



# COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY VI. IN ISMA'ILISM

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## COSMOGONY AND COSMOLOGY

### vi. In Isma'ilism

Isma'ili cosmology evolved in four major stages.

*Stage 1.* Pre-Fatimid doctrine, dating from the second half of the 9th century, seems to have been propagated mainly orally and is known only summarily, mostly from later texts. It reflects a cosmological myth of gnostic character, set forth most comprehensively in the *Resāla* of Abū 'Īsā al-Moršed (see Stern, pp. 6-29; Halm, pp. 75-80 and passim). God created through an act of his Intention (*erāda*) and Will (*mašī'a*) a light, which He addressed with the creative imperative *kon* (be!). Through duplication of the letters *kāf* and *nūn* the name became *Kūnī* (be!, fem.). *Kūnī* constituted the female, receptive principle in relation to the Creator but the male, active principle toward the creation below it. By order of the Creator, *Kūnī* created from its light Qadar as a vizier and assistant. Through *Kūnī* He produced (*kawwana*) all things, and through Qadar He determined (*qaddara*) them. *Kūnī* and Qadar were thus the first two principles of creation, also called the Antecedent (*sābeq*) and the Follower (*tālī*) and often identified with the koranic *qalam* (pen) and *lawḥ* (tablet). Together their names comprise seven (consonantal) letters, known as the higher letters (*ḥorūf 'olwīya*), which are the archetypes of the seven Speaker



(*nāṭeq*) prophets. Corresponding to them Kūnī next created seven Cherubim (*karūbiya*) with esoteric names, out of the light between it and Qadar. On its command, Qadar created and named twelve Spiritual Beings (*rūḥāniya*) out of its light, which, however, was not diminished by their creation. The Spiritual Beings are the intermediaries between Qadar, in which Kūnī is veiled (*eḥtajaba*) for creation, and the Speaker prophets. The first three of them, Jadd, Faḥ, and Kayāl, often identified with the angels Jibrā'īl, Mikā'īl, and Esrāfīl, take a prime role and are described as forming a pentad together with the Antecedent and the Follower. The material world was produced by Kūnī through the initial creation of air and water, which, in esoteric language, are named the throne (*'ars*) and the footstool (*korsī*) respectively. The seven spheres and seven seas of creation correspond to the seven Cherubim and the twelve signs of the zodiac to the twelve Spiritual Beings. Before the creation of Qadar, Kūnī for a moment did not see any other being beside itself and proudly thought that it was alone. Immediately six spiritual Ranks (*ḥodūd*) emanated from it through God's power, in order to teach it that there was an omnipotent One above it, without Whom it had no power. Three of these Ranks were above Kūnī and three below it. Kūnī then acknowledged its Creator, testifying "There is no god but God." Whereas, in gnostic terms, Kūnī appears as the demiurge, Qadar is expressly identified as the Celestial Adam (*Ādam al-samā'ī*). After the further creation Kūnī ordered the Cherubim, Spiritual Beings, and Ranks to prostrate themselves before Qadar, to which it wanted to turn over command. All obeyed except Eblīs, the first of the lower Ranks, who was therefore expelled from the Ranks and cursed. This event in the higher world was duplicated in the lower world, as Eblīs, according to Qur'an 2:32, refused to prostrate himself before the Adam of the religious community (*Ādam al-melli*). The five remaining Ranks, who submitted in obedience, were Tawahhom, Erāda, Maš'ā, Bedāya, and Martaba.

Although many of the mythological themes, concepts, symbolic numbers, and cabbalistic letter speculations of this cosmology are similar to those found in various earlier gnostic systems, the terminology is mostly koranic or derived from Islamic sources. Claims by Muslim heresiographers that Isma'ili doctrine was derived from Persian dualist religions must be viewed with reserve. The duality of Kūnī and Qadar is not based on a cosmic dualism of good and evil, light and darkness.

*Stage 2.* Early Isma'ili cosmology was transformed and partly superseded by the introduction of Neoplatonic thought, first apparently by the Transoxanian



*dā'ī* (proselytizer) Moḥammad b. Aḥmad Nasafī (q.v.) in his lost *Ketāb al-maḥṣūl*, written about 300/913. The basic doctrine of the book can be recovered from later quotations, particularly in Abu'l-Qāsem Bostī's *Kaṣf asrār al-Bāṭenīya* (see Stern, p. 307) and Ḥamīd-al-Dīn Kermānī's *Ketāb al-rīāz*. A major source of influence on Nasafī's thought seems to have been the "longer version" of the so-called *Theology* of Aristotle. This appears at the present stage of research more likely than the alternative possibility that the "longer version" was composed under Isma'īli influence (see Pines, pp. 7-20; Zimmermann, pp. 196-208). God was described by Nasafī as the One beyond comprehension, beyond being and nonbeing, beyond any attribute and name. Kūnī and Qadar were replaced as the Antecedent and Follower by the Intellect (*'aql*) and the Soul (*nafs*). The Intellect, the first originated being (*mobda' awwal*), was produced by *ebdā'*, origination out of nothing, through God's Word (*kalema*) of command (*amr*). The Word is described as the mediator (*wāseṭa*) between God and the Intellect, as its cause (*'ella*) and as the act of origination (*ebdā'*). It maintains its separate primordial identity, although its form (*ṣūra*) comes to inhere in the Intellect. The Intellect is eternal (*azalī*), perfect (*tāmm*), motionless, and inactive. The Soul issued from it by emanation (*enbe'āt*) and is deficient, seeking perfection through the Intellect. This desire is the cause of its movement and activity (*fe'l*). From the Soul emanated Nature (*ṭabī'a*), consisting of prime matter (*hayūlā*) and form. It first formed the seven spheres and their stars. Through their revolution in time the four elements (*mofradāt*), humidity, dryness, cold, and warmth, became mixed to form the four composites (*morakkabāt*), earth, water, air, and ether. Out of the mixture of the composites the plants developed with a vegetative soul (*nāmīa*); out of the plants the animals with a sensitive soul (*ḥessīya*); and out of the animals man with a rational (*nāṭeqa*) soul. Through his individual soul man joins the quest of the Universal Soul, of which it is part, for perfection.

Nasafī's teaching was criticized on some points by the contemporary *dā'ī* **Abū Ḥātem Rāzī** (d. 322/934-35) in his *Ketāb al-eṣlāḥ*, representing a less Neoplatonic point of view (see Zimmermann, p. 208). Abū Ḥātem held that the soul was perfect in essence like the Intellect and deficient merely in its action. He drew a sharp boundary between the world of nobility and virtue of the spiritual beings and the darkness and turpitude of the material world, holding that Nature and matter could not issue from the Soul by emanation as the Soul emanated from the Intellect but that they were merely the effects or traces (*aṭar*) of the Soul. In particular he insisted that individual human souls were traces, not parts, of the Universal Soul. Man was wholly the fruit (*ṭamara*) of



the physical world, not a fallen part of the spiritual world temporarily imprisoned in it. Abū Ḥātem also identified the Intellect with time and held that motion originated in the bestowal of all things by the Intellect upon the Soul and that rest originated in their reception by the Soul, thus giving motion primacy over rest.

Abū Ḥātem's criticism was rejected by [Abū Ya'qūb Sejestānī](#) (d. after 365/976), a pupil of Nasafī and the chief representative of Neoplatonic Isma'ili thought after him, in his *Ketāb al-noṣra*. Abū Ya'qūb's teaching was elaborated in numerous works written over a period of at least four decades and displaying some variation in substance and approach. After initially defending Nasafī's thought, he came into conflict with the latter's school, partly over missionary tactics (see Stern, p. 308) but also over doctrinal questions. He thus backed belief in metempsychosis (*tanāsok*) in a few of his works, holding that human souls pass through a series of rebirths until the advent of the Qā'em, when they will ultimately rise to the spiritual world. These rebirths are in human bodies only. Abū Ya'qūb later abandoned this doctrine, perhaps under pressure from the official Fatimid *da'wa*, which was strongly opposed to belief in metempsychosis (Madelung).

*Stage 3.* A further transformation of Isma'ili cosmology was brought about by Ḥamīd-al-Dīn Kermānī (d. ca. 411/1020). His cosmology was systematically set forth in his *Ketāb rāḥat al-'aql*. It was partially based on the philosophical thought of the school of [Fārābī](#) and took account of some of Abū Ḥātem's objections to Nasafī's teaching. The duality of Intellect and Soul in the spiritual world was replaced by a series of ten Intellects. The First Originated Being is the First Intellect, identical with the act of origination (*ebdā*), unity (*waḥda*), and one (*wāḥed*). Kermānī denied the hypostatic status of the Word. The First Intellect is not eternal in beginning (*azalī al-awwal*), but everlasting (*azalī al-ākher*), motionless, the first mover of moving things, the cause (*'ella*) of all beings, Intellect, intelligent (*'āqel*) and intelligible (*ma'qūl*) in its essence. It is living, powerful, knowing, and perfect in its essence, yet it has no knowledge of the Unknowable Originator for which it longs. From its higher relation (*nesba ašraf*) and its lower relation (*nesba adwan*) the Second and Third Intellects respectively issued by emanation (*enbe'āt*), which is described as a radiation of light from the essence of the First Intellect without primary intention (*qaṣd awwal*). The Second Intellect is the First Emanated Being, actual (*qā'em be'l-fe'l*) and, like the First Intellect, combining the first and second perfection (*kamāl awwal wa tātī*). The Third Intellect is Prime Matter,



Nature, the First Second Emanated Being (*al-monba'et al-tānī al-awwal*), potential (*qā'em be'l-qowwa*) and initially lacking the second perfection. From the First and Second Intellects proceed seven more immaterial intellects identified with the Seven Higher Letters of earlier Isma'ili cosmology. Each of the Intellects of the Abode of Origination has the form of man (*ṣūrat al-ensān*).

The Third Intellect, Matter or Nature, formed the corporeal world, in which it is, from the aspect of its substance, a single thing and, from the aspect of its acts, numerous things. It consists of two parts (*joz*), each one having two relations (*nesbatān*), one toward the First Originated Being, through which it exists, and one toward the multiple things, which exist through it. The first part is by its first relation actual life, also called form, emanating from the spiritual world, lacking independence (*ḡayr mostaqella*) in its existence, spreading throughout the corporeal world, and by its second relation it is the mover (*moḥarrek*) of all corporeal things, also called nature. The second part is by its first relation potential life from the spiritual world, equally lacking independence in its existence, in need of the first part, which is actual life, and in its second relation it is the three-dimensional body.

The physical world consists of nine celestial spheres, the highest sphere, the sphere of the fixed stars, the seven spheres of the planets, as well as the sublunar world of generation and corruption. The spheres are the simplest bodies in nature; their motions are circular, the noblest of motions, and they are not subject to change and corruption and do not accept forms other than their own. Each sphere is related to one of the Intellects. The Tenth or Active (*fa'āl*) Intellect governs the sublunar world in place of the First. Among the celestial bodies, the moon in particular is in charge of the matters of the world of generation and corruption. All Intellects and spheres, however, exert an influence on the lower world.

The First Material (*mādda ūlā*) of the sublunar world consists of the four elements (*arkān*). They are stratified and do not increase or decrease in their total mass, but mingle at their fringes under the influences of the higher world. From their mixture arises the Second Material (*mādda tānīa*) with the three realms of generation (*mawālīd*), minerals, plants, and animals. Even minerals have, through the life that spreads through all of nature, something like a soul that preserves their essence. The souls of the higher beings are cumulative; the sensitive soul of the animals includes the vegetative soul of plants. Man is the microcosm (*'ālam ṣaḡīr*) and the second end (*nehāya tānīa*) of nature. Both body and soul of man arise from nature. The human soul has



two states. At first it is like an accident (*'arāz*) and thus vanishes if it is separated from the body. In the second state it becomes a self-subsistent substance through the acquisition of spiritual knowledge. When the human soul thus reaches its second perfection, it is called the Second Emanated Being (*monba'et t̄ānī*). The early Isma'ili triad Jadd, Fath, and Kayāl represent ways in which the soul receives the knowledge from the spiritual world. After separation from the body, the souls are assembled in the *barzak*, which forms a limit between paradise and hell and is the highest place in the world of nature. Kermānī rejected metempsychosis, denying that the soul could become attached to another body. Only after the advent of the Qā'em and the Resurrection (*ba't*) will the souls arrive at their final destination in paradise, which is next to the First Intellect, or in hell, which is the remotest place from it.

*Stage 4.* Among the Yemenite Ṭayyebīs in the post-Fatimid period Ebrāhīm Ḥāmedī (d. 557/1162), the second *dā'ī moṭlaq*, transformed Isma'ili cosmology in his *Ketāb kanz al-walad*. While basically adopting Kermānī's system and also drawing upon the *Rasā'el Ekwān al-Ṣafā'*, especially *al-Resāla al-jāme'a*, the works of Mo'ayyad fi'l-Dīn Šīrāzī, and a few less-known earlier Isma'ili works, he formulated an original interpretation of them, personifying Kermānī's spiritual principles and introducing a mythical "drama in heaven" (Corbin). God initially originated, all at once, an innumerable host of spiritual forms, who were all, in accordance with His justice, equal in rank. One of them first recognized that there must be an Originator of the world and testified to His divinity, denying his own and his equals' divinity. By this act he acquired his second perfection and became the First Originated Being and the First Intellect. Two more spiritual forms immediately followed him, competing for the second rank. One of them testified to the divinity of the Originator and glorified the First Intellect and became the First Emanated Being and Second Intellect. The other also glorified the First Intellect but failed to recognize the precedence of the Second Intellect and also failed, by inadvertence, not by intention, to testify to the divinity of the Originator. This was the cause of his fall from the third rank. Most of the other spiritual forms followed suit and became arranged in seven ranks, each headed by an Intellect. As the fallen Third Intellect repented of his failure, he came to be ranked as the Tenth, who is the Spiritual Adam (*Ādam al-rūḥānī*), free from body. Those of the spiritual forms that had initially followed him in his mistake and then failed to recognize their fault became darkened and solidified (*takattafū*) and formed the physical world. Their chief is Matter and Form, the Third Emanated Being,



who will appear at the end of the era of 50,000 years as the Qā'em. Those of the dark forms whose fault was minor became established in the celestial world of the spheres and planets, while the most obstinate became assembled in the sublunar world of generation and corruption. The Tenth Intellect, as the demiurge, was charged with summoning them to repentance and recognition of the ranks above them.

The lower world evolves under the successive influence of one of the planets in millennia. The first millennium was dominated by Saturn alone, the next by Saturn jointly with one of the other six planets in succession. After 50 millennia the domination passes to the next planet. After the greatest aeon (*kawr a'zam*), lasting 350 millennia, the world disintegrates and then is completely restored for the next aeon. In the first six millennia the three realms of generation (*mawālīd*) evolved to reach their climax in man with the (upright) Alef stature (*qāma alefiya*), on whom the hope for salvation rests. The first men and women were produced in caves (*maḡārāt*) by natural generation. On the island of Sarandīb (Ceylon) the most noble twenty-eight men and twenty-eight women were thus produced. One of the twenty-eight first recognized that the whole world must have an Originator and testified to His divinity, denying his own and his companions' divinity. He thus became the Universal Adam (*Ādam al-kollī*), the Owner of the Originational Body (*ṣāḡeb al-jotta al-ebdā'īya*). He summoned his twenty-seven companions to affirm the Unity of God and to testify to His divinity and then sent them to the Twelve Provinces (*jazā'er*) of the earth to summon all other men to the worship of God. He thus opened the first cycle of revelation (*kašf*) in the seventh millennium. After his passing the Universal Adam rose to the spiritual world and took the place of the Tenth Intellect, who in turn rose in rank on his way to reach his original place next to the Second Intellect. After 50 millennia the first cycle of concealment (*satr*) was inaugurated by the first Speaker Prophet (*nāṭeq*), the Partial Adam (*Ādam al-joz'ī*); it will be closed by the Qā'em, the seventh Speaker, opening a new cycle of revelation.

The spiritual knowledge acquired by every faithful adherent from his superior in the teaching hierarchy forms a resplendent light in his soul that grows as he advances in gnosis. When he dies his soul, together with this light form, join the soul of his superior. The cause of its rise is the divine magnet (*maḡnāṭīs elāhī*) or Light Column (*'amūd al-nūr*), which extends from the Originator through the spiritual and the teaching hierarchies to the faithful, conveying spiritual light and taking it back. The soul and light form thus rise from rank to



rank until they reach the gate (*bāb*) of the Qā'em, where all of them assemble to form a light temple (*haykal nūrānī*) in the shape of a man. The light temple is called the Emāma. A trace of man's vegetative soul, the innate warmth (*ḥarāra ḡarīzīya*), remains behind in the dead body of the faithful adherent. Three days after death it rises up to the planets as a fine invisible vapor called the wind-like soul (*nafs rīḥīya*) and is eventually purified, together with the other wind-like souls, by the sun and Jupiter. The purified souls are sent down to earth and are consumed by the Imam and his pure wife, in whose womb this pure matter forms the noble, camphor-like body (*jesm kāfūrī*) of the next Imam. Then the Gate with the light temple in him joins the newborn Imam. The light temple becomes the soul or divine nature (*lāhūt*) inside the Imam, while the camphor-like body, the envelope (*ḡelāf*), constitutes his human nature (*nāsūt*). The imams who were descended from the Universal Adam, who had taken the place of the Tenth Intellect as the demiurge, rose after their death to his horizon, together with all the light forms assembled in them. There they remained until the advent of their Qā'em, when they assembled to form an immense light temple, each imam forming a member of it. Judgment, Reward, and Punishment occurred at the hands of the Qā'em, who then took, together with all the light souls of his cycles, the place of the Tenth Intellect, raising the ranks of those above him. Thus each Qā'em rises to the rank of the Tenth, and gradually all beings of the spiritual and material world rise to the rank of the Second Intellect. None, however, can reach the rank of the First Intellect.

The souls of the opponents of the hierarchy are unable to depart from their dead bodies (according to slightly later doctrine, not yet fully elaborated in Ḥāmedī's *Kanz al-walad*; see Ebn Walīd, pp. 125-30). The dark form (*ṣūra zolmānīya*) produced in them by their hatred of the people of the truth and their evil actions leaves their bodies to turn into a demon or wicked *jennī* inhabiting desolate places and taking possession of ignorant women or young boys. All dark forms are then assembled in the Tail of the Dragon (*ḍanab al-tannīn*, the southern, descending node of the moon), from which they continue to plague mankind. After undergoing much torment, some whose faults were few may accept the summons of a prophet and evolve, rising through the three realms of generation to attain human shape and be saved. The souls of the opponents, together with their bodies, are first dissolved and then, through transformation (*mask*), reintegrated in ever lower animal, plant, and mineral forms (*qomoṣ*), in which they suffer torment. At the time of the Qā'em they will appear in human shape and be slaughtered, consumed by fire from the ether,



and placed in Sejjīn, the most solid core of the earth, for the greatest torment, lasting the period of the greatest aeon. Minor offenders may descend only part of this scale and then ascend again to attain human shape and accept the summons to the truth.

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