



# MIRACLES I. IN ANCIENT IRANIAN TRADITION

---

## MIRACLES

### i. In Ancient Iranian Tradition

The written accounts of miracles in ancient Iran, both those relating to [Zoroaster](#) and his family and those regarding the legendary heroes of the [Kayanid](#) dynasty, have come down to us through the Pahlavi religious literature. The words used to designate them are: *abd(ih)* “wonderful(ness),” *warz* “miracle, miraculous power,” *warz-kardīh* “action of doing miracles,” *xwarrah-kardīh*, which has about the same meaning as the preceding, as summarized in the [Dēnkard](#) (V.22.2, ed. Amouzgar and Tafazzoli: *warz-kardīh ud xwarrah-kardīh ud abārīg ān ēwēnag abd*), and, less often, *widimās* “wonder, miracle” (MacKenzie, p. 90). It is also of note that *xwarrah*, in the sense of “glorious power” conferred by the gods who held it on a few men such as kings and legendary heroes, is associated with *warz* and *abdīh*, and is also part of the terminology of miracles (cf. *Dk.* VII.1.42, and 44: *abar warz ud xwarrah ud abdīh ī waxšwar ī dēn mazdēs*n; Molé, pp. 12, 13).

These miracles do not reflect historical events; they are always associated with the mythical and legendary history of Mazdaism and the ancient Iranian epic, although the miracle itself remains, as in other cultures, an act contrary to the laws of nature or one attributable to divine intervention (Sigal, p. 10). One



might even say that there is no hagiography in Iran comparable to that which grew up in Christendom or in Islam. Even though Zoroaster can be considered a saint, the legends concerning his life and miraculous deeds are probably of late origin. They are not comparable to the miracles attributed to Jesus and his disciples, nor indeed to those attributed to Christians martyred under the Sasanians (see Gignoux, 2000). The invention of miracles in Mazdaism may be the result of competition towards the end of the Sasanian period with other established religions (i.e., Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the aim perhaps being to show the holiness and eminence of the founder of Zoroastrianism; such hagiographic traditions can scarcely have survived for more than a millenium. The wondrous deeds of the Kayanid heroes as preserved in [Ferdowsi's Šāh-nāma](#) (see below), on the other hand, clearly go back to Avestan traditions, to the *Yashts* and *Zand*, but one may doubt whether they are really miracles in the same sense that is applied in other religions, insofar as the essential requirement was to show the superiority of the Iranians over their Turanian enemies.

The sources concerning Zoroaster, [Vištāspa \(Goštāsp\)](#), and others are *Dēnkard* V and VII, the *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram* (see [ZĀDSPRAM](#)), and the *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg*. No historic accounts exist of the life of Zoroaster. The Mazdean theologians formulated pious legends, mainly based on their own imaginative perceptions, although one may surmise the existence of lost parts of the Avesta or the *Zand* that would have attested them. The existence of many variations between the texts may be construed as evidence of their authenticity, or merely an indication that there was competition to relate the most striking and demonstrative miracles. The noticable differences between *Dēnkard* V and *Dēnkard* VII could confirm the multiple authorship of its different parts (see Gignoux, 2001).

*Dānkard* VII is the richest text in miracles confirmed by other treatises. During the pregnancy of [Dughdhōvā](#), Zoroaster's mother, the *xwarrah* lit her room very brightly even during the night, because of the light (*rōšnīh*) that radiated from her body (*Dk.* VII.2.3; Molé, pp. 14, 15; Jackson, p. 26). The *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* adds that this happened three days before the birth of Zoroaster. This is confirmed by the *Dēnkard* (VII.2.56-57; Molé, pp. 24, 25), which, however, says that three nights beforehand the entire village was lit up as if it was on fire. *Dēnkard* (V.2.2) extends this miracle to the entire duration of the prophet's life. *Zādspram*, who gives a philosophical analysis of the phenomenon, sees this as the infinite light (*asar-rōšnīh*), which, in the form of



the fire of the *xwarrah* became mixed with the domestic fire (*ātaxš*) and with Dughdhōvā, the mother of Zoroaster, then aged 15 years, the symbolic age of perfection.

Because the demons had accused Dughdhōvā of being a witch, the gods sent her to the land of Porušasp to marry. This episode described as *wuzurg abdīh* (Dk. V.2.3; Jackson, pp. 24-25), is strangely reminiscent of the poor reputation sometimes ascribed to the mother of Jesus in the Christian apocrypha (cf. Gignoux, 2008, p. 62).

The *Dēnkard* (VII.2.54; Molé, pp. 22, 23) speaks of a miraculous cure of Dughdhōvā when she fell victim to a serious illness during her pregnancy. *Zādspram* (8.1-5), gives the nature of this disease (fever, pain, and wind), which was sent by the demon that carries those ills, and relates that *Ohrmazd's* envoy (*Amahrspand*) dissuaded her from visiting a sorcerer (*jādug*), a renowned healer. He advised her to wash her hands with the butter (*rogn*) of the cow, then burn wood and incense on her belly, and this healed her.

A miracle of punishment is attested in *Dēnkard* (VII.3.4; Molé, pp. 28, 29); a sorcerer (see *KARAPAN*) called *Dūrāsrāw* wanted to crush Zoroaster's head at his birth, but his hands were paralyzed and he could no longer bring food to his mouth. According to *Zādspram* (10.2-3), the sorcerer had tried to strangle the baby with a lace, but his hand withered (cf. *Dk.* V.2.3, where several witches and sorcerers are mentioned). The sorcerer was called *Dūrāsrāw* according to the *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* (7), whose author declares that this extraordinary miracle was confirmed by all. In the *Dēnkard* (VII.3, 8-9), the sorcerer persuaded Porušasp to put Zoroaster on a pyre because he was frightened by the miracles that had accompanied his birth, but the fire would not light. According to *Zādspram* (10.8), the fire was lit, but it did not burn Zoroaster, which was "the mark of an ordeal." This gloss suggests that the author does not consider this event to be a miracle (Molé, pp. 14, 15, 28, 29; Jackson, pp. 28-29).

Three more murder attempts by sorcerers are well known in the Mazdean literature. In one Zoroaster is placed in front of a herd of cows, but the first cow stops and prevents the others from trampling him (*Dk.* VII.3, 11-12; Molé, pp. 30, 31; *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* 9), which expands the account with the information that Zoroaster was being sought everywhere, recalling the episode of Luke (2:43-47) in which Jesus escapes his parents. *Zādspram*



(10.5-6) mentions the symbolic number of 150 cows, and *Dēnkard* (V.2, 4), diverges from other accounts, saying that Zoroaster was thrown before “the wolves and other wild beasts.”

The second attempt involves horses (*Dk.* VII.3.13-14; Molé, pp. 30, 31; *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* 10; *Zādspram* omits this episode). The third attempt involves a she-wolf whose young were first of all killed so that on returning to her lair she would devour the infant (*Dk.* VII.3.15-16; Molé, pp. 30, 31; *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* 11; *Zādspram* 10.9; not mentioned in *Dk.* V). In these various cases too, the considerable differences between books 7 and 5 of *Dēnkard* cast doubt on the existence of a single original source and suggest that there were multiple authors (see Gignoux, 2001).

*The miracles of Zoroaster.* Zoroaster himself has been credited with some miracles. According to chapter 15 of the *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg*, when a wide river blocked the passage of Zoroaster and his companions, a voice was heard, and the water divided, allowing them to cross. This is clearly reminiscent of Moses’ crossing of the Red Sea while being pursued by the Egyptians. According to *Dēnkard* (V.2.8), Zoroaster revived a partly paralyzed animal. By means of his *xwarrah*, he caused the legs of Vištāspa’s unique black horse, which, due to an ailment, had disappeared into its belly, to come back out. This miracle convinced Vištāspa to join Zoroaster’s religion (*Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* 18; Molé, pp. 132, 133; Šahrestāni, I, p. 87; tr., pp. 187-88). According to Delphine Menant (p. 37), this story was borrowed from the Muslims who had circulated it before the 13th century. A miracle along the same lines, following which the king converted, is attested for Ardašir’s horse in Arabo-Persian literature, (cf. Browne, p. 219; Grignaschi; Schilling). Zoroaster is also recorded as having paralyzed the demons, who then all fled underground, by reciting the *Ahuna vairiia* prayer (*Dk.* VII.4.38; Molé, pp. 48, 49).

Finally, there are miracles concerning the sacred fire: according to the *Wizīrkard ī dēnīg* (17), Vishtāspa adopted the True Faith because he saw the sacred fire Burzēn-Mihr (*Ādur Burzēn-Mihr*) burning without wood or incense; the writer emphasizes the strangeness of this wonder (*škeftih*). The *Dēnkard* (VII.5.9; Molé, pp. 64, 65) merely states that some miracles of the fires (*awdih ī pad ātaxšān*) were recorded, but this might be just a reference to ordeals.

*The Kayanid heroes.* *Esfandiār*’s exploits, in which he faced a variety of dangerous trials, are described by Ferdowsi as his seven exploits (*haft kān*). In



that account (Ferdowsi, V, pp. 221-89, vv. 21-849; tr., IV, p. 391-428, summarized on p. 499), the first trial explained to Esfandiār by the Turanian prisoner Gorgsār consists of killing two formidable wolves, one male and one female, who were blocking the road to *Dež-e Ruyin*, the castle of *Arjāsp*, where his two sisters were held captive. The hero acknowledges the help God has granted him (pp. 226-27, vv. 79-91). In the second exploit, Esfandiār must kill two dreadful lions, one male and one female, and again he acknowledges that God had killed them through his hand (pp. 229-30, vv. 106-19). In order to kill the dragon in the third trial, he builds a wooden chariot bristling with swords, on top of which is placed a chest, in which he hides. The dragon gobbles up the two-horse chariot, but the swords prevent him from letting go of it. The hero then emerges from the chest and breaks its skull (pp. 132-33, vv. 146-63). In the fourth exploit, Esfandiār must face a sorceress (*zan-e jādu*). The sorceress changes herself into an enchanting beautiful Turanian girl (p. 237, v. 210). Esfandiār offers her a drink and then throws over her neck a magic chain that Zoroaster had tied up on his arm. The chain deprives the sorceress of her magic power (p. 238, vv. 216-20), which makes her once more appear in her real shape of a malodorous old woman (*ganda-pir*), and Esfandiār strikes her with his sword. In the fifth exploit, Esfandiār employs the same stratagem against the fearsome bird, *Simorg*, as he did against the dragon. Wounded by the blades, the bird cannot escape and Esfandiār strikes it with his sword (p. 242, v. 269). In the sixth exploit, snow covers the earth and a terrible wind blows for three days and three nights, but thanks to the prayers of his brother, Pašōtan, and the Iranian army, the bad weather disappears. He also has to cross a very deep river (*žarf-daryā-ye bibon*; p. 252, vv. 386-89), so he persuades Gorgsār to show him how to cross it. The entire army crosses upon goatskins and Esfandiār kills Gorgsār for having lied to him about the existence of water in the area (pp. 252-55, vv. 390-430; Ṭabari, I, pp. 679-80 [In some printed editions, crossing the river is mentioned as the seventh trial.]). In the seventh exploit, he enters *Arjāsp*'s palace disguised as a merchant, and by smuggling 160 trusty men inside hidden in chests, dupes *Arjāsp* and frees his captive sisters (pp. 258-81, vv. 467-747).

Esfandiār has other wondrous deeds to his name. He frees himself singlehandedly from the chains that the blacksmiths were unable to break (pp. 197-98, vv. 1280-86; tr., pp. 374-75). *Arjāsp* is terrified by a feat of Esfandiār and arrays a huge army that causes the air to turn violet from the reflection of the swords and spears (p. 209, vv. 1429-30; tr., p. 387).



Rostam's wondrous deeds demonstrating his extraordinary strength are also to be noted. Going to the hunt, he holds in one hand a tree trunk on which an onager has been impaled (Ferdowsi, tr., IV, p. 472-73). When Bahman rolls a rock down from the top of a mountain to kill Rostam, he does not even let go of the onager, but waits for the rock to reach him, at which point he kicks it back with the heel of his boot. It is also told (tr., p. 478) that Rostam broke the back of a mad elephant and flung it into the waves. Sām, too, killed two formidable monsters. A demon (*div*) was hidden inside one of them (tr., p. 495). Rostam is also said to have fished for crocodiles when casting his net into the China Sea, and to have seized leopards by the tail in the desert (tr., p. 532). He also grasped the white demon (*div-e safīd*) by the belt and threw it to the ground (Ferdowsi, II, pp. 42-43, vv. 570-81, tr., p. 533).

Ferdowsi also reports the feats of the Simorǧ. It healed the wounds of Rostam and his horse Raḵš, drawing out the arrow-heads from their bodies (Ferdowsi, V, p. 400, vv. 1265-70; tr., p. 357). It explained to Rostam how to make from a tamarisk branch an arrow that could slay Esfandiār; the arrow struck the latter in the eye and killed him (Ferdowsi, V, pp. 403, 412, vv. 1294-1304, 1370-85; tr., pp. 539-40). Another noteworthy brief tale is about King Kāvus, who, persuaded by a demon to find out the secrets of the spheres, ascends to the heavens borne by four eagles harnessed to his seat, but he falls down into the water at Āmol when the eagles have no more energy left (Ferdowsi, II, pp. 95-97, vv. 357-93; tr., p. 460).

*A typology of the miracles.* Many of the episodes described as miracles are only a way of exhibiting the unheard-of strength of the heroes, and as such they belong more to the epic genre than to the hagiographic. Such is the case for most of the exploits recounted in the *Šāh-nāma*. Besides, the persistent relationship of the miracle-workers with animals (horses, oxen, lions, wolves, crocodiles, elephants, leopards, eagles), with fantastic creatures such as the dragon and the Simorǧ, and with demons that are often disguised as animals must be emphasized, not to mention their relations with sorcerers and magicians. In all these relationships, the animals represent a danger to man, with the sole exception of the onager. Those categories of miracle that are well known in the western world are: miraculous cures (Zoroaster's mother), protection from danger (Rostam and the rock), the deliverance of prisoners (Esfandiār breaking his chains), interventions against the elements (the passage across the sea after it parts before Zoroaster), and punishments (the sorcerer who wishes to kill the prophet). Particularly characteristic of



Mazdean Iran are the luminous manifestations of the *xwarrah*, which is considered miracles by the theologians. These should, perhaps, be associated with the sacred fires. From a typological point of view they are the most original element.

*The survival of this typology in Islamic Iran.* Although Muslim hagiography was influenced more by Judaism and Christianity than by Zoroastrianism, nonetheless there is a striking similarity between the birth of Moḥammad and that of Zoroaster, for instance, the light radiating from Moḥammad's mother after she conceived the prophet. When Āmena bent Wahb "became pregnant with him, a light shone from her by which she could see the castles of Bostra in Syria" (Choksy, p. 60), and many sacred fires were put out by the light upon Moḥammad's birth. It was, in a way, the miracle opposite of what one would expect from Mazdean fires.

The miracles in favor of Vištāspa, convincing him to adhere to the religion preached by Zoroaster, have their counterpart in Islam, insofar as the miracle is a sign (*āya*) of the prophetic mission given by Allāh to convince his prophets of the authenticity of Moḥammad's mission (Grill, pp. 237-38). But the most notable typological survival may be the relationship of Muslim saints with animals. There is, nonetheless, a fundamental difference; in Mazdean Iran, miracles are accomplished to ward off a malignant action by animals, even domestic animals such as horses and oxen, whose action could be malignant due to the intervention of sorcerers. In Islam, by contrast, the domestic animal is of assistance, thanks to the mediation of the Muslim saint who lives in harmony with it. Such assistance may also be rendered by wild and ferocious animals, who are much in evidence in the hagiographies of the Muslim world, including lions, crocodiles, snakes, wolves, and occasionally dragons or ghouls. But the saint is there to tame them, not to kill them, as did the Kayanid hero.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

---

Denise Aigle, *Miracle et Karāma: Hagiographies médiévales comparée*,



Bibliothèque de l'École pratique des hautes études, section des sciences religieuses 109, Brepols, 2000.

Jaleh Amouzgar and Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Le cinquième livre du Dēnkard*, Studia Iranica, Cahier 23, Paris, 2000.

Edward G. Browne, "Some Account of the Arabic Work Entitled 'Nihāyatu'l-irab fī akhbāri'l-Furs wa'l-Arab'," *JRAS*, 1900, pp. 195-259.

Jamsheed K. Choksy, *Conflict and Cooperation: Zoroastrian Subalterns and Muslim Elites in Medieval Iranian Society*, New York, 1997.

Ferdowsi, *Šāh-nāma*, ed. Jalāl Kāleqi Moṭlaq (Djalal Khaleghi-Motlagh), 6 vols., New York, 1987-2005 (vol. 6 with Maḥmud Omidsālār); tr. Jules Mohl, as *Le livre des rois par Abou'l-kasim Firdousi*, 7 vols, Paris, 1876.

Philippe Gignoux, "Une typologie des miracles des saints et martyrs perses dans l'Iran sassanide," in Denise Aigle, ed., 2000, pp. 499-523.

Idem, "Le composition du Dēnkard et le contenu du livre V," in Ali Ashraf Sadeqi, ed., *Yād-nāma-ye Doktor Aḥmad Tafazzoli/Tafazzoli Memorial Volume*, Tehran, 2001, pp. 30-37.

Idem, "Comment le polémiste mazdéen du Škand Gumānīg Vizār a-t-il utilisé les citations du Nouveau testament?" in Christelle Jullien, ed., *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran: Controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran sassanide*, Studia Iranica, Cahier 36, vol. 2, Paris, 2008, pp. 59-67.

Mario Grignaschi, "La Nihāyatu-l-'Arab fī aḥbāri-l-Furs wa-l-'Arab" (Première partie), *Bulletin d'Etudes Orientales* 22, 1969, pp. 15-67.

Denis Grill, "Les fondements scripturaires du miracle en Islam," in Denise Aigle, ed., 2000, pp. 237-49.

Abraham V. Williams Jackson, *Zoroaster: The Prophet of Ancient Iran*, New York, 1965.

David Neil MacKenzie, *A Concise Pahlavi Dictionary*, London, 1971; repr., 1986.

Catherine Mayeur-Jaouen, "Miracles des saints musulmans et règne animal," in Denise Aigle, ed., *Miracle et karāma*, Brepols, 2000, pp. 577-606.



Delphine Menant, *Zoroastre d'après la tradition parsie*, Paris, 1908.

Marijan Molé, *La légende de Zoroastre selon les textes pehlevi*, Paris, 1967.

Abu'l-Fatḥ Moḥammad Šahrestāni, *Ketāb al-melal wa'l-neḥal*, ed. William Cureton, as *Book of Religions and Philosophical Sects*, 2 vols., Leipzig, 1923; tr. Afzal-al-Din Šadr Torka Ešfahāni, as *al-Melal wa'l-neḥal*, ed. Sayyed Moḥammad-Rezā Jalāli Nā'ini, 2nd ed., Tehran, 1946.

Alexander Schilling, "L'apôtre du Christ, la conversion du roi Ardashir et celle de son vizir," in Christelle Jullien, ed., *Chrétiens en terre d'Iran II: Controverses des chrétiens dans l'Iran sassanide*, Studia Iranica, Cahier 36, Paris, 2008, pp. 89-111.

Pierre-André Sigal, *L'homme et le miracle dans la France médiévale (XIè-XIIIè siècle)*, Paris, 1985.

Abu Ja'far Moḥammad b. Jarir Ṭabari, *Ta'riḫ al-rosol wa'l-moluk*, ed. M. J. De Goeje, 3 Series in 15 vols., Leiden, 1964.

John Wilson, *The Parsi Religion: As Contained in the Zand-Avasta*, Bombay, 1843.

Zādspram, *Anthologie de Zadspram*, ed. and tr. Philippe Gignoux and Ahmad Tafazzoli, Paris, 1993.