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Title: The Ismaili Vocabulary of Creation

Author: Professor Paul E. Walker

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To the Platonists (including of course the Neoplatonists) the realm of the intelligible contained all that was eternal, permanent and fixed. In it things existed in a simple state, or using what seems to me to be a more modern term, in a pure state. The sensible world, by contrast, was thought to be unreal because it consisted of composite or impure mixtures. Since these were dissolvable, they were consequently finite and temporary.

Although not all Greeks followed the Platonic theory of the relative reality of these realms, nearly all thought in terms of this two-fold division. Even Plotinus, whose most striking contribution to philosophy was his insistence on the importance of the super-essential One, was nevertheless compelled to see his God as one aspect of the intelligible universe and not as some kind of third category beyond both the sensible and the intelligible.

It is important to keep this basic predisposition of Greek philosophy always in mind, for it was against this backdrop that Christian and Muslim thinkers laboured to alter the human speculative outlook. For them the fundamental division was not between the intelligible and the sensible but between the Creator and His creation. The monotheist theologians directed a considerable amount of their efforts toward converting the Greek system into one which would allow their Creator a suitably detached role and which could incorporate both the sensible and the intelligible in one large category of created things. The original division of the Greek philosophers never entirely disappeared however and supplied the basic structure of the Ismaili theory of creation - the subject of this paper.

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The Ismaili Vocabulary of Creation

Professor Paul E. Walker

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Abstract

It has been noted by several authors that classical Greek philosophers operated under the fundamental assumption that the universe consisted of only two realms - the intelligible and the sensible.ⁱ Many of their philosophical speculations moreover were ultimately based on an attempt to define the relationship between the two. This, it may be argued, was the limit of their concern for the problem of creation.

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Keywords

Ismaili, Greek Philosophy, Creation, al-Sijistani, Amr

The earliest Ismaili thinkers were, like nearly all Muslim theologians and philosophers, confronted unavoidably with the problem of explaining how God created the universe. Apparently less concerned with public opinion and possible censure, they wrote freely although unorthodoxly on the subject. Most often they followed the dictates of their own Neoplatonist logic rather than tradition and the literal interpretation of Qur'anic scriptures.

Furthermore, in spite of their employing terminology then in use in the circles of the *falasifa* and the *mutakallimun* (philosopher-theologians, primarily Muslim, but also the Qaraite Jewish scholars), they seem to have surpassed their predecessors in the elaborateness and care with which they constructed their own solutions. Consequently they have left us an almost bewildering mass of data. In it there are expressions which can be at times deliberately ambiguous and at other times technically precise. It is the latter which I hope here to separate from the former, but to do this it is, I think, necessary to establish a kind of lexicon of the technical meanings and implications of Ismaili terminology for creation. From such a discussion, the basic outline of their doctrine on this subject will, I hope, emerge and become clear.

The work of Abu Ya'qub al-Sijistani, one of the earliest yet most prolific Ismaili theoreticians, here provides a suitable subject for analysis because it is better known than the work of the others which has in many cases been lost. About al-Sijistani's life, we know very little except that he was martyred probably not long after 361/971 CEⁱⁱⁱ. We do however know his writings and we know also that his thought had a profound effect on Fatimid theology. It is even fair to say, I think, that he was the most influential, and perhaps most important, of the Fatimid-Ismaili theologians.

Of his works several have been published. The most essential of these, for this discussion, is his *Kitab al-Yanabi'* (The Book of Springs) edited by Corbin in his *Trilogie Ismaélienne*,^{iv} and another which is of much greater value, although it remains unedited and is apparently quite rare even in manuscript. This work, called *Kitab al-Maqalid*,^v (The Book of Keys) has provided much of the material and a good deal of the supporting evidence for the Neoplatonic theory which follows.

Before proceeding it is necessary to recognise two special problems. In the first place since the terms al-Sijistani employs are often Qur'anic in origin as for example *al-Bari'* (*bara'a*), *al-Khaliq* (*khalaqa*), *al-Musawwir* (*sawwara*),^{vi} and *al-Badi'*^{vii} (from which comes the verb *abda'a*) he will often use them without a precise, technical meaning or else the same term will be used with a generally accepted religious connotation in one place and a special sense in another. Other terms like *al-Mu'ayyis* (*'ayyasa*) and *al-tarbiya* (*masdar* of the verb *rabba*^{viii}) are employed by him with less ambiguity. These less easily equivocated words sometimes provide a control on the vagueness of the others.

The tendency to allow words to retain a double meaning is further complicated by another. Armstrong, working with the thought of Plotinus,^{ix} has amply demonstrated, I think, that it must be analysed according to the particular perspective being used by the philosopher in each discussion. Thus, for example, Plotinus has three basic ways of looking at Intellect (*Nous*), his second hypostasis. Taken together his discussion in one place of one aspect will often tend to contradict what he had tried to realise in another. In this respect al-Sijistani more than once followed his classical master.

These tendencies are first apparent in his discussion of the world as a creation in the traditional, temporal sense of creation. When he speaks of something as *muhdath*, for example, he is talking about the realm of composite things only. The '*alam murakkab*, *al-'alam al-hissi* or *al-'alam al-tabi'i*, are all expressions denoting the sensible world of the ancient philosophers. This naturally includes everything known by the senses and in effect encompasses the whole physical universe - precisely that body which religious dogma held to be temporally created.

In this world time, a part of Nature (*physis*, the lower soul of Plotinus), is entrusted with the functions of change (*taghayyur*) and creative transformation (*tahadduth al-istihala*). These include generation (*al-kawn*) and corruption (*al-fasad*), increase (*al-ziyada*) and decrease (*al-nuqsan*), and transportation (*al-intiqal*) and transformation (*al-istihala*)^x. A thing in this world has a specific duration (*daymuma*). It can be said only to last or abide, perhaps eternally, but always contingent upon time.^{xi} Its non-existence (*lays*) is always with it, or to be more precise, the possibility of not existing is one of its characteristics.^{xii}

Time then encompasses and belongs to the physical world. It has been engendered because of the Soul's need to complete its work item after item. As in the thought of Plotinus, with whom al-Sijistani is clearly in accord at this point, "...the Soul is unable to seize the content of intelligence in one indivisible act; it must therefore review its aspects one by one. In doing so, it engenders time and subsequently produces the sensible as temporal."^{xiii}

The problem is that the Soul (or perhaps time itself) is here made to be the Creator, or at least the engenderer of the physical world, thereby giving support to the traditional charge used specifically against the Ismailis^{xiv} as well as many others that the Creator is but a demiurge in reality. Al-Sijistani, like so many others, really avoids the problem by simply denying that any temporal process is true creation. This for him must be the coming-to-be of a thing from nothing. Such a process furthermore is totally unrelated to time. For him to speak of Creation thus, of course, ignores the reservations of one like St. Augustine who held that to ask what happened before time is meaningless^{xv} or, in another direction, it denies the possibility of the second creation which is supposedly anticipated in the Qur'an.^{xvi}

Real creation then must take place in a higher world, above the realm of change where things are created only out of what ceases. This is where the father-forces of the spheres couple with the mother-forces of the four elements and where the mineral, vegetable, and animal kingdoms are born. Above all this lies the world of the intelligible. There, things come gushing forth from Intellect (*al-'Aql*) and there, to *know* and to *be* are one and the same.

There are two worlds which al-Sijistani uses to describe the emergence of things from (or more precisely in) Intellect. Soul (*al-Nafs*), he is careful to explain, comes from *al-'Aql* by means of an '*inbi'ath*'. The verb *inba'atha*^{xvii} seems to have been chosen because it conveys the idea of the eruption of a living, moving thing from something solid and quiescent, as water might spring from some mountain source. The term *al-Ifada* (*afada*), which is nearly universally employed in Arabic for the Neoplatonic process of emanation, is used by al-Sijistani also.^{xviii}

For him it has a broader and more generally accepted sense than '*al-Inbi'ath*'. Intellect emanates pure essences. This however is too imprecise to describe the creation of Soul. For the Ismailis then it is necessary to add the term *al-Inbi'ath* to explain this special creative function of Intellect which they seem to feel is not its normal emanative role. In fact al-

Kirmanī, the next major Ismaili theologian after al-Sijistānī, speaks of the world of the *Inbi'ath* (*al-'Alam al-inbi'athi*).^{xix} It is above the realm of form (*al-Sura*) and matter (*al-Hayula*) and their combination. Again, as with the lower kind of creating, they have avoided traditional theological terms for creating where referring to the procession of things from (or in) Intellect. But even these things are not new or original because they have a source, i.e., the Intellect (*al-'Aql*) and they are therefore things made of other things.

Ultimately one must ask how the first being, the source itself, came to be, for if it can be said to have come to be, it follows that it must have come from nothing. Here then is the core of the Ismaili creation theory. The coming-to-be of a thing from nothing must be, according to the Ismailis, above all beingness, i.e., above things of both the sensible and the intelligible worlds. In other words real creation must take precedence over both worlds of Greek philosophical antiquity. They are here searching for a real division between the Creator and the created.

It must be remembered however that the intelligible world is already eternal and permanent. It is therefore really impossible to speak of the world having been created in time or of it having not been once and then coming-to-be. Al-Sijistānī emphatically denies that the world was created thing by thing or moment by moment. It was, he maintains, *originated* at once (*daf'atan wahidatan*).^{xx}

Saying this, of course, sounds perfectly orthodox, as it was meant to, but in reality such a statement depends on a highly fundamental, metaphysical point - a point which reaches well beyond the comprehensible. It is after all in a realm beyond the intelligible.

In an interesting chapter of his *Al-Yanabi'*, al-Sijistānī sets forth several arguments in support of the proposition that *al-'aysu la yasiru laysan kama sara al-laysu'aysan*.^{xxi} (*That which is, does not become what is not that which is, just as that which is not what is became what is; or the existent does not become what is not the existent, as what is not the existent became the existent*.)^{xxii} Besides being an unequivocal statement of the eternity of the world, this formula also establishes its contingency. The ground here is fairly clear though difficult to state. Obviously there needs to be a cause beyond both beingness and not-beingness which brings about the being of beingness from not-being since they cannot be the causes of each other.^{xxiii} Non-being is not the cause for both non-being and being.

What then is the cause? Again recourse is had to a special term, *al-Ibda'*. The verb *abda'a* means precisely this. It is the radical coming-to-be of being from what is not-being. Its verbal noun is the First Cause and as such is an innovation rather than a beginning, for beginning implies an ending. *Al-Ibda'* is an eternal, timeless '*existenciation*,' (to use Corbin's term).^{xxiv}

God consequently is called *al-Mubdi'* (the Innovator) and the innovated (*mubda'*) is being, i.e., all being at once. The *mubda'at*, come-to-be all at once, finite in number, without anything being left out.^{xxv} This, it seems to me, is probably the only sense in which the world can be said to have come-to-be *daf'atan wahidatan*, for *al-Ibda'* is not really an action but rather a principle of relationship.

The use of the term *al-Ibda'* did not, of course, originate with the Ismailis, for al-Kindi had used it 50 to 100 years before the period of the major Ismaili writers.^{xxvi} He however had tried to have it apply to any action of God which brought something from nothing. It was thus employed by him to describe the second creation or the resurrection of the body.^{xxvii} It should

be clear that for al-Sijistani there can be no other, than a single *Ibda'*. Nothing comes-to-be from nothing after everything is.^{xxviii} It is well beyond both beingness (*al-'aysiya*) and not-beingness (*al-laysiya*).^{xxix} Its ontological status is, needless to say, somewhat unclear. It is for practical purposes, however, the outermost aspect of Intellect and the intelligible world. Intellect can comprehend it only as if it were intelligible.

If the *Ibda'* then is the First Cause (or if you like, the Prime Mover) much like that recognised by the philosophers and is conceded by the Ismailis to be complete and perfect (although non-existent), where in this scheme, you may already wonder, is God? That is of course a good question. It is at this point that we come to what seems to me to be the real contribution of Ismaili doctrine. To them God is beyond even what we have tried to understand as *al-Ibda'*. He is totally outside of comprehension. We can only say what He is not and also add that He is not *not*.^{xxx} The affirmation of God is outside the realm of negation altogether.^{xxxi}

Such a radical and strict adherence to the unknowability and ineffability of the Neoplatonic view of God raises, it seems to me, particular problems in understanding creation although it clearly puts God outside the intelligible realms. These problems become even more interesting when one realises that the Ismailis insist, against their own reasoning, that the creation process is voluntaristic.^{xxxii} God innovates by a Command (*al-Amr*) which is also called Will (*al-Irada*) and the Word (*al-Kalima*), i.e., the imperative 'be' (*kun*).^{xxxiii} *Al-Amr* then is synonymous with *al-Irada*. This is perhaps the only direction open to them. Having reached metaphysical bedrock, they can only say vaguely that things are and that God is responsible for their being. The term *al-Ibda'* says this from the point-of-view of His being, in some sense, their source. *Al-Ibda'* is that aspect of creation which indicates its non-temporal, non-spatial foundation. The term *al-Amr* says that it is God who is responsible for it happening. Things come-to-be because God is.

In sum, the creation process, which I have attempted to describe here, divides into three distinct levels, each corresponding to the level of reality being created.^{xxxiv} At the sensible level, things are created by the passage of time and things come-to-be out of things that were. On a higher plane, things in the intelligible world come forth by emanation or the special process of *al-Inbi'ath*. Above all, is creation by *al-Ibda'*.

In spite however of the elaborateness of this scheme, God is said to be *al-Khaliq* (the Creator) in all senses, and the universe is consequently *makhluq* (Creation). Created things are not necessarily eternal but God's creating is undeniable, unstoppable and unending.^{xxxv} God does not *not* create.

ⁱ For example S. Sambursky, *The Physical World of Late Antiquity* (New York: Basic Books, 1962), pp. 166-170; and I. P. Sheldon-Williams, "Introduction: Greek Christian Platonism", [Chapter 28] *The Cambridge History of Later Greek & Early Medieval Philosophy*, ed. by A. H. Armstrong (London: Cambridge U. P., 1967), p. 426.

ⁱⁱ The confusion between the Judeo-Christian use of the terms God (*Theos*) and divine (*Theios*) and the pagan, Platonic conception of the same words tend to encourage misunderstanding this point. The Christian tradition reserves these terms for the transcendent creative cause of all things while the pagan Greek applies them normally to beings which depend wholly for their existence on the supreme principle. See A. H. Armstrong, *Cambridge History*, p. 222.

ⁱⁱⁱ See S. M. Stern, "The Early Ismaili Missionaries in North-West Persia, Khurasan and Transoxiana", *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies*, XVIII (1960), pp. 56-90; and W. Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature* (Tehran: 1963), p. 27.

^{iv} At least ten, perhaps more, of al-Sijistani's writings have survived. Four of these have been published and at least six more are available in manuscript. The following were consulted in reference to this study: *Ithbat al-Nubuwa*, or *al-Nubuwwat* as in the edition of Tamer (Beirut: Catholic Pr., 1966); *Tuhfat al-Mustajibin*, ed. by Tamer in *Khams Rasa'il Isma'iliya* (Beirut, Dar al-Ansaf 1956); *al-Iftikhar* (MS, Great Mosque, San'a); *Sullam al-Najat* (MS, Fyzee Collection Bombay Un. Lib., Bombay); *al-Yanabi'*, ed. by Corbin, *Trilogie Ismaélienne* (Tehran: Institut Franco-Iranien, 1961); *al-Maqalid* (MS, Library of Dr. Abbas Hamdani); *Musliyat al-Ahzan* (MS, Fyzee Collection, Bombay Un. Lib., Bombay); *al-Nusra* (available now only in quotations by Hamid al-Din al-Kirmani in his *al-Riyad*, ed. Tamer (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1960); and *Kashf al-Mahjub*, Persian paraphrase or trans., ed. by Henry Corbin (Tehran: Institut Franco-Iranien, 1949).

^v Xerox copy of ms. belonging to Prof. Abbas Hamdani in my possession. I am indebted to Prof. Hamdani for his generosity in letting me make this copy. (NOTE: This manuscript is now part of the collection of The Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2011).

^{vi} For example *Surat al-Hashr*: 24, "Huwa allahu al-khaliqu al-bari'u al-musawwiru lahu al-'asma'u al-husna..."

^{vii} For example *Surat al-Baqara*: 117, "Badi'u al-samawati wa al-ardi wa idha qada 'amran fa' innama yaqulu lahu kun fayakun."

^{viii} He speaks of God's, "...tarbiyat al-ashya' la min shay'in." (*al-Maqalid*, p. 24).

^{ix} A. H. Armstrong, *The Architecture of the Intelligible Universe in the Philosophy of Plotinus*. (Cambridge, 1940).

^x *Al-Maqalid*, p. 145. These are the six kinds of movement according to Aristotle.

^{xi} *Al-Maqalid*, pp. 124-127.

^{xii} *Al-Maqalid*, p. 34.

^{xiii} A. H. Armstrong, *Cambridge History*, pp. 115-116; cf. *Ennead* III, 7.

^{xiv} 'Abd al-Qahir al-Baghdadi (*al-Farq bayn al-firaq*. Cairo, no date, pp. 293-294) accuses them of making the 'Aql and the Nafs creators of the world in the manner of the dualists.

^{xv} *Confessions* XI 1.12-14.17. Cf. *Cambridge History*, pp. 402-403.

^{xvi} For example *Surat al-Yunus*: 4 & 34, "Innahu yabda'u al-khalqa thumma yu'iduhu." Cf. al-Ash'ari, *Kitab al-Lum'*, ed. & trans. Richard McCarthy (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1953), pp. 8-9 (Arabic) and pp. 10-11 (English).

^{xvii} Sometimes the verb *inbajasa* is used in this context. It appears in the *Fi al-Khayr al-Mahd*, ed. by Badawi (Cairo: 1955). It is probably best translated as 'procession,' as both verbs seem to represent the Greek, Neoplatonic term *proodos*.

^{xviii} See for example *al-Yanabi'*, pp. 43, 63, & 83; *Sullam al-Najat*, f. 7b & 8a; *al-Maqalid*, pp. 115, 18, 121; and *al-Riyad* (quoting from *al-Nusra*), p. 107.

^{xix} See his *al-Riyad*, ed. Tamer (Beirut: Dar al-Thaqafa, 1960), and *Rahat al-'Aql*, ed. Hussein and Hilmy (Cairo: Dar al-Fikr al-'Arabi, 1953).

^{xx} *Al-Maqalid*, pp. 84-89. The appearance of one individual (*shakhs*) after another is, for him, like the assembling (*rakkaba*) of parts and does not constitute true creation. See *al-Maqalid*, p. 88.

^{xxi} *Al-Yanabi'* (ed. Corbin), Arabic text. pp. 37-38. This *yanbu'* was not translated by Corbin.

^{xxii} It is not enough, it seems to me, to translate *lays* as non-being. It is rather not-being. It is a logical concept based on the negation of a set. Thus given **A** (all being), we can recognise (logically) the category **not-A** (whatever is not **A**, i. e., not-being). See *al-Maqalid*, p. 103, where he defines *lays* as *la ays*.

^{xxiii} i.e., there is no being or not-being which is not contingent upon some cause outside both.

^{xxiv} See his "étude préliminaire," to his edition of Nasir-i Khusraw's *Jami' al-Hikmatayn* (Tehran: Institut Franco-Iranien, 1953), p. 114. He sometimes calls it "l'instauration créatrice primordiale." In the notes to his translation of *Al-Yanabi'*, he explains,

«Le premier Être ou Intelligence n'est pas émané, mais éternellement instauré dans l'être (*mobda'*). La théosophie ismaélienne conserve l'émanatisme, mais seulement à partir du premier Être; elle affirme l'acte créateur, mais non pas d'un être qui serait déjà de l'être, voire l'Être supreme. C'est ce qui fait son originalité. Ni créationisme à la manière de l'orthodoxie exotérique, ni émanatisme à la manière des *Falâsifa* néoplatoniciens. C'est pourquoi nous traduisons expressément le terme *ibdâ'* par instauration (initiale, primordiale).» (p. 20).

^{xxv} "...He by a single command originates (*ikhtara'*) beings all at once without the need afterward to alter or change," *Ithbat al-Nubuwa*, p. 3. The verb *ikhtara'* is apparently synonymous with *abda'a* although much less

frequently used. It is thus used by Isaac Israeli and the Ikhwan al-Safa. See Stern, *Isaac Israeli* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962), p. 66 and pp. 72-73 and references there.

^{xxvi} On the early use of this term see Gardet, "Ibda", *The Encyclopaedia of Islam*, new edition; and S. M. Stern, *Isaac Israeli*, pp. 66-74. The term is used in both the *Theologia* attributed to Aristotle (in reality a paraphrase of the *Enneads*) and the *Fi al-Khayr al-Mahd (Liber de Causis)*. In the latter the "Naw' al-ibda'," is said to be, "innama...lil-'illat al-ula wahdaha." (ed. Badawi, p. 19).

^{xxvii} See R. Walzer, *Greek into Arabic* (Oxford: Bruno Cassirer, 1962), pp. 187-190.

^{xxviii} *Al-Maqalid*, p. 137; *Ithbat al-Nubuwa*, p. 28.

^{xxix} *Al-Maqalid*, p. 38. He nevertheless occasionally refers to it as *lays*, see p. 34.

^{xxx} Al-Sijistani's theology of the double negative is explained in simple terms in the surviving Persian paraphrase of his *Kashf al-Mahjub* and in his *al-Ifrikhar*. In *al-Maqalid* he developed this doctrine with much greater care and cogency. In it he denies for example that God can be a cause or a substance or a thing. See Paul Walker, "An Ismaili Answer to the Problems of Worshipping the Unknowable, Neoplatonic God," *American Journal of Arabic Studies*, II (1974).

^{xxxi} "Wa qad hujiba ithbatuhu 'amma yakunu lil-naflyi fih sulukun," *al-Maqalid* p. 62.

^{xxxii} Corbin says, "La philosophie première de l'ismaélisme n'est une métaphysique ni de l'*ens*, ni de l'*esse*, mais de l'*esto*." (Notes to the French translation of *al-Yanabi'*, *Trilogie Ismaélienne*, p. 45.)

^{xxxiii} One must be careful to distinguish between the single, eternal command or word and its implications by extension and analogy. For example the *Amr* of the *Shari'a* exists by analogy with the true, divine *Amr*. (*al-Maqalid*, p. 78.) The *Amr* of God raises also by extension the problem of who shall receive or hear the spoken command. This necessitates a distinction between the '*alam al-Amr* (rational creatures who hear and obey) and the '*alam al-khalq* (those created things without the power of reason.) Here however one comes upon one of those shifts in perspective. Considered metaphysically *al-Amr* is a simple expression of God's eternal responsibility for the existence of being. Considered theologically *al-Amr* has much greater ramifications.

^{xxxiv} See *al-Maqalid*, p. 6, where he specifically mentions the *aysiya mukawwana*, the *aysiya munba'itha* and the *aysiya mahda*.

^{xxxv} I have come across another useful way of looking at creation which, while not specifically connected to the Neoplatonic or the Ismaili solution to the question of temporality, nevertheless relates to and helps clarify the general problem. Professor Mircea Eliade in a remarkable book called *The Myth of the Eternal Return*, Eng. trans. W. Trask (New York: Pantheon Books, 1954), demonstrates that creation is actually the process of transforming chaos into cosmos (p. 18). It takes place in "sacred time" and not in "profane time." Thus for those to whom this idea of creation applies (in my opinion it certainly does to the Ismailis), creation is the "assertion of order" (cosmos-isation, *qama bi amr*) and the most important question about this process is not when it was done but who did it.