



ĀZAR KAYVĀN

ĀZAR (ĀDAR) KAYVĀN (b. between 1529 and 1533; d. between 1609 and 1618), a Zoroastrian high priest and native of Fārs who emigrated to India and became the founder of the Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* or Illuminative School. The literature produced by this school constitutes a Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* literature. It is dominated by *Ešrāqī* doctrine and terminology and is the Zoroastrian response to the great project of Šayḡ al-Ešrāq Šehāb-al-dīn Yaḥyā Sohravardī (q.v.; d. 587/1191), which was the revival in Islamic Iran of the philosophy of Light taught by reputed sages of ancient Persia. Āzar Kayvān and his immediate successor Kay Ḳosrow b. Esfandīār, were designated as the heads of the *Ešrāqī* School.

The Islamic response to Sohravardī was given by his first commentators, and above all with the development under the Safavid dynasty of the School of Isfahan, with which Āzar Kayvān and his disciples were contemporaries, by Šadr-al-dīn Šīrāzī (Mollā Šadrā) (d. 1050/1640) and his students. Thus there is a synchronism in the development of the philosophy or theosophy of the “Light of the East” (*Hekmat al-ešrāq*) among the Shi‘ite thinkers of Iran and these Zoroastrian spiritual leaders. This synchronism is partially explained by the strong cultural and spiritual contacts between India and Iran occasioned by the “ecumenical” religious reform undertaken by the Mughal emperor of India, [Akbar Shah](#) (r. 963-1014/1556-1605). This helped produce a sort of philosophical and mystical revival in the Zoroastrian milieu, which up to that time seems to have remained largely outside the main currents of thought that had enlivened Iranian Islam. It was only then that the entire system of



cosmology, anthropology, psychology, and mystical theosophy of Iranian Islam became included in this Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* literature. Admittedly, it would be anachronistic to try to trace these elements back to the pre-Islamic era, yet these books had so many Zoroastrian resonances that the Parsis of India took an interest in them, considered them as at least “semi-Parsi” works, and published them.

Methodology. It is very important to be clear about the methodological postulate underlying Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* literature. This is an area in which historical criticism has no useful role. If we want to deal with anything other than apocryphal or “fictitious” writings we must use the kind of method designated by the German term *Formgeschichte*, which concerns itself with literary forms and types of composition. One of the results of Sohravardī’s work was to bind together the prophetic tradition of Zoroaster and the ecstatic holy sovereigns (Ferēdūn, Kay Kōsrow), with the Semitic prophetic tradition of the Bible and the Qur’ān. This combination was achieved by means of the coincidence between the concepts of the Zoroastrian “Light of Glory” (*Xvarnah*, Persian *Kōrra*), the “Mohammedan Light” (*Nūr-e Moḥammadī*), and the *Sakīna* (the Hebrew *Shekhina*, “Presence of the Divine Glory”) as sources of the prophetic charisma. Thus it is understandable how a circle such as that of Āzar Kayvān might have felt the need for something like a “Bible” of the prophets (*vaḵšūrān*, *vaḵšvārān*) of ancient Iran. The disciples of Āzar Kayvān believed that they received in visionary encounters the teachings of the ancient sages of Persia, Greece, and India, and as a result their literary productions belong to a type of hierology quite familiar in other systems of gnosis. The facts and events of their works do not belong to the actual, empirical history of this world; instead, they have that reality *sui generis* of facts which take place and unfold in that intermediate world which the *Ešrāqīān* called the *mundus imaginalis* (*‘ālam al-meṭāl*). It is from this perspective that we must also understand the lengthy chains of ancestry, all of them going back to the great figures of the pre-Islamic era, which these disciples gave themselves. For each member of a religious community is free to choose his own spiritual ancestry, to choose his “patron saint” and the “heavenly witness” under whose protection he places himself and who serves for him as model and guide. In other words, we are dealing here with biographies based on the style of hagiographies, and the method of purely historical criticism is of no use in dealing with such compositions if one is to understand their intentions and the experiences which they wish to express by means of the genealogies they adopt, the stories they tell, etc.



Sources. Concerning the sources at our disposal, we are caught in a bit of a circle. On the one hand, we owe the better part of our information concerning Āzar Kayvān and his disciples to the *Dabestān-e maḍāheb* (The school of religious doctrines), a source rich in facts and information not found elsewhere. On the other hand, the principle sources for the *Dabestān* in this area are either the books of those very disciples, or even the author's personal encounters with some of them. It was written in India, not by a certain "Moḥsen Fānī" (as was long believed), but by Mōbed Šāh (1615-70), during the reign of Awrangzēb (1658-1707). The author made many journeys through today's Pakistan, and undoubtedly went as far as Mašhad in Iran. He was acquainted with a great number of religious and scientific personalities from Parsism, Hinduism, Judaism, Christianity, Islam. A bad English translation of the *Dabestān* was done by Shea and Troyer (Paris, 1843; partial repr.: New York, 1937). The two translators, who did not work together, seem to have been quite ignorant of any of the technical vocabulary involved, and their work is full of gaps and mistaken readings. Hence the *Dabestān* still needs a critical edition and rigorous translation, as is true of the Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* literature in its entirety.

The *Dabestān* is divided into twelve books. Each of these books is called a *ta'līm* (instruction), and is subdivided into chapters called *nazar* (insight). In the first book, comprising fifteen *nazars* the author informs us as to the condition and the doctrine of the Parsis (*Pārsiān*), as they were known to him at his time and in the areas with which he was acquainted. He groups the Parsis into fourteen different communities (*gorūh*), each with various names. The *Dabestān* is our only source for this information. The first of these communities were the Sepāsiān, also known as the Yazdāniān, (present-day) Ābādīān, Āzar Hūšangiān, etc. This is the group to which Āzar Kayvān is supposed to have belonged.

The hagiography of Āzar Kayvān, son of Āzar Gašasb, traces his ancestry back to Sāsān the Fifth (cf. the *Dasātīr-nāma*, see below) then through Sāsān the First to the Kayanids, Gayōmart, and finally to Mahābād, the figure who appeared at the very beginning of the great cycle of prophecy, according to the "Bible of the Prophets of Ancient Iran," and who seems to be none other than the primordial Adam. His mother was named Šīrīn; her ancestry goes back to Kōsrow I Anōšīravān. Already as a young boy, Āzar Kayvān showed signs of his calling to the contemplative life. Through dream visions, he received the teaching of the ancient sages, which allowed him to give extraordinary replies



to the questions which were asked of him at the *madrasa* where he was a student, and which won him the nickname *Du'l-olūm* (master of the sciences). Certain references allow us to determine that his residence was at Eṣṭaḳr (about a hundred kilometers north of Shiraz), where he spent the first thirty or forty years of his life in contemplation and where he assembled his first disciples. Around 1570, drawn by the religious revival which was taking place in India around Akbar Shah, he left with them to settle down in Patna, where he lived until he died at around eighty-five years of age.

Already at Eṣṭaḳr, the most diverse personalities, including certain Muslim figures, had come to ask his spiritual advice: One day, for instance, someone expressed to him his surprise at hearing the Shi'ites attack and vilify two such eminent personages as Abū Bakr and 'Omar, the first two caliphs, who were highly honored by all the Sunnites. Āzar Kayvān replied that even though the Iranians had formed their Shi'ite faith by incorporating into it a great many elements of their ancient Zoroastrian faith, they could still not forget that the Arabs had attacked and ravaged the religion of their forefathers and destroyed its monuments.

Āzar Kayvān and his disciples avoided, so we are told, all contact with the profane and observed a strict esotericism. They advised people to keep and to deepen their own religion, because following the same spiritual path as themselves in no way depended on some external act of "conversion."

This last characteristic helps us to understand the special attraction for Āzar Kayvān of the project of religious reform which was pursued by Akbar Shah. Akbar, a man of profoundly mystical temperament, had conceived the notion of a "divine religion" (*dīn-e elāhī*), a sort of "ecumenism," which would be able to assemble all religious spirits in a single spiritual community capable of overcoming all confessional barriers and limits. Around him he set up a sort of academy made up of scholars, artists, and representatives of all the different religions. This circle included Parsi *dastūrs* and *mōbeds*, Christian friars, and representatives of Hinduism and Islam, especially, in the latter case, of Sufism. Until then no one has sufficiently emphasized the influence of the *Eṣrāqī* doctrine of Sohrawardī in the spirit of this ecumenism. One witness to that influence, among others, is the literature created by the School of Āzar Kayvān. However, Āzar Kayvān himself does not seem to have had any direct contact with the court of Akbar. He was content to set up residence at Patna (a site which also evokes the most ancient memories of Buddhism in India), in the company of his disciples, both old and new.



The author of the *Dabestān* gives us a considerable amount of firsthand, detailed information concerning these disciples, several of whom he knew personally. Some of them were Zoroastrians, others were not. Of this latter group, our author mentions seven Muslims, two Jewish rabbis, a Christian, and a Brahmin. The majority of the Zoroastrians were *mōbeds*, from the priestly class. The *Dabestān* gives a lengthy account of around twelve Zoroastrians whom the author had known personally and mentions another twelve. Below is a list of authors of Persian books that have survived to our own day. These are the authors of the “Zoroastrian *Ešrāqī* literature,” and the author of the *Dabestān* states (book 11) that everything professed by the *Ešrāqīān* is in complete concordance with what he has explained (in book 1) concerning the ancient religion of the Iranians. First are listed their names and biographical data, and then the titles and contents of their works.

Authors. Kay *Ḳosrow* b. Esfandīār, though not Āzar Kayvān’s son, was his spiritual successor at the head of his school, and inspired the composition or “translation” of several books.

Farzāna Bahrām b. Farhād b. Esfandīār traced his ancestry back as far as Gōdarz Kešvād, the minister of King Kay *Ḳosrow*. He knew Pahlavi, Persian, and Arabic, was well versed in philosophy, theology, mystical theosophy, and alchemy, and is the author of an important work entitled *Šārestān* He was the close confidant of Āzar Kayvān, whom he met at Patna, rather than in Persia. He states that it was Āzar Kayvān who first opened for him the way to the angelic worlds. Earlier, in Persia, he had been in close contact with *Ḳvāja* Jamāl-al-dīn Maḥmūd, a disciple of Jalāl-al-dīn Davānī, the famous commentator of Sohravardī’s *Book of the Temples of Light*. He died at Lahore in 1624 A.D.

Mōbed Sorūš b. Kayvān b. Kamgār, who traced his paternal ancestry to the prophet Zoroaster and his maternal ancestry to Jāmāsp, was a student of Āzar Kayvān and of Farzāna Bahrām, who taught him the Islamic sciences. He led an ascetic life, marked by thaumaturgical deeds. He is the author of the *Zar-e dast-afšār* and of two other books which are known to us today only by their titles. He died shortly after 1627.

Mōbed *Ḳodājūy* (He who searches for God) b. Nāmdār. A native of Herat, he joined Āzar Kayvān at Eṣṭaḳr, after seeing him in a dream. He is the author of the *Jām-e Kay Ḳosrow*. He died in Kashmir in 1631, the same year in which the author of the *Dabestān* had encountered him there.



Mōbed Kūšī for many years searched for a guide among the masters of the different religions; each of them sought to convert him to his own way. Finally the angel Sorūš advised him in a dream that until that time he had only investigated the tiny brooks and tributary streams; now he must await the great river, or rather, the ocean itself. This ocean was the spiritual teaching of Āzar Kayvān, whom he went to meet in the company of Mōbed Kōdājūy. He is the author of the *Zāyanda-rūd*.

Farzāna Bahrām b. Faršād, called Bahrām “Junior” (*kūčak*), so as not to confuse him with the Farzāna Bahrām already mentioned above. The author of the *Dabestān* met him in Kashmir in 1622. Learned in Arabic, Persian, Hindi, and even Farangī, he translated into Persian all the Arabic works of Sohravardī. He also wrote a book entitled *Aržang-e Mānī* (Mani’s picture book). However, no manuscript of any of these works has been discovered. Bahrām “Junior” died at Lahore in 1638.

Mōbed Hūš, whom the author of the *Dabestān* also met in Kashmir in 1622, was himself the author of the *K^vēš-tāb*. It is possible that he was not an immediate disciple of Āzar Kayvān, but belonged to his school.

Two individuals originally from Shiraz who are mentioned in the *Dabestān* (book 9) are Ḥakīm Elāhī Hērbad, a Zoroastrian, and Ḥakīm Mīrzā, a *sayyed* from Shiraz. Both of them are designated as *Ešrāqīān*. The works of Sohravardī were as familiar to them as they were to Farzāna Bahrām “Junior,” and they had made Sohravardī’s “Book of Hours” the scripture for their own personal spiritual practice.

Works. At the head of these books comes the *Dasātīr-nāma* (The book of sages; in fact, the original term is *vaḵšūr*, or prophet, which recurs repeatedly in the text). This “Bible of the prophets of ancient Iran” (cf. the methodological remarks above) is one of the basic sources on which the *Dabestān* bases its account of the theological situation of the Parsis in its own time, to such a degree that the two works are really inseparable from each other. This book, after having been praised to the skies at the time of its discovery—by the Orientalist William Jones, among others, as a document of ancient Persia and a complement of the Avesta, was then just as quickly relegated to oblivion as a cheap apocryphal trick. The truth of the matter is that this book deserved neither that original excess of honor nor its subsequent indignity and neglect. Although it has nothing to do with the theology of the Avesta, on the other hand, even though it does not bear the name of any author, it does have all the



interest of the sort of book that could blossom forth in the entourage of Āzar Kayvān. The work presents itself in two languages. The first has not been deciphered. It may be in a secret code or cipher (in which one letter is substituted for another), a special jargon, or in one of the dialects which was current in certain Zoroastrian communities. This “original” text is matched by a commentary and second version in very pure Persian, avoiding the use of any Arabic words. Both this Persian version and its commentary are stated to be the work “Sāsān the Fifth,” whose own book concludes this “Bible” and who is supposed to have lived under the Sasanian ruler Ƙosrow Parvēz (r. A.D. 590-628).

All the other books of the School of Āzar Kayvān also claim to be the work of very ancient personages; the *mōbeds* mentioned above only claim to be their “translators.” In general, these other books only repeat or amplify themes that are already given in the *Dasātīr-nāma*. However, even though this “Bible” of the prophets of ancient Iran has a speculative rather than a historical origin, it does contain allusions to a great many events which were familiar parts of the traditional histories. What actually predominates in this work is the influence of Sohrevardī’s “Zoroastrian Neoplatonism.” The philosopher can have no doubt about this, once he has read the “Book of Mahābād” and the “Book of Sāsān the First.” From the very beginning, it is the entire Avicennan cosmology and angelology, as revised by Sohrevardī, that finds its expression in this text and commentary. Only the Arabic vocabulary has been completely changed over to Persian words. Thus the *Ešrāqīān* are here the *Gašasbīān* or the *Partovīān*. The hierarchical Intelligences are designated by the names of the *Amahraspandān*, or Zoroastrian archangels. The Angel or “Lord” of each species (*rabb al-naw’*, which Sohrevardī identified with the Platonic idea-archetype of each species) is translated by *Parvadgar-ferešta* or “guardian angel” (cf. the Avestan concepts of *fravarti* or *fravaši*, and *ratu*). The “Light of Lights” (*Nūr al-anwār*) here becomes *Šēdān-šēd*; the subtle, imperishable body of the beings of Paradise is here called the *tan-e bartar*, etc.

Jām-e Kay Ƙosrow (the “Cup, or Grail, of Kay Ƙosrow”), written by Mōbed Ƙodājūy. Several other disciples had asked him to give a commentary on the contemplative visions of Āzar Kayvān, the “guide of the *Ešrāqīān*.” Since one of those who made this request was Kay Ƙosrow b. Esfandīār, Āzar Kayvān’s successor, the author dedicated the book to him. The title, while containing the name of the man to whom it was dedicated, also evokes a famous theme in the heroic and mystical epic literature of Iran. The book is also known as



Mokāšafāt-e Kayvān (The visionary experiences of Āzar Kayvān). The Persian text was published in 1848, along with a Gujarati translation, by Sayyed ‘Abd-al-Fattāḥ, known as Mīr Ašraf ‘Alī.

Šārestān(Šāhrestān)-e dāneš wa golestān-e bīneš (The city of knowledge and the rose garden of vision), the work of Farzāna Bahrām b. Farhād, more commonly known as *Šārestān-e čahār čaman* (The city of four gardens). It is a voluminous work of some 800 pages divided into four books: 1. Cosmogony (Sohravardī is cited as early as p. 4) and traditional history of the prophet-kings of ancient Iran, from Hūšang up to Kay Qobād; 2. The Kayanid kings, from Kay Ḳosrow b. Kay Qobād up to Lohrāsp; the prophet Zoroaster and the *Ešrāqīān* theosophers; Esfandīār, up to Dārāb (Darius) and Alexander; 3. The Arsacids (*Aškānīān*) and the Sasanians; 4. Cosmography and geography. This is the type of work in which the insertion of the philosophy of *Ešrāq* into the sacred history of the prophets of ancient Iran is already an accomplished fact, and the Avesta and other traditions are interpreted in light of the teachings of the Šayḵ al-Ešrāq. This corresponds to what had already become the traditional conception of the history of philosophy in Šahrazūrī (13th cent.), including the Iranian origin of the *Ešrāqīān*, the destruction of all the documents of the ancient Zoroastrian religion as a result of Alexander’s conquests, etc.

The following four books were published together in a collection entitled *Āyīn-e Hūšang* (The religion of Hūšang).

Ḳvēš-tāb (Burning by itself), a term equivalent to *Ḳvod-sūz*, the name of a fire-temple in Azarbaijan. The book was supposedly written by one Ḥakīm Ḳvēštāb, a disciple of Sāsān the Fifth, during the reign of Ḳosrow II Parvēz (590-628); it was originally entitled *Gārzan-e dāneš* (Crown of knowledge). The actual author, who claims to be only the Persian “translator” of his own day, is the Mōbed Hūš (see above), a disciple of Āzar Kayvān, who also began this work at the request of Kay Ḳosrow b. Esfandīār.

Zar-e dastafšār by Mōbed Sorūš is a commentary on the sayings of the prophets and sages of ancient Persia, various aspects of *Ešrāqī* cosmology and angelology, etc. The title literally means “gold which has been brought to such a malleable state that it can be worked by hand,” and may refer to a certain gold which was part of the treasure of Ḳosrow Parvēz. The alchemical allusion in this title may actually refer to Āzar Kayvān himself. (J. J. Modi, for some reason, read the title as *Daštafšār*, while Shea and Troyer made it out to be



Zardošt afšar “Companion of Zoroaster”!)

Zāyanda-rūd (The river that gives life) was supposedly written by a sage by the name of Zenda Āzarm in the time of Ƙosrow II Parvēz. The “translator” author is in fact Mōbed Ƙūšī (see above), who wrote this work at the request of Kay Ƙosrow b. Esfandīār, Āzar Kayvān’s successor. J. J. Modi mentions it under the title *Zenda-rūd* (“The living river” or “The river of life”); this is also the name of the river which goes through Isfahan. In either case, the allusion is the same, and agrees with the original title of the book, which is supposed to have been *Časma-ye zendagī* (The fountain of life, Arabic *‘Ayn al-ḥayāt*), a traditional term which appears in all the treatises of mystical theosophy and Sufism.

Zawra or *Zawra-ye bāstān*, a short treatise which closes this collection. A marginal note explains that *zawra* is the equivalent of *sūra* “sura” or chapter of the Qur’ān. This “Ancient chapter” was supposedly the work of one *Āzarpažūh* (Fire-seeker).

The biographical and bibliographical notices above all concern Āzar Kayvān’s Zoroastrian disciples. We have also briefly mentioned above some of his non-Zoroastrian disciples, whose presence is an illustration of the non-confessional character of his school. Among these non-Zoroastrian disciples, it is important to point out at least the names of two eminent personalities of Shi’ite Iran. One was Mīr Abu’l-Qāsem Fendereskī, a contemporary of Mīr Dāmād and Mollā Šadrā Šīrāzī, and a major figure in the School of Isfahan, notorious for his boldness in metaphysics as well as in his social behavior. He was also involved in the project of translating Sanskrit texts into Persian. The other was the eminent *mojtahed* and great figure in Imamite Shi’ism during the Safavid period, Shaikh Bahā’-al-dīn ‘Āmelī, “Šayḳ-e Bahā’ī,” the close friend of Mīr Dāmād, and like him, one of the intellectual masters of a great number of the students of the School of Isfahan. According to the account which Farzāna Bahrām “Junior” gave directly to the author of the *Dabestān*, Shaikh Bahā’-al-dīn’s encounter with Āzar Kayvān was so successful that the Shaikh considered himself as belonging to Āzar Kayvān’s circle. This is a little known feature in ‘biography of this famous *mojtahed*.

Thus we can perceive the outlines of a remarkable cultural cycle, as Iranism, preserved first in Iran itself, moves to India in a pilgrimage toward those who will keep alive its flame there, and then returns to the very heart of Iran, in the person of these masters of the School of Isfahan.



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(H. Corbin)



[The *Dasātīr*, mentioned in this article, has been proved a fabrication of the time of the Mughal emperor, Akbar, and was almost certainly written in India, apparently when Akbar's search for an ecumenical religion encouraged religious invention. Its contents have no relation to Zoroastrianism as embodied in the authentic literature of that religion. It contains gross absurdities, and claims, names and events born of fantastic imagination. Its text consists of unintelligible gibberish and the so-called commentary is in affected "pure" Persian, devoid of any Arabic words. (See Sheriarji D. Bharucha, *The Dasātīr*, Bombay, 1907; and E. Pūredāvūd. "Dasātīr," *Farhang-e Īrān-e bāstān*, 1326 Š./1947, pp. 17-51.) However, the falseness of the *Dasātīr* did not hinder its impact on some Zoroastrian factions. Mollā Kāvūs and his son, Mollā Fīrūz, were both deceived by it and through them its influence increased. Many of its faked "pure Persian words" found their way into Persian dictionaries, including the *Borhān-e qāṭe'*, *Farhang-e anjomanārā-ye nāṣerī*, and *Farhang-e nafīsī* (of Nāẓem al-Aṭṭebā') and were also employed by some late Qajar poets. Its use as a basis of Zoroastrian esoteric beliefs and its contamination of Persian during the period when that language was being affected by chauvinistic considerations remain a fact. *EIr.*]

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