy's Postscript, Critical of the Sultan

“O Mahmud, shah and conqueror. Though you fear men not, have fear of God. Many a righteous kings ruled over the world before your reign. 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 immune from the elements . . .

بزرگی سراسر به گفتار نیست دو صد گفته چون نیم کردار نیست

Yet greatness lies not all in words.

Two hundred words aren't worth half a deed¹³.

Much later in the Shahnameh Ferdowsy in relation to the above says :

بماناد تا هست گردون به پای مر این داستان همایون به جای

So long as the cosmos shall revolve

This, my august epic shall survive

The following headings refer to standard headings in various editions of the Shahnameh, except on the death of Rostam, where the page and edition are given.

Start of the Mythological Age, Reign of Kiumars

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* denotes life, that which is live and hence fleeting and perishable. *Maretan* denotes mortal and is a cognate of *mortal* in English. The Persian word for man, *pard*, derives from the same, meaning *he who is susceptible [one day] of dying*.

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.

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 other 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. 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 more significant differentiation in language than existed 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, but 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 equivalents in Sanskrit, in Scandinavian and Irish lore, and in Roman mythology, has been mentioned above.

During Jamsheed's reign there come into being, the functional classes of society, those of priests, warriors and farmers/tradesmen/craftsmen. These divisions 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.

Reign of Fereydoun

After a period of oppressive rule by a criminally ill *Zahhak*, a descendant of Jamsheed, *Fereydoun* becomes the savior of Iran. The Avestan for *Fereydoun* is *tharaetaona*, denoting 'of three *tan*', or three bodies, which may be interpreted to refer to his three sons. *Thrae*, meaning three, 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* had three sons, *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 *Airyana 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. Enact righteousness and magnanimity and you be Fereydoun.”¹⁴

Excerpt From the 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; Rise of Prophet Zoroaster

God summons Zoroaster to the realm of the spirit, *minoo* (Avestan *mainyu*). Zoroaster, inspired by *Ahura Mazda*, teaches a new religion and succeeds in converting the king. Up to the time of Zoroaster, in the Shahnameh Iranians appear to worship the sun, which may have been as a source of physical light, symbolic of the spiritual.

بشاه جهان گفت پیغمبرم ترا سوی یزدان همی رهبرم
زگوینده بپذیر به دین او بیاموز از او راه و آیین او
بیاموز آیین دین بهی که بی دین نه خوبست شاهنشهی
پدید آمد آن فره ایزدی برفت از دل بد سگالان بدی
پر از نور ایزد ببد دخمه ها وز آلودگی پاک شد تخمه ها

"Zoroaster said to the king of the World, 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* (metaphor for Zoroastrianism), for without that it is unseemly to rule. The Divine Glory appears. It cleanses all hearts. Filled with the Light of God were all the dark dungeons./ All seeds were cleansed from impurity”.

It is implicit in the Shahnameh that Zoroaster's message, would, in the End of Time, serve to slay Ahriman (Avestan *Angra Mainyu*), the Evil Spirit.

به یزدان که هرگز نبیند بهشت کسی کو ندارد ره زردهشت

"By God, whoso would not follow the way of Zoroaster, shall not enter paradise."

The news reaches the traditional enemies of Iran, Turanians, who then decide to make war anew on Iran. The Turanians were kin to Iranians. But they are depicted as a less civilized tribe. It is only epochs and millennia later than the term Turan begins to be grafted and identified with Turk. In origin, it derives from *Toor*, son of Fereydoun, who may be the same figure as *Thor* in Scandinavian mythology.

همی گوید از آسمان آمدم ز نزد خدای جهان آمدم

خداوند را دیدم اندر بهشت مر این زند اوستا همه او نوشت

بدوزخ درون دیدم اهریمن نیاستمش گشت پیرامنا

"Zoroaster claims to have come from heaven, from the sole God of the universe. He has seen the Wise Lord in heaven, and received the Avesta from Him. Zoroaster also visited hell, wherein he saw Ahriman¹⁵. Didn't hang around Ahriman's *piramoon* (cognate of English perimeter)."

His visit, i.e., his spirit hovering over and about hell, forms the prototype for the visit in *Ardaviraf-Nameh*¹⁶, a work dated to about 600 AD, where Ardaviraf visits heaven and hell and brings back news of them. In turn, centuries later, *Ardaviraf-Nameh* is a precursor to Dante's *Divine Comedy*. Although the provenance may not have been established, it is a given that in the ancient world the spoken word travelled more widely and faster than the written word.

Death of Rostam

The death of Rostam, Iran's greatest hero of legend, is a story not frequently recited from the *Shahnameh*, for it seems tantamount to the end of Iran, and God on Earth. 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. *Azad-Sarv*'s lineage went back to *Sam*,

grandfather of Rostam. It is 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 planted with poison tips pointing up awaited the victim. Rostam and his horse fall in the ditches. A little, after carrying out justice on the perpetrator, Rostam dies. Ferdowsy describes how the hearts and minds of human beings, which can be hidden from one another, being in the spiritual domain, are but plain to God. At his death Rostam gives thanks to God, and begs forgiveness for his sins. The sins are not explicitly stated, but in the main they would be Rostam's slaying of his son Sohrab to protect Iran:

که بودم همه ساله یزدان شناس	چنین گفت رستم یزدان سپاس
از این کین من روز نامد بشب	کزین پس که جانم رسیده به لب
از این بی وفا خوستم کین خویش	مرا زور دادی که از مرگ پیش
که هستی تو بخشنده و دستگیر	گناهم بیامرز و پوزش پذیر
پذیرفتم و راه آیین تو	همان راه پیغمبر و دین تو
روانم کنون گر بر آید چه باک	چو دارم ره دین و آیین پاک
بتست آشکارا نهران مرا	بمینو بر افراز جان مرا
برو زار و گریان شدند انجمن	بگفت این و جانش بر آمد زتن

“Thus said Rostam his last prayers. Thanks be to the Wide Lord; I have been a follower if God through my life. Thanks be that I was bestowed the strength to seek my vengeance from this traitor. Your prophet and your faith, I accepted, and so have no fear now, should life leave my body. Take up my soul then to heaven. My heart and mind plain to you. This he said, and life departed from his body; and left those who loved him in mourning.”¹⁷

The Iranian myth of creation as it comes to us in the *Greater Bundahishn*, part of its pre-Islamic scriptures, describes that human beings exist as souls in Heaven. They are brought into being in heaven during acts of creation by God. But they have Free Will. They exist in a state of timelessness in heaven. It is of their own volition that they decide to come down to Earth, be embodied in material form, risk exposure to Evil, and fight the good fight to advance the cause of Good. They then come down to earth, where time ticks. They vie to improve it, then return. Having left the earth better, they leave behind

their material bodies and return in a state of timelessness. The state of timelessness equates with eternity.

We have, further, a sublime discourse of Cyrus the Great, founder of the Iranian state (ca. 500 BC), on the immortality of the soul as recorded by Xenophon, and a millennium after that a very similar discourse by the great Persian King Anushiravan (late 500s AD). Of course we do not know how long has elapsed between the events described in the first two mythological sections in the Shahnameh and the third, the historical section. It is likely to be well over a millennium in most cases, and perhaps several millennia.

There is far more in the Shahnameh expressing Zoroastrian concepts, showing the continuing presence of pre-Islamic thought in Iran. It is difficult to convey the music and all of the spirit through translation. The spirit of ancient Iran runs through its tone. The foregoing is an abridgement of prior work that suffices as a representative set. It is apt to end this brief study with the observation of others well before us who sensed the same influence and who conveyed their impressions for those who may not be able to read the Shahnameh in the original, such as James V. Wilkinson, 1931:

"From its majestic breadth and range, from the sonorous sweep of its language, from its significance as the embodiment of the whole national legend of an ancient and imaginative race, the *Shah-Namah* of Firdausi ranks unquestionably among the great epics of the world. It is inspired by a deep sense of the greatness of Providence and the impermanence of mortal things. The real theme, indeed, is the unending conflict behind the scenes of fighting and feasting, knight-errantry and romance, between the powers of Good and Evil, a conflict which is emphasized by the habitual use of the language of the old Zoroastrian faith, rather than that of orthodox Islam."¹⁸

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In translating, I have employed the term *Bible* in place of Qur'an, for it conveys the meaning and connotations in English.

² See the article on literature in *Nagel's Iran*, 1977, p. 52. The author is not explicitly listed but I have a recollection it is Phillip Gignoux.

³ Based on there being 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 Mohammad Aly Foroughy

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⁵ امیر کبیر صفحه ۴۸

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امیر کبیر صفحه ۲۲

11

امیر کبیر صفحه ۲۲

12

امیر کبیر صفحه ۲۳

13

شاهنامه فردوسی، انتشارات جاویدان، بدون تاریخ
صفحه نوزده

¹⁴ This section appears in the Amir Kabir edition at the end Zahhak's reign, but does not occur in certain others editions.

¹⁵ After the Exile (597-537 BC) Satan assumed the role of Ahriman in the Judaeo-Christian tradition.

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Death of Rostam ¹⁷

امیر کبیر صفحه ۳۳۷

¹⁷ Wilkinson, J. V. S., *The Shah-Namah of Firdausi*, 1931, p. 5.

Renditions to English by the Author

Abridged from the author's *Moral Philosophy of the Shahnameh*, 1993

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Revision History

2014: Azhi Dahhak and Dragon paragraph revised.
