

## Riddle in Ancient Iran: Riddle Debate in the *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*

### Eski İran'da Bilmecce: Matikan-i Yuşt Feryan Metninde Geçen Bilmecce Münazarası

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**Submitted/Başvuru:** 02.02.2024

**Accepted/Kabul:** 16.03.2024

**Citation/Atf:** Amaç, Yaşar Yeşim. "Riddle in Ancient Iran: Riddle Debate in the *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*." *Şarkiyat Mecmuası - Journal of Oriental Studies* 44 (2024), 283-296.  
<https://doi.org/10.26650/jos.1454084>

#### ABSTRACT

The riddle, a literary genre with ancient roots, persists in both oral and written tradition to this day. Its presence in Iranian literature can also be traced to ancient times. *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*, among the earliest surviving examples of the riddle genre from ancient Iran, is believed to have been written in Middle Persian during the Sassanid period. This text narrates the intellectual clash between Yusht Faryan, a devout follower of the Zoroastrian faith, and Aht, a sorcerer, as they engage in a battle of wits through a series of riddles to test their knowledge.

According to the narrative, Yusht Faryan resides in a city named "Frasn Wizaran" (The Riddle Solvers), safeguarded by Urmuzd, the Zoroastrian god, and aided by the Amesha Spentas. Aht, aspiring to take control of the city, declares his intent to pose 33 questions to the city's young people aged under 15 years, threatening death to those unable to answer. He executes 900 mubeds (religious men) and 9 girls from the Espitman clan when they fail to answer his first question. However, a 15-year-old boy named Yusht Faryan successfully answers all his questions, receiving assistance from Urmuzd and the Amesha Spentas when needed. Subsequently, Yusht Faryan poses three questions to Aht, who is unable to answer them and receives no help from Ahriman and the giants. Thus, Yusht Faryan emerges victorious in the riddle debate and kills Aht.

This study examines the riddles in *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* through Persian translation, categorizing them based on their thematic subjects.

**Keywords:** Matikan-e Yusht Faryan, Aht, Ancient Iran, riddle, debate

#### ÖZ

Bilmecce, kökleri çok eski çağlara dayanan, sözlü ve yazılı edebiyat aracılığıyla günümüze kadar ulaşan bir edebiyat türüdür. İran edebiyatında da bilmecce türünün kökleri çok eskiye dayanır. Eski İran'dan günümüze ulaşan bilmecce türünde yazılı ilk örnek metinlerden *Matikan-i Yuşt Feryan*'in Sasaniler döneminde Orta Farsça dilinde yazıya geçirildiği düşünülmektedir. Bu metinde Zerdüştî dininin takipçilerinden Yuşt Feryan ile ruhanilerden büyücü Aht'ın bilgilerini test etmek için bilmeceler üzerinden yaptıkları zeka savaşı anlatılır.

Metindeki anlatıma göre, Yuşt Feryan, "Frasn Wizaran" (Bilmecce Çözenler) adlı şehirde yaşar. Bu şehir Zerdüştî dininin tanrısı Urmuzd ve onun yardımcıları



Emşaspendler tarafından korunmaktadır. Bu şehri ele geçirmek isteyen büyücü Aht, şehirdeki on beş yaşını geçmeyen gençlere otuz üç soru soracağını, soruların cevabını bilemeyenleri öldüreceğini bildirir. Sorduğu ilk soruyu bilemeyen dokuz yüz mubed (din adamı) ile Espitman soyundan dokuz kızı öldürür. Yuşt Feryan adındaki on beş yaşındaki genç onun bütün sorularına cevap verir. Yuşt Feryan bilemediği sorular için Urmuzd ve Emşaspendlerden yardım alır. Yuşt Feryan bütün soruları cevapladıktan sonra kendisi de Aht'e üç soru sorar; ancak Aht soruları bilemez. Ehrimen ve devler Aht'e yardım etmez. Bunun üzerine Yuşt Feryan bilmece münazarasında galibiyet kazanır ve Aht'i öldürür.

Bu çalışmada *Matikan-i Yuşt Feryan* metninin Farsça tercümesi üzerinden bilmeceler ele alınmış ve bu bilmecelerin konularına göre türleri incelenmiştir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Matikan Yuşt Feryan, Aht, Eski İran, bilmece, münazara

## Introduction

In ancient Iran, riddles played a prominent role, as evident in the Middle Persian debate between Yusht Faryan and Aht. This riddle debate, an ancient epic, is also mentioned in the *Avesta*, the holy book of the Zoroastrian faith. The *Avesta* mentions that Yusht Faryan hailed from the esteemed Faryan dynasty. To enlist the aid of Anahita, the goddess of water, Yusht Faryan performed a grand sacrifice, offering 100 male horses, 1,000 cows, and 10,000 sheep to the river Ereng. Empowered by Anahita's support, Yusht Faryan faced Aht, armed with the knowledge to answer Aht's 99 challenging questions. However, some parts of this epic are not described in the *Avesta*; this text has been preserved in memory through oral transmission and subsequent transcription.<sup>1</sup>

It is surmised that the composition known as *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* emerged approximately 80 years after Zarathustra's death. Preserved through oral tradition for an extended period, it was later transcribed in Middle Persian during the Sassanid era. Interestingly, while *Avesta's* section on the Yasht mentions Aht posing 99 riddles to Yusht, *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* records only 33 riddles. This discrepancy implies the loss of many ancient riddles, with the authors of *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* relying solely on surviving riddles without introducing new ones.<sup>2</sup>

Among the scholarly works on the *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* is the analysis conducted by Muhammad Muin: *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan and Marzbannameh*. Initially published in 1324/1945 at the Majlis printing house under the title *Yusht Faryan u Marzban nameh*, this work was later reissued by Mohammad Qazvini in 1327/1948 in Leiden, Netherlands, by the Brill publishing house without correction, before being reprinted and published in Tehran.<sup>3</sup> An important scholarly contribution to this text was made by Mahyar Nawabi and Mahmoud Tavusi, professors from the Department of Language at the University of Shiraz, in a 57-page publication in 1357/1978 at the University of Shiraz printing house.<sup>4</sup>

This epic, which is one of the oldest narratives of Iran, finds its roots in the *Avesta*, specifically in the chapter of the *Yashts*, in the 80th–84th verses. Discrepancies exist in the number of pages in the surviving copies of *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*. This text, which lacks the continuation of the 23rd verse in the fourth chapter, comprises approximately 3,000 words.<sup>5</sup>

## 1. Characters in the Riddle Debate

Yusht Faryan is a 15-year-old follower of the Zoroastrian faith. “The term *Yusht* means *yost* in Middle Persian and *yoista* (“youngest”) in *Avesta*. *Faryan* is used in *Avesta* as Yusht's surname, signifying *Fryan* (“many”) and thus associating Yusht with the Faryan dynasty.”<sup>6</sup>

1 Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Tarikh-e Adabiyat-e Iran-e pish az Eslam*, (Tehran: Intisharat-e Sohan, 1378/1999), 251; Abdolhossein Zarrinkoob, *Az Gozashteh-e Adabi-e Iran*, (Tehran: Intisharat-e Sohan, 1358/1979), 64.

2 Bahman Ansari, *Asater-e Irani*, (Tehran: Intisharat-e Arven, 1397/2018), 148-149.

3 Mahmood Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, (Tehran: Publication of Sazman-e Faravar, 1987), 16.

4 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 11.

5 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 14.

6 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 6-7.

Aht is a spiritualist antagonist of the Zoroastrian belief system. “Aht, also known as *axt* in Middle Persian and *axtay* in *Avesta*, is portrayed as a deceitful figure, labeled *dujdav* (“liar”).”<sup>7</sup> Descriptions within the *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* portray Aht as a sorcerer characterized by his ruthlessness, sinfulness, deceitfulness, and evil-mindedness. Aht is so evil that he kills his brother because he is curious about Yusht’s answer to a question. Furthermore, Aht brutally murders his wife, Hofarya, Yusht’s sister, when her answers do not meet his expectations.

Throughout the debate, Yusht Faryan astonishes and surprises the audience with his intellect and knowledge, effortlessly responding to each of Aht’s questions, whereas Aht becomes increasingly unsettled by Yusht’s answers. Yusht predominantly frames his answers within the context of the Zoroastrian religion. Notably, only Yusht Faryan begins with insulting words during the riddle debate. While other Middle Persian texts feature mutual insults, the *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan* presents only Yusht Faryan’s derogatory remarks toward Aht. For example, in the Middle Persian text *Deraht-e Asurik*,<sup>8</sup> a debate unfolds between a date palm tree and a goat, with both parties exchanging various insults while extolling their contributions to humanity. Aht’s provocations toward Yusht primarily revolve around Yusht’s sister. Some sentences may have been removed over time owing to Aht’s negative remarks about the Zoroastrian religion. The discrepancy in the number of riddles, with 99 in the *Avesta* and 33 in other texts, indicates textual alterations over time.

## 2. Subjects of Riddles in the *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*

The riddles posed by the sorcerer Aht to Yusht Faryan include a wide range of subjects, from religious and philosophical questions to moral, social, and natural laws. Within these diverse areas, some questions mirror those posed to children today as brain teasers, whereas others possess an enigmatic and symbolic quality. Additionally, certain questions utilize figurative analogies to challenge Yusht Faryan’s intellect and knowledge.

### 2.1. Questions About Religion and the Afterlife

The sorcerer Aht initiates the riddle debate with a question of profound religious significance: “whether heaven is in this earth or in the realm above?” This question is directed to 900 mubeds and 9 girls from the Aspetman clan. When they answer that heaven is in the celestial realm, Aht summarily executes them. In contrast, Yusht Faryan offers a different perspective, asserting that heaven is within this earthly realm.

Religious questions within the debate also extend to questions concerning the afterlife. One such question probes: “Who are the people who wish to be resurrected after death and die in peace after completing their unfinished works?” Yusht Faryan responds to this question by explaining three categories of individuals. The first category comprises those who abstain

7 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 9.

8 Ahmad Tafazzoli, *Tarikh-e Adabiyat-e Iran-e pish az Eslam*, 256.

from worship and refrain from imbibing haoma, an intoxicating beverage integral to religious rituals. The second category includes individuals who are unable to marry upon reaching maturity. Lastly, Yusht identifies those who neglect worship and charitable acts during their lifetime as constituting the third category.

## 2.2. Philosophical Questions

Yusht Faryan answers the following philosophical question: “What is it that people want to hide but cannot?” by relating it to Zurvan, the god of time in Zoroastrian belief.<sup>9</sup>

“What thing that falls down is good? Which thing is good to be cooled? Which thing is good to die?” The answer to these questions is left to Yusht Faryan’s interpretation, which is as follows:

“What is good to fall is water; what is good to be cooled is fire; it is good for a heathen sinner like Aht to die! If the water does not flow down, if the fire is not cooled down, and if a heathen sinner like Aht does not die, then the whole world will be filled with water, fire, and heathen sinners like him, and the world will be unsustainable.”

## 2.3. Social and Moral Questions

The question “Which food is better and tastier?” extends beyond personal preference, containing abstract meanings. Yusht Faryan provides moral inferences with his answer to this question: “The food you eat is more beautiful and delicious in return for what you earn as a good and honest person without deviating from the right path.”

Furthermore, the text mentions the subject of lying, which is considered one of the greatest sins in the Zoroastrian faith. The twenty-third and twenty-fourth questions ask what the coldest and hottest things are, respectively. In responding to these questions, Yusht Faryan asserts that the character of a liar is the coldest thing on earth, and the fist of one who avoids sins and does not lie is the hottest thing.

In addition, some questions in the text reflect societal sentiments through metaphorical analogies. Questions such as “What is heavier than a mountain? What is sharper than a steel pocket knife? What is sweeter than honey?” employ figurative language to convey a deeper meaning. In Yusht’s answers, what is heavier than a mountain is likened to the character of a liar, what is sharper than a steel penknife is likened to a human tongue, and what is sweeter than honey is likened to a good child.

Moreover, the tenth question, “Which people live more pleasant and comfortable lives?” may yield answers that reflect the thoughts and opinions of the society. However, Yusht gives the following answer: “People who are happy, wealthy, and have a fearless life live more comfortable and enjoyable lives.”

9 Mohammad Sharifi, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi*, (Tehran: Intisharat-e Moin, 1391/2012), 744.

## 2.4. Intelligence Questions

Questions such as “What has ten legs, three heads, six eyes, six ears, ten tails, three ovaries, two hands, three noses, four horns, three necks?” and “What is it from which the food and life of the world is provided?” represent examples of intellectual questions. The answers to these questions are two male cows and a farmer, respectively.

Similarly, “What remains dry yet does not burn?” and “What is wet but burns?” are intelligence question similar to riddles. The respective answers are soil, which does not burn even though it is dry, and animal fat, which burns even though it is wet.

## 2.5. Mysterious and Representational Questions

The following is an example of mysterious and representational questions: “What are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten?” Some of these numbers represent people or events in the Zoroastrian religion.

Yusht Faryan associates “one” with the sun, a symbol deeply rooted in ancient Iranian beliefs before Zoroastrianism, signifying the god Mehr.<sup>10</sup> For “two,” he suggests the rhythmic act of breathing in and out, symbolizing the cycle of *giti* (“life”), referring to the earthly realm, and *minu* (“death”),<sup>11</sup> pertaining to the celestial realm. The number two refers to these two worlds.<sup>12</sup> “Three” embodies the core tenets of Zoroastrianism: “good speech, good behavior, and good thought.” “Four” is interpreted as including water, earth, plants, and riding animals, with water symbolizing both the essence of life and reason, asserting that the belief and survival of everything depends on water. Water is also the symbol of reason.<sup>13</sup> From this perspective, the most important beings in the ancient world are presented in the answer. “Five” signifies the great Kayanian kings: Kay Kawad, Kay Kavus, Kay Khosrow, Kay Lohrasp, and Kay Gustasp. “Six” corresponds to the six days of Ahura Mazda’s creation of the world. “Seven” embodies the esteemed “immortal saints” and “pure immortals,” the Amesta Spentas. These seven divine beings, also known as gods or angels in Zoroastrian belief, comprise Sepand Mino, Khordad, Mordad, Bahman, Ordibehesht, Shahrivar, and Spandarmad.<sup>14</sup> The significance of “eight” lies in the notion of eight good names, although their precise meaning remains unclear. Yusht Faryan associates “nine” with the nine orifices of the human body, while “ten” symbolizes the ten fingers.

## 2.6. Questions about Natural Laws

Some questions are related to the laws of nature, such as the following question: “In how

10 Sharifi, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 1372.

11 Mohamad Djafar Yahaghi. *Farhang-e Asater va Dastanvareha dar Adabiyat-e Farsi*, (Tehran: Farhang Moaser, 1391/2012), 808.

12 Sharifi, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 649.

13 Sharifi, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 1.

14 Sharifi, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 199; Yahaghi, *Farhang-e Asater va Dastanvareha dar Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 159-164.

many months do elephants, horses, camels, donkeys, cows, sheep, women, dogs, pigs, and cats give birth?"

### 2.7. Opinion Questions

Emotionally charged questions such as "Which feet are more beautiful and better?" incite a reaction from Yusht Faryan regarding his sister. Aht further stirs the conversation by asserting, "Actually, I have seen many feet in my life, but among them, the feet of your sister, my wife Hoferya, are more beautiful and better." This prompts Yusht Faryan to draw an analogy between feet and water, declaring the feet of water to be superior and more beautiful.

Aht asks, "What are women's greatest desires?" Aht does not agree with Yusht Faryan's answer that "Women's greatest desire is to be with their husbands." Hoferya is asked to confirm this answer. When Hoferya's answer matches that of Yusht Faryan, Aht kills her.

### 2.8. General Riddle Questions

Questions two, three, and four are general riddles commonly posed to children today. "Which of Hurmuzd's creations is taller when sitting than when standing?" The answer is a dog. "Which of Hurmuzd's creatures walks but cannot take a step?" The answer is a sparrow. "Which of Hurmuzd's creatures has teeth made of horn and horns made of flesh?" The answer is a rooster. The rooster's role in this riddle is intertwined with the god Surush (also known as Sraosha). Roosters that crow at dawn are under the command of Surush. Surush orders the roosters to wake people up in the morning and prompts them to express gratitude to Ahura Mazda. Surush is one of the seven great gods or angels of the Zoroastrian and ancient Iranian religion, known as the Amesha Spentas.<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, the voice of Surush and the rooster transcends the physical realm; this voice is believed to emanate from the metaphysical realm. The crowing of the rooster heralds the return of the earth from darkness to light.<sup>16</sup>

## 3. Matikan-e Yusht Faryan

### First Part; 1–29 Verses<sup>17</sup>

May this Matikan<sup>18</sup> Yusht Faryan be blessed with the help of Ahura Mazda.

Legend speaks of the sorcerer Aht, leading an army of 7,000, who once laid siege to the city known as "The Riddle Solvers," declaring, "I will crush the City of The Riddle Solvers under the massive feet of my elephants!" Upon breaching the city walls, he gathered all those under the age of 15 and subjected them to a rigorous interrogation, executing any who failed to answer.

15 Sharifi, *Farhang-e Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 797-798.

16 Abdollahi Manizheh, *A dictionary of Animals in Persian Literature*, (Tehran: Pajoohande, 1381/2002), 340.

17 Mahmood Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, (Tehran: Publication of Sazman-e Faravar 1365/1987), 20- 32.

18 Matikan means book, treatise and epic.

Among the inhabitants of The Riddle Solvers dwelled a man named Marispand. He approached the sorcerer Aht, beseeching, “Do not destroy the city of Riddle Solvers, do not slaughter these innocent people! In this city, there lives a fifteen-year-old youth named Yusht Faryan. He can answer any question you ask him.” Aht, the sorcerer, sent a message to Yusht Faryan, demanding, “Come to me to ask you thirty-three questions. If you cannot answer them correctly or if you say you do not know, I will kill you immediately.” Thus summoned, Yusht Faryan ventured to the dwelling of Aht. Yet, sensing the presence of a human skeleton concealed beneath Aht’s bed, placed there for sorcerous purposes, Yusht Faryan refrained from entering. In response to Aht’s demand, he declared, “There is a human skeleton under your bed. Amesha Spentas will not enter because human bones are there. I will not enter until the skeleton is removed. I need Amesha Spentas’s help and support.” He then refused to enter until the skeletal talisman was removed. Yielding to Yusht Faryan’s condition, Aht ordered his servants to replace the bed with a new one. Summoned once more, Yusht Faryan confronted Aht, refusing to perch upon a cushion stained with death. “O cruel lying sinful man, I will not sit on this cushion, there’s the carcass of the dead on it. Ahura Mazda and Amesha Spentas are my refuge and my helpers. If I sit on this cushion, they cannot help me and I cannot answer your questions there.” Then, Aht ordered his servants to take the cushion away and bring a new one. This time, Yusht faced Aht and sat on a new cushion.

### **Second Part; 1–76 Verses** <sup>19</sup>

The sorcerer Aht’s first question to Yusht Faryan was, “Is heaven better on earth or in the upper realm?”

Yusht Faryan responded: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! Heaven is better on earth. He who has no work and effort on earth will have no reward in the upper world. If you have done no good deed on earth, you cannot bring goodness to that realm.”

The sorcerer Aht was surprised and confused by this answer while a man muttered a religious prayer. When he came round, he said “It is my misfortune that you prevail over me, as a brave man prevails over the bravest man, a brave horse over the bravest horse, a brave cow over the bravest cow, like the sky that commands the earth. I killed nine hundred mubed who could not answer this question, who drank haoma and turned yellow and worshiped. I also killed nine girls of the Espitman clan who remained faithful to their religion even though the kings gave them gold and pearls. When I asked them whether heaven was better on earth or in the upper realm, they said that heaven was better in the upper realm. So I said, ‘If heaven is better for you in the upper realm, then enter the heaven of the upper realm’. Then I killed them.”

Second question: “Which of Hormazd’s creations is taller when sitting than when standing?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The answer to your question is a dog.”

19 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 33-60.



Third question: “Which of Hormazd’s creations walks but cannot take a step?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It is the sparrow that can walk but cannot take a step.”

Fourth question: “Which of Hormazd’s creations has teeth made of horn and horns made of flesh?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It’s called rooster, the bird of Surush. When a rooster crows, darkness is lifted from Hormazd’s creatures.”

Fifth question: “Is a small pocket knife better or less food?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! A pocket knife is better than little food. The pocket knife is useful for cutting and picking barsam. <sup>20</sup> But little food cannot reach the stomach. If it reaches, it will cause bloating.”

Sixth question: “What are things that are full, half full, and never full?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! At the time of death, the wealthy man is full whose soul avoids sins, a poor man avoiding sins with nothing who has lived badly is half full, the man whose soul goes to hell is empty and never full...!”

Seventh question: “What is it that people want to hide but cannot hide?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The god of time that no one can hide is Zurvan.”

Eighth question: “Who are the people who want to be resurrected after death and die in peace after completing their unfinished work?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! Some of them are those who do not worship and do not drink haoma. Another group includes those who cannot marry when the time comes. The third category comprises those who neglect worship and charity during their lifetime. They pledge to give alms but fail to fulfill their promise. When they die, they desire resurrection, only to face death again. Estvihat Angra Mainyu, the angel of death, observes that death is a relief for them.”

Ninth question: “In how many months do elephants, horses, camels, donkeys, cows, sheep, women, dogs, pigs, and cats give birth?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The elephant gives birth in three years; the horse, camel, and donkey in twelve months; the cow and woman in nine months; the sheep in five months; the dog and pig in four months; and the cat in forty days.”

Tenth question: “Which people live more pleasant and comfortable lives?”

20 Barsam are the thin branches of the gaz or pomegranate tree. Mubeds use these branches in religious ceremonies. (Yahaghi, *Farhang-e Asater va Dastanvareha dar Adabiyat-e Farsi*, 206-207)

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! People who live happy, wealthy, and fearless lives are more comfortable and enjoyable.”

Eleventh question: “Who are the people in the world who resemble Hormazd and Amesha Spentas?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The Shah is Hormazd, and those who are like the Shah’s aides on earth are the Amesha Spentas, who are as bright as heaven. In the palace of the Shah they are like a star. Other people are small like other stars in the sky, as they are always busy in their own affairs.”

Twelfth question: “Which food is more beautiful and tastier?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The food you eat is better and tastier for what you have earned by being a good and upright person who has not deviated from the right path.”

Thirteenth-twenty-second question: “What are one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight, nine, and ten?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! ‘One’ is the sun that shines the whole world; ‘two’ is breathing; ‘three’ is good speech, good behavior, and good thought; ‘four’ is water, earth, plants, and animals; ‘five’ is the five great Kayanians shahs; ‘six’ are the six days during which Ahura Mazda created the world; ‘seven’ are the seven Amesha Spentas; ‘eight’ are the eight good names; ‘nine’ are the nine holes in the human body; ‘ten’ are the ten fingers on the human hand.”

### **Part Three; 1–97 Verses** <sup>21</sup>

Twenty-third question: “What is the coldest thing?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It is not what you think it is. You probably think that I know like this. You think that the snow that accumulates on the top of the mountain is so cold that the sun will never melt it. But it is not what you think. Because the character of lying people is colder. You have a brother who is a liar. He has so much poison in his heart. You cannot melt it with sun and fire. That poison can melt in the palm of my hand.”

Upon hearing this, the sorcerer Aht ordered his servants to bring his brother, kill him, and remove the poison from his heart. However, neither the sun nor fire could melt this poison. Then, Yusht Faryan held this poison in his fist and immediately melted it.

Twenty-fourth question: “What is the hottest thing?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It is the fist of one who shuns sins. Neither sun nor fire could melt your brother’s poison. But my fist has melted it.”

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21 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 61-93.

Twenty-fifth question: “Which thing falling down is good? Which thing is good to be cooled? Which thing is good to die?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It is good for water to fall down, it is good for fire to be cooled, it is good for a heathen sinner like you to die! If the water does not flow down, if the fire is not cooled, and if a heathen sinner like you does not die, then the whole world will be filled with water, fire, and heathen sinners like you, and the world will be unsustainable.”

Twenty-sixth question: “What is heavier than a mountain? What is sharper than a steel pocket knife? What is sweeter than honey? What is fatter than sheep’s tail fat? Who is more generous than the generous? Who is the fairest of the just?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! Heavier than a mountain is the liar; sharper than a steel pocket knife is the tongue of men; sweeter than honey are the good children of parents; fatter than the fat of a sheep’s tail is the angel of rain and earth, Spandarmad; more generous than the generous is the angel of rain, Tishtar; fairest of the just is the angel of the wind. For he is not ashamed or hurt by anyone, does not take bribes, and does not distinguish between god and his servant.”

Twenty-seventh question: “Which feet are more beautiful and better? Indeed, I have seen many feet in my life, but among them, the feet of your sister, my wife Hofarya, are more beautiful and better.”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The feet of the water are better and more beautiful, for when the water is stirred, greenery grows there, but wherever the feet of Hofarya tread, it dries up.”

Twenty-eighth question: “What is the greatest desire of women?”

Yusht Faryan: “May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It is not what you think. I know that you think that a woman’s greatest desire is to have a variety of clothes and well-behaved servants, but a woman’s greatest desire is to be with her husband.”

The sorcerer Aht said, “You are lying. I will kill you for giving this answer. Now come and let us go to Hofarya. She is your sister and my wife. She has never lied and never will. Let us listen to her.”

Yusht Faryan agreed. Aht went with Yusht Faryan to Hofarya. “Sit down and answer this question honestly,” they said. “Is a woman’s greatest desire to have a variety of clothes and well-behaved servants, or is it to be with her husband?” asked Yusht Faryan.

Hofarya: “How unfortunate I am, this liar, this sinner, if I lie, he will kill my brother and I will be a sinner, but it is better if I tell the truth. If I tell a lie, I will be a sinner and a heathen, and if he kills me with the truth, I will be the one who avoids sin.”

She put a veil over her head and said, “The greatest desire of women is to be with their husbands.” When Aht heard this, he became furious and immediately killed Hofarya. Hofarya’s

soul went to heaven. There, her soul said, "I was religious with good behavior, now I am even more religious. But you, Aht the sorcerer, were a sinner and now you will die even more sinful."

Twenty-ninth question: "What has ten legs, three heads, six eyes, six ears, ten tails, three ovaries, two hands, three noses, four horns, three necks? What is it from which the food and life of the world is provided?"

Yusht Faryan did not know the answer to these riddles. He said he wanted to use the restroom. The sorcerer Aht said, "Go and use the restroom somewhere nearby and come back and answer the question correctly! If you don't answer correctly, or if you say you don't know, I will kill you immediately." Yusht Faryan went and sat down and thought: "I am in a difficult situation, this lying sinful man is going to kill me. Neither the living nor the dead and risen can answer this question." Then, the god Hormazd told the god Neryosang about Yusht Faryan's situation. "Tell him that the answer to this question is a pair of cows and a farming man." When Yusht Faryan heard his voice, he saw no one and became suspicious. He thought to himself: "Or is it Ahrimen and the giants, do they want to kill me? If I answer this question in the same way, that lying and cruel man will kill me." Then, the god of Neryosang came to Yusht Faryan. He said to him, "Do not be afraid, I am the god Neryosang, I have come for you. The god Hormazd said that the answer to this question is a pair of cows and a farming man." Yusht Faryan was very happy to hear that. He immediately went to the sorcerer Aht, saying, "O cruel, lying sinner! The answer to this question is a pair of cows and a farming man who plows the land."

The sorcerer Aht was astonished upon hearing these words. For three days and three nights, he could not come to his senses. When he came to his senses after three nights, he said to Yusht Faryan: "Yusht Faryan, you are hoping for answers to your questions from god Hormazd. May he always come to your support and help."

Thirtieth question: "Which is the best horse?"

Yusht Faryan: "May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! It is the clean, noble and well-trained male horse that stays with the Shah's horses."

Thirty-first question: "What is dry but does not burn, and what is wet but burns?"

Yusht Faryan: "May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! That which is dry and does not burn is soil; that which is wet and burns is animal fat."

Thirty-second question: "Which Shah is better?"

Yusht Faryan: "May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! Better is the Shah who is forgiving, wise, and knowledgeable."

Thirty-third question: "You, Yusht Faryan! What are the three things you have?"

Yusht Faryan: "May your life be troubled, O cruel, lying, sinful man, and may you fall into hell after death! The first is what I eat, the second is what I wear, and the last is what I give to the poor."

### Part Four; 1–27 <sup>22</sup>

Yusht Faryan said, “I have answered all the thirty-three questions you asked me correctly, now I have three questions for you. If you cannot answer them, I will kill you immediately.”

The sorcerer Aht said, “Ask and I will answer.”

Yusht Faryan: “First, how much is a handful of seeds worth? Second, what is the value of a cow plowing the land? And third, how much is the reward for marrying close relatives?”

Aht did not know the answers. He asked for time, using the excuse of going to the restroom. Yusht Faryan said, “Go and use the restroom somewhere nearby and come back immediately and answer these three questions correctly! If you don’t answer correctly or if you say you don’t know, I will kill you immediately.” Aht the sorcerer went to hell with the power of magic and asked Ahrimen for help: “O Ahrimen, how much is a handful of seeds worth? What is the value of a cow that plows the land? How much is the reward for marrying close relatives?”

Ahrimen said, “I know the answer to these three questions, but I will not tell you. If I tell you the answer, it will increase your power and strength, and you will become my rival.” Aht was very sad and turned back. So Aht said to Yusht Faryan, “Hormazd and Amesha Spentas told you what you do not know. I had hoped for Ahrimen and the giants, but they did not tell me the answer.”

Then, Yusht Faryan killed the sorcerer Aht and neutralized the evil in his body by chanting religious prayers with his sacred pocket knife made of barsam branches.

### Conclusion

In conclusion, the riddle debate between Yusht Faryan and Aht, as depicted in *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*, offers a glimpse into the riddle genre prevalent in ancient Iran. This text encompasses riddles spanning religious, philosophical, social, and cultural topics as well as those commonly posed to children today. Yusht Faryan adeptly responds to almost all 33 riddles posed by the sorcerer Aht, drawing upon his knowledge of Zoroastrian religious beliefs. The fact that each question and its answer are explained in terms of gods or sacred objects in the Zoroastrian religion shows their metaphorical nature. Some answers are given through the gods representing these forces of nature, e.g., Surush and the rooster. Some answers are explained with a tree or drink that is considered sacred in the Zoroastrian religion.

After answering the 33 questions asked by Aht, Yusht Faryan asks Aht three questions. Two of his questions are about measuring the value of agriculture and animal husbandry. The third question concerns the importance of consanguineous marriage.

Indeed, *Matikan-e Yusht Faryan*, which was passed down over generations through oral literature and reached the Sassanid period, must have been a text preserved by the adherents of the Zoroastrian religion. In the riddle debate between Yusht Faryan and Aht, the victory of Yusht Faryan is also the victory of the Zoroastrian religion. With the help of Hormazd and the Amesha Spentas, Yusht Faryan triumphed over Aht, Ahrimen, and the giants.

22 Jafari, *Matikan i Yost i Fryan*, 95-106.

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**Peer-review:** Externally peer-reviewed.

**Conflict of Interest:** The author has no conflict of interest to declare.

**Grant Support:** The author declared that this study has received no financial support.

**Hakem Değerlendirmesi:** Dış bağımsız.

**Çıkar Çatışması:** Yazar çıkar çatışması bildirmemiştir.

**Finansal Destek:** Yazar bu çalışma için finansal destek almadığını beyan etmiştir.

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