

The Legends of Zarathushtra

Legend: Stranger than Truth

Legends are principles that are woven into stories which physically appear to be impossible. These stories are passed down from generation to generation in a style rich in allegory and symbolism. Legends cannot be historically verifiable, nevertheless they include a number of profound philosophical truths which are conveyed in an enigmatic way.

As there seems to be no chronology for any part of the Avesta, there is no means of knowing how soon after Zarathushtra's death, the legends about his life and times developed.

Zarathushtra's Birth

In the *Dēnkard* we are told that upon God's command, the prophet-to-be's *khwarr* (kingly glory) was brought from the celestial world and made to descend into the hearth of Zarathushtra's maternal grandfather, Frāhīm. *rvānā.zōish*. From this hearth-fire the kingly glory entered Dughdōvā's mother and later it passed into Dughdōvā herself. As a result of this, Dughdōvā radiated light around her, dispelling the darkness. The demons recognized this divine happening and therefore attempted to kill her. Dughdōvā's father sent her away to the house of the Spitaman family chief whose son, Pourushaspa, eventually married her.

According to the legend the kingly glory also entered Pourushaspa. One day Pourushaspa and his wife drank the juice of the *hōm* stalk, mixed with milk, whereupon the kingly glory (*Av.khvarenah*), the guardian spirit (*Av.fra-vashi*) and the physical body (*Av.tanū gaēthya*) came together and united in the mother-to-be to form the perfect man-child, under the guidance of the Bounteous Immortals. The demons tried to kill Zarathushtra in the womb of his mother. Dughdōvā, it is believed, was in great pain and anguish as she was attacked by the demons of fever, pain and wind. In desperation, she sought to go to a wizard but was advised not to go by the voice of God.

Instead, God instructed her to wash her hands and then take firewood, butter and meat as offerings to the hearth-fire. Legend has it that this propitiated fire surrounded her to protect her from the demons. (*Dk.bk.7 Ch.2, SBE Vol. 47 pp 17-30*).

Zarathushtra was thus born in a divine way, for included in his birth were the three components of *khvarenah*, *fravashi* and *tanū gaēthya*, which according to tradition was his ordination to be the future priest, warrior and herdsman amongst his people (*Zādspram 18.2*).

His Infancy

According to tradition Zarathushtra is said to have been the only child who laughed when he was born instead of crying. For it is stated, "...those who are made to cry have seen mortality as their end, and those who have laughed have seen their own righteousness." (*Zādspram 14.17*).

The demons, it is said, next tried to destroy the infant. According to the *Zādspram* (16.4-9), Pourushaspa being temporarily afflicted by evil gave his child to a wicked priest (*Ph.karb*) who tried to kill the infant Zarathushtra. First, the *karb* threw the baby in the path of a herd of cattle and later in the path of horses, but the baby was protected by a divine force and therefore remained unharmed. Zarathushtra was next thrown by the *karb* onto a pile of burning embers but once again he remained unscathed. Finally, the *karb* carried the infant to the lair of a she-wolf thinking that the animal would kill the baby; however, a divine power intervened and protected the infant Zarathushtra.

His Childhood

Zarathushtra's childhood is replete with stories about his understanding and sagacity. Even as a boy he showed opposition to the cult of the demons whom he recognized to be evil.

A priest of the demons (*Ph.dēvs*) was once a guest in his father's house and was invited to

recite the formal religious prayer (*māthra*) before food. Zarathushtra objected to this request which angered the priest who cursed Zarathushtra, only to fall dead from his horse as he rode away (*Zādspram* 19.8).

His Adolescence

At the age of fifteen, Zarathushtra asked his father for his rightful share of a girdle (*Phakūsfī*) which he later tied around his waist. It is said that the good mind (*Av. Vohu Manah*) instructed him to do that which was righteous and proper (*Zādspram* 20.1-3).

At the Court of King Vishtāspa

According to the *Zardusht Nameh*, Zarathushtra was persecuted by the wizards and sorcerers at King Vishtāspa's court. Zarathushtra was wrongly imprisoned by the King because his teachings were not acceptable to the counsellors at the King's court. His release came about when he miraculously cured Vishtāspa's favourite horse.

According to the legend, the prophet cured each limb of the horse, in return for four favours that the King had to concede. First, that Vishtāspa himself should embrace the teachings of Zarathushtra; secondly, that his son Isfandiār (*Spentōdāta*) should champion and support the faith; thirdly, that Queen Hutaosā should also be converted; and fourthly, that the King should put to death Zarathushtra's traducers. Upon the granting of these favours by the King, the horse is believed to have leapt back to its feet, fully cured!

Zarathushtra's Posthumous Sons

It is believed that Zarathushtra will have three sons born posthumously at intervals of a thousand years. His last son will be the Saoshyant who, it is said, will appear fifty-seven years before the final renovation of the world. Evil, at that point, will finally be defeated and the world will once again be restored to a perfect harmonious state devoid of all evil. (*Dk.* bk. 7, 9-11, *SBE* Vol. 47 pp 107-118).



Horse's head made in silver in Sasanian times (c 6th century B.C.)