

SAM'ĀNI, AḤMAD

SAM'ĀNI, ABU'L-QĀSEM AḤMAD b. Abu Bakr Maṣṣūr (b. 487/1094; d. 17 Šawwāl 534/11 June 1140), author of *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ fi šarḥ asmā' al-malek al-fattāḥ* (The repose of the spirits: explaining the names of the All-Opening King), a 600-page masterpiece of Persian prose. The book may well be the most detailed exposition of divine and human love written in the 12th century, but it and its author were largely forgotten until Najib Māyel Heravi published the text in 1989.

The only information we have about Aḥmad Sam'āni is provided by his paternal nephew, the well-known biographer Abu'l-Sa'd 'Abd-al-Karim b. Moḥammad Sam'āni (506-562/1113-66). He describes him in an account of the Sam'āni family in *al-Ansāb* and lists him as one of his 1,446 teachers in *Montakāb men mo'jam al-šoyuk*. Aḥmad's father Maṣṣūr (426-89/1035-96) was a prominent Hanafi jurist in Marv. During a stay in Mecca he became a Shafi'i; when this became known upon his return to Marv in 1075, he was exiled from the city but was welcomed by [Nezām-al-Molk](#) (q.v.; d. 485/1092) in Nishapur, where he continued to teach until his return to Marv in 1086. He shared several students with [Abu Hāmed Ġazālī](#) (q.v.; d. 505/1111). Three of his ten books that are mentioned by 'Abd-al-Karim have been published: a commentary on the Qur'an and two works on jurisprudence (*feqh*, q.v.). His first son, Moḥammad (466-510/1074-1116), 'Abd-al-Karim's father, was a prominent teacher of jurisprudence but died before completing books in progress. His second son, Ḥasan (468-531/1076-1137), was a scholar who avoided public life. His third son, Aḥmad, was born nineteen years after Ḥasan and only two years before his father's death, at which point he was adopted by his brother Moḥammad. 'Abd-al-Karim was born when Aḥmad was nineteen, four years before the death of his father Moḥammad. Aḥmad, whom he usually calls "my uncle, the imam" (*'ammi al-emām*), became his teacher in jurisprudence; for a time 'Abd-al-Karim acted as his teaching assistant in the Nezāmiya madrasa in Marv. At 'Abd-al-Karim's request, Aḥmad took him to Nishapur in the year 529/1135, to study with prominent Hadith transmitters. After some months, Aḥmad returned to Marv, but 'Abd-al-Karim continued his travels and did not return before his uncle's death (Sam'āni, *Repose*, pp. xiii-xxviii).

The only other contemporary mentions of Aḥmad seem to be by Ebn 'Asāker, who writes in about fifteen instances in *Tāriḳ madinat Demashq* that he received a Hadith from Aḥmad Sam'āni in Marv. Ebn 'Asāker also mentions him as one of his 1,621 shaikhs in *Mo'jam al-šoyuk*, giving him the title *faqih* and citing, as is his custom for all of his shaikhs, one Hadith that he had heard from him, in this case a Hadith about love (I, p. 128). Mentions of Aḥmad in later literature are rare and add nothing to the information provided by 'Abd-al-Karim. Ḥājji Kalifa is one of the few authors to mention him by name—under *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ*.

It should not be surprising that 'Abd-al-Karim does not mention his uncle's book, given that he had no interest in Persian books or in any fields of learning other than Hadith and jurisprudence. He typically used the generic word *'elm* to mean knowledge of Hadith. He certainly considered his uncle an *'ālem*, but even if *Rawḥ-al-arwāḥ* had been written in Arabic, he probably would have ignored it, since it pays no attention to the concerns of the Hadith-transmitters and jurists. Rather, it is a comprehensive presentation of Sufi teachings, thoroughly integrated with the Qur'an, the Hadith, Ash'arite theology (*kalām*), and mainstream Sunni scholarship. Despite the book's title and the stated purpose of explaining the divine names—a

topic of many earlier Arabic books by lexicographers and theologians—*Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* is far closer in content, style, and approach to Rumi’s *Maṭnawī* than to any previous book on Islamic learning in Arabic.

Sam‘āni makes no claim to be espousing the Sufi perspective. Rather, he takes it for granted that the Qur’an and the Hadith exist in order to offer people the means to transform their souls and gain nearness to God and that teachers often labeled “Sufis” were the ones who paid closest attention to this goal. He mentions the words Sufi or Sufism (*taṣawwuf*) in only eleven instances, nine of which are quotations. Frequently, however, he stresses the importance of supplementing the *ṣari‘at* (the revealed law codified by the jurists) with the *ṭariqat* (the path of inner struggle and discipline) and the *ḥaqīqat* (the life-giving reality behind the outward forms)—a triad that had already been discussed by Sufi teachers like ‘Abd-Allāh Anṣārī (q.v.; d. 481/1089).

Both Heravi and Moḥammad-Taḳī Danešpažuh say that in manuscripts of *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ* the name of the author is usually garbled or not mentioned. One of the few books in which both the text and its author are named is *Ṭawāle‘ al-šomus*, an unpublished, three-volume Persian commentary on the divine names by the Češti and Sohravardi shaikh Qāzi Ḥamid-al-Din Nāgowri (d. 643 or 644/1246 or 1247). Nāgowri sometimes quotes short passages from the commentaries on the divine names by both Ġazālī (*al-Maqṣad al-asnā*) and Abu’l-Qāsem Qoṣayri (d. 465/1072; *Šarḥ asmā‘ Allāh al-ḥosnā*), but more often, in at least thirty instances, he quotes short Arabic passages from *Rawḥ al-arwāḥ*—even though not more than ten percent of *Rawḥ*’s text is in Arabic. *Rawḥ* was also well-known to Sam‘āni’s contemporary Rašid-al-Din Meybodi (q.v.), who borrowed from it extensively without acknowledgement in the second half of his ten-volume Qur’an commentary, *Kašf al-asrār*, a book begun in 520/1126 (Meybodi, pp. xiv-xv).

In the one-sentence introduction to his book, Sam‘āni says that he wrote it “in Persian for the benefit of the Muslims.” The style often suggests that the text was meant to be delivered orally, but the frequent passages in Arabic, not only Qur’an verses and Hadith but also lines from at least 75 different poets, mean that it must have been addressed to well-educated readers, probably students in a madrasa. The Persian often verges on the ornate and employs many uncommon words; Meybodi frequently abridged and simplified the text when borrowing from it. Sam‘āni comments on 102 divine names, sometimes on two or more in a single section, for a total of seventy-four sections. With minor changes, the names follow a standard list of ninety-nine going back to Abu Horayra (a Companion of the Prophet; d. ca. 58/678), the same list used in the commentaries of Ġazālī and Qoṣayri. The text deals briefly with the first seven names, then doubles the length of explanation from the eighth to the twenty-first, then triples the length in the next ten sections (fifteen names). At the beginning of the thirty-seventh name, Sam‘āni apologizes for his long-windedness and makes the remaining sections relatively brief. In contrast to the typical Arabic commentaries, his discussions of the linguistic and theological meanings of the names are concise. Typically, he quickly says that anyone who understands the meaning of this name will modify his thought and behavior accordingly. In the rest of the section, he explains the practical implications of the name for living in the presence of God, with frequent anecdotes about the Prophet, his family and companions, and various saints, as well as citations of Sufi sayings and appropriate poetry. Much of the poetry would not be considered Sufi outside the context in which Sam‘āni quotes it. The direct relevance of the name in question to the main body of the discussion is not always obvious, but the text flows smoothly from topic to topic. A good deal of it comments on Qur’anic verses; Aḥmad is one of only ten of his 1,446 shaikhs

whom ‘Abd-al-Karim calls a *mofasser*, a Qur’an-commentator, and his skill and originality in interpreting the Qur’an appear in many passages.

In general, Sam‘āni wants to show that each divine name designates a specific application of the formula of *tawḥid*—“no god but God”—to the human self, sometimes in terms of the utter difference between God and creation and sometimes in terms of the manner in which human beings embody, or should embody, the divine attributes. Like Rumi and many others, he frequently discusses the names in terms of the complementary categories of gentleness (*loṭf*) and severity (*qahr*), or beauty (*jamāl*) and majesty (*jalāl*). He achieves a remarkably subtle theological balance, prefiguring in many ways the fine-tuning that is evident in the works of Ebn ‘Arabi.

Among the important theological themes that Sam‘āni addresses with unusual clarity is the distinction between the two sorts of divine command, commonly called the creative (*kalqī*) and religious (*dīnī*) commands, or the engendering (*takwīnī*) and prescriptive (*taklīfī*) commands. He refers to them as the decree (*qazā*) and the command (*amr*) and discusses them in a variety of contexts. More clearly than most authors he explains that the decree follows upon the absolute reality asserted by the formula of *tawḥid*, while the command appears in the prophetic messages. The diverging implications of the two standpoints appears in the contrast between the “compulsionists” (*jabriān*), who place too much stress on the decree, and the “free-willers” (*qadariān*), who give too much credit to the command. “Our position,” he says, “is neither compulsion nor free will. The free-willers want to take away ‘No god but God.’ The compulsionists want to quarrel with ‘Moḥammad is God’s Messenger’” (Sam‘āni, *Rawḥ*, p. 71; idem, *Repose*, p. 52).

Unlike authors on *kalām* or philosophy, Sam‘āni wrote in an accessible manner. He drew from the scholarly tradition and from the imagery of both poetry and everyday experience, constantly interweaving the divine reality with both cosmic existence and the human self. In the words of Dānešpažuh, his book “is fluent, eloquent, heart-pleasing, and ancient, so much so that you never become tired of reading it and you want to keep on reading to the end” (Dānešpažuh, p. 303).

One of the more original of Sam‘āni’s contributions to the literature comes in his interpretations of the Qur’ānic stories of the prophets, especially Adam, the archetypal human being, whose love affair with God is a prominent theme of the book. He describes each of the major prophets as a model lover of God, even Moses, who is typically represented as a stern lawgiver (Chittick, 2018). Always keeping in mind the precedence of God’s mercy over his wrath, Sam‘āni explains with entrancing imagery how God’s love for human beings demanded that Adam fall from the Garden. Only in separation from his origin could Adam learn the path of love, which is utterly distinct from the path of obedience typified by the angels (and codified by the jurists). Separation from God allows the Adamites to understand that pain and suffering are necessary concomitants of love. Only the intense pain of love’s fire can deliver lovers from illusory love and take them back to their true beloved. What Aḥmad Ġazālī explains briefly and allusively in *Sawāneḥ*, Sam‘āni explains in copious detail and in a language that is often as beautiful, making *Rawḥ* a treasure trove of teachings that appear afterwards in the poetry of ‘Aṭṭār and Rumi; one scholar has even shown that many verses of [Hafez](#) (q.v.) are prefigured almost verbatim in Sam‘āni’s prose (Faryāmaneš).

Sam‘āni often integrates passages from earlier works into his text without mentioning the source; he sometimes quotes Arabic passages verbatim, sometimes translates them, and in a few instances does both. His most important inspiration seems to be the works of Qoṣayri, especially

his Qur'ān commentary, *Laṭā'ef al-ešārāt* and occasionally his commentary on the divine names. Many of the Sufi sayings he quotes are also found in Qošayri's *Resāla*. He borrows two short paragraphs from Ġazālī's *Ehyā' 'olum al-din* and bases part of a discussion of the relationship between the macrocosm and the microcosm on Ġazālī's *Kimiā-ye sa'adat*. Two long passages that deal with the same topic are translated from various treatises of the [Ekwān al-Safā'](#) (q.v.). His most often used Persian source is the poetry of [Sanā'i](#) (q.v.; d. ca. 1087/1130)—105 verses from the *Divān*, scattered throughout the text, and nine verses from *Sayr al-'ebād*. He also borrows and abridges about ten pages from Esmā'il Mostamli's (d. 434/1043) *Šarḥ al-ta'arof*. In one instance he ascribes a *ḡazal* (q.v.) to himself; judging from its style, he is probably the author of another dozen poems in the text. On the whole, the sources from which he draws make up a small percentage of the text and in no way detract from the overall sense of seamless integration by a powerful voice.

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Cite this page

Chittick, William C., "SAM'ĀNI, AḤMAD", in: Encyclopaedia Iranica Online, © Trustees of Columbia University in the City of New York. Consulted online on 03 February 2022 <http://dx.doi.org/10.1163/2330-4804_EIRO_COM_363915>
First published online: 2022