



KAŠF AL-MAḤJUB OF SEJZI

KAŠF AL-MAḤJUB OF SEJZI (“Unveiling the hidden”), the Persian version of an Isma‘ili treatise originally written in Arabic by the 10th century *dā‘i* (q.v.) Abu Ya‘qub al-Sejestāni (or Sejzi).

The fact that Sejestāni wrote an important work titled which was from the start subject to considerable doctrinal controversy both inside and outside [Isma‘ilism](#), is well attested by independent references made to it by three early authorities writing from quite different perspectives: the anti-Isma‘ili Zaydi Mo‘tazilite Abu‘l-Qāsem al-Bosti (d. 1030) in his *Kašf asrār al-bāṭeniya wa-ḡawār maḍhabehem*, the neutral scholar Biruni in his *India* (written in 421/1030), and the Isma‘ili philosopher Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow in two of his books: *Ḳvān al-ekwān* and *Zād al-mosāferin* (the latter written in 1061). However, this original *Kašf al-maḥjub*, which was, like all the other works of Sejestāni, doubtless written in Arabic (*pace* Ḡolām-Ḥosseini Ebrāhimi-Dināni, *Daftar-e ‘aql-o ‘ešq*, pp. 335 f.), is no longer extant as such. What we have instead is by all appearances a Persian translation or paraphrase, which has been dated for linguistic reasons to the 11th century (Lazard, *La langue des plus anciens monuments*, p. 87; see also below). The title *Kašf al-maḥjub* is attested in the epilogue of the text itself (Corbin, ed., pp. 96 and 97), but the Persian translator does not name himself, nor does he indeed spell out the fact that he is translating Sejestāni. In one passage (Corbin, ed., p. 83), he does, however, refer to “Bā Ya‘qub,” quoting him with a whole sentence in Arabic, evidently because the latter, which deals with grammatical modifications of the Arabic root *b-‘t* (“to call forth, resuscitate, resurrect”), and alludes to a crucial point in



Sejestāni's thought, could not easily be translated literally into Persian.

Given this situation, two questions arise: who was the translator, and to what degree can the translation be presumed to faithfully reproduce the original?

Regarding the first question, one obvious candidate is, of course, Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow, who is indeed known to have paraphrased and incorporated selections from another of Sejestāni's works, the *Ketāb al-yanābi'*, in his own *Kvān al-ekwān* (for an identification of numerous examples, see Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne*, introd., notes). However, since Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow in the same work (Qavim, ed., pp. 131 ff., 135, 139) as well as in *Zād al-mosāferin* (Baḍl al-Raḥmān, ed., pp. 421 f.) explicitly criticizes Sejestāni for having spread in the *Kašf al-maḥjub* a doctrine of *tanāsok* (reincarnation) which he himself deemed highly unorthodox, it seems rather unlikely that he should have wanted to enhance the influence of this particular book in the Persianate world by translating it as well (cf. Corbin *Kašf*, introd.). Another possible candidate, proposed by H. Landolt (2001), is the anonymous commentator of the 10th-century Isma'ili philosophical poem known as the *qaṣida* of Abu'l-Haytam-e Jorjāni, who may be identified on the basis of Bayḥaqi's *Tatemma Šewān al-ḥekma* as a certain Moḥammad b. Sorḳ of Nishapur (see Mo'in and Corbin, *Šarḥ-e qaṣida . . .*, Persian introd., p. 2). This commentator indicates that he had been Jorjāni's disciple for nine years (*Šarḥ*, Persian text, p. 109) and that he was writing "some forty years after [the master] had spoken" (*Šarḥ*, Persian text, p. 43)—which presumably places him towards the end of the 4th/10th or in the early 5th/11th century (see Lazard, *La langue*, pp. 54 f. and note 4; see also S. M. Stern's review in *BSOAS* 22, 1959, pp. 585-88). At the end of his commentary he admits that he had read whatever he wrote in his text "in the books of the sage-philosophers" (*kotob-e ḥokamā*), while at the same time insisting that he had heard it all from Jorjāni (*Šarḥ*, Persian text, p. 109). He normally refers to the latter as "our master" (*Kvāja-ye mā*), or simply *Kvāja*, and praises him as an "excellent man" (*in mard-e fāzel*; cf. *Šarḥ*, Persian introd., p. 5). In one place, however, he introduces an argument (*qawl*) which he ascribes to "the great teacher" (*ostād-e bozorg*), adding that he himself had "commented upon" or "translated" it (*tarjoma kardastim*) elsewhere, to the effect that the beauty of Nature must be spiritual (*Šarḥ*, Persian text, p. 58). Since the same argument is spelled out in virtually the same terms in the *Kašf al-maḥjub* (Corbin, ed., pp. 49-51), it seems safe to assume that the title "the great teacher" refers, not to the otherwise hardly known Jorjāni (as was presumed by Corbin, *Šarḥ*, French introd., pp. 38-40), but to the famous



Sejestāni. If so, it would follow that the commentator thus identified himself indirectly as the translator of the by then well-known original *Kašf al-maḥjub*. The only apparent difficulty with this solution is that it would imply, given the above approximate dating of the *Šarḥ*, that the Persian *Kašf al-maḥjub*, too, was probably written still within the 10th century rather than in the 11th.

As for the second question, S. M. Stern, noting that “two passages quoted by al-Bustī do not recur in the Persian version,” concluded from this that the latter “must therefore be assumed not to reproduce the original text in full” (*Studies in Early Ismā‘īlism*, p. 307, with reproduction of the relevant Arabic text of Bostī’s *Kašf asrār al-bāṭeniya* in the note). Against this conclusion, Landolt (2001) adduced two counter-arguments: first, Bostī’s references to the *Kašf al-maḥjub* are not exactly ‘quotations’ but summaries of doctrinal points, which the anti-Isma‘īli author of course phrased in his own way in order to refute them. Second, and more importantly, the two doctrinal points allegedly made by Sejestāni in the original *Kašf al-maḥjub* are explained in great detail in the *Ketāb al-yanābi‘* (§§70-84), whereas, conversely, another philosophical idea which Sejestāni according to Bostī propounded in the *Ketāb al-yanābi‘*, concerning the celestial bodies (*ajrām*) said to be the cause of the elements (*mofradāt*), is not really found in this book at all (*pace* P. Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom*, p. 143, referring to *Yanābi‘* §56), but can easily be explained as summarizing a doctrine which is, in fact, strongly maintained in the extant version of the *Kašf al-maḥjub*, namely, that “the beings pertaining to the realm of natural generation (*mawālid*) take their attributes from the elements under active influence of the celestial bodies” (*be fe’l-e ajrām-e samāvi; Kašf*, Corbin, ed., pp. 7, 11) and that the celestial bodies “preserve the species” in their existence (*ibid.*, pp. 55 f., 60 f.). It appears as a result of this, in short, that Bostī simply confused the two book titles and that Stern’s negative conclusion cannot be regarded as decisive in any case. While it cannot, of course, be excluded that the Persian translator occasionally colored the text according to his own understanding, there is no reason to assume that anything essential was lost in the process.

This Persian text is not an arbitrary compilation but a well-structured book that follows a clear plan. It is divided into seven ‘Discourses’ (*maqālāt*), each being itself composed of seven chapters titled, depending on how one prefers to read the word, *jostār* (Corbin hence translated as ‘recherche’) or *jastār* (Landolt hence translated as ‘issue’ or ‘stream’). This symbolic structure reflects, on the one hand, the original Isma‘īli pattern of six plus one prophetic



cycles, and on the other, the Qor’ānic ‘six days of Creation.’ While the first Discourse is on *tawḥid* (specifically, the negation of both positive and negative ‘divine attributes’ characteristic of classical Isma‘ili apophysis theology), the subsequent six Discourses (i.e., II to VII) each represent one of the six ‘creations.’ Thus Discourse II, on the ‘first creation’ (*kalq-e avval*, more precisely called *mobda‘-e avval* in the table of contents), is on Intellect (*kerad* or ‘*aql*). Discourse III, on the ‘second creation,’ concerns the Soul (*nafs*), specifically its ‘descent in the Form of Man,’ and Discourse IV identifies the ‘third creation’ as ‘Nature’ (*ṭabi‘at*). Discourse V, on the ‘fourth creation,’ asserts the ‘preservation of the species’ and contains a rejection of *tanāsoḵ* in the specific sense of a transfer of the human soul “into the body of a dog or a donkey” (Corbin, ed., pp. 60, 7)—a point which is reflected in Biruni’s singling out Sejestāni’s *Kašf al-maḥjub* as “propounding a doctrine according to which the species are preserved and *tanāsoḵ* proceeds within each species only, without passing to any other” (*Fi taḥqiq mā le‘l-Hend*, Hyderabad, 1958, p. 49; tr. Sachau, I, pp. 64 f.). Discourse VI, on the ‘fifth creation,’ is devoted to the special place of prophethood within the human species and presents the succession of prophets throughout salvation history in terms of a progress from *potentia* to *actus*, ending up with the ‘Lord of the Final Rising of Liberation’ (*koḍāvand-e rastākiz*), that is, the (apparently still expected) *mahdi* or *qā‘em*. Finally, Discourse VII, on the ‘sixth creation,’ approaches the notion of individual resurrection (*bar-angiḡtan* or *ba‘t*) in terms that suggest the idea of a series of reincarnations of individual individual human souls throughout the prophetic ‘cycles’ of salvation history, whereas the notion of a ‘vulgar’ *tanāsoḵ* is, again, rejected (Corbin, ed., pp. 7-9, 88).

The text has been preserved in an *unicum* belonging to the late Sayyed Naṣr-Allāh Taqavi, which was copied sometime before 1402. Handwritten copies of this were made in 1931 by Ebrāhim Zanjāni (available in identically incomplete photocopies from Cairo, Dār al-Kutub 1792 [= *taṣavvof fāresi* 81] and Tehran, Majles 11692, where the missing part has, however, been completed by another hand) and in 1940 by Moḥammad ‘Ali Moṣāḥebi Nā‘ini (Tehran, *Adabiyāt* 194j). Extracts from the Taqavi *unicum* were published by Mahdi Bayāni in *Nemuna-ye soḡan-e fārsi* (Tehran, 1938, pp. 226-32), but the full text was critically edited for the first time and published with an introduction by Henry Corbin in 1949 (2nd revised ed., 1979). Corbin’s own French translation appeared posthumously in 1988 (together with a reprint of his 1949 introduction) as *Le Dévoilement des choses cachées: Recherches de philosophie ismaélienne*. A partial English translation with an introduction by



Hermann Landolt is available in S. H. Nasr et al., eds., *An Anthology of Philosophy in Persia II*, 2001 (see Bibliog.; for a revised English translation of Discourse VI see H. Landolt et al., ed., 2008; pp. 121-30).

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