



## KEZR

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**KEZR** (Ar. *Kezr*, *Kazer* “green,” “green herbs,” “verdure”; *Kezr nabi*, *Kvāja Kezr*), a prophet known to Islamic written tradition and folklore, from the Balkans to India. His worship, widespread all over Iran, Afghanistan, and Central Asia, is connected with local calendar beliefs and fertility cults.

The origins of the *Kezr* legend are obscure. No prophet of this name is known to the Old Testament, neither is he mentioned by name in the Qur’ān. Yet, Islamic commentators (Boḳāri, see Vollers, pp. 240-45; Ṭabari, I, pp. 414-29; idem, *Tarjama-ye Tafsir-e Ṭabari* III/IV, pp. 931-34, 946-56; Nišāburi, pp. 239-40; Farisi: see Khoury, pp. 25-33; Ibn al-Aṭir, p. 62.) identify him with an anonymous spiritual guide to Moses (Musā) mentioned in the Qur’ān (18:60-82). The passage in question consists of three distinct parts:

1. (vv 60-65). Moses, accompanied by a youth, sets out on a journey in search of the junction of the Two Seas (*majma’ al-baḥrayn*). On their way they forget about a dried fish under a rock. The fish gets into the water and miraculously revives. This is the sign that they have reached their goal.
2. (vv 66-82). Moses sets off on a sea travel with “one of God’s servant” met on his way, as a guide. By his consecutive shocking deeds the guide tests Moses’ patience three times and the prophet fails the tests.
3. (vv 83-97). *Ḍu’l-Qarnayn*, “The Horned One” (identified with Alexander the Great) travels to a place in the extreme West where the sun sets in a pool of muddy water; then he constructs an iron wall against the barbarian people of



Gog and Magog (Ya'juj Ma'juj). No guide appears in this passage.

The three stories, though apparently inconsistent, contain a number of mythical motifs of diversified origins, which have contributed to the Kezr legend, the most important of them being the immortality issue. The scholars dealing with the topic point to the Sumerian epos of Gilgamesh as one of its possible sources. Gilgamesh travels to the “mouth of a river” where the mankind’s ancestor Utnapishtim lives, in order to learn the secret of immortality from him (Wensinck and Kramers, p. 286; Berthels, p. 290). On the other hand, the story of Kezr, as adapted to the Koranic tradition, has been connected with an apocryphal biography of [Alexander the Great](#). The motif of the Water of Life, and the miraculous revival of a dried fish comes from the romance of Pseudo-Callisthenes, in which Alexander’s cook, called Glaukos (the “Blue” or “Green” one; also known as Edris, i.e., Andreas), on the passage through the Land of Darkness, washes a salted fish in a pool, and the fish swims away. Then the cook himself drinks from that water and becomes immortal (Friedlaender, pp. 94-96; Berthels, pp. 286-87, 290-92; Frye, pp. 286-87; Wensinck and Kramers, pp. 286, 289). The motif of the test, as found in Jewish tradition (cf. Wensinck and Kramers, p. 287), has for its hero the Biblical prophet Elijah, with whom Kezr is generally identified or associated by Islamic authors, while some sources believe Kezr to be identical with Elias’s disciple Elisha (cf. d’Herbelot, p. 993; Friedlaender, pp. 96-99; Dehḳodā, XXI, pp. 607-8; Owrang; Franke, pp. 136-59).

Various aspects of Kezr’s personality in Islamic literature and ritual practice (the Hadith, gnostic, and sufi tradition; popular devotion and folklore) have been thoroughly investigated by Patrick Franke (2000). His book includes a large collection of related passages in German translation (pp. 377-562). Iranian authors had a considerable role in shaping Kezr’s image in religious writings and in poetry. The legend of Kezr became a regular element of the Alexander romance in Persian epics. It is found in Ferdowsi’s *Šāh-nāma* (VII, pp. 80-81) and Neẓāmi’s *Eskandar-nāma* (pp. 1149-151) as well as in its later imitations such as Amir Ḳosrou Dehlavi’s *Āyena-ye eskandari* (p. 117), anonymous *Eskandar-nāma* (tr. Southgate, pp. 159-60) in *Dārāb-nāma* by Ṭarsusi (pp. 584-60) and *Ḳerad-nāma* by Jāmi (p. 965). In the passages on the search for the Water of Life, Kezr (alone or together with Eliās) acts as Alexander’s guide. On their way through the Land of Darkness they become separated from one another: Kezr reaches the spring of the Water of Life, drinks from it, and acquires immortality, while Eskandar, strained in the

darkness, misses the goal. The legend includes the motif of the pebbles collected by Eskandar's soldiers and turning into precious stones, and that of the place where the sun hides in the water. Another constant element of Eskandar's story is his building of the wall against Gog and Magog. Some texts (Dehlavi, Jāmi) have Keẓr and Eliās for Alexander's companions in his naval travels. The legend, together with other stories on Keẓr, his miracles and his controversial behaviors, reiterates in historical, encyclopaedical and hagiographical works (e.g., Tabari, I, pp. 415, 429; idem, *Tafsir* pp. 494; 946-56; Bal'ami, pp. 322-34; Mas'udi, p. 26; Ta'ālebi, pp. 432-33; *Mojmal*, pp. 202-6, 434; Farisi: see Khoury, pp. 25-33; Hojviri, p. 130, 178-179, 302; Nišāburi, pp. 302, 331, 337-42; Ṭusi, pp. 103, 159-60, 212-13; 415-16; Zakariā' Qazvini, pp. 83-84; Mostawfi, pp. 37, 45, 97).

Keẓr is a symbolical character of gnostic parables, as in *'Aql-e sorḳ* of Šehāb-al-Din Sohrawardi (Sajjādi, pp. 52-53; Sohrawardi, tr. pp. 111-12), or 'Abd-al-Karim Jili (Corbin, 1977 p. 72; cf. Nicholson, pp. 82, 124). He is evoked by mystical poets: for Jalāl-al-Din Moḥammad Rumi the Musā-Keẓr encounter is a model for the *morid-moršed* relations (*Mat-nawi* I. vv. 224, 235-36, 2969-971, II. vv. 436, 3262-264, 3515-517, III. vv. 1959-961, 2756-757, V. v. 714). In Farid-al-Din Aṭṭār's *Divān*, in which references to Keẓr are numerous, his spring of the Water of Life is compared with the water of Kawtār and Reẓwān, wine, Jamšid's goblet (*jām-e Jam*); sun in the darkness, clear mind, illumination, salvation, lover's lips etc., as contrasted with darkness, mirage (*sarāb*), thirst, infidelity (*kofr*), ignorance (Aṭṭār, pp. 13, 35, 57, 78, 81, 109, 121, 125, 164, 197, 213, 236, 257, 258, 263, 326, 343, 348, 371, 384, 539; cf. also Sanā'i, *Divān*, pp. 224, 278, 465, 572, 656; for more poetical examples, see Dehḳodā, XXI, pp. 607-8; Franke pp. 217-18, 222-24).

In Persian writings of all types, the most important features of Keẓr are: 1) his role as a spiritual guide to Moses, Alexander, or to a Sufi adept in his journey of initiation; a guide to strained travelers on land and sea; 2) his rule over nature: vegetation, waters and deserts; everything becoming green and blossoming under his steps or touch (Dehḳodā, XXI, pp. 607-8; Franke, pp. 80-88; cf. a proverb quoted by Steingass, p. 465: *Keẓr bahār dar qadam dārad* "Khizr has spring in his wake"); his patronage over the sea, navigation and the sailors (cf. Olearius, p. 622; Franke, pp. 88-101); 3) his immortality, usually connected with the spring of the Water of Life (cf. his eschatological functions in Franke, pp. 121-24), thus his extremely old age and knowledge of the past and future; 4) his affiliation to an intermediary sphere of reality, between the



material and the spiritual worlds, symbolized by the “Junction of the Two Seas,” the “Extreme North” or “Extreme West”; a remote sea island; a place where the sun hides in the water and strange astronomical phenomena occur, a paradise-like place, free from death and from the passage of time (see Jili, apud Corbin, 1977, p. 72; Franke, pp. 207-8), hence his connection with other immortals such as Edrīs, Eliās, Jesus, the Hidden Imam and the *Rejāl al-ġayb* “Men of the Invisible” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 202; Corbin, 1977, pp. 156-58; Nicholson, p. 124); 5) his close relationship with Eliās, expressed as their being doubles of one another, twin brothers, or two friends closely bound together, with the respective spheres of interest (land and sea, plants and waters) divided among them, (cf. Franke, pp. 136-62).

Kežr is supposed to have taken on the features of ancient local divinities and heroes all over the Islamic world: of Adonis, Tammuz, and some pre-Islamic Arab fertility gods in the Near East (Vollers, pp. 279-80); of Soma, Gandharva, Varuna, and Vishnu in India (Coomaraswamy, p. 176; Wensinck and Kramers, p. 290); in transitory Christian-Islamic areas, Kežr has been assimilated to St. George, St. Nicolas and St. Sergius, all of whom are frequently coupled with St. Il’ia, that is, Elijah (d’Herbelot, p. 993; Ivanov and Toporov, pp. 209-216; Bayazidi, p. 32, n. 64; Makashina, p. 91; Enjavi, II, pp. 116-19; Uspienski, pp. 57-63; Georgeva, pp. 68-74; cf. Krasnowolska, 1995, pp. 169-72).

On Iranian ground Kežr is supposed to have overtaken the functions of Zoroastrian Soruš, Av. Sraoša (for Soruš’s shrines in Yazd rededicated to Kežr and / or Eliās, see Boyce, 1967, p. 31; Soruš is replaced by Kežr in ritual and literature, see Russel, pp. 529-33; Amir Kosrow Dehlavi, pp. 114, 117). In Iranian folklore Kežr shows the attributes typical of female goddesses of fertility and abundance (Anāhitā, Esfandarmad; see Boyce, 1967, p. 32; idem, 1977, pp. 255 ff.; Bāstāni Pārizi pp. 326-29; Sorušīān, p. 204; Raži, pp. 698-99; Miršokrā’i, p. 370), and shares some features with Rapit̄win, a deity of summer, noon and crops (see Krasnowolska, 1998, pp. 151-52); there are many parallels between his cult and the cult of ancestral souls, *fravaši* (Raži, pp. 193-94; Homāyuni pp. 192-93; Snasarev, 1969, p. 218). Moreover, Kežr and Eliās, as two closely bound together patrons of plants and waters, show similarity to the Haurvatāt-Ameretāt couple in Zoroastrianism (Krasnowolska, 1998, pp. 150-151).

In Iranian popular beliefs Kežr, as a patron of vegetation, crops and abundance, is believed to secretly visit households and bless crops by leaving an offprint of his hand in sacrificial food (*qāvut*, *samanu*, a heap of threshed

corn). He is venerated as a calendric patron, and the days dedicated to him fall at the crucial points of the year: 1) End of the Great or of the Small Čella in winter, corresponding to the Zoroastrian festivals of Sada and Esfandagān respectively (for Kurdish, Azeri-Turkish and Persian speakers of West Iran, see Olearius, pp. 821-22; *Jašn-e Sada*, pp. 89-90; Enjavi, II, pp. 38, 43, 118-24; Sā'edi, p. 130-31; Raži, p. 195; Rāseḳ, p. 229; cf. Asatrian and Gevorgian, pp. 503, 508 for the Zāzā of Diārbakr; for Transcaucasian Kurds, see Aristova, p. 177, and Bayazidi p. 34; for North Afghanistan, see Hackin and Kohzad, pp. 165-67); 2) beginning of spring, the days preceding Nowruz i.e. the former Farvardegān (All Souls) festival (Shiraz and Tehran: Homāyuni, p. 192-3; Hedāyat, p. 154; Kurds of Mahābād and Yazidi Kurds of Transcaucasia: Enjavi II, pp. 134-5; Rudenko, p. 121; Bartang Valley, Pamir: Maiski, p. 104; 3) mid-spring, *čehelom-e bahār*, corresponding to Zoroastrian Maiḍyōi-zarəməya Gāhānbār, among the pastoralists of Kermān (Miršokrā'i 1982, pp. 367-69, 372-4); 4) harvest time, end of summer: South-east of Iran (Miršokrā'i, pp. 370-71), North Afghanistan and Central Asia, where Kežr is generally identified with *Bābā-ye Dehqān* (the Forefather-farmer), patron of farmers and of their professional brotherhoods (Snesarev 1969, pp. 218; 223; Dzhahonov, p. 116; Mukhiddinov, p. 88; Kisliakov, p. 82; Zarubin, p. 1169; Karmysheva, pp. 62-63).

In pastoral communities Kežr is in charge of herds and of milk products which usually are the domain of women (Bāstāni Pārizi, pp. 328-29, Miršokrā'i, pp. 370-71; Raži, p. 195; Rāseḳ, p. 229; for Tajikistan, see Peshchereva, 1927, pp. 52-56). In eastern Tāleš, he is identified with Siāh Gāleš, "Black Shepherd," a mythical protector of animals (Abdali, p. 190; Hedāyat, p. 165; Arakelova, p. 173), hunters venerate him as the patron of game (Hedāyat, p. 165; Andreev, 1958, p. 226). He rules over waters (springs, wells and pools, rivers and streams, seas and oceans), thus his sanctuaries are often built at springs or underground pools, or at the islands. Kežr is venerated at tomb-like shrines (as an immortal, he is not supposed to have any "real" burial place); at *qadamgāhs*, where an imprint of his foot has been left in stone, at graveyards (Boyce, 1967, p. 31; Miršokrā'i, p. 370; Sorušiān, pp. 204-5; Riāḥi, p. 39; Afšār Sistāni, p. 251; Šakurzāda, pp. 74-75). Some of his most important shrines are those of Ābādān, Čāhbahār (cf. Franke, pp. 104, 129, 150), Āmol (Maqbara-ye Kežr), Samarqand and Kabul (Šohādā-ye Sāleḥin cemetery).

In spite of being male, Kežr is considered a patron of women and their fertility, invoked at childbirth and implored for progeny. Omens are taken and fate-opening magic (*bakt-gošā'i*) is performed in his name (Enjavi, II, pp. 40,



130, 131; Bāstāni Pārizi, pp. 326-27; Katirā'i, p. 25; Miršokrā'i, 1982, p. 370; Šakurzāda, pp. 74-75; Aristova, p. 177). In the Matča valley (Tajikistan) Kežr is reported to preside over an orgiastic women's fertility rite of *čel tan* (forty people, i.e., saints), also known as *Rejāl al-ḡayb* (Andreev, 1927, p. 341). In the cities Kežr is venerated as the patron of craftsmen guilds: calligraphers, potters, water-bearers, greengrocers etc. (Schimmel, 1984, pp. 47-48, 71; Peshchereva, 1959, p. 319; Mokri, pp. 141, 146-47, 155; Malov, p. 141); and a *pir* of Sufi brotherhoods or individual darvishes (Hojviri, pp. 128, 130, 193-94; Schimmel, 1975, pp. 102, 105-6, 427; Nicholson, pp. 13, 66; Corbin, 1971, pp. 25-27, 38; Riāḥi, pp. 39-40). According to popular beliefs, Kežr shows himself as a beggar, an old man, or a darvish, dressed in green (*sabzpuš*), to those lost in wilderness or needing help (Hedāyat, p. 53; Šakurzāda, pp. 273, 333-34; Mukhiddinov, p. 89); he also may take on the form of a snake or some other animal (in Zāzā rites: Asatrian and Gevorgian, p. 508; for Central Asia, see Snesev, 1972, p. 172; Karmysheva, pp. 62-23). His alter ego is the prophet Eliās, with whom he shares his functions in different ways, sometimes they are imagined to be one person named Kežr-Eliās.

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April 15, 2009