

The Continuity of Zoroastrian Thought in Iran as Evident in the Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam

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Omar Khayyam (1048-1131 AD) is the chief Persian poet of whom there exists a long-standing inspired translation in English, done faithfully by Edward Fitzgerald in the mid-late 1800s with the aid of his mentor and teacher in Persian at the University of Cambridge, Edward Cowell. Omar Khayyam's quatrains in Fitzgerald's rendition were quite popular in Europe and America then. His various decorated editions were being given as gifts. There was an Omar Khayyam Club of America, based in Boston around 1920. An amusing point is that an entrepreneuring poet in America adapted his *Rubaiyat*, or quatrains, and produced the *Rubaiyat of a Persian Cat*. Other poets worked various new themes based on the Rubaiyat.

Khayyam was a polymath. Besides being a poet he was an astronomer, a mathematician, and a historian. He devised a calendar more accurate than the one in use in the world today, the Georgian. His poems are concise, analogous to formulas in mathematics. The first three hemistichs in the quatrain serve as but a preface, and he states his real message in the fourth.

In the short work on the history of the Persian New Year ascribed to him, called *Norooz-Nameh*, Khayyam states that the monarchs of Iran and Rome are of the same lineage, the same origin¹: "They are of one wellspring and each other's kin. All are progeny of Fereydoun, It is therefore incumbent upon the people of the World to honor and observe

them, for being descended from them." From the description he gives, his main reference is Ferdowsy's Shahnameh and the account therein of *Fereydoun (Thraetaona)* and his three sons, *Salm, Tour and Iraj*, being respectively the eponymous ancestors of Rome, the Turanians of the North, and of Iran. Throughout the Shahnameh the Turanians are depicted as a tribe closely related to Iranians who have not yet advanced in civilization. The two royal houses, kin to each other much as the kings of Iran and Armenia were in Parthian times, are in a feud, which leads the two nations to war.

There are a number of representative quatrains of Khayyam showing the continuity of thought from before Islam. It should be noted that Khayyam did not subscribe to all Zoroastrian doctrines, just the ones that he felt comfortable that he could believe in. Case in point is heaven and hell. But contrary to the impression of others (including our admirable poet Fitzgerald), it will be clear he was not an epicurean and did believe in the immortality of the soul. But this may be due to the fact there were quatrains of Omar Khayyam Fitzgerald did not have.

Further, the reader should be informed that due to his tendency to state his thoughts in just two distichs, the linguistic devices protecting and effectively locking the verses as in the case of others who composed longer poems were weaker. Since some admirers did not have his stature and renown and were afraid of the Islamic establishment to utter the same thoughts, they tried to pass their compositions under his name. By contrast in the 19th century and under Christendom Fitzgerald was free and had no need to hide. Over the years scholars have weighed in on what is and is not attributable to Khayyam, and the quotes that follow are from one such edition. Persian editions have been produced with the initials of each scholar under each quatrain indicating his verdict as to whether authentic.

In the following quatrain زُنار (*zonnar*) refers to a belt that the Zoroastrians used to wear in ceremonies, which name today it has given way to *Kusti*.

تا چند کنم عرضه نادانی خویش
ببازار شدم از این پریشانی خویش
زُنار مغان که بر میان خواهم بست
دانی ز چه از ننگ مسلمانان خویش

For how long must I profess ignorance
Heartsick am I of this distress

The Magi's *zonnar* that I shall don,
Do you know why ? In the shame of being Moslem

Fitzgerald saw Khayyam as finding nothing in the world to be indicative of an afterlife and hence being a materialist, believing only in the here and now. He writes of Khayyam: "Having failed (however mistakenly) of finding any Providence but Destiny, and any World but This, he set about making the most of it." ⁱⁱ However, some of Khayyam's verses which may not have been available to Fitzgerald in the 1800s show his belief in the immortality of the soul. Two of his quatrains will suffice to illustrate that. The immortality of the soul is a major doctrine of Zoroastrianism as indicated in the sacred literature and attested in the will and death-bed address of Cyrus the Great ca. 530 BC in Xenophon's *Cyropaedia* ⁱⁱⁱ, as well as stated a millennium afterwards in the address of Khosrow Anushirvan or the king "of Immortal Soul" in the mid 500s AD, and in other primary sources. Like similar statements in classical Persian literature, reference is made to the soul as pre-existing and preceding the body, as stated in the *Greater Bundahishn*, part of the Zoroastrian scriptures containing an account of creation. In Afterlife, these souls return to God. It is clear in Khayyam's verse that he meant the embodiment of the soul is effected through the intermediary of nature and physical laws. He does not address in this quatrain or indeed any quatrain the primal cause behind nature and physical laws and is content without an explanation of such primal cause, But that may describe the status of these questions in the science of our day as well.

His reference below to the four elements, clearly, is to fire, water, earth and air, as stated in the prolegomena in Ferdowsy's *Shahnameh*, and as attested frequently in other works in Persian literature.

کردند نیازمندت این چهار انباز
تا باز چنان شوی که بودی ز آغاز
آنی که نبودت به خور و خواب نیاز
هر یک ز تو آنچه داد بستاند باز

The time when you had no need of eat or sleep
These Four Elements caused you to be needy of it

Yet each shall take what it has given you
Until you become what you were at the outset

بازی بودم پریدم از عالم راز
اینجا چو نیافتم کسی محرم راز
شاید که رسم من از نشیبی به فراز
زان ره که درون شدم برون رفتم باز

A Hawk I was, and flew whence Mystery resides
That I might soar to great heights upon the hillsides

But I found few in whom to Confide
Thus I Returned, by the same Portal I arrived

In the following, Khayyam criticizes the abuse of God to advance political and material agenda.

آنرا که به صحای علل تاخته اند
امروز بهانه ای در اداخته اند
بی او همه کارها بپرداخته اند
فردا همه آن بود که خود ساخته اند

He whom they have run out to the abyss of logic
Without Him they have carried out their goals

To-day they have but excuses they have made up
Tomorrow it shall all be what they themselves have made

In the following the term *gabr* denotes a Zoroastrian. It was a derogative term in Islam, descriptive of Zoroastrians. The Magi were the priests of Zoroastrianism, and astrologers, a number of whom Matthew reports carried gifts to the baby Jesus.

گر من ز می مغانه مستم مستم
هر طایفه ای به من گمانی دارد
گر کافر و گیر و بت پرستم هستم
من زان خودم چنانکه هستم هستم

If I am made out to be drunk in the manner of the Magi, it is as well
If I am made out to be an infidel, *gabr* or idolater, it is as well

Every sect suspects me for something or another
I am but what I am, let me be what I am

In the following Khayyam talks to his higher being, and makes the case that he trusts Him to be rational and just. The word *mehrab* refers to the altar in a place of worship. It is quite clear that by *mehrab* he means the altar in a Moslem prayer house or mosque.

با تو به خرابات اگر گویم راز به زانکه کنم بی تو به محراب نماز
ای اول ای آخر خلقان همه تو خواهی تو مرا بسوز و خواهی بنواز

Communion with you at the abode of the Magi
Is preferable to praying at the *mehrab* but devoid of your presence

O thou, Author of the first and last of Creation
- Whether you burn [in hell] or praise me

The following is a polemic of Khayyam with his other side's position stated, against Sunni doctrine. Because of his first name, Omar, Khayyam is believed to have been born in a family that was Sunni. Sunni doctrine, generally holds that man has no free will over his own actions. At least three of the four major branches of Sunnism, as well as all fundamentalist sects, deny the existence of Free Will. This is contrast to Shiism, whose belief in the doctrine of the Free Will derives and was inherited from Zoroastrianism. The consequence of denial of free will is that man becomes absolved of moral responsibility toward his fellow men. Here Khayyam is critical in that if there is no free will, and if he has no part to play in his judgment, then how could there be a Judgment Day?

بر من قلم قضا چو بی من رانند پس نیک و بدش چرا ز من می دانند
دی بی من و امروز چو دی بی من و تو فردا بچه حجتم به داور خوانند

If I have no part in the judgment rendered on me
Then why ascribe the rights and wrongs to me ?

Yesterday without me and alike, today without me and you
Tomorrow for what just cause can they call me to be judged?

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All quatrains quoted are from the following Persian edition. The quatrains are arranged alphabetically by the ending latter of the last distich. Scholars give their individual verdict on the attribution of each quatrain.

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ⁱⁱ Edward Fitzgerald's preface to most copies of the Quatrains of Omar Khayyam, e.g. *Rubaiyat of Omar Khayyam, Astronomer-Poet of Persia*, Twentieth American Edition, Boston, 1892, p. 13.

ⁱⁱ Xenophon, *Cyropaedia*, Henry Graham Dakyns, Tr., VIII,C7.19

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