

**BEHROOZ MAHMOODI-BAKHTIARI  
MARZIYE VARVANI-FARAHANI**

**A *Ta'zia* Text about St. George from the Qājār Era**

**Abstract**

The present article introduces one of the *Ta'zia* texts from the Qājār era (19<sup>th</sup> century, Iran), in which the main character is Saint George. This *Ta'zia* manuscript is kept in central library of the Iranian Parliament, and has not been published yet. The important and noticeable point about Saint George is that he has not been mentioned in Quran, and all the stories related to him are, as opposed to the rest of the prophets, the result of the folk beliefs.

**Keywords:** *Ta'zia*, Iran, Islam, Shi'a, Qājār dynasty

**Introduction: *Ta'zia***

*Ta'zia* is one of the most important displays of Iranian Shi'ite Islamic culture, which is an imaginary representation of the story of the martyrdom of Imam Hussain (d. 680, the third *Shi'ite* imam), who was brutally murdered, along with “according to tradition” 72 of his male children, brothers, cousins, and companions, while on his way to Kufa at the invitation of the people of there. This Shi'ite passion play with its sequential episodes, referred to as *majles*, is a noble and original play in which many artistic, cultural, and religious traits of the Iranian culture may be found. According to some sources, the origins of *Ta'zia* goes back to the pre-Islamic Iranian culture and rituals and parallels to *Ta'zia* may be found in the Middle Persian epic *Ayādgār ī Zarērān*, and *Shāhname* (*Encyclopedia Iranica*, entry *Ta'zia*).

With the beginning of Safavid reign (ca. 907/1501), Shi'ite Islam became the state religion in Iran, and consequently, lamentation for Imam Husain turned to an official affair. However, the *Ta'zia* passion play was not born up to the middle of the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Chelkowski, *Encyclopedia Iranica*). At first, it was confined to rituals and carnival

demonstrations, but gradually the text of *Ta'zia* was also added to this show. Although it is not clear when it started to take the form of a dramatic ritual with texts and actors, the prosperity of this ritual surely starts with the advent of the Qājār dynasty (1785–1905) in Iran, and according to available evidence at the time of Nāsser al-Din Shāh (R. 1848–1896), they were aware enough of the dramatizing possibilities of *Ta'zia* (Mahjub 1384 Š/ 2005: 131). As a matter of fact, the Qājār Kings' extensive support of *Ta'zia* made an appropriate ground for its growth, and *Ta'zia* reached its peak in terms of content, quality, and location.

It was during this period when so many groups emerged to perform this rituals, and dozens of valuable manuscripts were composed as the *Ta'zia* texts, which turn out to be very diverse in terms of their subjects and characters. In some *Ta'zia* texts we may discern several legends, myths, or stories of non-Islamic religious figures as the subject of the manuscripts. But it should be kept in mind that for the *Shi'ites*, Imam Hussain's martyrdom overshadows all other human tragedies, therefore, even in those texts which apparently deal with stories other than the story of Karbala, the text retains a connection to that tragedy by means of a narrative and dramatic device referred to as *Goriz* (lit. 'divert', see below). It is also noteworthy that *Ta'zia* is a play performed by men, even if the character is a woman (see Beeman 2003, Mottahedeh 2005).

In the recent years, academic studies on *Ta'zia* texts have flourished, and major scholars such as P. Chelkowski, S. Homāyuni, J. Malekpour, and 'E. Shahidi have contributed a lot to this field. However, the lack of published sources and the non-availability of many of the manuscripts still remain a major problem. Many of the important *Ta'zia* manuscripts are not edited, and many of them have been lost or are threatened to decay and vanish. Therefore, as a measure to collect, edit and publish the threatened *Ta'zia* manuscripts of the Qājār era, thirty six texts of the *Ta'zia* manuscripts about the non-Islamic figures were collected and edited at the department of Performing Arts, University of Tehran. One of these texts deals with Saint George (*Jerjis*), which bears a special importance since Saint George is a well known figure in both Islamic and Christian cultures, although with some differences, and of course, due to the lack of reference to him in Quran.

In this article, after providing a brief background of *Ta'zia* texts, the *Ta'zia* manuscript of Saint George will be introduced and a translation of some parts of the text will be provided. Some additional explanations about this manuscript, its structure and features will follow.

### The Text of *Ta'zia*

The texts of *Ta'zia* are written all in verse, and the separate parts intended for each of the characters, on loose narrow sheets of paper, are prepared or collected by director (Mu'in al-Bokā') and handed to *Ta'zia* players before the beginning of the performance. According to Homāyuni (1380 Š/2001: 390), the term "manuscript" is used in two cases: one of them is a long scroll paper with the width of approximately ten centimeters and its length depends on the text written on it and is rolled like a tube. Each *Ta'zia* has an

original manuscript or list in which the names of the characters are written along with some words of their first lines. Each *Ta'zia* player holds little folded scripts of his own role in the palms of his hand to read his lines from. The tradition that the actors do not seem to memorize the texts and read them, lies in the fact that they (especially the protagonists, who represent the holy Muslim figures) want to indicate that they were only role carriers and did not assume the personality of the holy characters they played.

On the other hand, the original manuscript is in the hand of director and from this list he knows the turn of every actor. The actor reads from the text and plays his role until he comes to some kind of a sign which is a long line or space between the lines, then he stops reading and the director points to the next actor and asks him to start (ibid: 390). After finishing the *Ta'zia*, the director collects all the copies and rolls them into a single tube.

The *Ta'zia* style of writing is not very literary, since the scripts are not intended for reading alone, but for performing. The value of these strips must, therefore, be measured in their theatrical context, taking into consideration the setting, costumes, movement, and the sung and spoken aspects of the drama (for more information see Chelkowski 1977, and Homayouni 2005).

In terms of content, it should be noted that at the time of Qājār period, *Ta'zia* was not limited to issues of Karbala and Quranic and biblical stories and legends started to be added to its table of content (see Anvar 2005). As Homāyuni (1380 Š/ 2001: 301) writes:

“Several *Ta'zia* manuscripts are taken from religious mythology, these include: “The slaughter of Ishmael” written by someone called Kamāl, ‘Cain and Abel’, and “Joseph and Job”. Some of them are taken from religious sayings, and some others are just popular legends like “The Desert Dervish”, which roots in Rumi’s *Mathnavi*. But generally, most of the *Ta'zia* manuscripts are based on the text of Qur’an, traditions and histories, and usually *Ta'zia* writers select one part of an event and with the power of innovation, imagination and faith turn it into a *Ta'zia* text.”

From that period there has emerged a tendency towards introducing lay affairs within the framework of religious issues, and writers of *Ta'zia* manuscripts gave new features to it using some kind of diversion called *Goriz*, which connected these kinds of plays to the tragic events of Karbala or the life of Imam Husain’s family, before and after his martyrdom in the desert (Mahjub 1384 Š/ 2005: 130). It is through this device that *Ta'zia* drama expands beyond the spatial and temporal constraints. It allows the spectators to be simultaneously in the performance space and at Karbala. This device is used in different ways – direct verbal reference to Hussain’s martyrdom or a brief scene depicting an aspect of his tragedy, or both. In terms of shrine – singers and preachers, *Goriz* is used when the preacher quotes one of the events of Karbala during his speech in a way which is appropriate and, as it is said, it is “to apostrophize the events of Karbala” (Malekpur 1366 Š/ 1987: 313). When dealing with characters other than the usual martyrs of Karbala, when they fall into a pain or difficulty, suddenly Gabriel as the courier of

revelation appears, and reminds them the events of Karbala, so that to downplay their plights against the story of Imam Hussain, and reduce the intensity of their own pain. Examples of such references are abundantly seen in the *Ta'zia* texts about Jesus Christ, Joseph, and Saint George, which is the subject of the present article.

### *Ta'zia* Manuscripts

Although *Ta'zia* belongs to an Iranian performing art, a large portion of *Ta'zia* texts is not kept in Iran. The largest collection of *Ta'zia* manuscripts (1,055 volumes) is housed in the Vatican Library. Besides that, two very important collections of *Ta'zia* manuscripts are *Malek* and *Majles* Libraries in Tehran. The impressive collection of the Library of Iranian National Parliament (*Majles*) is the second largest collection after the collection of Vatican Library. This collection, catalogued by Reza Kuchak-zāde (1389 Š/ 2010) in two volumes, contains 444 *Ta'zia* manuscripts. Even if we consider only the complete manuscripts, the number of the texts of this collection is far more bigger than any other national collections. Although many of the *Majles* manuscripts are incomplete and damaged, the value and antiquity of them should not be neglected. In this collection, according to the dates written on some of the manuscripts or the dates deducted from some signs, there are manuscripts from about 1831 to 1954 C.E (1247 to 1370 Q). So the time range of these manuscripts spans between the reign of Fath-Ali Shāh Qājār (r. 1797–1834) to the reign of Rezā Shāh Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941), however some of these texts go back to the early years of Mohammad Rezā Pahlavi's reign (1326 Š/ 1947) (Kuchak-zāde 1389 Š/ 2010: 39).

Among the *Ta'zia* texts held in *Majles* library, forty six manuscripts are dedicated to the life story of non-Islamic religious leaders and prophets. One of them is about St. George, which is fortunately a complete text. In the present article we first introduce the major characters of this *Ta'zia* according to the Islamic beliefs, and later we will concentrate on the text of the manuscript.

### **St. George according to the Islamic beliefs and folklore**

As it was said before, there is no reference to St. George in Quran. According to the Islamic beliefs, he was a prophet, not a saint, who lived after Jesus and before Mohammad. He was tortured and killed several times, but was revived according to God's order, and tried to lead people to prosperity. According to the book *Rozat ol-Safā*, he was a disciple of Jesus, and lived in Palestine. He was so rich that the amount of his wealth was unknown (as opposed to the Christian beliefs, which hold that he presented himself to Emperor Diocletian to apply for a career as a soldier). His contemporary king named Rayān (seemingly "Diocletian" in the Western tradition), had a large idol named Efyon, and forced his people to worship it. St. George sent him some gifts and invited him to change his faith into monotheism and

to believe in one God. This happened when Rayan set a large fire, and was encouraging everybody to worship it. Rayan ordered St. George to be severely tortured to death. But according to God's will, no torture was effective, and St. George kept restoring himself back to life and kept inviting the king to believe in God. St. George prayed for several times, and set the dead people back to life, in the hopes that they get faith in God, but no one did. So he cursed them, and they were all dead (see. Esfahāni, 753).

Neyšāburi (1375/ 1996: 54) names his contemporary king as Daziyan, who ruled Mosul. He narrated: one day the king went to the woods and took Efyun with him. He ordered a great fire to be lit, and told people that whoever would not bow to Efyun would be burnt in the fire. St. George who was very rich stood up, gave all his wealth to the faithful people, went to the king, and asked him not to worship the idols. The king was impressed by his manners and asked about his past. He said that he had come from Rume (Anatolia) with a large amount of money, in order to encourage him to believe in God. Daziyan did not kill him, and agreed to lead him to his own religion. He told St. George to stop being stubborn and worship Efyun to receive wealth. However, St. George refused, and the king said he had to either worship the idol, or enter the fire, or endure severe tortures. St. George refused worshipping the idol. According to the king's order, St. George was tied to a wooden column, and his skin and flesh were removed. His bones were also crushed and boiled in vinegar. His body was later pulled on the ground by nine men, and was later on nailed to the ground. Then a large column was placed on him, and he was left alone in that way. When the night came, God sent an angel to remove those stones, and told him to wait until he is martyred just like John the Baptist, the son of Zechariah. On the day of doom he will be the lord of the martyrs. God told him that he wanted to revive him every time he was killed. The king kept killing St. George several times. He tore him with a large saw, but he came back to life according to God's will. Every time he came back to life, the king's anger escalated. He ordered him to be cut into pieces, crushed and burnt. After that his ashes were blown by the wind by the sea. God revived him again, and the people set faith in his religion, and there were companions of the king among them as well.

It is said that 34000 faithful persons were killed because of him. St. George was also pulled on the ground, and a large mill rolled over him, so that his body disappeared in the ground. God revived him again, and St. George felt pity for the faithful people, and prayed to God to get their revenge from the king, and get his life after all the enemies would die. When he finished his prayers, a white cloud appeared, and rained fire on the people. All of them were burnt to ashes (see also Yāhaqqi 1386: 285).

According to another story, St. George was introduced as the son to Anak bn. Khosrow, the king of Armenia. He was still underage when his father died. Tirtat, St. George's uncle, became the king and started worshipping the idols. St. George was ordained to prophet at the age of 16 and tried to stop his uncle. Tirtat ordered him to be imprisoned, and wounded him with iron fangs, so he lost much of his flesh, and then he was set free. The next day he went to his uncle and asked him to stop his worship once again. According to the king's order he was severely tortured and beheaded. He was tortured

14 times until he was dead, but he revived again. Finally they put him inside the tree, and cut him with a saw. Then they decapitated him, but were finally chastised by the divine calamity (Esfahāni 1337: 752).

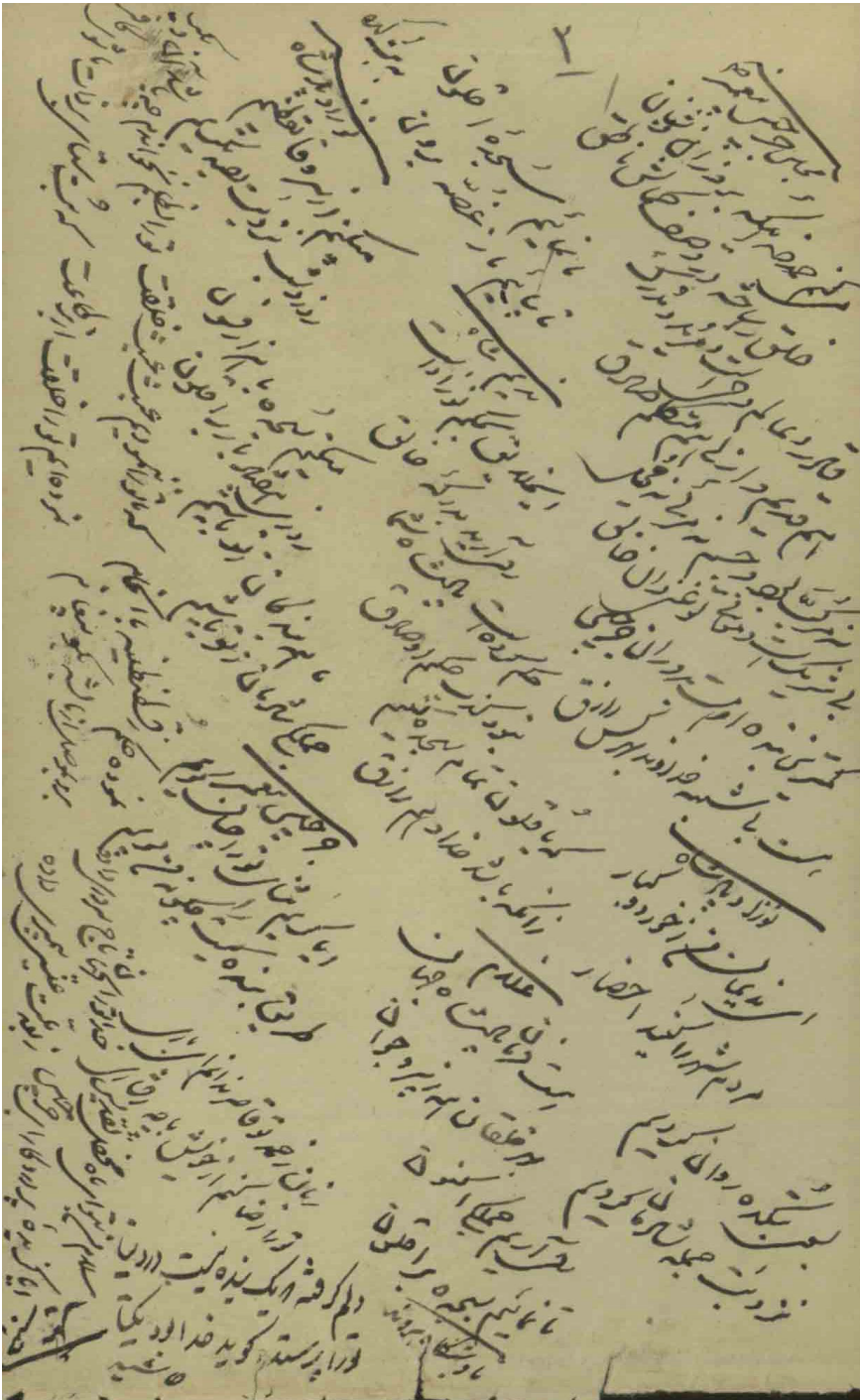
Knowing these accounts on St. George, now we will examine the manuscript of the *Ta'zia* of St. George.

### **The *Ta'zia* of St. George (*Majles-e Hazrat-e Jerjis*)**

The Manuscript *Majles-e Hazrate Jerjis* was written in Jamādi al-thāni 25<sup>th</sup>, 1300 Q/ May 3<sup>rd</sup>, 1883. The manuscript is composed in 451 verses and includes a twenty verses long dialogue between St. George and the courtier of the king. As it was noted earlier, the story related in this manuscript did not exist in Quran, but it was written exactly like the story told in *Qeşaş al-Anbiyā*. It starts with St. George inviting the king to believe in God. Instead, the king tortures and kills St. George. He is revived and then asks people to believe in God. The king tortures and kills him again. Then again he is revived and he is asked to perform miracles. He does some miracles and people believe him, but again he is jailed and tortured. At the final part when he eventually starts moaning, Gabriel appears and reminds him of Karbala and the martyrdom of Imam Hussain.

### **The Plot**

The *Ta'zia* starts with St. George's prayers. According to the text, Nozād, the king of Mosul, encourages people to worship an idol named *Aqlun*, so people go to the temple to prostrate themselves before it. St. George is sad and he is lamenting that no one worships God. At this moment, Gabriel appears to him and advises him to go to Mosul from Constantinople and lead their king to change religion into monotheism. At his request, St. George goes there as a merchant, and requests Nozād for a visit. Nozād receives him. As St. George enters, he starts to praise God. Nozād angrily notes that he himself is the god, but St. George tells him not to refuse God's orders, and worship him. The king asks about his ancestors, and St. George introduces himself, and invites him to worship God once again. Instead, the king forces him to bow to the idol; otherwise he would burn him in fire. St. George curses the idol. So, Nozād orders him to be dropped in fire and hanged later on. Then, his flesh is removed from his body by an iron set of fangs, and he is stoned to death. During all these tortures St. George keeps praising God. At this moment Gabriel remembers Moslem, who was hanged in Kufa, while he was a stranger with no companions. St. George moans out of loneliness and Gabriel reminds him of Hussain, whose dead body was dropped on the grounds of Karbala for three days. Gabriel asks St. George about his state and St. George thanks the God. The servants tell the king that apparently St. George is a prophet, and ask for king's command about his corpse. Nozād orders them to bury St. George's body and not reveal him as being



The first page of the *Nosxe* ("manuscript") of the *Ta'ziah* of St. George, kept in the Library of the Iranian Parliament





a prophet. Gabriel once again refers to Karbala desert and Hussain's headless body, who has no one to bury him. The servant asks people to take St. George to the cemetery and bury him. Gabriel refers to Hussain's lonely body once again. St. George's dead body is placed on the ground, and people start a feast. Gabriel tells St. George that God will revive him to invite people to believe in God once again. St. George goes back to people and invites them to worship God once again. Nozād orders him to be placed between two wooden bars and cut in half, and to throw his dead body to the lions. This is done, but the lions refuse to eat the dead body, and St. George revives again. A servant tries to kill him, but St. George kills him first.

Nozād resorts to the idols for a rescue. A servant tells St. George that 2960 people have been killed because of him, and that the king took shelter in the idols' house. St. George orders the idols to be destroyed, and the king to be killed. The servant tells the king to stand up and to see all the idols broken, and all the king's servants turned into God's believers. The king asks about the best course of action, and the servant suggests that he should ask St. George to perform an impossible miracle. Therefore, St. George is asked to change back wrecked woods of a building to a fruit tree. St. George prays, and the woods turn into a tree. The servant believes that he is a magician and they should do something. So, they lie to him that they have got faith in God, and ask him to come to Nozād's palace. Noshād, Nozād's wife, informs him of this trick, and tells him that she has got faith in him, along with some other 700 people. St. George goes to fight Nozād together with them. Nozād orders him to be flogged, but St. George keeps inviting them to believe in God. Nozād orders a cow-shaped iron case to be made, and put St. George in it and cook him in fire. The king's orders are done accordingly, but Gabriel revives St. George again. Nozād asks for his servant's help once again, and he advises him to ask St. George to revive a dead person. St. George prays, and 17 dead people are revived. St. George talks to one of these formerly dead people and he asks St. George to rescue him and all the others from the fire of the hell.

The servant takes faith in God and is hanged afterwards. Thousands of people get faith in St. George, but he is captured and imprisoned in an old woman's house by the order of the king. Gabriel appears to him and gives him the good news that God is with him. He tells him that he will be killed four times but God will revive him every time. At this moment Gabriel remembers of Musā Ibn Ja'far (the 7<sup>th</sup> Imam of the Shi'ite people), who was imprisoned in Hārūn al-Rashid's prison for 7 years, and was finally martyred by Hārūn's poisonous dates.

There is nothing to eat in the old woman's house. So, St. George makes a miracle, and the column in the middle of the house bears fruits. He also prays for the crippled child of the old woman to be healed. St. George is taken again to Nozād. His hands and feet are tied, and his body is torn to pieces with swords. Then his torn body is burnt and his ashes are set to wind. God collects his ashes once again and revives him. He goes to Nozād again. Nozād's wife advises husband to get faith in St. George's religion, but Nozād orders the massacre of all of the God's believers. St. George is stoned to death, and he asks if there is anyone who has been tortured as much as him, and Gabriel reminds

him of the calamity that Imam Hussain endured. St. George asks Gabriel about Imam Hussain's family, and Gabriel tells him all, and shows him the Karbala desert. Finally, St. George cries and laments for Imam Hussain.

This story is similar to the one read in *Qisase-i Qor'an*, but some kinds of tortures are different, and at the end of each torture, Gabriel refers to the Karbala desert accordingly.

The transcription of the Persian text of the opening of this manuscript, along with a (non-literary) translation of it, is as follows:

|                         |  |                        |  |
|-------------------------|--|------------------------|--|
| <b>Jerjis:</b>          | <i>mikonam hamd xodā'-i ke be ruzān o šabān</i>    | <b>Saint George:</b>   | I praise the God, who, during the days and nights,   |
|                         | <i>xalq rā sāxte dar vāsf-e kamālaš nāteq</i>      |                        | Has enabled people to praise his perfection,   |
|                         | <i>qāder o 'ālem o hay ast o morid o modrek</i>    |                        | He is the one who is powerful, wise, everlasting and understandable,                           |
|                         | <i>ham qadīm o azali, ham motakallem, sādeq</i>    |                        | As well as being old, eternal, and a true speaker.   |
|                         | <i>na morakkab bovad o jesm, na mar'I na mohil</i> |                        | Not composed of anything, and without any body; the one which is neither visible, nor cunning, |
|                         | <i>bi šarik ast o mo'ādi, to qani dān xāleq</i>    |                        | (And) without any partner or companion. Knowing him to be the richest (the least needy),       |
|                         | <i>kamtarin bande-ye u hast be dorān Jerjis</i>    |                        | George is the least servant of him in this time.   |
|                         | <i>Hast bi šobhe xodāvānd be hark as rāzeq</i>     |                        | No doubt, God is the one who feeds everybody.  |
| <b>Nozād-e Pādešāh:</b> | <i>ey nadimān-e man, ze xord o kebār</i>           | <b>Nozād the King:</b> | O, my companions, from all the young and the elderly,  |
|                         | <i>mardome šahr rā konid ehzār</i>                 |                        | Summon all the people of the town:   |
|                         | <i>be su-ye botkade ravān gardīm</i>               |                        | Let's go to the temple,  |
|                         | <i>Nazde bot jomle šādemān gardīm</i>              |                        | (and) get joyful besides the idols.  |
|                         | <i>mā namāyim sejde-ye Aqlun</i>                   |                        | We prostrate ourselves before <i>Aqlun</i>   |
|                         | <i>tā biyāyim mā ze qoše borun</i>                 |                        | And do away with grief (lit. come out of grief).   |

|                         |  |                          |  |
|-------------------------|--|--------------------------|--|
| <b>Nadim-e Pādešāh:</b> | <i>ey xalāyeq be hokme nozād ast</i>     | <b>King's Companion:</b> | O people, this is Nozād's order:                             |
|                         | <i>ruy ārid be dargah-e xāleq</i>        |                          | Head towards the creator's place,                            |
|                         | <i>Hokm karde ast pādešāh-e šomā</i>     |                          | This is your king's order.                                   |
|                         | <i>Nabovad kez b, hokme u sādeq</i>      |                          | And his order is not wrong, it is true.                      |
|                         | <i>ke be aqlun tamām sejde konim</i>     |                          | We should prostrate ourselves before <i>Aqlun</i> sincerely, |
|                         | <i>Zānke bāšad xodā va ham rāzeq</i>     |                          | Since it is both the god and the feeder.                     |
| <b>Qolām:</b>           | <i>hast farmān-e pādešāh-e jahān</i>     | <b>Servant:</b>          | This is the order of the world king:                         |
|                         | <i>Bahr-e xalqān hame ze pir o javān</i> |                          | For all the people, young and old,                           |
|                         | <i>ruy ārim jomlegi aknun</i>            |                          | Now we all set out together,                                 |
|                         | <i>tā namāyim sejde bar aqlun</i>        |                          | In order to prostrate ourselves before <i>Aqlun</i> ,        |

And the manuscript is terminated with the following verses:

|                  |  |                      |  |
|------------------|--|----------------------|--|
| <b>Jebre'il:</b> | <i>Ān setamgar bud Šemr-e bi-hayā</i>        | <b>Gabriel:</b>      | That cruel was the shameless Shemr,                                  |
|                  | <i>Miborad ra's-e Hoseyn rā az qafā</i>      |                      | Who cut Hussain's head from his back.                                |
|                  | <i>In zamān ensāf deh, ey nur-e eyn</i>      |                      | Now, fairly say, O my dear (lit. the light of my eyes),              |
|                  | <i>Dard-e to dard ast, yā dard-e Hoseyn?</i> |                      | Is the (real) pain that of yours, or that of Hussain's?              |
| <b>Jerjis:</b>   | <i>Man fadā-ye dared hejran-e Hoseyn,</i>    | <b>Saint George:</b> | May I die for the strangeness of Hussain,                            |
|                  | <i>Jān-e man bādā be qorbān-e Hoseyn,</i>    |                      | May my life be sacrificed for Hussain,                               |
|                  | <i>In hame dardi ke bar man rox namud,</i>   |                      | All the pain that I endured (lit. that faced me),                    |
|                  | <i>Šemme-ye dard-e 'Ali-Akbar nabud.</i>     |                      | Was not (even) a fraction of 'Ali-Akbar's (Imam Hussain's son) pain. |

## Conclusion

This article was a report on a newly edited *Ta'ziya* manuscript on a non-Islamic religious figure of St. George. The way St. George is treated in the Islamic tradition and folklore is not alike that of the Christian tradition. The fact that he was tortured and suffered for his beliefs makes him a good comparison with Imam Hussain, whose sufferings are enumerated by Gabriel in the text. As the only extant manuscript on this prophet, it is a valuable text and deserves full publication for further studies.

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