Can we know anything about paradise and hell before being sent to them? This question must have been considered by the first Muslims, who worried about their eternal fate. The relatively scarce details given in the Quran may well have triggered the believers’ imagination while failing to give any comprehensive answers to their questions. That task was left to the early exegetes, the storytellers (qāṣṣ, pl. quṣṣāṣ) and preachers who explained the Quran, recounted the life of the prophet Muḥammad, and alerted souls to the afterlife (targhīb wa-tarhīb). They were first hand witnesses to the most reliable source of further knowledge: the Prophet himself, whom they made journey through heaven and hell, in the best tradition of Apocalyptic and Ascension literature. Moses, Enoch, and various Christian apostles before him were said to have made a similar journey, and this tradition was also known in Iranian literature, in the Ardā Virāz Nāmag (sixth century CE?). This genre was to continue for centuries: much was written on Muḥammad’s ascension, and this even spread within Europe (Liber Scalae Machometi; ca. 1250?). The idea was also picked up by al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1058), Dante (d. 1321), and, at a more popular level, by the Bulūqiyyā story, for example, in the Arabian Nights.1 In this text Bulūqiyyā, a Jewish boy from Cairo, wishes to find the prophet Muḥammad. His quest leads him through mythological landscapes, where he meets various supernatural beings who teach him about the unknown parts of the universe from where they originate. A king of the Jinn named Ṣakhr tells him about hell:

Bulūqiyyā, God created hell in seven layers (ṭabāqāt), one above the other, and between every two layers is a distance of thousands of years. The first layer He called Jahannam; He set it up for the disobedient among the believers who die without having repented.2

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1 Alf layla wa-layla i, 660–704.
2 Ibid., i, 668.
The other layers have names as well, all taken from the Quran, such as al-Jaḥīm, Saqar, and so on. After the king has enumerated them all, Bulūqiyā asks:

“So perhaps Jahannam has the least of torture, since it is the uppermost?” “Yes”, said King Ṣakhr, “it has the least of torture of them all; yet in it are a thousand mountains of fire, in each mountain seventy thousand valleys of fire, in each valley seventy thousand cities of fire, in each city seventy thousand castles of fire, in each castle seventy thousand houses of fire, in each house seventy thousand abodes of fire and in each abode seventy thousand couches of fire and in every couch seventy thousand manners of torment. [...] As for the other layers of hell, Bulūqiyā, nobody knows the number of kinds of torment therein but God alone”. When Bulūqiyā heard this from King Ṣakhr, he fell down unconscious [...].3

From where did the storyteller of the Arabian Nights obtain his material? He may have been inspired by al-Thaʿlabī’s (d. 427/1035) story about Bulūqiyā, which is, however, far less detailed.4 It is perhaps more likely that he got it from another book that dealt with such matters, of which a number must have existed.

1 The Kitāb al-ʿAẓama

One of these books is the Kitāb al-ʿAẓama, whose section on hell will be discussed here. ʿAẓama is not an Apocalypse or an Ascension story, instead being essentially a book on cosmology. It advertizes itself as a book on “God’s sublimity; His creatures in heaven and on earth, in between them and under the earth; the air; the creation; and the characteristics of paradise and hell”.5 However, in content, style, and atmosphere ʿAẓama is closely related to the Bulūqiyā story.6 ʿAẓama does not rely on the authority of Muḥammad, but on that of more ancient prophets. The original book is said to have been revealed to Adam, who wrote it down on clay tablets, baked them, and deposited them in a cave

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3 Ibid.
4 Thaʿlabī, Qīṣaṣ 354–62 (tr. 593–604).