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Abu Ishaq Quhistani

By Dr [Farhad Daftary](#)

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Few biographical details are available on Abu Ishaq Ibrahim Quhistani, a prominent Nizari Ismaili author and missionary (*da'i*), who flourished in the second half of the 9th AH / 15th CE century and died not too long after 904 AH/1498 CE. He was born in the district of Mu'minabad, to the east of Birjand, in Quhistan, the medieval name of the south-eastern region of Khurasan. He evidently spent his entire life in that part of Persia.

As mentioned in his sole surviving work, *Haft bab*, or Seven Chapters (pp. 24, 63), a treatise written at the beginning of the 10th AH / 16th CE century and preserved by the Nizaris of Central Asia, Abu Ishaq was a contemporary of the thirty-fourth Qasimshahi Nizari imam, Mustansir bi'llah also known as Gharib Mirza (d. 904/1498), whose mausoleum is still preserved in the village of Anjudan in central Persia. As explained in the first autobiographical chapter of his *Haft bab* (pp. 4-9), Abu Ishaq was born into a non-Ismaili (probably Ithna'ashari) family and converted to Nizari Ismailism in his youth by a local *da'i*. Subsequently, he was appointed to a post in the *da'wa* or missionary organisation of the Quhistani Nizaris by the region's chief *da'i*, a certain Khwaja Qasim.

For about two centuries after the Mongol destruction of the Nizari Ismaili state in 654 AH / 1256 CE, the Nizari *da'wa* remained inactive in Persia while the imams were in hiding. But from around the middle of the 9th AH / 15th CE century, the imams of the Qasimshahi branch of Nizari Ismailism emerged from their obscurity and established themselves in Anjudan, initiating a revival in the *da'wa* and literary activities of their community. Abu Ishaq Quhistani's *Haft bab* is perhaps the earliest major Nizari doctrinal treatise written in Persian during this Anjudan revival, lasting some two centuries; and as such, it occupies an important place in the Nizari literature of the early post-Alamut period. This book, comprising seven chapters with an initial autobiographical one, deals with a range of subjects reflecting the Nizari teachings of the time. It contains chapters on the seventy-two erring sects in Islam; the saved community (*firqa-yi naji*); on prophet hood, the revelation (*tanzil*) of the Qur'an and its esoteric interpretation (*ta'wil*); on the imamate and the eras of concealment (*satr*), manifestation (*kashf*) and resurrection (*qiyamat*); on the spiritual and physical worlds, origination and return, and the hierarchy of the *da'wa*, from mustajib or responding novice to imam; and, finally, on certain esoteric interpretations or *ta'wilat*.

The *Haft bab* (pp. 41-2) also contains a unique description of the declaration of the *qiyamat* or

spiritual resurrection which took place at Alamut on 17 Ramadan 559 AH / 8 August 1164 CE. Abu Ishaq's *Haft bab* was evidently later plagiarised by another Nizari author, Khayrkhwah-i Harati (d. after 960 AH / 1553 CE), who now called it the *Kalam-i pir* and attributed it to the eminent Persian poet and Ismaili *da'i* Nasir-i Khusraw. Abu Ishaq Quhistani evidently produced other works, including *Tarikh-i Quhistan*, or History of Quhistan, which do not seem to have survived.

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Further Reading

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