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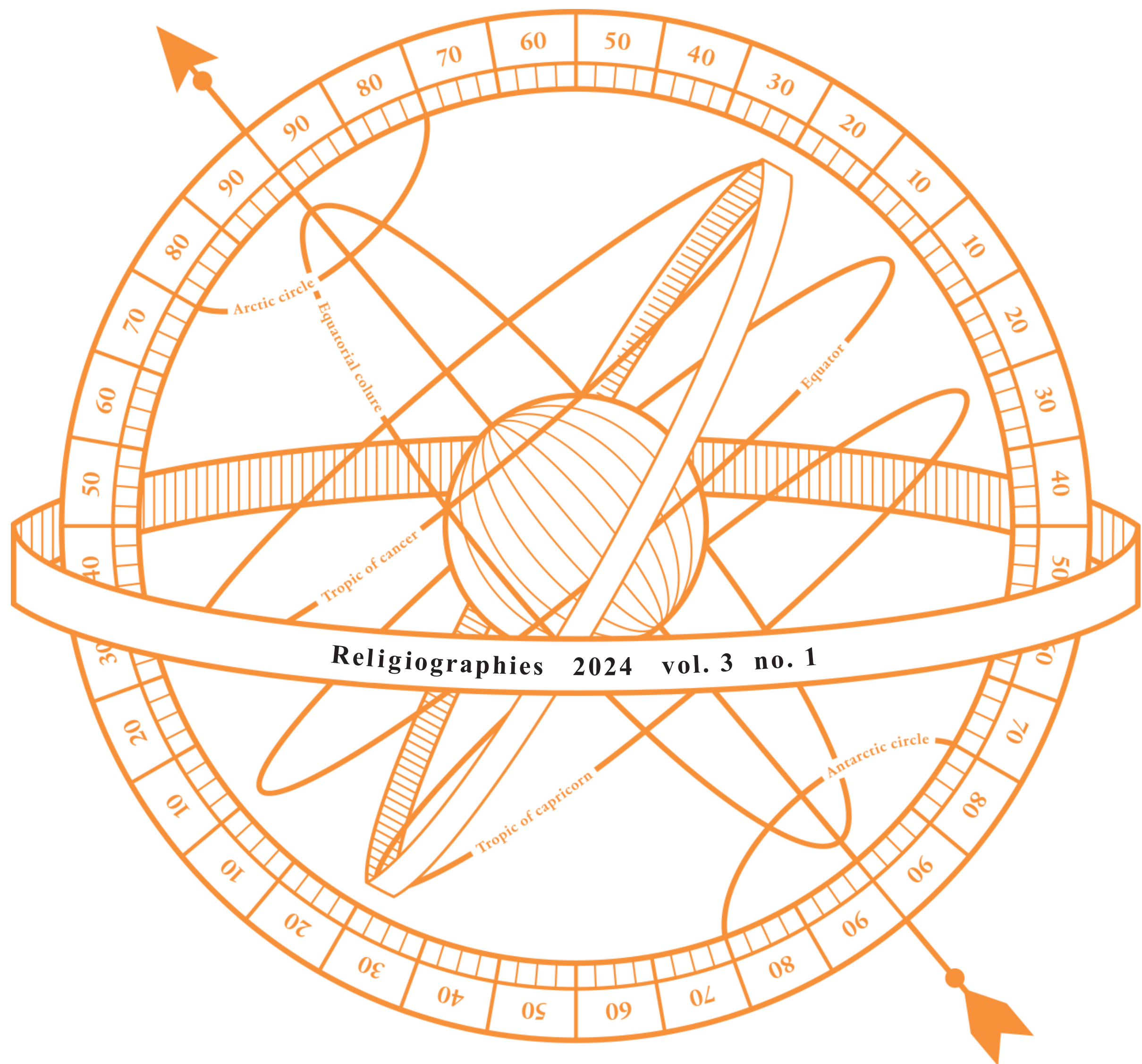

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Book review

Farzaneh Goshtasb

Āzar Kayvān: Zendegī Nāme, Āthār va ʻAqā`ed

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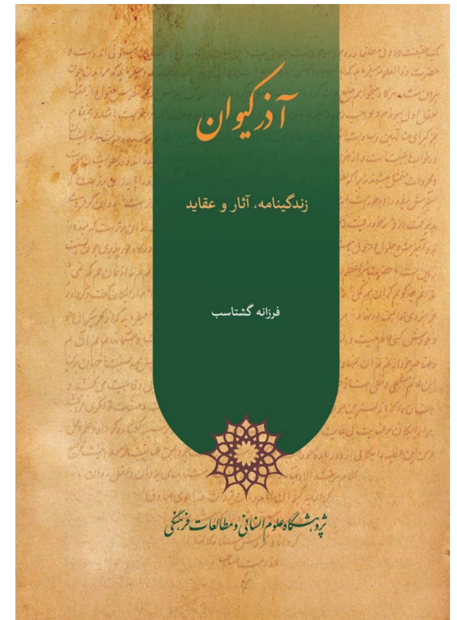
In her book, *Āzar Kayvān: Zendegī Nāme, Āthār va ʻAqā`ed* (Āzar Kayvān: biography, accomplishments, and ideologies), Farzane Goshtasb provides a detailed analysis of the life and achievements of Āzar Kayvān (1533–1618) the founder of the "Āzar Kayvān school," who lived in Safavid Iran and Mughal India during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The book is divided into four chapters, followed by an appendix that includes six additional sections (pp. 257–99). The introduction (pp. 11–20) provides an overview of the previous studies on Āzar Kayvān from the eighteenth century to the present. The second chapter is a comprehensive examination of the life of Āzar Kayvān, his disciples, and their writings (pp. 21–98). In chapter three, the interactions between followers of the Āzar Kayvān's school and various rulers, religious groups, and philosophers within the context of India's pluralistic religious society are examined (pp. 99–156). The final chapter of the book presents the belief system of the Āzar Kayvān school, including their views on the creation of the world and on the afterlife (pp. 157–255).



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The initial chapter provides a concise overview of Āzar Kayvān and his followers, as presented in the works *Dabestān-e Mazāheb* (hereinafter *Dabestān*) and *Sharestān-e Chahar Chaman* (hereinafter *Sharestān*), which constitute the primary sources that the author uses to reconstruct the history of the Āzar Kayvān school. The author then proceeds to illustrate the prevailing scholarly position on Āzar Kayvān and his school, which can be broadly classified into two categories. The majority of scholars regarded Āzar Kayvān as a Zoroastrian or even a high Zoroastrian priest of Fars and considered the books produced by his disciples to be a valid source for reconstructing aspects of Persian history or for examining them to understand modern Zoroastrianism (pp. 12–14). The author finds these studies unconvincing, as there is a paucity of compelling evidence in the writings of the followers of Āzar Kayvān that would support the claims made in these studies (p. 10). Another frequent topic of discussion regarding the Āzar Kayvān school pertains to its relationship with Eshraqi philosophy (p. 19). This chapter concludes with a synopsis of the most recent research conducted by Takeshi Aoki and Daniel Sheffield (p. 20). The author frequently cites and challenges Aoki's research, which proposes the Zoroastrian background of Āzar Kayvān while simultaneously justifying the dearth of references from Zoroastrian sources in the surviving manuscripts of Āzar Kayvān's followers. The work of Daniel Sheffield examines the influence of religious movements in the Safavid era on the Āzar Kayvān school. His second area of interest concerns the influence of Āzar Kayvān's concept of Universal Religion on Akbar Shah. While Sheffield's research could provide a valuable source for the author's arguments, there is a lack of direct references to his work.

The second chapter is divided into five sections, the last three of which comprise lists of names. The first section provides a list of the names and biographies of Āzar Kayvān followers (pp. 33–49), while the subsequent section offers a comprehensive account of the manuscript information for eight books of the Āzar Kayvān school (pp. 49–82). This chapter finishes with an additional list of manuscripts, which includes the names of lost books that are referenced or quoted in part by other available manuscripts (pp. 82–98).

In the initial two sections of the second chapter, Goshtasb presents a biography of Āzar Kayvān and his followers, drawing upon *Dabestān* and *Sharestān*. According to these books, Āzar Kayvān was originally from the province of Fars and spent the majority of his life in Shiraz, where he had numerous disciples and convened meetings for discussions. Goshtasb challenges the genealogical attribution of Āzar Kayvān. While *Sharestān*, written by Āzar Kayvān's disciple Bahram Farhad (d. 1624), locates the city of Estakhr as Āzar Kayvān's original residence before Shiraz, Goshtasb posits that this attribution is symbolic. She argues that this city, the former capital of the Ancient Persian Empires, was entirely destroyed by the time of Āzar Kayvān (p. 22). Similarly, she postulates that the genealogy of Āzar Kayvān as presented in *Dabestān*, which links him to the early mythical Persian kings, is fictitious (p. 24). The followers of Āzar Kayvān (*Āzarian* and *Ābadian)*, who designated themselves as Parsi (plural: Parsians), distinguished themselves from other Iranians and Zoroastrians of Iran and India (pp. 29–31). The Indian Zoroastrians were regarded as inauthentic Parsis, as they were perceived to feign adherence to Zoroaster's teachings while neglecting the traditions of the ancient Persian kings. The true Parsis, on the other hand, were those who interpreted (*Ta'wil*) the teachings of the Zoroaster and compared them to *Dasātīr*, the heavenly book that was sent to Mah Abad (p. 32).

The third chapter of the book concerns the interactions between Āzar Kayvān and other religions, thinkers, or philosophers, as well as rulers. A significant number of extant manuscripts belonging to the Āzar Kayvān school include a comparative analysis of other religious groups. As these descriptions are not polemical in nature, Goshtab postulates that their objective was to elucidate the shared tenets of these religions with that of Āzar Kayvān's followers (p. 100). In both *Dabestān* and *Sharestān*, the authors devoted a portion of their work to the sayings of philosophers and thinkers. This, according to Goshtab, demonstrates their depth of knowledge and their interest in this subject matter. Furthermore, these books include the Indian and Iranian thinkers and philosophers who were contemporaries of Āzar Kayvān and his followers, with whom they engaged in dialogue and from whom they acquired knowledge (pp. 112–13). Among these philosophers, Surawardi occupies a significant position (pp. 104–07).

Two of Goshtasb's principal arguments are discussed in this chapter. First, she posits that although the majority of scholars who have written about Āzar Kayvān have considered him to be a Zoroastrian or even a Zoroastrian priest, her analysis of all *Āzarian* sources does not corroborate this argument. This is because none of the sources refer to Āzar Kayvān as being a Zoroastrian, nor do they include any Avestan or Middle Persian sentences or any Zoroastrian texts. The author states that the adherents of Āzar Kayvān acknowledged Zoroaster as a prophet, yet did not regard themselves as the followers of his teachings (pp. 118–23). Second, the author emphasizes the relationship between Āzar Kayvān and Akbar Shah (1556–1605), during whose rule Āzar Kayvān migrated to India. This is discussed in the context of the universal religion *dīn-e elāhī* (p. 126). Goshtasb asserts that the accounts of meetings between Āzar Kayvān and Akbar Shah in *Sharestān*, as well as the suggestion that Akbar Shah adopted ideas from

Āzar Kayvān as proposed by some scholars, lack substantiation due to the absence of corroborating evidence in the historical sources from Akbar Shah's era.

The final chapter focuses on the beliefs and practices of the Āzar Kayvān school. It addresses a number of topics, including the creation of the world, reincarnation, abstinence, and the possibility of a universal religion. Goshtab identifies numerous parallels between the teachings and beliefs of the Āzar Kayvān school and those of earlier historians and philosophers. One illustrative example is the principle of reincarnation, which is a central tenet of Āzar Kayvān and his followers (p. 165). The author cites a passage from *Sharestān* on reincarnation and posits that the text represents a concise summary of Suhrawardi's commentary on the subject (p. 167). Furthermore, the author suggests that these ideas were additionally shaped by the influence of other Muslim thinkers (pp. 168–75). Another significant aspect of their belief system is the reliance on the *Dasātīr*, the heavenly book of Āzar Kayvān's followers written in an invented language known as *Āsmānī* (pp. 161–89). Goshtab highlights the emphasis of *Dabestān* on the teachings of Zoroaster, which are conveyed in a mysterious language (Avesta and *Zand*) that people can read but cannot fully comprehend. However, she fails to acknowledge the argument put forth by Sheffield[1] prior to her book, which posits that the writings of Āzar Kayvān followers' exhibit a structural resemblance to Zoroastrian sacred books.

Goshtasb's study offers a comprehensive account of Āzar Kayvān's biography and his contribution to medieval Iran and India. Although the introduction is clear, the overall conclusion is lacking. It is evident that the author's objective in writing this book is to argue that there is no evidence to substantiate the claim that Āzar Kayvān was a Zoroastrian. This argument is repeatedly emphasized throughout the book. Furthermore, she underscores the impact of the Mughal Indian milieu and the pivotal role of Persian nationalism in the ideologies of Āzar Kayvān and his followers. To reinforce this argument, the author could have referred to the previously mentioned study of Sheffield on the influence of the *Hurufi* and *Nuqutawi* schools in Safavid Iran on the genesis of the Āzar Kayvān school.[2]

Although Goshtab's book is well researched, it regrettably lacks a comprehensive structure and a clearly delineated methodology for assessing the credibility of its sources. For instance, none of the chapters in this book includes a conclusion or a clearly articulated argument to guide the reader through the book. Moreover, Chapter Two contains a lengthy list, including the names of Āzar Kayvān's followers and their writings. Goshtasb does not include the majority of the cited literature in this chapter in her subsequent analysis. This is because the writings lack clear dates, rendering them unreliable as historical documents. The allocation of so many pages to this list is, therefore, arguably unnecessary, particularly when one considers the potential benefits of including it in a table format. Nonetheless, this book offers an extensive and detailed examination of Āzar Kayvān and his school, a field that has received scant attention from Iranian scholars.

1 Daniel J. Sheffield, "The Language of Heaven in Safavid Iran: Speech and Cosmology in the Thought of Āẕar Kaivān and His Followers," in *No Tapping Around Philology: A Festschrift in Honor of Wheeler McIntosh Thackston Jr.'s 70th Birthday*, ed. Alireza Korangy and Daniel J. Sheffield (Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz Verlag, 2014), 161–83.

2 Sheffield, "Language of Heaven," 161–83.