



## HĀDI SABZAVĀRI

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**HĀDI SABZAVĀRI, Shaikh Mollā** (b. Sabzavār, 1212/1797, d. Sabzavār, 28 Du'l-ḥejja 1289/26 February 1873; [Figure 1](#)), the most famous Islamic philosopher of the Qajar period, as well as an outstanding theologian and a notable poet.

*Life.* Ḥāji Mollā Hādi b. Mahdi b. Ḥājj Mirzā Hādi Sabzavāri, known simply as Hāji in traditional Persian schools (*madrasa*), was born in Sabzavār, Khorasan, to a family of land-owning merchants. His serious education started at a tender age under his cousin, Mollā Ḥosayn Sabzavāri, and he wrote a small treatise at the age of seven. His father died when he was seven or eight years old and he was left in the care of Mollā Ḥosayn Sab-zavāri, who was a student of the religious sciences. At the age of ten he was taken by his cousin to Mašhad, where he resided in the Ḥājj Ḥasan *madrasa* near the mausoleum of Imam 'Ali al-Rezā, where he studied Arabic, jurisprudence, logic, and the principles of religion and law (*oṣul*) with Mollā Ḥosayn for a period of ten years. At the age of twenty he returned to Sabzavār with the plan to make preparations for the *ḥajj*, and then he set out in the direction of Isfahan in 1232/1816-17 (Sab-zavāri, in Ġani, 1944, pp. 45-46; *idem*, in Mawlawi, pp. 424-25; Browne, 1950, pp. 143-44)

At that time Isfahan was still the most important intellectual center of Persia, where such masters of philosophy and gnosis as Mollā 'Ali Nuri (d. 1246/1830-31) and Mollā Esmā'il Eṣfahāni, a student of Nuri, taught Islamic philosophy, mostly of Ṣadr-al-Din Širāzi (Mollā Ṣadrā) and his school. Ḥājj Mollā Hādi became so attracted to them that instead of continuing his journey



to Mecca he decided to remain in Isfahan and study the intellectual sciences (*al-ʿolum al-ʿaqliya*), to which he was deeply attracted by his inner nature. He remained in Isfahan for eight or nine years, studying with these two undisputed masters of Mollā Ṣadrā’s school of philosophy and concentrating on careful study of the main works of Mollā Ṣadrā, such as the *Asfār* and *al-Ṣawāhed al-robubiya*, but he paid much less attention to the works of Ebn Sinā. Concurrently Sabzavāri also studied Islamic jurisprudence (*feqh*, q.v.) with Āqā Moḥammad-ʿAli Najafi, one of the major Shiʿite scholars of Isfahan. He led a life of austerity in Isfahan, despite the substantial inheritance that he had received. According to Edward Browne, “he used to take pains to discover which of the students stood most in need of pecuniary help, and would then secretly place sums of money in their room during their absence, without leaving any clue that would lead to the identification of the donor. In this way he is said to have expended no less than 100,000 *tumāns* (about 30,000 Pounds Sterling), while he was in Iṣfahān, leaving himself only so much as he deemed necessary for his own maintenance” (Sab-zavāri, in Ġani, pp. 45-46; idem, in Mawlawi, pp. 424-25; Browne, 1950, p. 144).

In 1242/1826-27, Sabzavāri returned to Mašhad and began to teach in the Ḥājj Ḥasan *madrasa*, but the religious scholars of Mašhad did not have the same interest in philosophy as those of Isfahan, and Sabzavāri did not find the same degree of freedom in pursuing the subject of the intellectual sciences as he did in Isfahan. Nevertheless, he continued to teach there for five years in both the transmitted (*al-ʿolum al-naqliya*) and intellectual sciences, using his own philosophical poem, *al-Manẓuma*, which he must have composed while he was in Isfahan, as text. His own commentaries to this most famous of his works were to be completed, however, much later in 1261/1845 (Sabzavāri, *Divān*, Amin’s introd., pp. 128-29).

In 1247/1831-32 Sabzavāri set out for Sabzavār and after making preparations for the *ḥajj*, left for Mecca in 1248/1832-33. After performing the rites of pilgrimage, he returned to Persia in 1250/1834-35 at the time of the death of Faṭḥ-ʿAli Shah Qājār, as a result of which traveling within Persia had become dangerous. Having lost his wife during the *ḥajj*, Sabzavāri settled in Kermān to await calmer conditions in order to return to Khorasan. He spent a year in Kermān in ascetic practices, agreeing to sweep a *madrasa* for its keeper on the condition of being given a room in which to live. To be able to be intimate with the keeper’s family, a condition which his state necessitated, he married the keeper’s daughter who was to accompany him later to Sabzavār. During this



time no one knew his real identity and the degree of his learning and knowledge (Reżā-nežād, pp. 82-84).

In 1252/1836-37, Sabzavāri finally set out for Sab-zavār, where he established a center for the study of Islamic philosophy and gnosis, a center which, thanks to him, vied with the schools of Isfahan and Tehran for several decades. For a period of ten months during this period he taught in Mašhad, but the rest, lasting until his death in 1289/1872, was spent in Sabzavār, where he made the Faṣḥiyya *madrasa* the center of his teaching, which eventually became also known as Madrasa-ye Ḥāji, part of which survives to this day (Mawlawi, pp. 464-66). Students began to flock to this school and the lessons of Ḥāji from all over Persia, Iraq, Turkey, Caucasia, India, and even Tibet. His fame spread all over Persia to the extent that when in 1274/1857-58 Nāṣer-al-Din Shah made the pilgrimage to Mašhad, he stopped in Sabzavār and paid a visit to the great *ḥakim*. The king was so impressed by the presence of this saintly philosopher that he asked his royal photographer Āqā Reżā ‘Akkās-bāši to photograph the master (Ḥakim-al-Mamā-lek, apud Afshar, p. 264). The picture, which still exists, is the oldest known authentic photograph of a 13th/19th century Islamic philosopher. The Shah also asked Sabzavāri to write for him a book in Persian containing the complete cycle of traditional philosophy. Sabzavāri obliged and composed the *Asrāral-ḥekam*, which is dedicated to Nāser-al-Din Shah, and another one called *Hedāyat al-ṭālebin* (Browne, 1950, p. 146; Sabzavāri, *Divān*, Amin’s introd., p. 131).

Sabzavāri died suddenly in 1289/1872, probably of a heart attack, after leading a very active intellectual life to the very end (Browne, p. 145). The date of his death is recorded in several chronographs, including “*ka namord zendatar shod*” in a couplet composed by one of his students (E’temād-al-Salṭana, III, pp. 200-201; Sabzavāri, *Divān*, Amin’s intro., pp. 68-69). He was buried near the Nišāpur gate outside of Sabzavār. The prime minister Mirzā Yusof Mostawfi-al-Mamālek Āštiāni built a mausoleum over the tomb in 1300/1883 (for details see E’te-mād-al-Salṭana, III, pp. 201-202 and Mawlawi, pp. 429-35), which has been renovated in recent years. For over a century his tomb has remained a site of pilgrimage and is visited every year by numerous pious Muslims attracted to his saintly presence (Reżā-nežād, pp. 34-102).

*Works.* Sabzavāri wrote some fifty-two works in both Arabic and Persian. These works deal mostly with the philosophy (*ḥekmat*) of the Sadrian School, but a number of them also deal with other subjects such as literature and poetry, jurisprudence, and what in English would be called theology, although



Hāji was much more of a philosopher (*ḥakim*) than a theologian (*motakallem*). The corpus of his works includes independent books, commentaries on well-established earlier texts as well as on his own works, and also answers to questions posed by students or other scholars (see Amin, pp. 50-51). Some of his most important works are as follows:

- 1). *Šarḥ al-manẓuma*, a work in Arabic, known also as *Ġorar al-farā'ed*, is his most famous book (comp. 1261/1845) which is taught to this day in Persian *madrasas* with numerous later commentaries. It is a versified summary of Sadrian philosophy, which, being complicated, caused Sabzavāri himself to write commentaries and glosses upon them.
- 2). *Asrār al-ḥekamfi'l-moftataḥ wa'l-moḳtataḥ* (q.v.), a large work written in Persian (comp. 1286/1869) at the request of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah Qājar. It is in two parts, each part divided into several chapters, dealing with metaphysics and eschatology as well as specifically theological questions such as prophecy and the Imamate. It is one of the major Persian texts of philosophy of the Qajar period.
- 3). *Ta'liqāt*, in Arabic, the most important of Sabzavāri's commentaries upon Mollā Ṣadrā's works and one of the major sources for the elucidation of the meaning of many difficult passages of Mollā Ṣadrā's main philosophical masterpiece.
- 4). *Ḥa-wāši*, in Arabic, is Sabzavāri's glosses upon Mollā Ṣadrā's *al-Šawāhed al-robotiya fi'l-manāhej al-solukiya*. It is considered as the most definitive and extensive commentary on this major masterpiece, the commentary being longer than the text itself.
- 5). *Ḥawāši*, a short book in Arabic containing Sabzavāri's glosses on *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, another major work of Mollā Ṣadrā.
- 6). *Ḥa-wāši*, a collection of glosses upon Mollā Ṣadrā's *Mafātiḥ al-ḡayb*. This is an Arabic commentary upon parts of one of Mollā Ṣadrā's seminal writings.
- 7). *Šarḥ do'ā' al-Jawšan al-kabir*, known also as *Šarḥ al-Asmā' al-ḥosnā*, a commentary (*šarḥá*) in Arabic (comp. 1266/1850) upon *al-Jawšan al-kabir*, the famous prayer comprised of a thousand names of God (*al-Ḍari'a XIII*, p. 248), upon which Sabzavāri wrote further annotations. This is considered by some as his greatest work. It is a work of both Shi'ite piety and gnosis (Tehran, 1283/1866).
- 8). *Mešbāḥ al-falāḥ fi šarḥ do'ā' al-šabāḥ*, one of Sabzavāri's most esoteric works (comp. 1267/1851), is a gnostic commentary in Arabic dealing with the inner meaning of the famous Shi'ite prayer attributed to Imam 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb (*al-Ḍari'a XIII*, pp. 255-56).
- 9). *Šarḥ-e abyāt-e moškela-ye Maṭnawi* (Tehran, 1285/1888), a commentary on the difficult verses of the *Maṭnawi* of Jalāl-al-Din Moḥammad Balki Rumi, composed (1858) at the request of Solṭān Morād Mirzā Ḥosām-al-Salṭana, the governor of Khorasan. This Persian work demonstrated Sabzavāri's intimate knowledge of Rumi's masterpiece and is



one of the most important commentaries upon the *Maṭnawī* in the Persian language written during the Qajar period, published in Tehran in the 1970s as *Šarḥ-e asrār-e Maṭnawī*. 10). *Nebrās al-hodā*, an Arabic poem on *feqh* but concerning primarily the inner meaning of religious acts and especially acts of worship, which demonstrates Sabzavāri's mastery of both the exoteric and esoteric aspects of Islam. He also composed a commentary in Arabic on his own poem to elucidate its meaning. 11). *Hedāyat al-ṭālebin*, a book composed in Persian (comp. 1273/1956) at the request of Nāṣer-al-Din Shah; it deals with knowledge of the prophets and the Imams. 12). *Divān*. Sabzavāri was a fine poet and his *divān* of over 1,700 verses, consisting of *ḡazals*, *robā'is*, *maṭnawis*, etc., written under the pen name (*taḳallosá*) *Asrār*, is well-known in Persia. It was printed for the first time in 1299/1882 and again in 1300/1883 (Browne, 1950, p. 608).

Sabzavāri wrote many other works dealing with an array of subjects from prosody to logic to Shi'ite theology, but the majority of his works deal with philosophy and mysticism (*erfān*; Javāreškiān and Elyāsi, eds., pp. 419-53).

*Sabzavāri as a teacher*. Sabzavāri was apparently a magnetic personality and an outstanding teacher who would attract numerous seekers of knowledge to his lectures. Since so many people came to study with him from all over Persia and other places, he devised an examination and would accept only the most advanced students, leaving the rest to study with his senior students including his own son Mollā Moḥammad. He taught mostly the *Asfār al-arba'a*, *al-Šawāhed al-robubiya*, *al-Mabda' wa'l-ma'ād*, *Mafātiḥ al-ḡayb*, *Šarḥ Oṣul al-kāfi*, *al-Ḥekmat al-'aršiya*, and *al-Maši'er*, all of Mollā Šadrā. In addition the *Šarḥ hekmat al-ešrāq* of Qoṭb-al-Din Maḥmud Širāzi, the *Šawāreq al-elhām* of 'Abd-al-Razzāq Lāhiji, and the *Šarḥ al-mawāqef* of Sayyed Šarif Jorjāni were read to some extent concurrently with the works of Mollā Šadrā. Students would also study Sabzavāri's own *Šarḥ al-manẓuma*, sometimes with the master but most often with Mollā Moḥammad. A simple period of study would be comprised of seven years and the lessons of the master always combined rigorous analysis of the philosophical text involved with quotations from the classical Persian Sufi poets such as Sanā'i, Farid-al-Din 'Aṭṭār, Rumi, and Hāfez.

Sabzavāri trained many students who influenced nearly the whole intellectual life of Qajar Persia. Among his most celebrated students one may mention, in addition to Mollā Muhammad, Solṭān 'Alīšāh Gonābādi, the founder of a major branch of the Ne'matāllāhi Sufi order (see GONĀBĀDI ORDER) and author of the important Koranic commentary *Bayān al-sa'āda*, which clearly reflects



Sabzavāri's influence; Ḥakim 'Abbās Dārāni, known especially for his commentary upon the famous philosophical *qaṣida* of Abu'l-Qāsem Mir Fendereski; Adib Pišāvari (q.v.), who is considered as one of the greatest masters of Persian literature of the past two centuries; the famous Shi'ite jurist Mollā Moḥammad-Kāẓem Ḳorāsāni; and Mirzā Moḥammad Yazdi, known as Fāẓel-e Yazdi, who encouraged Sabzavāri to write a treatise to refute the philosophical claims of Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā'i (q.v.), whom Sabzavāri had in fact met during the latter's student days in Isfahan.

*The personal traits of Sabzavāri.* Sabzavāri was not only a philosopher, but also a saint. In fact there are very few famous Islamic philosophers whose saintly character has been so emphasized by their contemporaries and especially by their students. He lived simply and displayed the greatest degree of piety in all aspects of his life. In addition he journeyed upon the spiritual path and was what Persians called *ahl-e sayr o soluk* (that is, a spiritual wayfarer). He had no interest in material possession or worldly power, and even his love of knowledge was solely for a spiritual reason. The pursuit of inner illumination and knowledge was for him the gate to sanctification and was inseparable from the sacred. His inner state of divine drunkenness, combined with the most sober lucid illumination of his being by divine knowledge, is particularly well reflected in some of his poems. In any case in dealing with Sabzavāri one is dealing with at once a major philosopher and a very significant saint of Sabzavār, whose spiritual radiance still plays an important role in his city of birth and death. (Rezā-nežād, pp. 249-72).

*Sabzavāri and philosophy.* The fame of Sabzavāri, who has been referred to as "the sole philosopher of the 13th/19th century" in Persia (Rypka, p. 442), resides primarily in the domain of traditional Islamic philosophy in which he was almost completely a follower of Mollā Ṣadrā. Like his intellectual master, Sabzavāri defended the unity, gradation and principiality of existence (*wojud*) and refuted sharply those opposed to the metaphysics of Mollā Ṣadrā as we see in his *Šarḥ al-manẓuma*. In the *Šarḥ-e manẓuma* he attacks the defenders of the view of *aṣālat al-māhiya* or principiality of quiddity as well as Shaikh Aḥmad Aḥsā'i, who had made the bewildering claim that both *wojud* and *māhiya* were principial. Sabzavāri also defended the reality of the archetypal world and spoke of the imaginal world in the manner of Mollā Ṣadrā and his school.

Sabzavāri was much concerned with the question of knowledge and wrote very profoundly on various aspects of this central issue. It is also only in this



domain that he criticized his master. Whereas, in some of his writings, Mollā Ṣadrā considers knowledge to be of the category of quality belonging to the human soul, Sabzavāri asserts that knowledge belongs to the very substance of the soul and is above the categories. Also he accepts the Sadrian doctrine of the unity of the intellect and the intelligible (*al-‘āqel wa’l-ma‘qul*), but he criticizes the proofs offered by Mollā Ṣadrā for it. Altogether Sabzavāri emphasized above all else the Sohrevardian notion of “knowledge by presence” (*al-‘elm al-ḥozuri*) and believed that even knowledge of logical categories is the result of illumination (*ešrāq*). Sabzavāri was in fact very much attracted to Šehāb-al-Din Sohrevardi, not only through Mollā Ṣadrā but also directly. He, like Sohrevardi, emphasized the wisdom of the ancient Persian sages, as we see in his *Šarḥ al-manẓuma*, in which he identifies the doctrine of the gradation of *wojud* with the *fahlawiyun* or Pahlavi sages. Sabzavāri was also well versed in the philosophical views of Mir Dāmād (d. 1630), independent of Mollā Ṣadrā’s understanding of them. In the domain of the theoretical gnosis (*‘erfān*), he associated with Ebn al-‘Arabi (q.v., d. 1240), Ṣadr-al-Din Moḥammad Qunavi (d. 1274), Šāyen-al-Din ‘Ali Torka Ešfahāni (d. ca. 1432), and others, but his knowledge seems to have been primarily through the works of Mollā Ṣadrā and not through independent channels. One sees in Sabzavāri that wedding between the rigors of logic and inner illumination that characterize so much the Sadrian perspective, of which Sabzavāri was one of the most imminent representatives in the Qajar period (Nasr, 1996, pp. 308-15; Sabzavāri, 1969; idem, 1970, Āštiāni’s introd., pp. 103-76).

*Sabzavāri and poetry.* In discussing Sabzavāri one cannot disregard the role of poetry in his life and his own poetic works if one is to understand this great Qajar master in his integral reality. Sabzavāri was devoted to poetry from an early age and was poetically inclined. He was very well acquainted with classical Arabic and Persian poetry and especially the Persian Sufi poets, chief among them Jalāl-al-Din Rumi and Ḥāfeẓ. He often quoted from the classical masters even in the middle of his classes on philosophy and theology. Furthermore, he was himself a fine poet writing in both Arabic and Persian. Some of his verses are merely rhymed phrases (*naẓm*) rather than real poetry (*šer‘*) and are meant to facilitate learning a subject. In these poems he followed the time honored Islamic tradition in which poems on subjects as diverse as grammar, medicine, and astronomy were composed and memorized by students of these subjects. A second category of Sabzavāri’s verses are poetry in the true sense and include many moving poems along the lines of well-known Persian mystical poets, in which the moving language of poetry is not



sacrificed to technical philosophical and theosophical expression. He was in fact a more talented poet than figures such as Mir Dāmād and Mollā Ṣadrā, who also composed some poems. The *Divān* of Sabzavāri makes him comparable in his poetical achievements among philosophers to such figures as Afzal-al-Din Kāšāni and ‘Abd-al-Razzāq Lāhiji. A few of Sabzavāri’s *gāzals* have even been compared by some of the foremost recent scholars of Persian literature to the *gāzals* of Ḥāfez (e.g., apud Amin, introd. to *Divān*, pp. 150-51).

Sabzavāri’s love for Sufi poetry is seen, not only in his own poems, but also in his important commentary upon the *Maṭnawī*. It is evident that he knew this bible of gnosis in Persian verse intimately and he enumerated eight particularly outstanding qualities of this incomparable work such as its sapiental depth, its uniting of the inner and outer aspects of truth, unveiling the depths of interpretation of Koranic verses etc., qualities with which he dealt at length. It is remarkable that Sabzavāri was at once drawn in the ocean of love expressed with such ecstasy by Rumi and engulfed by the light of the intellect which illuminated the works of Mollā Ṣadrā and his own teachers of Isfahan. (Javāreškiān and Elyāsi, eds., pp. 299-417).

*The influence of Sabzavāri.* Sabzavāri is without doubt the most famous and influential Islamic philosopher of Qajar Persia and was very instrumental in the revival of Sadrian philosophy at that time. Not only his own circle in Sabzavār was to flourish as a major center of Islamic philosophy throughout most of the 19th century, but he was also to be a major influence in the School of Tehran, the school of philosophy founded by Mollā ‘Abd-Allāh Zonuzi in Tehran during the reign of Faṭḥ-‘Alī Shah (1212-50/1797-1834) and which has continued to this day (Sabzavāri, 1970, Āštiāni’s introd., pp. 67-82). His writings came also to be extensively studied in Qom, where the teaching of Islamic philosophy was established after World War II by ‘Allāma Ṭabāṭabā’i. Sabzavāri’s *Šarḥ al-manẓuma* continues to be one of the most popular texts of *hekmāt* studied in various traditional *madrasas*. Many commentaries have been written on it since its composition, including those of Āḳund Hidaji, Moḥammad-Taḳī Āmoli, Mirzā Mahdi Āštiāni, Sayyed Abu’l-Ḥasan Qazvini, and Mortazā Moṭahhari. This work was also one of the first ones belonging to the school of Mollā Ṣadrā to be translated and analyzed in a European language by Toshihiko Izutsu and Mehdi Mohaghegh (1977). The influence of Sabzavāri continues in Persia, while it is now growing along elsewhere with the greater interest being shown in both East and West in the thought of Mollā Ṣadrā and the later Persian philosophers.



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