

THE PERSIAN MÂR-NÂMEH

OR,

THE BOOK FOR TAKING OMENS FROM SNAKES.*

Read on 30th November 1892.

President—SURGEON-MAJOR G. WATERS.

THE custom of taking omens from snakes seems to be very ancient. The people of antiquity associated with the snake various peculiar ideas. Some held it in great veneration and made it a symbol of Divine wisdom; others considered it to be a symbol of deceit and cruelty. Those who held it in veneration considered it to be "the most spirit-like of all the reptiles." Others who did not so hold it in veneration, considered it to be the symbol of the power of evil. Again, some held it be an emblem of eternity; others to be that of fickleness and treachery. For example, the Sesha Nâga of the ancient Hindus, under its name of "Ananta" *i.e.*, the endless, was a symbol of eternity. Those who considered it to be "the most spirit-like of all the reptiles," compared the earth with it, saying that, as the serpent cast off its old skin and appeared in a youthful state, so the earth, after the resurrection, is expected to appear in a rejuvenated state.¹ The ancient Assyrians had made the serpent an emblem over their military flags from a similar view of veneration, and it is said that the Persian king Cyrus had imitated that emblem over his flag from the Assyrians.²

From Herodotus we learn that the sudden appearance of a large number of snakes in a district was considered to be full of omens. In the reign of the Lydian king Cræsus, "all the suburbs of Sardis were found to swarm with snakes, on the

* Journal Vol. III, No. 1, pp. 35-41.

¹ *Isis Unveiled*, II., p 490.

² *Ibid.*

appearance of which the horses left feeding in the pasture grounds, and flocked to the suburbs to eat them. The king, who witnessed the unusual sight, regarded it very rightly as a prodigy. He, therefore, instantly sent messengers to the soothsayers of Telmessus to consult them upon the matter. His messengers reached the city, and obtained from the Telmessians an explanation of what the prodigy portended, but fate did not allow them to inform their lord; for ere they entered Sardis on their return, Cræsus was a prisoner. What the Telmessians had declared was, that Cræsus must look for the entry of an army of foreign invaders into his country, and that, when they came, they would subdue the native inhabitants, since the snake, said they, is a child of earth, and the horse a warrior and a foreigner.’¹

According to the same authority, in ancient Thebes, some serpents were regarded as sacred. When they died, they were buried in the temple of Jupiter, the god to whom they were sacred.²

The idea of attaching sacredness to snakes as to other animals seems to have originated from the fact that, though injurious to mankind to a certain extent, they did a good service to those who believed in their sacredness in some way. For example, we learn from Herodotus,³ that the ancient Egyptians held the bird Ibis sacred, because it destroyed the winged snakes which made their entrance from Arabia into Egypt regularly with the commencement of the spring. Then the asp, a species of venomous snake, was in its turn held sacred at some places, because it destroyed rats and other vermin that worked havoc in the fields. Sir George Rawlinson says that the asp or Naia was the emblem of the goddess Ranno, and was chosen to preside over gardens on account of its habit of destroying rats and other vermins. Altars and offerings were

¹ Rawlinson's *Herodotus*, Book I., Chap. 78.

² *Ibid* Book II., Chap. 74.

³ *Ibid* Book II., Chap. 75.

placed before it, as before dragons, in Etruria and Rome. . . . In hieroglyphics it signified "goddess;" it was attached to the head-dresses of gods and kings, and a circle of these snakes composed the "asp-formed crowns" mentioned in the Rosetta stone. Being the sign of royalty, it was called βασιλικος (basilisk) "royal."¹

Considerations like these would lead us to the large question of snake or serpent worship which I do not wish to enter into here. Suffice it to say that, as pointed out above, some nations held snakes in veneration, on account of the services they were believed to do directly or indirectly to their country, while others held them in contempt.

The ancient Persians or Zoroastrians were one of those nations that held the snake in no veneration. The snake was one of those "Kharfastars," which it was always considered meritorious to kill. A believer of the good Mâzdayaçnân religion was recommended to keep with him a (𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬌) snake-killer, which was a stick to kill the snakes with,² This stick was also used to punish the criminals who were considered to be as poisonous spiritually as the snakes were physically. A priest had always with him such an instrument (Zend³ 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬌𐬀𐬎𐬌𐬀𐬎𐬌 Pahlavi 𐬨𐬀𐬎𐬌 𐬌𐬀𐬎𐬌𐬀𐬎𐬌). Mairya (Mâr) i.e., the snake, was a synonym for Ahriman, the evil spirit.⁴

The Persian Mâr-nâmeh or The Book of Snakes—the text and translation of which I beg to submit before our Society this evening—is a small metrical composition in modern Persian of 32 couplets, which can lay no claim to elegance of style or beauty of language. It enumerates the thirty days of a Parsee month and describes the omens which the sight of a snake presents on those days. That it is written by a

¹ Rawlinson's *Herodotus*, Vol. II., p. 123.

² S. B. E., Vol. v., West's *Bundehesh*, ch. XXVIII, 22.

³ *Vendidad*, XVIII., 4.

⁴ *Vend.*, XXII., 2, 9, 15.

Zoroastrian Persian appears from two facts: firstly, the names of the thirty days of the month are Parsee or Zoroastrian names. This alone will not be sufficient to enable us to say that the book is a Parsee book, because we know, that even after the Arab conquest, the Mahomedan writers had, for some time and for several reasons, continued the use of the ancient Parsee names for days and months. But the second reason which determines that the book is the work of a Parsee is this: that the Mâr-nâmeh forms a part of the Parsee Revâyats, which are to a great extent, a collection of various writings, both in prose and verse, on Zoroastrian subjects.

From what we have said about the view of the ancient Persians, it clearly appears that the contents of this Mâr-nâmeh are not in the spirit of the belief of the ancient Persians, who, not only took no omens from snakes, but were enjoined to kill them whenever and wherever they saw them. It is true that the idea of holding the different days of the month auspicious for particular kinds of work, was not foreign to the ancient Persians of at least the Sassanian times. This we find from a small Pahlavi book, the Mâdigân-i-Si-roz, supposed to be written by that great Zoroastrian divine, Âderbâd Mârespand, who lived at the end of the third century after Christ. This Pahlavi book enumerates the thirty days of a Parsee month, just as our Mâr-nâmeh does, and describes for what particular kinds of work those days are specially auspicious. But the idea of taking omens from the sight of snakes on those days is foreign to the views of the ancient Persians about snakes. It is possible that foreign views had influenced the Parsee writer of the Mâr-nâmeh. A foreign belief in the sacredness of the serpents and in the omens presented by their movements, as that which prevailed in Egypt, had possibly influenced the Parsee writer of the Mâr-nâmeh.

The Revâyât, of which it forms a part, seems to have been written and collected about four hundred years ago.

With these few observations, I beg to submit before the Society the short text of the Mâr-nâmeh, which has not hitherto been published, for publication in its Journal. I will add my own translation of the text. I am indebted to my learned friend, Mr. Edalji Kersâspji Ântiâ, Zend Teacher in Sir Jamsetjee Jejeebhoy Zarthoshti Madressa, for the text which I have copied from his manuscript of the Revâyat-i-Dârâb Hormazdiâr.¹ I have collated the text with that of the Revâyat of Burzo Kâmdin in the Mulla Ferooze Library in Bombay, and have given the variations in footnotes:—

مار نامه

اگر مار بینی بروز هر مزد
 زیادت شود حرمت و مال و مزد
 اگر روز بهمن به بینی تو مار
 غمی سخت بینی در آن روزگار
 اگر مار بینی باردی بهشت
 2 شود خویش تو یک سوی بهشت
 بشهرور اندر به بینی تو مار
 یکی غایبی را بگیرد کنار
 سفندارم روز ببینی تو مار
 تو نزد خلقان بود خوبکار
 بخورداد گر مار بینی نگر
 که نامه پیش تو آید سفر
 بکام دل خویش گشتن بزود
 3 که غمگین نگردی تو خود با وجود
 بهرداد گر مار بینی صبین
 4 که نامه پیش تو آید غمین
 بدیاد اندر ببینی تو مار
 بر آید مراد تو از هر کنار

¹ Vol. III., p. 582.

² M. F. (Burzo Kamdin's Revâyat in the Moola Ferooze Library, p. 355) has یکی خویش تو میشود سوی بهشت

³ M. F. بقو اندرون کرد بسیار مرد

⁴ M. F. بگردی زچیزی تو ناگه غمین

اگر روز آدر ببینی تو مار
 بیابایی بسی خوبی از روزگار
 بآبان اگر ببینیش در زمان
 بر آید مراد تو اندر زمان¹
 اگر مار بینی تو در روز خور
 بزودیک شادان شوی یاز دور
 اگر مار بینی در روز ماه
 زدیدار او کار گوید تباہ
 اگر مار بینی در روز تیر
 بیابایی تو مالی قلیل و کثیر
 اگر مار بینی تو در روز گوش
 صفر پیدست آید تو دیوی مگوش
 اگر مار بینی تو در دیهبر
 بر آید مرادت زگردان سپهر²
 اگر مار بینی تو در روز مهر³
 صفر پیدست آید بزودی نه دیر
 اگر مار بینی بروز سروش
 بستانه رو و جامه نو بپوش
 اگر رشنه بینی سرشرا بکوب
 اگر سنگ باشد و گر خشک چوب
 که علت فزاید زدیدار اوی
 بود ناتوانی هم از کار اوی
 اگر مار بینی بفروردین
 فزاید ترا شادی و نازنین⁴
 اگر روز بهرام بینی تو مار
 از آنروز رخسار خود دور دار
 اگر مار بینی تو در روز رام
 تو در جنگ و پرخاش مانی مدام

¹ M. F. بیابایی مرادی هم اندر زمان

² M. F. بر آید مراد تو ای خوب سپهر

³ M. F. اگر مهر باشد که بینی لگو
 که نامه پیدش تو آید صفر

⁴ M. F. فزاید ترا شاد مانی دین

اگر مار بینی تو در روز باد
 ز دیدار او مال گردد بباد
 اگر مار بینی تو در دپدین
 بود رنج و علت دایلمت این
 1 بدین روز گر مار بینی از آن
 برآید مرادت شوی شادمان
 اگر ارد باشد که بینی همین
 که ناگاه گردی ز چیزی غمین
 2 اگر روز آستاد بینی تو مار
 همه روز و شب شادمانی شمار
 اگر مار بینی 5 بروز آسمان
 (4) تو شنوی ز بهقنهای گران
 اگر روز زمیاد بینی تو مار 5
 بیابنی تو داد از جهان کردگار
 اگر مار بینی بهار سپند
 سرش را 6 جدا کن که رستی ز بند
 چون روز انیران بینی تو مار
 7 غم و فکر زان روز چندی شمار

TRANSLATION.

1. If you see a snake on the day of Hormazd,⁸ your honour, property and income will increase.
2. If you see a snake on the day of Bahman, you will meet with great grief at the time.

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- 1 M.F. { اگر مار بینی تو در روز دین
 برآید مراد تو ای پاکدین
 2 M.F. { چو آستاد باشد که بینی بدان
 تو باشی همه روز و شب شادمان
 3 M.F. بسی بشنوی 4 تو در
 5 M.F. { اگر مار بینی تو در زمیاد
 ز دادار گیتی بیابنی تو داد
 6 M.F. فوو کوب
 7 M.F. ازان روز رخسار خود دور وار

⁸ Hormazd is the first day of a Parsee month, Bahman the second day, Ardibehesht the third day, and so on.

3. If you see a snake on the day of Ardibehesht, a relation of yours will go to heaven.¹

4. If you see a snake on the day of Sheherivar, you will (soon) find an absent friend in your arms.²

5. If you see a snake on the day of Safendârmad, your affairs with the people of the world will end happily.

6. If you see a snake on the day of Khordâd, expect, that you will shortly have a long journey before you, that you will soon return (from it) with the desire of your heart fulfilled, and that you will not be disgusted with your life.³

7. If you see a snake on the day of Merdâd (Amerdâd) do not look at it, (or otherwise) you will soon have a cause to be sorry.

8. If you see a snake on the day of Depâdar, your desires will be satisfied from all directions.

9. If you see a snake on the day of Âdar, you will receive a great good from the hand of Time.

10. If you see it (the snake) on the day of Âbân, your desires will be immediately fulfilled.

11. If you see a snake on the day of Khur (Khurshid), you will be happy shortly or after some time.

12. If you see a snake on the day Mâh, your affairs will be all ruined by seeing him.

13. If you see a snake on the day of Tir, you will come in possession of some property, whether large or small.

¹ Ardibehesht, the name of the third day of the month, for which the omen is described, is also the name of an archangel who is said to have the key of the Gate of Heaven in his charge. Ardibehesht is the later form of the Avesta word "Asha Vahishta," which means "the best purity." When Ardibehesht is said to be in charge of the Gate of Heaven, it is meant that a man can go to paradise, by observing in his life, "the best purity." "To go to paradise," has come to mean colloquially 'to die.' Therefore, what the Mâr-nâmeh seems to mean is: that, if a man were to see a snake on the third day of the month, it is a bad omen, predicting the death of a near relation.

² In India, a peculiar noise made by a crow is supposed to indicate the arrival of a dear relation or at least of a letter from him. *Vide* my paper before the Society on "A few Superstitions Common to Europe and India," Vol. II., No. 3, p. 167. *Vide* above p. 28.

³ M. F. (M. F. Burzo-Kamdin's Revâyat), you will get great profit from it

14. If you see a snake on the day of Gosh, a journey will be soon before you ; you need not wait long.

15. If you see a snake on the day of Depmeher, the revolving heavens will satisfy your wishes.

16. If you see a snake on the day of Meher, it will not be long before you will go out on a journey.

17. If you see a snake on the day of Sarosh, go home and put on a new suit of clothes.

18. If you see a snake on the day of Rashnê, strike on its head either with a stone or with a dry stick, because a look at it (on that day) increases your defects, and because helplessness results from its works.

19. If you see a snake on the day of Farvardin, that will increase your joy and merriment.

20. If you see a snake on the day of Beherâm, keep away your face from that day.¹

21. If you see a snake on the day of Râm, you will always remain in a state of warfare and quarrel.

22. If you see a snake on the day of Bâd (Goâd), a look at it will destroy all your property.

23. If you see a snake on the day of Depdin, trouble and loss will be the result of that.

24. If you see a snake on the day of Din, your desire will be fulfilled and you will be glad.

25. If you see it on the day of Ard (Ashishang), you will unawares have cause to be sorry for something.

26. If you see a snake on the day of Âstâd, count upon all joy for that day and night.

27. If you see a snake on the day of Âsmân, you will hear of grave charges against you.

28. If you see a snake on the day of Zamyâd, you will obtain justice from the Creator of the world.

29. If you see a snake on the day of Mârespand, sever its head from its body, so that you may be free from difficulties.

30. If you see a snake on the day of Anirân, count upon some grief and anxiety from that day.

¹ The meaning is not clear ; perhaps, it means 'Do not go out on that day.'