



JA'FAR AL-ŞĀDEQ IV. AND ESOTERIC SCIENCES

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iv. Esoteric sciences

Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq, a major figure in Shi'ite esotericism, is purported to be the founder of occult science in Islam. According to Imami-Shi'ite tradition, his knowledge concerned “the exoteric (*al-zāher*), the esoteric (*al-bāṭen*), and the esoteric of the esoteric (*bāṭen al-bāṭen*)” (Āmoli, p. 33; Corbin, pp. 188-89). “Our science, Ja'far is reported to have said, is immemorial and written in venerable books; it is engraved in the hearts and fixed in the ears. We have in our possession the red *Jafr*, the white *Jafr*, the Book of Fāṭema (*Mashaf Fāṭema*) and *al-Jāme'a* (the “Encompassing”)” (Shaikh Mofid, p. 274). These books, containing knowledge of all things past, present, and future, were transmitted from one prophet and imam to another, the *Jafr* even going back to Adam, and reached Ja'far al-Şādeq through Imam 'Ali b. Abi Ṭāleb and the other Shi'ite imams. Written on colored tablets made of pearl (white), ruby (red), emerald (green) or gold (yellow), they evoke both by their content and their material substrate the two esoteric sciences in which Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq is said to have excelled: divination and alchemy (Kolayni, I, pp. 344-46; Straface, pp. 347-49; Amir-Moezzi, pp. 186-88, 196-97, tr. pp. 73-74, 78).

Several pseudo-epigraphical works in Arabic, covering different sciences of



divination, were transmitted under the name of Ja'far al-Şādeq (Sezgin, I, pp. 530-31; Ullmann, pp. 195-96). The *Ketāb al-jafr* deals with a Shi'ite science par excellence, being considered a privilege of the imams. It contains apocalyptic predictions on the advent of the Mahdi, the final triumph of Shi'ism, and the annihilation of Sunni rule, using divinatory techniques such as gematria (*ḥesāb al-jommal*) and the occult power of the letters of the alphabet. According to Ebn Kaldun, Ja'far al-Şādeq possessed its original copy written on the skin of a young bull. It allowed him to reveal the hidden meaning of the Qur'ān (Ebn Kaldun, pp. 264-65, tr. Monteil, pp. 524-25, tr. Rosenthal, II, pp. 209-10; Kolayni, p. 348; Fahd, "Djafir," p. 377; 1966, pp. 219-24). Closely related to the science of *jafr* are books on the "salutary properties" of the Qur'ān (*Manāfe' sowar al-Qor'ān*, *Kawāss al-Qor'ān al-a'zam*; Sezgin, I, p. 530), a method of divination based on the "mysterious letters" at the beginning of certain chapters (*sura*), the *basmala* or the names and attributes of God (Fahd, 1966, pp. 241-43). Ja'far al-Şādeq was also well versed in the *'elm al-fa'l*, the "science of omens," teaching how to interpret natural phenomena as good or bad presages (Fahd, 1966, pp. 450-83). To this discipline belongs hemerology (*ektiārāt*), a divinatory technique based on astrological calculations in order to determine the auspicious and inauspicious nature of specific years, months, days, or hours (Fahd, 1966, pp. 483-88; see Ja'far al-Şādeq, *Fa'l-nāma*; *Ektiārāt al-ayyām wa'l-šohur*). Moreover, Ja'far al-Şādeq is reported to have introduced in Islam the science of palmomancy (*ektelāj al-a'zā'*), enabling one to take presages about the future of a given person from the spontaneous pulsations and contractions of all parts of his body (Fahd, 1966, pp. 397-402; see Ja'far al-Şādeq, *Ketāb ektelāj al-a'zā'*, containing his predictions and those of Daniel, Alexander, and Persian and Greek sages).

Imam Ja'far al-Şādeq is known in Islamic esoteric tradition as the father of Arabic alchemy. According to Ebn al-Nadim (p. 420, tr. II, pp. 853-54), the Shi'ites claim that he was the master of Jāber b. Ḥayyān. The alchemical corpus transmitted under Jāber's name is indeed presented as written under the direct inspiration of Ja'far al-Şādeq, who initiated his disciple into the secrets of alchemy. The historical relations between Ja'far al-Şādeq and Jāber b. Ḥayyān remain very controversial, as they are linked to still unresolved questions about dating, composition, and authorship of the texts attributed to Jāber. Scholars such as Julius Ruska, Paul Kraus, and Pierre Lory consider Ja'far al-Şādeq's involvement in the transmission of alchemical knowledge as a literary fiction, whereas Fuat Sezgin, Toufic Fahd, and Nomanul Haq are rather inclined to accept the existence of alchemical activity in Medina in



Ja'far al-Şādeq's time, although they remain cautious regarding the authenticity of the attribution of the Jaberian corpus to Jāber b. Ḥayyān and of the alchemical works to Ja'far al-Şādeq (Ruska, 1924, pp. 40-52; 1927, pp. 264-66; Kraus, I, pp. LV-LVII; Lory, pp. 14-21, 57-59, 101-7; Sezgin, I, p. 529, IV, pp. 128-31; Fahd, 1970, pp. 139-41; Nomanul Haq, pp. 3-47). Among several apocryphal works attributed to Ja'far al-Şādeq figures a *Resāla fi 'elm al-senā'a wa'l-ḥajar al-mokarrem*, also known under the title *Resālat al-wasāyā lesayyedenā al-Emām Ja'far al-Şādeq* (for manuscripts, see Sezgin, I, p. 531, IV, p. 131; Ullmann, pp. 195-96, 221). Ruska, who translated this text (in Ruska, 1924), showed that it is nearly identical with the *Ketāb ta'wiḍ al-Ḥākem fi 'elm al-san'at al-āliya*, containing two receipts for the elaboration of the elixir, allegedly transcribed from the bracelet of the Fatimid caliph al-Ḥākem, who inherited it from his ancestors and thus ultimately from Ja'far al-Şādeq (Ruska, 1924, pp. 67-113, combines both texts in his German translation and gives a facsimile edition of the *Ta'wiḍ* from a Gotha manuscript).

Ja'far al-Şādeq is supposed to have revealed his esoteric knowledge to a small circle of privileged disciples, such as Abu'l-Ḳaṭṭāb Moḥammad Asadi and **Mofazzal b. 'Omar Jo'fi** (eponyms of Khattabiyya and Mofazzaliyya), both considered by later Imami-Shi'ite tradition as extremists (see *ḡolāt*). Ja'far al-Şādeq's "secret revelations" to Mofazzal are transmitted in the *Ketāb al-ḥaft wa'l-azella* (partial Ger. tr. in Halm, 1982, pp. 246-74) and in the *Ketāb al-şerāt* (ed. Capezzone, pp. 318-415). These texts played an important role in the elaboration of the esoteric doctrine of the Nosayris (Halm, 1978, pp. 253-65; 1981, pp. 72-84; Capezzone, pp. 265-73), who consider Ja'far al-Şādeq one of their main authorities (Bar-Asher and Kofsky, pp. 8, 22-23, 26-27, 32, 37, 80, 84, 129, 134).

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