

According to eighth century texts our hero, called in his own Arabic tongue as-Samaw'al bin Adiya, was lord of the castle of al-'Ablaq near Tayma in Arabia. He lived in the sixth century, during that shadowy heroic time before Islam known as the "Days of Ignorance" (*al-Jahiliyya*). A Jew, perhaps of Palestinian origin, and a poet, he is the source of a famous Arabic proverb — "as faithful as Samuel!" (*awfa' min as-Samaw'al*).

This proverbial quality of good faith, of fidelity and loyalty stems from Samaw'al's connection to Imru 'l-Qays, the pagan author of the most famous of the *Mu'allaqat* — *the Seven Odes*, pre-Islamic masterpieces, prize-winning poems from annual contests at a fair near Mecca. Imru 'l-Qays was "the oldest of the great Arabian poets and the mightiest in genius," according to H. A. R. Gibb. He was also a reckless and ultimately unfortunate rogue, killed around A.D. 540 by the emperor Justinian who sent him a poisoned cloak of honour. In one of the Traditions attributed to the prophet Muhammad, Imru 'l-Qays is confirmed as one of the greatest of poets, and their leader into Hell.

Before his death, Imru 'l-Qays had sought refuge with and left in the safekeeping of Samaw'al his coats of mail and weapons. When it became known that Justinian had killed him, Imru 'l-Qays's legendary enemy, the king of Hira, sent an emissary to Samaw'al to demand the coats of mail. Samaw'al refused, saying: "By God, most great, I will not go back on my promise, nor betray my trust, nor compromise the good faith to which I am bound in order to satisfy the King." Then he barricaded himself in his castle. The king sent out an army, besieged the castle and captured Samaw'al's son. He held up the boy and said: "If you hand over to me the coats of mail, I'll hand over your child, and if not I'll slaughter him. Think carefully and make your choice." Samaw'al answered: "Do as you like for I won't go back on my good faith and my promise." And the king slaughtered the boy before Samaw'al's eyes. Thereafter the king failed to take the castle and withdrew. The inheritors of Imru 'l-Qays came and received the coats of mail and weapons. The text concludes: "He [Samaw'al] considered the keeping of his covenant and the maintaining of his good faith more precious than the life of his son, than his survival. Thus was coined the proverb: "In matters of good faith, there is none like unto him."