



KETĀB AL-‘ĀLEM WA’L-ĠOLĀM

KETĀB AL-‘ĀLEM WA’L-ĠOLĀM (The Book of the sage and the youth), the title of a doctrinal work attributed to the **Fatimid** Isma‘ili missionary **Ja‘far b. Manṣur-al-Yaman** (d. ca. 960). The work is notable for its unusual literary form, a dramatic dialogue in which an Isma‘ili missionary, the *‘ālem* (learned one, sage) successfully convinces the *ḡolām* (the youth) to join the Isma‘ili fold.

There is insufficient evidence to authenticate the Isma‘ili tradition’s attribution of the *Ketāb al-‘ālem wa’l-ḡolām* to Ja‘far b. Manṣur-al-Yaman. It is clear, however, that the work was composed in the period that the later missionaries refer to as “the period of the hidden Imams,” that is, prior to the advent of the Fatimids in North Africa in 297/909. The work’s long standing importance and popularity among Isma‘ilis is evidenced by the numerous extant manuscripts in the Mosta‘liya Yemeni and Gujarati Isma‘ili communities, and by contemporary Isma‘ili informants who report that the work has long been part of the contemporary Mosta‘liya curriculum in both its Dāwudi and Solaymāni branches.

The text begins with a frame story in which a group of young Isma‘ili missionaries seek guidance from their teacher. He instructs them that a true believer’s foremost duty is to propagate the true religion, and illustrates this point with the story of *al-ālem wa’l-ḡolām* (the sage and the youth). The sage is “a man among the people of Persia,” who, after successfully completing his own Isma‘ili education, sets out to spread the Isma‘ili teaching. He travels a great distance until he finds what he deems to be a fertile ground for the message, a Muslim community that is already exploring religious matters. A



stranger joins an informal gathering and, when asked about his school’s teaching, exclaims, in a discourse laden with Qur’anic allusions, that the utmost need for human intellect is to seek refuge in the hidden, interior meaning of religion entrusted only to humanity’s guiding light (Qur’an 27:7). His speech leaves all those present in tears. All take their leave except one man who is particularly moved by the stranger’s words and becomes the sage’s student. He leaves his father’s house and takes the secret oath of allegiance to the Isma‘ili mission. After the student completes his Isma‘ili education, he converts his father, a scholar, and his father’s scholarly companions to the movement.

The character of the teachings conveyed by the sage and his student (e.g., emphasis on the interior sense (*bāṭen*) of religion; parallels between Speaker-Prophets (*noṭaqā*) and legatees (*awṣiā*) during humanity’s seven historical periods; allegorical interpretations of Qur’anic creedal statements; parallels between the luminary spheres (*aflāk*) and the earthly mission (*da‘wa*) are consistent with those found in other doctrinal works of the early Isma‘ili movement. What makes this work unusual is that the Isma‘ili esoteric interpretation (*ta‘wil*) found in other sources is here situated in the context of the powerful and emotive narrative. The *Ketāb al-‘ālem wa’l-ḡolām* thus provides a major exemplum of the primary task of the Isma‘ili missionary, which is attracting non-Isma‘ilis into the Isma‘ili fold.

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