



## **Immortality in the Great Religions and Myths of Iran, Mesopotamia, Sumer and Greece**

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### **Abstract**

In every mythological story, a quest for immortality and eternity depicts man's inner fervor for unity with gods and the supreme power. Man seeks full immersion in life and longs for immortality at the same time. In other words, he wants to live both in time and in eternity. The desire for eternity in man shows his ceaseless struggle with time, and even more so an intense fight with death to conquer eternal life. This article studies religious and mythological figures who have either been immortal or sought to be so. Jesus Christ, Idris (Enoch), Khidr, and Elias (Elijah) from religious schools of thought; Peshotanu, Giv, Tous, Kay Khosrow, Garshasp, and Zahhak from Persian myths; and Utnapishtim in Mesopotamia are immortals. Some mythological figures such as Gilgamesh and Alexander also sought deathlessness, yet failed to find it. Most mythological and even religious schools of thought have dealt with immortality. Anyone who has set out to find eternity has returned empty-handed, losing their life during the quest: Gilgamesh and Alexander sought immortality and the structures of their journey and quest are similar in many ways. However, they both failed. Those who received immortality from God, on the other hand, remain eternal, as immortality belongs to the realm of God's grace, not man's struggle.

**Keywords:** Immortality, Myths, Quest, Eternity, Sempiternity

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## **Introduction**

It is difficult to find a definition for myth agreed upon by all scholars and comprehensible for non-experts. Myth is a quite complex cultural reality that could be studied and interpreted from points of view that can vary from and complement each other.

Eliade (1963) defines myth, asserting that the actors in myths are Supernatural Beings who are known primarily by what they did in the transcendent times of the "beginnings." Hence myths disclose their creative activity and reveal the sacredness (or simply the "supernaturalness") of their works (p. 6). Eliade (1963) writes elsewhere that the myth becomes the example of all significant activities because it chronicles feats and heroic actions of supernatural creatures and manifestations of sacred forces. Eliade believes: myth is a sacred account of the manifest gesta of gods, supernatural beings, or mythical ancestors, which occurred in the beginning, in the time without beginning, in the timeless time; therefore, the myth details the genesis of the world, animals, plants, mankind, institutions, rituals and traditions, and their *raison d'être*, and in general the creation of the cosmos (Rastegar-e Fasayi, 2009).

Lalande says, "Myth is a mysterious and wondrous story rooted in people and out of the realm of thought, where agents not among persons but often natural forces are represented as people whose actions and stories have symbolic meanings" (Sattari, 1991, p. 6). Finally, Eliade (1963) considers the best definition of the myth as such:

Myth narrates a sacred history; it relates an event that took place in primordial Time, the fabled time of the "beginnings." In other words, myth tells how, through the deeds of Supernatural Beings, a reality came into existence, be it the whole of reality, the Cosmos, or only a fragment of reality. (p. 5)

Myth fulfills in primitive culture an indispensable function: it expresses, enhances, and codifies belief; it safeguards and enforces morality; it vouches for the efficiency of ritual and contains practical rules for the guidance of man. Myth is thus a vital ingredient of human civilisation; it is not an idle tale, but a hard-worked active force; it is not an intellectual explanation or an artistic imagery, but a pragmatic charter of primitive faith and moral wisdom (Malinowski, 1955).

One of the issues common among most myths is the search for deathlessness. The phenomenon is even seen in some religious schools of thought. In every mythological story, a quest for immortality and eternity, depicts man's inner fervor for unity with gods and the supreme power. Man seeks full immersion in life and longs for immortality at the same time. In other words, he wants to live both in time

and in eternity. The desire for eternity in man shows his ceaseless struggle with time, and even more so an intense fight with death to conquer eternal life.

The mystery of death, along with the concept of life, has been one of the first human concerns; before he thought about the meaning of death, man searched for ways to escape, after many searches; man has closed the doors and roads, and he has fallen out in surprise and grief before it.

The passion for immortality reflects our fear of death. A man who finds death terrifying, in the world of mind and in reality, tries to find a way to escape from it. Past myths are full of anecdotes of people who have died in search of the elixir of life. The philosophies of the predecessors also created vast systems to make us believe that death is not the end of life, and the existence of a person continues beyond his physical death. One of the secrets of the charm of religions has been the promise of immortality. Hope for eternity drives away fears of death, and calms down a frightened man's life. In all of these cases, it is assumed that bad death and immortality are good.

The formation of eternal characters, or those who seek immortality and are deprived of it, has been made for two reasons: the first is that humankind aspires to live forever as he is evasive to destruction, and it is unacceptable for him to go back after enjoying the taste of life. The second reason is that some societies that failed to reach their ambitions within a certain period of time or who believe in their beliefs to all, created in their myths the characters who in the future would fulfill the desire for the dignity of a particular people or religion.

The concept of immortality has been considered more than any other myth in the civilizations of Iran and Mesopotamia. And in all three great religions (Judaism, Christianity, and Islam), the Immortal characters have a strong presence.

### **Research Questions**

1. In which religions and myths, the subject of immortality has been discussed?
2. Who are the religious and mythical immortals?
3. Who asserted the immortality and who failed?

### **Discussion**

#### **Religious Immortals**

##### **Jesus Christ**

Jesus Christ was a herald of theism and monotheism, as Gospel of John asserts: "Now this is eternal life: that they know you, the only true God, and Jesus Christ,

whom you have sent" (*The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ*, According to St. John, 17:3). Or according to the Gospel of Mark "The most important commandment is this: 'Listen, O Israel! The LORD our God is the one and only LORD. Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind and with all your strength'" (*The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ*, According to St. Mark, 12:29 & 12:30).

In verses 157 and 158 of the Surat An-Nisa, *The Holy Quran* refutes the supposition of the Jews and some Christian sects about the death of Christ:

"And for their saying, 'We slew the Messiah, Jesus son of Mary, the Messenger of God' -- yet they did not slay him, neither crucified him, only a likeness of that was shown to them. Those who are at variance concerning him surely are in doubt regarding him; they have no knowledge of him, except the following of surmise; and they slew him not of a certainty -- no indeed; God raised him up to Him; God is All-mighty, All-wise" (*The Holy Quran*, Al- Nisa, 157-158).

Elsewhere in *The Holy Quran*, we have: "And Allah said: 'O Jesus! It is surely I who will make you die and cause you ascend to me, and cleans you of those who disbelieve'" (*The Holy Quran*, Al- Imran, 55).

These holy verses indicate that Jesus was not killed but ascended to heaven, whereas the Jew claimed to have killed Jesus.

Christians, however, believe:

... Now when the Sabbath was past, Mary Magdalene, Mary the mother of James, and Salome bought spices, that they might come and anoint Him. Very early in the morning, on the first day of the week, they came to the tomb when the sun had risen. And they said among themselves, "Who will roll away the stone from the door of the tomb for us?" But when they looked up, they saw that the stone had been rolled away—for it was very large. And entering the tomb, they saw a young man clothed in a long white robe sitting on the right side; and they were alarmed. But he said to them, "Do not be alarmed. You seek Jesus of Nazareth, who was crucified. He is risen! He is not here. See the place where they laid Him. But go, tell His disciples—and Peter—that He is going [a] before you into Galilee; there you will see Him, as He said to you. (*The Holy Gospel of Jesus Christ*, According to St. John, 14-15)

This account of the Gospel of Mark is told with minor differences in three other Gospels (Matthew, chapters 26 and 27, Luke, chapters 22 and 23, and John, chapters 18 and 19). According to this account, in which Christians believe, Jesus was

crucified and buried but resurrected after three days and ascended to the heaven, placed beside God.

### **Idris (Enoch)**

There are different points of view about his name and ancestry; some believe the word Edris to be a derivative of Darous and Derasat, and the namesake to be the vast knowledge and perseverance in learning, saying he has taught more than thirty scriptures (Tabarsi, 1993). Others consider the derivation to be from the word Dorous, meaning to hide, considering the namesake to be that of Idris' abrupt hiding (Khazaeli, 1992). Some say that Idris is an Ajam (non-Arab) word and cannot be derived from the word Derasat (Zobeydi, 1994). It is said that Idris is Hermes who is considered, in Greek mythology, a liaison between man and gods (Ibn-e khaldoon, 2000). According to yet another theory, he is the same person called Enoch in The Torah, whose father's name was Bard ibn Mahlil (Book of Genesis, 5:19-25). And because Idris is that of Torah and articulations of sounds in Arabic are different from those of Jewish language, such a difference in the name has occurred (Ibn-e khaldoon, 2000).

According to the historical accounts of Islamic books, Idris was the first person who tailored, made, and wore clothes, at a time when people still wore animal skin or leaves. He was also the first man who used quill to write, and worked on astronomy and calculus (Shahrestani, 1982). Therefore, he is seen as the first teacher of mankind, to whom the basic principles of every science is attributed. That is why man is indebted to him in the fields of astronomy, geometry, philosophy, mathematics, calculus, logic, and wisdom (Tabatabayi, 1997).

There are also differences regarding his death or his end on earth: according to some accounts, Idris chose from his followers a hundred of the best and from the hundred seventy, and from the seventy some ten, and from the ten seven individuals. Idris, together with this select seven, started to pray to God, until God took Idris' spirit to heaven (Majlesi, 1984).

Some others have said that having seen the sins of Cain's children, Idris asked God to raise him above, which God granted, and he now lives in the fourth or sixth sky (Bahrani, 1996). Some have said he went to the fourth sky and died there (Tabarsi, 1993). In contrast, some believe he entered the heaven alive and never came out (Ibn-e jozi, 1993).

It is said that the reason behind Idris' ascend to heaven was that an angel promised him that his deeds would be accepted and his flaws pardoned. He then wished to continue living. The angel asked why he wanted life. "To thank God, because I prayed during my life for my deeds to be accepted. Now that I have my goal reached, I want to thank God," he replied. The angel opened its wings,

embraced him, and took him to heavens (Deylami, 1957, p. 1). "Enoch lived a total of 365 years. Enoch walked faithfully with God; then he was no more, because God took him away," according to Torah (Book of Genesis, 5:19-25).

The Prophet Idris has also attracted attention in Islamic mysticism, being "an example of a devotee who ended material attachments and ceased earthly desires, who died a voluntary death before dying" (Poornaamdaarian, 1990, p. 1). Also from an interpretive point of view, Ibn Arabi sees Idris an incorporeal soul who has a relation to God, believing that such a soul deserves sanctification. That is why Idris finds a completely allegorical meaning for Ibn Arabi (Saffari / Hakima, 2015).

Considering the attitude of *The Holy Quran* as well as Muslim mystics toward Idris, mystic poets have depicted the allegorical and interpretive parts of his lifetime. More than anything, his immortality is noted, where Idris stands for voluntary death and immortality (Attar, 2005; Rumi, 2004; Sanā'ī, 2009).

### **Elias (Elijah) the Prophet**

Elias bin Yasin bin Fenhas (Tabari, 1988) was a prophet of the Israelites and a descendent of Aaron the Prophet (Seddig, 1999). His name is mentioned in *The Holy Quran* twice, once as Elias and once as Eliasin. In The Bible, Elias has been commemorated as Elijah. Most fables describing Elias in The Bible are given with differences in Islamic accounts—incidents such as Elijah's drought curse on the Israelites (Book 1 king, 17), healing of Elisha (Book 2 king, 2), and the battle with Ahab (Book 1 king, 18).

Elias became a prophet after the death of Ezekiel the Prophet (Tabari, 1988). He was appointed prophet during the realm of Ahab, an Israelite king (Hamavi, 1995). Ahab and his wife Jezebel encouraged people to practice idolatry. Elias rose against them and forbade idolatry. After years of his tribe's insistence on idolatry, he cursed them for a drought and the people had to struggle with famine (Tabari, 1997).

As time passed and drought spread, claiming many lives, the people, who found themselves hopeless, regretted what they did and resorted to Elias, accepting his call. Then, with Elias' prayer came heavy rain with flood everywhere. However, the people forgot their vows with God and returned to idolatry. When Elias saw the situation, he asked God for death – but God gave him a chariot of fire and he went to the Heaven, choosing Elisha, his disciple, to replace him (p. 23).

### **Khidr the Prophet**

Historians have a difference of opinion regarding his name and ancestry. It has come down from Prophet Mohammad: his name was (Talia) Belia bin Malkan bin Amer bin Arpachshad bin Shem bin Noha and his epithet Khidr, because the ground where

he set foot grew green as a result of his presence (Makaarem Shirazi, 1995). Thus, Khidr is one of the descendants of Shem bin Noha and a cousin of Dhul-Qarnayn. Ibn Habib (d. 245) is one of the earliest Muslim historians, who mentions Khidr, considering him a descendent of Isaac the Prophet, and his name as Khedroun bin Amyayil (Ibn-o Habib, 1942):

Khidr drank the water of life, thus he is alive and shall not die before the day Israfil's trumpet is blown. He comes to us to salute. We hear but not see him. He shall appear whenever his name is called. So, any of you shall name him in salute. He attends Haj each year, does all the rituals, and stands in Arafah, saying amen to prayers of the believers. Soon, God shall appoint him companion to our Qa'im, during his disappearance, to end his isolation (Ibn-o Asaaker, 1995, p. 6).

Imam Reza has been quoted as saying:

Ibn Abbas was also told, "We do not hear anything from the companion of Moses!" to which he replied: "He drank from the water of life and found eternal life, went aboard a ship to the sea, where he shall ride until Doomsday." (Siooti, 1984, p. 4)

### **Persian Immortals**

According to Pahlavi accounts, Zoroastrian texts, and Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, the following individuals are alive and immortal:

#### **Peshotanu**

His name has been recorded Peshotanu in The Avesta, Peshyotan in Pahlavi, and Peshotan in Persian (Afifi, 1995). It is traditionally believed that Zarathustra gave him holy milk and bread, making him eternally immortal (Poordavood, 2008). Bahram-e Pazhd's *Zaratusht-Nama* (The book of Zarathustra) also notes Peshotanu's immortality (Pazhd, 1959).

In Denkart's account, Peshotanu is among the immortals who ruled over Kangdež and in the last decade of the last millennium, rose to help Saoshyant together with one hundred fifty thousand of his companions and ten thousand banners, commanded by Khorshid Chehr, who is Zarathustra's son. He is one of the four sons of Vishtaspa. Peshotanu is always represented as a vigilant and wise youth in *Shahnameh*. He is a prince, always placed beside Esfandiyār as a counsellor and the only person trusted by Esfandiyār. Esfandiyār tells him of his plans and appoints him as replacement in his own absence.

### **Giv (Geoni)**

He is one of the fictional champions of Iran, son of Goudarz, and son-in-law to world champion Rustam. After seven years of search, it was he who brought from Turkistan to Iran, Kay Khosrow, son of Siavash, grandson of Kay Kāvus and Afrasiab, together with his mother, Farangis. As figured from historical sources, Goudarz is Giv's son but in *Shahnameh*, it is the other way around and the same happens in Pahlavi texts. According to Ferdowsi's account, Goudarz Gashvadegan's family came only second in significance to Sam Nayram during the Kayan era. The founder of the Pahlavi family was Golden-hat Gashvad, one of the champions of Fereidoun's era. His son, Goudarz, a great champion and moderator of the Kāvus and Kay Khosrow era, had seventy-eight sons and grandsons. The greatest champion of the family was Giv, unrivaled after Rustam, who married Banu Goshasp, Rustam's daughter. His name was recorded in Pahlavi texts as Viv and Giv, who is Goudarz's son and among immortals. Christensen believes that because the name of most immortals has been extracted from the detailed list in the 13<sup>th</sup> Yasht (Fravardin Yasht), Giv's should also be looked for in the same Yasht and thus Gaevani, son of Vohunemah, should be Giv or Viv himself (cited in Safa, 1954).

Giv's fate in *Shahnameh* is to accompany Kay Khosrow, together with four other champions, in his journey toward God. In spite of Kay Khosrow's warnings that only those having God's grandeur can tread that way, or else they will be destroyed or disappeared, the five champions, including Giv, choose to accompany him. Eventually, upon Kay Khosrow's ascend to the higher world, all the five champions are stuck in sleet and disappear on the spot (Ferdowsi, 2011). However, he is named among the immortals in Bundahishn, who accompanies Saoshyant in the end.

### **Kay Khosrow**

Kay Khosrow is one of the mythological kings of *Shahnameh*, one whose birth, growth, functions, and fate are extra-historical and almost supernatural. Kay Khosrow was born in the enemy's land, a land of darkness and oppression, Turan, as opposed to luminous Iran -- like a dark Ahriman against a bright Hurmazd. In Turan, he was brought up with Piran Viseh, a related champion and Afrasiab's minister, who had saved Siavash's pregnant wife from death. The news of Kay Khosrow's birth revived the hope for revenge in the heart of Iranians. Kāvus deployed Giv, the powerful son of Goudarz and one of the commanders of the king to find the princess and take him back to Iran. After a dangerous journey, Kay Khosrow was victoriously brought back to the Iranian court (Yaarshaater, 1989).

In the 17<sup>th</sup> verse of the 19<sup>th</sup> Yasht (Zamyad Yasht), Kay Khosrow is described as below:

Thus, Kay Khosrow overcame the nefarious enemy and was not stuck in bolt-hole throughout the battleground, when the vicious trickster was fighting him on horseback. The victorious chief Kay Khosrow, the avenger of brave Siavash, killed cowardly, and of brave Aghrirat, took captive vicious Afrasiab and his brother Garsivaz. (Doostkhaah, 1991, p. 499)

Without doubt, Kay Khosrow is strongly related to the savior myth in Zoroastrian accounts of the end of the world. He is related to Frashokereti and the renovation of the world, and religious practice and faith are among his main functions. A Pahlavi account goes:

Thereafter, at the end of Houshidarmah millennium, Saoshyanth, at the age of 30, shall meet Hurmazd. The sun shall stop then, for thirty days over [the sky] and when Saoshyanth comes back, Kay Khosrow, who sitteth afloat on Vayu [the lord of the winds], shall greet him. Saoshyanth sayeth 'who art thou atop Vayu, mounted on that camel?' Kay Khosrow shall reply 'I am Kay Khosrow' and Saoshyanth then sayeth 'Kay Khosrow who prudently turned away when thou dug a pagoda in Chichast?' Kay Khosrow responds I am the one and Saoshyanth sayeth 'now thou did a good act for if not, all the roll, which is a good renovator, shall be hard'. And asks, 'You killed the vicious Turanian Afrasiab', and he replies, 'I did'. Saoshyanth sayeth: 'Now thou did a good act for if not, all the roll, which is a good renovator, shall be hard'. Saoshyanth says: 'Oh Kay! Go and glorify faith'. Kay Khosrow shall glorify faith. Then, in that fifty seven years, Kay Khosrow shall be the king of the seven lands and Saoshyanth the priest of priests. (Bahaar, 1996, pp. 280-281)

The account of Kay Khosrow's disappearance in snow, with some of his renowned warriors, is also probably the result of attributing the immortal to him (Yaarshaater, 1989).

## **Tous**

Tous, son of Nowzar, is one of the greatest champions of *Shahnameh* and warlord of the Iranian army. He was known to wear golden shoes. His father, Nowzar, was the king of Iran, taken captive and then killed by Afrasiab during the war with Turanians. After Nowzar's death, Iranian leaders who did not find his children, Tous and Gostaham, eligible to rule, chose another person called Zou as the king.

In Pahlavi and Avestan texts, Tous has a mythical character. His name in The Avesta is Tusa. He is described as such in Aban Yasht: "Tous, a warrior champion, prayed to Anahita, and asked for strength of his horses and his own health . . ." (Doostkhaah, 1991, p. 499). As reward for killing the Turanians, he is among

immortals and in the company of Saoshyanth. He is among the champions who accompanied Kay Khosrow and were lost in sleet (Ferdowsi, 2011).

### **Garshasp**

Meaning owner of horses, Garshasp is recorded as Keresaspa in The Avesta and as Krsāsva in Sanskrit (Poordavood, 1998). Garshasp is depicted as being longhaired, having a bludgeon, and manly.

His feats are perfectly prominent:

- a. Killing a horned monster called Sravara, as told in the 11<sup>th</sup> verse of the 9<sup>th</sup> chapter of Yasna.
- b. Killing a demon called Gandarewa, introduced in The Avesta, as an open muzzle to ruin the material and true world (Afifi, 1978).
- c. Farvardin Yasht of the Avesta recounts his fight with bandits.
- d. Battle with a group of demon-like enemies, as told in the Avesta
- e. According to Vandidad's account, Garshasp is captivated by a beautiful lady, a demon-like, and commits his life's greatest sin by falling in love with the fairy whose name was Xnaθaiti.
- f. One of his most important missions is to kill Zahhak. Based on the 61<sup>st</sup> verse of Farvardin Yasht, Garshasp is an immortal champion, whose sleeping body is guarded by 99999 angels (Poordavood, 1998).

In the Avestan tradition, he is one of Saoshyanth's aids, who accompanies him in renovating the universe, resurrecting the dead, and arranging the resurrection.

### **Zahhak**

Aži Dahāka; a three-headed six-eyed monster in the Avesta, who is in later epic texts such as Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh* is introduced as the snake-shouldered Zahhak. In Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, Zahhak Bēvar Asp had no good nature. Killing his father, Merdās, he became the king and when he entered Iran, he took captive Jamshid, who had divine glory, and had him sawn in half. Not long after, he became a king, he joined Ahriman, after which two snakes grew on his shoulders, who were fed on the brains of Aryan youth. Zahhak's rule lasted a thousand years; ancient Iranians believed a savior emerges at the end of each millennium.

As Kaveh the Blacksmith enters the scene, people go to Fereydun who lives on Damavand Mountain and choose him as the king. Fereydun pursues a series of liberating wars and, finally, defeats Zahhak in Al-Quds and marries Jamshid's sisters then in Zahhak's captivity. When Fereydun wants to crush Zahhak's brain

with his ox-headed mace, an angel comes down saying his time is yet to be over and he should be bound and imprisoned in a far place so he should not harm people because his death would release all vices and insidious beasts, spreading them on earth. Thus, Fereydun imprisons him in a cave in Damavand. He continues to live today, but without any activity (Ferdowsi, 2011).

## **Immortals of Mesopotamia**

### **Utnapishtim**

His immortality is recounted through the story of Gilgamesh, where he is said to be the titular character's ancestor. After much suffering and a perilous journey, Gilgamesh meets him saying, "I must go on, to see Utanapishtim, that happily blessed man who has found life ... I want to destroy the demons of deaths. Utnapishtim! Tell me what life is; how you have found life" (*Afsaney-e Gilgamesh*, 2003, p. 90).

Utnapishtim symbolizes a person who humbly surrenders to God and acts in accordance with the purpose of his creation. It is this obedience that makes him receive the gift of immortality from God. He tells Gilgamesh that gods wanted only three people, he himself, his wife, and ferryman to become immortal and bear witness to the pre-Deluge era. In other words, because he went through six days and seven nights of a heavy storm successfully with his boat, ferryman, and wife, the gods made him immortal as a reward for his service. The main point of the story lies here: he has succeeded in a divine test. In mysticism too, whenever a mystic overcomes the difficulties of his way, he reaches the status of a perfect man and God's deputy.

## **Unsuccessful immortality seekers**

### **Gilgamesh**

Gilgamesh is the titular hero of an epic in verse who ruled over Uruk in Babylon (Yahaghi, 2015). His name is derived from an ancient word, bil-ga-mes, meaning an old man, or a middle-aged man. Historically, he is the fifth king of the Sumerian dynasty, who ruled over Sumerians for 125 years after Noah's Storm.

He was two parts: God and human, as his mother was, like Achilles' mother, a goddess. From her, he inherited power, beauty, and dynamism. He would inherit mortality from his father (*Afsaney-e Gilgamesh*, 2003). One of his famous achievements is building the wall of the city of Uruk. Uruk's nobles complained to gods that Gilgamesh had to be a pastor for his own people but acted like an arrogant tyrant. They asked gods to make a creature like Gilgamesh so that he would test his powers against him and the people could find peace. Thus, the goddess Aruru

formed Enkidu from clay. He was a wild man living in plains but Gilgamesh had a dream in his palace where a monstrous man had arrived, and he wanted to fight with him. When Enkidu met Gilgamesh in his palace, Gilgamesh welcomed him after an epic wrestle, and the two sat side by side. Enkidu became a bosom pal and inseparable friend of Gilgamesh's and started a kingly life.

The rest of the story deals with the adventures of Gilgamesh and Enkidu. They set out to attack and kill the fire-spewing monster Humbaba. The purpose of the adventure, as Gilgamesh tells Enkidu, is to "wipe the earth of all vices". Enkidu dreams that he is taken to the underworld, where Nergal turns him into an apparition. Then he becomes ill and dies. Then, Gilgamesh treads mountains and plains in a quest for deathlessness. He moves further away from people in his search to find his ancestor, Utnapishtim, who has survived the big storm and found eternal life with his wife. He goes through plenty of obstacles. When he finally meets Utnapishtim, the latter invites Gilgamesh to fight sleep in order to become immortal. Gilgamesh loses the fight, as he immediately falls asleep, not waking up for seven days.

Utnapishtim proves Gilgamesh cannot even resist sleep, let alone the last sleep of death. When a desperate Gilgamesh is ready to leave, Utnapishtim tells him of a plant, as a souvenir, which has the ability to rejuvenate the old. However, Gilgamesh should go deep down the sea in order to find it. Gilgamesh does so and brings the wondrous plant up. On his way back to Uruk, he stops near a lake to wash, when a snake smells the plant and takes it, molting as it moves away. The quest for deathlessness remains futile in this way. Gilgamesh cries in lamentation for his failure and returns to Uruk empty-handed (pp. 21-100).

### **Alexander**

The first source to mention Alexander and his quest for immortality is *The Shahnameh* by Ferdowsi. According to Ferdowsi, Alexander is the son of the Iranian king Darab and Nahid, daughter of Philip II of Macedon, and so is a descendent of semi-mythological Iranian kings, Kaianids. Ferdowsi points out his learning, wisdom, and championship and occasionally speaks of him as a person in touch with the invisible world, depicting him as a prophet. He travels around the world in search for the water of life, wreaking many sufferings on himself and his army, where he finally arrives in a county whose people tell them the path to the Spring of Life. Alexander chooses from among his army those who are more patient, prepares supplies for forty days, and follows Khidr for two days and nights. On the third day, in the dark, they reach a fork. Khidr suddenly disappears in the eye of Alexander, reaches the spring of life, washing his own body and becoming immortal, but Alexander's quest remains unfulfilled despite all his sufferings. On his way, parted with that of Khidr's, he arrives in a mountain and meets Israfil, receiving a message

that predicted his death. Alexander goes into the darkness but cannot reach the water of life and immerses himself in to find a new life (Ferdowsi, 2011).

### **A general analysis of the stories of Gilgamesh and Alexander**

The stories of Gilgamesh and Alexander are quite similar in many ways. The following similarities declare that immortality is a divine matter which belongs to the realm of God's grace not man's struggle – however, he takes high risk journeys:

- a. They both set out an adventurous journey to find water of life and deathlessness.
- b. They both suffer a lot during the adventurous journey.
- c. They both encounter supernatural creatures.
- d. They both have to go to the world beyond in order to find the water of life.
- e. They both cross the sea aboard a ship.
- f. They both travel with a guide; Khidr as Alexander's and Utnapishtim as Gilgamesh's.
- g. They both are told to give up their quest because they are trying to find something impossible.
- h. They both want immortality for the sake of material power and fame.
- i. They both have to pass through darkness in order to reach immortality.
- j. They both fall prey to heavy, excessive sleep during the quest.
- k. They both rule over their countries.
- l. They both travel to the end of the world, when the sun rises.
- m. They both arrive at a mountain.

### **Conclusion**

Immortality and deathlessness are desires dealt with in most schools of thought, so much so that some religious beliefs are bound to deal with the concepts fully. A fundamental issue is that immortality is completely God-given, in the sense that an immortal character receives immortality as a gift from God in return for his ultimate surrender to God and obedience regarding his commandments. Idris the Prophet directly asks God for immortality, something which God grants. Utnapishtim has survived with his own boat, ferryman, and wife, from a formidable storm of six days and seven nights and the gods have made him immortal to reward him for his services. Tous and Giv are also immortal because they have killed the Turanians and

they shall accompany Saoshyanth. Kay Khosrwo too, directly in touch with Saoshyanth, is reserved for kingdom in his time. Garshasp is also reserved to kill Zahhak and shall resurrect with Saoshyanth. Peshotanu is made immortal by Zarathustra. God gave Elijah as chariot of fire, taking him to heaven. It is obvious that their immortality comes from God. On the other hand, the only vicious immortal in world mythology is Zahhak who shall live in Saoshyanth's time to prevent the spread of evil. However, anyone who sought immortality came back empty-handed, losing his life during the quest. Gilgamesh and Alexander sought immortality but in vain, because immortality belongs to the realm of God's grace rather than human struggle.

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