

ABŪ YA'QŪB SEJESTĀNĪ

ABŪ YA'QŪB SEJESTĀNĪ (or SEJZĪ), ESHĀQ B. AḤMAD, one of the most important of the early Isma'ili *dā'īs*. He achieved during his lifetime (fl. second-third quarters of the 4th/10th century) a special renown as a teacher and leader among the Isma'ilis and gained even more recognition during subsequent generations for the influence of his doctrinal writings, which have been preserved and studied by members of the sect until modern times. His written works, only recently uncovered and publicized by non-Isma'ili researchers, reveal that his contribution to the development of the sect's doctrinal position was seminal. They show that he was strongly influenced by the Neoplatonic tendencies current in the philosophical thinking of his time and that he played a major role in the development of ideas and dogmas which combined this Neoplatonism with a previously existing Isma'ilism. These works make Sejestānī an eminent figure in both the development of Isma'ili theology and the history of Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy.

Sejestānī remains a shadowy figure historically—the subject of vague and elusive references in several heresiographies and histories of the Isma'ili sect. Unfortunately, Isma'ili sources themselves are mostly silent on the details of his life, his position in the *dawā*, and the place of his activities. Sejestānī lived in a period of crucial importance for the elaboration of formal Isma'ilism. He held a high position, perhaps several positions, in the *dawā*(s) of the Iranian provinces. His fame also extended outside the inner circle of the Isma'ili mission. Several non-Isma'ili contemporary and near contemporary writers mention him and his curious nickname of “Cottonseed,” which appears, for example, in the text of 'Abd-al-Qāher Baġdādī as *banba-dāna* (= *panba-dāna*) and in other sources (Abu'l-Qāsem Bostī, Kāšānī, Rašīd-al-dīn) as *kayšafūj*. (Both words have the same meaning; see S. M. Stern, “Arabico-Persica,” *W. B. Henning Memorial Volume*, ed. M. Boyce and I. Gershevitch, London, 1970, pp. 415-16.)

There is an uncertain reference by Neẓām-al-molk (*Sīāsāt-nāma*, ed. J. Še'ār, Tehran, 1348/1969, p. 329) to an Eshāq who became head of the *dawā* in Ray about 322/934-35 upon the death of the *dā'ī* Abū Ḥātem Rāzī. Another, apparently unconnected report comes from Ebn al-Nadīm (*Fehrest*, pp. 189-90) concerning an Abū Ya'qūb who was “the lieutenant of the Imam” residing at Ray in the period 320 to 330/932-42. These seem to indicate that Sejestānī first came to prominence in that city. If so, he had assumed overall control of the regional *dawā* there, as well as in several other areas such as northern Mesopotamia and Baghdad itself, before the end of the third decade of the 4th century. He mentions in his *Eftekār* that he was in Iraq in 322/934. It appears that he, like the *dawā* of Ray in general, did not support the Fatimid claim to the imamate at this time and was won over to the Fatimid cause at a later date.

Other sources, like Nāṣer-e Ẓosrow, indicate more definitely that he was later chief of the *dawā* in Khorasan following Moḥammad Nasafī; still others (Esfarā'enī, Rašīd-al-dīn) place

him in Sistān either during the lifetime of Nasafī or after, or both. Yet another piece of evidence contained in his *Eftekār* implies that this work was composed shortly after the year 361/971. Finally it is noted by Rašīd-al-dīn, among others, that he died at the hand of ʔalaf b. Ahmad, Saffarid ruler of Khorasan between 353/964 and 393/1002. That he was still writing during the caliphate of the Fatimid Ḥākem (386-411/996-1021), as may be deduced from the mention of the latter's name in the introduction of two of his works, seems difficult to accept. These references are perhaps later additions.

The extant works of Sejestānī cover a range of subjects on religious observance, on political and historical theories of prophecy, and on various theological doctrines of mainly cosmological significance. As they exist now, it is in some cases difficult to determine the original form of the texts. Several, such as his *Kašf al-maḥjūb* (available only in Persian) and *Toḥfat al-mostaḥibīn*, appear to be paraphrases or summaries only (concerning the former, see S. M. Stern, "Al-Bustī and his refutation of Ismā'īlism," *JRAS* 1961, p. 22); others, such as the *Eṭbāt al-nobūwāt*, show signs of later editing. Those which are mentioned by Sejestānī himself include *Eṭbāt al-nobūwāt* ("Proofs of prophecy"), *Yanābī* ("The sources"), and *Bešāra* ("Glad tidings"), all cited in his *Maqālīd* ("The keys"). After these he wrote *Eftekār* ("The boast") and *Sollam al-najāt* ("Ladder of salvation") and probably several others. To these should be added his *Noṣra* ("The Defense"), an important work, no longer extant except in quotations. In it he defended many of the views expressed by Nasafī in his *Maḥṣūl* which had been rejected by [Abū Ḥātem Rāzī](#). Of his major works only *Eṭbāt al-nobūwāt*, *Yanābī*, and *Kašf al-maḥjūb* have been published. The last of these presents an unusual and extremely interesting early attempt to express in Persian translation some of the subtlest concepts in Sejestānī's philosophy. Of the two remaining works of greatest importance, *Eftekār* is about to be published. Still lacking is an edition of *Maqālīd*, without which it is difficult or impossible to gain a proper appreciation of the range and scope of Sejestānī's thought. (See I. K. Poonawala, "Al-Sijistānī and his Kitāb al-Maqālīd," in *Essays on Islamic Civilization Presented to Niyāzi Berkes*, ed. D. P. Little, Leiden, 1976, pp. 274-83.)

A major problem in analyzing Sejestānī's theological contributions is posed by the role of his predecessor Nasafī, whose major work *Maḥṣūl* is no longer extant except in isolated quotations found in later books. It would appear that Nasafī began the philosophical trend which Sejestānī continued. Together they developed a highly complex theological system which revolutionized Ismā'īlism and made of it a sophisticated, rationally argued and intellectually defensible alternative both to Sunni orthodoxy and to other forms of Shi'ism. In general, the views they expressed eventually found favor in the central *da'wa* under the Fatimids and continued to occupy this preeminent place until the end of the dynasty, even though Ḥamīd-al-dīn Kermānī, an outstanding *dā'ī* and theologian, proposed major modifications and revisions to the doctrines of his predecessors at the outset of the 5th/11th century.

The major theological contributions of Sejestānī are reasonably intelligible from surviving texts and may be summarized as follows:

God is completely unknowable, ineffable, and absolute in His uniqueness. Consequently, proper worship is achieved only by a rigorous denial of both *tašbīh* (the use of analogies for understanding) and *ta'īl* (the denying of all substance to God). This must be done by the use of a twofold negation: that God is, for example, not a thing, not limited, not describable, not in a place, not a time, not a being, and equally not not a thing, not not limited, not not describable, and so forth.

There are three distinct levels of the creation process, each of which corresponds to the kind of reality being created. The first is pure innovation (*ebdā*), the second is procession (*enbe'āt*), and the third is coming-to-be (*takwīn*). The first is completely non-temporal and therefore eternal. The second is outside of time but results in the creation of Soul (*al-nafs*), which contains time. The third takes place in time and brings about the physical universe.

Intelligible reality is arranged in two major hierarchies. One, derived from Neoplatonism, includes God, intellect, soul, nature and the lower orders. Intertwined in this is a second order called the normative or moral hierarchy which is of specifically Isma'ili provenance. It includes the two roots (*ašlān*), *ḡadd*, *fath*, *ḡayāl*, and the terrestrial, ecclesiastical body of legislative prophets and imams. The salvation of mankind is a historical process. Man is saved because of the truth which he receives from the prophets. Because true knowledge is eternal, that part of man which possesses this knowledge also becomes eternal.

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On Sejestānī’s thought and doctrines: W. Ivanow, “An Early Controversy in Ismailism,” in *Early Persian Ismailism*, 2nd ed., Bombay, 1955, pp. 87-122. W. Madelung, “Das Imamāt in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre,” *Der Islam* 37, 1961, pp. 101-14. The following articles by P. Walker concentrate mainly on the work of Sejestānī himself: “An Ismā‘īlī Answer to the Problem of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God,” *American Journal of Arabic Studies* 2, 1972, pp. 7-21; “The Ismaili Vocabulary of Creation,” *Stud. Isl.* 40, 1974, pp. 75-85; “Cosmic Hierarchies in Early Ismā‘īlī Thought: The View of . . . Al-Sijistānī,” *Muslim World* 66, 1976, pp. 14-28; “Eternal Cosmos and the Womb of History,” *IJMES* 9, 1978, pp. 355-66.

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