In his Ādāb al-mulūk, a book of advice for kings, the famous littérateur al-Thaʿālibī (d. 429/1038) cautions rulers against a number of potential disasters, including that of falling prey to heretical missionaries. By way of warning he recounts how the Samanid amir Naṣr II b. Aḥmad, known as al-Saʿīd (r. 301–331/914–943), was converted to Ismailism along with other potentates, thereby throwing considerable light on an episode which has so far been known only from two sources, Ibn al-Nadīm and Niẓām al-Mulk. In what follows we offer a translation and discussion of al-Thaʿālibī’s text as a token of gratitude to Donald Richards, from whose erudition, good humour and personal warmth we have both benefited greatly over the years.1

Translation

[168]

#458 Among them (the evils that afflict kings) are the adroit and unbelieving swindlers who proselytize on behalf of followers of selfish whims, innovators and heretics (ahl al-ahwāʾ waʾl-bidaʿ wa-dhawī ʾl-ilḥād fī ʾl-niḥal), such as the Bāṭiniyya, Qarāmiṭa, Ismāʿīliyya and other proponents of elementary qualities and celestial bodies who do not affirm the existence of prophethood and who call prophets (mere) ‘lawgivers and (ful-

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* We are indebted to Professor S. Hanioğlu for helping us obtain a microfilm of the manuscript and to Professors M. Cook and W. Madelung for reading an earlier draft.

1 Crone (a colleague of Richards from 1977 to 1990) found the text; Treadwell (a student of Crone and a colleague of Richards from 1993 to 2000) supplied most of the information about the events to which it refers (cf. W.L. Treadwell, ‘The Political History of the Sāmānid State’, Oxford D.Phil. 1991, ch. 6). The translation and interpretation are joint.

2 Al-Thaʿālibī, Ādāb al-mulūk, J. al-ʿAṭiyya, ed., Beirut, 1990, 168–172, reproducing ms Süleymaniye Kütüphanesi (Istanbul), Esʿad Efendi no. 1808/1 fols. 56r–58v. [Ed.: The numbers in square brackets refer to the page numbers of the published edition, and ##458–460 refer to its paragraph numbering.]
fillers of) needs’ (aṣḥāb al-nawāmīs waʾl-ḥawāʾij). They will frequently insinuate their ways into the affairs of kings who have not heard [169] the teaching of the mutakallims or studied the science of kalām. They will take them aside and deceive them with their mellifluous charms, their gilded sophistry and their spurious doctrines, claiming to transport them from the slavery of the law to the freedom of heresy (min riqq al-sharīʿa ilā ḥurriyyat al-ilḥād) and to liberate them from the shackles of religious observance, giving them license to abandon prayer and other acts of worship and to indulge their desires. Thus they slip a halter (over their heads) and take hold of their reins. For as they (the kings) will take the opportunity to rest in comfort, security and ease, they (the missionaries) will be emboldened to engage in forbidden acts, commit sins, shed blood, seize the wealth (of others), break covenants, violate writs and make light of Islam.

Al-Saʿīd Naṣr b. Ahmad fell into this trap. It had been set by Abū ʾl-Ṭayyib al-Muṣʿabī and Abū ʾl-Ḥasan Ibn Sawāda al-Rāzī, two arch heretics (anyāb al-mulḥidīn) who were relentlessly trying to become intimate with him. Among the things related about him is that he had repented of drinking and shedding blood, fearing the Station of his Lord (cf. Q 55:46; 79:40), and that he had knocked on the door of pious observance, secluding himself to pray and weep in extreme fear of death. But al-Muṣʿabī and Ibn Sawāda continually deceived him with their honeyed words and gradually introduced him to their doctrine. They told him that worry and grief were no protection against adversity and misfortune, and that it was better to engage in pleasure and constant drinking and listen to beautiful singing girls so as to rid the rational soul (al-nafs al-nāṭiqa) of its trouble in this corporeal world (al-ʿālam al-jusdānī), which consists entirely of worries and pain. For nothing but pleasant diversion and song, music-making and carousal would drive away (worries and pain). They made it seem to him that the bitterness of death lay in his fear of it whereas (in fact) death was utter bliss and the ultimate repose because it was the gate to the spiritual world in which there are no pains, no sorrows and no terrors. (They added) more nonsense of a similar nature until he began to accept what they told him and embarked on their course.

3 Muḥammad b. Ḥātim al-Muṣʿabī, a secretary who became vizier in 330/941–942 at the latest; see below, section 11(b).
4 A missionary also mentioned by Niẓām al-Mulk; cf. below, section 11(a).
5 Reading qasf for qaṣab (as suggested by Everett Rowson).