Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī in Modern Scholarship

Paul Walker
The University of Chicago
pwalker@uchicago.edu

Abstract

Although al-Sijistānī was a leading figure in the development of Ismāʿīlī philosophy, particularly its Neoplatonism, serious investigation of his writing has been slow to enter modern scholarship, in part because his works have remained inaccessible until quite recently. Moreover the first printed versions were often incomplete or corrupt. Lately the situation has changed substantially with availability now of new critical editions.

Keywords


Introduction

Abū Yaʿqūb Isḥaq b. Ahmad al-Sijistānī (or alternately al-Sijzī) was the major philosophical theologian of Ismāʿīlī Shiʿism in the mid-fourth/tenth century. Although he was put to death by the Šaffārid governor of Sijistan at an uncertain date, but not long after 361/971, his writings continued to have great influence with Ismāʿīlī writers to end of the Fatimid period. Later treatises, notably some by Nāṣir b. Khusraw,¹ contain passages that simply quote or paraphrase al-Sijistānī’s works. Even later, the Ţayyibi daʿwa in the Yemen and in India carefully preserved many of his writings and continued to hold them in high regard.

The details of his career are, however, obscure. He is mentioned by several medieval authors, both Ismāʿīlī and non-Ismāʿīlī, although under a puzzling variety of names including a most peculiar nickname “cotton-seed”

¹ Nāṣir’s Khwān al-ikhwān, for example, draws heavily on al-Sijistānī’s al-Yanābīʿ.
which appears once in Persian as panba-dāna and several times in Arabic as khayshafūj. Two sure dates for him, both given in his own writings, are, first, 322/934, at which time he passed through Iraq on his return from the pilgrimage, and, second, 361/971, the year he composed Kitāb al-Iftikhār, one of his last books. It is quite likely that he was, on the former occasion, already a fully active senior member of the Ismāʿīlī daʿwa, possibly stationed then in the area of Rayy. Later he moved to Khurasan, where he may have been a disciple of the famous early dāʿī Muḥammad al-Nasafi, and finally, after the latter’s execution in 332/943 at the hands of the Samanids, to Sijistan.

His writings, which have been slow to reach modern scholarship, are best represented by six main treatises: Kitāb al-Maqālīd (or al-Maqālīd al-malakūṭiya, or al-Aqālīd al-malakūṭiya3), Ithbāt al-nubuwwât (or al-nubuwwa), Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ, Kitāb al-Iftikhār, Sullam al-najāt and Kashf al-maḥjūb. The first two are the most substantial and important. Even so the Maqālīd was not published until 2011 and the Ithbāt existed until recently in an unreliable edition only.4 In these works the author expresses support for the Fatimid caliphs—something many of the earlier eastern dāʿīs had not done. Nonetheless, there is evidence that even al-Sijistānī had changed his mind, accepting the Fatimids only late in his career, probably during the reign of the Fatimid caliph al-Muʿizz. He was therefore once a representative of those eastern Ismāʿīlīs who initially refused to recognize the Fatimid caliphate, a tendency often labeled Qarmatian. However, eventually he reversed himself and began thereafter to recognize them as the representatives of the absent imam Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. Most likely these six works therefore date from the years of al-Muʿizz’s reign, namely between 341/953 and 365/975. The works he originally composed prior to that time were subsequently revised by the author himself during this very period and thus made to accord with these changed circumstances.5

Quite aside from Ismāʿīlī doctrine, which al-Sijistānī shared with other members of the daʿwa, his thought is important for his pronounced use of elements of Neoplatonism. In that regard he stands out even among the philosophers of his time. It is as yet uncertain exactly what his sources were in this regard but many writers of that period, among them his immediate predecessors in

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2 On this, see Stern, “The Early Ismāʿīlī Missionaries”; and idem, “Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijzī’s nickname”.
3 The title of this work as it appears in the citations of it by Ibn Taymiyya.
4 The work is now available in a critical edition by Paul Walker and Wilferd Madelung (Tehran, 2016). For details of editions and translations of al-Sijistānī’s extant writings, see also the bibliography below.
5 For details, see the studies by Paul Walker cited in the bibliography.
the Ismāʿīlī daʿwa, Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī and Muḥammad al-Nasafi, had begun to mix Neoplatonic philosophy with Islam doctrine. The clearest connections for al-Sijistānī are with the works now known as the *Pseudo-Ammonius* and the two versions—the shorter and longer—of the *Theology* (of Aristotle). Al-Sijistānī actually quotes passages from the latter in his *al-Maqālīd*. One more work by him, once well known but now lost, was his *al-Nuṣra*, a specific defense of al-Nasafi's seminal *Kitāb al-Maḥṣūl*, which is also no longer extant. However, it served as a point of controversy within the daʿwa and the early fifth/eleventh century Ismāʿīlī theologian Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī wrote a refutation of both called the *Kitāb al-Riyāḍ*. In this treatise al-Kirmānī attempted to challenge a number of doctrines advocated by al-Sijistānī. His goal was in general to replace some Neoplatonic features of his predecessor's teachings with those he preferred and which incline more toward Aristotelian doctrine. There are several characteristic features in al-Sijistānī's thought. One is his insistence that God can be apprehended neither by comparisons and approximations nor by intellectual stratagems such as negations (the *via negativa*). His own method would deny both, first by stating that God is not a thing, not in time, not in place, not describable, not classifiable and then by negating these negations. For example, God is not a thing and He is not *not* a thing. Another is the preservation of the distinction between the world of intellect and the world of soul, as in Plotinian Neoplatonism. Human soul is a part of universal soul with many of the ramifications such a doctrine entails, including the notion that soul, in the individual human, has “forgotten” what it was previously. He was accused of believing in metempsychosis (*tanāsukh*), by among others al-Bīrūnī in his work on Indian religions, a charge al-Sijistānī had himself anticipated and rejected, but with some difficulty.

**Modern Study of al-Sijistānī**

Over the first half of the 20th century several scholars began to be aware of al-Sijistānī's possible importance, but no actual text by him was then available.  

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6 For details and references, see Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, Chapter Two.  
7 This doctrine drew considerable comment from Ibn Taymiyya. See, for example, his *Sharḥ al-Iṣbahāniyya*, p. 522, where he quotes from al-Sijistānī's *Maqālīd* (the 10th *iqṭīd*). There he also recognizes al-Sijistānī as “... among the best (*afḍal*) of these Qarmaṭians (*al-Qarāmiṭa*).” This reference was brought to my attention by Rodrigo Adem.  
8 See Madelung, "Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī and Metempsychosis"; Walker, “The Doctrine of Metempsychosis in Islam".
except in manuscript form. As late as 1960 S. M. Stern’s brief notice about him in the second edition of the Encyclopaedia of Islam could cite of his works only the Persian translation of his Kashf al-mahjūb, which Henry Corbin had edited and published in 1949. Corbin next added, in 1961, an edition and partial French translation of al-Sijistānī’s al-Yanābīʿ, which he included in his Trilogie ismaélienne. Five years later in 1966, Aref Tamer printed the text of his Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt through the Catholic Press (al-Maṭbaʿa al-Kāthūlīkiyya) in Beirut. The following year the same scholar published, in his Khams rasāʾil Ismāʿīliyya, a short treatise called Tuḥfat al-mustajībīn (or Risālat tuḥfat al-mustajībīn) with an indication that its author was al-Sijistānī. Whether it is actually a work of al-Sijistānī remains uncertain.

With only these few items published, it continued to be essential to have access to manuscript copies of the others. My Ph.D. dissertation, entitled “Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī and the Development of Ismāʿīlī Neoplatonism,” completed at the University of Chicago under the direction of Wilferd Madelung, in 1974, was based on manuscript copies for al-Maqālid and al-Iftikhār, in addition to what was by then available in print.

In 1980 Mustafa Ghalib brought out in Beirut an edition of al-Iftikhār and the same year Mohamed Alibhai provided in his Harvard doctoral dissertation an edition of the Sullam al-najāt. Thus the situation was substantially improved, although with a few problems added. Tamer’s edition of the Ithbāt and Ghalib’s of al-Iftikhār were both helpful in giving a general idea of each text and yet were quite unreliable for accuracy. Neither in fact faithfully reflected the text they were supposedly based on. In addition to inaccuracies, Ghalib deliberately omitted passages. Both works sorely needed a new critical edition. And at this point the Maqālid had not appeared in print, nor were manuscript copies of it readily available.

Nevertheless, important studies of aspects of al-Sijistānī work and career began to materialize. A major step forward was Stern’s “The Early Ismāʿīlī Missionaries in North-West Persia and in Khurāsān and Transoxania,” (1960) which outlines what evidence exists for al-Sijistānī’s career. This was followed

10 He also published it in Mashriq (Beirut), March-April, 1967, pp. 135-46.
11 On this problem see Walker, Early Philosophical Shiism, p. 165, n. 79.
12 For an assessment of the faults of Tamer’s edition of the Ithbāt, see Walker’s and Madelung’s introduction to their recently published critical edition of the work.
13 For details see also the bibliography below.
by studies on his works and thought; see also the articles by Poonawala, Madelung and the many studies of him by the present author. My monograph of 1993, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, has the subtitle *The Ismāʿīlī Neoplatonism of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī* and it represented an attempt to bring knowledge of al-Sijistānī, and my earlier studies of him, up to date.

The task of properly editing the *Iftikhār* was accomplished only in 2000 with Poonawala’s careful publication of it based on several manuscripts and a sound apparatus. The same scholar finally produced in 2011, also in Beirut, an edition of the *Maqālīd*. With its appearance, all the main works of al-Sijistānī had become easily accessible. Moreover, a new reliable edition of Sijistānī’s *Ithbāt al-nubuwwāt* has now been published by Paul Walker and Wilferd Madelung (Tehran 2016), based on two manuscripts of the text: an undated manuscript that once belonged to A. A. A. Fyzee and is now in the library of Bombay University, and a second manuscript that comes from the Hamdani collection which was copied by ʿĪsā b. Dāʾūd-bhāʿī b. ʿAbd al-ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm-jī al-Sayfī and was completed on 29 Rabiʿ I 1307/22 November 1889.

For the future it is important to explore the possible influences of al-Sijistānī both among the later Ismāʿīlī authors and those few Sunni authorities who admit to having read his works. On that score Yahya Michot’s discovery of a connection to Ibn Taymiyya is especially significant. The evidence noted by Michot was expanded by Poonawala for his introduction to the *Maqālīd* and, recently, Rodrigo Adem, who recently completed his Ph.D. dissertation at the University of Chicago on Ibn Taymiyya, has added more still.

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14 Poonawala, “Al-Sijistānī and his *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*.”
15 Madelung, “Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī and Metempsychosis”; idem, “Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī and the Seven Faculties of the Intellect”.
16 For further details see Goriawala, *A Descriptive Catalogue*, p. 10.
18 First announced in Michot’s “A Mamlûk Theologian’s Commentary,” pp. 199-203.
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