



OMM AL-KETĀB

OMM AL-KETĀB, title of an anonymous Persian book associated with certain early Shi'ite *gōlāt* (extremist) groups of southern Iraq. The origins of this syncretic text, produced initially in Arabic, are shrouded in mystery. Subsequently, this work found its way into the manuscript collections of the Nezāri Isma'īlis of *Badaḡšān* (an area now divided by the *Oxus River* between *Tajikistan* and *Afghanistan*) and adjacent areas, such as Hunza and *Chitral*, all situated in *Central Asia*. The Central Asian Nezāris, thus, regard the *Omm al-ketāb* not only as an Isma'īli text but also as one of their most sacred and secret works, although it does not contain any known Isma'īli doctrines.

The process of recovering manuscript copies of the *Omm al-ketāb* commenced in the opening decades of the 20th century, when Russian scholars and officials, who had then become aware of the existence of Isma'īli communities within their own domains in Central Asia, attempted to establish contact with these sectarians, concentrated mainly in the western Pamir districts of *Badaḡšān*. Several copies of the *Omm al-ketāb* were procured by such officials and, in due course, deposited in the Asiatic Museum of the Russian Academy of Sciences (*Aziatskiĭ Muzeĭ*), whose collections are now part of the collections of the Russian Institute of Oriental Manuscripts in St Petersburg. In subsequent decades, a few more copies of this work were recovered from Central Asia (see Bertels and Bakoev, p. 28); seven copies of the *Omm al-ketāb* are found in the Persian manuscript holdings of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.

Wladimir Ivanow was the first Western orientalist to introduce the *Omm al-*



ketāb to the scholarly world (Ivanow, 1932, pp. 419-81; idem, 1963, pp. 193-95). In 1936, Ivanow also published a critical edition of the *Omm al-ketāb*. This edition, reprinted recently in Turkey after some seven decades (see Kaygusuz, Persian text, pp. 1-92), remains the only edition of the Persian text of the *Omm al-ketāb*, which was translated in 1966 into Italian by P. Filippini-Ronconi and into Turkish in 2009 by Alim Selmān. In recent decades, only a few scholars have concerned themselves with this text. E. F. Tjstens also produced its first partial German translation (Tjstens, pp. 241-526), while H. Halm shed new light on the origins of the *Omm al-ketāb*, focusing on the so-called Moḳamma tradition of the early Kufan Shi'ite *ḡolāt* milieus. Halm also produced another partial German translation of the text, which, as in the case of Tjstens, was based on Ivanow's edition (Halm, 1982, pp. 113-98). Filippini-Ronconi produced valuable studies on the cosmological and soteriological doctrines of this work, in addition to postulating a complex hypothesis regarding the origins of the *Omm al-ketāb* and the circumstances under which it found its way to the Ismaili communities of Central Asia (Filippini-Ronconi, 1977, pp. 101-20; idem, in his tr. of *Omm al-ketāb*, pp. xxvii-lv).

The *Omm al-ketāb* contains the supposed discourses of Imam Moḳammad al-Bāqer (d. ca. 114/732), one of the early Shi'ite **imams**, in response to some thirty-eight questions on the secrets of cosmology, eschatology, and soteriology, posed by an anachronistic circle of disciples, including 'Abd-Allāh Anṣāri (d. 78/697) and Jāber Jo'fi (d. 128/746). Recalling the figure of Jesus in certain apocryphal Gospels, Imam al-Bāqer appears here in the guise of a five-year-old child (Ivanow, 1946, pp. 99-101).

Various scholars have argued that the *Omm al-ketāb* is a syncretic, gnostic work reflecting the influences of certain early Shi'ite *ḡolāt* as well as diverse non-Islamic traditions, such as Valentinian **Gnosticism** and **Manicheism**. However, until recently there was lack of consensus on the authorship and the date of the composition of the *Omm al-ketāb*. For instance, **Henry Corbin** assigned its origins to the early **Ḳaṭṭābi** followers of **Abu'l-Ḳaṭṭāb Asadi** (d. 138/755), who gave rise to proto-Isma'ilism (Corbin, 1953, pp. 14-16; idem, 1964, pp. 111-12; idem, 1975, pp. 526-28). The *Omm al-ketāb* does, in fact, mention the **Ḳaṭṭābis**, a group that emerged on the fringes of Imami Shi'ism (see *Umm al-ketāb*, ed. Ivanow, text, p. 11).

By analyzing the terminology and the cosmology of the *Omm al-ketāb*, which are expressed in the terms of a gnostic myth, recent scholarship in the field has now definitely attributed the origins of this text to a particular extremist

Shi'ite tradition of the second half of the 2nd/8th century, designated by the medieval heresiographers as the Moḳammaṣa or Pentadists. The Moḳammaṣa generally espoused the divinity of the five members of the *ahl al-kesā'*, or the People of the Cloak (Āl-e 'abā), namely, the Prophet Moḳammad, 'Ali, Fāṭema, Ḥasan, and Ḥosayn, which is also a recurrent theme in the *Omm al-ketāb*. Qom(m)i, the only early Imami Shi'ite heresiographer who discusses the Moḳammaṣa in some details, informs us that, according to this doctrinal tradition, Moḳammad was the godhead who had appeared in the above-mentioned five different bodies. In this divine pentad, however, only the person of Moḳammad represented the true meaning (*ma'nā*). The Moḳammaṣa also maintained that Moḳammad had been Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, appearing continuously in cycles (*adwār*; see *DAWR* [1]) amongst Arabs and non-Arabs, and that Salmān Fārsi/al-Fāresi (d. 36/656) was the *bāb*, or gate, who always appeared with Moḳammad. These and other doctrines of the Moḳammaṣa are strongly represented throughout the *Omm al-ketāb* (see Qomi, pp. 56-59; Rāzi, I, pp. 559-60; Halm, 1978, pp. 157 ff.; idem, 1982, pp. 218-25; Madelung, pp. 517-18).

In addition to its pentadist doctrines, the attribution of the *Omm al-ketāb* to the Moḳammaṣa tradition of the early Shi'ite *ḡolāt* is supported by other doctrinal features of this text, such as its propagation of metempsychosis (*tanāsoḳ*), its gnostic-cabbalistic elements, and the important role it assigns to Salmān Fārsi and Abu'l-Ḳaṭṭāb. In fact, Salmān, whose gnostic name in this text is al-Salsal, and Abu'l-Ḳaṭṭāb are mentioned jointly and repeatedly in a sacred formula throughout the text. Be that as it may, the doctrines of the Moḳammaṣa, especially regarding the creation and divinity of the Prophet Moḳammad, and the imams, are quite different from those propounded by the early Isma'ilis, who also had fundamental doctrinal differences with the Ḳaṭṭābis.

The cosmological and eschatological doctrines of the Noṣayris, named after Moḳammad b. Noṣayr (d. 270/883), who was originally a supporter of the eleventh imam of the Eṭnā'ašari Shi'ites, Ḥasan al-'Askari (d. 260/874), are also present in the *Omm al-ketāb* (see Qomi, pp. 100-01; Halm, 1982, pp. 284-355; Daftary, 2013, pp. 175-90). The Noṣayris, now present in Syria, Lebanon, and Turkey, where they are commonly known as 'Alawis, worship 'Ali as godhead, while Salmān Fārsi assumes a special rank for them.

It is thus reasonable to conclude that the enigmatic *Omm al-ketāb* originated during the second half of the 2nd/8th century in the Imami Shi'ite *ḡolāt* milieus of southern Iraq. More specifically, it represents the earliest extant Shi'ite



record of the doctrinal tradition manifested by the Moḳamma. By the earlier decades of the 6th/12th century, the original Arabic text of the *Omm al-keṭāb* had been translated into Persian in an expanded version by the Persian Nezāri Ismaʿilis; and, this final redaction of the text, like the post-Nāṣer-e Ḳosrow Ismaʿili texts of the Persian Nezāris, found its way into the literature of the Central Asian Ismaʿilis through the activities of the Nezāri *dāʿis* (summoners) who were sent from Qohestān, in southeastern Khorasan in Persia, to Badakṣhān. Under the circumstances, the Central Asian Ismaʿilis claimed the book as their own, even though it did not contain any Ismaʿili doctrines.

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