

The Relationship Between Zoroastrianism and Kingship in the Iranian Empire

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Abstract: This essay discusses the relationship between Zoroastrianism and kingship through the primary source of *Shahnameh*, the epic of the Persian Kings, written by Abolqasem Ferdowsi. *Shahnameh* is a crystal of Iranian culture, it is a complete religious doctrine following the guidance of Zoroastrianism, it teaches the practice of threefold paths to Asha with the idea of spreading goodness into the society. They include personal religion, social life, and individual morality. Furthermore, the study connects the religious concept of the threefold paths to Asha and *khvarenah*, a mysterious concept in Iran myth that symbolize the bless from heaven and God, to the actual examples of the engagement of kingship.¹ The paper introduces and corresponds the example of Jamshid, a Shah in the mysterious age of the Iranian empire, to the practice of Zoroastrianism. Finally, the paper concludes that in the Sassanid dynasty of Iran empire, the king in the world was decided by the heaven.² The heaven blesses and protects those who were destined to be the king in all aspects. This is the myth of the divine right of kingship propagated by the rulers to maintain their power and status. However, although the kingship is shrouded in mystery, humans on earth eventually decide the kindship.³

Keywords: Zoroastrianism, Iran, Sassanid empire, Shahnameh

1. Introduction

During the ancient Sassanid period in Iran, the main religion of the Iran empire was Zoroastrianism. The creation of Zoroastrianism is revolutionary since it marked the beginning of the separation of the two major Indo-Iranian national religions, the Diver-Yasna and Mazda-Yasna, and led to a series of social transitions in Saeiran, including a shift from nomadic to agrarian and sedentary life, and from polytheistic to monotheistic beliefs. Zoroastrianism was founded by its patriarch, Zoroaster, based on the inheritance and reform of the traditional religion of the Iranian Aryans. It was characterized by the dualism of good and evil and the exclusive reverence for Mazda. Zoroastrianism has shaped not only Iran's religious value system but also its vital political and cultural attributes, which have penetrated deeply into the social life of the Iranian people and become an integral part of the psychology of contemporary Iranian society.

¹ Zhibin, H, Zhibin, X. (2019) The Trajectory of Zoroastrianism in Iran. *Journal of World Religion and Culture*, 6: 58-64.

² Boyce, M. (2000) *Zoroastrians: Their Religious Beliefs and Practices*. Routledge, London.

³ Kantorowicz, E. (2016) *The King's Two Bodies*. Princeton University Press, Princeton.

As a typical representative of dualistic religions that were dominant through the Achaemenid and Sassanid empires, Zoroastrianism flourished from the 6th century B.C. to the 7th century A.D. During this period, the three-fold paths of *Asha*, an essential moral concept of Zoroastrianism, shaped not only the daily practice of average citizens but also determined the alternation of kingship. We can find relevant evidence in the primary source *Shahnameh*, where the author Ferdowsi compiles a series of stories to illustrate the close relationship between the practice of Zoroastrianism and the emergence and disappearance of the king.

2. The Epic *Shahnameh*

The *Shahnameh* is about the rise and fall of the Iranian dynasties from ancient times to the Arab invasion in 651 AD. It covers the events of the reigns of 50 Iranian kings. It can be said that the *Shahnameh* is an encyclopedia of social life in ancient Iran, an accurate picture of the formation, migration, and development of the Iranian nation, and a reflection of its spirit. The main material on which the *Shahnameh* is based is the book *Avesta*, which attributes to a large portion of Iranian literary composition. *Avesta* also represents the Holy book of Zoroastrianism because it traces the historical links between the beginnings of the religion and the death of the last Sassanid emperor, which ended the Zoroastrian influence in Iran. The *Shahnameh* is widely known for containing four main parts, mythical age, heroic age, chronological age, and the message Ferdowsi wishes to preach. The imaginary part of the *Shahnameh* is relatively short compared to other portions of the book; the author gives an account of the creation of the world and man as believed by the Sassanians, followed by the story of the first king of Iraq.

In contrast to the mythical age, the heroic age is a significant portion of the book. To be short, it is about the kingdom of Kelaniya, which establishes a long history of heroic age in which myth and legend are combined. Moreover, various heroes and rulers are mentioned until Alexander the Great's conquest. Moreover, to the chronological age, which is the relatively accurate history of the Sasanian Empire, the book includes the fall of the Sassanids and how the Arab conquest of Persia. For the last part, the *Shahnameh* teaches a wide variety of moral virtues, like worship of one God; religious uprightness; patriotism; love of wife, family, and children; and helping the poor, which are all included in the practice of Zoroastrianism.

In the book of *Shahnameh*, the term *khvarenah*, a fundamental concept of Iran mythology that stands for glory and splendor in the Avestan meaning, is mentioned. *Khvarenah* can be understood as a divine, mystical force or power that the Creator of the World gives.⁴ The term also reflects the perceived divine empowerment of kings and carries a secondary meaning of "good fortune"; those who possess it can complete their mission or function in the Iranian world.

Khvarenah is a kind of light, or it may be manifested as other symbols, such as animals.⁵ Its basic meaning is a blessing from heaven. If a spiritual light blesses a tribal leader, he can create a peaceful and happy life and a just and equal social environment for others. When a do-gooder is blessed by it, he becomes a missionary of Zoroastrianism. According to Zoroastrianism, the best people in the world, whether they are religious leaders, outstanding people who pursue the good path, just and wise princes, or brave men who uphold justice, would be blessed by the light. The key to being blessed or not is to follow the three paths of *Asha*. The concept of three paths to *Asha* also comes from *Shahnameh* and remains essential in living Zoroastrianism. It has gained greater prominence among those reformists who sought to simplify their ancient faith. The reformists believe that it can "be reduced to a very simple belief in an omniscient, all bountiful, omnipotent God, who insists on a good thought, good word and good action, and ordains evil to the evildoer and blessings to the pure both

⁴ Jiahong, W. (2012) The Search for Zoroastrian in Iran. Portrait, 2: 83-87.

⁵ Ferdowsi, A. (2006) *Shahnameh: The Persian Book of Kings*. Translated by Davis, D. Viking Press, New York City.

in this world and the next according to their thoughts, words, and deeds.” Zoroastrians of every shade of doctrinal belief acknowledged this ancient moral code as taught by their Prophet. It became the unifying factor for their community, a source of pride for them, and the basis for profound benevolence.

3. The Threefold Paths to Asha and Kingship

What is the content of the three paths of *Asha*? It can be understood in three ways:

- a. In terms of religious beliefs, a believer in goodness should recognize the supreme celestial status of Ahura Mazda. They should listen to the Prophet's teachings, strictly observe the religious rules and fulfill their religious obligations.
- b. In terms of social life, the believers are expected to engage in agricultural production, protect the land, water, fire, environment, and air in social life, and care for the animals, especially the cattle.
- c. Regarding personal moral cultivation, the faithful should maintain purity in both body and mind and pay attention to personal and environmental hygiene.

More importantly, they should be mindful of spiritual purity, seek the truth and remove falsehoods, and pay attention to knowledge and reason.

For a monarch, it is the exercise of benevolence. Moreover, if the king who is blessed with the light wants the Mshid and the Khaus, as soon as they deviate from the right path, do the wrong thing, cheat people, or oppress the people, the light will fly away from them. They will fall into the fate of failure and suffer a miserable end.

In the *Avesta*, there are two kinds of light. One is the spiritual light that blesses Iran, and the other is the spiritual light that blesses the king. The spiritual light that blesses Iran ensures that the Iranians are fat, strong, and lucky and that the enemies of Iran, Ahriman, and Other evil spirits were defeated. The spiritual light that blesses kings is enjoyed by wise and just rulers, who govern with benevolence under the blessing of the spiritual light. They were blessed by the light of the spirit and governed with benevolence, and got good results. However, during the Sassanid period, the inner wine of the khvarenah changed subtly. If we say in ancient times, those who did good deeds were blessed by the farr, at this time, they were handed over to those who were ordained as kings by God, the royal power of the heavenly bin, that is, its destiny factor. This period even saw the emergence of Kyokai people who could communicate between man and God; that is, they could pray for heavenly blessings. This shows that this ancient traditional concept gradually became a concept used by the ruling class.

To illustrate this relationship between following the threefold paths to *Asha* and the receiving of power, we can use an example in the *Book of Shahnameh-Jamshid*. Ferdowsi has portrayed a series of kings in the epic mythology section who were the original rulers in the mythology of the Iranian nation. All these characters appear in the *Avesta*, but in the *Book of Kings*, they are more fully fleshed out, and their stories are more convoluted than in *Avesta*. In comparison, the characters' primary positive and negative status does not change, nor do the basic ideas of grace that they embody.

There were three most important early kings in the early period. They are the three kings of the first great dynasty of the low mythical Pishdadian dynasty: Jamshid, Zahhak, and Faringdon. Jamshed is an important figure in the early Aryan mythology, whose origin has been mentioned in the second chapter of this manuscript. In the *Avesta*, Jamshid is a god. The God Ahura Mazda asked him to go down to the next world to preach, but he did not accept the task because he was not prepared. Later, the God of Heaven asked him to be a king in the next world and to rule over the world.

The essential features of the Jamshid image are largely preserved in the *Shahnameh*. The *Avesta* does not mention the origin of Jamshid because he is a god. In the *Shahnameh*, he is the grandson of the second king of the Pishdadian dynasty, Hassan (the son of the third king, Tamuras), which means that he was a man of the world without any supernatural overtones, and he became king due to the

death of his father.⁶ Under Jamshid's rule, the kingdom prospered, and all kinds of businesses flourished. Under his rule, there were four people: priests, warriors, farmers, and artisans. Each of the four types of people had its own business. Jamshid led them to engage in various kinds of activities, such as making clay, building houses, mining, fetching precious stones, buying medicine, healing the sick, traveling on boats, and improving the food of dumplings, and as a result, life was greatly improved, and everyone lived a long and healthy life without any disease. However, there is no story in *Shahnameh* that he asked the gods of heaven to triple the size of the earth, so there is no story that the gods of heaven forewarned him of a great snowstorm and told him to build an underground palace.

In both books, Jamshid is mentioned as having made a mistake. *Avesta* states that Jamshid's mistake was lying and teaching the world to eat meat. *Shahnameh* asserts his mistake was being a liar and disrespecting the gods.⁷ Lying was a major sin in the Iranian Zoroastrian religion, so the light of the Khvarenah flew away from him, letting his condition deteriorate daily. Eventually, Zahhak, a human invader of the Arabian tribe, overthrew and killed Jamshid. In the *Chronicle of Kings*, Zahhak was the king of Arabia. Zahhak became an important figure after Jamshid. In the late years of his life, the group of beans left the country and went away to Arabia. The Zahhak later invaded Iran and became the king of Iran.

In summary, the rule of Jamshid was good and lasted for three hundred years. During his ruling time, longevity grew, disease was banished, and peace and prosperity prevailed. Nevertheless, Jamshid's pride grew with his power, and he began to ignore that all the blessings of his reign originated from God. He boasted to his people that all blessings attributed to him alone and demanded divine honors as if he were the Creator. The *Khvarenah* departed from Jamshid. People started to murmur and rebel against him. Even though Jamshid later repented, the glory never returned to him. Meanwhile, the vassal ruler of Arabia, Zahhak, made war upon Jamshid under the influence of Ahriman. Many Jamshid's discontented subjects welcomed him. Jamshid fled from his capital, but Zahhak ultimately trapped and brutally murdered him. After seven hundred years of rule, mankind fell back from the height of civilization to the Dark Ages.

4. Conclusion

Jamshid's story directly illustrates how a Shah gained or lost its sovereignty. The critical step of following the three-fold paths to Asha is to practice good deeds. Fereydun, the seventh king of the Kayan Dynasty, was a wise king who led his army to defeat foreign invaders. During his march, he had three signs, all of which were the result of spiritual light. All these show that the king in the world was decided by the heavens, and the heavens blessed and protected those who were destined to be kings in all aspects. This was the myth of the divine right of kingship propagated by the rulers to maintain their power and status.

However, despite the kingship being shrouded in mystery, it was still up to man to decide who would be the king on earth. From the examples provided in the *Chronicle of Kings*, it seemed that the son often inherited the father's throne, and the brother could succeed the throne without a son, and in exceptional cases, the daughter could also succeed the king's throne. The royal family and the ministers would often support the king. Following the teachings of Zoroastrianism, the Shah of the Iranian Empire was in constant turnover. Their behavior was closely related to their religion, and in a way, their behavior was the best confirmation and expression of it. Whether they achieved prosperity or led the kingdom to ruin, the kings' attitude to religion determined the change of power.

⁶ S. Behnaz Hosseini. "Chapter 3 Yārsāni Religious Practice and Identity", Springer Science and Business Media LLC, 2020.

⁷ Foundation, Encyclopaedia Iranica. "Welcome to Encyclopaedia Iranica." RSS. Accessed August 31, 2022. <https://iranicaonline.org/articles/humata-huxta-huvarsta>.

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