# Between Zoroastrian Mytho-History and Islamic Hagiography: Trajectories of Literary Exchange

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**Abstract**

The paper presents a comparative analysis of the Pahlavi "Story of Jōišt ī Friyān", comparing it with three other tales, which span several hundred years and belong to several cultural traditions. By isolating structural and content-related features from the narrative core of these tales and setting them into relation with each other, the present author attempts to answer the following questions. Are there meaningful parallels between these four tales, which would suggest literary borrowing? And, if there are, would it be possible to identify one of them as the primary source of the others? The study is intended to contribute to our understanding of the process of literary exchange between Zoroastrians and Muslims in early Mediaeval Iran.

**Keywords**

Zoroastrianism, Pahlavi Literature, Middle Persian, Oral Tradition, Riddle Literature, Sufi Hagiography, Bayazid al-Bistami, Religious Storytelling, Conversion Narrative, Kazakh-Kirghiz Book Chants, *Marzban Name*

The *Mādayān ī Jōišt ī Friyān* (MJF), which will act as the starting point for the present study, is a Pahlavi text of the didactic genre.[1] Drawing from the sources of Zoroastrian mythical history, it tells us how the wise and devoted youth Jōišt ī Friyān succeeds in outwitting the wicked sorcerer Axt in a question-and-answer contest. The story was composed in Iran, possibly around the 10th century[2] (Weinreich 2016: 45f.) and is preserved in several manuscripts, the earliest written in India in 1269.

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[1] On the MJF as part of Middle Persian didactic (*Handarz*) or wisdom literature, see, e.g. Tavadia 1956: 107f; Boyce 1968: 54; Cereti 2001: 185ff; Macuch 2008: 170; König 2010: 116.

[2] If not mentioned otherwise, all dates are given according to the Gregorian calendar.

Although Jōišt's questioning by Axt is mentioned briefly in the *Avesta* (Yt. 5.81-83), no further notice of it is taken in the extant Pahlavi texts, nor in later, pre-modern Zoroastrian literature. Moreover, none of its main characters are mentioned in Firdausī's *Šāh-nāme* or in any other source of the Islamic period, which deals with Iranian history before the Arab conquest. This circumstance, as well as the peculiar fact that the name of the protagonist Mp. *jōišt* or *yōšt*[3] is consistently (but wrongly) glossed as /*gwšt*/ in all relevant Pahlavi manuscripts, suggests that at the latest by the second half of the 13th century (and perhaps much earlier), the story was no longer part of living tradition (Weinreich 1992: 44, n.1).

Nevertheless, since the appearance of its first critical edition in 1872,[4] several attempts were undertaken to connect the MJF to other narratives circulating in Central Asia, the Middle East and the Caucasus.[5] The most consistent efforts in this regard were made by two distinguished scholars. The first to contribute to the discussion was the German folklorist Reinhold Köhler, who compared the Pahlavi tale to a Kazakh-Kirghiz Book Chant called "The Lark" (Köhler 1876). The second significant step in this direction was made by the Iranian scholar Moḥammad Moʿīn, who defined it as the source of "The demon Ox-Foot and the pious Dini", one of the narratives contained in the *Marzbān-nāme*, a collection of entertaining and educative stories, edited in New Persian about the 12th century (Moʿīn 1945).

To this list of candidates for the following comparative analysis, the present author would like to add a short Arabic story about Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī, which can be traced to a collection of popular Islamic sermons, edited in the 14th century.

Before we start with the comparison of these four accounts, spanning several hundred years and belonging to different cultural traditions, a

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[3] So e.g., in Kłagisz 2007, 2019; Cantera/Andrés-Toledo 2006.

[4] Text-critical editions of the MJF are the following: West 1872 (see Haug/West 1874 for a glossary); Jaʿfarī 1987 (for a critical evaluation of it, see Kłagisz 2007); Weinreich 1992, 1994; Cantera/Andrés-Toledo 2006.

[5] W. Schultz (1914: 80) alone lists no less than seven fairy tales, which are in his opinion comparable with MJF. See also Hultgård (2009: 536 f.), who draws our attention to the similarities between the MJF and the Old Norse literary tradition related to wisdom and riddle contests.

comprehensive summary of each story should be given. Afterwards, we will isolate significant structural and content-related features from the narrative core of these tales and set them into relation with each other. The aim is to answer the following questions: Are there meaningful parallels between these stories, which would suggest literary borrowing? And, if there are, would it be possible to identify one of them as primary source of the others?

### THE STORY OF JŌIŠT Ī FRIYĀN

(1) The narrative begins with Axt and his army invading Jōišt's homeland. The evil sorcerer threatens to raze the country to the ground, unless one of its inhabitants is able to solve his riddle-questions. (2) After a number of unsuccessful contesters are slain, a man called Māraspand (Av. *maϑ-ra.spənta-* "holy word") proposes young Jōišt's candidacy. (3) Axt invites Jōišt to his court, daring him to answer 33 riddle-questions or be killed. Jōišt accepts the challenge, assures himself of divine support and responds to his adversary's questions with answers referring to the Zoroastrian belief system. (4) To give one example: Axt's 13th question sounds as follows: What is 'one', and what is 'two', and what is 'three' ... up to 'ten'. Jōišt responds: "One is the sun, two is the inhalation and the exhalation of breath, three are the good thought, the good word and the good deed" and so on until "ten". (5) In the course of the contest the sorcerer, in a misguided attempt to prove his adversary wrong, first orders to kill his own brother to remove poison from the latter's heart, and then, overcome by anger, slays his wife, who was so bold as to take Jōišt's side. (6) Later on, God Ohrmazd helps the youthful hero to solve a particularly complicated riddle. (7) After having responded correctly to Axt's 33 questions, Jōišt takes the initiative. He challenges his adversary to answer three questions or be killed. (8) Axt consents, but on hearing the questions, which concern human efforts to multiply life on earth, he does not know what to answer. To save his life, he rushes to hell and asks the Evil Spirit for support. (9) However, Ahriman is unwilling to help. (10) He explains to Axt that in consequence of the correct replies, the demons (Mp. *dēwān*) would run away from the earth, all evil would disappear, and the end of time would occur. (11) Thus, deprived of all hope Axt returns from hell, blames Ahriman and the demons for not providing him the right answers, accepts

defeat and is executed by Jōišt in accordance with the conditions of the contest.

## DEMON OX-FOOT AND THE PIOUS DINI

The tale provides the frame story for the 4th chapter of the *Marzbān-nāme*. The title of the book pertains to its original version, which was allegedly written in the dialect of Tabarestan by a certain Marzbān ibn Rustam ibn Šīrwīn, in northern Iran, approximately in the 10th century. The original, though now lost, is continued in two independent New Persian adaptations. The more prominent version belongs to Saʿd al-Dīn Warāwīnī, who composed it in a style reminiscent of the famous "Kalila and Dimna" in the beginning of the 13th century (Crewe Williams 2014).

The other, slightly earlier composition also pertains to the genre of Adab literature and bears the original title of *Rawḍat al-ʿuqūl*. It was authored near the end of the 12th century by Muḥammad ibn Ġāzī Malaṭyawī, who worked at that time at Konya (Asia Minor), under the patronage of a Seljuk ruler (Houtsma 1898).

Judging by Warāwīnī's and Malaṭyawī's versions[6] the original *Marzbān-nāme* must have contained a significant amount of material rooted in pre-Islamic Iranian narrative tradition, which both authors adapted to the tastes of their own time (Houtsma 1898: 362; Moʿīn 1945: 7; Levy 1959: 8f). Although the compositions by Warāwīnī and Malaṭyawī differ from each other in a number of aspects, the tale about Ox-Foot and Dini is presented by the two authors in very similar ways.[7]

(1) The protagonist of the story is Dini, a learned religious man, who, by living the life of an ascetic Sufi Saint, leads his compatriots away from evil. (2) Annoyed by Dini's piety, the demons (Pers. *dīwān*), who in those times used to mingle and freely associate with human beings, complain about him to their leader and military commander called Ox-Foot (Pers. *gāw-*

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[6] Warāwīnī's version was edited e.g., by Qazwīnī (1938) and Rahbar (1991), translated into English by Levy (1959) and into French by Ponroy (1992). There is no edition or full translation of Malaṭyawī's *Rawḍat al-ʿuqūl*; there exists only a partial rendition by Massé (1938) and an extended summary by Houtsma (1898), both works based on a manuscript from Leiden (Collection Warner 539).

[7] For Warāwīnī's original text, see Qazwīnī (1938: 81-106) and Rahbar (1991: 213-273); for Malaṭyawī, see summary in Houtsma (1898: 382-383).

*pāy*). (3) After consulting his advisers, Ox-Foot sends a message to Dini, challenging him to a public question-and-answer contest. (4) Should Dini not be able to respond correctly to Ox-Foot's questions, Dini's enemies would be free to treat him according to their fancy, (5) but should he win the contest, all demons would forsake the inhabitable earth, and make their dwellings underground. Dini accepts these conditions and appears at the appointed place. (6) In the presence of a huge crowd of onlookers he gives the right answers to Ox-Foot's questions, which are of religious-philosophical content. (7) As Dini puts Ox-Foot to shame by winning the contest, (8) all demons vanish into the ground and thus, as aptly put by Warāwīnī, "the evil of their society was ended to the satisfaction of mankind".

## BOOK CHANT "THE LARK"

The narrative was recorded in the second half of the 19th century by the famous German-born Russian Turcologist Friedrich Wilhelm Radloff (Rus. *Vasiliy Vasilievič Radlov*) from Muslim nomads, who lived in the steppes of South Siberia.[8] It belongs to the genre of Book Chants (Germ: *Bücher-gesänge*), i.e. narratives which were originally based on written sources, adapted by Islamic preachers to the linguistic and cultural context of their nomadic audiences (Radloff 1870: XIX f.).

(1) The versified text[9] recounts how Hazrat Ali, at the behest of Prophet Mohammad, is looking for money to repay the debt of a destitute but pious Muslim. (2) Holding onto the feet of a wondrous lark, Hazrat Ali is carried through the air to a city of unbelievers, where he secretly joins a festive congregation of its inhabitants. (3) At the high of the event, their

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[8] Radloff (1870: XIV, XVIII) collected his material "bei Omsk, Semipalatinsk, Buchtarma, Ala Tau, am Schu und bei Taschkent" from local informants, whom he calls "Kirgisen". However, he also mentions that the steppe region „vom Altai bis zum Flusse Ural, von Omsk bis zu den nördlichen Grenzgebirgen des Serafschanthales" is inhabited „von Gliedern eines Stammes, man möchte sagen Volkes, <....> das sich selbst Kasak nennt, und das fälschlich von den Russen und allen Europäern Kirgisen oder gar Kirgis-Kaisaken genannt wird". Retaining Radloff's original terminology, I leave it to the specialist to establish the exact linguistic provenance of the text under consideration.

[9] For the original in Cyrillic transcription, see Radlov 1870: 693-713, for its German translation, see Radloff 1870: 780-802.

religious leader climbs a kind of minaret and starts to curse Islam to the approval of his followers. However, not long into his speech the preacher stops and declares that he senses the presence of one of the Prophets. The congregation is upset but cannot identify the intruder. (4) Hazrat Ali makes himself recognised. He is captured and brought before the local ruler. (5) In agreement with the king, the preacher announces that Hazrat Ali should be killed, unless he was able to correctly answer ten questions. (6) Hazrat Ali endorses this decision, but under the stipulation that in case of success he would in turn be permitted to pose three questions to the preacher. (7) The latter accepts this condition and asks his ten questions, which are formulated in the following way: "What is 'one' and not two? What is 'two' and not three? What is 'three' and not four?" and so on until 'ten'. (8) Hazrat Ali's responses are all linked to well-known Islamic concepts and win the approval of the preacher and his followers. (9) Now, he poses his own three questions: "What is written on the door to paradise? What is written on the most honourable place in paradise? What is written on the most beautiful place in paradise?" (10) First, the preacher refuses to answer. However, urged by his congregation, he finally agrees to do so, under the condition that his followers would adopt the same point of view. (11) As they promise to do so, the preacher provides the right answer: *La ilaha illa Allah*. (12) In one voice the congregation repeats these words after him and everybody present embraces Islam. 13) Full of joy the new converts ask Hazrat Ali how they could reward him for showing them the right way. When he tells them about their destitute brother in faith, they share their gold and silver with the Imam, who with the help of the lark returns to this world and repays the poor man's debt.

## BĀYAZĪD AL-BISṬĀMĪ AND THE MONKS

The narrative, which is preserved in Arabic, is linked to the hagiographical tradition surrounding the famous Persian Sufi Saint Abū Yazīd (Bāyazīd) al-Bisṭāmī (d. 874-5), who lived and preached in North-Eastern Iran.[10] Although Abū Yazīd's feats and teachings are presented in many anthologies, including the celebrated *Taḏkirat al-Awliyā'* by Farīd ud-Dīn

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[10] For a comprehensive study of al-Bisṭāmī's life and religious views, see ʿAbdu-r-Rabb 1970.

'Aṭṭār (d. 1220-1), our tale does not occur in any of these collections (Ar-
berry 1938). Instead, it first appears in a book titled *Kitāb al-Rawḍ al-Fā'iq
fī al-Mawā'iẓ wa al-Raqā'iq* "The Splendid Garden of Sermons and Edifying
Tales" among anecdotes from the life of famous Sufis and other devout
men. These stories were collected, thematically arranged, and literarily
embellished by the 14th century Egyptian Sufi preacher Šayḫ Šu'ayb (or
'Ubayd) al-Ḥurayfiš (or al-Ḥarfūš) (d. 1398-9).[11] Lifted from al-Ḥurayfiš's
work at a later stage, the narrative, now in form of an isolated anonymous
story, found its way into several manuscripts, preserved in Asian and Eu-
ropean libraries.[12]

(1) The tale is told by Abū Yazīd himself. He relates, how in obedience to a
heavenly voice he dresses in the garb of a monk, leaves his abode, and se-
cretly visits a Christian monastery. (2) There, the monks are assembled to
celebrate a religious holiday, listening to a discourse from their superior.
Abū Yazīd hides among them. (3) The abbot, however, is unable to make
his address. He explains to the monks that he is prevented from doing so
by the presence of a Muslim in their midst. Exasperated, the monks de-
mand: "Show him to us, that we may slay him!" (4) Yet, the abbot declares
that he wishes to question the Muslim on certain religious matters. If the
latter were able to answer, then he might go free, but if not, then they
should kill him. (5) Thus challenged, Abū Yazīd reveals himself and agrees
to the abbot's proposition. (6) The latter presents a series of questions,
starting with "What is the 'one' that has no second, what is the 'two' that
have no third, what is the 'three' that have no forth?" and so on until 'ten'.
(7) Abū Yazīd answers these and other questions successfully, giving them
the awaited and accepted religious significance. (8) Afterwards, he him-
self asks his adversary: "What is the key to paradise and to heaven?" (9)
The abbot refuses to answer, reasoning that the monks would not agree

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[11] More on al-Ḥurayfiš's collection and about the uncertainty surrounding the author's
name and identity in Berkey 2001: 18, 45ff; Brinner 1963: 199, 210.

[12] A printed version of the story's original text can be found e.g., in Ḥurayfiš 1890-1: 203-
205. The relevant mss versions are as follows: Ahlwardt 9057, 9058, 2, 3 (Staatsbibliothek,
Berlin), Ḥussain I, 388, 152 (Āṣafiya Library, Hyderabad/Deccan); probably also Maḥmūd
Beg 5381, 12 (Fātiḥ-Mosque Collection, Istanbul), Ḥussain II, 1710, 4, 2. (Āṣafiya). A similar
but not identical story is contained in Ahlwardt 9058, 1 (Staatsbibliothek), de Slane 1913, 14
(National Library, Paris); see also Massignon 1922: 245; Arberry 1938: 90.

with his response. However, the monks object, saying that they always approved of his actions and so they would agree with him also this time. (10) Thus, the abbot responds: "The key to paradise is *La ilaha illa Allah, Muhammad rassul Allah*". (11) The monks are so delighted by the abbot's words that they one and all tear their Christian girdles apart, convert to Islam, and turn their monastery into a mosque. (12) On his way back home Abū Yazīd is addressed by a heavenly voice who tells him: "For my sake you have girt yourself with one Christian girdle (Ar. *šadadta zunnā-ran wāḥidan*), I have torn apart 500 Christian girdles for yours".[13]

## COMMON FEATURES

The following comparison of our Pahlavi tale with the three stories summarised above is illustrated by four tables (see below). Their head row lists the titles of the concerned narratives in abridged form: MJF stands for the *Story of Jōišt ī Friyān*, OPD for the New Persian *Demon Ox-Foot and the pious Dini*, KGL for the Kazakh-Kirghiz Book Chant *the Lark*, and BBM for the Arabic *Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī and the Monks*. Further on to the left, the column labelled 'Features', enumerates characteristic traits, which MJF shares at least with one of the three other stories. These features can represent content-related, as well as formal aspects of these narratives, whereby their presence is indicated by paragraph numbers referring to the summary of the concerned texts, and their absence is marked with a "minus". Finally, the Roman numerals in the extreme left column are intended to facilitate reference.

**Table 1**

| № | FEATURES | MJF | OPD | KGL | BBM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | Divine appointment | 2 | - | 1 | 1 |
| II | Question format 1-10 | 4 | - | 7 | 6 |

[13] Alternatively, this declaration can also mean: God has helped Abū Yazīd to convert 500 Christians, because Abū Yazīd had wholeheartedly devoted himself to His service (cf. Ar. *šadda* (1) "to tie, bind" + Ar. *zunnār* "waist-wrapper" (acc.) = "employing oneself vigorously in work", see Lane 1872: 1518, col. 1; cf. also Pers. *kamar bar miyān bastan/zadan* "to gird up one's loins = to prepare for action, to engage heart and soul in business", see Steingass 1892: 1049).

| № | FEATURES | MJF | OPD | KGL | BBM |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| III | **Divine support** | 6 | - | - | 12 |
| IV | **Counter Question(s)** /eschatologically significant/ | 7 & 9 | - | 6 & 9 | 8 |
| | **Antagonist hesitates,** | 8 & 9 | | 10 | 9 |
| | **but finally responds correctly** | - | | 11 | 10 |
| V | **Antagonist & friends turn into positive characters** | - | - | 12 | 11 |
| VI | **Antagonist vanquished** | 11 | 7 | - | - |
| VII | **Demons disappear** | [10] | 5 & 8 | - | - |

Table 1 deals with characteristics, which MJF shares only with some of the other three stories.[14] Let us start with № IV, divided into three sub-sections: In three of our stories, MJF, KGL, and BBM, the protagonist poses counter questions to his adversary; in OPD this feature does not appear /№ IV.1/. Yet, while in all the three stories the adversary[15] hesitates to reply /№ IV.2/, only in KGL and BBM does he finally provide the right answer /№ IV.3/. Furthermore, the characteristics № I "Divine appointment", № II "Question format 1-10", and № III "Divine support" are not present in OPD.

Interestingly enough, while in KGL and in BBM the antagonist together with his associates finally turn into positive characters by adopting

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[14] There are also features that all four stories have in common: Each of them has two main characters competing in a question-and-answer contest; the initiative always comes from the antagonist; the protagonist is supposed to be killed unless he responds correctly; however, he does not fail and provides answers, which are related to religious-philosophical concepts. Most of these traits MJF, OPD, KGL, and BBM share not only with each other, but also with other question-and-answer-contest narratives from all over the world (for an overview, see, e.g. de Caro 1986). The wide distribution of these parallels suggests that we should regard them as trivial, because they are unlikely to tell us anything significant about a possible genealogical inter-relationship of our stories.

[15] In MJF (8-9) Axt's function as antagonist is temporarily split in two, with his patron, the Evil Spirit, taking the lead.

Islam /№ v/, the adversary in MJF and OPD does not change sides and is finally vanquished /№ vi/. However, in contrast with KGL and BBM, in MJF and OPD we find references to demons, who disappear as a result of the question-and-answer contest /№ vii/. Yet, while in OPD the demons depart for real, in MJF their disappearance is only considered a possibility. This is the reason for putting the reference for this feature into square brackets.

At the same time, KGL and BBM share a significant number of the listed characteristics. In fact, there is only one trait, "Divine support" /№ iii/, which does not appear in both of them.[16] In the present author's opinion, the substantial overlapping of such non-trivial features allows to conceive KGL and BBM as genealogically interrelated.[17] In regards to a possible chronological order of appearance, we should recall that KGL belongs to the Kazakh-Kirghiz Book Chants, which are based on written sources, adapted by Muslim preachers to the Central Asian context during the Islamisation of the local nomads. As this process did not take a foothold before the 15th century, it seems likely that the narrative core of KGL was extracted from BBM, which for its part was composed at least 100 years earlier. For this reason, starting from Table 3 both narratives will be represented by BBM, as it is the one chronologically closer to MJF. For the time being, let us have a look at the relationship between MJF and OPD, visualised in Table 2.

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[16] In KGL (2, 11), though not mentioned *expressis verbis*, this feature could be considered as implied by the help of the wondrous lark, who transports the protagonist from this world to the other and back.

[17] The assumption of a genealogical link between both stories is further supported by the parallels which they share with each other, but not with MJF: 1) Their protagonist is a popular Sufi authority (Imam Ali / Abū Yazīd); 2) He secretly joins a festive congregation of unbelievers (KGL 2, MMB 2); 3) but later makes himself recognised (KGL 4, MMB 5); 4) The antagonist is the spiritual leader of the congregation (KGL 3, MMB 2); 5) who is unable to continue his discourse because he discerns the presence of a Muslim (KGL 3, MMB 3). And, last but not least, both stories are about a group of unbelievers converting to Islam.

**Table 2**

| № | FEATURES | MJF | OPD |
|---|---|---|---|
| I | Divine appointment | 2 | - |
| II | Question format 1-10 | 4 | - |
| III | Divine support | 6 | - |
| IV | Counter Question(s) /eschatologically significant/ | 7 & 9 | - |
| IV | Antagonist hesitates, | 8 & 9 | - |
| IV | but finally responds correctly. | - | - |
| V | Antagonist & friends turn into positive characters | - | - |
| VI | Antagonist vanquished | 11 | 7 |
| VII | Demons disappear | [10] | 5 & 8 |

Table 2 shows that the only characteristics, which MJF and OPD have positively in common are the defeat of the antagonist /№ VI/ and the disappearance of the demons /№ VII/. It is worth noting that in contrast with feature № VI, which is part of most question-and-answer-contest narratives around the world, feature № VII is not devoid of a certain originality. In fact, it was exactly the presence of this trait, which Moḥammad Moʿīn (1945: 14 f.) used as his main argument for postulating the literary dependence of OPD on MJF.

However, there are two facts, which weaken Moʿīn's argumentation. First, the disappearance of the demons in MJF does not really take place,

but is only formulated as a possibility, if Ahriman would provide answers to Joist's questions, which he does not. In OPD the demons leave for real, as their departure had been agreed upon if Dini won the contest. And secondly, within Zoroastrian literature, including Pahlavi texts, the demons leaving the visible world after their power has been weakened is a rather popular motif, in no way limited to the MJF.[18] If the author of OPD was really using Zoroastrian narrative material, he might rather have been inspired by the story of the face-to-face encounter of Zarathustra with Ahriman and his demonic associates, which is known from the *Avesta* (Vd. 19.1-10, 44-47), from some Pahlavi texts (Pahl.Vd. 19.1-10, 44-47; DMX 64.2-14;[19] Dk. 7.4.36-45), as well as from the New Persian *Zarātušt-nāma* (ZN 709-725).[20] Be it as it may, the almost complete lack of meaningful parallels between MJF and OPD makes us remove the latter from our list of comparison.[21]

**Table 3**

| № | FEATURES | MJF | BBM |
|---|----------|-----|-----|
| I | Divine appointment | 2 | 1 |
| II | Question format 1-10 | 4 | 6 |
| III | Divine support | 6 | 12 |
| IV | Counter Question(s) /eschatologically significant/ | 7 & 9 | 8 |
| | Antagonist hesitates, | 8 & 9 | 9 |
| | but finally responds correctly. | - | 10 |

[18] Besides in the texts listed below, demons fleeing under the earth and/or back to hell are also mentioned in Y. 9.14-15; Yt. 17.18-20; Yt. 19.78-81; WZ 34.47; ZWY 3.23, 27, 32-35.

[19] Quoted after Čunakova 1997 (transliteration p.74, translation pp.117-118), corresponding to § LVII. 24-29 in Sanjana 1895: 80.

[20] See also Redard (2018: 246 ff.), who refers to Vd. 19.1-10 as *"la tentation de Zaraθuštra"*, and Andrés-Toledo (forthcoming), who interprets Vd. 19.4-10 as a riddle contest between Zarathustra and the Evil Spirit.

[21] Moʻīn's assumption of a genealogical relationship between MJF and OPD was recently also questioned by M. Kłagisz (2019: 239).

| № | FEATURES | MJF | BBM |
|---|----------|-----|-----|
| v | Antagonist & friends turn into positive characters | - | 11 |
| vi | Antagonist vanquished | 11 | - |
| vii | Demons disappear | [10] | - |

Comparing MJF with BBM in table 3, it appears that the two stories share features № i, № ii, № iii, as well as parts of № iv, including the facts that the protagonist's counter questions are of eschatological significance, and that the antagonist hesitates to answer to them. Through this, the parallels between the two stories seem to be exhausted, because in BBM the abbot finally responds correctly /№ iv.3/, and, together with his monks, acquires a new life by embracing Islam /№ v/. Sorcerer Axt, for his part, has no answers to offer and subsequently meets his death, while Jōišt can be expected to have gained his freedom to preserve his religion together with his people.

However, the author of MJF also gives us an alternative, if only hypothetical, solution. When in MJF the sorcerer Axt, having transferred himself to hell, asks Ahriman for help, the Evil Spirit is not willing to provide the responses to Jōišt's three questions. Intriguingly, he justifies his outright refusal not with his own ignorance, but with the argument that pronouncing the correct answers would lead to the final destruction of evil, an outcome which he, the devil, would obviously have no interest in.[22] In fact, Zoroastrian teaching contains the speculation (and Ahriman is clearly aware of it) that the all-encompassing spread of religious knowledge would lead to its unconditional acceptance and implementation by all human beings. Such good behaviour on mass scale would then bring about the departure of the demons from the visible world, which would set in motion *Frašagerd*, the glorious events related to the end of

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[22] On Ahriman's perceived ignorance and his surprising insight into Zoroastrian core values, see Weinreich 2011.

time.[23] As a result, eternal life and everlasting bliss would be given to all people, including the worst sinners.

Table 4

| № | FEATURES | MJF | | BBM |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| I | Divine appointment | 2 | | 1 |
| II | Question format 1-10 | 4 | | 6 |
| III | Divine support | 6 | | 12 |
| IV | Counter Question(s) /eschatologically significant/ | 7 & 9 | | 8 |
| | Antagonist hesitates, | 8 & 9 | | 9 |
| | but finally responds correctly. | - | [+] | 10 |
| V | Antagonist & friends turn into positive characters | - | [+] | 11 |
| VI | Antagonist vanquished | 11 | - | - |
| VII | Demons disappear | [10] | | - |

As for MJF this would mean the following (see table 4): If Axt had received the three correct answers from Ahriman, he would have provided

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[23] Cf. Dk. 6 C75 (see Shaked 1979: 171): "From knowledge of the religion there comes about consideration of the sacred word, from consideration of the sacred word there comes about the increase of the practical application of the religion and (the increase) of the worship of the gods, and from the increase of the practical application of the religion and (the increase) of the worship of the gods (there comes about) the elimination of the demons from the world, and from the elimination of the demons from the world there comes about immortality, the Renovation (*frašagerd*) and the Resurrection of the dead". See also the thematic parallel in Dk. 6. C49, cf. Shaked 1979: 163.

them to Jōišt /№ IV.3/, who, on his part, would have had no reason to kill the sorcerer /№ VI/. Pronouncing these answers, Axt would have automatically accepted their intrinsic truth and thus joined all other malefactors, who like him, taking Ahriman's words for granted, would have wholeheartedly repented their sins and thus acquired eternal life /№ V/.[24] Hypothetical as it is, this alternative end of the story is nevertheless an integral part of MJF, which can now be considered as sharing all but feature № VII with BBM.

The preceding survey brings us to the conclusion that the narrative core of the Pahlavi *Mādayān ī Jōišt ī Friyān* and that of the Arabic hagiographic account *Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī and the Monks* are so close to each other that one can safely assume a genealogical relationship between them.

### TRAJECTORIES OF LITERARY EXCHANGE

Now, would it be possible to establish which story depends on which? Well, let us give it a try: At first sight, the most likely candidate for having the honour of chronological precedence is MJF, the Pahlavi tale. It is the typological argument that appears as foremost: On the one hand, there are countless examples of pre-Islamic narrative material, which found their way into the New Persian and Arabic writings of Moslem authors. To give just some of the most evident instances: Firdausī's *Šāh-nāme*, Gurgānī's *Wīs-ū Rāmīn*, Ṯaʿālibī's *Ġurar Aḫbār Mulūk al-furs* etc. On the other hand, while an intellectual involvement with Islamic concepts can be detected in Zoroastrian Middle-Persian treaties like the *Škand Gumānīg Wizār* and the *Dādistān ī Dēnīg*[25], Pahlavi imaginative literature does not usually exhibit traces of such an influence. Moreover, the oldest recorded version of the BBM dates only to the end of the 14th century, while the MJF was written sometime before 1269, most probably around the 10th century.

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[24] According to GrBd. 30.13-25, which contains its most elaborate description, the resurrection at the end of time is universal. However, Supp.ŠnŠ 17.7 states that people, who have committed particularly grievous sins take no part in it. Be it as it may, the possibility that evil Axt might be perceived as being affected by this restriction, would in no way exclude less grievous sinners from the benefits connected with an immediate end of time.

[25] Middle Persian Zoroastrian texts, which show obvious signs of contact with Islam are discussed in Menasce 1975.

However, there are arguments less general and rather related to social context, which suggest that notwithstanding the chronological gap, the MJF might have come second. The BBM was composed and disseminated by representatives of Islam, the undisputed religion of political and economic power in post-Sasanian Persian society. As a conversion narrative it was intended for the ears of both the internal and the external audience. Hearing it, Muslims should feel reassured about the veracity of their faith and encouraged to expose the eternal truths of Islam to local Christians (and possibly also Zoroastrians and Jews), who in this way could be easily enticed to offer their prayers to the One True God. Non-Muslims, who certainly had their fair share of this still very popular tale,[26] would be commended by it to embrace Islam, as it was anyway close to their own beliefs, and would, moreover, guarantee them a suitable place in the other world.[27]

In contrast, the MJF did not address outsiders. It was created within the Zoroastrian community, which, as a religious minority group exposed to active proselytising, was increasingly losing members and economic

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[26] Nowadays, the story is told in Sufi sermons on Internet, whereby the role of al-Bisṭāmī's adversary can also be taken on by a priest, a rabbi, or even by the Pope in person; see e.g.,

in Urdu: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6YMr9EX7iY4,

https://www.youtube.com/ watch?v=04llw_VLooM;

in Arabic: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RBGCfdHRLoE;

in Turkish: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dnSn3ofEIto;

in Malay: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FGy6qHt6EiA.

[27] Taking as a point of departure Ch. Sahner's observations on the nature of conversions from Christianity to Islam in the early medieval Middle East (Sahner 2016: 266f.), one may assume that also for the majority of Zoroastrians, embracing Islam was at that time not a matter of spiritual conviction, but rather the result of an array of social and political factors detached from questions of high theology and doctrine. As in the case with the local Christians, the level of religious instruction of lay Zoroastrian was probably very low, and in the cities and villages where they rubbed shoulders with Muslims, it would not always have been clear where the practice of one faith ended and the other one began. The theological uncertainty, moreover, might have been compounded by social and cultural similarities between the two populations, bearing in mind that the ranks of the Muslim community were filled with recent converts with a Zoroastrian background.

assets to their dominating Muslim neighbours.[28] The main purpose of its composition was to consolidate the remaining believers around Zoroastrian values, to provide them with defensive arguments against conversion, as well as to give hope that it was possible to resist. With a strongly negative representation of the religious Other promoted throughout the story as a powerful, wicked, stupid and extremely aggressive adversary, it is rather unlikely that a Zoroastrian would have ventured to share it with a Muslim audience, which would have easily recognised its own distorted mirror image. Additionally, even if privy to it and able to overcome his aversion to such revolting heathen tales, a Muslim author in search of inspiration for a conversion narrative would have hardly been able to recognise and extract MJF's narrative core from the maze of Zoroastrian themes and teachings surrounding it.

These considerations suggest that the "Story of Jōišt ī Friyān" might well be composed on the pattern of, and perhaps also as an internal response to a catchy conversion narrative[29], which was identical with, or very similar to, the tale of "Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī and the Monks".[30] If this is

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[28] On the challenges faced by the Zoroastrian community following the Arab conquest and the subsequent erosion of society and traditional belief systems, see, e.g. Choksy 1997, Crone 2012.

[29] The appeal of BBM is mainly grounded in Abū Yazīd's counter question and the abbot's reaction to it. This short scene interrupts the plot and redirects it towards an unconventional ending, suggesting to the audience, amazed by the sudden twist, that the Islamic profession of faith guarantees direct access to paradise. Also, in MJF the protagonist's counter questions carry a disruptive potential, because Ahriman's correct answers would have suddenly triggered the events leading to the much-awaited end of time. However, the Evil Spirit's well-reasoned refusal to respond does not divert the plot from its conventional path. Instead, it emphatically underlines the eschatological significance of Jōišt's questions and reminds the Zoroastrian audience that eternal bliss cannot be achieved by a mere speech act (be it performed by the abbot and the monks, or considered by Ahriman), but is only to be gained through the sustained accomplishment of good deeds. Furthermore, if the MJF was really composed in response to the growing influence of Islam, then Axt's travel to hell (MJF 379-398), and the episode about the violent removal of the poison from his sinful brother's heart (MJF 180-197) could be interpreted as satirical references to the famous Islamic accounts about Prophet Mohammad's ascension to heaven and the cleansing of his heart.

[30] On another narrative pattern discernible in MJF, see Weinreich 2016.

the case, it would be the first time that we are able to identify the influence of Islamic fiction on Pahlavi imaginative literature.

## ABBREVIATIONS

| | |
|---|---|
| BBM | Arabic story *Bāyazīd al-Bisṭāmī and the Monks*. |
| Dk. 6 | 6th book of the *Dēnkard*, see Shaked 1979. |
| Dk. 7 | 7th book of the *Dēnkard*, see Molé 1967. |
| DMX | *Dādestān ī Mēnōg ī Xrad*, see Čunakova 1997: 10-138. |
| GrBd. | *Greater Bundahišn*, see Anklesaria 1956. |
| KGL | Kazakh-Kirghiz Book Chant *The Lark*. |
| MJF | Pahlavi story *Mādayān ī Jōišt ī Friyān*, see Weinreich 1992; idem 1994. |
| OPD | New Persian story *Demon Ox-Foot and the pious Dini*. |
| Pahl.Vd. | *Pahlavi Vīdēvdād*, see Moazami 2014. |
| Supp.ŠnŠ | *The Supplementary Texts to the Šāyest nē Šāyest*, see Kotwal 1969. |
| Vd. 19 | 19thchapter of the *Vīdēvdād*, see Redard 2018: 246 ff.; idem 2010. |
| WZ | *Wizīdagīhā ī Zādspram*, see Gignoux/Tafazzoli 1993. |
| Y., Yt. | *Yasna* and *Yašt*, parts of the *Avesta*, see Wolff 1910 |
| ZN | *Zarātušt-nāma*, see Rosenberg 1904. |
| ZWY | *Zand ī Wahman Yasn*, see Cereti 1995. |

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