

The Armenian National Epic: David of Sassoon

The name "David" comes from the Hebrew for "the beloved one." Like the Old Testament David who slew Goliath, David of Sassoon is the beloved, national hero, the defiant and self-reliant youth, who by the grace of God defends his homeland in an unequal duel against a titanic oppressor.

The epic spans four generations of the house of Sassoon, a mountainous enclave of the Armenian highlands, west of Lake Van and Mt. Ararat, known for its hearty folk and indomitable spirit. The epic took shape in the 10th century based on an oral tradition spanning centuries. The earliest written reports of the epic were made by Portuguese travelers in the 16th century. The basic text of the epic was first recorded in 1873 by Fr. G. Srvandzdyants. The full epic is a hefty tome that, one can imagine, took medieval tellers days to recite, easing the boredom of the long, lonely winters for these highland shepherds.

The epic begins with two brothers, Sanasar and Balthasar. Some scholars link them to the brothers Adramelek and Sarasar, the sons of Hezekiah (2 Kings 19:37, Is. 37:38), the king of Israel during the siege of Jerusalem by Sennecherib, King of Assyria. Movses Khorenatsi, the father of Armenian history (II.5,7, III.55), considered the Artsruni dynasty of Armenia, which ruled in and around Vaspurakan (Lake Van to Lake Urmia) and reached its height from 908 to 1021, to be descended from Sanasar. According to Armenian tradition, the two sons settled near the mountain called Sim, which some have identified as a mountain in Sassoon. The pair of brothers resurfaces in the Armenian epic as the immaculately conceived sons of the Armenian princess Dzovinar, who was taken from Armenia to Baghdad by the Caliph when most of Armenia was under Arab domination from (7-9th centuries). The Caliph decides to kill them, but before he can, they escape to Armenia. After slaying dragons, building cities, and restoring Armenia to prosperity, the brothers return to Baghdad to rescue their mother.

In the epic of David of Sassoon, the Moslems (referred to as Musr or Egypt in this version of the epic) and their leader (referred to Melik - king) may have displaced the Assyrians, and two thousand years of history may be compressed into a single storyline, but the north-south geopolitical dynamic between Armenia and Mesopotamia persisted in the people's collective memory and remained deep rooted in the repertoire of Armenian oral tradition.

The next cycle is the story of David's father, Lion Mher, who is the epitome of the noble, wise, fair and self-sacrificing father-king. Approaching old age without an [?mature or adult?] heir, he accepts with gentility the passing of his generation as the [price of ?] the next generation. As the reading from the Armenian requiem states, "except a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains alone; but if it dies, it bears fruit." (John 12:24). Lion Mher represents the strength of nature and rectitude of character that bears fruit in his son, David, who is raised an "orphan, no keeper on earth."

David's story resonates not only with the Old Testament David, but also with the battle between Hayk of Armenia and Bel of Assyria. Hayk is the Armenian Orion (Job 9:9), the deified archer-protector-forefather of the Armenians. His deification has been linked by some scholars to the Prometheus story in Greek mythology. In Movses Khorenatsi's history, the story of Hayk's titanic battle with Bel is one of the key episodes in the formation of the Armenian people. Hayk was a handsome, friendly man, with curly hair, sparkling eyes, and strong arms. He was a man of giant stature, a mighty archer and fearless warrior. Hayk and his people, since the time of their forefathers Noah and Japheth lived in and around Mt. Ararat (whence the name of the region below Ararat, Nakhichevan – "the place where Noah descended"). To the south ruled a wicked giant, Bel. Bel tried to impose his tyranny upon Hayk's people. But proud Hayk refused to submit to Bel. After major battles, Hayk delivers his people and restores freedom to his homeland. This north-south struggle is a recurrent theme in Armenian history, repeated in the century from 750 to 850 between the Armenian Bagratuni kingdom of Ani and their Arab overlords. According to some scholars, a century later, David Bagratuni surfaces as David of Sassoon, the fearless, freedom-loving youth, and Hovnan Bagratuni as Uncle Ohan, the cringing appeaser.

An epic cannot be summed up in a single word or from a single point of view. Each reader and listener will relate to certain characters and events in different ways. Nevertheless, the image of David of Sassoon, his nobility, fearlessness, kindness, strength, and simplicity, while having special significance for Armenians, has a universal appeal that speaks to all peoples.

Here are some excerpts from Thomas Samuelian's verse translation of Hovhannes Toumanian's captivating rhymed version of the third cycle of the epic. It attempts to replicate the rhymes and rhythms of the Toumanian version, in short, the music of the poetry that draws the

reader in and pulls the reader forward through line after line of this marvelous epic work.

I

Great Lion Mher, with his noble pride,
For forty long years ruled Sassoon far and wide,
His rule was so awesome that in his day,
Across Sassoon's peaks even birds feared to stray,
Far from the highlands where Sassoon was found,
His dreaded fame spread with a thunderous sound,
And praise for the high deeds of Lion Mher,
On thousands of lips, in one voice, filled the air.

II

He ruled in Sassoon with lionly might,
The prince of the highlands, unchallenged in right,
For forty long years he ruled without foe,
And in forty long years he knew not one woe,
But now as old age upon him descended,
This valiant man's heart a pang apprehended,
Which prompted the aging grand hero to ponder:
"My life's autumn days will soon take me yonder,
The captive of earth and its black sandy cloak,
The fame of Mher shall vanish like smoke,
And my name, and my might, and my glory shall pass,
In my orphaned and leaderless realm shall amass,
Thousands of bandits and fiends on the make,
No heir have I left, no successor to take,
My sword in his hand for Sassoon's protection,"
So thought the great prince in pensive dejection.

III

Then one day, as he thought, his grey eyebrows knit tight,
An angel from heaven, in fiery light,
Came to the prince, feet fixed on a cloud,
Bringing a message, proclaiming aloud:

"Greetings! your highness, O Sassoon's great lord,
Your voice to God's throne in high heaven has soared,

And soon shall he grant you the heir that you seek,
Heed me well, though, prince Mher, great king of this peak,
On the day that the Lord gives effect to your prayer,
Neither you nor your wife shall he suffer to spare."

"May God's will be done," said Mher without sigh,
"Death is our lot; all mortals must die.
But when in this world we've a child in our stead,
Through our child we live, although we be dead."

And then in a flash, the Angel took flight,
And nine months and nine hours from that joyous sight,
To Lion Mher a child was born,
And he called his cub David. On that happy morn,
He summoned his brother Ohan of Great Voice,
And his realm he bequeathed, no time to rejoice,
To his brother Ohan and his newly born son,
Knowing his days and his wife's were now done.

IV

In those times, reigned a king, over Egypt victorious,
Called Melik of Musr, mighty and glorious,
As soon as he learned of Great Mher's demise,
He set for Sassoon to conquer a prize,
Ohan of Great Voice trembled in fear,
Bowing his head, as the warlord came near,
Down on his knees, begging he said,

"You be our master," quaked he with dread,
"So long as we're under the force of your sway,
We'll be your true servants, your tribute we'll pay,
But on one condition our land must remain,
Untouched and intact for as long as you reign."

"No," said Melik, "your whole nation must go,
Under my sword their submission to show,
And prove that whatever my policy be,
No native of Sassoon shall rise against me."

Ohan called his people from near and from far,
They passed one by one 'neath Melik's scimitar,
All except David, who try though they did,

Refused to do honor as Melik had bid.
The crowd dragged him forward by force to his foe,
Raging, he tossed them away, high and low,
He grazed his small finger against a large rock,
Emitting a lightening bolt to the crowd's shock.

"This rogue, he is trouble, I must kill off."
Said the King to the elders, who started to scoff.

"King," they protested, "you're mighty and strong.
How could this young lad do you any wrong,
Though he were fire from head down to foot,
After everyone under your sword you have put?"

"You think you know best," said Melik, with alarm.
"But be warned, if upon me should ever come harm,
Upon this boy's head shall the penalty rest,
As this day's defiant events do attest."

V

At the time of this clash, David the great,
Was but a small boy, of seven or eight,
A boy though I say, he was strong as could be,
All were the same to him, man, beast or flea,
It's an old saying, but truth it does hold,
"Eat up your porridge, grow up strong and bold."
But pity this child, no keeper on earth,
Although Mher's son, they knew not his worth.

Ohan of Great Voice had a mean, wicked wife,
Her tongue she first held, then started the strife,

"I'm only one person, with thousands of cares,
Enough mouths to feed, without rearing theirs,
What did I do that you took in this knave?
I'm telling you straight, I'm nobody's slave.
I'll bury this boy, if you don't send him packing,
So set something up, work's what he's lacking."

And then she began to moan and complain,
That she was so poor, that all was in vain,
Her burdens were boundless, at least in her eyes,

I've no keeper, no helper, no pity, no prize.

Ohan went and thought, now what shall I do?
He found iron boots, for the boy as a shoe,
And a large iron rod, to sling on his back,
A shepherd he made him, Sassoon's sheep to track.

VI

Our hero the shepherd tended his sheep,
He wandered the hills of Sassoon high and steep,

Hey, my dear highlands,
O Sassoon's highlands,

He shouted in joy, his voice echoed so,
Rumbling it bounced from the peaks high and low,
And the birds and the beasts fled their lairs and their nests,
Scampering on rocks, with no where for rest,
David gave chase o'er the hills and the vales,
The fox and the deer, the hares and the quails,
Gathering them up, he climbed top the rocks,
He mixed them all up with the sheep in his flocks,
Down to the town of Sassoon they stampeded,
With noise, dust and uproar, they brayed and they bleated,
The city folk cried, their eyes not believing,
The livestock charged forth, the town's life upheaving,

Oh help, someone save us!
The children cried out,
The grown-ups in panic
Their work threw about.

Wherever they hid, at home, church or store,
They locked up the windows and bolted the door.
When David arrived and stood in the square,
He looked all about, but no one was there,

"Yo there, he shouted, it's too soon to sleep,
I've come with your goats, and brought you your sheep.
Goatherds and shepherds, get up from the sack,
For each one I took, ten I've brought back.
Hurry, come get them and take them away,

To your barns for safekeeping, or else they will stray."

But no one came out, the doors didn't budge,
Back to the hills, too tired to trudge,
He pulled up a rock and rested his head,
And soon fell asleep, the square for a bed.

When the sun rose, the town's folk emerged,
At old Ohan's house, they quickly converged,
"Hey there, old Ohan of the Great Voice,
It's you or the kid, you've left us no choice.
How could you put our whole flock in his hands,
The town's filled with beasts, he's ruined our lands,
He can't tell a fox from a lamb. What a mess!
So find him another job, quick, and God Bless!"

VIII

Up to the pasture he went with his herds,
To Sassoon's still highlands, fair beyond words,

O my dear highlands,
Sassoon's sweet peaks,
My heart in your bosom
Finds just what it seeks.

He shouted aloud in his voice pure and strong,
The canyons and mountain tops rang with his song,
The birds and the beasts fled their nests and their lairs,
They scampered away to avoid David's snares.

XII

When David discovered the convent's sad fate,
He called to old Ohan, "Dear Uncle, please wait!
I am an orphan, no keeper on earth,
You are my father, though not by birth.
I want to stay here on Maruta's peak,
Until I've rebuilt our convent unique,
Provide me, my keeper, five hundred skilled men,
And five thousand workers to build it again,

Just as it was, we've no time to lose,
Send them this week, please don't refuse."

Just as he promised, Ohan brought a corps,
Of five thousand five hundred superior
Workers to rebuild the convent on high,
Banging and clanging, it rose to the sky,
Just as it was, in all of its glory,
The Church of Our Lady, a blessed promontory.
The monks to the convent quickly returned,
Chanting soared up again, candles were burned,
David came down from the convent sublime
Restored to the splendor of Great Mher's time.

XXIV

"Heed me, men of Egypt, you're tillers of soil,
You're hungry and tired, you're longing for home,
Why have you come to Sassoon to despoil,
Our land and our people? Why do you roam?

You've a thousand and one worries and pains,
You've a thousand and one troubles to bear,
We too have our homes, our families and strains,
We too have our young and our old who need care,

Can you explain why you've traipsed over here?
Are you restless and bored with your calm peaceful lives?
Your land and your kinfolk, aren't they dear?
Have you tired of tilling your fields so they thrive?

By the same route that you came here, you now must go back,
To your homeland of Musr in Egypt afar,
But be warned if you ever raise arms and attack
Us again by some ruinous, ill-fated star,

No pit that you dig can be dug deep enough,
No millstones you stack can be piled high enough,
To spare you the wrath of this son of Sassoon,
Or the bright Lightening Sword with its piercing typhoon.

Then only God will know,
Who will regret it more,

We, who must go to war,
Or you, who made us your foe.