

Lists of Prophets in Persian Poetry: Application, Classification, and Context

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Traditionally, medieval Persian poems have an introduction that praises God and the Prophet. Often the praise is expressed by comparing Muhammad with his predecessors. Usually the conclusion (often implicit) of such a comparison is that Muhammad has surpassed all the other prophets in everything and, unlike them, has no imperfection. It is not uncommon for the description of the mir'aj to be used as the basis for such a listing. This tradition goes back to a hadith describing Muhammad's ascension to the divine throne, where he was greeted in turn by all his predecessors. The use of the lists of prophets is closely connected with the theme of the affirmation of monotheism — tawhīd. The literary canon prescribes mentioning this theme in introductions of various kinds, be it the first chapter of a poem, the first ghazal in a divan, or the beginning of a separate qasida. The enumeration of the names of the prophets and the elements of the stories related to them (the miracles they performed, the trials they faced, or the sins they committed) demonstrate the omnipotence of God and the immutability of His will, and point to the path that the believer must take to be united with the Absolute. An analogue and prototype of this technique of Persian poetry are the so-called rows of prophets found in the Qur'an. The function of such rows is to demonstrate the prophetic succession from the first man, Adam, to the "Seal of Prophecy", Muhammad, by presenting the legendary history of humanity before the advent of Islam.

Keywords: Persian literature, prophets, Qur'an, list, poem, introduction, canon, mir'aj, 'Attar, Nizami.

Introduction

Those who study classical Persian poetry are familiar with the phenomenon of lists. This term, as well as the words "catalogue" or "register", are used to indicate the enumeration of several uniform elements in poetic language. Thus, the catalogue of birds became the basis of an independent genre that incorporated Avestan and Muslim imagery. In the context of seasonal themes, the list of birds heralding the arrival of spring often appears in the introductions to qasidas, together with the enumeration of various flowers and herbs. The compositional idea of such list is that it represents a kind of *zhikr* in which each bird praises the Lord in its own way. This motif is based on a Qur'anic quotation: "Hast thou not seen how that whatsoever is in the heavens and in the earth extols God, and the birds spreading their wings? Each — He knows its prayer and its extolling; and God knows the things they do" (Qur'an 24:41)¹. The further development of the motif leads to *Mantiq al-*

¹ The Qur'an is cited in J. Arberry's translation. The Qur'anic Arabic Corpus was used for citation [1].

tayr (“Language of the Birds”), a poem by ‘Attar (1146–1221), where the idea of the soul’s journey to God and finding the unity with Him is fully developed.

Another type of list is described by M. L. Reisner. It is the list of social classes in the introductions to the *qasidas*, where the symbolism of catastrophe is used. This theme, like that of the list of birds, has pre-Islamic roots. The conceptual idea of this motif is that some catastrophe — of natural or social character, such as the death of a ruler or the decline of morals observed by the poet — is equated by the author with the loss of the universal balance, the end of the “golden age” associated with the reign of the legendary king Jamshid. In accordance with the catastrophic nature of the phenomenon, the whole harmonious way of life is shattered, and a representative of each stratum finds himself occupied with something other than what his social status prescribes [2].

Often, the occasion for poets to demonstrate their art of versification was the enumeration of their predecessors. Such list sets a kind of literary canon, a tradition, the follower of which the author considers himself to be [3].

At the same time, lists of prophets in the context of Persian literature do not seem to have been described until now. Similar lists in the Qur’an were first defined by A. R. Gainutdinova as “ordered and organised references to prophets or their stories, built according to a common compositional plan, possessing common formulaic elements and also — often, but not necessarily — possessing a common beginning and/or termination” and called prophetic rows [4, p. 16]. The presence of such organised series of prophetic stories, she writes, is a distinctive feature of the Qur’an: repetitions of some stories or the succession of several prophetic stories one after the other are also found in the Bible, but it is the Qur’an that made the prophetic series integral part of the text, where their composition reflects the idea of the legendary history of mankind before the advent of Islam. In her article, A. R. Gainutdinova has convincingly shown that such combinations occur throughout the Qur’an and are intended to enhance the reader’s perception of individual provisions as well as to emphasise the continuity of the prophetic mission from the earliest of the prophets to the “seal of the prophethood” — Muhammad.

A. R. Gainutdinova divides the rows of prophets in the Qur’an according to the thematic principle into the following groups:

- Rejected prophets: Noah, Hud, Salih, Lot, Shu‘ayb, Moses. It should be noted, however, that M. B. Piotrovsky already placed these figures in a special category — “prophets of great catastrophes” in his “Qur’anic Stories”.
- Covenant Prophets, “who demonstrate the universal nature of propethood as a factor determining the development of human history”: Abraham, Moses and Jesus.
- The Prophets of Abrahamic monotheism: Abraham and his descendants: Isaak, Jacob, Moses and Jesus.
- Universal prophetic line: from Adam to Muhammad.

The article by A. R. Gainutdinova shows that the distribution of these types is not identical in the Meccan and Medina suras. In particular, the early Meccan suras are dominated by references to the nations that were punished for unbelief, and in most cases the names of the prophets sent to these nations are not even mentioned. Thus, the emphasis in the narrative is on God’s punishment rather than on the prophetic mission itself. In the Medina suras, however, the emphasis shifts to affirming the concept of Abrahamic monotheism and the continuity of Islam, so that the third and fourth types come to the fore.

The very idea that references to the prophets occur regularly in the Qur'an and can be logically categorised indicates that the totality of the prophets was thought of as a whole in the medieval Muslim world. It was a system in which each element had its own well-defined place; although the concept of this system evolved and changed over time, the idea of its integrity remained unchanged. More precisely, it is this last factor — the possibility of tracing the evolution of the idea of the prophetic row — that allows us to say that we are not dealing with a random event, but with a regular phenomenon. Thus, the prophetic rows in the Qur'an is a cultural phenomenon, and it seems logical to look for its manifestations not only in the Qur'an itself, but also in those texts that fall within the orbit of the Muslim literary tradition.

A. R. Gainutdinova noted the presence of formulaic elements in the prophetic rows of the Qur'an as one of the obligatory attributes of these rows. According to the theory of M. Parry and A. B. Lord, a formula defined as “a group of words which is regularly employed in the same metrical conditions to express a given essential idea” [5, p. 30] is the hallmark of oral literature. In Monrow's article [6, p. 99], to which A. R. Gainutdinova refers, this theory is described in detail in relation to the pre-Islamic literature of the Arabs, and on its basis the authenticity of this literature is proved, as well as the fact that it was oral in nature.

Developed Persian literature of the classical period, especially the “big” forms such as *mathnavī* poems with paired rhymes, cannot of course be regarded as oral. It would therefore be appropriate to speak not of formulaic but of canonical elements, since the canon nature of Persian poetry is a fact that is generally recognised by scholars. The poetic canon, in contrast to the formulaic element of the oral tradition, is an established combination of images and motifs that are not rigidly bound to metrics. At the same time, however, it can be said that the canon in classical Persian poetry and the formula in Arabic oral tradition technically have a similar position: they represent the minimum unit of poetic language, whether oral or written. In other words, the mention of this or that prophet in the Qur'an in the form of a conditional formula (which is a minimal unit of the language of oral poetry) corresponds to the motif (which is “the smallest indivisible unit of the artistic text”) [7, p. 223] in the Persian classical poems.

Thus, prophetic rows in the Qur'an and the lists of prophets in the Persian poems can be considered phenomena of the same order. However, the principles of formation and functioning of these lists are quite different. The present article attempts to formulate these principles and to identify several types of prophetic lists found in classical Persian literature and to determine their place in the canon.

* * *

Since the time of Ferdowsi, the theme of the affirmation of monotheism — *tawhīd* — has occupied a special place in the design of the introductions to the *mathnavī* poems. Obviously, after a certain point, poets began to recognise the mention of this theme in the introduction to the whole poem or its individual chapters as part of the canon. Later, this canon was extended to smaller forms — qasidas and ghazals — not only in the form of referring to the theme of *tawhīd* in the first part of the poem itself, but also in the form of dedicating to it an entire qasida at the beginning of a divan. In time, the introduction with the affirmation of monotheism developed into a series of chapters at the beginning of the

poem, in which, in descending hierarchical order, the Creator, then the Prophet and the ruler to whom the work is dedicated were glorified². Of particular importance within this theme is the reference to the unbroken chain of succession that led to the emergence of Muhammad, which is embodied in the enumeration of his predecessors.

We can see an example of this use of the list of prophets in the introduction to the 'Attar's poem *Mantiq al-ṭayr* mentioned earlier³:

19. The leaders who came seeing the way,
Have come at all times for this cause.
20. [They] found that their souls were pure wonder
And are fellow-travellers with the essence of weakness and sorrow.
21. Look first at what came to Adam:
How the years [of] dwelling in grief passed for him⁴.
22. Look at Noah, struggling against the abyss (*gharqābkār*)⁵:
What he endured for a thousand years from the unbelievers.
23. See Abraham, who has lost his mind [from love] (*dil shuda*),
The catapult and the fire became his home.
24. See Ishmael in mourning:
His ram has been sacrificed on the street of the Friend⁶.
25. Look at Jacob in distress (*sargardān*),
Who has lost his sight because of his son.
26. Look at Joseph at the trial:
Slavery, the well and the prison [fell] on his head.
27. Look at the suffering Job,
Left among the worms and wolves outside the door⁷.
28. Look at Jonah, who lost his way,
Who fell from the moon to the fish several times⁸.
29. Look at Moses, [for whom,] since his birth
The Pharaoh [was his] nurse and the coffin was his cradle⁹.

² For more on the functioning of the *tawhīd* theme in the introductions of the poems, see [8].

³ Our translation is based on the edition by Sadiq Gowharin [9, pp. 2–3], the enumeration of the *bayts* is given according to this edition. There is another English translation of the poem, which includes the fragment under discussion: [10, pp. 5–6]. The author of the present study consulted with the comments in both publications.

⁴ S. Gowharin, in his commentary on the poem, quotes a hadith narrating how Adam mourned for a hundred years over his sin that led to his expulsion from Paradise [9, p. 265].

⁵ Another possible translation: “Look at Noah, immersed in his work (*gharqāb-i kār*)”.

⁶ Contrary to the Biblical tradition, Muslim commentators held to the version that Abraham was going to sacrifice not Isaac but his other son. S. Gowharin quotes a hadith: when God cancelled his order, a lamb appeared to Abraham and he sacrificed it instead of his son. According to the legend, it was the same lamb that was sacrificed by Abel, that was revived by divine power [9, p. 266].

⁷ Job was metaphorically “left at the door” by his tribesmen. They had banished him when he contracted leprosy.

⁸ “The journey from the moon to the fish” is a metaphor that is often used in connection with the image of Jonah, because it nicely combines the Biblical/Qur'anic story of Jonah being devoured by a sea monster and saved by the will of God on the one hand, and the ancient idea of a fish on whose back the earth rests on the other. Thus the successes and failures of the prophet are compared to his ascent to the heavens and his fall to the earth.

⁹ When the Pharaoh ordered all babies to be killed, Moses was saved by his mother who sent his cradle down the Nile — so the cradle that was meant to be his coffin became his salvation. The baby was found in the river by the Pharaoh's daughter, and so Moses was brought up in the Pharaoh's palace.

30. Look at David, the maker of coats of mail,
Who made metal [soft as] wax by the heat of his heart.
31. See how King Solomon's
Kingdom was carried away on the wind by a demon¹⁰.
32. Behold him whose heart was filled with rage,
With a saw over his head he made no sound and was silent¹¹.
33. Look at John: before the assembly
His weeping severed head on a dish is like a candle¹².
34. Look at Jesus, who from the foot of the gallows
Several times escaped from the Jews.
35. Look at the Head of the Prophets:
What torment and suffering came upon him because of the unbelievers!
36. Do you think this is easy?
The [earthly] kingdom is the least in the renunciation of life.

The *bayt* that precedes the above list explicitly states that the following are those who, like Muhammad, appeared to guide the nations on the true path. Thus, the theme of the continuity of the prophetic mission is set. However, various misfortunes befell them along the way. Next, all of the major Qur'anic prophets are listed, together with some episodes of their stories. At the same time, some of the images above refer to the theme of mystical love. Abraham, for example, is described as having "lost his mind [from love]" (*dil shuda*) — that is, because of his passionate desire for God. In the Qur'an, Abraham is the only prophet who is called a friend of God — *khalil*, which can also be translated as "beloved". King Nimrod ordered him to be thrown into a bonfire with a catapult (*munjaniq*), but thanks to the divine intervention the fire did not harm him (Qur'an 21:68–70). Burning in the Sufi imagery is a standard metaphor for the love/mystical experiences. The same topos is used in the case of David. The two miracles that the tradition attributes to this prophet are the invention of chain mail ("And We softened for him iron" (Qur'an 34:10)) and the wonderful voice with which David enchanted his listeners. "Heat of the heart" is a reference to the longing and suffering of love in the conventional vocabulary of Persian poetry.

The list ends with the words, "Do you think this is easy? / The [earthly] kingdom is the least in the renunciation of life"¹³. This phrase indicates that all the hardships of the prophets were only the first step on the path, the rest of which is no less difficult. The emphasis of the list is made on the fact that the tribulations of the prophets were related to the earthly life and physical suffering. One might think that it is not so difficult to re-

¹⁰ King Solomon had power to control winds and other natural forces that was given to him by the magic signet-ring, and he always carried that ring with him. When the ring was lost, Solomon's throne was usurped by a demon. The phrase "kingdom built on the wind" (or "carried with the wind") refers to this episode of the Solomon's story. It also alludes to the themes of the vanity of the earthly life and power.

¹¹ The name of the prophet is not mentioned in this *bayt*, but it is clear from the context and also from variations in some manuscripts that it is Zechariah. He was deprived of the ability to speak for three days as punishment for doubting that God could grant him son in his old age. The mention of the saw alludes to the story of Zechariah's death: fleeing from his pursuers, he hid in the hollow of a tree, but he was discovered by the hem of his garment left outside, and he was sawed together with the tree [11, p. 74].

¹² John was beheaded because he disapproved of the king of Israel's marriage. According to the legend, the severed head, which was brought to the king on a plate, continued to speak for some time, and John's blood was boiling [12, pp. 104–105].

¹³ تو چنان دانی که این آسان بود
ملک کمتر چیز ترک جان بود

nounce a life in which there is nothing but suffering, especially if the union with God in the hereafter is following. However the abandonment of the earthly life is only the beginning of the path to the Absolute. As to the whole of this path, the poem itself will tell us what it is like. Thus, the theme of the mystical path, which is central to *Mantiq al-ṭayr*, is already set in the introduction by referring to the stories of those who have travelled this path. At the same time, the listing of the prophets in chronological order itself marks the major milestones in the legendary history of mankind, which is also a kind of path from the ignorance of idolatry to the light of the true faith.

The spiritual journey is a central theme in another poem by ‘Attar, namely *Muṣibat-nāma* (“The Book of Affliction”). The introductory part of the poem contains a description of *mi’rāj*. This is one of the canonical variants of the *tawhīd* introductions, and in this case it also echoes the main theme of the entire poem. This chapter contains a list of prophets¹⁴:

414. For the eye it is sufficient to see, and for the soul it is sufficient to burn,
And if not, without Him, [the words] “swerved not” are sufficient for the eye¹⁵.
415. First, He lifted Adam, who was born an old man¹⁶, from dust
And gave him milk by His grace.
416. Adam had no mother or father,
He brought him up — indeed He is the Provider!
417. He clothed him with the garment of his nakedness.
[But] what is nakedness? In other words, [a garment] of his faith¹⁷.
418. First He taught him all the names,
And after that He [made] those named bow down to him.
419. Then He sat down in the seat of honour for the sake of learning,
And taught Idris the lesson of “that He revealed”¹⁸.
420. He tried Noah in his distress,
Indeed, He explained to him the cry (*nuḥa*) of longing.
421. Then He turned to Abraham,
He taught him a hundred lessons (*sabaq*) of love (*khullat*).
422. Then He gave Jacob his remedy,
Gave the sorrow of faith to his abode of grief¹⁹.

¹⁴ Our translation is based on M.-R. Shafi’i Kadqani edition [13, pp. 136–137].

¹⁵ This is a reference to the description of *mi’rāj* in sura “al-Najm” (“The Star”): “(13) Indeed, he saw him another time (14) by the Lote-Tree of the Boundary (15) nigh which is the Garden of the Refuge, (16) when there covered the Lote-Tree that which covered; (17) his eye swerved not; nor swept astray. (18) Indeed, he saw one of the greatest signs of his Lord” (Qur’an 53:13–18).

¹⁶ The epithet “born an old man” (*tifl-i pīrzād*) seems to indicate that Adam was not born per se but was created by God; since the process of creation took some time, Adam already was an adult by the time of his birth [14, p. 46].

¹⁷ Adam’s clothes are compared to faith: before eating the forbidden fruit, people in paradise were unaware of their nakedness, i. e. they were as if clothed in their own faith. Kadkani points out that this metaphor is a reference to a hadith: “Faith is nakedness, and its garment is abstinence, and its ornament is shame, and its fruit is knowledge” [13, p. 510].

¹⁸ This again is a reference to sura “al-Najm”: “(5) taught him by one terrible in power, (6) very strong; he stood poised, (7) being on the higher horizon. (8) then drew near and suspended hung, (9) two bows’ length away, or nearer, (10) then revealed to his servant that he revealed” (Qur’an 53:5–10).

¹⁹ Suffering of faith (*dard-i dīn*) in the Sufi vocabulary is a passionate striving for union with God, the anguished state of a Sufi who longs for oneness with the divine Absolute (cf. the same expression in another work by ‘Attar, *Ilāhī-nāma* [15, vol. 2, p. 1113]). The abode of sorrow (*kulba-yi aḥzān*) is an epithet tradition-

423. He came to Joseph together with the movement of the heavenly spheres
And gave him a pinch from the saltcellar of beauty.
424. He came to Ishmael and he (Ishmael) gave Him his life.
He was killed because of love, gave Him his sacrifice.
425. He gave great depth to Moses' business,
He showed him a hundred mountains a hundred times higher than Mount Sinai.
426. He told David a hundred secrets about the Word of God (*nubī'*),
He told him the secret of the hidden Psalter.
427. Then to Solomon during his reign
He gave ring²⁰ in the kingdom of poverty.
428. He made a new abode for Job the prophet,
He replaced the kingdom of worms with heaven for him.
429. He became Jonah's guide on the way from the fish to the Moon,
He made him the Shah of everything from the Moon to the fish²¹.
430. Blessed Khizr was thirsty for Him —
He dropped living water on his lips²².
431. When he saw the severed head of John,
He ranked him with His Hussein²³.
432. He went to Jesus and made him mufti,
Made him the Mahdi of guidance forever²⁴.
433. Even though He did arrange affairs of a hundred orders,
There was not a single particle with Him, that was not Him — and peace
[be with Him]!

The unifying idea of this list is the enumeration of what the Lord gave to his prophets and what he taught them. More attention is given to Adam than to the other characters: the four verses devoted to him (as opposed to one for all the other prophets) form a kind of introduction to the following account of how God taught the people through his messengers. The greater number of verses can be explained by the fact that Adam, as the first prophet and the first human being, had more to learn than all the others, for he had to learn the initial basis of knowledge about God, faith and the world. The list ends with the affirmation of monotheism.

The theme of learning links this list to the “spring” introductions to the poems. As M. L. Reisner notes, the description of the blossoming garden and the coming of spring

ally given to Jacob longing for his missing son. Therefore the meaning of the *bayt* is that in Jacob's case, the passionate religious longing of the Sufi was expressed in his grief for Joseph.

²⁰ The kingdom of poverty (*shāhī-yi faqr*) is the earthly world (cf. the use of the similar term *mulk-i faqr* in another work of 'Attar, *Ilāhī-nāma* [15, vol. 1, p. 486; 16, p. 327]).

²¹ It is noteworthy that, unlike in the previous example, here Jonah's journey “from the fish to the moon” is used with a positive connotation: it is considered not as the misery of the fall, but as the ascent to heaven.

²² Khizr (*Khidr* or *Khaḍīr*), whose name is not mentioned in the Qur'an, is the legendary companion of Moses or Iskandar (Alexander the Great) in their quest for the source of living water [17].

²³ Husayn ibn Ali, grandson of Prophet Muhammad, was beheaded (at the Battle of Kerbala in 680 AD), as was the Prophet John.

²⁴ Jesus is often compared and even identified with the Mahdi. Both figures act as Messiahs whose appearance will mark the end of times.

can act as a substitute for the praising of God within the framework of the *tawhīd* theme. The association is based on the fact that the awakening of nature and the coming of the New Year, which is seen as a “small creation”, is one of the miracles of the Almighty [8, p. 9]. Here, the list of prophets functions in a similar way: at the moment of creation, each of them was in some way favoured by the Almighty or gifted with a miraculous ability in which the omnipotence of God is manifested, just as it is manifested in every element of the creation.

An abbreviated version of the list of prophets, mentioning the miracles with which they were endowed, appears one more time in the introduction to *Muṣibat-nāma* [13, p. 134]:

372. When, from the depths of the Most Sacred, the mystery shone on his brow,
Everything he discovered he made like himself through light.
373. He touched the face of the faithful Joseph,
Spread the tent of his beauty in all directions.
374. He inflamed David’s throat (*ḥalq*) with joy,
He astonished the people (*kḥalq*) with this throat.
375. He touched Moses’ hand and manifested [it],
so that the whole world could see the “white hand”²⁵.
376. At that moment he eclipsed the breath of Jesus²⁶,
And caused the whole world to be shaken.

In this case, the sequence is truncated: it begins immediately with Joseph, bypassing the earliest prophets such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Ishmael and Jacob. ‘Attar has chosen the most widely used images with the most striking features to show that all the miracles of the prophets are in fact merely the light emanating from Muhammad.

The description of the *mi’rāj* may be the basis for the listing of the prophets. As was mentioned above, this story is often included in the section of the introduction devoted to the praise of Muhammad. Over time, it became a part of the canon and eventually formed an independent genre of *mi’rāj-nāma*. According to a hadith (Bukhari, Hadith 3887), Muhammad met all the prophets in turn on his way to the divine throne. The narrative of this hadith is used virtually unchanged by ‘Attar in the poem *Ilāhī-nāma* (“The Divine Book”). Here is a fragment of the introduction²⁷:

²⁵ This is a reference to the Qur’an: “And he drew forth his hand, and lo, it was white to the beholders” (Qur’an 7:108, 26:33). M. B. Piotrovsky explains that the Biblical text refers to leprosy. However, he also mentions that the commentators of the Islamic Scripture, who did not know about this source, believed that Moses was black, and that his hand could literally change its colour [18, p. 110–111]. For more details about poetic metaphors based on this image see [19, p. 171–172].

²⁶ The motif of Jesus’ life-giving breath goes back to the story of how he breathed life into the clay birds (Qur’an 3:49) and to his identification with the Spirit of God (*rūḥ Allah*) (for more details see [20, p. 88; 20, p. 87; 22, p. 148]).

²⁷ This passage is included in the part of the introduction that M.-R. Shafī’i Kadkani, one of the editors of the poem, considers to be a later insertion. In his opinion, none of the three versions of the introduction found in different copies of *Ilāhī-nāma* is authentic. He suggests that the original text was included in the poem attributed to ‘Attar and now known as *Khusraw-nāma* [16, pp. 63–67]. Nevertheless, he included one of the variants as the most common in the manuscripts in his edition and cited the others in a critical apparatus. Another editor of *Ilāhī-nāma*, F. Ruhani, believes that all three introductions were written by ‘Attar himself, but at different times. In his edition he included a hybrid text containing fragments of two introductions [15, vol. 2, pp. 958–959]. The Russian translation by L. G. Lahuti [15], as well as the English translation by J. A. Boyle [23], are based on the F. Ruhani’s edition, and therefore do not include the cited

209. One night joyful Gabriel appeared to him,
[He said:] “Know ye well, O Most Gracious Ruler,
210. Rise from the abode of darkness and conquer,
Go to the Divine capital.
211. This night, turn your steps towards the Nowhere²⁸,
Take this [door] ring and knock at [the door of] the sacred place.
212. The creatures of the world are in agitation this night because of you,
All the cherubim are serving [you],
213. Prophets and messengers stand,
To see your beauty today.
214. The heavens and paradise are open,
Many hearts are glad to see you.
215. Tonight ask Him for what you long for,
For tonight you will see God, there is no doubt.
216. This night grieve for your people, for you truly know
All the hidden secrets!
217. They brought Buraq, who was like lightning,
For the Lord created him from pure light.
218. He was full of divine light,
He surpassed the wind in speed.
219. The Prophet jumped on him immediately,
He left his place and went to the Nowhere.
220. A tumult arose at the throne of the Almighty,
For the ruler and the moon of the two worlds had come.
221. Angels with trays of gifts for him
All stood and loved him sincerely.
222. He saw all the prophets on the way,
They revealed to him the secrets.
223. First, Adam showed him all the beauty,
Truly he gave him *khal’at* in honour of the meeting with him.
224. And then Noah told him everything,
So that from this knowledge he became the possessor of secrets²⁹.
225. From Abraham he learned all about friendship (*khullat*).
So that the whole [essence] of intimacy became clear to him.
226. After Ismael had trained him,
Isaac strengthened his soul.

fragment with the list of prophets (however, both of them include another list, that will be discussed below). The translation given here is based on the edition of M.-R. Shafi’i Kadkani [16, pp. 119–120]. The introduction to *Khusraw-nāma* does not contain a list of prophets, so it is not considered here.

²⁸ Nowhere (*lā makān*) is the immaterial world. It is the place outside of space where spiritual entities reside.

²⁹ Another possible translation of the *bayt* is: “And then Noah told him of the burden (*kall*) / So that from this knowledge the Owner of the secrets bent (*tā shud*)”. Although the use of *ki tā* (“so that, until”) in other parts of this passage indicates that the meaning given in the main text of the translation was primarily intended, the second translation is also grammatically possible. It also seems logical in meaning, especially when one considers that the word *kall* (“heavy burden”), which is homographical with the word *kull* (“all, each”), is used in the first *misra’*. Thus, the *ihām* technique is implemented, which consists in the possibility of a double understanding of the text based on the use of words with multiple meanings.

227. Then Jacob delivered him from sorrow,
So that his essence was filled with love.
228. Joseph sincerely told him the secrets,
Explained to him the nature of passionate desire [for the Friend].
229. Since Moses yearned for him because of his light,
He made him incomparable in his love for the Absolute.
230. Then David told many hidden secrets,
Solomon told him many commentaries and stories.
231. Then Jesus, when he saw his exalted essence,
Made him matchless in beggary.
232. Indeed, he stretched out his hand of grace to the prophets, one after another,
And went on his way.
233. When he heard of the nearness of the Friend,
He went to the Friend.

As Muhammad ascended to the Divine throne, the prophets took turns to greet him and to bestow upon him what they themselves had received. For example, Abraham, whom the Muslim tradition calls the Friend of Allah (*khalīl Allah*), told him all about friendship (*khullat*). Jacob, who was known to have mourned for his missing son for years, relieved him of his grief. Joseph, called veracious (*ṣiddīq*) and revered as the epitome of the Perfect man (*insān-i kamīl*), sincerely (*ba ṣidqī*) revealed secrets to him and “told him of the longing (*shouq*) for the Friend”.

As a result of his ascension, Muhammad finds himself in possession of all the goodness bestowed upon each of the preceding prophets individually, thus becoming the embodiment of the concept of Prophet as a whole, i. e. the Perfect man in whom the divine essence is fully present without distortion. Similarly, the bird Simurgh in *Mantiq at al-tayr* is the metaphysical sum of all thirty birds (*sī murgh*) who have come to it and achieved unity by seeing themselves reflected in it as in a mirror. Likewise, the rose (*gul*) is hierarchically higher than all other flowers and embraces all their diversity — not only because, according to the hadith, “the scarlet rose was created from Muhammad’s sweat during the *mi’rāj*”, but also because the word *gul* is lexically a name for all flowers in general [24, p. 320].

The introduction of another recension of *Ilāhī-nāma* also contains a list of prophets³⁰. The central themes of the two versions of the list are similar: each prophet greets Muhammad according to a key element of the tradition associated with him. Thus, Adam serves as his scribe because he was the one who wrote down the names of all things and living beings. Idris, to whom tradition attributes knowledge of the secrets of astronomy, predicted his appearance through the stars. Noah, who built the Ark, became his pilot, etc³¹.

Examples of the description of *mi’rāj* and the use of the list of prophets are not only found in the poems of ‘Attar, which are well known for their Sufi character. Nizami (1141–

³⁰ This variant of the introduction was included in the published translations by L. G. Lahuti [15, vol. 2, pp. 41–42, bayts 372–387] and J. E. Boyle [23, pp. 17–18], so we do not cite it here.

³¹ The similarity of the concepts of the lists in the two recensions may suggest that they were written by one author. This indirectly confirms F. Ruhani’s suggestion that these introductions (at least two of the three) were written by ‘Attar himself at different times. However, we do not have sufficient data to make a reasonable claim that the author of both introductions is one and the same person (whoever he may be), and it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate this question.

1209) included *mi'rāj-nāma* in all five poems of his *Khamsa* (“Quintet”). A. E. Berthels has stressed the special role of these chapters in the “Quintet”, calling them a kind of “tuning for the following exposition” in which “the main philosophical and theological categories of the epoch” are given [25, p. 346]. In “Treasure of the Mysteries” (*Makhzan al-asrār*), this section contains an enumeration of Muhammad’s predecessors³²:

1. O the jewel in the crown of the prophets,
The giver of the crown to the noble!
2. All strangers and those of your tribe —
They are all guests in your house.
3. Although the *bayt* started with your name,
Your name also completed the rhyme.
4. This ruined village³³, when the order was given,
was rebuilt by you and Adam.
5. What is new in both worlds —
This is the last brick in the first row of the wall³⁴.
6. You are Adam and Noah — no! — You are better than both,
You are the messenger who has the characteristics of both.
7. When Adam got indigestion from that grain³⁵,
Repentance became a light jam of roses for him.
8. The repentance of the heart is your fragrance on His lawn,
His rose jam is the dust of your street.
9. When, thanks to you, the heart tasted the rose jam of repentance,
The rose jam itself denied its sweetness.
10. The ball of obedience [to God] was created in eternity,
Then thrown on the field of the heart.
11. Adam entered [the game] as a beginner,
To hit this ball with his club.
12. When his horse retreated behind the wheat,
He left the ball and took refuge in the corner.
13. When Noah, suffering from thirst, approached the living water,
He made a mistake, and reached a flood instead of a spring³⁶.
14. The palanquin of Abraham, when he set out on his journey,
Halfway fell over in two or three places³⁷.

³² The translation is based on the edition by Vahid Dastgirdi [26, pp. 28–30]. The *bayts* are not numbered on this edition. There is another edition with comments by Bihruz Thirvatiyan [27, pp. 57–59]. For the alternative English translation see [28, pp. 110–111].

³³ “The ruined village” (*dih-i virān*) — the earthly world.

³⁴ Dastgirdi comments that this *bayt* describes Adam as the first row of bricks in the wall of creation and Muhammad as the last brick of this first row. This metaphor alludes to a hadith which Dastgirdi cites: “My similitude in comparison with the other prophets before me, is that of a man who has built a house nicely and beautifully, except for a place of one brick in a corner. So I am that brick, and I am the last of the Prophets” (Sahih al-Bukhari 3535) [29].

³⁵ In Muslim tradition, a grain of wheat is considered to be the forbidden fruit that Adam ate.

³⁶ Dastgirdi notes that Moses’ mistake was that he said: “My Lord, leave not upon the earth of the unbelievers even one” (Qur’an 71:26).

³⁷ Dastgirdi says that the palanquin of Abraham falling in three places alludes to the three times when he told lies. The first time was when he said that he was sick while in fact he was not (Qur’an 37:89). The second time was when he told his people that it was not him who had crushed the idols but one of the idols

15. Since David was out of breath,
He had [too] low voice for this high tune³⁸.
16. Solomon watched over his piety,
But, defiled by power, he did not seek that crown.
17. Joseph could not see clearly from the well,
He saw nothing but a rope and a bucket.
18. Khizr returned from this fruitless journey,
He found only his ham wet from the water of the spring.
19. Moses found his hands empty of the bowl,
He broke the glass vessel at the foot of the mountain “Show me”³⁹.
20. Jesus did not look for this grain,
For deep inside (*zi darūn*) he had misgivings about home (i. e. this world)
(*tuhmatī-yi khāna būd*)⁴⁰.
21. You [alone] threw the sphere,
Threw the shadow over this affair⁴¹.
22. This book was sealed with your name,
This sermon ended with [the advent of] your epoch.
23. Arise and make a turn better than the celestial sphere.
It will not do the work — you do it.

Beginning with Adam, Nizami explains in turn why each of the prophets is flawed in some way, while Muhammad is free from any flaw. The simile of a game of polo is chosen as a unifying metaphor to describe the stories of the prophets. The central theme is trust in God: the poet makes the main emphasis on the fact that all the prophets, except Muhammad, failed to follow absolute obedience to the Almighty. Adam showed his disobedience by eating the forbidden fruit, and all his subsequent asceticism consisted of constant repentance. Joseph, thrown into the well by his brothers, saw his hope of salvation in other people rather than in help from above. Moses dared to ask God to reveal Himself to him, which was a manifestation of doubt.

(Qur’an 21:58–63). The third time was when he told a tyrant, he had met on the road, that Sarah was not his wife, but that she was his sister. All the three stories are narrated in the hadith collection of Bukhari (Sahih al-Bukhari 3358 [29]) but only the first two are also mentioned in the Qur’an. Probably, that is the reason why Nizami speaks hesitantly of “two or three instances” (*du-si bār*).

³⁸ Dastgirdi comments that this *bayt* alludes to the story of David’s sin with Uriah’s wife Bathsheba [30].

³⁹ A reference to a quote from the Qur’an: “And when Moses came to Our appointed time and his Lord spoke with him, he said, ‘Oh my Lord, show me, that I may behold Thee!’ Said He, ‘Thou shalt not see Me; but behold the mountain — if it stays fast in its place, then thou shalt see Me.’ And when his Lord revealed Him to the mountain He made it crumble to dust; and Moses fell down swooning. So when he awoke, he said, ‘Glory be to Thee! I repent to Thee; I am the first of the believers’” (Qur’an 7:143).

⁴⁰ This *bayt* probably alludes to the story of Jesus’ needle. According to tradition, the needle was Jesus’ only earthly possession, although otherwise he was perfect in his asceticism. That is the reason why, after his death, he was only admitted to the forth selestial sphere and not to the divine throne [31, pp. 150–151]. Both Dastgirdi and Thirvatiyan suggest that this *bayt* refers to the doubts of the unbelievers concerning Jesus’ father. Dastgirdi also suggests that *tuhmatī* might be understood as “calumnious” and thus is a reference to the story when Jesus was accused of urging people to worship himself and his mother as gods: “And when God said, ‘O Jesus son of Mary, didst thou say unto men, «Take me and my mother as gods, apart from God?»” (Qur’an 5:116).

⁴¹ The metaphor of the polo game is continued in this *bayt*. The heavenly sphere (*falak*) is compared to the ball. Thus the meaning of the *bayt* is as follows: you alone managed to hit the heavenly ball in this game and threw the shadow of your club over the ball of obedience.

In the second part of “The Book of Iskandar” (*Iskandar-nāma*), traditionally called “The Book of Happiness” (*Iqbāl-nāma*), Nizami also compares Muhammad to each of the prophets⁴²:

58. Muhammad, who has no claim to the throne and crown,
Takes tribute from the Shahs by the sword.
59. I said wrong — he is the Shah whose throne [is like] Lotus⁴³,
Who has both crown and throne.
60. His body is a pilgrim to the throne of Heaven⁴⁴.
His head is the owner of the crown “If it were not for you”⁴⁵.
61. [He is the model of] an angel who knows God,
We thank God for him.
62. He is the one who leads us to the blooming paradise,
He is our liberator from the cramped, vile underworld.
63. [He is] a dawn in the night of existence,
[He is] the dweller of the darkness, like the living water⁴⁶.
64. Had he not ascended above the vault of the Throne,
Who would tear the veil from this green carpet?⁴⁷
65. He has given us the steed of our souls,
He has sent us the gift from his throne⁴⁸.
66. Our heads are not worth the dust of his street,
[they are] all but the tip of his hair.
67. From us he has experienced suffering, and we have received comfort,
[He is] our lamp by night and our torch by day.
68. Healer of every broken heart,
Advocate for every sin.
69. The greatest of all leaders!
The most chosen of prophets!
70. When Adam descended from heaven to earth —
This earthly treasure ascended to heaven.
71. When the moon of Joseph came out of the well,
This sun (*chashma*) reached the vertex of the moon.
72. When Khizr crossed [the spring of] living water,
Muhammad crossed the source of the soul.

⁴² The translation is based on Vahid Dastgirdi’s edition [32, pp. 7–10]. The notes on the text by V. Dastgirdi and also by B. Zinjani [33, pp. 11–12] have been used in the translation.

⁴³ This is a reference to the Lote-Tree of the Boundary (*sīdrat al-muntāḥā*) mentioned in the Qur’an, which Muhammad passed over on his way to the divine throne (Qur’an 53:13–17).

⁴⁴ A possible translation is “His body is a faithful friend of the throne of heaven”. The word محرم can be read as *maḥram* — “close friend, trusted servant” or as *muḥrim* — “pilgrim” (i. e. the one who dons *iḥrām* — pilgrim’s garb).

⁴⁵ Zinjani points out that this is a reference to the hadith: “And if it were not for you, we would not have created the heavens” [33, p. 135].

⁴⁶ According to legend, the spring of living water, that Iskandar sought, was in the kingdom of darkness.

⁴⁷ The “green carpet” refers to the sky. The *bayt* alludes to Muhammad’s journey to the divine throne beyond the celestial sphere.

⁴⁸ Both editors point out that the gift refers to the forgiveness of sins.

73. And when Jonah was chased by the fish,
Before him, both the fish and the serpent made an earthly bow⁴⁹.
74. And if the age of chain mail began with David,
Muhammad had a hundred dervish robes [similar to] chain mail.
75. When Solomon raised his throne on the wind,
Muhammad playfully raised the wind.
76. And when Mount Sinai served Moses as a palisade,
Ahmad's tent was made of light.
77. And when Jesus' cradle reached the heavens,
Muhammad himself rose from the cradle⁵⁰.
78. See: oil in every lamp there is,
Hasten to receive alms from your candle.
79. You are the spring whose water is pure,
The face of the earth is washed with this water.
80. The earth has become dust, and you are its perfume,
The world is sick and you are its physician,
81. A physician whose countenance heals with its beauty and freshness,
By the command of God, the healing balm is in his hands.
82. You are the one who enlightens the eyes of mortals,
A musician who plays on the strings of angelic souls.
83. The ornament of speech is the splendour of your name,
Eternal existence is a sip from your cup.
84. Whoever takes a sip from your cup
Will be protected from pain and suffering forever.
85. God forbid that any mortal like myself
should be denied a sip of this wonderful drink!

In this case, the author removes the negative element: he does not list the shortcomings of the prophets, but rather describes what makes them glorious. In each case, however, he adds the corresponding achievement of Muhammad, thus proving that the superiority of the latter is undeniable. The semantic parallelism of the narrative is enhanced by the syntactic one: each *bayt* dedicated to a particular prophet begins with the conjunction *agar* ("if"), and the next *mişra'* describes which of Muhammad's achievements is contrasted with the deeds of the prophet in question.

Although this preface does not explicitly mention the theme of *mir'āj*, references to it can be found in several *bayts* of the above passage. These are the mentions of the heavenly sphere torn by the Prophet, the Lote-Tree of the Boundary, and the contrast between Muhammad's ascension and Adam's expulsion from Paradise, etc. So we can say that Nizami, in keeping with the canon of referring to the theme of *mir'āj* in the introduction, used the listing of the prophets, but managed to do so in a non-trivial manner.

⁴⁹ Both editors refer to a story when a serpent and a fish made bow before the Prophet, but none cites any hadith or other source.

⁵⁰ I. e. rose from the cradle of the earthly life during the night of *mi'rāj*.

Conclusion

Traditionally, medieval Persian poems have an introduction that praises God and the Prophet. Often the praise is expressed by comparing Muhammad with his predecessors. Usually the conclusion (often implicit) of such a comparison is that Muhammad has surpassed all the other prophets in everything and, unlike them, has no imperfection. It is not uncommon for the description of the *mir'āj* to be used as the basis for such a listing. This tradition goes back to a hadith describing Muhammad's ascension to the divine throne, where he was greeted in turn by all his predecessors.

The variety of content of the lists of prophets can be reduced to the following types:

- Listing of the prophets with their main positive characteristics and achievements. The main emphasis is made on the fact that Muhammad is superior to all of them. This type corresponds most closely to the universal rows of prophets in the Qur'an, as A. R. Gainutdinova called them. It can be described as a chain of succession marking a historical perspective and leading to the praise of the last prophet who completed it.
- The enumeration of the prophets with their sins and mistakes, as well as the misfortunes that befell them at the hands of the unbelievers, which is a testimony to the omnipotence of God and the immutability of His will. The composition of such lists of prophets varies slightly. It unfolds chronologically according to the Qur'anic narrative and usually begins with Adam and ends with Jesus. Noah, Abraham, Joseph, David, Solomon and Moses are the most common figures in the Persian literary tradition, while Jacob, Isaac, Ishmael, Jonah and Khizr are mentioned less frequently.

Thus Persian literature, having accepted the Qur'anic idea of prophetic succession as a brief retelling of the sacred history that prepared the appearance of the last prophet, was largely unconcerned with the other types of prophetic lists identified by A. R. Gainutdinova. This can be partly explained by a shift in emphasis. Conveying the idea of the superiority of monotheism to the readers and frightening them with the fate of peoples who rejected their prophets was not the main task for the literature in the New Persian language, created in an originally Muslim environment. However, the didactic element is undoubtedly present here as well. It was more important for the poets to demonstrate their skill in creating a chain of logically linked recognisable images, each of which is surrounded by corresponding connotations known to the reader. It may be for this reason that the prophetic lists in poetry did not include purely Arab prophets. Their images were not as popular and well-known in the Persian poetic tradition as, for example, Joseph or Moses. At the same time, the examples from the poems by Nizami (who lived in Ganja, modern Azerbaijan) and 'Attar (born in Nishapur, northeastern Iran) cited here demonstrate the geographical breadth of the phenomenon of the prophetic lists. This is a testament to its widespread acceptance and an undoubted recognition.

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Списки пророков в персидской поэзии: применение, классификация и контекст

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В средневековых персидских поэмах часто можно встретить вступление, содержащее восхваление Бога и Пророка. Нередко это восхваление реализуется посредством сравнения Мухаммада с его предшественниками. Как правило, выводом (зачастую имплицитным) из такого сравнения является то, что Мухаммад во всем превзошел всех прочих пророков и, в отличие от них, не имеет ни в чем несовершенства. Кроме того, сюжетным поводом для использования списка пророков во вступлении поэмы часто становится описание мир'аджа, что восходит к хадису с описанием вознесения Мухаммада к божественному престолу, где его по очереди приветствовали все его предшественники. Использование списков пророков тесно связано с темой утверждения единобожия — таухид. Литературный канон предписывает упоминать эту тему во вступлениях разного рода, будь то первая глава поэмы, первая газель в диване или в начале отдельной касиды. Перечисление имен пророков и элементов связанных с ними историй (чудес, совершенных ими, выпавших на их долю испытаний или содеянных ими грехов) демонстрирует всемогущество Бога и непреложность Его воли, а также указывает на путь, который должен пройти верующий для соединения с Абсолютом. Аналогом и прототипом этого приема персидской поэзии являются так называемые ряды пророков, которые можно найти в Коране, где их функцией является демонстрация пророческой преемственности от первого человека Адама до «печати пророчества» Мухаммада. Пророческие ряды композиционно выстроены так, чтобы отражать представление о легендарной истории человечества до появления ислама.

Ключевые слова: персидская поэзия, пророки, Коран, списки, поэма, вступление, канон, мир'адж, 'Аттар, Низами.

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