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Book Review

## Early Philosophical Shi'ism: The Isma'ili Neoplatonism of Abu Yaqub al-Sijistani

By Paul E. Walker. Cambridge, UK and New York:  
Cambridge University Press, 1995, 203 pp.

*Early Philosophical Shi'ism* is a comprehensive study of the Ismā'īlī thinker and neoplatonist, Abū Ya'qūb al Sijistānī. Chapter one, which follows a brief preface that presents some general remarks about al Sijistānī and the book's structure, discusses "The Ismā'īlī Message and Its Philosophers." He first explains the origin of the Ismā'īlīs and their doctrine of authority and then alludes to the concept of *imāmah* and its relationship to occultation (*ghaybah*). After this, Walker deals with the concept of *da'wah* from its origin to its subsequent historical development. Several Ismā'īlī *dā'īs*, among them al Rāzī, al Kirmānī, Nāṣir-i Khusraw, and al Shirāzī, are discussed briefly, as are the role of early *dā'īs* and the concept of hermeneutics (*ta'wīl*). Walker begins with Iran in order to provide a background to *da'wah* in that land and also analyzes the massacre of al Naṣafī and his followers. The author, having offered an account of Sijistānī's biography and the evolution of some of his thoughts, brings the chapter to an end by introducing his works and placing particular emphasis on *al Yanābi'*, *al Maqālid*, *al Iftikhār*, and *Sullam al Najāt*.

The second chapter, entitled "Religious and Philosophical Resources," traces the figures and texts that may have influenced al Sijistānī. Walker argues that al Sijistānī was influenced by Shi'ism, philosophy, and theology (*kalām*), deals with specific Shi'ite themes ranging from the exoteric and esoteric dimensions of the Qur'an and 'Alī ibn Abū Ṭālib as the *waṣīyah* (the chosen) of God to various esoteric connotations of the concept of prophecy and a theory of angelology within that concept.

Walker then examines al Sijistānī as a philosopher and the extent to which he was influenced by Greek philosophers. It is not entirely clear to me why this section is presented, since al Sijistānī's philosophical thought is not presented and no connection between him and the Greek and Muslim philosophers is established. In fact, the author goes on to say that "al-Sajistani simply did not consider himself a member of the *falsifa*" (p. 32). Al Sijistānī as a neoplatonist is discussed next. In this rather interesting section, several figures, among them the Jewish neoplatonist Isaac Israeli and such texts as his shorter and longer *Theologia* and *Kalām fī Mahd al Khayr* are discussed as likely sources of influence on al Sijistānī.

Finally, the influence of *kalām* on al Sijistānī is considered. Despite the prominence of Mu'tazilites, "al-Sijistānī never admitted to the Mutazilite influence on his thought or gave them credit" (p. 44). Having alluded to some of the Muslim sects mentioned by al Sijistānī, such as al Karrāmīyah, al Murjī'īyah, and al Najjārīyah, Walker concludes that al Sijistānī's intellectual perspectives were somewhat similar to the Ash'arites before they rose to prominence.

In chapter three, Walker discusses those Ismā'īlī thinkers who served as al Sijistānī's intellectual predecessors and to whom he is indebted. The first group consists of those unknown philosophers who compiled the neoplatonic materials, and the second group is made up of al Nasafī, Abū Ḥātim al Rāzī, and al Kirmānī. Having presented the views of such scholars as S. M. Stern and H. Halm, who argue that the Ismā'īlī cosmological doctrine "moves over time from primitive expressions of cosmological doctrines through ever more elaborate stages" (p. 46), Walker introduces the above figures.

Al Rāzī's *A'lām al Nubūwah* and the central themes of his philosophy, in particular such concepts as originating (*al ibdā'*), command (*amr*), and soul (*rūḥ*), are discussed first. The role of Muhammad al Nasafī and his important work *al Maḥsūl* as a likely source of influence on al Sijistānī, mediation between God and creation, how the existence of an immaterial soul could produce the physical world, and degrees of corporeality are discussed next. Walker argues that attempts to replace the traditional neoplatonism with that of al Fārābī and Ibn Sīnā by al Kirmānī in his *Riyāḍ* may have been influential in al Sijistānī's view of the soul.

In chapter four, the author makes some general remarks regarding central intellectual traits of al Sijistānī's thought beginning with his gen-

eral principles of cosmology. With God at the center of the universe, his views on higher and lower schemes of creation are then analyzed. It is not entirely clear to me why these materials are discussed in a short chapter (five pages) and not included in the following chapter. Chapter five analyzes the unknowable God, His creative act, and the types of knowers. Having alluded to the method of "negative theology," Walker then presents al Sijistānī's criticism of it, his view of God as the Absolute Transcendent, and touches on such key concepts in Ismā'īlī thought as revelation (*tanzīl*), *tashbīh*, and hermeneutics (*ta'fīl*).

In chapter six, "Creation as Command," the relationship between the concept of divine command and the created order, intermediaries, and such ideas as gushing (*inbajasa*) and procession (*inba'atha*) are discussed. Al Sijistānī argues that God creates by issuing a command (*amr*) and is therefore the Originator (*mubdi'*). One of the classical objections to God having created the world through a command is that such an assertion introduces motion into the divine essence. It would have been pertinent for the author to present al Sijistānī's response and his understanding of this issue. This short chapter is followed by a discussion of the intellect in chapter seven. The nature of intellect, human and prophetic intellects, and their relationship to revelation in Sijistānī's various works are alluded to, as are such notions as the universals, the seven categories of intellect, and the inability of physical existence to access pure intellect.

Walker then turns to a discussion of the descent and the ascent of the soul and shows how intellect and its mate (soul) "form the two roots (*aṣṣlān*) of the spiritual world" (p. 95). The soul, whose status is below that of intellect and thus ontologically less perfect, is created through a process of procession or emission (*ibbi'āth*). The dual aspects of intellect within a Gnostic context, the soul's epistemic status after it departs the body, and its ascent and descent as a sojourn constitute the content of the eighth chapter.

Arguing that "nature arises within the soul" (p. 103), Walker expounds upon the physical realm and the creation of the physical dimension of humanity in its role as an archetype of humanity. Humanity, being the crown of creation, can deliver itself from the ensuing bondage. Following this, humanity as the microcosm, the structure of physical reality, and the hierarchy of beings from mineral to human are discussed in chapter ten. Of particular significance here is the section concerning prophets and their roles and relationship to the law, a subject treated by the author at some length in chapter eleven. Al Sijistānī attempts to elaborate on prophecy by reconciling revelation and philosophy within a neoplatonic scheme. Such questions as why there is not a single scripture and law, the multiplicity of prophets, their common lineage and unique powers, along with a set of philosophically significant vocabulary, are introduced in this chapter.

In chapter twelve, al Sijistānī's view of *ta'wīl*, *tanzīl*, and the person who carries out the interpretation (imam) are discussed. The role and function of prophecy, as well as those who are qualified to go beyond the exter-

nal appearance (*zāhirī*) and offer the esoteric interpretation (*bāṭinī*), constitute the content of this chapter. Chapter thirteen treats eschatology (*qiyāmah*). Refuting the physical resurrection of the body, al Sijistānī advocates intellectual resurrection. The soul leaves the body and resides in the spiritual realm in a status relative to its acquisition of rational knowledge. Walker also touches upon such issues as the messiah, the *waṣīy*, and faith.

The author concludes his work with an epilogue in which "the use and control of reason" is discussed. Alluding to al Sijistānī's desire to bring about a rapprochement between reason and religion, Walker analyzes the concepts of reason, rationality, authority, and philosophy according to al Sijistānī, whose adoption of neoplatonic philosophy allowed him to defend his theological positions. Referring to al Sijistānī's uneasy relationship with philosophy and his many weaknesses in this regard, Walker concludes that "his philosophical attachment to Neoplatonism is of greater significance for the history of Neoplatonism than for philosophy as a whole" (p. 154).

*Early Philosophical Shi'ism* is a brief but thorough study of al Sijistānī and a particularly important work for historians of intellectual thought. My two minor suggestions are: first, the author could have included a sample translation of al Sijistānī's philosophical writings, perhaps as an appendix. Second, several of the chapters are too brief and could be merged easily with other chapters to make the presentation more coherent. Overall, this work is a valuable contribution to the field of Islamic intellectual thought, in particular that of Ismā'īlī Shi'ism.

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Al-Sijistānī

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