

UNVEILING OF THE HIDDEN

Translated for this volume by Hermann Landolt from Abū Ya'qūb Sijistānī, *Kashf al-mahjūb*, ed. H. Corbin (Paris-Tehran, 1949), pp. 2–96

[Prologue]

In the Name of God, the Compassionate, the Merciful, from Him we seek Help!

Be aware that the realities of True Knowledge (*ḥaqāyiq-i 'ilm*) are hidden from Iblis and his progeny, while they are manifest with God's Friends (*awliyā'-i khudāy*) and His Chosen ones (*guzīdagān-i 'ū*). For that is the secret of God, which He makes known to whom He wishes among His Friends. True¹ Knowledge is in His treasure-house, [access] to which He grants to whomever He wants among His Servants. Those debarred from it stray in perdition and wander in blindness. On their hearts are locks which cannot be opened, and on their intellects are chains which cannot be lifted. The Friends of God graze in the pastures of Paradise, picking fruits from its trees without being ever sated and swimming in its rivers without ever tiring. They have recognized the One whom they worship, holding Him separate and pure from the traits of the creatures and keeping Him aloof from all their attributes. The Lords of Perdition have likened the Creator to the creatures, confined Him within definition, and pictured Him with attributes to the point of numbering them! Indeed they have become incapable of recognizing the angels (*firishtagān*)² and the degrees of creation, ignoring established knowledge and believing in unfounded assertions; whereas the Lords of the True Realities are cognizant of God's angels and possessed of the science of the degrees of creation. They do not recognize the unknowable, but they know the knowable, and place their hope in that which may come to be, [namely], that the angels will descend upon them. For the Friends of God there is no pain in preserving True Knowledge in such a way that the sciences of the True Reading (*'ulūm-i ta'wīl*)³ become patterns engraved on their spiritual souls and will be of the essence of the substance of their Soul. Indeed, whatever belongs to the essence of a substance is never severed from it, as with the motion of fire which is not separable from fire.

1. The adjective 'True' has sometimes been added to 'Knowledge' in this translation. As often in Ismaili texts, *'ilm* means definitely more than just 'knowledge'; it corresponds to the special kind of salvatory 'Knowledge' which is known as Gnosis. It does not, however, imply—at least not in our text—the rejection of the material world generally associated with Gnosticism.

2. Perhaps meaning the imams. See Introd. p. 76, n. 1..

3. Much has been written about *ta'wīl*, one of the cornerstones of Ismailism and Shi'ism in general. For Sijistānī in particular, see Anton M. Heinen, 'The Notion of *ta'wīl* in Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's Book of the Sources (*Kitāb al-yanābī*)', *Hamdard Islamicus*, 2 (1979), pp. 35–45; and Jean-François Gagnon, 'Gnose et philosophie: une étude du *ta'wīl* ismaélien d'après le *Livre des Sources* d'al-Sijistānī'. Unpublished thesis, McGill University, 1995.

May God preserve us and you from the yokes and fetters of non-cognition and ignorance, and may He allow us and you apprehension of the true realities and search for the growth of True Knowledge, which is the 'Heaven of Refuge'¹ and the 'Highest Paradise'! May He keep us on the 'Straight Path'!² Indeed He is ever-generous and noble, the Possessor of abundant grace.

Now, by virtue of the shining Light and the great Power coming from the Friend of God³ on this 'Earth of Convocation' (*zamīn-i da'wat*),⁴ which is the home of the spiritual souls, and by the blessing of my obedience to him and of his kindness to me, I shall undertake to unveil those secrets which were sealed, symbols which were kept in the treasure-house. No one has transcribed this [heavenly] Word into [earthly] script. These are verbal expressions and spiritual symbols which should work as a cure for the people of our time and adequately provide that for which there is a need. I shall unveil [them] in this book based on seven principal sources (*aṣl*), which are the most important of all:

- I. On assertion of the One
- II. On the First Originated
- III. On the Second Creation
- IV. On the Third Creation
- V. On the Fourth Creation
- VI. On the Fifth Creation
- VII. On the Sixth Creation

Discourse One: On Assertion of the One

Issue One: On eliminating thingness⁵ from the Creator

I. 1.1.

The notion of being a 'thing' should be eliminated from the Creator, as this is properly that by which creatures are designated and through which they can be

1. Cf. Qur'ān 32:19.

2. Cf. Qur'ān 1:6.

3. Perhaps meaning the Fatimid Caliph al-Mu'izz (reg. 341/953–365/975). Cf. Intro.

4. On the significance of the 'Earth of Convocation' see below, IV. 4. 1.–2.

5. *Chizī*, the abstract form of *chīz*, is the Persian equivalent of the Arabic *shay'īyyah*, 'thingness', a technical term of *Kalām*, which is sometimes also used for the philosophical notion of 'essence' or 'quiddity'; see Jean Jolivet, 'Aux origines de l'ontologie d'Ibn Sīnā', in Jean Jolivet and Rushdī Rāshed, ed., *Études sur Avicenne* (Paris, 1984), pp. 11–28, as indeed it is used later in our own text (see II. 2. 1. and the note ad loc.). In the present *Kalām* context, however, I have preferred to translate *chizī* literally as 'thingness', as does De Smet (*Quiétude*, p. 90). A 'thing', according to Nāṣir-i Khusraw, is a knowable entity (*Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, ed. H. Corbin and M. Mu'in [Tehran and Paris, 1332/1953], Persian text para. 89). The position of our author, namely, that God is neither 'thing' nor 'not-thing' (cf. I. 7. 1.–2.) is exactly what distinguishes Ismaili doctrine according to a

distinguished from each other, for every thing preserves the form of its respective species in order for the soul to be enabled to tell the colours¹ of the spiritual [lit. ‘subtle’] world. Now, which thing, whose [specific] form would be neither of Soul, nor of Nature, nor of Art, would be suitable for God? Such is far from Him by virtue of the majesty (*buzurgwārī*) of His power and the pervasiveness (*rawā’ī*) of His sovereignty. Indeed, God’s majesty is beyond taking the name of a thing, whatever thing that may be. It is improper to attribute thingness to Him or to link him with thingness—except by establishing His transcendent Essence (*dhāt-i buzurgwār-i ‘ū*) beyond all the things by which creatures are designated.

I. 1.2.

Further, all men believe that ‘God was while no thing was’,² and they have commonly agreed that God is not like³ His own deed [i.e., The Creation]. But a ‘thing’ cannot escape being either a substance or a body or an accident or motion or rest, whereas God is beyond coming under any of these divisions, so that [it can truly be said that] neither is creature like the Creator, nor the Creator like creature. If God were a ‘thing’, and had brought forth ‘things’, He would [himself] be a [thing] ‘come forth’ since ‘things’ come forth by way of generation (*bi-naw‘-i tawlid*). Therefore, since you have ruled that ‘No one was generated from Him, nor He from any one’,⁴ now [you also must accept that] ‘thing’ and ‘thingness’ are eliminated from God, and that ‘thingness’ is attributed to creature. Understand this!

I. 1.3.

Further, if attribution of ‘thingness’ to God were admissible, it would become necessary to say that ‘one thing is the Creator’ and ‘one thing is the creature’. But these ‘things’ are either substance or accident, and substance is either body or spirit, and body is either animate or inanimate, and animate is either vegetal or animal. Now, coming back to the division of [the thing supposed to refer to] the Creator, what shall we say? Which one among these divisions would apply to the Creator? Clearly the Creator does not come under these divisions, nor does any non-divided [i.e., not subsumed] division apply to Him. No, He is [absolutely] alone and beyond being susceptible of our attributing to Him things either spiritual or corporeal, [all of] which are multiple. Since we have from the start asserted His being beyond, it necessarily follows that God does not come under the division of the creatures,

well-informed Zaydī doxographer of the 6th/12th century, Nashwān b. Sa‘īd al-Himyarī, *Sharḥ risālat al-hūr al-‘īn*, ed. Kamāl Muṣṭafā (Cairo 1367/1947), p. 148.

1. The ‘colours’ of the spiritual world are a frequent theme with Sijistānī; cf. IV. 6.1. and VI. 6.1.; also *Wellsprings*, para. 14.

2. Persian translation of well-known ḥadīth (*kāna Allāhu wa lam yakun ma‘ahū shay’*), which Sijistānī evidently quotes here because of the word ‘thing’.

3. Reading *namānad* p. 4, line 14 (with both MSS. Cairo and Tehran).

4. Cf. Qur’ān 112:3.

which may well be thought to be many or few, and since this is so, they are divisible, and every divisible is defined, and every defined is finite, and every finite is created; for every created there is the necessity of the Creator. Thus, God is the Creator, and there is for us the necessity to recognize His absolute sovereignty (*kibriyā'i wa 'aẓamat-i 'ū*) so that the assertion of His Oneness be far beyond [implying] the attributes of the creatures whether corporeal or spiritual. Understand this!

Issue Three: On eliminating attributes from the Creator

I. 3.1.

All attributes are found to exist either in substances or as adjoined to bodies or souls. As for those [attributes] that exist in the absolute substance (*jawhar-i muṭlaq*), that is, in the Intellect, they are, like the latter, directly originated through origination (*ibdā'*) from the Originator and caused through causation from a causing agent (*'āll*).¹ And causedness and originatedness (*mubda'i*) are the attribute of the Prime Intellect, who is the one created primarily, not out of a thing. And whatever attribute qualifies the primarily created or all other creatures is far removed from the Creator.

As for those [attributes] that exist in bodies, they are external qualifications such as the colours, the odours, the savours, warmth and coldness, softness and hardness.

As for those that exist in the soul, they are internal qualifications such as knowledge and ignorance, courage and cowardice, generosity and meanness, gentleness and intemperance. Now the Creator is far beyond whatever attribute qualifies the First Substance [i.e., Intellect] and the Second Substance [i.e., Soul] and the composed bodies and the [individual] souls; [He transcends all this] in every respect and by all means. Understand this!

I. 3.2.

Further, the attributes qualifying a thing result from something other than that thing, for, the beings pertaining to the realm of natural generation (*mawālīd*) take their attributes from the elements, under active influence of the celestial bodies; the elements and the [celestial] bodies receive their attributes from Nature; Nature from Soul; Soul from Intellect; and Intellect from the [creative] Word (*kalimah*) and

1. Strictly speaking, the causing agent is not God or 'the Originator' himself, but 'the Origination' (*ibdā' = hast kardan = amr*); see II. 2.2. and II. 5.2.; also *Wellsprings*, paras 24–25 and 40 (*al-'illat al-ūlā = al-amr = al-kalimah*). This ultimate Cause is also identical with 'Oneness' (II. 2. 1.–3.) . As for Intellect as 'absolute Substance', see also I. 6.2. and II. 7.1.; cf. *Wellsprings*, para. 55. See also Shigeru Kamada, 'The First Being: Intellect (*'aql/khirad*) as the link between God's Command and Creation according to Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī', *The Memoirs of the Institute of Oriental Culture*, 106 (1988), pp. 1–33.

the Origination by the Originator, who has no attribute whatsoever. For example, sweetness, the attribute of anything sweet, is adjoined to a sweet thing because of the right proportion of warmth; bitterness, the attribute of anything bitter, is adjoined to a bitter thing because of excessive warmth; acidity, the attribute of anything sour, is adjoined to a sour thing because of a lack of warmth. Similarly, the attributes of Soul, which are invisible and internal, are adjoined to the Soul due to its receiving instruction from the Intellect, and they leave it [again] due to its compliance with Nature—but this concerns [only] the individual souls.¹ Also consider the intellectual attributes, which are adjoined to the First-Originated (*mubda'-i awwal*) due to the Origination and the [creative] Word.² And the Creator is far beyond the attributes of Intellect, Soul and Body... .

Issue Five: On eliminating time from the Creator

I. 5.4.

Further, time is caused by the motion of the sphere, and the motion of the sphere is the cause of time. Whatever is a necessary concomitant of the motion of the sphere—which is the cause of time—is also a necessary concomitant of every moving object, [whether it be moving] in terms of generation or corruption, increase or decrease, or transportation from one place to another, and [all this] is not in God, for these are attributes of natural things, and God is alone and far from being susceptible of being linked with attributes, whether corporeal or spiritual. As for the time that you attribute to God, [it is to be understood] in the sense that He is the Originator (*mubdi'*) of time and the Originator of things both non-composed and composed. As for the imaginal time (*zamān-i wahmī*) from which the natural motions keep coming forth, this is the [lower] limit of the activity of the Soul, for it is through its [respective] imaginal motion (*ḥarakat-i wahmī*) that the universal Soul receives the light of the oneness of God (*nūr-i waḥdat-i īzād*), and it is through it [i.e., the imaginal motion of the universal Soul] that natural time and motion subsist [or: 'arise', *bidū qā'im ast*].³ Therefore, since imaginal motion, which is the cause of all motions, is related to Soul, and [since] universal Intellect, which is the Prime Originated (*mubda'-i awwal*), is far beyond that motion, how could it be admissible to attribute motion—which is the cause of time—or time—which is

1. Cf. I. 6. 1. and II. 7. 3. (Not translated here).

2. This is probably an allusion to the 'seven powers of Intellect' Sijistānī discusses in the *Wellsprings*. See Introd. p. 81, n. 5..

3. Cf. *Wellsprings* Para. 122, where imaginal motion (*al-ḥarakat al-wahmiyyah*), produced by the activity of the Soul, causes the manifestation of matter combined with form (or Nature). The Soul itself originates in no time as a result of Intellect's contemplation, and is as such capable of receiving its benefits from the Intellect. Also see Nāṣir-i Khusraw, *Khwān al-ikhwān* chapters 21 and 62 (ed. Qawīm, pp. 67, 70, and 185). The Neoplatonic tradition (Iamblichus, Proclus) has an 'intelligible time' between eternity and physical time.

caused by motion—to the Creator? Thus, time cannot be attributed to the Creator in any way whatsoever. Understand this!

Issue Six: On eliminating 'being' from the Creator

I. 6.1.

'Being' is attributed to beings either because [their domain] can be conceived as not-being, or because one thinks of a thing above it, which has dominated it.

As for the things which it is possible to conceive as not-being, they are those below Intellect, that is to say, those beings which turn into not-being and are under Nature.

As for that which is above things, dominating them by the Command of God, it is the Prime Intellect. And that Form which is deposited in it, is the Form of Man (*ṣūrat-i mardum*), which is stable in its own state, [although] it may happen that it inclines to Nature, worships it and becomes submissive to it.¹

I. 6.2.

Be aware that the division here is into three categories:

[a] One is a substance, which is neither being dominated nor becoming not-being. That is the Prime Intellect, which due to the Command of God is the noblest of all creatures.

[b] One is both being dominated and becoming not-being. That is the form of the natural beings pertaining to the realm of generation (*mawālīd-i ṭabīʿī*) and the external form of the religious laws (*ẓāhir-i sharīʿathā*).

[c] One is being dominated but not becoming not-being. That is the noble Form of Man, which came forth from the permanent substance, that is, the light of the world of Intellect. These [three categories of] beings are remote from the Creator, because He is the Maker-of-Being of the beings, as all beings came forth by virtue of His Command. Therefore, since 'being' is applicable to that which may be imagined as not-being, or to that which is dominated and forced by one dominant and powerful [i.e., the Intellect] above it, it is necessary to eliminate 'being' from God in every respect. Thus, it has been verified that to attribute 'being' to God is impudent, because the beings all became 'being' through His Command.

I. 6.3.

Further, he who criticizes us for eliminating 'absolute being' (*ḥastī-yi muṭlaq*) from God, while he himself eliminates the differentiated beings from God, [should consider this]: Once you subsume the differentiated beings [under a class], the result is 'absolute being'. Indeed our adversary eliminates from God the being of the celestial

1. Cf. I. 3.2.

spheres and the being of the stars and the being of the elements and the being of the realm of generation and the being of the bodies, substances and accidents, and the being of motions and rest, and every being that you may find among the creatures, all of them our adversary eliminates from God. Now, since [all this] differentiated 'being' may be subsumed under 'Absolute Being', it is necessary to eliminate both 'absolute being' and differentiated being from the Creator, so that God is far beyond both being and not-being, in every respect. Understand this!

I. 6.4.

Know that the attribution of 'being' to God is bound to come under one of two alternatives: Either He has no need for 'being', [in which case] it is redundant. And if 'being' is redundant because the Maker-of-Being has no need for it, then why blame us for eliminating that which He does not need? Or, [on the contrary] it is the case that the Maker-of-Being has Himself no existence except through being. [But in that case,] what difference¹ would there be between the Maker-of-Being and the Made-to-Be? On what grounds would it then not be admissible that the Maker-of-Being equals the Made-to-Be and the Made-to-Be, likewise, the Maker-of-Being? As a result, there would be ambiguity in our knowledge of the Maker-of-Being, the Creator, whereas we must be able to know the Maker-of-Being [as distinct] from the Made-to-Be. Thus, it is necessary to eliminate 'being' from the Maker-of-Being, the Creator, and to attribute it to the Made-to-Be, the humble servant, for it is the latter who is in need of 'being'. Thus it has been verified that 'being' is not in any way whatsoever a necessary concomitant of the Creator. Understand this!

Issue Seven: On eliminating anything antithetical to the above by-names from the Creator

I. 7.1.

If in this issue we have emphasized that the correct assertion of the [idea of the] Creator consists in eliminating the above states of being and attributes from Him, thus saying that He is neither thing nor subject to definition nor subject to qualification nor in place nor in time nor being, and then say that we have correctly asserted it on the grounds that the first elimination (*dūr kardan-i awwal*)—that is to say, of corporeal attributes—from the Creator amounts to correct assertion of transcendent Oneness (*tawhīd-i mujarrad*), this is not necessarily so. Rather, the correct assertion is that which follows [this prior] elimination. The prior elimination (*dūr kardan-i pīshīn*) entails [only] separation from that which marks creatures, while the [subsequent] elimination is the mark of correct assertion of the Creator in such a way that the claim about Him does not amount to [sheer] 'divestment' (*ta'fīl*). Nevertheless, we

1. Reading *faṣl* (Persian text p. 13, line 19), in accordance with MS. Tehran.

say as follows: The Creator is not 'thing' and not 'not-thing'; not subject to definition and not not-subject-to definition; not subject to qualification and not not-subject-to-qualification; not in place and not not-in-place; not in time and not not-in-time; not being and not not-being. As a result, we will have gotten rid of both 'likening' [Him to creatures, *tashbih*] and 'divestment' [of existence, *ta'fil*]. We get rid of 'likening' through the prior elimination (*dūr kardan-i nakhusht*) and of 'divestment' through the subsequent elimination (*dūr kardan-i ākharīn*). Thus it has been verified that [true assertion of] the transcendence of the Creator will not be achieved except by elimination of that which comes in as opposite of these eliminations, that is to say, through both the prior elimination in order to get away from likening and through the subsequent elimination in order to eliminate divestment. Understand this!

I. 7.2.

On the other hand, if we set the correct assertion of [the idea of] the Creator on one elimination of those things which we have [already] eliminated from Him [i.e., the second elimination only], thus saying that He is not 'not-thing' and not 'not-being', it follows necessarily that He becomes linked with that thing which is 'thing' and 'being'. And if we say that He is not 'not-subject-to-definition' and not 'not-subject-to-qualification' and not 'not-in-time' and not 'not-in-place', this amounts to likening and is no assertion of pure transcendent Oneness, because it implies that He is subject to qualification and subject to definition and in place and in time. Therefore, both the prior elimination [of 'things'] and the subsequent elimination [of 'not-things'] from the Creator are necessary for the pure transcendent Oneness to be [real] and absolute Singleness (*fardāniyyat-i mahd*). Understand this!¹

Discourse Two: On Bringing to Mind the First Creation [i.e. Intellect]²

Issue One: In what sense Intellect is the centre of the two worlds³

II. 1.3.

Further, the centre is that point which is the remotest from all those points that turn around it, as well as the closest of all points to that motion from which the circle becomes manifest. Likewise, Intellect is the closest of all the beings to the Command

1. For this theme of the 'double negation', central to Sijistānī's theology, see, e.g., *Wellsprings* Para. 22.

2. 'Creation' (*khalq*, *āfarīnīsh*) is used ambiguously in our text as well as in other works of Sijistānī. In the present context, as also, e.g., in *Kitāb al-iftikhār*, 35 (*al-khalq al-awwal*), it refers to what is normally called *ibdā'*, i.e., the direct 'origination' of the Intellect beyond time. Also note that the title of the present chapter is *Dar Mubda'-i Awwal* according to the table of contents as given in the Prologue.

3. For this theme, cf. *Wellsprings* Para. 84; *Kitāb ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, ed. 'Ārif Tāmīr (Beirut, 1966), p. 47.