



MEYBODI, ABU'L-FAẒL RAŠID-AL-DIN

MEYBODI, Abu'l-Faẓl Rašid-al-Din (fl. early 12th century), Sunni scholar, mystic and author of the *Kašf al-asrār wa 'oddāt al-abrār* (Unveiling of mysteries and provision of the righteous), a monumental Persian Sufi commentary on the Qur'ān. His full name is variously given in two manuscripts of *Kašf al-asrār* as Abu'l-Faẓl b. Aḥmad b. Abi Sa'd b. Aḥmad b. Mehrizad Meybodi, and Rašid-al-Din Abu'l-Faẓl Aḥmad b. Abi Sa'd b. Moḥammad b. Aḥmad Mehrizad (see Meybodi, 1952-60, eds.' Intro., I, p. i and VII, p. ii), whilst in a single manuscript of the *Ketāb al-foṣul* attributed to him it appears as al-Šayḵ al-Emām al-Ḥāfeẓ Rašid-al-Din Abu'l-Faẓl al-Meybodi (Dānešpažuh, p. 44).

There is a dearth of biographical information available on Meybodi; according to his own statement, he began to write the *Kašf al-asrār* in 1126 (Meybodi, pp. 1331-339, I, p. 1). This makes it likely that he was born in the second half of the 11th century and died during the second quarter of the 12th century. It has been suggested that his father was Jamāl-al-Eslām Abu Sa'id b. Aḥmad b. Mehrizad (d. 1087), a native of Yazd (Afšār, 1961, p. 312). According to the histories of Yazd, Jamāl-al-Eslām was a scholar and mystic of some repute, whose tomb, built together with a *kānaqāh* in 1347, was the site of a number of miracles and continued to be visited until Safavid times. His children are described as having been pious ascetics (Moḥammad Mofid, III, pp. 621-24; Ja'fari, pp. 120-21), and his descendants are said to have been mostly virtuous,



learned, and ‘honored by sultans’ (Moḥammad Mofid, III, p. 624). Among the descendants of Jamāl-al-Eslām named by the histories are Ġiāt-al-Din ‘Ali Monši, Mo‘in-al-Din Jamāl-al-Eslām, and Šehāb-al-Din ‘Ali. Iraj Afšār has located the gravestone of Sa‘id Mowaffaq-al-Din Abi Ja‘far b. Abi Sa‘d b. Aḥmad b. Mehrizad (d. 1174-75), who seems to be one of his sons (Afšār, 1967, pp. 191-92), and of a grand-daughter, presumed to be the daughter of our commentator and named Fāṭema bent al-Emām Sa‘id Rašid-al-Din Abi'l-FaẒl b. Abi Sa‘d b. Aḥmad Mehrizad (Afšār, 1968, p. 440; idem, 1973, pp. 203-4, 205). The correspondence between these names and that of Rašid-al-Din certainly seem to confirm a direct link to Jamāl-al-Eslām and therefore also to the region of Yazd, while the *nesba* “Meybodi” indicates more precisely that he had either been born, or at some time settled, in the town of Meybod, situated some 60 km northwest of Yazd. The location of Fāṭema bent Rašid-al-Din’s tombstone in the Friday mosque (masjed-e jāme‘) at Meybod would appear to confirm this connection.

If Meybodi was indeed the son of Jamāl-al-Eslām we may assume that he was raised in an environment of learning and mysticism. After completing his elementary education locally, he would probably have traveled to some of the great centers of learning such as Damascus, Baghdad, Nishapur, Marv, or Herat, to increase his knowledge of Hadith, jurisprudence, and other Islamic sciences. At some point, he appears to have become closely acquainted with the teachings of the famous Hanbalite mystic K̄vāja ‘Abd-Allāh Anšāri of Herat (d. Du‘l-ḥejja 481/March 1089, see [‘ABDALLĀH ANŠĀRI](#)). Although it is not known if Meybodi ever met K̄vāja ‘Abd-Allāh in person, it is clear from his constant reference to him as *pir-e ṭariqat* (master of the path) that he regarded him as his spiritual master. He was, moreover, profoundly influenced by Anšāri’s dogmatic ideas. It is possible that, having traveled to Herat, he spent a period of his life in the circle of Anšāri’s followers at the *kānaqāh* by his tomb at [Gāzorgāh](#), a village northeast of Herat. Although none of the histories mention his presence there, the *Kašf al-asrār* certainly reveals its author’s familiarity with both the written and oral tradition of “*Anšāriyāt*.”

There are other factors to indicate that Meybodi spent some time either in Herat or elsewhere in Khorasan. These include features of Khorasani, or more specifically Heravi, dialect in the *Kašf al-asrār* (the former, according to an as yet unpublished study of ‘Ali Rawāqi in Tehran; the latter, according to Fekrat, 1999); familiarity with the commentaries of Abu ‘Abd-al-Raḥmān Solami (d. 1021) and Abu'l-Qāsem Qoşayri (d. 1072), the *Sawāneḥ* of [Aḥmad Ġazāli](#) (d.



1126), and the poetry of Sanā'i (1131), all of which are cited (though not by name) in the *Kašf al-asrār*; a number of passages in common with the *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* of Aḥmad Sam'āni (d. 1148), composed either just before or after Meybodi's commentary (Şayfi; Purjawādi, 2000); and more generally, the influence of the doctrines and literary language of love mysticism, which at this time were blossoming in eastern Iran and which are fully evident in the mystical sections of the *Kašf al-asrār* (Keeler, 2006, chaps. 4 and 7). Presumably, our commentator must have died on his travels because no trace of his grave has yet been found in the region of Meybod.

Thus, until further biographical data emerges about Meybodi, we can do no more than speculate about his life. It is possible, however, to glean substantial information about his learning, doctrines, and interests from the text of the *Kašf al-asrār* itself. Meybodi was clearly a scholar of some standing in the religious sciences. His name, as it appears in the colophon of the *Ketāb al-foşul* (ed. Dāneşpażuh, p. 44) would suggest that he was a *ḥāfeẓ* (one who knows the Qur'ān by heart), and the facility with which he is able to cross reference Qur'ānic verses in the *Kašf al-asrār*, using the Qur'ān to comment on the Qur'ān, would confirm this. Evidently a proficient scholar of Hadith (*moḥaddet*), he includes in his commentary numerous traditions of the Prophet and companions as well as of the *Ahl al-bayt* (on the latter see Rokni Yazdi, 1995). Meybodi was also, apparently, the author of an *Arba'in* or collection of forty Hadiths (Meybodi, 1952-60, V, p. 219), although no such work by him has yet been found. The number of sources cited in his work, his knowledge of Arabic, his eloquent use of Persian prose, and his numerous citations of Persian and Arabic poetry all attest to his erudition.

In jurisprudence (*oşul-al-feqh*), Meybodi followed the school of Şāfe'i, to whose authority he consistently refers on points of law. Unlike many Shafe'ites of his time, however, he did not adhere to the school of Abu'l-Ḥasan 'Ali Aş'ari in matters of theology (*oşul-al-din*); on the contrary, he explicitly condemns Ash'arites on two occasions in the *Kašf al-asrār*, firstly for being "deniers of the Divine attributes" (1952-60, VIII, p. 486), and secondly for their belief that the Qur'ān is uncreated, but only in meaning (ibid, VIII, p. 507). As a Shafe'ite, Meybodi was in fact a fervent traditionalist who condemned all forms of speculative theology (*kalām*) as well as philosophy. He also espoused a number of Hanbalite doctrines, although in his commentary he never expressed any formal allegiance to that school, merely maintaining his position to be that of the *ahl al-sonna wa'l-jamā'a* (in Persian, *ahl-e sonnat wa jamā'at*). Among



Hanbalite doctrines that he championed were: (A) the belief that God is in a direction, that direction being above (*Kašf al-asrār* I, p. 123, III, p. 29); (B) the belief that the Qur'ān was uncreated, not only in meaning but also in letters and sounds (ibid, II, p. 237, VIII, p. 507); and (C) particularly important in the context of a Qur'ān commentary, the insistence that the anthropomorphic expressions in the Qur'ān should be accepted as they are, without seeking to interpret them. He condemns as heretical metaphorical interpretations of the anthropomorphic verses by Mu'tazilites and others, and recommends that believers should accept whatever they hear from the Qur'ān, desisting from the "way of asking how" (*rāh-e čegunagi*; *Kašf al-asrār* III, p. 169, VI, p. 111). He maintains that this position, apparently equivalent to the doctrine of *be-lā kayf*, avoids the two extremes of denial of divine attributes (*ta'ṭil*) on the one hand, and anthropomorphism (*tašbih*) on the other (ibid, III, p. 169, V, p. 374). Adherence to these traditionalist doctrines is, in Meybodi's view, a *sine qua non* of spiritual realization. Thus he states: "The noble ones of the way and wayfarers on the path of truth are those whose hearts God kept pure of desires and innovation (*bed'at*), who accepted what they heard, and went the way of submission (*taslim*). They purified their hearts from the world and its contamination, until the light of gnosis (*ma'refat*) shone in their hearts and the springs of wisdom opened within them" (ibid, III, p. 625).

It is in his combining of traditionalism and mysticism that Meybodi may chiefly be regarded as a disciple of 'Abd-Allāh Anṣāri. Yet an overall examination of the mystical doctrines of the *Kašf al-asrār* reveals that he drew on a vast array of Sufi sources, citing many famous figures in the history of Islamic mysticism such as Ḥasan Baṣri, [Bāyazid Bestāmi](#), Yaḥyā b. Mo'ād, Abu'l-Qāsem Jonayd, Abu Bakr Šebli, and [Ḥosayn b. Manšur Ḥallāj](#). Moreover, we find integrated in Meybodi's work doctrines of *Malālamatiya* (the school of blame), *fotowwa* or *javānmardi* (the way of spiritual chivalry), and above all, of love mysticism (Keeler, 2006, chap. 4, pp. 115-16, chap. 6, pp. 168-72, chap. 7). It is particularly with regard to the latter that Meybodi can be said to have gone beyond the heritage of Anṣāri, for whilst there remains uncertainty regarding the status of love in the writings of the latter (e.g., it is placed among the *'elal al-maqāmāt* "deficiencies of the stations" in Anṣāri, 1956, pp. 169-70, and at an intermediary stage in Anṣāri, 1962, pp. 71-72, but at the ultimate stage encompassing all the others in Anṣāri, 1954, p. 30), there can be no question of its central importance to the mystical teachings of the *Kašf al-asrār*. Perhaps Meybodi felt more at liberty to express these doctrines in the wake of Aḥmad Ġazālī's seminal treatise on love, the *Sawāneḥ*, and in a



climate in which other authors such as 'Ayn al-Qożāt Hamadāni, Aḥmad Sam'āni, and Sanā'i were freely writing on the subject. One indication of this change of climate in the early 12th century is the application of the word 'ešq to the love of God, which had remained controversial during the 11th century, and was criticised by Hojviri (pp. 400-1), and Qoşayri (1966, p. 615). The word 'ešq is not to be found in any of Anşāri's formal written works. Yet Meybodi, like Aḥmad Ġazāli, applies the word not only to the love of human beings for God (Meybodi, 1952-60, *passim*), including the Prophet's love for Him (*ibid*, I, p. 53), but also for God's love for human beings (*ibid*, I, p. 142, III, p. 732).

Love mysticism, however, did not manifest itself as one school of thought; it was rather a movement that embraced a number of different approaches to the way of love. Thus we find that the mystical doctrines of the *Kašf al-asrār* do not include a metaphysic of love as expounded by Aḥmad Ġazāli (A. Ġazāli, 1980). For Meybodi, love is simply a purifying fire which, through the pain of separation from, and intense longing for the divine Beloved, gradually frees the seeker from all other than Him (Meybodi, 1952-60, I, pp. 674-75, V, p. 727, VI, pp. 112-13). Underlying this doctrine of love in Meybodi's teachings are two theological dogmas. The first is a firm belief in the limits of human reason, a firm conviction that the rational faculty ('*aql*) can of itself never attain true experiential knowledge of God (*ibid*, II, pp. 508-9, III, p. 294); and the second is the doctrine of God's pre-ordination and pre-determination of all things (*qazā'*, *qadar*, or *taqdir*), which here includes not only human acts but also spiritual states and mystical realisation, which can only be attained through the intervention of divine grace (*Kašf al-asrār* II, p. 496, IV, pp. 236, 279, 441). These two doctrines, combined with love, constitute what might be called the "mystical theology" of Meybodi (Keeler, 2006, chap. 7).

In common with many Sufis, Meybodi understands the goal of the mystical way to be annihilation of self (*fanā'*) and subsisting in God (*baqā'*; *Kašf al-asrār* I, p. 60, II, p. 186), and he includes in his esoteric commentary numerous explanations of the different states and stations on the path (e.g., *ibid*, II, pp. 273, 400, III, p. 156, X, pp. 178, 274), as well as of what might be called the "spiritual psychology" of the human being (e.g., *ibid*, I, pp. 581-82, III, p. 557, VII, pp. 248-49, IX, p. 469). Nonetheless, the main preoccupation of his mystical interpretations seems to be with conveying his belief in the ineffability and omnipotence of God, and the pre-eminence of love. These three prevailing doctrines, expounded in great detail through the esoteric sections of the *Kašf al-asrar*, would later become essential themes in many works of mystical



literature in Persian, including the poetry of Farid-al-Din 'Aṭṭār and Jalāl-al-Din Moḥammad Rumi.

Works. Meybodi's magnum opus, and the only significant work of his pen that has survived, is his monumental Persian commentary on the Qur'ān, the *Kašf al-asrār wa 'oddāt al-abrār*. At ten volumes in its published edition, it is one of most extensive Persian commentaries, second only in size to the Shi'i commentary of Abu'l-Fotuḥ Rāzi (d. 12th cent.). It is also possibly the earliest extant example of a complete Persian Qur'ān commentary with a substantial mystical content. In fact, it is arguable that Meybodi's commentary established the genre of Sufi *tafsir* writing in Persian; certainly, the style and content of the mystical sections of the *Kašf al-asrār* were to influence several later Sufi commentaries, including the *Ḥadā'eq al-ḥaqā'eq* of Mo'in-al-Din Farāhi Heravi (d. 1502), and *Mawāheb-e 'aliya* of Kamāl-al-Din Wā'eẓ Kāšefi (d. 1504). As one of the most popular Persian commentaries, it has been preserved in over fifty manuscripts (listed in Monzawi, I, pp. 55-56; Masarrat, 1995).

According to Meybodi's introduction to the *Kašf al-asrār*, his work was based on an earlier commentary by K̄vāja 'Abd-Allāh Anṣāri. Meybodi explains that he read this commentary, and, despite its eloquence and depth of meaning, found it to be too short, and thus he decided to expand upon it (Meybodi, 1952-60, I, p. 1). Passages directly ascribed to Anṣāri are preceded by the words *Pir-e ʿariqat goft* (the master of the path said), or more respectfully with his *laqab*: *Šayḫ al-Eslām K̄vāja 'Abd-Allāh Anṣāri goft*. They are usually to be found in the mystical sections of the *Kašf al-asrār*, and for the most part comprise *monājāt* (intimate prayers), aphorisms, and short theological sermons, and actually include little material that could strictly be defined as exegetical. Anṣāri's own commentary is no longer extant for the purposes of comparison, and since Meybodi himself seems to have emulated his master's eloquent writing style in much of his commentary, it is difficult to ascertain how much of the *Kašf al-asrār* derives from Anṣāri's original. In any case, as mentioned above, it is evident that Meybodi drew on a great number of sources for the writing of his work (discussed in Keeler, 2006, pp. 20-22). Among Sufi commentaries, he was particularly dependent on Qoṣayri's *Laṭā'ef al-ešārāt*, from which he derived not only exegetical ideas, but also numerous passages, some of which he translated, often with considerable expansion, into Persian, while others he left verbatim in the Arabic. Not surprisingly, Meybodi never once credited the name of this work's famous Ash'arite author. It is probably due to the frequency with which Anṣāri's name is mentioned in the *Kašf al-*



asrār that for a long time the commentary continued to be known as Anšārī's *tafsir*.

A unique feature of the *Kašf al-asrār* is its threefold structure. The Qur'ān is firstly divided into sessions of convenient length, consisting of anything between five and fifty verses. The commentary on these verses is then presented in three *nawbats* (lit., turns): The first one consists of a concise rendering of the verses in Persian; the second *nawbat* is the conventional or exoteric commentary; and the third is the esoteric commentary. Looking more closely at the content of Nawbat I, we find that, rather than being a “literal Persian translation” of the verses (Storey, I, part 2, pp. 1190), the Persian renderings which Meybodi presents often constitute more of a succinct interpretation of the verses (e.g., Qur'ān 1:1, 6 and 7; Meybodi, 1952-60, I, p. 2). Apart from its interest as an early and eloquent verse-by-verse rendering of the Qur'ān in Persian, the Nawbat I of Meybodi's *Kašf al-asrār* is also valued as a source for the study of early new Persian, providing numerous examples of archaic words, the meanings of which are clear from their Arabic equivalents (for examples see Šari'at, 1994, pp. 12-16, 752-68).

The Nawbat II sections of the *Kašf al-asrār* include all the components that are usually to be found in a conventional Qur'ān commentary, such as discussions of relevant traditions, circumstances of revelation (*asbāb al-nozul*), legal rulings (*aḥkām*), abrogating and abrogated verses (*nāseḵ* and *mansuḵ*), grammar, lexicography, stories of the prophets (*qeṣaṣ al-anbiā'*) and so on. Although the *Kašf al-asrār* is described as a Persian commentary, its Nawbat II sections have a substantial Arabic content. This is an indication that the *Kašf al-asrār*, like other commentaries written in Persian, was not solely intended for an audience lacking in Arabic literacy (see [EXEGESIS iii. in Persian](#)). Interestingly, the proportion of Arabic in the Nawbat II sections gradually increases during the course of the work, reaching around 80 percent or more towards the end of the commentary.

Meybodi describes the esoteric sections of his commentary, Nawbat III, as comprising “allegories of mystics” (*romūz-e 'ārefān*), allusions of Sufis (*ešārāt-e ṣufiān*), and “subtle associations of preachers” (*laṭā'ef-e moḍakerān*). This broad definition gives some idea of the scope and variety of its content, which includes, in addition to esoteric interpretations of selected verses from each session: passages of encomium to God, the Prophet or the Qur'ān; explanations of different aspects of Sufi doctrine; sayings of and anecdotes about great and less-known mystics; aphorisms; poetry; prayers and invocations (*monājāt*);



and passages of narrative relating, from a mystical point of view, events in the lives of the prophets. In contrast to Nawbat II, Nawbat III is composed almost entirely in Persian with only a small proportion of Arabic, consistently throughout the commentary. Moreover, the prose styles of the two Nawbats are markedly different. In Nawbat II the prose appears to be plain and functional, as in many early Persian Sufi works such as the *Kašf al-maḥjub* of Hojviri, and the *Šarḥ al-ta'arrof* of Mostamli. Nawbat III, however, boasts an artistic, poetical style of prose, richly embellished with imagery and metaphors, often incorporating passages of metered and rhyming prose (*saj'*), interspersed with poetry and constantly interwoven with Qur'ānic quotations that are skilfully integrated into the narrative. Combining these elements with passages of dramatic storytelling, Meybodi developed a compelling didactic prose style of enduring appeal. This probably accounts for the continuing influence and popularity of the *Kašf al-asrār*, and is no doubt the reason why it is still considered to be one of the monuments of Persian literature.

The threefold format of the *Kašf al-asrār* provided Meybodi with the scope he needed to develop fully the rhetorical style of his esoteric commentary. At the same time, it allowed him to maintain a boundary between two clearly defined exegetical realms: those of exoteric interpretation, based largely on traditional material (*tafsir be'l-ma'tur*), with a limited amount of reasoned judgement (*tafsir be'l-ra'y*; Meybodi, 1952-60, X, p. 679); and of esoteric interpretation, derived from divine illuminations and mystical unveilings (*mokāšafāt*). From the latter realm, the rational faculty was, in Meybodi's view, to be entirely banished, a point which he underlines from time to time in his Nawbat III commentary with brief passages condemning *ta'wil*, that is, metaphorical interpretations of the anthropomorphic verses of the Qur'ān (e.g., Meybodi, 1952-60, VI, p. 111, IX, p. 486). It seems, however, that once the rational faculty is safely at bay, and the exegete is in the state of receiving inspiration rather than applying reason, the shackles of literalism may be allowed to fall away, and it is noteworthy that the esoteric sections of Meybodi's commentary actually include some surprisingly free metaphorical and allegorical interpretations of the Qur'ānic verses (e.g., Meybodi, 1952-60, III, p. 410, V, pp. 671, 729, VI, p. 274). In fact, the mystical interpretations of *Kašf al-asrār* represent a significant hermeneutical development as compared to earlier Sufi *tafsirs*, and for this reason Meybodi's esoteric commentary is now regarded as a key source for the study of the medieval Sufi exegesis, alongside the Arabic commentaries of Solami, Qošayri and Ruzbehān Baqli.



Apart from the *Kašf al-asrār* the only extant work bearing Meybodi's name is the *Ketāb al-foṣul*, a short treatise that has apparently survived in only one manuscript. The treatise comprises an introduction and seven sections, each comprising three chapters, which discuss the ideal virtues of important figures of state and religion, starting with sultans and ending with scholars and *qāzīs*. According to the colophon, the work was originally composed by Abu'l-Qāsem Yusof b. Ḥosayn b. Yusof Heravi, and then “excerpted” or “drawn upon” (*estakrajahu*) by al-Šayḵ al-Emām al-Ḥāfeẓ Rašid-al-Din Abu'l-FaẒl Meybodi (ed., *Dānešpažuh*, p. 44). The chapters usually begin with a few lines of Arabic, presumably the extract taken from Heravi's original, which are then followed by an expanded and elaborated translation into Persian, presumably the work of Meybodi. The prose style of the *Ketāb al-foṣul* has several characteristics in common with the third nawbats of the *Kašf al-asrār*, namely the use of rhyming prose, the inclusion of Arabic and Persian poetry, and the interweaving of Qur'ānic quotations into the narrative. In general, however, the prose style is not as appealing as that of the Nawbat III sections of the Qur'ān commentary. In terms of content, there are a few similarities. Although there is little sign of love mysticism in this work, the devotional fervour is there, with eulogies upon the Prophet and his family, descriptions of nature and the cosmos, and some emphasis on divine pre-ordination.

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