

The Tale of Zahhak

Abolqasem Ferdowsi was born in a village near the town of Tus in the Khorasan Province of the Persian empire in 940. He devoted most of his adult life to composing his epic masterpiece, the *Book of Kings (Shahnameh)* between 980 and 1010. He is commonly called by Iranians Ferdowsi-e Tusi (Ferdowsi of Tus).

The story of Zahhak begins with that of Jamshid, a legendary king who had led Iran magnanimously for seven hundred years and brought about peace and justice, civilization, sanitation and health, arts and splendor, joy and prosperity, by the grace of God during his reign. But his success eventually led to pride and arrogance. He thus demanded to be recognized not only as the ruler of the world, but its creator. The arrogance marked his downfall as God withdrew the *farr*, or divinely granted royal grace, fortune, and wisdom, granted to Jamshid. Jamshid's fortune declined until Zahhak appeared.

Zahhak was deceived by Ahriman (Satan) to kill his father Merdas, an Arab nobleman, to acquire his fortune and power. Ahriman assisted by digging a pit and covering it with leaves and branches in the garden where Merdes took a walk and prayed at dawn every morning. Merdes fell in the pit and died. Zahhak became the ruler.

Ahriman appeared as a cook and presented Zahhak, the new ruler, for three days with marvelous spreads of delicious, colorful dishes made of birds and animals. On the fourth day, Zahhak, pleased with the cook, told him to ask for anything he desired. Having waited for the opportunity, Ahriman replied that he wished nothing but Zahhak's happiness, and would be overjoyed if he was allowed to kiss the king's shoulders. Permission granted, Ahriman kissed Zahhak's shoulders and disappeared. Two black snakes appeared where Ahriman's lips had touched. The snakes could not be removed, as new ones would replace them as soon as they were cut off. All physicians and healers in the realm proved powerless to deal with the snakes. Ahriman appeared in court as a skilled physician and prescribed a young human brain to be fed daily to each snake to keep Zahhak safe from them. Ahriman, hateful of human happiness, had prescribed murdering all mankind.

At the time that Jamshid lost his divine *farr*, Zahhak took the opportunity to attack Iran. Jamshid was defeated, escaped, and remained in hiding for a hundred years. He was finally caught and on Zahhak's order cut in half. Zahhak claimed Jamshid's throne. He ruled as an evil tyrant for years and killed many innocent young people to satisfy the snakes. One night he dreamed that three warriors attacked, bound, and dragged him to Mount Damavand near Tehran as a cheering crowd followed. The dream terrified Zahhak and he consulted many wise men and dream interpreters. A brave one finally interpreted that Zahhak's days were numbered, and a new king, Feraydun, would overthrow him.

In the meantime, Kaveh the blacksmith marched into Zahhak's palace one day to protest loudly the arrest of his eighth son to be killed as were the previous seven to satisfy the

demonic snakes. Taken aback at Kaveh's fearlessness, Zahhak ordered Kaveh's son be released, but asked Kaveh to recognize the king's royal generosity, justice, and benevolence by signing a document already signed by the leaders of the land.

Kaveh tore up the document in rage upon reading it and scolded the stunned cowardly courtiers serving a demonic tyrant. Kaveh stormed out of the court with his son, hoisted his leather apron on a lance, and called upon people to join together to remove the tyrant. People listened and thus began Kaveh's revolution, and his apron became the legendary national banner (Drafsh-e Kaviani).

A brave young man named Feraydun whose father had been killed by Zahhak, a descendant of the Persian King Tahmures, had already risen to avenge his father. Kaveh, his son, and his followers joined the noble young man as their king, as they recognized the sun-like splendor of divine *farr* in him. They rode for days and crossed Arvand Rude (Arvand River, now between Iran and Iraq, flowing into the Persian Gulf) to reach Zahhak's capital. They conquered the town and the palace and freed prisoners, but Zahhak and his army were away. When informed that his palace had been occupied, Zahhak and his great army rode to the capital, but were attacked by inhabitants from all corners. He was finally subdued by a blow to the head by Fareydun, with Kaveh and his son beside him (as Zahhak had dreamed, that three men would arrest him as the youngest delivers him the immobilizing blow). He was bound and taken to a cave under Mount Damavand, where he was imprisoned in chains. Fareydun thereafter proceeded to erase all traces of Zahhak's tyranny.

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