



BĀBĀ ṬĀHER 'ORYĀN

BĀBĀ ṬĀHER, known as 'ORYĀN, a dervish poet from the area of Hamadān. This is almost all that is known of him; even his dates are a matter of dispute, estimates ranging from the 4th/10th to the 7th/13th centuries. His tomb in Hamadān, where his companion Fāṭema is also buried, is first mentioned in the *Nozhat al-qolūb* (p. 71); it was renovated in 1329-30 Š./1950-51 (for a picture, see *Farhang-e fārsī* V, p. 18). One story makes Bābā Ṭāher a contemporary of 'Ayn-al-Qoṣṣāt (d. 526/1131), another of K̄vāja Naṣīr-al-Dīn Ṭūsī (d. 672/1273-74). On the other hand Reżāqolī Khan Hedāyat in the *Majma' al-foṣaḥā'* claims, without citing any evidence, that he predeceased Ferdowsī and 'Onṣorī in 410/1019-20 (II, p. 845). A *do-baytī* attributed to him appears to contain a reference to a date: "I am that sea and have come into a bowl; I am that dot and have come into a letter; in every thousand one straight-as-an-alef (*alef-qadd*) appears; I am that straight one, for I came in a thousand." Mīrzā Mahdī Khan Kawkab calculated by *abjad* that this would give the date 326/937-38 for Bābā Ṭāher's birth, which would fit with Hedāyat's version. Rašīd Yāsamī, on the other hand, takes the third line to refer to the Zoroastrian belief that a spiritual leader will appear every thousand years; Bābā Ṭāher, he maintains, is claiming to be such a leader, having been born in A.D. 1000 (i.e., 391 A.H.). Mojtabā Mīnovī, however, dismisses this theory as too far-fetched: Bābā Ṭāher would scarcely have known his date of birth according to the Islamic calendar, let alone the Christian. The one story that has the ring of truth is to be found in the *Rāḥat al-ṣodūr* of Rāvandī (completed 603/1206), which, based on hearsay, describes a meeting between Bābā Ṭāher, in company with two other saints (*awlīā'*), and the Saljuq conqueror Ṭoḡrel (pp.



98-99). This meeting, if authentic, must have taken place between 447 and 450 (1055-58); the use of the term saint would suggest that Bābā Ṭāher must have been of an advanced age, which would bring his birth-date very close to that calculated by Yāsamī. The year 410/1019-20 given for his date of death (Reżāqolī Khan Hedāyat, *Rīāz al-‘ārefīn*, Tehran, 1316 Š./1937, p. 167) and accepted by Nafisī (p. 24) is unlikely.

Bābā Ṭāher is best known for his *do-baytīs*, quatrains composed not in the standard *robāī* meter but in a simpler meter still widely used for popular verse (*hazaj mosaddas maḥdūf*: ◡ --- ◡ --- ◡ ---), which Nyberg regards as having affinities with Middle Persian verse. The other characteristic of these verses is their use of what was probably the local dialect of the period, though in course of time so many corruptions have crept in through the ignorance or carelessness of copyists that it is impossible to be certain what the original form was. Most traditional sources call it loosely Lorī, while the name commonly applied from an early date to verses of this kind, *fahlavīyāt*, presumably implies that they were thought to be in a language related to the Middle Iranian dialect Pahlavi. Roubène Abrahamian however found a close affinity with the dialect spoken at the present time by the Jews of Hamadān.

When we come to the problem of assessing Bābā Ṭāher’s view of the human predicament, we encounter an obstacle not dissimilar to that faced by students of ‘Omar Ḳayyām. Short dialect verses of the kind attributed to him have been composed by a number of well-known poets and many lesser ones. When Heron-Allen produced his edition in 1902 no more than some eighty quatrains were known. In 1927, however, Waḥīd Dastgerdī produced an edition of 296 *do-baytīs*, together with four *ḡazals* and seventy additional quatrains of more doubtful authenticity. Many are found in the *dīvāns* of other poets. Nevertheless there is a certain consistency of feeling, even in the larger number, that encourages one to think that they could all have emanated from the same mind. The qualities that strike one most forcibly are simplicity, sincerity, humility; indeed the straightforward nature of his verse, unencumbered by intellectual conceits and artifices, could scarcely have found a better medium than the dialect quatrain, redolent of the windblown deserts, the towering mountains, the isolated valleys, the austere life of the nomad. All of Bābā Ṭāher’s images are drawn from this environment. He is the humble, self-effacing wandering dervish, pouring out with earnestness and passion his love of God, whom he sees everywhere around him. Like many of his fellows, he is conscious of man’s insignificance, of his rejection, loneliness,



and isolation; but unlike Ḳayyām he sees the solution to this not in a hedonistic savoring of the pleasures of the world, but in *fanā'*, ultimate absorption and annihilation in God. Yet there is an earthy side to his poetry, too; his love is human as well as divine, and indeed his expression of it is more genuine than the somewhat artificial court verse of his contemporaries like 'Onsorī or Manūčehrī, who were writing to please a royal patron. He could be described as the first great poet of Sufi love in Persian literature. In the last two decades his *do-baytīs* have often been put to music.

Bābā Ṭāher was first and foremost a Sufi, and this comes out most vividly in the only other work, apart from a few *gāzals*, attributed to him—the *Kalemāt-e qeṣār*, a collection of nearly 400 aphorisms in Arabic, which has been the subject of commentaries, one allegedly by 'Ayn-al-Qozāt Hamadānī. If these are authentic (and no other authorship is claimed), Bābā Ṭāher must have had a considerable degree of education, and so can hardly have been the unlettered tribesman that his verse suggests. The aphorisms are divided into twenty-three chapters, covering all the themes of Sufi teaching from *'elm* and *ma'refa* to *ḥaraqa* and *taqdīr*: “Knowledge is the guide to gnosis, and when gnosis has come the vision of knowledge lapses and there remain only the movements of knowledge to gnosis”; “knowledge is the crown of the gnostic, and gnosis is the crown of knowledge”; whoever witnesses what is decreed by God remains motionless and powerless.”

It has been argued that Bābā Ṭāher was a Shi'ite; this is deduced from a line “O God, by virtue of your eight and four . . . ,” which is taken to refer to the twelve imams revered, by the Shi'ites. It should be said, however, that figures like this are open to various interpretations; they could mean, for instance, the eight heavens, the four elements, and so on. According to the *Ahl-e Ḥaqq*, who use Bābā Ṭāher's verses in their rituals, he was an incarnation of one of the angels who accompanied the third manifestation of the Divinity. Many stories are told of his miracles and magical powers. One of the best-known relates how, stung by the mockery of students at a college in Hamadān, he spent the night in a frozen tank, and emerged in the morning filled with divine knowledge.

For a music sample, see [Tasnif-e Mobtalā](#).



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