



KĀŠEF-AL-ĠEṬĀ', JA'FAR

KĀŠEF-AL-ĠEṬĀ', JA'FAR B. KEẒR NAJAFI (b. Najaf, 1156/1743; d. Najaf, 1227/1812), Shi'i scholar and jurist, broadly influential in both Iraq and Persia. His cognomen, meaning "remover of the veil," alludes to one of his best known works, *Kašf al-ġeṭā' an mobhamāt al-šari'at al-ġorrā'* ("Removing the veil from the obscurities of the resplendent divine law"). Combined with *āl* ("family"), it also came to serve as designation for the scholarly lineage he inaugurated. He is sometimes known in the biographical literature as Šayḡ-e Akbar ("the supreme sheikh") or as Šayḡ-e Najafi, for it was in Najaf that he spent the major part of his career; he left only for regular visits to Persia and in order to perform the Hajj, first in 1186/1772 and then in 1199/1785.

Sheikh Ja'far was born in Najaf in 1156/1743 to Keẓr, a scholar of some renown who had migrated there from Janāja, a village near Ḥella, and it may be presumed that his father was his first teacher. But far more significant was his training at the hands of luminaries of the resurgent Oṣuli school of Shi'ite jurisprudence, including Moḡammad Bāqer "Vaḡid" Behbahāni (d. 1205/1791), commonly regarded as the *mojadded* ("renewer") of that school; [Sayyed Mahdi Baḡr al-'Olum Ṭabāṭabā'i](#) (d. 1212/1797); and Sayyed Šādeq Faḡḡām. Among those whom he in turn trained were Moḡammad Ḥasan b. Moḡammad Bāqer Najafi (d. 1266/1850), commonly known as Šāḡeb-e Javāher, with respect to his well-known book, *Javāher al-kalām*; Hojjat-al-Eslām Moḡammad Bāqer Šafti (d. 1260/1844), an influential figure in Isfahan for much of the reign of Fath-'Ali Shah; Sheikh Moḡammad-Taqi Najafi, author of *Hedāyat al-mostaršedin*; Sayyed Šadr-al-Din Musavi 'Āmeli; and Sheikh Aḡmad Aḡsā'i (q.v.; d.



1241/1826), founder of the theological school known as the Šayḳiyya. On the death of [Baḥr-al-'Olum Ṭabāṭabā'i](#) in 1212/1797, Sheikh Ja'far became the most widely followed scholar in Iraq, Persia, and other areas of Shi'i population. He consolidated the Oṣuli position as normative for Shi'ism and, by the same token, enhanced the social and even political role of the ulama.

For Sheikh Ja'far's influence transcended the strictly scholarly sphere. Although he never learned any Persian, he was much respected in Persia, where he paid annual visits to collect for immediate distribution among the poor the religiously mandated payments known as *vojuhāt-e šar'iya*; the relief and support of the indigent seems, indeed, to have been at all times one of his primary concerns. His influence extended as far as the Qajar throne. Echoing 'Ali Karaki's fictive investiture of Shah Ṭahmāsp the Safavid in 930/1524, Sheikh Ja'far issued a proclamation in 1212/1797 in which he "permitted" Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah to mount the throne as his deputy (*nā'eb*) on condition that a muezzin (*mo'addan*) be appointed to each brigade of the army and a prayer leader to each battalion and that the troops listen to a preacher once a week (*Qeşaş al-olamā'*, p. 141). How closely Sheikh Ja'far scrutinized the fulfillment of these conditions is unclear, but he had occasion at least once to give annoyance to the monarch— precisely how, is unknown—who then attempted, unsuccessfully, to deny him access to the court (*ibid.*, pp. 141- 42).

More significant tensions arose when Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah was suspected of favoring the Aḳbāri school of jurisprudence (see [AḲBĀRIYA](#)), which Oṣulis such as Sheikh Ja'far had effectively vanquished in Najaf but not rendered fully extinct. In the treatise, *Kašf al-ġeṭā' 'an ma'ā'eb Mirzā Moḥammad 'aduv al-olamā'* ("Removing the veil from the vices of Mirzā Moḥammad, the enemy of the scholars"), a refutation of the sharply polemical defense of Aḳbārism made by Mirzā Moḥammad Aḳbāri of Nishapur (see [AḲBĀRI, MIRZĀ MOḤAMMAD](#)), Sheikh Ja'far accused his adversary of writing an anonymous commentary in the margins of a book written for the monarch that was designed to lessen his respect for the ulama. When Mirzā Moḥammad fled Najaf for Tehran, Sheikh Ja'far sent the monarch a copy of his treatise, warning him against the dangers of associating with this fugitive Aḳbāri. Mirzā Moḥammad Aḳbāri responded with a treatise fulgurously entitled *al-Şayḥa be'l-Ḥaqq 'alā man alḥada wa tazandaq* ("The righteous outcry against the atheist heretic"), but it found no favor, and its author was obliged to return to Iraq. Revealing, although possibly apocryphal, is the story according to which the mother of Faṭḥ-'Ali Shah, on pilgrimage to the shrine cities of Iraq, begged Sheikh Ja'far to pray for



her and her son: “Since my son is king, he [necessarily] commits much oppression and cruelty towards his subjects. I beg of you, contrive that God Almighty may forgive our sins and resurrect us with Hażrat Fāṭema” (*Qeşaş al-olamā*, p. 141).

Another indication of the broad influence that Sheikh Ja‘far exerted was his success, in 1219/1804, in persuading Moḥammad-‘Ali Mirzā, commander of a Persian force invading Iraq, to halt his advance on Baghdad and to release the Arab and Turkish troops he had captured; this earned him the gratitude of ‘Ali Pasha, the Ottoman governor of the city. The Ottomans reciprocated by helping him arm the inhabitants of Najaf to ward off the Wahhābis, who had been raiding southern Iraq for several years. Again in 1227/1812, he was able to persuade a Persian force to draw back from Baghdad. At around the same time, possibly somewhat earlier, he was one of the numerous ulama to deliver a *fatwā* proclaiming the war of defense then underway against Russia to be an instance of *jehād* (jihad, on which, see [ISLAM IN IRAN xi](#)) (Algar, 1969, p. 79).

Sheikh Ja‘far died on 22 Rajab 1228/21 July 1813 and was buried in Najaf, leaving behind both a formidable literary legacy and a lineage of prominent scholars that was to persist for several generations. The following appears to be a complete list of his works, most of them still unpublished: (1) *Kaşf al-ġeṭā’ an Mobhamāt al-šari‘at al-Ġorrā*, published in Tehran in 1271/1855, the book on the principles of jurisprudence that earned him his sobriquet, *Kāşef-al-Ġeṭā*, its excellence the more remarkable for being written while he was traveling without access to relevant works by his predecessors; (2) the similarly titled *Kaşf al-ġeṭā’ an ma‘ā‘eb Mirzā Moḥammad ‘Aduv al-‘olamā*, discussed above; (3) *al-Ḥaqq al-mobin fi taşwīb al-mojtahedin va takṭe‘at johalā’ al-Akbāriyin* (“Manifest truth in vindicating the mojtaheds [i.e., the Oşulis] and refuting the ignorant among the Akbāris”), a somewhat conciliatory work, in that only “ignorant” Akbāris are harshly condemned, published in Tehran in 1316/1898 together with *al-Qawā‘ed al-šar‘iya*, a compilation by Musā b. Moḥammad-Reżā, one of Sheikh Ja‘far’s descendants; (4) *Eṭbāt al-ferqat al-nājiya men bayn al-feraq al-Eslāmiya* (“Establishing which of the Islamic sects is that destined for salvation”), an attempt to prove that Shi‘is are the sect uniquely destined for salvation, according to a Hadith, the authenticity of which has increasingly come under question; (5) *Aḥkām al-amwāt* (or *al-janā‘ez*), regulations for washing and burying the dead; (6) *Buġyat al-ṭāleb fi ma‘refat al-mafruż wa’l-wājeb* (“The desideratum of the student in the knowledge of the ordained and the obligatory”), a work partly on dogmatic



topics and partly on ritual ablutions and prayer; (7) *al-'Aqā'ed al-Ja'fariyya* (“Ja'fari creed”); (8) *Resāla fi'l-'ebādāt al-māliya* (“Treatise on acts of worship involving the expenditure of property”); (9) *Resāla fi'l-ṣawm* (“Treatise on fasting”); (10) *Ġāyat al-morād* (“The ultimate purpose”), a work on *jehād*, possibly identical with the fatwā he gave on the occasion of the First Russo-Persian War; (11) *Šarḥ al-qawā'ed*, a commentary on the chapter in 'Allāma Ḥelli's *al-Qawā'ed* concerning transactions; (12) *Kašf al-eltebās bayn al-ḥayż wa'l-esteḥāza wa'l-nefās* (“Resolving the confusion between menstrual, premenstrual, and post-parturitional discharge”); (13) *Manhaj al-rašād le man arāda al-sadād* (“The path of guidance for those who seek the right opinion”), a politely worded response to the denunciation of sundry traditional practices by 'Abd al-'Aziz b. Moḥammad, the Saudi chieftain; it counts as the first refutation of Wahhabism from either a Sunni or a Shi'i pen (published on pp. 30-180 of Moḥammad Ḥosayn Kāšefal- Ġeṭā's *al-'Abaqāt al-'anbariya fi ṭabaqāt al-Ja'fariya* [Beirut, 1418/1998]; an extract translated in Algar, 2002, pp. 81-84). Sheikh Ja'far also wrote poetry, claiming to be both *aša'r al-foqahā'* (“the best poet among the jurisprudents”) and *afqah al-šo'arā'* (“the most learned in jurisprudence among the poets”; cited in Modarres, V, p. 26).

Sheikh Ja'far left behind three sons, 'Ali, Musā, and Moḥammad Ḥasan. He had a high opinion especially of Musā, thinking him the equal of such luminaries of Shi'i jurisprudence as [Moḥaqqueq Ḥelli](#) and Šahid-e Avval, perhaps because he wrote a commentary on the latter's *al-Lom'at al-demešqiya*. In addition, Musā honored his father by writing a two-volume commentary on his *Kašf al-ġeṭā' 'an mobhamāt al-šari'at al-ġorrā'* and a briefer one on his *Buġyat al-ṭāleb*. He also perpetuated his father's legacy of anti-Akbāri struggle by delivering the fatwā which played a role in the death of Mirzā [Moḥammad Akbāri in Kāzemayn](#) (more important, perhaps, was the attempt by one contender for the governorship of Baghdad to employ Mirzā Moḥammad's occult powers against his rival). Musā died in 1242/1826, and it was Ḥasan, who outlived Musā for a full twenty years, that proved the most influential of Sheikh Ja'far's sons. Many regarded him as almost equal to his father in learning, and some as more knowledgeable (*a'lam*) than all his contemporaries; this led to his recognition as sole *marja' al-taqlid* (point of emulation) for Persians resident in the shrine cities of Iraq and, through their medium, for Persia itself. Noteworthy was his participation in the joint Sunni-Shi'i assembly that convened in Baghdad in 1261/1845 to pass judgement on the claims of [Sayyed 'Ali-Moḥammad “Bāb”](#). He completed his father's unfinished commentary on 'Allāma Ḥelli's *al-Qawā'ed*; wrote an introduction to his father's *Kašf al-ġeṭā' 'an*



mobhamāt al-šari‘at al-ḡorrā’ and a commentary on the same work; and authored *Anwār al-faqāha*, a handbook on most concerns of jurisprudence, excluding only hunting, slaughtering, and the fixed penalties (*ḥodud*) for certain offenses. He died in 1262/1846 from the plague then ravaging Iraq.

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