

THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play

Translated into French By Alexandre Chodzko

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|----------|
| <u>THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play</u> | 1 |
| <u>Translated into French By Alexandre Chodzko</u> | 2 |
| <u>PREFATORY NOTE:</u> | 3 |

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(1875)

English translation from the French
By Frank J. Morlock
C 2003

Etext by Dagny

Thanks to Mimi Arbabi for reviewing this work for authenticity.

Special thanks to Amy Kimball and the Special Collections Department of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library, Johns Hopkins University, for helping me to obtain a copy of this and other rare texts.

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PREFATORY NOTE:

This play is a Persian Religious play called a Taazie. Mr. Chodzko translated it into French from a Persian original. Because I have very little Persian (Farsi) and do not have access to the Persian original in any event, I can only answer for my translation from the French into English. I have asked a Persian friend, Mimi Arbabi, to review the play for its authenticity. Satisfied that it represents fairly accurately the type of Persian play commonly known as a Taazie and seems to be authentic, I am offering my English translation of the French. I hope this work will break new ground even if it is merely a translation of a translation, because, as far as I know, this sort of play has never been previously translated into English.

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CHARACTERS:

THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL

MOHAMMED, the Prophet

ALY, his son-in-law

FATIMA, daughter of the Prophet and wife of Aly

HASSAN, elder son of Aly and Fatima

HUSSEIN, his brother

ZEINEB, daughter of their sister

ASMA, their servant

The action takes place in the house of the Prophet.

The Archangel Gabriel had the honor to say to the Prophet Mohammed what follows.

GABRIEL: I salute you, royal knight, making your way to the country of anguish. O most noble since the son of Adam your name is: Death! It's a painful duty for me to deliver the prophetic message I am charged with for you; yet hear it, for it emanates from the will of the All-Mighty. It has been decreed that a poison administered by a traitor will corrode the entrails of your grand-son, the Imam Hassan, at a time when neither you, nor his father and mother, will still exist on earth. The pitiless hand of destiny will make him vomit the shreds of his liver destroyed by the action of the poison. His brother, the Imam Hussein will not have a bitter fate. Abandoned by his allies in the midst of the desert of Kerbela, he will fall a martyr under the sword of unworthy impostors! They will take his cut-off head to the town of Damascus, which at the present time, seems like the Sun radiating a thousand beauties. Perched on a blade it will be exposed to the insults of the populace. On this woeful day they will cut off the water from the orphans of the martyr and will let the fire of thirst spread in their burning veins!

PROPHET: Tell me, Messenger of the Lord God, why must death as martyrs come to eclipse the life of these two stars in my constellation? For what sin are these lights of my daughter's eyes to be extinguished under the impure breath of a storm so frightful! How many sufferings and humiliations on the part of these enemies of our faith? They, rogues, who in the face of Allah, dare to butcher the children of the only daughter of his prophet?— Explain to me this mystery, you who are initiated in all that is decreed in the court of His Divine Majesty.

GABRIEL: Your grand-sons will not perish under the blows of an enemy so ignoble as to have transgressed all the commandments of God. No, the stain of sin has never contaminated any member of your family, O phoenix of the universe. On the contrary, they are being sacrificed to the redemption of nations who have embraced Islamism, and so that the face of martyrs will be eternally radiated from the purity of the elect of Allah. If you want the sins of these prevaricating nations to be remitted do not oppose the plucking of these two roses from your garden before their time.

THE PROPHET: O my brother, illustrious messenger of my sovereign God, each sacrifice that Allah commands of me is a favor that he deigns to confer on me. Surely, since it is a question of the health of my faithful, I consent to whatever the Dispenser of Graces wants of me.

GABRIEL: O you who enjoy the privilege of being able to speak face to face with God, here is what the Immaculate has charged me to tell you, my Lord. It's necessary that the prophet also obtain the consent of Aly,

THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play

that one being only the grandfather of two victims while this one is the father.

PROPHET: Here's a very arduous task! Tell me, confidante of Allah, how to broach a question which touches so closely the dearest affections of my son-in-law? All obedient as Aly is to the orders of God, I will have great shame to propose to him the martyrdom of his sons; he has only these two heirs of his name and his virtues.

ALY: (as he enters) I see tears spreading like pearls on the white page of your cheeks. You weep, you, source of possibility, you, source of miraculous virtues with which God gratifies the soul of these prophets? Can I know what afflicts you?

PROPHET: Hear me friend of God. I will communicate to you a revelation of numerous celestial mysteries. The most loyal spirit, Gabriel, has just come from the court of the Creator with a message which really afflicts the whole earth. It's news that's really disastrous for us, it burns like fire, it pierces through and through like an discharged arrow. Hassan will die poisoned; he will give up his soul with shreds of his lacerated entrails. The archangel announces to us as well that God wants another martyr: Hussein will fall under the sword of soldiers of Yezid; and not only will his head be perched on the top of a lance, but the women and children of his harem will accompany the triumph of our enemy.

ALY: Why then, illustrious envoy of God, for the expiation of what sin, will Hassan be cruelly poisoned? What have you done so that Hussein must become a martyr, he, so full of life and youth? And his family which is still young, for what will it be dishonored and led on the backs of our enemies camels? Explain to me, I beg you, pure and saintly soul!

PROPHET: God wishes it, O heaven of nobility, radiant star of the zodiac of the Virgin, you whose valor earned you the surname Lion of God, you, son of my uncle, God orders you to make this sacrifice. He has designated and named your Hussein to serve the redemption of our faithful Shiites and to intercede in their favor on the day of the last judgement. The tortures of thirst which he must suffer and his martyrdom will earn him this title. For my part, I have already consented; may God take him and glorify him. But one of the conditions of Allah is also your consent freely given, here his archangel stands before you and waiting for your concurrence.

ALY: May I fall your victim, O most perfect creature of the world. Yes, I consent to sacrifice my children. Observe the act, Gabriel, and be my witness before God who sends you.

GABRIEL: He said it, O prophet, and I am devoting myself to you, who embellish the glories of seventh heaven, count me in the number of your humble servants. Also necessary is the concurrence of your daughter, without which your consent and that of your son-in-law will not suffice, It's one of the inevitable clauses.

PROPHET: Alas! It's not easy to tell it to Fatima. I am not clever enough to be able to enclose the pearl of this mystery in the casket of my daughter's understanding. At the sole mention of the martyrdom of her sons, you will see Gabriel, all her senses will be confused like a head of hair in disorder.

FATIMA: (entering) My august father, you crown of the mysterious throne of Allah, elect of the elect of God, who through love for you created mankind, why are you weeping so; one would say that the apple of your eyes has changed into an autumn cloud. Your tears make me suffer, can I know the cause?

PROPHET: Two pains have thrown me on a bed of burning coals; two disasters make me pour out a torrent of tears; first of all the punishment of fire that on the day of judgement will fall like a burning ember on the guilty heads of my sheep, followed by the shameful death of Hassan and Hussein. How can I not weep over the premature end of these two flowers from my garden? The perversity of the age will make them die the death of martyrs: Hassan poisoned will give up his soul with his burning entrails, and the cut-off head of Hussein will go to Damascus, perched on the iron of a lance.

FATIMA: They, my two sons, renounce their lives, to become martyrs, great God! What have they done to deserve this punishment, as frightful as it is dishonoring? You haven't acted towards your people except as a sovereign full of solicitude for their well being. Will they be ingrates and criminals to the point of daring to raise their hands against the princes of your family?

PROPHET: The martyrdom of my descendants doesn't prove any fault of theirs whatever. They would live forever if life was the reward of merit. But only their martyrdom can assure the well being of my disciples and witness in their favor on the day of resurrection. God himself has decreed thus regarding your two sons. As for me, the prophet, along with your husband, we have already acquiesced to the divine will. Come, in your turn, my daughter, come assure the eternal happiness of my people! Consent and you will become the dawn of the day of

THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play

their eternal happiness; your assent will cover them with an aegis against the blows of evil. God wills that this treaty of alliance be adorned with you seal, on a single word of yours depends the well being of millions of mine.

FATIMA: Since they want the true believers be to saved at the price of my misfortune, I consent to be the most wretched of mothers, and that the great calamity run its course! But, tell me, where will I myself be on this woeful day, will I be near my children or far from them? I really have a soul in my heart and I won't hesitate to meet Hassan and Hussein on the day of their martyrdom.

PROPHET: This will happen on a day when, you, Aly, and I are no longer numbered amongst the living. The two young trees of our garden, will be beaten down from their homeland. You will have a palace in the gardens of paradise, but from the height of this dwelling of happiness, you will look sadly on the earth while awaiting their arrival. As for me and Aly, we will already have left the gate of this world, after having emptied the chalice of death.

FATIMA: O my father, how I am falling a sacrificed victim to your honor; you who come to the aid of suffering humanity, you, the panacea of all hearts distressed with sorrow; tell me; heaven will pursue to the breaking point the last ring in the chain of our family? Will our young martyrs have no one on earth to honor them with the tribute of princely mourning? What, not one friendly hand to support their last agonies?

PROPHET: Why, there will be better than that: their martyrdom will be venerated in centuries to come. Know that a whole nation devoted to the cult of Aly will institute annual funeral pomps in honor of Hussein. Great will be the mourning of my faithful Shiites on the arrival of the anniversary of their two imams. Men and women, souls contrite, faces covered with ashes, clothes torn, will come to celebrate the funeral of the martyrs.

FATIMA: O my father, from today I will take on mourning if you will permit me. It seems to me that in going thus before the disaster that must strike Hussein and Hassan, by paying them a tribute of my tears, and my anticipated regrets, by allowing my heart to dissolve in the fire of sorrow, the memory, the thought of what the archangel has just informed us will make me less ill.

PROPHET: Go, poor mother, take your mourning and do all that you wish! Make your wailing resound from the regions of the moon to the depths of the abysses haunted by the great sea-serpent. May tears of blood stream over the lilies of your cheeks! Undo your hair and abandon yourself as you wish to all the storms of pitiless heaven.

FATIMA: Hurry, my faithful Asma, have two tombs constructed, you will cover one with a green cover and the other with scarlet, and you will bring for me, and all our women, black robes.

(Asma leaves.)

ZEINEB: Let me become your victim, O sovereign mistress of all the Arabias; Zeineb willingly will die in the honor of your glorious name. Tell me why you are making your eyes cry, is it possible that a mother as happy as you is afflicted and weeps?

FATIMA: It's for you that I shed these tears, my sweet Zeineb, and for Hassan and Hussein, you also, you will shed many, indeed bitter ones, my poor friend. My heart is sad even to death!

ZEINEB: Let my soul serve as ransom for yours, my good mother! Tell me, what misfortune will fall from the height of one of these stars that roll under the celestial vault? Why are you weeping so in pronouncing the names of Hassan and Hussein?

FATIMA: Daughter of sorrow, know finally that Hassan will die a martyr poisoned by a traitor, that my sweet Hussein, in the middle of a desert, abandoned by his people, vilified, outraged, will be martyred by the assassins of the infamous Ibn-Zeiad, and that the people of his harem, women and children, become their captives, will be ignominiously dragged in the mud of the streets of Damascus. How can I not bewail such misfortunes? Not to weep! Why, that's impossible!

ASMA: (entering) Greetings, daughter of the friend of God! The two tombs are ready, as you ordered, and I have brought mourning clothes for you and all our women.

FATIMA: I am going to these tombs to perform the obsequies for Hassan and Hussein. You will come to find me there, Asma, with all the Arab women of the surrounding tribes, after having dressed them in black, as is the custom on such occasions. Tell them not to spare their screams, their lamentations and their funeral songs! (arriving at the tombs) O pain, feast yourself, come, gnaw, devour my heart like the poison that must devour the entrails of Hassan! O my tears, weep hot and bitter, fall thickly, and may I die for those that must be shed for Hussein! O Hassan, thirst and the intensity of the desert sun that you must endure, I have them all in my heart, I'm

THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play

burning already! Hassan, what you must suffer in body, I am suffering in spirit, sorrow has poisoned me. Hussein, your mother has been before you to weep and to bury herself in the arid sands of the desert of Kerbela. Ah! How thirsty I am!

ASMA: (arriving with the women of the tribe of Beni-Hachem) Women of Medina! Utter sighs, scream, shout like a wolf that has lost her cubs in the mugs of dogs. Join yourselves to the sorrow of the mother of Hussein, she has invited you here to weep and wail, with the water of your eyes extinguish the fire that devours her! Anticipating the mourning of the relatives of Hussein and Hassan, sit around their tombs, let blood overflow our hearts, let's wail, let's lament! (Funeral song of the women of Beni-Hachem) Shame and misery, alas! Under the sword of a faithless enemy, cruel and ignoble, will fall the children of the best of prophets! They will die martyrs! They, the joy of the heart of the Lion of God, Aly, they the tranquility of the most pure soul, Mohammed. No more happiness, no more repose on earth for the soul of Love-Incarnate, Mohammed is troubled. They, the last scions of the blessed family will expire, one falling after the other, without a friend by his side, without a mother at his bedside, without a sister, without a living being who loves them!

FATIMA: Dear friends, join yourselves to my anguish, great and small, help me all with your regrets. Let's anticipate the mourning that will afflict the world after the death of Hassan and Hussein. Let's anticipate the honors owed to these glorious martyrs, let's weep for them, let's wail!

PROPHET: (placing himself between the tombs) O tomb of my poor children! Here I am seeming a victim that has been immolated in your honor, I salute you, sacred asylums!— It's vain for me to resist the torrent of pain, it ravishes my heart from me, see the prophet of God weeping in the fashion of these women: Ah, the two trees of my genealogy withered before their time! After having torn them from their native soil, death will cast them on the sands of a distant desert. My two sighs ascend towards heaven, like two flamboyant meteors, for one cloud, the color of blood, is going to eclipse my two suns! The age, like a corsair avid to pillage, is going to carry off the two pearls that make up all my riches, Pure souls of martyrs, receive the sacrifice of my prophet's soul, it's no longer Mohammed, the Arab, that you see standing between your two tombs, no, no my name is Death!

ALY: (between the tombs) So then you are going to flicker out, O lights of your father's eyes! The age is going to ravish you of all, your fatherland, your family, your friends, your allies! Is it just that my palm trees fall before bearing fruit, the one by the diamond reduced in the poison powder, the other by the blade of a dagger? Where is the father that would have consented to the murder of his children? O my heart, will you ever pardon destiny for having snatched my consent to the murder of my children? But I will no longer pity myself, for it since it's a question of the remission of sin of our faithful Shiites, I dedicate myself and I am silent.

HUSSEIN: (entering) For whom are these obsequies, and this shower of tears that you are shedding here, my mother? This rain of tears that you are sowing with such profusion on your breast, certainly won't produce roses very soon. You have only Hassan and me, and we are full of life and hope to make you happy, unless the influence of these evil stars which turn on high have led us to some unexpected disaster? Tell me, who are the Hassan and Hussein that I hear you naming here?

FATIMA: In my flower garden I have only two roses, you and your brother, I have never cultivated others, the sublunar world of spheres in rotation, never having granted me more than two sons. Yes, I possess only you in the world, and destiny intends that you both be martyrs. But, I want to advance the woeful day, I have donned mourning clothes like a saddle, I am weeping over the misfortune before it arrives, and my burning heart exhales sadness like a lamp ready to flicker out, darkening with its smoke the cavernous vaults where it has been forgotten.

PROPHET: Come so I can embrace you, my heroes! I already see you covered with the wounds of martyrs, and prophetic though I be, I cannot with dry eyes, contemplate your future misfortune; you, far from your fatherland, you without brother, without sister, you prisoner of infidels, your breast panting with exhaustion, and lips darkened by the fever of thirst, you stretched near a river of fresh water, your gullet open mouthed by a profound wound and your blood reddening the sand of the shore of the Euphrates! God, such horrors!

ALY: Yes, my unfortunate orphan, you must die far from us, distorted by thirst, and face uncovered to the rays of the sun and your cherished face, that the envoy of God allowed to doze on his shoulders, it will be seen, perched, alas! at the top of an enemy lance!

FATIMA: (embracing Hussein) O light of your mother's eyes, you the solace of my breast exhausted with sorrow, how much I love to caress your neck radiant with purity, how sweet it is to me to touch the soft down of

THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play

these fresh and rosy cheeks. Why will the dagger of a criminal murder them? Why would sorrow have bent down a tree so young and so handsome?

HUSSEIN: It will be a happiness for me to be able to sacrifice myself, body and soul, for our virtuous family. I am burning with impatience to learn through yourselves the details of this mystery. In the name of God, don't hide anything from me, cut out all precautions and paraphrases, tell me frankly and briefly, what role is reserved for me in this great event?

HASSAN: I will tell you frankly, on the condition that you willingly submit yourself to the orders of God, for such is his will. Know then from me, I will have my entrails torn apart by poison from a traitor, as for you, you will die as a martyr: by the order of Yezid, your head will be separated from your throat, set atop a lance and paraded on high, under the sun, while your cadaver hurled to the ground, this old ground stained by so many crimes to make the most beautiful decoration. Your wives and your daughters, mounted on the backs of camels of the brigands of Koufa, will be taken to Damascus like a troupe of slaves.

HUSSEIN: O light of the eyes of the prophet! Since you and I are born of a single mother why is it we are not also given to die together? To my eyes, the infamies and humiliations that an infidel enemy makes martyrs submit to are not less dishonoring. By falling together we would have equally deserved the glory and admiration of the just. It would be indeed wretched not to consent to obtain at the price of our martyrdom, the salvation of the Shiite peoples. Yes, I consent to be a martyr and I glorify God all pure, who, for some drops of my blood shed on the earth, deigns indeed to receive my severed head in exchange for the sins of our friends! Blessed be Allah, the merciful! But is it true, will all the Shiites really be pardoned?

THE ARCHANGEL GABRIEL: (entering) O Hussein, God salutes you through my mouth, and he has charged me at the same time to announce to you that God never fails to accomplish his promises, so long as his servants remain faithful to the letter of sworn faith. Don't afflict yourself, then, over the fate of your Shiite peoples, O Hussein, God says " Each instant of your sufferings will be worth centuries of beatitudes for them, for I am more charitable than my servants."

HUSSEIN: (to Mohammed) Chief of God's creatures, sacrifice me as a thing of no value! Allah has just overwhelmed me with his favors: in your turn, be generous like him. What reward are you reserving for the faithful who henceforth will celebrate mysteries in commemoration of our martyrdom?

PROPHET: O light of my eyes, the apple of my eyes, love of my beloved daughter! All men who will weep for your misfortunes will enjoy the privilege of sitting at my side in the gardens of paradise.

HUSSEIN: (to his father) O my august father, heir presumptive of the prophet, you who sit on the rug of true religion, show to mortals the way to salvation! Tell me, what grace you will confer on the day of the last judgement to those who will take on mourning to honor the anniversary of my martyrdom; will you think of the spiritual interests of my friends?

ALY: Don't afflict yourself, I swear to you by the respect owed to your chaste soul. Heaven and its angels know the price of the water of the eyes of your friends. For a tear, which, in your honor, has moistened the eyelid of a mortal, I will make him sit face to face with me on the flowering shore of Kouser.

HUSSEIN: And you, beloved mother, tell me truly as you love me, what will you give for those who have suffered for me, when at the call of the trumpet of the resurrection, the head of each of them raises itself from the tomb to invoke me to his aid?

FATIMA: Don't worry about it, O joy of my eyes, just as true as God is glorious and without parallel in his essence, I will have no other friends in the abode of happiness than that of women who will have been present at the celebration of mysteries in your honor; I'll be waiting for them at the gates of paradise and I will introduce them to my palace as soon as they arrive. They have only to present themselves, those that will have been seen on the day of the anniversary of your martyrdom, hair disheveled, eyes full of tears and hearts burning.

HUSSEIN: And you, my brother, you the most virtuous of men, Prince Hassan, what do you intend to do for our friends, tell me as true as you see me here weeping for the sufferings that await you.

HASSAN: In the presence of all of you, I take a vow that God will deign to accomplish: that each of those who shall have wept for us, have a castle in the vicinity of mine in paradise.

HUSSEIN: Amen! Come on then, brother of my soul, let's pour torrents of tears of love and devotion. Give me your hand before it becomes icy from death, and let's make our provision for the water of eyes, this last sacrament of martyrs, it will revive us from the toils of a long and painful journey. (addressing his tomb) Here I

THE MESSENGER OF GOD: An anonymous Persian Play

am, Hussein, as God ordered me, and as I consent to become: martyr of the dagger of traitorous infidels; Hussein, innocent victim of human injustice; Hussein who, full of grace and love of my peoples, delivers to the executioners, my innocent head. Open yourself, my tomb, and hear all these promises that I just made before heaven and men! Goodbye, my friends, present and to come, remember my great love for you, and my sufferings in the desert of Kerbela, and rejoice me with some drops of rose color from your eyes.

HASSAN: (addressing his tomb) Hear me, my tomb, I, the Cypress Garden of Mohammed of Arabia, I consent to die beforehand, and to shut my heart to all the joys of the world, as if this heart were only one which carries in it its broken lock. Unjust and perverse world, Hassan leaves you a vase full of shreds from his faith, corroded by poison, eat it, feast yourself. And you, pitiless destiny, you vainly poisoned my drinking cup, your proteges won't fetch anything from it; I have promised my God to empty it all alone.

FATIMA: (singing) Ah, my poor head, strike it, my hands, Strike hard O Hassan, O Hussein! For my two sons, I have only sorrow, Only a sigh, O Hassan, O Hussein! The Archangel Gabriel came and he spoke to my two eyes which wept blood. He said to them: A people perjured to its God will butcher your Hussein; From diamonds pulverized by a son of these people the heart of your son Hassan will be made to fly apart in splinters. And these words of the archangel have driven out the calm and repose of my soul. Ah! My poor head, strike it, my hands, strike it hard! There, lies my Hassan; a mother wouldn't know his features disfigured by the poison. There, he falls, he rolls in the dust, my Hussein, covered with wounds from sword and lance. There, his wives and children watch the Euphrates, open their feverish lips and twist and contort in the tortures of thirst. Ah! my poor head; Hassan, Hussein! There, all the members of my Ali-Ekber fall cut up one after the other. There, the bloody cadaver of my Ali-Asgar, I see it, alas! The ignoble archers have made it the target of their arrows. How not to shiver; ah! my poor head bury yourself under the earth! O Hassan, o Hussein! There, under the knives of assassins falls on to the earth the severed arm of the intrepid Abbas! There, Qassem, the fiancé of my daughter, I see his feet standing in a pool of blood and red as if he had painted them with henna for his wedding. Bitter mockery! His nuptial chamber is only a tomb whose vault resounds with the echoes of songs of deaths. Ah! my poor head, break in the clasp of my hands!

GABRIEL: (addressing the Prophet) I must return to heaven. Greetings, to you, pride of the world of change and the world that is changeless; their Creator orders me to say to you: O my prophet, cast your eyes toward the world of the Spirits and see the trouble and emotion which reigns since you and your august family have begun to celebrate on earth the funerals of your future martyrs. From echo to echo, your wailings have reached and filled space right up to the seventh heaven where the throne of God is.

MOHAMMED: Adorable girl whose light is reflected in my eyes and in my soul, you my happiness and my joy! Cease your grievings which burn me to the heart. They have filled with their echoes the world of angels, and all of heaven is dressed in a cloak of mourning.

CURTAIN