

The amazing exploits of Rostam

How Ilm-e-Khshnoom reveals his spiritual stature as the Prime Forerunner of Prophet Zarathushtra

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Part 1: General Introduction to the Shah Nameh

The Shah Nameh of Firdausi occupies a pre-eminent place in Zarathushtrian studies. As an epic, its scope and grandeur is unmatched. Even though it is almost twice as long as the Iliad of Homer, the western world has, save for some notable exceptions, mostly ignored its existence. The Shah Nameh and its various stories and lessons were part of the great oral tradition among Parsis, told by grandparents to their grandchildren before bed, inculcating in them the first seeds of awe and respect for their ancient and illustrious ancestors. With the passage of time and the disappearance of the study of the Persian language among Parsis, even this tradition is almost lost. Parsi children are more aware of Harry Potter and Tolkien, rather than Faridun and Rostam.

The Shah Nameh, as we have it today, is not a complete version. Moreover, there are several passages in the epic which are puzzling, to say the least. While some episodes of history have been dealt in great detail by Firdausi, some rather important events – such as the birth and life of the Prophet Zarathushtra have been dealt in a short and cursory manner. The advent of our Master, Ustad Saheb Behramshah Nowroji Shroff at the beginning of the twentieth century and his subsequent exposition of the inner secrets contained within the Shah Nameh shed great light on these mysteries. Using internal evidence as well as the knowledge he had gained from the Abed Sahebs of Demavand, the Master explained that the construct of the metrical verses of the Shah Nameh was based on a special set of esoteric laws known as ‘*Takseeraat*’. This word is of Pahlavi origin, although it is found today in the Arabic language and means ‘unravelling the inner truth behind something’. Thus the correct reading of certain verses of the epic can lead one to the real inner understanding of what Firdausi was trying to say. Firdausi has himself pointed out this fact in the Shah Nameh. He writes:

‘The history I am writing has been written by those before me. They have taken away all the fruits from the Garden of Knowledge. It is not possible for me to reach the top

of these fruit bearing Trees of Knowledge, because I do not have the strength to climb these trees. But a man sitting under the shadow of these great trees can take refuge under them and get some respite from his sadness. It is possible that I may find some place to take refuge under these Trees of Knowledge and leave behind me as my legacy this history of the Zarathushtrian Kings – the Shah Nameh. O reader, do not consider this history as lies or myth, because the passage of time is never the same over the ages. There are several topics in this history which your common sense will not be able to comprehend, whereas there are several mysteries in this history which need to be properly understood. Innumerable such stories were written in the olden days in many such histories. In later times, several different stories were in the possession of the Mobeds, in a scattered manner, and each of these wise ones would make use of these stories for their (spiritual) benefit. A brave descendant of Dahekan, who was himself courageous, wise and a giver of charity, gathered together all these fragments and put together the facts of this ancient history.’

This quote from the introductory verses of the Shah Nameh illustrates not only the difficulty that Firdausi faced in gathering his facts, but also very clearly states that there are several passages which mean much more than they reveal at face value. But the real secret of Firdausi was revealed to us by our Master, who shed great light on the life of Firdausi. It is through our Master that we learnt that Firdausi, although a Muslim by outward appearance, was a Zarathushtrian by practice and lineage. He had a Zarathushtrian Master who guided him throughout his life. Through this Master, Firdausi was given the ‘Amal’ or power to communicate with the Yazata Sarosh, at a lower level. This fact is also noted by Firdausi himself in the Shah Nameh when he writes:

“I receive a lot of joy inducing information from Sarosh Yazad, but my tongue is like the imprisoned Azi Dehak (Zohak) in front of this treasure of my heart.”

The hero Rostam occupies a focal position in the Shah Nameh. Some of Firdausi’s most poignant and grand verses relate to Rostam’s life. The complete absence of Rostam’s name in the extant Avesta has been a matter of great puzzlement for scholars. Some go so far as to consider him a mythical figure, who probably did not exist. Our Master has shed light on this aspect which will be explained in later writings on this topic. In order to properly understand the life and exploits of Rostam, it is necessary to first understand his family lineage and spiritual stature, for which we have to take a brief look at time in the Zarathushtrian religion.

The Avesta mentions three distinct concepts of time: *Zravane Akarne* – Endless time that encompasses the entire creation; *Zravane Daregho Khadata* – one cycle of 81,000 years through which the earth passes from creation to destruction; and *Zravane Thwashe Khadata* – an individual's one cycle of birth to death. The entire creation thus moves within the endless time – *Zravane Akarne*, within which are the cycles of the Earth – *Zravane Daregho Khadata* (ZDK) and man's individual time cycle – *Zravane Thwashe Khadata*. The secret of comprehending much of the Shah Nameh lies in understanding what happens in one *Zravane Daregho Khadata* cycle.

The last few thousand years of the ZDK cycle mark the nadir of human existence. Man descends into an almost animal-like state with his entire existence being driven by his primary needs, which are fuelled by his physical senses. It is pertinent to note that this diminished human-like behaviour is also marked by a striking change in man's appearance at that time. The average height of man during those last few years is not more than four feet. Truth becomes a scarce commodity and the institutions of all the major religions remain in a state of disarray. The very existence of earth is threatened as the individual and collective Activity-clouds become more and more murky, and form the dreaded '*Saen Druj*' clouds which can wipe out the entire existence. The few good men and women left stand no chance against the combined might of this collective evil. At this point in time, when everything seems lost, the last great saviour – Soshyos, called *Astvat Ereta* in the Avesta, descends on the visible earth after making preparations over many years in the unseen earth, or *Aiwithrishwa* to fulfil his duties as described in Karta 28 of the Fravardin Yasht. With his spiritual authority, the saviour begins the process of screening and then selecting one good pair of every genus, species and sub-species of all animate and inanimate creations. When the selection is complete, the entire group begins the migration towards a place called '*Pamar*'. (not to be confused with the modern day *Pamir* range of mountains in Central Asia and Tajikistan.) This is to be the place of sanctuary for the group of souls who would be the sole survivors of the destruction that would soon follow. The *Pamar*, referred to in the Avesta as '*Airyana Vaeja*' is located near the North Pole on the very top of the world. Preparations for the reception of the great group of survivors were made at this place many years in advance by the forerunners and helpers of Soshyos. Here, the community of survivors, led by Soshyos establishes their abode.

Soon thereafter, as the 81,000 year cycle comes to its fag end, the process of glaciation begins. Temperatures throughout the world plummet and rainfall, and thereafter snowfall, increase. Gradually, all parts of the earth are covered by ice and entire civilizations, countries and continents are submerged under a thick layer of ice. Soon, the world is totally destroyed and the Ice Age begins. The process of giving the earth a spiritual bath begins with this cleansing. As the perpetrators of evil perish, the advanced souls residing in the unseen area of the earth, Aiwitrishwa, (which is not subject to glaciation), begin the slow but steady purification of the earth, a course of action which will take nearly 25,000 years.

Meanwhile, as temperatures around the globe plummet, the North Pole experiences the phenomenon of Eternal Spring. In the Pamar, the survivors of the deluge, under the spiritual and temporal leadership of Soshyos and his appointed successors, (and, in time, their descendents), begin the journey of their spiritual advancement. Practicing the spiritual kinetics handed to them by the Saviour and his successors, the survivors start their progression. The practices of the individual religions which had existed at the time of the deluge are now merged into the collective worship of the Supreme Being, Ahura Mazda. As each successive generation arise, the degree of spiritual development increases. Slowly but surely, the survivors become the adept and are now called the *Anjuman-i-Salasi*: the Universal Brotherhood. This process continues for a period of nearly 25,000 years, and as the Earth finished her spiritual cleansing, the *Anjuman-i-Salasi* reached their own pinnacle of spiritual advancement.

As this period ends, and the waters recede, the descendants of the group of souls that were taken up by Soshyos descend on the now dry and hospitable Earth to start life afresh. Before that can happen, however, the *Daevas* – the evil ones descend on the Earth too and start their nefarious activities. The aim of the *Daevas* is to despoil the Earth and make it unsuited for humans to advance spiritually. The scientific and technological prowess of the *Daevas* was such that even modern technology would pale in comparison. They possessed the ability to mutate elements, change weather, alter geographical expanses in the blink of an eye, and cause untold destruction to human life and property. The fantastical descriptions of certain ‘monsters’ and ‘dragons’ given in the *Shah Nameh* are the allegorical imagery of these *Daevas*. Pitted against this mighty force were the *Peshdadians*, known in the *Avesta* as the *PoiryoTkaesha* – the First Law Givers. Not to be confused with ordinary kings who hanker for more territory and subjects, these were spiritually advanced souls, who had no human

obligation to give or take, but who take birth specially to help in the process of Frashogard. It is to be remembered that this is a time nearly 4000 years before the advent of the Prophet Zarathushtra. The Zarathushtrian faith and its many institutions had yet to be established. The people practiced the Mazdayasni faith, carried forward from the time of the last Zravane Daregho Khadata. It was the responsibility of the Peshdadian monarchs to uphold the Mazdayasni faith and more importantly, prevent the Daevas from having a free run. They were, therefore, the forerunners of Zarathushtra, preparing for his advent. The detailed descriptions in the Shah Nameh of the various fights of these Peshdadian monarchs with several Daevas are to be viewed against this backdrop.

Part 2: The lineage of Rostam

In this onerous task, the Peshdadian monarchs were helped by the paladins – or royal warriors from the family of *Saam-e-Savaar*, who was the son of *Nariman* and the grandson of the legendary *Keresaspa*. Saam was the foremost warrior in the court of the Peshdadian King *Minocheher*, and had developed a reputation for scourging all the Daevas of that time. He was guided in his divine mission by a great Mazdayasni Master who gifted him the ‘*Amal*’ of certain specific Avesta Nirangs to use against these Daevas and their science. As mentioned earlier, the Daevas, through the use of very advanced science and technology had the ability to mutate the elements and take various forms. One of the foremost Daevas of that time was *Sohaam* – who generally appeared in the Fire element form. Sohaam boasted of being invincible, but Saam, through the use of the powerful Nirangs gifted to him by his Mazdayasni Master, managed to capture him. Terrified of being killed by Saam, Sohaam asked for forgiveness, and promised to serve Saam for the rest of his life as his horse. Saam agreed, and the invincible combination of Saam and his Daevayasni-turned-helper Sohaam (in the form of Saam’s horse) rained utter destruction in the camp of the Daevas moving from one corner of the earth to another. Considering the wily nature of Sohaam, even though he had transformed into a horse, it was an amazing feat of Saam to be able to control and ride him. It is for this reason that Saam earned the epithet ‘*Savaar*’ – Master Rider. Hence his lineage earned distinction and was known as the family of Saam-e-Savaar. To this illustrious warrior was born Zaal, who was to become the father of Rostam.

The verses of the Shah Nameh relating to the birth of Zaal are highly mysterious. According to Firdausi, Zaal was born an albino – that is, his body was covered with white hair, and it looked as though he was the child of a Daeva. Saam ordered that the baby be thrown away in a valley to die its death. The abandoned baby was picked up by a bird called the *Simorgh*, who had its nest on Mount Demavand, to feed its newly hatched babies. Yet the bird had an amazing change of heart, and instead of feeding the baby to its brood, the Simorgh raised up the child as one of her own, and after many years returned the child to his father. Firdausi writes thus:

“The Lord aroused the maternal instinct in the Simorgh towards the baby, and it forgot all about eating the child. The Simorgh heard a voice in its ear say: ‘O valiant bird of kind sight! Take great care of this suckling child, for from his loins is destined to spring forth the seed that will give birth to a man of men, a world warrior as brave as a lion! This child has been entrusted to you on this mountain, and you yourself will see how time plays its part.’”

This fantastic story, which can be dismissed as totally absurd, has been beautifully explained by the Zarathushtrian mystic revelation. As mentioned earlier, Saam was guided in his divine mission by a Mazdayasni Master, whose name was *Saena-Amru*. This great spiritually advanced being, who was not even governed by the forces of gravity, resided in the restricted environs of Mount Demavand in the Alburz range. He was the possessor of the grand spiritual forces known in the Avesta as *Saena*, *Amru* and *Chamru*, (see Fravardin Yasht, Karta 25) and hence identified by the same name. Such advanced beings are also known as ‘birds’ in the Avesta because of their ability to appear at any place. When Zaal was born, he was immersed in an awe-inspiring aura and looked most radiant, yet was covered by white hair. The learned Mobeds of that time told Saam that the birth of the child with such albino features indicated that although this child had immense potential to start a family of distinguished lineage, certain sins relating to a previous birth had caused him to be born with this defect. In order to preserve his potential, and to ensure that the effect of the sins of the previous birth did not do any harm to the child in its early formative years, the Mobeds advised Saam that he should give custody of the child to his Mazdayasni Master, *Saena-Amru*, who would not only give him the right training, but also reduce the malefic effects of his birth by the time the child turned seven. This great event, which is difficult to explain in normal language, has been beautifully dramatized by Firdausi in his Shah Nameh as the story

of Simorgh. Firdausi's mysterious verses relating to this event themselves indicate that there is more to the story than meets the eye. He very cleverly alludes to the spiritual stature of the Simorgh as well as the future potential of Zaal. Several years later, the Simorgh returns Zaal to this father. This event has also been very well dramatized by Firdausi. According to the Shah Nameh, Saam had a dream in which he saw a man riding an Arabian steed coming from the direction of India, and giving him good news about his son. The next day, Saam gathered the Mobeds and the wise ones and asked for an explanation of the dream. The wise ones told him that it meant that Saam's son was alive and he would be able to find him. The next night, Saam had a dream once again wherein he saw a proud flag fluttering in the Hindu Kush mountains with a handsome slave standing next to the flag. On the left side of the slave stood a Mobed and on his right stood a wise man. Behind the slave stood a vast army. The Mobed and the wise man severely scolded Saam, berating him for not finding a maid for his son, that he had to give him to a bird. Following the dream, Saam, along with a team of soldiers proceeded towards the Alburz Mountain and on a very high cliff of that mountain he saw a young man having the build and features identical to his own. He saw a nest on the very summit of that cliff but he could not reach it. Subsequently, the Simorgh lifted his son and handed him back to Saam. Firdausi writes in his beautiful metre and unmatched style thus:

“He (Saam) saw a mountain whose height extended till the Pleiades (the Seven Sisters star formation), as if the mountain was trying to swallow the Pleiades itself! On this great mountain stood a giant nest, upon which the planet Saturn had no influence. The nest was made of ebony and sandalwood, bound together with Aloes (Agar wood). A young man with the features of Saam stood beside the nest, moving around. Saam knelt down and rubbed his cheeks against the ground and offered thanks to the great creator that he had fashioned such a great nest on this mountain which extended to the stars. Saam looked around for a way to reach the nest, but forget man, not even a foraging animal or a bird could find a way to the nest. From afar, the Simorgh spied Saam and his men and realised that they had indeed come to fetch Saam's son, and not to meet the Simorgh. The Simorgh spoke to the man thus: ‘O young one who has faced the difficulties of this nest! I am the nurse that has nourished you. I am your nurse, and I am also your good fortune. I have named you ‘Dastan-e-Zand’ because your father used cunning and intrigue against you and abandoned you. When you leave from here to meet your illustrious father, ask him to call you by this name. He is the finest among men and the most valiant of all warriors,

and has come searching for you and has great respect for you. I would like you to remain here, but there are greater things in store for you. Keep this feather of mine with you, and you shall always remain connected to me. Whenever you face any danger or difficulty, hold this feather in the fire and immediately I shall appear in front of you.’ Thus consoling the young man, the Simorgh lifted him and with great grace and flamboyance flew in the air and set down the young man, whose white hair extended to his chest, at the feet of his father.”

These few verses from the Shah Nameh not only show the brilliance and flowery imagery of Firdausi, but also give us an idea that the mighty epic is not to be read and taken merely at face value. Only the Zarathushtrian mystic revelation can explain passages such as these in their true light and glory. We have mentioned earlier that there exists a region of this world, where none of the pestilence and evil of the world can reach. This is known in the Avesta as *Aiwithrishwa* (literally, one third) and contains within it those regions where normal man may not set foot. This region connects the North Pole and the string of mountains passing roughly around the equator and houses the spiritual retreats and abodes of enlightened beings of all major religions. It also houses the great field known as the *Var* (enclosure) of Jamshid, built by the Peshdadian monarch at the very beginning of the Zravane Daregho Khadata, as also the regions of Mount Demavand inhabited by the Abed Sahebs who brought our Master to stay with them for a period of three years at the end of the nineteenth century.

We have seen earlier that the Mazdayasni Master of Saam, called Saena-Amru has been depicted as the bird Simorgh by Firdausi. The abode of these Masters is in the *Aiwithrishwa* region, where no man, or even unwanted animals and birds can enter. This spiritual fact is presented by Firdausi in the imagery of the giant nest situated on the top of a very high mountain. The mountain is said to reach up to the stars, denoting its spiritual zenith. The nest of the Simorgh is described as being made of sandalwood, ebony and Agar, which are the fragrant woods associated with the Jupiter Jiram which governs the Mazdayasni-Zarathushtrian faith. It is further described as being immune to the influence of Saturn. In astrology, it is well known that the planet that brings down good and bad fate is Saturn, who is much feared. However, the planet has no influence over the spiritually evolved Saena-Amru, hence the statement. The Simorgh describes itself as the maid as well as the good fortune of Zaal, indicating that the Mazdayasni Master was the spiritual fosterer of Zaal, in whose great destiny it was to receive the blessings and care of the Master at such a young

age. Lifting certain weaknesses from a child is the responsibility of its father. Zaal was born with an inclination for certain sins as a result of his previous lives, which is denoted by the term '*Dastan-e-Band*' – i.e. cunning and intrigue of his father. The Simorgh calls Zaal '*Dastan-e-Zand*', i.e. one whose fortune has been reversed by the power of the Zand-Avesta, thus showing that the spiritual responsibility of Saam was taken over by his Mazdayasni Master, who through the power of his Amal and the Avesta Manthras, overturned this weakness and strengthened the innate power of Zaal, so that he could fulfil his glorious destiny. It was due to these efforts of Saena-Amru, that despite several difficulties in his extremely long life of over 800 years, Zaal played a major role in preparing for the advent of the Prophet Zarathushtra and containing the spread of the Daevas. This spiritual fact is beautifully explained by Firdausi through the reply of Zaal to the Simorgh. The Shah Nameh says thus:

“Behold, O reader, what Dastan (Zaal) said to the Simorgh: ‘verily it seems you are weary of this companion of yours? O Simorgh, this nest of yours is my throne and your sheltering wings my Aura protector. I offer my thanks to God for your success, for the great burden on me you have lifted with great ease.’”

In this manner, the Mazdayasni Master of the house of Saam successfully lifted the great spiritual burden of Zaal from his shoulders, strengthened his divine prowess and concentrated the immense seed of greatness descended from Keresaspa into him. Even though he was named Zaal (meaning an old woman of white hair, for his appearance), the name given to him by Saena-Amru is more apt to show his transformation and subsequent great destiny. After taking leave of the Simorgh, Zaal was escorted to Saam’s palace where Saam closely examined him for the tell tale signs of greatness, his ability to bear the great Aura (Khoreh) of the house of Saam, and the Benign Divine Lustre (Kyanian Khoreh) which identified the Peshdadian worthies. Thus says Firdausi:

“Saam-e-Savaar examined his son from head to foot, whether he was worthy of bearing the Kyanian Khoreh and the crown and throne; and his heart filled with joy as if he were transported to Paradise and he showered many blessings on his son.”

In this manner, we see how Nature started preparing for the birth of Rostam, five generations before him, concentrating the spiritual brilliance and Divine Lustre through the seed of Keresaspa, Nariman, Saam and finally Zaal, so that it may burst forth in the to be born

Rostam. After an intensive period of training in the martial arts as well as court protocol, Saam introduced Zaal in the court of King Minocheher, and in a short span of time Zaal became well liked and respected. As he entered the service of the Peshdadian King, Minocheher gifted him the governorship of the regions east of Iran, including Afghanistan, Kabul, India, and Sind, along with priceless gifts of jewels, gold, horses and precious spices.

In those days, the area of Kabul was ruled by a man called *Mehrab*, who used to pay an annual tribute to King Minocheher. Although Mehrab was descended from the accursed Zohak, he had a noble and intelligent lady called *Sindokht* as his wife, who was descended from a very spiritually evolved Iranian family. They had a daughter called *Rodabeh* who was exceedingly beautiful. Zaal was introduced to this daughter by accident and immediately both were smitten by each other. Zaal was however, aware of the troubling lineage of Rodabeh and hence wrote a letter to his father asking for permission to wed her. Saam was put in a quandary when he received the letter. On one hand, he did not want to refuse anything to Zaal because of his deprived childhood. At the same time, the great *Pehliva* could not even consider upsetting the Peshdadian monarch Minocheher to whom he had sworn allegiance and who was the undisputed leader of the Mazdayasni followers of that time. He therefore called in the Mobeds and the astrologers to determine what kind of result could be expected from the union of Zaal and Rodabeh. Shortly, the wise ones returned with happy faces and a heartening reply, which Firdausi writes:

“Hail unto thee, O Saam, for we have followed the movement of the stars and counted their course, and we have read the message of the skies. And it is written: ‘A clear spring shall issue into the day, a son shall be born to Zaal, a hero full of power and glory, and there shall not be his like in Iran.’ ”

A relieved and rejoiced Saam wrote back to his son, saying that although he approved of the union, it was his duty to take the permission of the King before giving the go ahead. Minocheher himself was agitated when he heard about this development. He met Saam but refused to be drawn into any discussion on Zaal. The next morning, the King ordered Saam to march forthwith to Kabul and destroy Mehrab and his kingdom. With a heavy heart, but fully conscious of his responsibilities and priorities, Saam accepted the King’s orders and began the march to Kabul with a large army. When news of this development reached Kabul there was great consternation and fear, for Mehrab stood no chance against the battle hardened army of Saam. Zaal left his camp and went forward to meet his father to plead his case. After

discussion, it was agreed that Zaal himself would take a letter written by Saam to King Minocheher, laying down the facts of the case, the astrologers' tidings and Saam's own request for approval of the union.

As Zaal departed for the court of Minocheher, the wise Sindokht – wife of Mehrab, devised a plan to save her family and country. She gathered a tribute for Saam from the treasury of her husband. Firdausi's description of this tribute is worth quoting here:

“Then Sindokht went to the treasury of Mehrab, and took three hundred thousand Dinars of gold. And she took with her, to the house of Saam, ten famous horses caparisoned in gold, along with fifty slaves with cummerbunds of gold; thirty Arab horses from the province of Fars, caparisoned in silver; sixty servants bedecked with silver necklaces, each holding a golden cup in their hands, filled to the brim with musk and camphor, and rubies, and turquoise, and precious stones of every kind, some with the finest wine and some with sugar; forty lengths of silk, embroidered with gold, the hems of each studded with precious stones; two hundred Indian swords of silver and gold, their edges seasoned and sharpened with poison water; one hundred camels with crimson manes; one hundred load bearing and travel worthy mules; a crown fit for a king, bedecked with precious jewels, along with chains, necklaces and bracelets; a heavenly throne made of gold and studded with precious stones, whose width was as much as twenty kingly hands and whose height was as much as a rider on a steed with his head held high; and four elephants from India, laden with the best carpets and rugs; and the train reached for two miles beyond Saam's gates.”

We have quoted this passage here to give an idea of the wealth of ancient Iran. If a vassal king of a small province like Kabul could afford to spare this amount as tribute, one can well wonder about the treasures in the King of Iran's treasury. Laying this massive tribute at the feet of Saam, and with a honey tongue and intelligence worthy of her exalted family, Sindokht managed to get a promise from Saam that he would not harm her family, come what may. Using an equal amount of intelligence, Saam briefed Sindokht about the events that had happened before her arrival, but refused to accept the tribute directly, as doing so would have meant disrespect to the King. He instead asked Sindokht to hand over the same to Zaal's treasurer. In this manner, both parties saved face and managed to extract something from each other.

Meanwhile, Zaal reached the court of King Minocheher and handed over his father's letter to the King. The letter laid bare Saam's feelings towards his son, as well as his desire not to cause any grief to the King. The King asked for time and consulted the astrologers and Mobeds of his court. The wise ones went into a huddle for three nights and days, and finally presented themselves before the King on the fourth morning. Thus writes Firdausi:

“ And they (the Wise Ones) said unto him—“Hail to thee, hero of the golden girdle, we have examined the revolving heavens and from the movement of the planets we bring unto thee glad tidings. The son of Saam and the daughter of Mehrab shall be a glorious pair, and from their union shall spring a son like to a war-elephant, and he shall subdue all men by his sword and raise the glory of Iran even unto the skies. His entire long life shall be filled with valour, victory and great fame. Wherever he and his valiant horse shall roam, there his enemies' hearts will wither with fear. None shall pass over his helmet, and there shall be no one to match him. He will be of a long and illustrious life, and shall catch a lion in the swirl of his net. An entire wild ass he shall roast over fire and eat, and shall cause the air to cry with its smoke. He shall prove to be a saviour for Iran and shall always gird his loins against Iran's enemies. His loyalty shall always be towards Iran and for years he shall fight Turan and the kings of China. And he will give back sleep to the unhappy, and close the doors of discord, and bar the paths of wrong-doing. The kingdom will rejoice while he lives; Rome, India, and Iran will grave his name upon their seals.”

The King was overjoyed with these glad tidings, but asked the Wise Ones to keep their prophecy a secret. The King decided to test Zaal and see whether he was indeed a worthy son of Saam. He beckoned Zaal to his court and selected a group of Wise Ones to question and test his wisdom. In this grand assembly, the Mobeds started their test of Zaal's intelligence. Thus Firdausi:

*“And the first opened his mouth and said—
 ‘Twelve trees, well grown and green,
 Fair and lofty, have I seen;
 Each has sprung with vigorous sprout,
 Sending thirty branches out;
 Wax no more, nor wane, they can
 In the kingdom of Iran.’*

And Zaal pondered a while and then answered and said—

*'Twelve moons in the year, and each I praise
As a new-made king on a new throne's blaze:
Each comes to an end in thirty days.'*

Then the second Mobed questioned him and said—

*"Thou whose head is high in air,
Read me now of horses twain;
Both are noble, swift to speed;
Black as storms in the night one steed,
The other crystal, white and fair,
They race for ever and haste in vain,
Towards a goal they never gain."*

And Zaal thought again yet a while and answered—

*"Two shining horses, one black, one white.
That run for ever in rapid flight;
The one is the day, the other the night,
That count the throbs of the heavens height,
Like the hunted prey from the following chase
They flee, yet neither wins the race."*

Then the third Mobed questioned him and said—

*"Thirty knights before the king
Pass along. Regard the thing
Closely; one is gone. Again
Look—the thirty are in train."*

And Zaal answered and spoke—

*"Thirty knights of whom the train
Is full, then fails, then fills again,
Know, each moon is reckoned thus,
So willed by God who governs us,
And thy word is true of the faint moon's wane,
Now failing in darkness, now shining plain."*

Then the fourth Mobed questioned him and said—

*"See a green garden full of springs;
A strong man with a sickle keen
Enters, and reaps both dry and green;
No word thine utmost anguish wrings."*

And Zaal bethought him and replied—

*"Thy word was of a garden green,
A reaper with a sickle keen,
Who cuts alike the fresh and the dry
Nor heedeth prayer nor any cry:
Time is the reaper, we the grass;
Pity nor fear his spirit has,*

*But old and young he reaps alike.
No rank can stay his sickle's strike,
No love, but he will leave it lorn,
For to this end all men are born.
Birth opens to all the gate of Life,
Death shuts it down on love and strife,
And Fate, that counts the breath of man,
Measures to each a reckoned span."*

Then the fifth Mobed questioned him and said—

*"Look how two lofty cypresses
Spring up, like reeds, from stormy seas,
There builds a bird his dwelling-place;
Upon the one all night he stays,
But swift, with the dawn, across he flies;
The abandoned tree dries up and dies,
While that whereon he sets his feet
Breathes odours out, surpassing sweet.
The one is dead for ever and aye,
The other lives and blooms always."*

Then Zaal yet again bethought him before he said—

*"Hear of the sea-born cypresses,
Where builds a bird, and rests, and flees.
From the Ram to the Scales the earth overpowers,
Shadows obscure of the night that lowers,
But when the Scales' sign it must quit,
Darkness and gloom overmaster it;
The sides of heaven thy fable shows
Whence grief to man or blessing flows,
The sun like a bird flies to and fro,
Weal with him bringing, but leaving woe."*

Then the sixth Mobed questioned him, and it was the last question that he asked, and he deemed it the hardest of all to answer. And all men hung upon his words and listened to the answer of Zaal. And the Mobed said—

*"Built on a rock I found
A town. Men left the gate and chose
A thicket on the level ground.
Soon their soaring mansions rose
Lifting roofs that reach the moon,
Some men slaves, some kings, became,
Of their earlier city soon
The memory died in all. Its name
None breathed. But hark! an earthquake; down,
Lost in the chasm lies the land-
Now long they for their rock-built town,
Enduring things they understand."*

*Seek in thy soul the truth of this;
This before kings proclaim, I was,
If rightly thou the riddle read,
Black earth to musk thou hast changed indeed.”*

And Zaal pondered this riddle but a little while, and then opened his mouth and said—

*“The eternal, final world is shown
By image of a rock-built town;
The thicket is our passing life,
A place of pleasure and of pain,
A world of dreams and eager strife,
A time for labour, and loss, and gain;
This counts thy heart-beats, at its will
Prolongs their pulse or makes it still.
But winds and earthquake rouse: a cry
Goes up of bitterness and woe,
Now we must leave our homes below
And climb the rocky fastness high.
Another reaps our fruit of pain,
That yet to another leaves his gain;
So was it aye, must so remain.
Well for us if our name endure,
Though we shall pass, beloved and pure,
For all the evil man hath done,
Stalks, when he dies, in the sight of the sun;
When dust is strewn on breast and head,
Then desolation reigns with dread.””*

The correct and learned answers of Zaal to the queries put forth by the priests amazed the assembly and greatly pleased the King, who ordered a grand banquet to be thrown in Zaal's honour. The above quotation from Firdausi shows the deep knowledge of astronomy which was present in those so called “primitive” times, and also displays the erudition of the priests of that age as well as the spiritual stature of Zaal, thereby showing that it was not only physical strength but also a high level of intelligence that was got through the early years of training with the great Saena Amru Master. The next day, Zaal requested the King to give him leave to go to Kabul. But the King was not yet finished with his testing. He bade Zaal stay one more day and arranged a sporting competition in which the might of Zaal was tested against the best archers, lance men, wrestlers and swordsmen who comprised the King's knights. In every competition, Zaal excelled himself and beat his opponents, thereby increasing his favour with the king and the love and adulation of the courtiers. Finally satisfied with Zaal, the King dictated a letter to Saam, granting permission for Zaal to marry

Rodabeh as well as giving Saam a glorious description of his son's prowess. Armed with the letter and precious gifts from the King, Zaal set forth for Kabul.

Soon the scouts reported the news of Zaal's arrival to Saam and the father-son met and exchanged the happy news with each other. The army of Saam immediately changed from their martial dress to their ceremonial attire and the beats of the drums of celebration echoed throughout Saam's camp and reached the ears of the general population of Kabul which offered grateful thanks to the Creator for saving them from certain destruction. The streets of Kabul were sprinkled with rosewater and wine so that the dust may not disturb the wedding party. A victorious procession now reached the gates of Kabul where the father-son were met by Mehrab and his wife Sindokht. Costly gifts were offered to Zaal and the wedding exchanges were formalised and agreed. The entire city feasted for seven days and nights. In this manner, with the blessings of the Saena Amru master, the intelligence of Sindokht, the wisdom and loyalty of Saam, and the sheer strength and spiritual brilliance of Zaal, the future parents of the illustrious Rostam were finally joined in holy matrimony.

Part 3: The Birth and childhood of Rostam

*“Basi bar neyaamed barin roozgaar
Ke aazaadsarv andar aamad babaar”*

*“It wasn't many days before
the stately cypress bore fruit”*

With these apt words, Firdausi begins his account of the birth of the greatest Pehliva the world has even seen. Soon Rodabeh became pregnant. Her happiness was short lived and soon gave way to misery and heartburn. The extreme size of her foetus caused her great discomfort. At three months, she could not even walk, and as the pregnancy advanced, it seemed certain that either mother or the unborn child would have to be sacrificed. As she reached nine months, Rodabeh began to get spells of fainting and it was at one of these times, that those around her feared the worst. As her nurses rushed to Zaal and gave him the worrying news, the great warrior remembered his Mazdayasni master, the Saena Amru. Immediately he held the talisman given by the saint in the fire and ere the Bird of God appeared in front of him and blessed him.

The Mazdayasni Master reassured the worried father-to-be, and reminded him that befitting the stature of his unborn child as the greatest forerunner of Prophet Zarathushtra, both his entry into and exit from this world would be unique and unparalleled. Saena Amru explained to Zaal that it would not be possible for the child to descend into the world through the normal route, and advised him to contact a noted Mobed, who was also a Master Surgeon of that time. As the learned one arrived, the Simorgh directed that a certain type of sleep inducing wine be administered to Rodabeh. As her consciousness dulled, the Master Surgeon made an incision on the mother's abdomen and delivered the child safely. He then applied certain pain relieving and wound healing herbs on the incision. After his departure, the Mazdayasni Master, through his Amal of certain Manthras caused the wound to heal immediately, and the mother to recover speedily. In this manner, we see that just as the Prophet Zarathushtra was born in a unique manner, laughing at his birth and praying the Ahunavar, so also his principal forerunner Rostam was born vide the world's first "Caesarean" operation. It is of course a different matter that this event took place nearly 6000 years before Julius Caesar's so-called birth which lends its name to the procedure even today!

As Rodabeh regained consciousness, the baby was paced next to her. Firdausi describes the scene as:

"They quickly placed the baby next to its mother, praising it as a celestial baby. The one day old baby looked as big as a one year old, like a bouquet of roses and lilies. The stately cypress-like mother was overjoyed on seeing her child and she noticed his imperial stature. As she saw her famous child, she became aware of the lifting of the great load from her body, and she cried out: 'I am relieved and my pain has disappeared. Hence I shall call this child of mine "Rostam" (delivered).'"

The exceptional character of Rostam was evident right from his birth. Firdausi writes thus:

"Ten nurses were kept to feed the child milk, because only they could satisfy his hunger and give him strength and nourishment. As he graduated to solid food, he began eating mutton and naan (unleavened bread). His appetite was equal to five grown up men, and everyone used to wonder at his diet. When he completed eight years, he emerged as tall as a cypress and looked as a shining star – one whom people would keep staring at. In build, intelligence, looks and wisdom, he was as if a

copy of the Pehliva Saam himself. Skill itself was his teacher, and time itself was his helper.”

These couplets of Firdausi are not exaggeration or mere poetic license, but are real pointers to the exceptional stature of Rostam. This spiritually very advanced soul was born with a certain aura and many skill-sets relating to his future mission were already ingrained in his body. He never had to be taught how to use the various weapons of his age – he was born with their mastery. This exceptional character was proved very shortly at the age of eight.

One night as Rostam slept in his father’s palace, he was waken up by shouts of fear and pandemonium outside. On inquiry from the guards posted outside, he came to know that a prized white war elephant of Zaal had gone berserk and was running around the streets causing damage to property, goods and life. The innate fighting spirit present in his genes was activated by this happening. He immediately picked up the very heavy mace of his grandfather Saam and proceeded to the gate, where he was stopped by the guards who feared to let a young boy of eight years out of the protective walls. An angry Rostam first beat up the guards and shoed them away and with a slight push, broke open the chain on the palace gates, and ran out in the direction of the noise and commotion. Shortly he saw the elephant and let out a great shout to attract its attention towards him. The enraged elephant trumpeted and raising its trunk rushed to crush and kill this new opponent. Before it could do anything, Rostam raised the heavy mace of his grandfather and dealt such a heavy blow on the elephant’s head that it trembled violently and immediately fell lifeless to the ground. Rostam turned around and went back to his palace and slept till the morning as though nothing had happened. The next morning, Zaal was informed of the previous night’s events and he beckoned Rostam and showered him with many blessings. The war elephant which Rostam had killed with one blow of his grandfather’s mace was a prized possession of Zaal, who had used it many battles to trample thousands of enemy soldiers. The fact that this massive war machine had been destroyed by one blow of an eight year old boy amazed Zaal, who immediately recognised the immense potential of Rostam and remembered the prophecy of his Mazdayasni Master, Saena-Amru. A life of valour, bravery and complete loyalty to the Mazdayasni cause and the Peshdadian monarchs, which was to stretch for over 600 years was now set to begin. The greatest forerunner of Prophet Zarathushtra was ready to take charge.

Part 4: Rostam's conquest of the Fort of Mount Sepand

Mount Sepand was situated in a range of mountains in Iran. There existed a very old and unique fort on this mountain which had, over the years, become the residence of many sorcerers and evil followers of the Daevayasni path. Despite many expeditions to capture and destroy this fort, it remained unbeaten. One of the main reasons for this was the very steep incline of the mountain. Any person attempting to reach the walls of the fort had to climb this steep incline over a narrow path which extended for some three miles to the top in such a manner that it left them completely exposed to attacks from those inside the fort. There was absolutely no protection from these attacks. In one such expedition, Nariman, the grandfather of Zaal and great grandfather of Rostam, under the directions of the then Peshdadian monarch Faridun, had besieged the fort for a long time, but in an one attempt to reach the walls of the fort he was exposed on the narrow trail. The soldiers from the fort let loose a huge boulder which hurtled down and completely crushed and killed the valiant Nariman. Over the years, the population within the fort had increased and it had become like a small self-sufficient city. The general population was kept in control by the Daevayasni Masters, who through the power of their evil sciences and the benefit of their isolated position used this fortress as the headquarters for their nefarious activities. Although the fort was nearly self-sufficient in most items, it faced an acute scarcity of salt – a prized commodity in those times. Ever since the attack on the fort by Nariman, and his subsequent death, the Daevayasni Masters refused to open the gates of the fort and let anyone in or out.

Zaal was very keen to conquer this fort and avenge the death of his grandfather. He therefore gave this mandate to Rostam. As mentioned earlier, from the time he was born, Rostam had been gifted with some innate abilities. In addition to this, given his stature and his important missions, Rostam had the ability to be in direct contact with the Yazata *Behram* (presiding over warfare and victory), the Amesha Spenta *Sherevar* (presiding over righteous authority and metals) and the Yazata *Dami Upamana* (presiding over Wisdom). This awesome combination gave rise to the faculty of *Aoj* – spiritual potency which made Rostam invincible. Using these divine faculties, Rostam immediately came to the conclusion that a direct attack on the fort was neither feasible nor advisable. He therefore devised a stratagem and disguised himself as a salt trader and gathered together a caravan of helpers drawn from within the ranks of his soldiers. They hid their weapons within the large bags of salt, changed their dress to reflect their new trade and set off for Mount Sepand.

As they reached the base of the fort, they were stopped by the guards who asked them their business. Rostam immediately befriended them and confided that he was carrying a large quantity of salt to trade. The soldiers promptly despatched a messenger to their evil masters with this news. Given the acute scarcity of the commodity, and the no-risk profile of the caravan traders, the Daevayasni masters allowed the caravan to enter the walls of the fort. As they entered the city, Rostam immediately despatched a large quantity of the best salt to the Daevayasni masters as his tribute and gift to them. They gratefully allowed him to trade on the open market and as the day passed, Rostam and his soldiers sold huge quantities of the commodity to the general population of the fort. As darkness fell, the soldiers quickly changed their disguise and put on the arms and armour hidden beneath the bales of salt. They then fell upon the Daevayasni Masters and their soldiers and managed to kill most of them while the rest fled. As the sun rose the next morning, the victorious Rostam and his soldiers saw a huge stone building in the centre of the city which had a massive iron door with no visible means to open or enter. Rostam right away took his heavy mace and dealt a crushing blow on to the door and broke it open. The sight which beheld them was awesome. The entire building was a treasury which housed innumerable gold coins, precious stones and other items. As Firdausi writes in his colourful language:

“Who ever thought that we would find this here? It seems the mines of the earth have been emptied of their gold, and the oceans emptied of their pearls and treasures so that they could be collected and placed here, nay it seems they have been layered over here.”

After the victory Rostam dictated a letter detailing his exploits to his father Zaal and asking for further instructions. Zaal was overjoyed after reading the contents and heartily congratulated Rostam on his triumph. He further despatched one thousand camels to carry away the treasure from Mount Sepand and directed Rostam to raze the structure to the ground so that no one would even remember that it existed and also to ensure that all the evil circuits created by the Daevayasni Masters over the years would be totally destroyed. Upon receipt of the courier, Rostam followed the instructions and soon the fort of Mount Sepand was but a distant memory. Rostam was given a hero's arrival in the court of Zaal and father and son met and exchanged greetings on a mission well accomplished. Zaal now dictated a letter to his father Saam detailing the exploits of Rostam and explaining how his father's death had been properly avenged. Saam wrote back saying that Rostam's victory did not come as a

surprise to him, giving the analogy that a pet lion cub, even though separated from its parents and reared by humans, would also grow up to strike fear into the hearts of those same humans, since it was in the lion's instinct to be fierce and kingly. So also, Rostam, having the genes of Saam and Zaal would rightly follow in their footsteps and achieve even greater fame than them. In this manner, through the success of the expedition to Mount Sepand, Rostam firmly established his credentials as a worthy successor in the line of Pehlivas like Saam and Zaal. The stage was now set for even greater successes. A beautiful couplet of Firdausi aptly summarizes the feeling at that time in Iran. He writes:

*Jehaan zu pur-ummid shud yaksareh
Ze ru-e zameen taa ba burz-e-bareh*

*“From the flat plains of the earth to the constellation of Aries;
the whole creation became pregnant with expectation of his (Rostam's) further
exploits”*

The news of his bravery and success soon reached the ears of the Peshdadian King Minocheher, who was also happy and content that a new generation of loyal warriors to the Mazdayasni cause had been instituted. However, this atmosphere of happiness was soon overshadowed by the news of the death of King Minocheher of old age.

[to be continued...]

Primary source:

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