# The Role and the Function of Religious-Historical Figures in Iranian Folktales

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## Introduction

Legends and tales as branches of folklore literature have always maintained their relationship with history and religion and provided an appropriate context for recreating religious and historical figures. In this research, the four volumes of *Iranian Folktales* have been subjected to a descriptive-analytical study in order to show the role and function of religious-historical figures in them. The four-volume collection is an invaluable treasure of folktales which are gathered by Anjavi Shirazi and other researchers in the field of folk culture and literature from around the country.

The analysis of the 211 tales in this collection shows that religious-historical figures appear in 42 tales. These figures are Prophet

Soleyman [King Solomon], Imam Ali (the first Imam of Shiites), Satan, Alexander the King [Alexander of Macedonia], Khezr [Khidr], Prophet Mohammad, Hazrat Abbas [an important figure in Karbala] and Prophet Zechariah.

**Methodology, Review of Literature and Purpose of Study**

Folktales have been analyzed from various perspectives and approaches by many researchers; for instance, Beizaei and Rahimi (2015) in "Studying the system of beliefs in categorized Iranian folktales" have classified a number of folktales based on their types, and extracted and analyzed their system of beliefs from a psychological approach. Zolfaqari (2014) in "The structure of plot in Persian folktales" has categorized forty verse folktales based on their plots. Shakibi Momtaz and Hosseini (2013) in "Categorizing various types of the birth of heroes in folktales and fairy tales" uses a psychological approach to categorize the various types of births of heroes. Barfar (2009) in "Vegetable fairies" has collected a number of fairy tales from a mythological point of view and with the use of library and documentary methodology; and after investigating the conventions dominant in these tales, concluded that they originate from the imagination of the humans about nature's animation. Afshari (2003) in "The magic of the drop: Signs of the myth of vegetable god in Persian folktales" has investigated the transformation of blood drops into plants in a handful of folktales and maintained that these mythological tales have roots in the imagination of the human beings in the agricultural period.

The present study tries to investigate the manner of recreation of religious-historical figures as well as their roles and functions in the

four-volume collection *Iranian Folktales* using a descriptive-analytical method.

**Discussion**

These are the religious-historical figures in order of frequency of their appearance in the folktales:

Appearing in 16 tales, Prophet Solomon is one of the most frequently appearing figures. His appearances in the tales are sometimes direct, sometimes through his actions and sometime through some tools associated with him such as rug, ring, hat, book, mirror, goblet, cane, kashkoul and stamp.

Imam Ali is the second most frequently appearing religious-historical figure in the folktales with 12 appearances. His character and his name signifies a wise old man who helps the tales' heroes.

Satan as an anti-religious figure appears in four tales with two different approaches and serves the villainous characters of the tales. The significant point about Satan's appearance is that in two tales, it is actually Satan that is deceived by human beings.

Alexander the King is the only historical figure who appears in the tales as a mythological-legendary person. The other religious-historical figures function as guides and helps to heroes and protagonists of the tales; whereas Alexander, who is only a historical figure, appears in four tales with two different faces.

Prophet Khidr is another religious-historical figure who appears in two tales functioning as a help to the hero. In Islamic and popular belief, too, he functions as a wise old man and a guide.

Prophet Mohammad appears in two tales in the collection. In fact, only his name is mentioned and he is not involved in the conflict of the tales. Prophet Mohammad is a holy figure and has a high status; therefore, he appears less frequently than the other religious-historical figures. Prophet Mohammad does not have a counterpart in myths and legends, and consequently, does not appear in folktales which are based on myths and legends.

Hazrat Abbas's presence in the collection is limited to one tale whose theme is associated with taking an oath.

Prophet Zechariah and his martyrdom, along with his son's, appears in one tale which is recreated according to the taste of the common readers.

**Conclusion**

Legends and tales provide a suitable context for the representation of religious-historical figures. These characters have been developed and completed in the imagination of the public and are recreated according to their wishes. The struggle between vice and virtue is a significant motif in the tales which results in the victory of virtue. The heroes of the tales have helpers and guides in order to overcome the challenges on their paths. Prophets, Imams and God's servants are significant examples of helpers and guides for the heroes. In the tales investigated for this research, the three figures Imam Ali, Prophet Khidr and Hazrat Abbas fulfil this function. Prophet Solomon has a more prominent presence in the tales due to his ability to communicate with other creatures and supernatural beings. On the other hand, only the name of Prophet Mohammad is mentioned in the tales because he is so revered

among people that he is never represented beside mythological elements. The story of the martyrdom of Prophet Zechariah is recreated in one of the tales with some modifications compared to the text of the Holy Quran. Alexander the King as the only historical character has two different personalities in the tales: one the one hand, he as a king helps the hero of the tale; and on the other hand, he is a greedy king who has failed in his quest for eternal life. Satan is the only figure in the religious discourse whose presence in the story is associated with vice and destruction and helps the sinister characters with their deceptions.

**Keywords**: religious figures, historical figure, anti-hero, Iranian folktales, hero

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