



RAYḤĀNI, ABU'L-ḤASAN 'ALI

RAYḤĀNI, ABU'L-ḤASAN 'ALI b. 'Obayda (d. ca. 219/834), a prolific author, a high ranking civil secretary (*kāteb*) to the 'Abbasid caliph *al-Ma'mun* (r. 189-218/813-33), and an outstanding littérature (*adib*), whom some medieval critics preferred to *Jāḥeẓ* in eloquence and erudition.

Next to nothing is recorded about his parentage and upbringing. The attribution *rayḥāni* implies that his father or grandfather had been engaged in selling basil (*rayḥān*), a sign of the family's modest social origins. His patronymic (*konya*) Abu'l-Ḥasan suggests that he probably had a son called Ḥasan. His Iranian family, originally from Khorasan, had moved to Basra, perhaps with the 'Abbasid revolutionary armies. He was born there around 139-40/757. As a youth, he pursued the profession of a soldier (Zakeri, 2007, II, p. 7). It is not clear what circumstances helped him rise to the rank of a caliphal advisor. Neither is it obvious where and from whom he received his multifaceted education. Only a dozen of his illustrious companions and acquaintances are named in the sources, among them the Mu'tazilite theologian Ṭomāma b. Ašras (d. 213/827), the vizier Ḥasan b. Sahl (d. 236/850), the musician-scholar Eshāq b. Ebrāhim Mawṣeli (q.v.; d. 235/849), the grand *qāẓi* Yaḥyā b. Akṭam (d. 242/856), the linguist-grammarian Abu Ḥātem Sejestāni (d. 255/868), the versatile littérateur *Jāḥeẓ* (d. 255/868), and the historian Aḥmad b. Abi Ṭāher Ṭayfur (d. 280/893), who was trained by him and became the main propagator of his literary heritage. In theology, he followed the doctrine of the Mu'tazilites and was once accused of being a *zendīq*, which at the time signified a libertine or a freethinker.



Rayḥāni was a powerful prose stylist, and a poet of repute, but little of his poetry has survived (cf. Zakeri, 2007, II, pp. 1029-32). The attractive style of Arabic calligraphy called *rayḥāni* (See [CALLIGRAPHY](#)) owes its origin and designation to Rayḥāni (Zakeri, 1994, p. 84).

Classical bio-bibliographical dictionaries starting with [Ebn al-Nadim](#) (d. 380/990) provide us differing lists of Rayḥāni's books that, after collating, add up to sixty titles. Some twenty of these are so corrupt and distorted that nothing can be even guessed about their contents; another twenty have meaningful and suggestive names, but have left no trace in the literature for further identification of their subject matter and structure; and the other twenty can be better identified and a few of them may be partially reconstructed. These are on a variety of topics, mostly on the themes of *adab*, including music (e.g., *al-Iqā'* 'Rhythm'), literary analysis and linguistics (e.g. *al-Ma'āni* 'Meaning'; *al-Awṣāf* 'Descriptions'), biographical sketches (e.g., *A k lāq Hārūn* 'Hārūn's characteristics'), friendship and love (e.g., *al-E k wān* 'Friends'; *Šaml wa-olfa* 'Union and friendship'), as well as several vainglory debates (e.g. *al-Sam' wa'l-baṣar* 'Hearing and sight').

From among all these, only his relatively large *Jawāher al-kelam wa-farā'ed al-ḥekam* in full and some selections from a few other books made by al-Wazīr al-Maḡrebi (d. 418/1027) have survived. These texts as well as a great number of quotations from Rayḥāni's works and anecdotes about him scattered in the literature have been collected, edited, and translated by Mohsen Zakeri (2007). Fluent in Middle Persian, Rayḥāni not only translated from the written sources in that language, but also based part of his own numerous writings on knowledge gained from them. Of particular interest are the titles which seem to have been translations from Middle Persian: *Kay Lohrāsb al-Malek* 'The King Lohrāsb' (a work belonging to the Persian heroic cycle), *Adab Javānšir* 'The Wisdom of Javānšir', [*Ādāb*] *Mehr Ā d arjošnas*, and *Rošnā'i-nāma* 'Book of light'. His *Ketāb al-maṣūn*, partially preserved, is said to have been a compilation of ethical and wisdom sentences he extracted from the Avesta (Zakeri, 1994, pp. 91-92). Some evidence suggests that Rayḥāni was perhaps the first translator of the *Sendbād-nāma* and *Belawhar wa Budāsaf* (see [BARLAAM AND IOSAPH](#)), the legendary life of Buddha (Zakeri, 2007, I, pp. 100-15, 116-31). Moḥammad b. al-Marzbān (see [EBN AL-MARZBĀN](#)), another productive translator from Middle Persian into Arabic, emulated Rayḥāni's style in his translations and literary pursuits (Şafadi, V, p. 11).



An abridged adaptation of Rayĥāni's book *Mehr Ā d arjošnas*, the Arabic translation of a Pahlavi work, has entered the *Ādāb al-falāsefa*, an anthology of gnomologia compiled by one Moĥammad b. 'Ali Anšāri (fl. 4th/10th c.), that has been wrongly attributed to Ḥonayn b. Ešĥāq (d. 260/873); Zakeri, 1994, pp. 96-102; idem, 2004, pp. 173-91; idem, 2007, I, pp. 141-44; II, pp. 1010-28). This short text consists of an introduction and fifty-six concise ethical and practical precepts addressed by a wise sage to an unnamed king, hence constituting an early example of a mirror for princes.

The famous book entitled *al-Adab al-šaġir* (q.v.), which had been ascribed to Ebn al-Moqaffa', has been shown by Gustav Richter (1931), Francesco Gabrieli (1931-32), and Eḥsān 'Abbās (1977) to be spurious. After a brief introduction, *al-Adab al-šaġir* (= AŞ) consists of four distinct units, the slightly longer versions of three of which we find dispersed in Meskawayh's *Jāvidān k erad* (= J.) as independent texts without any attribution:

AŞ pp. 15-26 = J., pp. 68-74 (starts on J., p. 67): Meskawayh introduces this as *Faṣl men kalām ḥakim Fāresi* (Aphorisms of a Persian sage).

AŞ pp. 27-38, 48-52 = J., pp. 188-91, 191-92: Meskawayh has no title for this.

AŞ pp. 39-48 = J., pp. 74-77 (continues to J., p. 86): Meskawayh calls this *Waṣīyya le'l-Fors* 'A Persian counsel'.

AŞ pp. 52-60: This section contains 27 succinct *ḥekam*, which have been extracted from Ebn al-Moqaffa's *Kalila wa Demna*. Seven of these appear also in the *Waṣīyya le'l-Fors*.

A large number of sentences from "A Persian counsel" and the other sections are circulated in the literature as words of wisdom composed by Rayĥāni. For example, the pseudo-Ebn al-'Arabi's *Moḥāzarat al-abrār* (II, p. 490) has a long statement on "Envy" that reads under *Waṣīyat 'Ali b. 'Obayda le'l-Ma'mun fī'l-ḥasad* ('Ali b. 'Obayda's counsel to al-Ma'mun on envy; see J., pp. 81-82). The piece on envy as well as the rest of "A Persian counsel" can be found in Rayĥāni's *al-Maṣun* (cf. Zakeri, 2007, II, pp. 930-42). It would be hard to believe that he gained his high repute with the caliph as an elegant and pure writer blatantly presenting to him the compositions of his celebrated predecessor as his own. In light of the discovery of Rayĥāni's *Jawāher al-kelem* and other text samples from his compositions, it has been suggested



that *al-Adab al-ṣaḡīr* is quite likely a work penned by Rayḥāni following the footsteps of Ebn al-Moqaffa', or compiled by someone else using his writings. For a review of the discussion and documentation of this proposition see Zakeri (2007, I, pp. 317-26).

The *Jawāher al-kelam*, which has survived in a unique manuscript, contains slightly over 2000 aphorisms, many of them proverbs, or proverbial sayings, arranged alphabetically into thirty chapters. The work is a compilation of wisdom sentences from older unnamed sources interspersed with the author's own moral and proverbial injunctions. This impressive collection of maxims represents one of the earliest and most extensive anthologies of gnomic literature (*al-am t āl wa'l-ḥekam*) in Arabic. Its importance for the literary history of Arabic and Persian literature can hardly be overestimated. It was used widely by later compilers of *adab*-encyclopedias and proverb-handbooks including Abu'l-Faḥr Aḥmad Maydāni (d. 518/1124), who shares more than one hundred sentences with him in his *Majma' al-am t āl* (cf. Zakeri, 2007, I, pp. 371-72, the index under Maydāni).

Jawāher al-kelam is a treasury of ancient wit, but it is not a collection of proverbs. It reads more like an ethical essay. The author's intention, as explained in his introduction, was to present the gist of his life-experiences and learning as a compendium of rules of life, a form of practical morality, making it accessible to a greater public through words of wisdom. His approach of an *adib* (man of letters) rather than a philosopher makes him avoid theoretical discussions of ethics and concentrate on sketching with good sense and insight the portrait of a perfect man using terse and aesthetically powerful maxims. A substantial catalogue of virtues and vices is provided and characterized by a remarkable harmony in spirit and tone. The virtues he takes into account have reference to man's mundane life rather than spiritual world. His ethical view focuses on the interest of the individual in a healthy and justly ruled society. In all these, Ebn al-Moqaffa's strong influence on him can be observed.

The numerous anecdotes involving Rayḥāni in the literature, particularly in the works of [Abu Ḥayyān Tawḥīdi](#), portray him as a liberal scholar, an aesthete, devoted to the "beautiful" in literature and art (Tawḥīdi, I, pp. 28, 68, IV, pp. 150-151, V, p. 191, VI, pp. 23, 155, 172, 203, 233, 237, VII, pp. 31-32, VIII, p. 168). In his writing, Rayḥāni constantly tried to combine sublime thoughts with that of excellent diction, moral warning with that of political instruction.



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