

Chess and the Divine Decree

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TRANSLATED BY HAMZA YUSUF

IT WOULD BE HONOR ENOUGH for the people of India had they bequeathed us nothing but chess, a game that, like the sun itself, has traversed the entire globe. Indeed, people everywhere hold high in esteem and deem intelligent anyone who masters it or even plays it well. Such being the case, in how much greater esteem should we hold the brilliance of its ingenious inventor?

His name was Sissah b. Dahir, and he invented chess for Shah Rām around 500 CE, the king of India, after the Persian Ardashir b. Babak (d. 393 BH/241 CE) invented checkers for the first of the latter kings of Persia. The Persians and their king took great pride in checkers, which soon became their national pastime. However, when Sissah b. Dahir, the Indian philosopher, introduced the game of chess to the world, all the sages of his time immediately recognized its superiority over checkers.

After demonstrating the game to Shah Rām, Sissah completely beguiled the king and overjoyed him with its ingenious qualities. Shah Rām informed Sissah that he could “ask whatever reward desired, and it shall be granted.” Sissah replied, “I ask only that you take one grain of wheat and place it upon the first square of my board and then continue to double it with each additional square until the last square is reached, and bestow upon me all the grain that has accumulated.”

The bemused king could only laugh at such a paltry request and informed Sissah that he could not comply with such an insignificant request for such a momentous invention; moreover, the king had already resolved to grant him a much greater prize. Sissah informed him that his original request was all he wanted.

They continued to debate the point until the king realized how resolute Sissah was in his desire. Finally, the king commanded his factor to fulfill the inventor’s request, but when the ministers began to calculate just how much wheat would be needed, they realized the impossibility of the request. They explained that they did not have enough wheat in the royal storehouses to fulfill the request. The king scoffed and demanded an explanation. The ministers sat down with the king and illustrated their calculations, and he soon comprehended the reality of their conclusion. The king then turned to Sissah and said, “In your request, you have revealed to us something even more wondrous than your invention!”

Whoever ponders the game of chess, and reflects deeply upon the nature of its pieces and the fixity of its patterns will realize that a profound secret concerning the nature of destiny has been disclosed to him by the simplest of methods. This could only result from its originator being a realized sage who revealed his profound wisdom in the arrangement

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and organization of his game.

In fact, God, the Exalted, revealed to the formulator of chess what God Himself has pre-eternally performed, what is pre-existent in His knowledge, and what occurred in His first determination of the cosmos. For this reason, no other person, save the game's originator, shared with him its creation. Moreover, this reveals why all those who play chess are constrained by the predetermined limits decreed by the game's inventor. And, although the player of chess is in complete subordination to the originator's decreed limitations, the player's own merit and effort or neglect and lassitude will determine whether he wins or loses the game of chess.

Indeed, both players, despite being entirely free to choose their actions, to deliberate their possibilities, to utilize their strategies, and to exert all of their personal efforts in their moves are nonetheless entirely circumscribed in their possibilities, due to the very limitations predetermined by the inventor himself. They cannot break the laws set, nor exempt themselves from the limited possibilities given. In this way, they are fated yet appear free and, equally, they are free yet appear fated!

The inventor caught a glimpse of a sacred secret among the paradoxes of providence and realized that all human beings are freely accruing their actions and either gaining the rewards of their right moves or suffering the consequences of their wrong ones. Furthermore, he realized that God, the Exalted, does not oppress His servants, but that they themselves are the oppressors. Human beings are fulfilling their destiny without being forced against their will in the paths they pursue. Indeed, God left the creation free to err or act appropriately. Analogously, the inventor of chess has decreed certain things for those who play his game, and while they are held to those limitations, they are nonetheless free to choose their moves while not being stripped entirely of their own volition.

Hence, if one plays his game well, it is to his advantage, and if poorly, it is to his detriment. Neither of the two players can escape the limits of the squares, the pieces, their numbers, and their prescribed movements. Had its inventor allowed other possibilities, the players would have been constrained by them as well.

Ponder this well, for chess is an edifying metaphor and a sagely invention. It develops the rational component; increases intelligence; diverts the mind from distressing matters; reveals hidden character traits in its players, as games are wont to do; and imitates very realistically military situations that result in the sweetness of victory over one's opposition or the bitterness of defeat at his hands.

ʿAbd al-Qādir b. Muḥyī al-Dīn b. Muṣṭafā al-Ḥasanī al-Jazāʾirī, *Dhikrā al-ʿāqil wa tanbīh al-ghāfil*. (Dār al-Yaqazah al-ʿArabiyyah), 146 – 7