



HĀRUT AND MĀRUT

HĀRUT and MĀRUT, two fallen angels who taught mankind magic in Babylon. They are mentioned once in the Qur’ān (2:96 [2:102]) in a passage admonishing (Jewish) disbelievers who follow the teaching of the Satans (Šayāṭin) at the time of Solomon. “Solomon did not disbelieve, but the satans disbelieved, teaching the people magic [siḥr] and what had been sent down to the two angels in Babel, Hārut and Mārut; they do not teach anyone without first saying: ‘We are only a temptation, so do not disbelieve,’ so they learn from them means by which they separate man and wife; but they do not injure any one thereby, except by the permission of Allah” (tr. Bell, I, p. 14). The origins of the angels and the nature of their crime are left unexplained, so theologians and Koranic commentators sought to explain the episode by utilizing Talmudic, Syriac, Iranian, and even Greek fables (see below). They came up with various traditions, most comprehensively collected by Ṭabari (*Tafsir* II, pp. 412 ff; see also Vajda, p. 237), and best studied by Enno Littmann (see bibliography). Side by side with the purely Islamic versions, there also developed a Muslim-Persian rendering which will be treated below.

The Islamic version can be summarized as follows. As mankind multiplied, their sinfulness and debauchery led the angels to complain that God was being too lenient towards them. But God replied that if the angels had been exposed to the same passions and pressures which drove men to commit these carnal sins, they too would not be able to control themselves. The angels volunteered to go down and live on earth like human beings but refrain from committing crimes like them. God made this possible. Two of the purest and noblest of the



angels, Hārut and Mārut, descended on earth and for a while led a blameless life until the day they were asked to arbitrate between a beautiful woman (described as a princess from Fārs in some commentaries) and her husband. The two angels became infatuated with her, but she resisted their carnal desires until they granted her a great favor. Some said that she discovered from them the ineffable Name of God that had enabled them to ascend to Heaven at night. By evoking it, she went up and affixed herself to the sky as the planet Venus (Zahrā/Zohra), leaving the sinful angels powerless on earth. Others maintained that she introduced them to wine, whereupon they murdered an innocent passer-by. Angered by all this, God was about to inflict a drastic punishment on the faithless angels, but, at the intercession of a great angel (or a prophet, Edris in some versions), He allowed them to choose between perpetual torment in this world or infernal punishment in the next. They chose the former, and were chained and imprisoned in a well in Babylon. According to Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfī (cited in Le Strange, *Lands*, p. 72), the well was “at the summit of the hill.” Seekers of forbidden mag-ical arts went there to be instructed by the fallen angels. The Kufan scholar Abu Moḥammad Solaymān b. Meh-rān A‘maš (d. 148/765) is quoted as saying that Ḥajjāj ordered the R’as al-Jālūt (the exilarch) to guide an inquisitive, pious Muslim to the well, and “they saw the two angels, massive as two mountains, hanging upside down, their head barely above the ground, and chained from the ankle to the knees. In awe the pious man uttered the name of Allah, whereupon the chained ones trembled violently, and their commotion so frightened him that he fainted” (Qazvini, *Āṭār al-belād*, pp. 305-7).

The development of the story of the fallen angels has been studied by Littmann, Leo Jung (pp. 131-32), Bernard Heller, Josef Horovitz (pp. 146-48), Jean de Menasce, Bernard Bamberger (pp. 114-17), Georges Vajda, and others. They have shown that the theme is ultimately based on the love of the “sons of Elohim” and the daughters of men in Genesis 6:1-4, with the motif of the fallen angels who mastered magic supplemented from the apocryphal books (Jubilees 5:6; Enoch 6-8) and allusions in the New Testament (2 Peter 2:4; Jude 6). The Midrash Abkir, which is rich in old Jewish traditions, calls the guilty angels Shemḥazaie, ‘Uzza and ‘Aza’el, (see also Surābādi, p. 16) and explains how they lost their power by revealing the ineffable Name of God to Na‘amah, the beautiful woman who used it to escape from their unwanted lust and was rewarded for her chastity by God with being allowed to remain in heaven as the planet Venus.



Muslim philologists recognized that Hārūt and Mārūt were not of Arabic origin (see Jeffery, p. 283 with references), but it was left to Paul Lagarde (pp. 15, 169) to discover that they represented the Avestan Haurvatāt (q.v.)/Kordād and Amərətāt/Amurdād (q.v.), two of the Aməša Spəntas (q.v.) who were the guardians of waters and plants respectively (see the detailed study of Darmesteter). He further noted that the ‘Zaharā’ of the story who became the planet Venus was none other than Anāhid (q.v.) or Bidokt (a Nabataean word according to some *tafsirs* and of Persian origins according to others). The loss of the initial *a*- in Mārūt at such an early date has other parallels. By the time [Agathangelos](#) wrote, Armenian had combined the two names Haurvatāt and Ameretāt to form Hauraut-Mauraut, the name for a flower of the hyacinth family (Dumézil; see further Ananikian, p. 62 and Henning, 1965, p. 251[1977, I, p. 626]) “used in popular rites on Ascension Day” (Russell, p. 375). A Manichean glossary pairs Middle Persian ‘mwrđ’d hrwd’d with Sogdian hrwwt mrwwt (Henning, 1940, pp. 16, 19 [1977, I, pp. 17, 20]). The Slavonic version of the Book of Enoch names (33.11 B) Arioch and Marioch as guardians of the earth (Littmann, p. 83; Horovitz, p. 147), and the forms once doubted (Jefferey, loc. cit.) are now confirmed by the Aramaic version found at Qumrān (Milik, p. 110).

The demonization of the Iranian Aməša Spəntas in a foreign environment should not come as a surprise. The Qur’ān itself attests a similar case in Surah 27.39, where ‘Efrit “demon” is a transformation of the Avestan genius Āfriti surnamed the *dahman* “pious,” who manifests herself to the righteous when he utters benediction (Gray, *Foundations*, pp. 130-31; Jeffery, p. 215). There are of course several other parallel analogous examples in a wider context, such as Buddha becoming *but* “idol” in Persian (Bailey, p. 103).

Side by side with the purely Islamic versions, there also developed a Muslim-Persian rendering, first fully recorded in the so-called Ṭabari’s *Tafsir* in Persian, compiled for the Sāmānid king Maṣṣūr b. Nuḥ in 362/963 (*Tarjoma-ye tafsir-e Ṭabari* I, pp. 96-97), which draws on material from both Ṭabari’s Arabic Commentary on the Qur’ān and his Annals. Other renderings in the early Persian *tafsirs* tend to add an interesting detail or a new twist to the tale. The Persian variant has not yet received sufficient attention. Indeed, little research has been done on the sources, narrative techniques, and the range of details found in the early Persian *tafsirs* (see [EXEGESIS iii. In Persian](#)), including, for example, *Tāj al-tarājem fī tafsir al-Qor’ān le’l-a’ājem* of Abu’l-Moẓaffar Šāhfur Es-frāyeni (d. 471/1078), the *Tafsir-e Surābādi* of Abu Bakr ‘Atiq Nišāburi



Surābādi (d. 484/1091), *Kašf al-asrār wa 'oddāt al-abrār* (begun in 520/1126) of Abu'l-Faẓl Rašid-al-Din Meybodi, and *Rawż al-jenān* of Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi (fl. first half of the 6/12th cent.). Many of the commentaries on this Koranic passage expound on the nature of magic of both licit and illicit categories, and some contain interesting additional details.

The Islamic Persian version of the myth gives the same story but with a divergent outcome: after lusting for the woman and becoming intoxicated with wine and committing murder, Hārut and Mārut were imprisoned inside a well in Mount Damāvand (see [DAMĀVAND ii](#)). There they remain suspended by the feet, with tongues sticking out because of thirst “although the distance between their mouth and the water amounts only to the thickness of a sword blade. They shall remain so till the end of the world, and whoever desires to learn sorcery goes there and learns magic from them” (*Tarjoma-ye tafsir-e Ṭabari*, I, pp. 96-97). Damāvand was a favorite haunt of demons or Dīvs (q.v.), and one recalls that a tradition claimed that demonic Zaḥḥāk was taken there by Frēdun (q.v.) and imprisoned in a well where he would remain until the end of the world. Already the caliph 'Oṭmān exiled to Damāvand an Arab who was accused of sorcery (the Arabic text has the Persian word *nirang* for sorcery), “because that is a land where sorcery is in vogue” (Ṭabari I/6, p. 3033; see further Schwartz, *Iran*, p. 786). Thus, the link between Damāvand and the fallen angels was natural in Iranian lore. Indeed, by Ṭabari's time, a locality in the Damāvand area had come to be called Bā-bel Donbāwand, “the Babylon of Damāvand,” and Suddi located the tormenting place of Hārut and Mārut in “Bā-bel Donbāwand” (Schwarz, loc. cit., with references). Ḥamd-Allāh Mostawfi, who has given a long account of the fallen angel's imprisonment in Babylon, also says (*Nozhat al-qolub*, ed. Le Strange, p. 37) that Hārut and Mārut are kept in chain in Damāvand. The torment of Hārut and Mārut in the Iranized version of the story is an embellishment derived from classical antiquity. It recalls the myth of Tantalus (Ovid, *Metamorphoses* 4:458-59; Homer, *Odyssey* 9:582-92), one of the four legendary figures often associated together (the others being Ixion, Sisyphus, and Tityus) that underwent punishment for various offences. Among Tantalus's offences was that of revealing the secrets of gods to mankind, and he was punished by being forced to stand up perpetually to his neck in a pool of water but unable to quench his thirst, with the water receding whenever he tried to drink.

The “tantalization” of Hārut and Mārut gained wide and lasting currency throughout the Muslim world (Bamberger, pp. 115 ff.). Persian dictionaries



define the names as famed sorcerers and as synonyms of sorcery. In the prelude to the story of Bēžan (q.v.) and Manēža, Ferdowsi tells us how in a dark night his beloved fetched him a lamp and prepared a feast of wine, quinces, oranges, and pomegranates and then played the harp so wondrously that the overjoyed poet thought: “you would have said it is Hārut who performs magic (*nirang*)” (*Šāh-nāma*, ed. Moscow, V, p. 7; ed. Khaleghi, III, p. 305, n. 2). The reference is of course particularly apt in this context, as Bēžan was also later imprisoned in a well. Illustrations of Bēžan imprisoned in a well in the hostile land of Turān, and that of Hārut and Mārut hanging upside down in a well in Babylon, formed part of the pictorial cycle of illustrated manuscripts of the *Šāh-nāma*, in the case of the former, and that of the *Qesās al-anbiyā* and *‘Ajā’eb al-makluqāt* genre in the case of the two fallen angels (see, for example, Schmitz, fig. 2 from *‘Ajā’eb al-makluqāt*, ca. 1050/1640, folio 19). Other Persian poets, most notably NāsĀer-e Kōsrow, Nežāmi, and Jalāl-al-Din Rumi, make several allusions to the story in their poetry. In the case of Rumi, he characteristically finds a mystical significance behind the story and in one passage (tr. Nicholson, Book V, lines 182-85) he explains “that the intellect and spirit are imprisoned in clay, like Hārut and Mārut in the pit of Babylon” (R. A. Nicholson, tr., and ed., *The Mathnawi of Jalālu’ddin Rumi*, translation, III, repr. 1977, p. 14). On the other hand, some Islamic sources were skeptical of the way the story was expanded in the Persian version. Thus, Maqdesi (*Bad’* III, pp. 14-15) pours scorn on much of the account and dismisses it as material propagated intentionally by atheists to further their corrupt intentions.

Two later developments of the story of the two angels are worthy of note. The 14th-century Armenian John VI Cantacouzenus cited in an anti-Muslim treatise the legend of Arōt and Marōt, whom God sent to earth “in order to rule well and justly” (Russell, p. 381). Hārut and Mārut also make an appearance in English literature from the end of the 18th century onwards as part of a romantic celebration of defiance and rebellion and the interest in the very notion of fallen angels. The pair appears in the poetry of George Croly (1780-1860; see Chew, pp. 201-3) and Thomas Moore (1779-1852). Moore’s “The Loves of the Angels,” published in 1823 in London, his last long poem and a *succès de scandale* at the time, deals with the theme in an extensive way. In a more lighthearted and swashbuckling manner, Sir H. Rider Haggard (1856-1925), in *The Ivory Child* (London, 1916, Chap. IV. Harut and Marut) alludes to the story in his account of the African magicians, Harut and Marut, who are announced by the butler as “Mr. Hare-root and Mr. Mare-root” and



proceed to impress the entire English household with their skill in magic.

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