PART 4

Varieties of Hell in Islamic Traditions

Ismaʿili-Shiʿi Visions of Hell

From the “Spiritual” Torment of the Fāṭimids to the Ṭayyibī Rock of Sijjīn

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“Locating hell” in medieval Ismaʿili-Shiʿi thought is not an easy task. Far from holding a unified and homogeneous interpretation of Islam, Ismaʿilism has a wide range of conflicting movements and ideas. But even among authors belonging to the same religious and intellectual tradition, conceptions about paradise and hell are not always uniform. In the first part of this article, I shall try to address the idea of hell in Qarmatian and Fāṭimid Ismaʿilism (fourth-fifth/tenth-eleventh centuries, mainly in Persia and Egypt); the second part is devoted to the “hell of Sijjīn” in Ṭayyibī Ismaʿilism (which appeared in Yemen from the sixth/twelfth century onwards).¹

Our investigation is seriously hampered by the “esoteric writing”² Ismaʿili authors adopted when dealing with matters related to eschatology. It is important to bear in mind that Ismaʿili conceptions concerning the Resurrection and the Afterlife are quite different from the beliefs currently held by Sunnis, Zaydīs and Twelver Shiʿis. Hence, such “dissenting” views on paradise and hell have been one of the main targets of anti-Ismaʿili polemics, as they were often used as a decisive argument for designating Ismaʿilism as *kufṛ* (“unbelief”) and its adherents as *mulḥidūn* (“apostates”) or *zanādiqa* (“Manichaeans, dualists, heretics of all kinds”).

To give only one example, Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111), after repeating again and again in his *Kitāb Fadāʾih al-bāṭiniyya* that in matters of eschatology the Ismaʿilis follow the doctrines of the philosophers (*falāsifa*), concludes with a *fatwā* (“legal opinion”) in which he settles a question that was much debated at the time, given the long-running conflict between the Saljūqs and the Nizārīs:³ are the Ismaʿilis guilty of unbelief and is the shedding of their blood legitimate? According to al-Ghazālī, those who maintain that the pleasures of

1 For a brief survey of the doctrinal history of Ismaʿilism, see De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 15–22.

2 I use this expression (“écriture ésotérique”) in the sense described by Strauss, *Persécution* 51–69.

3 Mitha, *al-Ghazālī* 1–27.

paradise and the torments of hell are purely spiritual and not corporal, and who base their doctrine on a *ta'wīl* ("allegorical interpretation") of the Quranic verses related to the Garden and Hellfire, claiming that these are only images meant for common people, are treating God as a liar. Charging God and his Prophet with lying (*takdhīb*) is an act of manifest unbelief (*kufr ṣariḥ*), and in the period of the Companions, al-Ghazālī adds, someone professing such blasphemous views would have been slain.⁴

Given the gravity of these accusations, one can easily understand why Isma'ili authors treated the thorny question of eschatology with caution, avoiding expounding their position in a clear and systematic way, preferring instead to scatter their teachings about "reward and punishment" (*al-thawāb wa-l-'iqāb*) throughout their works, including them in different contexts⁵ and shrouding them in deliberately obscure and often ambiguous language. When we add to this the numerous problems related to the transmission of Isma'ili manuscripts and the poor quality, if not outright unreliability, of many modern editions of Isma'ili texts, it becomes clear that it is not easy to make sense of the sources we are about to study.

Nevertheless, some general principles forming the background of all Isma'ili speculations about punishment and hell can be highlighted. Most authors belonging to different trends and periods of Isma'ilism would probably adhere to these, although with some important nuances. In order to facilitate the understanding of what follows, it will be useful first to briefly underline these principles.

1. Since the opening of the present "cycle of occultation" (*dawr al-satr*) by Adam (or Noah according to another opinion),⁶ a first level of hell is located in this world (*al-dunyā*). Hellfire indeed refers to the revelations and the laws imposed by the six "Speaking-Prophets" (*nuṭaqā'*, i.e., Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus and Muḥammad), as long as these revelations and laws are only taken in their outward meaning (*ẓāhir*), thus depriving them of their hidden and real sense (*bāṭin*) which each prophet entrusted to the Imams of his cycle. The satans and devils are the antagonists (*aḍḍād*) and enemies of the prophets (in the cycle of Muḥammad: the first three caliphs, the wives and companions of the Prophet hostile to 'Alī, the Umayyads, and the Abbasids), but also the *fuqahā'* (jurists), the philosophers, and the theologians among the *ahl al-ẓāhir* (exotericists, i.e., the mainstream of Sunni Islam). The *muslim* who

4 Ghazālī, *Fadā'iḥ* 151–4. Cf. McCarthy, *Freedom* 267.

5 The "dispersion of knowledge" (*tabdīd al-'ilm*) is one of the methods of "esoteric writing" often followed by Shi'i authors. See Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète* 97–8, n. 36.

6 De Smet, Adam 187–202.

accomplishes the prescriptions of the sharia without understanding their inner significance suffers the torments of hell during his earthly life, whereas the *mu'min* (believer) who is aware of their *bāṭin* aspect already enjoys the pleasures of paradise.

2. Punishment, hell, suffering and damnation are always linked to ignorance and lack of knowledge due to the rejection of the *bāṭin* that is expounded in the teaching (*ta'līm*) of the imams. On the other hand, reward, paradise, pleasure and salvation result from the acquisition and acceptance of this teaching.

3. "Rebirth" (*ba'ṭh*) is distinct from "Resurrection" (*qiyāma*). As long as the present "cycle of occultation" lasts, human souls cannot subsist without a material substrate. After the death of its body, each soul is reborn in a new body, the nature of which Isma'ili authors held conflicting opinions about, ranging from rebirth in another human body or even in that of an animal (raising the delicate issue of metempsychosis, highly controversial even in Isma'ili circles)⁷ to a rebirth in the *barzakh* or one of the celestial spheres. In any case, this new corporal "envelope" (*qālab*) is for the soul a kind of prefiguring of paradise or hell, according to the degree of salvation or damnation acquired during its previous life on earth.

4. The "Great Resurrection" (*al-qiyāma al-kubrā*) is operated by the "Resurrector" (*Qā'im*), the "Lord of the seventh cycle" (*ṣāḥib al-dawr al-sābi'*). He will open a new "cycle of manifestation" (*dawr al-kashf*) by closing the cycle of Muḥammad and abrogating the *ẓāhir* of his sharia. As he reveals the *bāṭin* of all the previous revelations in its totality, the *Qā'im* provides the soul with the knowledge it needs in order to reach its "second perfection" (*al-kamāl al-thānī*)—which means the entire actualization of its rational faculty, the intellect—and, ultimately, to be liberated from its entanglement in matter. Hence, *qiyāma* is a purely spiritual event which precludes the resurrection of the body. The afterlife concerns only the souls, not their bodies. Paradise is then located in the intelligible world: the abode of the saved souls is the Throne (*ʿarsh*) of God and its Pedestal (*kursī*), identified respectively with the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul, and the Closest Angels (*al-malā'ika al-muqarrabūn*), which refer to the remaining cosmic entities (*ḥudūd*) composing the intelligible world. As to the location of hell after the Great Resurrection, this issue is shrouded in obscurity. Even the souls of the wicked are resurrected without their body and hellfire refers to a purely spiritual punishment: all authors seem to agree on these matters. But does this mean that hell is also located in the intelligible world? Or is there a place of punishment elsewhere in the universe; for instance, somewhere in the celestial

7 De Smet, Transmigration 77–110.

spheres, or even here on earth? Qarmatian and Fāṭimid authors do not address this question directly and explicitly, and they also avoid the related topic of the “end of the world”: does the advent of the Great Resurrection suppose that the “heavens and the earth” will cease to exist, or is the world eternal? Later Ṭayyibī doctrine would develop a theory about the “hell of Sijjīn”, and integrate it into the structure of its complex cosmic system. But here again, many ambiguities remain.

1 The *Kitāb al-Shajara* Attributed to Abū Tammām (Fourth/Tenth Century)

As a great part of Qarmatian⁸ literature from the fourth/tenth century has been lost, the “Book of the Tree” (*Kitāb al-Shajara*) is of the greatest importance for our present investigation. However, the transmission of the text, its dating, and the identification of its author raise many problems, amplified by the mystifications of its modern editor.

The book was first published by ‘Ārif Tāmīr in 1965 with the title *Kitāb al-Īdāh* and attributed to Shihāb al-Dīn Abū Firās al-Maynaqī (d. 937/1530 or 947/1540), a Syrian Nizārī *dā’ī*. A close examination of the text shows that the first part is missing and that its contents have nothing to do with tenth/sixteenth century Syrian Nizārim, reflecting instead a much older strand of Isma‘īli doctrine. Without referring to his previous edition, ‘Ārif Tāmīr published an almost identical text in 1982, but this time with the title *Kitāb Shajarat al-yaqīn* and under the name of ‘Abdān (d. ca. 286/899), one of the founders of the Qarmatian movement! Although the book clearly belongs to the Qarmatian tradition, its attribution to ‘Abdān seems improbable, as the author extensively quotes the now lost *Kitāb al-Maḥṣūl* of Muḥammad al-Nasafī (d. 332/934). Eventually, Paul Walker discovered the first part of a *Kitāb al-Shajara* attributed to a *dā’ī* called Abū Tammām in the Hamdani Collection of Isma‘īli manuscripts. As the last folios of this manuscript include the beginning of the text published by Tāmīr, Walker concluded that Tāmīr’s text is the second part of the *Kitāb al-Shajara* by Abū Tammām, obviously a Qarmatian *dā’ī* and disciple of al-Nasafī, active in Khurāsān during the fourth/tenth century.⁹

8 I use the term “Qarmatian” to designate those Isma‘īlis, mainly belonging to the Eastern *da‘wa*, who remained faithful to the original doctrine by considering Muḥammad b. Ismā‘īl as the seventh and last Imam of the cycle of Muḥammad and as the Qā‘im whose advent was expected in the near future. They thus rejected the claims of the Fāṭimids to the imamate.

9 Walker, Abū Tammām 343–52; Madelung and Walker, *Heresiography* VII–VIII, 1–9.

Tāmir seems to have based his two editions upon different manuscripts, as there are variant readings due to scribal errors and interpolations. The text, which apparently was not transmitted by the Indian Bohras¹⁰ but only by Syrian Nizarīs whose libraries remain closed to outsiders, is in a poor condition, with numerous corrupted passages, incongruities and contradictions, omissions, and false readings, probably worsened by Tāmir's unreliable editing of Arabic texts.¹¹ Hence, without access to the manuscripts, it is clear that the contents of the *Kitāb al-Shajara* must be studied with great caution. My analysis of its doctrine about hell and punishment can, therefore, only be tentative.

Throughout his work, the author makes several short statements about paradise and hell which are quite conventional parts of Isma'ili doctrine. As paradise is the "spiritual world" (*al-ʿalam al-rūḥānī*), "entering paradise" means, for the *mustajīb* (the Isma'ili initiate who "responds" to the call of the imam), leaving the sense world and returning to the world of the Intellect.¹² The *zāhir* is the cause of death and punishment ("the *muslim* is the one who dies"), whereas the *bāṭin* leads to resurrection and reward.¹³ "The satans and devils *in potentia*", which are only concerned with the *zāhir*, are bereft of the knowledge proceeding from the Intellect: for them, this lack of knowledge is equivalent to hell.¹⁴

However, one section of the book is exclusively devoted to the question of punishment and hellfire.¹⁵ It contains a very original doctrine about seven hells located in the seven planetary spheres, for which there is to my knowledge no direct parallel in Isma'ili literature.

The author begins by distinguishing three kinds of fire, each situated in a different part of the universe and corresponding to a particular mode of punishment. "Corporal fire" (*al-nār al-jusmāniyya*) refers to the element "fire", which encompasses the three other elements: air, water and earth. As "corporal fire" is one of the four elements of the sublunary world, the hell to which it refers is

10 The Qarmatian and Fāṭimid literature written in Arabic was mainly transmitted by the Ṭayyibi Isma'ili community in Yemen and later in India, where they are known as Bohras.

11 For a similar case, that of *al-Risāla al-Mudhhiba* attributed to al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān; see De Smet, *The Risāla al-Mudhhiba* 309–19.

12 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 40, 42, 138/38, 39, 132. For all quotes from the *Kitāb al-Shajara*, the first pagination refers to the text published by Tāmir under the name of 'Abdān, the second (after the slash) refers to the text he published under the name of Abū Firās al-Maynaqī.

13 Ibid., 50/48.

14 Ibid., 75/74. On the distinction between satans and devils *in potentia* (*bi-l-quwwa*) and in act (*bi-l-fi'l*), one of the main items of the book, see Madelung and Walker, *Heresiography* 19–28.

15 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 125–51/121–45.

located here on earth.¹⁶ Next, there is the “celestial fire” (*al-nār al-jirmāniyya*),¹⁷ generated by the rotation of the seven planetary spheres. As each sphere contains its own hell, there are seven celestial hells in which seven categories of *ahl al-ẓāhir* are punished. Both kinds of fire and the hells they nourish will last for as long as the heavens and the earth exist. After their annihilation (with the advent of the *Qā'im*) only the third kind of fire will remain: the “spiritual fire” (*al-nār al-rūḥāniyya*), in which the souls of the damned will burn forever.¹⁸

Abū Tammām continues by giving a long description of the seven hells located in the planetary spheres. Strangely enough, these hells seem to be intended only for the punishment of “scholars and intellectuals”, and not for ordinary people. Only the *khāṣṣ* (“the elite”) is to be sent to these celestial hells, not the *‘āmm* (“the populace”). According to the author, when the satans and the devils *in potentia* are separated from their corporal envelopes (*qawālib*), they become satans and devils *in actu*. This means that their souls, with their vegetative, sensitive, and rational faculties, are transported to the sphere of the moon, where they are attached to the ether that composes this sphere (probably because, prior to the advent of the *Qā'im*, souls cannot exist without a material substrate). Their ethereal bodies are ignited by the fire generated by the rotation of the moon. Those souls which have acquired a highly imperfect, ugly, and compact form are compelled to stay there, as they are forbidden from proceeding further in their ascension through the spheres. These are the souls of well-known doctors and philosophers of nature who criticized the science of *ta'wīl* and proclaimed instead the eternity of the world, such as the materialists (*dahriyya*). This hell, located in the sphere of the moon, is called *saqar* in the Quran (Q 74: 42–7).¹⁹

The less compact souls enter the sphere of Mercury (*‘utārid*) and burn in the fire generated by its rotation and by that of the moon. The souls of the mathematicians and geometers (*muhandisūn*) among the *ahl al-ẓāhir* are

16 Ibid., 125/121. This hierarchy of the four elements—earth, water, air, fire—is widespread in Isma‘ili doctrine. See, for instance, al-Sijistānī, *Yanābi‘* 15; al-Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 229, 275. However, it is not clear to me why the author refers to the element “fire” with the term “ether” (*athīr*), the “fifth element” composing the matter of the heavenly spheres, stars and planets according to Aristotle. The text is probably corrupted, as the celestial spheres are linked to the second kind of fire.

17 In Arabic Neoplatonic texts, *jism* refers usually to bodies in the sublunary world, composed of the four elements, whereas *jirm* is used for the celestial bodies. See, for instance, Rudolph, *Doxographie* 140–1.

18 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 125/121.

19 Ibid., 125–6/121. There follows a long set of speculations about the correspondences between the letters of the words *qamar* (“moon”) and *saqar*.

placed here: their hell, located in the sphere of Mercury, is called *al-hāwīya* (Q 101: 9–1). At the next sphere, that of Venus (*zuharā*), the souls of astronomers and astrologers (*munajjimūn*) are kept: they remain there, in a hell called *jaḥīm*.²⁰ The “satanic forms” (*al-ṣuwar al-shayṭāniyya*) of the souls of the philosophers (*falāsifa*), in particular those versed in metaphysics (*mā ba'da al-ṭabī'a*), remain in the sphere of the sun, burned in the fire generated by the rotation of the spheres of Venus and the sun itself. Their hell, located there, is called *laẓā* (Q 70: 15–6). The “jurists engaged in trivialities” (*al-fuqahā' al-qishriyya*),²¹ i.e., those who only accepted the *ẓāhir* of the laws revealed by the prophets, are punished in the sphere of Mars (*mirrikh*), in a hell called *al-ḥuṭama* (Q 104: 4–6). The souls of their colleagues trained in theology (*kalām*) have a “satanic form” that prevents them from proceeding beyond the sphere of Jupiter (*mushtarā*): here, they burn in a hell called *jahannam* (Q 21: 98). Finally, the souls of apostates, those who, after being initiated into the science of *ta'wīl*, subsequently rejected it, are held in the sphere of Saturn (*zuḥal*): their hell is called *al-sa'īr* (Q 67: 5).²²

By making use of the rich variety of Quranic terms related to hell and hell-fire, Abū Tammām is able to speak of seven celestial hells, located in the seven planetary spheres. These are, according to the author, the seven gates of hell mentioned in Q 15: 44. The first six of these hells, as we have seen, are the abode of specific categories of “scientists and scholars” who, although having acquired knowledge and science, refused to accept the teaching of the Imams. The ethereal bodies in which their compact and obscured souls (their “satanic forms”) are imprisoned are ignited by the heat proceeding from the rotation of the spheres. Yet at the same time, they are also tormented by an intense cold (*zamharīr*) caused by the rotation of the sphere of the zodiac that penetrates the planetary spheres with varying degrees of intensity. According to Abū Tammām, the Prophet would have alluded to this fact in the following hadith: “In hell there is an intense cold with which the unbelievers are punished”. Apparently, heat and cold increase from sphere to sphere, starting at

20 Ibid., 126–7/122 (with kabbalistic speculations about the letters forming the names *uṭārid-hāwīya* and *zuharā-jahīm*). Although this last name is Quranic, the author quotes Q 2:39, in which *jaḥīm* is not mentioned.

21 *Qishriyya* and its synonym *hashwiyya* are derogatory terms used by the Isma'ilis to designate the *ahl al-ẓāhir*, in particular the Sunnis.

22 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 127–9/122–4. The correspondence between the name of the sphere and the hell which is located in it, is “proved” once again by kabbalistic speculations about the letters of *shams* (“sun”)–*laẓā*, *mirrikh-ḥuṭama*, *mushtarā-jahannam* and *zuḥal-sa'īr*.

the moon and ending with Saturn. The hell of Saturn is therefore the worst place of punishment, where the gravest category of sinners, the apostates, are tortured.²³

Despite all this, the punishment of the physicians, mathematicians, astronomers, metaphysicians, jurists and theologians in their six celestial hells is only temporary. Although the text is not entirely clear, the author seems to present their torment as a kind of “purgatory”. Burning in the celestial spheres implies a process of purification for these souls. As a result of the gravity of their—intellectual—sins and their capacity to gradually adopt a “spiritual form” (*ṣūra rūḥāniyya*), they will sooner or later be allowed to join the other *muqalladūn* which are in the “rotation” (*dawrān*) of the successive “corporeal generations” (*al-mutawallidāt al-jusmāniyya*).²⁴

In Ismaʿili terminology, the *muqalladūn* are the *ahl al-taqlīd*, the common people (*al-ʿamm*) who blindly follow (*taqlīd*) the outward (*ẓāhir*) meaning of the Quran and the Law without knowing their real, internal (*bāṭin*) sense. If I understand the text correctly, the author states that, as soon as the souls of the “scholars” have undergone their punishment in the celestial hells, they shall return to earth and enter into the cycle of successive reincarnations that is hell for ordinary people. In other words, after their return, they again burn in the first kind of fire, the “corporeal fire” of the sublunary world.

As is usual in Ismaʿili works belonging to the Qarmatian and Fāṭimid traditions, Abū Tammām treats the thorny question of the transmigration of the soul in deliberately obscure and veiled terms. His starting point seems to be Q 4:56: “Those who disbelieve Our revelations, We shall expose them to the Fire. As often as their skins are consumed We shall exchange them for fresh skins that they may taste the torment”.²⁵ The author first gives a daring interpretation of this verse, stating that it contains an allusion to the succession of the prophetic cycles: every prophet abrogates the *ẓāhir* of the sharia of his predecessor and imposes the *ẓāhir* of a new sharia. This is the “lower punishment” (*al-ʿadhāb al-adnā*) mentioned in Q 32:21. The *ẓāhir* of the sharia being hell on earth, the “lower punishment” occurs with the succession of the corporeal generations along the prophetic cycles.²⁶ The common people (*al-ʿamm*), the

23 Ibid., 130–2/126–32.

24 Ibid., 134–5/129–30.

25 The translation is that of Pickthall.

26 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 134/129. According to Poonawala in the English introduction to Sijistānī, *Maqālīd* 28, Abū Muḥammad al-Yamanī, in his *ʿAqāʾid al-thalāth wa-l-sabʿina firqa* (written ca. 540/1145–6), attacks Abū Tammām for having declared in his *Shajarat*

ordinary *muqalladūn*, are swept away in the rotation (*dawrān*) of the successive corporal generations. Their souls are

established in the skins of the corporal generations, transported (*tastahīlu*) from one skin to another during the rotation, and they are supported by the shells (*qushūr*) of the physical elements which are transformed from one form into another during transmigration (*jawalān*).²⁷

This clearly suggests metempsychosis and is presented as a second *ta'wīl* of Q 4:56.²⁸ Later on, the verse is again quoted in relation to “the lower punishment by the shells”, which is the lowest level of hell, located here on earth, and clearly distinguished from the second level which are the seven hells located in the planetary spheres.²⁹ As they belong to the “lower punishment” the terrestrial and celestial hells are not eternal. Only for the souls of the apostates in the hell of Saturn is no salvation possible.

With the advent of the *Qā'im*, when the heavens and the earth will be annihilated, punishment in the corporal and celestial fire comes to an end. The Great Resurrection initiates the “spiritual punishment” (*al-'adhāb al-rūḥānīyya*), located in the “spiritual fire” of the intelligible world. Strangely enough, this third level of hell, the only one that will last forever, seems to be restricted to the souls of apostates. Upon the destruction of their abode—the sphere of Saturn—they will enter the intelligible world. They are allowed to do so because of the “spiritual form” they acquired at the very moment when they took their oath of allegiance (*'ahd*) before the Imam or his representative.³⁰ This form, which remained in their soul even after they betrayed the *da'wa* and rejected the teaching of the Imam, grants them access to the intelligible world, as the sphere of Saturn which blocked their way no longer exists. However, being unprepared to receive the “influences” (*āthār*) and the “inspiration” (*ta'yīd*) proceeding from the Universal Intellect,³¹ they are unable to receive

al-dīn that the strict observance of the sharia in everyday life is hell for the ordinary Muslim. Cf. Walker, Abū Tammām 346.

27 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 137/131.

28 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 136–7/130–1; cf. *ibid.*, 150–1/144–5. The author (*ibid.*, 137/131) says that he developed this question in more detail in his *Kitāb al-Burhān*. On this lost work, see Walker, Abū Tammām 349–51.

29 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 140–1/134.

30 On the Isma'ili oath of allegiance that every neophyte has to take prior to the beginning of his initiation, see Halm, Oath 91–8.

31 In Isma'ili terminology, *āthār* (pl. of *athar*) and *ta'yīd* refer to the flow proceeding from the Intellect. This continuous emanation maintains all beings in existence; it is also the

its “benefits” and “graces”, which represent the rewards of the blessed. Residing in paradise without being able to participate in its (intellectual) delights is an extreme form of punishment called “spiritual fire” or “spiritual hell”.³²

As to the *ahl al-zāhir* who never converted to Ismaʿilism, Abū Tammām remains silent about their destiny. Probably they will “die”. As their souls never succeeded, in spite of their successive reincarnations, to become plainly actualized by the teaching of the Imam, one might surmise that they will vanish with the disintegration of the sense world.

Upon the death of their bodies the blessed souls of the initiates are transported through the seven planetary spheres. The subtleness of their “spiritual forms” makes them insensible to the heat of the various celestial fires and allows them to pass through the sphere of Saturn and enter the sphere of the zodiac. However, just as it is impossible to acquire knowledge of the *bāṭin* (= paradise) without previous knowledge and experience of the *zāhir* (= hell), even the blessed are unable to proceed directly to the intelligible world, because prior to the advent of the *Qāʾim* their souls still need a bodily substrate. In the eighth sphere they receive a temporary punishment for their sins, as the sphere of the zodiac acts as a kind of “purgatory for the elect”. This was what the Prophet meant when he said: “The sinful believer will be punished in the fire, in function of his sins, and then he will leave it”.³³ With the advent of the *Qāʾim* they will enter the intelligible world, which is the abode of the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul.

2 Hell in the Works of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971)

In the present state of our documentation, the impressive hierarchy of seven celestial hells described by the author of *Kitāb al-Shajara* remains unparalleled in the Ismaʿili literature from that time. Nevertheless, the idea that, after the death of their bodies, human souls rise to the heavenly spheres in order to receive a temporary and provisional reward or punishment before the advent of the *Qāʾim* is attested by other Ismaʿili texts. The still unpublished *Kitāb al-Fatarāt* attributed to Jaʿfar b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d. c. 346/957), for instance, gives the sun a central role in the temporary reward and chastisement of the souls of the deceased, as it sends the saved souls of the Ismaʿili initiates to the

source of revelation and it provides the knowledge necessary for salvation through the intermediary of the Imams and their representatives.

32 Abū Tammām, *Shajara* 135–6, 139/129–31, 133.

33 Ibid., 137–9/131–3 (the hadith is quoted in *ibid.*, 139/133).

spheres of Jupiter and Venus (probably in a kind of “purgatory for the elect” that has nothing to do with the hells of Jupiter and Venus described by Abū Tammām) and the wicked souls of the unbelievers to the spheres of the ominous planets Saturn and Mars.³⁴

As far as I can see, this kind of speculation, which probably served as an alternative to the doctrine of successive transmigrations of the soul from one terrestrial body to another prior to the advent of the Great Resurrection, does not occur in the writings of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī. This celebrated Iranian *dā'ī*, who first served the Qarmatian *da'wa* before recognizing the claims of the Fāṭimids to the imamate,³⁵ explicitly rejected the traditional Islamic doctrine about the Resurrection and the afterlife in paradise or hell. But his own views on eschatology, in particular the destiny of the souls of the damned, remain shrouded in obscurity.³⁶

Like the author of *Kitāb al-Shajara*, al-Sijistānī locates hell, or at least a first level of it, in the sublunary world. The torments of hellfire, as they are described symbolically in the Quran, in fact refer to the sufferings of ordinary Muslims, condemned to comply with a religion, that is, Islam, and a Law, that is, sharia, the real meaning of which is ignored. In the 28th “wellspring” of his *Kitāb al-Yanābiʿ* (“The Book of Wellsprings”), al-Sijistānī claims that paradise and its pleasures refer to the state of felicity provided by the instruction of the Imam, whereas hell means the *ẓāhir* of the sharia without its *bāṭin*. Just like the element “fire” (*nār*), the sharia is both beneficial and harmful. The believer is not able to acquire the virtues necessary for his salvation without adhering to the principles of religious law, but the practice of the sharia without knowledge of its inner sense is a deadly poison which ineluctably leads to perdition. Al-Sijistānī is perfectly clear on this issue:

Fire is employed for the improvement of life and for the cooking of raw things even though it corrupts natural forms and makes them unknowable so that the form of what has a form cannot be grasped. In a way similar to this, normative scriptural laws (*al-sharāʿ al-nāmūsiyya*), devoid of [underlying] sciences, are employed for the improvement of the natural world and for the maintenance of people in it, despite [the danger] that being warmed by them and using them corrupts the sublime form and causes doubt and ambiguity to occur. But when that form appears in its

34 Orthmann, *Astrologie* 354.

35 On the works and thought of al-Sijistānī, see De Smet, *Religiöse Anwendung* 519, 527–9.

36 As remarked by Walker, *Early Philosophical Shi'ism* 134–42, especially 142; Poonawala, English introduction to Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* xxiv–vi.

true identity, it beholds the laws inflicting such grievous pain to the souls [still] attached to them [...]. An example here would be a deadly poison that nature has produced in order to ameliorate the condition of people on certain occasions that call for it. If someone were to prolong its use, his life would be vitiated and he would be cut off from the pleasures of this sensual world.³⁷

In other words, the Ismaʿili initiates, by gradually acquiring the esoteric knowledge taught by the Imam and his representatives, enjoy an intellectual pleasure during their earthly life which is a foretaste of their state of felicity in paradise. The pious “exotericist” Muslim, on the other hand, although the prescriptions of the sharia turn him away from earthly pleasures, is at the same time bereft of any form of intellectual enjoyment, so that his daily life is a hell that foreshadows his future sojourn in hell.

What happens to the elect and the souls of the damned after the death of their bodies is not clear in al-Sijistānī’s thought. As with many other Ismaʿili authors, he introduces a distinction between “rebirth” (*baʿth* or *bar-angikhtan* in Persian) and “resurrection” (*qiyāma*), linking them with the “two blows of the trumpet” mentioned in Q 39:68. Prior to the advent of the *Qāʾim* (the “Lord of the seventh cycle” who will operate the Great Resurrection, “the second blow”), souls cannot exist without a corporal substrate. Hence, they must continuously be reborn into new bodies whose perfection is in accordance with the degree of purification attained by them during their previous lives. Although al-Sijistānī explicitly rejects reincarnation into animals as a form of punishment—a doctrine he attributes to the “extremists” (*ghulāt*)³⁸—it seems to me that his conception of *baʿth* (“the first blow”) implies a form of transmigration, and that for impure souls the long cycle of successive reincarnations represents a form of corporal hell (“the lower punishment”, *al-ʿadhāb al-adnā*) in a foreshadowing of the “greater punishment”, the “real hell”, that will be purely spiritual.³⁹ In other words, hell is corporal before *qiyāma* and spiritual after *qiyāma*.

37 Sijistānī, *Yanābīʿ* 68 (§ 133). The translation is that of Walker, *Wellsprings* 90.

38 Sijistānī, *Maqālīd* 200–4; idem, *Kashf* 59–60, French trans. Corbin, *Dévoilement* 93–4, English trans. Landolt, *Unveiling* 109–10.

39 On the distinction between *baʿth* and *qiyāma*, see Sijistānī, *Kashf* 81–94, Corbin, *Dévoilement* 114–28, and Landolt, *Unveiling* 118–27. See also Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* 181–205; *Bāhira* 40–9. For a detailed analysis of these texts, see De Smet, *Transmigration* 82–86, 95–103.

This seems to be confirmed by al-Sijistānī's *al-Risāla al-bāhira*, which is in large part a refutation of traditional Muslim views on eschatology. Raising the question of the soul's fate before the advent of the *Qā'im*, the author warns the reader that this matter is "very difficult, as it is only accessible to those who possess a pure soul prepared to conceive spiritual and luminous things". Only the initiates mastering the "knowledge of the *barzakhs*" (*ma'rifat al-barāzikh*) are able to understand this matter.⁴⁰ Traditional Muslim eschatology usually interprets the Quranic term *barzakh* ("barrier") as referring to the place where the souls of the deceased remain while awaiting the Day of Resurrection, and where they receive a foretaste of their future destiny in paradise or hell.⁴¹ Al-Sijistānī, however, uses the term in the plural form and applies it to the bodies into which the souls transmigrate prior to the *Qiyāma*. The corrupted souls, spoiled by the vices of the physical world, are reborn in bodies prepared to receive such ugly forms, by the influence of the celestial spheres at the moment of their generation. This means that they return in bodies naturally predisposed to all kinds of depravation and sin. These corrupted bodies are their *barzakhs* in which they suffer the torments of hell during their successive earthly lives. The purified souls, on the other hand, are reborn in harmonious and noble bodies, predisposed to the acquisition of knowledge and virtues, through which they enjoy the pleasures of paradise.⁴²

While the whole notion of *barzakhs* remains quite obscure, al-Sijistānī is far more explicit when refuting the resurrection of the body during the Great *Qiyāma*. The *ahl al-ẓāhir* who limit themselves to a literal understanding of the Quranic verses referring to *qiyāma* believe that the bodies of the deceased will be reassembled and their souls attached to them, so that they will appear before the Judge with the same bodies they possessed during their earthly lives. After judgment, they will enter paradise or hell while keeping their bodies. According to al-Sijistānī, such a belief is both ridiculous and contrary to reason, as it reflects complete ignorance about the real meaning (*ḥaqīqa*) of *qiyāma*. To the *ahl al-ḥaqā'iq* (i.e., the Ismaʿilis) *qiyāma* is a "spiritual, psychic state" (*ḥāl rūḥānī nafsānī*). This means that, with the appearance of the "pure soul" (*nafs zakīyya*) of the *Qā'im*, the "influences" and "benefits" proceeding from the intelligible world will plainly illuminate the souls of the elect, causing their spiritual resurrection.⁴³ Transformed by the "cognitive and

40 Sijistānī, *Bāhira* 46.

41 Guiraud, *Barzakh* 114–8.

42 Sijistānī, *Bāhira* 40, 46–7. Cf. Madelung, Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, 138–9; De Smet, Transmigration 101–103.

43 Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* 182–4, 194.

intellectual emanations" (*al-idāfāt al-'ilmiyya al-'aqliyya*) which are to descend from the Universal Intellect through the intermediary of the "pure soul" of the Resurrector, they will abandon forever their bodily vehicle and ascend to the intelligible world, meaning paradise. The impure and darkened souls, however, will not gain any advantage from these emanations and illuminations, remaining in profound obscurity, which is hell for them.⁴⁴

In his *Kitāb al-Iftikhār*, al-Sijistānī describes punishment (manifestly after the Resurrection) in the following terms:

Punishment is a distress (*shaqwa*) attached to the souls, which causes the oppression (*ḍīq*) of their substance, prevents them from obtaining the ranks which are convenient for them and provokes their downfall to the lowest levels, because of their inadvertence and neglect of the luminous world that is theirs, and because of their link with and their blind passion for the material things of this world, which only procure for them vileness and poverty. Thus, they continuously move further away from felicity (*sa'āda*), being more and more confused in their distress. What distress is more obvious than the distress of the ignorant people who remain in this state day and night?⁴⁵

It is clear from this text that, in contrast to Abū Tammām, al-Sijistānī does not locate his ultimate hell in the intelligible world. For him, the meaning of hell is rather privation from knowledge and exclusion from the intelligible world. The doomed remain outside. But where? What is their abode? Al-Sijistānī states only that after the Resurrection, those punished will stay close to the natural world.⁴⁶ Does this then mean that the physical world will continue after the advent of the *Qā'im*? Certainly, in the 13th "Wellspring" of his *Kitāb al-Yanābī'*, he explicitly advocates the eternity of creation and hence of all levels of reality. As the act of creation (*ibdā'*) through which God, who is beyond Being, produced the first being (the Intellect) was absolutely perfect, transforming being into non-being—which implies the destruction of creation—would be an act of imperfection, unworthy of God. Hence, Intellect, Soul, Nature, minerals, plants, animals, man, reward, punishment, paradise and hell cannot be annihilated and are therefore eternal.⁴⁷ It is not clear, however, if the hell of the

44 Sijistānī, *Bahira* 45, 48–9.

45 Sijistānī, *Iftikhār* 212.

46 Sijistānī, *Ithbāt* 35.

47 Sijistānī, *Yanābī'* 37–8 (§ 66–9); Walker, *Wellsprings* 65–6.

damned is located somewhere in a place close to the physical world, or if their torment consists of a new cycle of successive transmigrations here on earth.⁴⁸

3 Hell in the Works of Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. after 411/1020)

Although he was one of the most famous representatives of “moderate” Fāṭimid Isma'īlism, active under the reign of the caliph-Imam al-Ḥākim, al-Kirmānī⁴⁹ openly includes the Quranic descriptions of paradise and hell among the “sense images” which the Prophet⁵⁰ used in order to express a reality that is not perceivable by human senses.

In his main work *Kitāb Rāḥat al-ʿaql*, he states that the knowledge of the real quiddity (*māhiyya*) of reward and punishment is an “obstructed path” (*sabīl munsadd*) only practicable for the “inspired” (*al-muʿayyadūn*). This is because the Prophet, when speaking about realities which are not perceptible to the senses (such as God, the angels, paradise, hell, reward and punishment) was compelled to make use of images and symbols by referring to things which can be sensed. Had he not done so, common people would have been unable to understand his message. Thus, he described hell with images related to fire, pain, boiling water, and instruments of torture only for pedagogical reasons, in order to evoke repugnance and fear of hell.⁵¹

In nearly identical terms, al-Kirmānī defends in his *Kitāb al-Maṣābiḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma* the symbolic nature of the Quranic descriptions of paradise and hell:

48 The anonymous author of the *Jāmiʿat al-jāmiʿa*, attributed to the Brethren of Purity, seems close to agreeing with Abū Tammām and al-Sijistānī when he places hell in the physical world. As in the *Kitāb al-Shajara* (see above), Q 4:56 is quoted as scriptural proof for the doctrine of metempsychosis: after death, the impure souls return to “the abode of abasement, the place of illnesses and pains in the world of generation and corruption”. Their torture will last there “as long as the heavens and the earth exist” (Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ [attr.], *Jāmiʿat* 176). As noted by Baffioni, *Éléments* 108 n. 27, this raises the question of the eternity of hell.

49 On Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, see De Smet, *Quiétude* 3–16; idem, *Religiöse Anwendung* 518–20, 529–31; Walker, *Kirmani* 1–61.

50 According to common Isma'īli doctrine, the Quran was “created” by the Prophet from a non-verbal “inspiration” (*taʿyīd*) he received from the intelligible world. His task was to translate this inspiration into the language of his people and in accordance with their intellectual level (i.e., Arabic spoken by illiterate Bedouins). See De Smet, *Triade* 319–36.

51 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 522–3.

There is no way to comprehend what is unseen and not subject to sensation other than by means of an expression for it, that is, something that can be seen and sensed. The Messenger reported about what cannot be seen or sensed, such as God, paradise and its felicity, hell and its torments [...]. Thus, for example, [...] his report about hell and its torments, which are neither seen nor sensed, is by reference to fire and burning and boiling water and burning thirst and iron chains and fetters and all manner of physical pains that are entirely seen and sensed. If that is a necessary consequence, what he said and did and summoned to in regard to the afterlife follows the rule of similitudes in forming likenesses (*al-amthāl fī l-tashbīh*). Similitudes require the things that are represented by them (*al-amthāl taqtaḍī l-mumaththalāt*) and the things that are represented are designated by interpretation (*ta'wīl*). Thus, for what the Messenger brought and summoned [people] to in the revelation and law, there is an interpretation. Hence, the interpretation is necessary.⁵²

As the Quranic descriptions of paradise and hell are purely symbolic, their literal sense (*ẓāhir*) seems absurd and contrary to reason. They have, however, an inner, esoteric meaning (*bāṭin*) which has to be discovered by *ta'wīl* under the guidance of the Imam. How to understand the *bāṭin* of hell in al-Kirmānī's thought is indeed an "obstructed path" for the non-initiate, as it is not easy to interpret the few passages referring to it.

In a certain sense, the issue is complicated by the fact that al-Kirmānī rejects without compromise any idea of the transmigration of the soul, even criticizing al-Sijistānī on this point, albeit in veiled terms.⁵³ Nevertheless, he adopts the latter's distinction between *ba'th* and *qiyāma*, linked to the "two blows from the trumpet".⁵⁴ Here again, the distinction appears between the "rebirth" or first resurrection of the soul after the death of its body, and the second resurrection operated by the *Qā'im*, the "Lord of the seventh cycle" who brings the "new creation" (*al-khalq al-jadīd*) to completion.

However, the last part of al-Kirmānī's *Rāḥat al-aql* which is devoted to eschatology raises some problems. Although usually a very careful writer adopting a rigorous method of "scholastic" argumentation, he seems here to mix the two resurrections, so that it is not always clear whether his scattered remarks

52 Kirmānī, *Maṣābīḥ*, 32; the translation is that of Walker, *Master of the Age*, 66–7. A similar argument occurs in Kirmānī, *Kāfiyya* 151–2; Haji, *Distinguished* 60.

53 Kirmānī, *Tanbīh* 212–21; idem, *Aqwāl* 50–4; idem, *Rāḥat* 543–5. Cf. De Smet, Transmigration 87–93; Walker, Metempsychosis 236–8.

54 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 511, 514–5.

on “reward and punishment” refer to the destiny of souls before or after the appearance of the *Qā'im*. In other words, he follows an esoteric way of writing, dispersing his doctrine over several passages intersected with Quranic verses and hadith for which the *ta'wīl* is not always given.⁵⁵ In any case, it is clear that al-Kirmānī adheres to the general Isma'ili principle that, before the advent of the *Qā'im*, the soul cannot exist without a material substrate, whereas the Great Resurrection is purely a spiritual event.

First of all, al-Kirmānī quotes a version of the well-known hadith about the “interrogation in the tomb”: after the deceased is buried, he is interrogated about his deeds and, depending on his answers, the gates of paradise or hell are opened for him, so that he already knows what his future abode will be.⁵⁶ Much later, al-Kirmānī introduces the notion of *barzakh* (quoting Q 23: 101): after the death of their bodies, all the souls are gathered in the *barzakh*, waiting there for the moment when all cycles will be closed by the advent of the *Qā'im*, well aware of what their future condition in paradise or hell will be. Contrary to al-Sijistānī, who used the term in the plural form and identified the *barzakhs* with the bodies into which the souls have to transmigrate, al-Kirmānī locates the *barzakh* at the top of the physical world, just below but outside the intelligible world.⁵⁷ He then quotes a second version of the hadith about the “interrogation in the tomb”:

When the deceased is laid in the tomb, he is submitted to an interrogation. If he belongs to those who have professed God's unity (*tawhīd*) and who acted in obedience to Him and to His Messenger, the gate of paradise is opened for him. The actions he accomplished by worshiping God take the form of a person (or a human body, *tashkhaṣu*) which comfort him in the distress he suffers in the tomb and announces to him that he belongs to the elect. Hence, his soul is in a state of rest (*rāḥa*) until the day of the Resurrection [...]. On the other hand, if he belongs to those who were guilty of polytheism (*shirk*), who were disobedient and proud, and who neglected and refused the worship of God, the gate of the hell is opened for him. His base actions become for him an animal (*ḥayawān*) which tortures him and fills him with terror, so that he remains in distress and fright until the day of Resurrection, being certain to belong to the inhabitants of hell.⁵⁸

55 See De Smet, Transmigration 103–7.

56 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 519–20.

57 Ibid., 538–9, 543.

58 Ibid., 538.

From this, one may infer that this hadith is referring to the *barzakh*. As all souls still need a corporal substrate, those saved are reborn here in a noble body which prepares them to receive all the benefits of the intelligible world on the day of *qiyāma*, whereas the doomed ones are reborn in an “animal body” which only increases their state of depravation.

On the day of Resurrection, the “spirit of sanctity” (*rūḥ al-quds*, i.e., the infusion emanating from the Universal Intellect) will reach, through the intermediary of the “Lord of the seventh cycle”, all the souls gathered in the *barzakh*, allowing them to leave that place, meaning they are liberated from any material substrate. All the souls that once came into existence, will be “as the form of one single person” (*ka-shakhṣ wāḥid*) made up of several limbs. According to the form each individual soul acquired during its earthly life, it will be allotted a place in one of the limbs of this “spiritual man”, the most subtle (*latīf*) souls being near the head and the most compact ones at the lowest level, that of the feet. This is the “second creation”, the perfection of the “first creation” which was the creation of “the first *shakhṣ* or the first being” (i.e., the Universal Intellect).⁵⁹

It is quite clear that, to al-Kirmānī, paradise is located in the world of the Intellect. Due to the spiritual “benefits” (*faḍā'il*) proceeding from the “pure soul” of the *Qā'im*, (all?) the souls in the *barzakh* accede to their “second perfection” (*kamāl thānī*), which means that they are plainly actualized: being no longer *in potentia* and bound to a material substrate, they join the intelligible world. For the elect, this implies a state of eternal peace and rest, enjoying perpetual intellectual pleasure in the near vicinity of the Intellect (“the head” of the spiritual *shakhṣ*), as do the angels and the other entities composing the intelligible world.⁶⁰ The doomed souls are gathered in the lower limbs of the spiritual *shakhṣ*, the level of their remoteness from the Intellect depending on the gravity of their errors. But does this mean that ultimate hell and eternal punishment are located in the intelligible world?

Al-Kirmānī includes, amidst speculations about the *barzakh*, a long passage reporting al-Ḥākim's teaching concerning punishment. The caliph-Imam is supposed to have taught that it is sins committed during their earthly lives that torture the souls once they are separated from their bodies. At this moment, they regret that they made no use of their bodies as instruments in order to acquire knowledge and virtue. The benefits and the good things of which the doomed souls are deprived are for them a source of eternal torment. This is hell for them. The pain and sufferings resulting from their nakedness burn

59 Ibid., 539–41.

60 Ibid., 506, 519, 528. Cf. De Smet, *Quiétude* 17 n. 69, 368; Walker, *Kirmani* 105–6, 111.

these souls, as fire burns physical bodies.⁶¹ As the text stresses the eternal character of this punishment, it must refer to the state of the damned souls after Resurrection.

Further on, al-Kirmānī gives a long *ta'wīl* of Q 83:7–11, about the enigmatic term *sijjīn*. According to his understanding of these verses, it is the souls of sinners, those who opposed the commandments of God, his Messenger, and his Friends (i.e., the Imams) by not observing a strict balance between *zāhir* and *bāṭin*, “who are in *sijjīn*”. This means “in the farthest remoteness (*bu'd al-ab'ad*) from the first limit (*al-nihāya al-ūlā*) which is *ʿIlīyyūn*”. In al-Kirmānī's terminology, “the first limit” refers to the first Intellect.⁶² Deriving *sijjīn* from *siḥn* (“prison”), he claims that *sijjīn* refers to the place where sinners are punished, just as prisons are intended to punish criminals in the physical world.

After mentioning in passing the opinion of the exoteric interpreters of the Quran (*ahl al-tafsīr*), who understand *sijjīn* as a rock located at the lowest level of the universe, al-Kirmānī continues his *ta'wīl* by explaining *kitāb marqūm* (“an inscribed register”, Q 83:9) as referring to the souls on which the forms and images of their evil deeds are “inscribed”. After the advent of the *Qā'im*, these forms will determine their suffering, caused by their remoteness from the Universal Intellect.⁶³

In a similar manner, the souls of the *munāfiqūn* (“the hypocrites”) have a tenebrous form that veils them from the lights and the benefits of the intelligible world. This veiling torments them, as they fall down into the deepest part of hell, at the greatest remoteness from felicity. Still worse is the fate of the apostates, who rejected the truth after knowing it. Their souls have acquired two distinct forms, the first proceeding from their former faith (*īmān*) and the second produced by their base actions. The presence of these two opposite forms is for them a source of indescribable suffering.⁶⁴

Al-Kirmānī obviously conceives of hell after the Resurrection as a state of privation: the incapacity of wicked souls to enjoy the intellectual goods and benefits of the intelligible world and to participate in the eternal peace of mind that is paradise for the elect. Nevertheless, there remain many open questions. Will the doomed souls also acquire their “second perfection” with the advent of the *Qā'im* and be allowed to enter the intelligible world, kept at the “farthest

61 Ibid., 522.

62 De Smet, *Quiétude* 190–3. *ʿIlīyyūn* (Q 83:18–21) is, together with *sijjīn* (Q 83:7–9), one of the enigmatic terms occurring in the Quran. See De Smet, *ʿIlīyyūn* 413–5. Traditional Sunni *tafsīr* often identifies them respectively with paradise and hell.

63 Kirmānī, *Rāḥat* 530–1.

64 Ibid., 535–6.

remoteness" from the Intellect, not being able to enjoy the benefits emanating from it? This would be the highest form of punishment—"hell in paradise"—as described by Abū Tammām. This could be inferred from the image of the "spiritual *shakṣ*", as hell is located "nearby his feet". But what does "at the lowest level" of the intelligible world mean? In the vicinity of the sense world and matter? It is not clear at all if, according to al-Kirmānī's system, the physical world will disappear after the final Resurrection, or rather if it supposes the eternity of the world, as did al-Sijistānī's.

4 The Ṭayyibī Hell: The "Rock of Sijjīn"

Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī was considered a major authority by the Ṭayyibī Ismaʿīlis in Yemen.⁶⁵ Starting with Ibrāhīm b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ḥāmidī (d. 557/1162) and his *Kitāb Kanz al-walad*, Ṭayyibī authors interpreted al-Kirmānī's thought in the light of the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* and the *al-Risāla al-jāmiʿa* attributed to the same "Brethren of Purity". Moreover, they adopted many "gnostic" elements taken from early Shiʿi *ghulāt* texts (such as the *Kitāb al-Haft* and the *Umm al-Kitāb*) supposed to contain the secret "revelations" of the sixth Imam, Jaʿfar al-Sādiq, to his disciple al-Mufaḍḍal al-Juʿfi.⁶⁶ In consequence, they developed an impressive system which presents the generation of the sense world as the direct result of what Henry Corbin called "the drama in heaven" (*le drame dans le ciel*).⁶⁷

It is not possible here to give an extensive account of Ṭayyibī cosmology.⁶⁸ For our present purpose, it may be sufficient to recall that "the drama in heaven" was caused by the "oblivion" and the "error" of the third Intellect. According to al-Kirmānī, the first of the ten cosmic Intellects simultaneously generated an Intellect in act and an Intellect *in potentia*. In al-Ḥāmidī's interpretation, the third Intellect, being *in potentia* and thus imperfect in actuality, falsely considered the first Intellect to be the Ultimate Principle (in fact it is the first created being) and refused to recognize the pre-eminence of the second Intellect. This "error" (*khaṭiʾa*) caused the emanation, out of the second Intellect, of seven Intellects in act, so that the Intellect *in potentia* became the tenth and last of the

65 On the history of Ṭayyibism, the "new *daʿwa*" (*daʿwa jadīda*) established in Yemen after the death of the Fatimid caliph-Imam al-Āmir (524/1130) by the partisans of his son al-Ṭayyib, see Daftary, *Ismāʿīlīs* 261–9.

66 De Smet, *Éléments* 45–53.

67 See, for instance, Corbin, *Histoire* 124–7.

68 See Daftary, *Ismāʿīlīs* 269–76; De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 157–68.

cosmic Intellects.⁶⁹ This downfall produced obscurity (and probably matter), so that parcels of light from the intelligible world became mixed with the darkness of matter. Frightened by the consequences of its error, the tenth Intellect (the “first Adam” or “cosmic anthropos”) repented and received from the first Intellect the power to create, from the matter that was produced by its fall, the stars, the planets and the sublunary world (with its three kingdoms: minerals, plants and animals, and man) as a cosmic “machine”, in order to free as much light as possible. Finally, prophets and Imams were sent to mankind, in a great number of successive cycles, all attempting to liberate human souls—parcels of light fallen from the intelligible world—from their imprisonment in matter, by providing the necessary knowledge for their salvation.⁷⁰

Ṭayyibī authors adhered to the common Ismaʿilī idea that paradise can be identified with the intelligible world and hell with remoteness from it. But they considerably complicated this doctrine by introducing notions of *naskh/nasūkhīyya* and *maskh/masūkhīyya* taken from the *ghulāt* tradition and by openly professing a belief in metempsychosis.

At the very moment when the neophyte takes his oath of allegiance before the Imam or his representative, a point of light (*nuqṭa min nūr*) appears in his soul. As he advances in his initiation and acquires more knowledge from the Imam, this light increases. When his body dies, he is reborn in a nobler body, duly prepared to receive this purified soul by a complex alchemical and cosmological process. If, in the course of numerous reincarnations, the believer remains faithful to the teaching of the successive Imams, his soul becomes more and more luminous. At the same time the purity of its corporal envelope increases, as to become as “white as camphor”, increasingly resembling the “camphor-like body” (*jism kāfūrī*) of the prophets and the Imams. Incorporated in these bodies, from which the obscurity of matter is progressively eliminated, the believer receives a foretaste of paradise during his earthly life. The whole process of gradual ascension is called *naskh* or *nasūkhīyya*. With the advent of a *Qāʾim* closing a series of prophetic cycles (as most Ṭayyibī authors accept the existence of several *Qāʾims*)⁷¹ all souls liberated during these cycles are

69 Hāmidī, *Kanz* 66–8; cf. De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 82–8; idem, *Quiétude* 243–51.

70 This comprehensive system is expounded in a concise and relatively clear way in the *Risālat al-Mabdaʾ wa-l-maʿād* of al-Ḥusayn b. ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd (d. 667/1268), ed. and French trans. in Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne* 99–130 (trans. 129–200).

71 According to Ṭayyibī doctrine, a prophetic cycle lasts 7000 years. After seven prophetic cycles (49,000 years) a *Qāʾim* appears. He opens a “cycle of manifestation” of 1000 years, during which all the light liberated during the previous cycles is gathered in a “Light Temple” nearby the tenth Intellect, allowing the latter to ascend to the ninth rank in the

attracted by “divine magnetism” (*al-maghnātīs al-ilāhī*) through the “column of light” (*‘amūd min nūr*) and gather in a “Temple of Light” (*ḥaykal nūrānī*) located in the vicinity of the tenth Intellect. This “Temple of Light” is paradise as symbolically described in the Quran and other revealed texts.⁷²

On the other hand, the souls of those who refused the teaching of the Imams, or even worse, betrayed the oath they took before them during their present life (or during a preceding existence),⁷³ choose the descending path of *maskh/masūkhīyya*: “transformation” or “metamorphosis”.⁷⁴ This means that they are first reborn in “ignoble” human races, such as blacks (*zanj*), Turks or Berbers, and next in animals whose meat is licit, for instance cows, sheep or chickens. At this stage however, there is still some hope for salvation: a black can accept the teaching of the Imam and be reborn in a “nobler” body. If a given person, after consuming the meat of a cow whose soul belonged to an apostate, conceives a child, the soul may enter into his sperm and be reborn in a human body susceptible to receive the knowledge necessary for salvation. However, the most darkened souls proceed further downwards, being reborn in animals whose meat is *ḥarām* (pigs, dogs, apes, snakes, etc.) or not fit for consumption; then as worms, scorpions, chafers, scarabs, spiders and other kinds of frightening insects born by spontaneous generation out of excrements and putrid matter. The lower they fall, the smaller their chance to attain salvation becomes. All these animal bodies are *barzakhs*, ranged in several levels of decreasing purity, in which the wicked souls suffer, here on earth, the torments of hell. This is the “lower punishment” (*al-‘adhāb al-adnā*, Q 32: 21).⁷⁵

cosmic hierarchy. As the fallen third Intellect needs to climb seven ranks in order to return to its initial position, there are seven series of seven prophetic cycles. At their end, after 350,000 years ($7 \times 50,000$), the “Great Resurrection” occurs. A final “cycle of manifestation” of 1000 years achieves the liberation of light and the sublimation of nature. After 360,000 years, the results of the “drama in heaven” are effaced: this corresponds to the “Great Year” of Greek astronomy. Cf. Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 9, 12, 19; De Smet, *Philosophie ismaélienne* 166–8.

72 Hāmidī, *Kanz* 134–48; ‘Alī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd, *al-Mufīda* 172–3; Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 116–8 (trans. 172–5); Idrīs, *Zahr* 83–96; Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 97–8, 105–7. Cf. De Smet, *Scarabées* 50–3; Freitag, *Seelenwanderung* 165–9.

73 The Ṭayyibī system probably presupposes that the souls of the initiates are reborn inside the community, as is the case with the Druzes. However, I am not aware of any text stating this explicitly.

74 On this term, see De Smet, *Métamorphose* 552–4.

75 Hāmidī, *Kanz* 300–11; Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabda’* 125–9 (trans. 191–5); Idrīs, *Zahr* 327–8; Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 11–3, 16–7, 53–4, 63–4, 126. Cf. De Smet, *Scarabées* 41–9; Freitag, *Seelenwanderung* 170–82.

The “greatest punishment” (*al-ʿadhāb al-akbar*) is inflicted by the *Qāʾim* at the end of every set of prophetic cycles. Shortly before his advent the most wicked souls, those that have reached the lowest *barzakhs*, are reborn in plants which are eaten by all kinds of unbelievers, entering into their sperm and reappearing in the bodily envelopes of their children. When the *Qāʾim* appears, he calls them into his presence, and confronts them with their sins and destiny. Then they are killed and their souls go to Sijjīn. This is a rock located in the “lowest part” of the earth. When the demiurge—the tenth Intellect—created the sense world in order to liberate as much light as possible from the obscurity of matter generated by his fall, he compressed the most darkened elements of it into an extremely compact mass: the “Rock of Sijjīn”, which is in the middle of the earth. The doomed souls, fully conscious of their faults, are imprisoned inside this rock, suffering the torments of hell because they are now completely cut off from the intelligible world and its brightness, being covered in an absolute darkness, at the utmost distance from the “Temple of Light”. This is the “greatest punishment”.⁷⁶

Al-Ḥusayn b. al-Walīd adds, however, that Sijjīn is only a place of punishment for the gravest sinners, “the greatest antagonists”, probably referring to the enemies of the prophets and the Imams. It would be contrary to divine justice to inflict such a severe punishment upon ordinary people, the “fools and ignoramuses” among the masses. They continue their transmigrations among the *barzakhs* and, at certain instances, God in His mercy grants them the favor of being reborn in human bodies, giving them a new chance for salvation.⁷⁷

The question remains as to what will happen with Sijjīn and its inhabitants after the advent of the final *Qāʾim* and the closing of the ultimate cycle, generally considered to occur 360,000 years after the “drama in heaven”.⁷⁸ As we have seen, this is the lapse of time needed to save enough parcels of light in order to allow the tenth Intellect to rejoin the third rank of the cosmic hierarchy and to restore the initial configuration of the intelligible world. But does this mean that matter and all material beings, including the earth and the Rock of Sijjīn in its center, will disappear?⁷⁹

76 Ḥāmidī, *Kanz* 301–2; Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabdaʾ* 106–7, 128–9 (trans. 154–5, 193–5); Idrīs, *Zahr* 322–44; Strothmann, *Gnosis-Texte* 11–4, 16–7.

77 Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabdaʾ* 129 (trans. 194–5).

78 See above, n. 71.

79 Ibn al-Walīd, *Mabdaʾ* 128 (trans. 194) claims that the souls of the damned will be in *sijjīn* during a “great cycle” of 360,000 × 360,000 years! Cf. Corbin, *Trilogie ismaélienne* 199 n. 127. However, it is not clear to me how this can be explained within the general structure of the Ṭayyibī system.

5 Conclusion

Locating hell in medieval Ismaʿilism is not an easy task, as the positions differ from one tradition or author to another. Hell starts here on earth for the masses of common people who blindly follow established religions and laws whose real, hidden sense they ignore. After the death of their bodies their souls remain attached to a bodily substrate in which they continue to suffer the torments of hell that are ignorance and remoteness from “real” knowledge. They transmigrate from one body to another, they are “burned” in the fire of the planetary spheres, or they are tortured by their “animal form” in the *barzakh*. After the advent of the *Qāʾim* they are liberated from their corporal prison, but only to enter a new kind of hell, either located in the intelligible world or somewhere in the physical realm, be it here on earth, or in its “deepest part”. In both cases, their torture consists of their incapacity to enjoy the intellectual delights proceeding from the Universal Intellect. Many questions about the location of the places of punishment, their nature, their eternity or temporality, remain. Far removed from Islamic “orthodoxy”, Ismaʿili eschatology is deliberately shrouded in obscurity, as it is one of the most esoteric and secret parts of the doctrine, an “obstructed path” only accessible to the initiated happy few.

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