

A Legend of Alexander and the Merchant and the Parrot
Dramatic Poems

Herbert Mason

In this masterful retelling of two classic Persian tales, Herbert Mason captures the essence of traditional Islamic storytelling and makes it live again in a modern idiom. The stories themselves are concerned with universal themes such as quest, enslavement and loss, transcendent love and freedom, and in Mason's narrative they serve to contrast the sensibilities of the East and West.

A Legend of Alexander recounts the journey of Alexander the Great and his mysterious guide Khidr through the Land of Darkness to the spring of eternal life. Alexander's personality, memory and desire for heroism embody the Mediterranean, Western, more modern worldview; his quest for immortality is in vain. By contrast Khidr, whose values and calling reflect a Mesopotamian, Eastern, more spiritual vision of life and death, acclaims a world transcending human limitations.

The Merchant and the Parrot is a touching embodiment of the Sufi theme of fraternal substitution. Mason's refashioning of the tale brings a fresh clarity to the Persian poem *Tuti va Bazargan* by Rumi—a piece that illuminates the mystic sense of brotherhood.

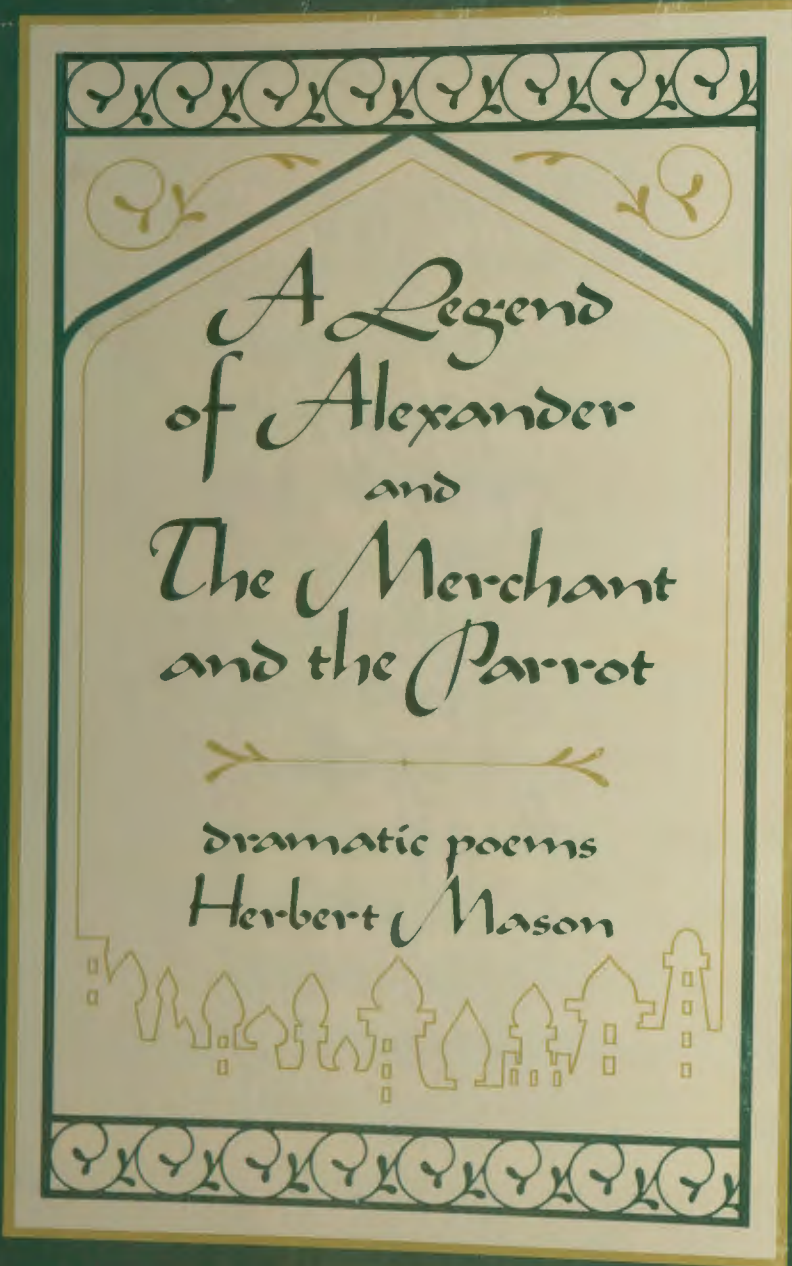
Mason includes three poems of his own that add a unique personal dimension and reaffirm the themes of the tales. The result is a volume that speaks of timeless values in a modern and memorable way.

Herbert Mason is University Professor of History and Religion at Boston University. He is well known for his narrative versions of the epic *Gilgamesh* and *The Death of al-Hallaj* (Notre Dame Press, 1979) as well as his four volume translation of Massignon's *The Passion of al-Hallaj*.

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With best wishes to
Marshall by
from Herbert Mason

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Books by Herbert Mason

The Death of Al-Hallaj: A Dramatic Narrative

Gilgamesh: A Verse Narrative

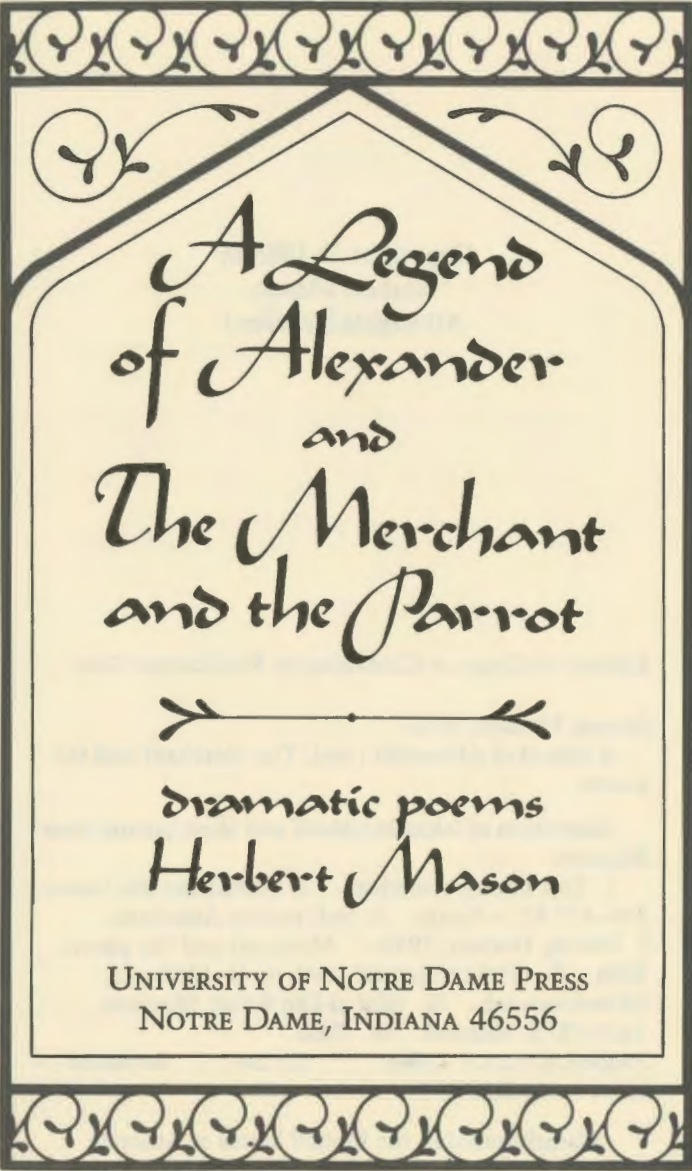
Summer Light, a novel

Moments in Passage, a memoir

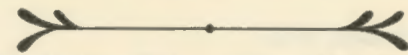
The Passion of Al-Hallaj by Louis Massignon, four volumes
(translator)

Two Statesmen of Mediaeval Islam, a study

Reflections on the Middle East Crisis (editor)



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Two Views: An Introduction

The Mediterranean epic tradition, built upon Homer by Virgil, Dante, Milton, and Goethe, is a sequential architectural structure; it recalls and it projects; it builds a world view on world views; it assumes the authority of survival; the modern-day novel sustains its idea of wholeness but not its same interdependence.

The Mesopotamian journey epic is sequential in an older, more primitive, unVirgilian way. Its world view is implicit; its eventual deciphering is by those who see their own lack of assumed survival mirrored in its own; its idea is sustained by fragmentary consciousness; it is not a whole conception.

The Mediterranean views ruins as monuments, the Mesopotamian as inevitable consequences of erosion.

In one death is the incident that tests excellence; in the other it reveals impotence. They are not incompatible visions, but the Mediterranean is paradoxically both more modern and less sophisticated; it builds to an increasing ideology of the triumph and tragedy of will. The hero's willfulness is considered the substance on which survival depends and the basis of the epic's heroic affirmation.

In the Mesopotamian epic—which has appeared at even rarer times than the Mediterranean: in Gilgamesh, the legends attached to Alexander the Great, and those assimilated by the Semitic Bible and the Koran—the substance on which hope depends is grace. The hero's will is terminal; he drifts toward salvation by the winds, by Ultimate Reality, not by his own gifts. In the evolution of the epic, this Ultimate Reality

is not fate or chance or coincidence but conscious intent, grace, mysterious Personality. The hero's hope is not his will but the response to his desire from beyond himself by Another Presence.

The Mesopotamian is a religious epic, the Mediterranean an epic of civilization.

In the Mesopotamian, civilization collapses and the hero journeys from ruins to a realm without buildings; his efforts to construct his own salvation fall to further ruin. The source of ruin is in his own incompleteness: ultimately he is not the creator of the kingdom he seeks; the kingdom without death is beyond his invention.

In the Mediterranean, death is glorified in order to exalt the will. It is a tragic vision. The Mesopotamian is a tragic revelation of the end of the will from which humanity alone, not any of its creations, survives. This vision is much the oldest yet also the more sophisticated. There is something naive and obvious in the Mediterranean, wise and elusive in the Mesopotamian. Both recognize the profound consequence of loss, both are architectural acts of recollection and hope made in times of profoundly felt loss, yet the Mediterranean constructs a defiant work of denial, the Mesopotamian surrenders to revelation. Both reenter the worlds of their loss—the Mediterranean to relive tragedy in more concentrated dramatic forms, the Mesopotamian to live by accepting the ultimate failure to save. The one immortalizes the structures of this world, the other knows immortality exists only in the world to come. The epics are conditioned by the seas and rivers that surround and buttress or erode and undermine their monuments. But each is a survival in which many human minds and hearts see reflected to the edge of time the desire that is inextinguishable in themselves.

The Alexander and Khidr story, as I attempt to retell it, is written as a narrative of contrasts and interweaving testimonies of these two beliefs.

The narrative can be traced in terms of its personae and

their mythical encounter to the twelfth-century Persian poet Nizami, whose celebrated *Khamasa* includes among its "five epics" an *Iskandernamēh*, a journey account of Alexander the Great and his companion-cook Andreas in their mutual quest for the spring of eternal life. The journey is fulfilled for Andreas, who becomes el-Khidr, the Green Man, one of the four immortals along with Elijah, Idris, and Jesus of the Koran; but Alexander seeks in vain.

Their encounter was conceived, then as now, for the historic force of Alexander's personality, his memory, and his heroic desire; and for the contrasting perspective of Khidr, whose values and calling are centered elsewhere than in worldly culture and self. We can identify the former without difficulty. We can understand the latter, not by "going Eastern" and even less by "studying myth," but by encountering a somewhat deeper yet quite sober orienting point within ourselves. They are contrasts in world views and world hopes, with Alexander being the doubting protagonist, and Khidr the relentless guide to eternal life.

It is a narrative for two voices. Khidr has encountered his celebrated companion in the Land of Darkness and is taking him to the Spring. The two men are dressed in robes, one green, the other gold.