



# ĠAZĀLĪ, ABŪ ḤĀMED MOḤAMMAD I. BIOGRAPHY

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### i. BIOGRAPHY

A man of Persian descent, Ġazālī (variant name Ġazzālī; Med. Latin form, Algazel; honorific title, Ḥojjat-al-Eslām "The Proof of Islam"), was born at Ṭūs in Khorasan in 450/1058 and grew up as an orphan together with his younger brother Aḥmad Ġazālī (d. 520/1126; q.v.). After instruction in Islamic jurisprudence as a teenager in Jorjān, he became a student of the leading Ash'arite theologian and Shafi'ite jurist Emām-al-Ḥaramayn Abu'l-Ma'ālī Zīā'al-Dīn 'Abd-al-Malek Jovaynī (d. 478/1085) in Nīšāpūr, where he also studied with the Sufi master Abū 'Alī Fārmaḍī (d. 477/1084-85), a disciple of Abū Sa'īd b. Abī'l-Ḳayr (d. 440/1049, q.v.), Abu'l-Qāsem Qoṣayrī (d. 465/1072), and Abu'l-Qāsem Korrakānī (d. 469/1076). In 478/1085, after the death of his teachers, Ġazālī joined the circle of scholars at the camp and court of the Saljuq vizier K'āja Neẓām-al-Molk (assassinated in 485/1092, q.v.), the patron of colleges (*madrāsas*) he had founded. Appointed by Neẓām-al-Molk in 484/1091, Ġazālī became an influential professor on Shafi'ite jurisprudence for four years at the Neẓāmīya *madrasa* in Baghdad (Glaasen, pp. 131-75). Overcome by a severe physical illness and plagued by a nagging skepticism born of his intensive self-study of Islamic philosophy, Ġazālī decided to abandon his teaching position in 488/1095 in favor of his brother Aḥmad. This year signaled a deep identity



crisis in Ġazālī. Shaken by epistemological doubt, he resolved to seek certitude (*yaqīn*) as the underpinnings of his intellectual knowledge. His crisis occurred only a few years after political rivals, in concert with Neẓārī Ismaʿīli enemies against whom Ġazālī had written a refutation on the order of caliph al-Mostazher (487-512/1094-1118), had engineered his patron's assassination. Using a pilgrimage to Mecca as the pretext to escape Baghdad, Ġazālī gave up his academic career. He was particularly disillusioned by the corruption affecting the scholarly circles of the college in the aftermath of the political turmoil following Rokn-al-Dīn Barkīāroq's (q.v.) teenage accession to the Saljuq sultanate in 485/1092.

The next eleven years, from 488/1095 until 499/1106, when Ġazālī returned to his academic career as a professor at the college of Nīšāpūr, were doubtless a period of intense intellectual incubation, although specific details about his life and work in this period remain historically uncertain. According to his autobiography, Ġazālī first went to Damascus where he taught in the *zāwīa* of Naṣr Maqdesī (d. 490/1097; Makdisi, p. 45). Then he journeyed from Syria to Jerusalem and visited the tomb of Abraham at Hebron in 489/1096, where he made the vow never again to take money from the government, never again to serve a ruler, and never again to enter into scholastic disputations (van Ess, p. 61). He then went to Medina and Mecca, where he performed the pilgrimage in 489/1096, returned to Syria, possibly after a short visit to Alexandria in Egypt, and finally, after a brief stay in Baghdad in 490/1097, settled down at Ṭūs. During this intellectual exile from organized teaching, Ġazālī lived in great solitude and poverty, engaged in ascetical exercises and mystical prayer, and composed his most famous work, *Eḥyā' ʿolūm al-dīn* "The revival of the religious sciences," which advocates Sufi spirituality as the fulcrum of Islamic religion. Although this work bears all the marks of the manual of a great teacher and would thus presuppose Ġazālī lecturing to students, the sources offer few clues about who his crucial Sufi contacts might have been on his journeys, or, barring a few minor exceptions, who his audience might have been in his hometown.

In 499/1106, Neẓām-al-Molk's son Faḵr-al-Molk (q.v.), who had become the vizier of Sanjar, the Saljuq sultan of Khorasan, invited Ġazālī to return to lecturing at the Neẓāmīya of Nīšāpūr. Breaking the vow he had made at Abraham's tomb, Ġazālī accepted the invitation and taught in Nīšāpūr until shortly before his death, animated by his belief that it was God's will for him to function as the renewer of religion (*mojadded*) at the threshold of the new



Islamic century. His autobiography, *al-Monqed men al-zalāl* “The deliverer from error” (cf. Watt, 1953; tr. McCarthy, pp. 61-143; first translation into French by A. Schmölders, Paris, 1842) dates from this final period of Ġazālī’s teaching, during the last months of which he retired to the Sufi retreat (*kānaqāh*) he had established for his disciples earlier in Ṭūs. He died there in Jomādā II 505/December 1111. The chronology of Ġazālī’s biography has been established by Margaret Smith (1944), Maurice Bouyges and Michel Allard, and W. Montgomery Watt, (1963) on the basis of Ġazālī’s autobiography and a great number of biographical accounts found in the Arabic primary sources (listed in Ḍahabī, p. 115).

Ġazālī was a prolific author whose writings, examined chronologically by Bouyges and Allard (pp. 85-170; Badawī), number about five dozen authentic works, in addition to which some 300 other titles of works of uncertain, doubtful, or spurious authorship, many of them duplicates owing to varying titles, are cited in Muslim bibliographical literature. The charge that books were falsely ascribed to Ġazālī increased after the dissemination of the large corpus of Ebn ‘Arabī’s works (d. 638/1240, q.v.). Nevertheless, it is a questionable criterion of authenticity to reject works of Ġazālī that are highly mystical or esoteric in character as spurious, separating them from works said to be genuine because they are rather rational or exoteric in nature. It is also an all-too simplistic assumption that Ġazālī’s writings move from exoteric topics to mystical ones as he advances in age, though some of the most esoteric writings attributed to Ġazālī do belong to the last phase of his literary activity. The rule-of-thumb criterion suggested by Watt (1952, pp. 24-45; idem, 1961, pp. 121-31) that Ġazālī never directly contradicted on “higher” levels what he maintained on lower levels, forces a harmonizing consistency on a highly prolific author who underwent severe personal crises and shifts of intellectual outlook. Already Ebn Ṭofayl (d. 581/1185, q.v.) observed that Ġazālī wrote for different audiences, ordinary men and the elite (pp. 69-72), and Ġazālī himself completed the rather moderate theological treatise, *Eljām al-‘awāmm’an ‘elm al-kalām* “The restraining of ordinary men from theology,” in the last month before his death (cf. Hourani).

In addition to the aforementioned autobiography, which is the retrospective story of his religious development rather than a historical account of his life curve, the following are considered to be the major works of Ġazālī, all undisputedly penned by him. The legal writings of Ġazālī, who followed the Shafi‘ite school of law, include the compendia, known as *al-Basīṭ*, *al-Wasīṭ*, and



*al-Wajīz* that still await scholarly analysis and may represent paraphrases of his teachers' works. The first two are treatises on legal applications (*forū' al-feqh*) written early in his career, while the third one is an epitome compiled in 495/1101. Ġazālī's principal treatise on the foundations of Islamic jurisprudence, entitled *al-Mostaṣfā men 'elm al-oṣūl* "The essential theory of legal thought" was written in 503/1109 at Nišāpūr (Ebn Kallekān, ed. 'Abbās, IV, p. 217). This last great treatise, completed two years before his death, examines the rules of law (*aḥkām*) and their foundations (*oṣūl*) with unparalleled methodical acumen (Laoust, pp. 152-82). A generation after Ġazālī, scholars such as Abū 'Abd-Allāh Moḥammad b. 'Alī Mazārī (d. 536/1141-42), praised Ġazālī for his comprehensive knowledge of the legal applications but criticized his grasp of the legal foundations (Sobkī, *Ṭabaqāt* 2 VI, p. 241). High praise was expressed also by Ebn 'Abbād Rondī (d. 792/1390), who, on account of Ġazālī's first half of his voluminous *Eḥyā'*, called Ġazālī an authority on Islamic jurisprudence (pp. 88-89). Except for Sufism, no other field of the Islamic sciences absorbed so much of Ġazālī's time and energy as that of jurisprudence (Lazarus Yafeh, pp. 373-411). He was in the first place a professor of Shafī'ite law.

Ġazālī's study of Islamic philosophy received initial motivation from his teacher Jovaynī, but benefited mainly from his self-study of the works of Abū Naṣr Fārābī and Avicenna (q.v.) during his years as professor at the Neẓāmīya of Baghdad. Ġazālī approached philosophy in three stages. First (pace Graef, *ZDMG* 110, 1961, pp. 162-63), he summarized the principal points of philosophy by compiling a systematic exposition, entitled *Maqāṣed al-falāsefa* "The intentions of the philosophers," which became a highly acclaimed treatise in medieval Europe upon its translation into Latin (*Logica et Philosophia Algazelis Arabis*) by Dominic Gundisalvi in the 12th century (Muckle; cf. P. Liechtenstein's Latin edition, Venices, 1506), and into Hebrew in the 13th century (Steinschneider). Second, in the first fortnight of 488/1095, he completed the *Tahāfot al-falāsefa* "The incoherence of the philosophers" (ed. M. Bouyges with a summary in Latin, Beirut, 1927), a controversial work of refutation which provoked the great philosopher of Muslim Spain, Ebn Roṣd/Averroes (d. 595/1198) to reply with his own refutation (*Tahāfot al-tahāfot*). In the *Tahāfot al-falāsefa* Ġazālī enumerated twenty maxims of the philosophers that he found to be objectionable or inconsistent with their own claims, three of them justifying the charge of unbelief: the philosophers' claim of the eternity of the world, their denial of God's knowledge of particulars, and their repudiation of the resurrection of the body. Ġazālī tended to reject the



necessary link of causality since all that can be affirmed is a post-hoc rather than a propter hoc, as shown by his example that the combustion of cotton occurs at the moment of its contact with fire, while it cannot be demonstrated that it occurs because of the contact between cotton and fire. For Ġazālī human reason alone is unable to attain certitude, though he paradoxically uses his own certain reason to destroy the certitudes of the philosophers by borrowing their method for his arguments! Third, Ġazālī authored three treatises that prepared the ground for his subsequent systematic writings on theology, his elaborate *Me'yār al-'elm* "The standard of knowledge" and his brief *Meḥakk al-naẓar* "The touchstone of thought," both treatises on logic, as well as his *Mīzān al-'amal* "The balance of action," a tract on philosophical ethics.

Ġazālī's writings on Islamic theology (*'elm al-kalām*) signal a significant stage of development for its rational methodology because he used the Aristotelian syllogism and systematically applied it to theological thought. Ġazālī's influence on theological method, noted in Ebn Ḳaldūn's (d. 808/1406, q.v.) *Moqaddema* (tr., III, p. 52), is evidenced in his principal work on Islamic theology, *al-Eqteṣād fī'l- e'teqād* "The just mean in belief" (Asín Palacios, 1929) completed in 488/1095, the year of his departure from Baghdad. This work weighs traditional theological maxims (maintained by major scholars of law, e.g., Šāfe'ī, Mālek b. Anas, Abū Ḥanīfa, Ebn Ḥanbal) against Ġazālī's own opinions and expresses strong reservations about a theology based on faith in authority (*taqlīd*) and marked by polemics. In the *Eḫyā'* and the *Monqed* this reserve turns into outright rejection of theology as a reliable way to certain truth and, in the *Eljām*, into a warning against the dangers hidden in its study. Ġazālī, however, engaged in theological polemics himself, and his more systematic writings on theology were preceded by his polemical treatise against the Bāṭenīya sect of Neẓārī Isma'īlism. This refutation, *al-Mostaẓherī fī faẓā'eḥ al-Bāṭenīya* "The abominations of the sectarians" (Goldziher, 1916), was named after the caliph al-Mostaẓher (acceded to the caliphate in 487/1094), on whose order Ġazālī wrote the work in Baghdad. Two later works that reflect Ġazālī's intellectual struggle with the principle of hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*), upheld by the authoritative teaching (*ta'līm*) of the Bāṭenīya, are the *al-Qeṣṣās al-mostaqīm* "The correct balance" (tr. McCarthy, pp. 287-332) and the *Fayṣal al-tafreqa bayna'l-Eslām wa'l-zandaqa* "The arbiter between Islam and heresy" (tr. McCarthy, pp. 145-74), the latter of which includes an innovative argument for the tolerance of heterodox groups within the Islamic community (Griffel, pp. 34-42). The authenticity of Ġazālī's *al-Radd al-jamīl 'ala'l-elāhīyat 'Īsā ṣarīḥ*



*al-Enjil* “The excellent refutation of the divinity of Jesus from the clear evidence of the Gospel” is maintained by Louis Massignon (pp. 491-536), although questioned by others (Lazarus-Yafeh, pp. 458-87).

Ġazālī’s most important work, the monumental *Eḥyā’ ’olūmal-dīn*, written during his years of travel and retreat between his teaching at Baghdad and Nīšāpūr, represents a moderate form of Sufism, one stressing religious knowledge and righteous action (cf. the analysis of Bousquet). The work as a whole reflects Ġazālī’s self-perception as one chosen to revive religion, being a complete guide to Islamic piety, divided into four volumes of ten “books” each (*’ebādāt* “religious duties,” *’ādāt* “social customs,” *mohlekāt* “faults of character,” and *monjyāt* “virtues”). Convinced that in his time the scholars of law and religion (*’olamā’*) had debased religious knowledge, making it a business of this-worldly gain, Ġazālī tried to revive a true religiosity that, in his view, had become moribund. To this end he wrote his work in an eloquent didactic style, addressing himself to the common people yet also adding insights for the mystically attuned elite. A teacher and preacher more than an original thinker, he intended, through clarity of thought rather than brilliance of diction, to convert others to following the path to God. Though Ġazālī used Abū Ṭāleb Makkī’s (d. 386/996) *Qūt al-qolūb* and Qoṣayrī’s *Resāla* as major sources, and even copied pages of Makkī’s work wholesale, the work is an independent and freshly organized compendium drawn from his broad knowledge of the Islamic sciences. After the completion of his monumental work Ġazālī wrote a short summary of it, entitled *Ketāb al-arba’in* “The book of the forty,” compiled the *al-Maqṣad al-asnāfi asmā’ Allāh al-ḥosnā* “The noblest of aims,” an exposition of the most beautiful names of God (*al-asmā’ al-ḥosnā*) and answered the critics of the *Eḥyā’* with his *al-Emlā’ ’alā moškel al-Eḥyā’* (printed in its margin). Among the smaller treatises, written after the *Eḥyā’*, mention may be made of the eschatological tract, *al-Dorra al-fākera fī kašf ’olūm al-ākera*. Finally, an extensive commentary on the *Eḥyā’* (*Eḥāf al-sādat al-mottaqīn*) was compiled by Moḥammad b. Moḥammad Zabīdī, known as Sayyed Mortazā (d. 1205/1791), while in modern times dozens of the “books” of Ġazālī’s magnum opus have been translated into Western languages (such as, e.g. the annotated translation of Gramlich).

The scholarly analysis of works of Ġazālī, and his Sufi writings in particular, has been controversial for about a century (Macdonald, pp. 71-132; Carra de Vaux; Asín Palacios, 1931-41; Wensinck; Obermann; Jabre; Watt, 1963; Laoust; Lazarus-Yafeh) because of the predominant emphasis on Ġazālī as an



orthodox rationalist. In addition, his monumental *Ehyā'*, which deals with Sufi topics for only half the work, has overshadowed a number of smaller Sufi treatises Ḡazālī authored especially in the later stages of his life. The crux of the question about the extent to which Ḡazālī may be interpreted as a mystical philosopher is centered on his *Meškāt al-anwār* “Niche of lights.” The work was first studied and translated by William H. T. Gairdner (1924; 1914, pp. 121-53), whose attribution and analyses were challenged by W. Montgomery Watt (pp. 5-22), and ‘Abd-al-Rāḥmān Badawī (pp. 193-98) added the observation in 1948 that a collective manuscript of Ḡazālī’s writings, copied only four years after his death (MS Şehit Ali 1712), included the entire *Meškāt al-anwār*. In a recent study, Hermann Landolt (pp. 19-72) assembled a series of arguments in favor of the authenticity of the work and of the consistency of its ideas with esoteric passages of the *Ehyā'*. More textual studies on other small Sufi treatises of Ḡazālī, in comparison with the *Ehyā'*, are needed to clarify our understanding of Ḡazālī’s mystical philosophy. Such small treatises of disputed authenticity are the *Menhāj al-‘ābedīn* (Bouyges and Allard, pp. 82-84), assumed to have been his last work, and the *al-Maẓnūn* (Cairo, 1303/1885-86; Bouyges and Allard, pp. 51-56), addressed to his brother Aḥmad. Meticulous manuscript study is also required to support the authenticity of the *Resāla al-ladonīya* (M. Smith, 1938, pp. 177-200, 353-74; idem, 1944, p. 212), which is frequently held to be a work of Ebn ‘Arabī (Bouyges and Allard, pp. 124-25).

Because the vast majority of Ḡazālī’s writings are compiled in Arabic, little scholarly attention is commonly given to the books he wrote in Persian. His *Kīmīā-ye sa‘ādat* “Alchemy of happiness” is a Persian synopsis of his *Ehyā'* for his disciples, rather than its popularized version (Pretzl, p. 17). Completed shortly before 499/1106 (Bouyges and Allard, p. 60), the work is a well-organized religious ethics (de Fouchécour, pp. 223-52), enriched by mystical reflections on the heart (*qalb*) that is “alchemically” purified and empowered to reach God. Succinctly put, the *Kīmīā-ye sa‘ādat* finds the solution of Ḡazālī’s own original crisis concerning the human heart, held in the physical body, though fashioned from the substance of angels, as being in the image of God. As the organ of intimate union with God and the locus of the inborn nature (*feṭra*), it is the seat of the knowledge and love of God as well as the source of moral action. In his brief refutation of the *ebāḥīya* (Islamic freethinkers) written in Persian in 499/1106, Ḡazālī tries to safeguard his moderate mystical synthesis by attacking antinomian Sufi extremism (ed. Pretzl). It may also be noted that Ḡazālī’s short *Ayyoha’l-walad* “Oh child” (cf. Hammer-Purgstall), written after the *Ehyā'*, was originally composed in Persian, and only later



translated into Arabic under the title *Ḳolāṣat al-taṣānīf* (Bouyges and Allard, pp. 60-61, 97-98).

Another Persian work is the *Naṣīḥat al-molūk* “Counsel for kings” (tr. into Arabic well after Ġazālī’s death by Abu’l-Ḥasan ‘Alī b. Mobārak b. Mawhūb Erbīlī as *al-Tebr al-masbūk*; Meier, pp. 395-408), which was compiled about 503/1109 and belongs to the literary genre of “mirrors for princes.” Weaving together anecdotes of Sasanian court literature and stories of Muslim lore, the book is written in a pleasing Persian and divided into two parts, a theological part, explaining the beliefs and principles on which a ruler should act, and an ethical part, including counsels and maxims according to which a ruler should administer his charge. It is generally assumed that the *Naṣīḥat al-molūk* was written for the Saljuq sultan Moḥammad b. Malekšāh, whose rule (498-511/1104-17) followed that of his brother Barkīāroq (Meier, p. 395; Ġazālī, tr. Bagley, pp. xvii-xviii). In her dissertation on Ġazālī’s letters and public addresses, however, Dorothea Krawulsky argues (pp. 20-25; Laoust, pp. 144-52) that the book was addressed to the Saljuq sultan Sanjar, the brother of his two predecessors, who, prior to his own rule (513-52/1119-57), administered the eastern half of the sultanate in his two brothers’ stead as “king of the east” (*malek-e mašreq*). Then again, attribution of the second part of the *Naṣīḥat al-molūk* has been seriously questioned by C. H. de Fouchécour (pp. 389-412), while Patricia Crone has rejected its authenticity altogether (pp. 167-91). The compilation of the small treatise, *Serr al-‘ālamayn* “The secret of the two worlds,” also in the genre of “mirror for princes” though written in Arabic, is linked with an often repeated, yet doubtful, story about Ebn Tūmart (d. 524/1130). The Mahdi of the Almohads, said to have copied the book while studying with Ġazālī in Baghdad, informed the master about the public burning of his *Ehyā’* in Cordoba and throughout the Almoravid dominions (Goldziher, 1903, pp. 18-19).

Given the great volume of Ġazālī’s writings, it is difficult to state succinctly the significance and influence of his life and work. Nevertheless, Ġazālī’s own confession, in the opening pages of his *Monqad* (ed. Jabre, pp. 10-11), of a thirst to free his inborn intellectual nature (*feṭra*) from the blind adherence (*taqlīd*) to inherited religion may reflect the core of his religious quest and provide the key to his work. A more balanced interpretation of Ġazālī may well lie in the acknowledgment that his manifold ideas evolved over a long career, rather than in the insistence upon either an objectivist or subjectivist approach to his thought. The richness of Ġazālī’s legacy embraces not only a systematic study



of law and theology that rejects both legal casuistry and scholastic ingenuity, yet includes a polemical fervor against philosophers and heretics, but it also embodies a high standard of morals and a deep mystical insight. Ġazālī's influence on the rationalist philosophy of the Islamic West as well as on the scholasticism of Judaism and Christianity in medieval southern Europe has been highlighted for centuries; the study of his impact on the inner life and mystical thought of the Persian-speaking world has barely begun.

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