

**Between Reason and Revelation: Twin Wisdoms
Reconciled. An Annotated English Translation of
Nasir-i Khusraw's *Kitāb-i Jāmi' al-Hikmatayn***

Eric Ormsby, trans.

*London and New York: I.B. Tauris in association the
Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2012. 292 pages.*

Nasir-i Khusraw (d. 469/1077), who was appointed by the Fatimid imam al-Mustansir bi'llah (d. 487/1094) as the *hujjat* and chief *dā'ī* for the region of Khurasan, lived the later period of his life exiled in Badakhshan due to religious persecution. This treatise, a virtual summa of eleventh-century Ismaili philosophical theology put forth in a question-and-answer format, deals with almost all of the scientific and philosophical issues that occupied the minds of the Isma'ili mission of his time. The context is a reply to the *amīr* of Badakhshan, Abu al-Ma'ali 'Ali ibn al-Asad (reign 462/1069), who had requested Nasir to explain Abu al-Haytham Ahmad ibn al-Hasan al-Jurjani's (d. 10th century) philosophical *qaṣīdah*. The text itself, originally edited by Henry Corbin and Mohammed Mu'in in 1953, offers an alternative reading to Latimah Parvin Peerwani's clear but partial English translation, which was recently published in the second volume of *An Anthology of Philosophy of Persia*. Ibrahim al-Dasuqi Shata had translated the 1953 edition into Arabic in 1974, and Isabelle de Gastines' French translation was made available in 1990.

Although the majority of the text is written in prose and not poetry, it would still be pretentious in this short review to focus too critically on possible alternative readings. Any reader with competence in the original language and a concern for specific passages now has several translations, along with the edited text, from which to make a critical comparison. The fact remains that Ormsby has rendered a fluid and accurate translation that maintains the simplicity required to enable a broader audience to follow the complexity of Nasir's ideas. An additional aid is also found in the copious footnotes, introductory essay, index, and bibliography, all of which not only explain the many obscure points in Nasir's treatise, but also suggest many areas for future research.

There is one question regarding the Persian text that does need additional clarification: Ismail K. Poonawala pointed out in his review of Faquir M. Hunzai's edition and translation of Nasir's *Gushāyish va Rahāyish* (translated as *Knowledge and Liberation: A Treatise on Philosophical Theology*) that the

transmitted manuscript was “edited and censored by a Sunni hand” (See *Iranian Studies* 32, no. 3, summer 1999). Likewise, in his *Bibliography of Ismā‘īlī Literature*, he had mentioned that there is also uncertainty regarding the possibility of later revisions to other writings of Nasir. In light of Poonawala’s previous concerns, one might reasonably wonder if the text can be regarded as an accurate reflection of Nasir’s authentic teachings. Ormsby does agree that the *Aya Sofya 2393* manuscript used in this translation was produced by a copyist who, in the words of Corbin, “unfortunately had only a very limited knowledge both of Persian and Arabic” (p. 13). Fortunately, while finishing this current translation, Ormsby was able to gain access to a digital copy of the original manuscript and used it to compare and reconcile more questionable passages.

Admittedly, this question of authenticity will not, and in my opinion should not, concern most readers. They can be assured that there is little indication that the ideas presented therein stand in sharp contrast to Nasir’s earlier writings or even earlier Isma‘ili ideas in general, especially those found in the writings composed by the mission’s tenth-century “Persian school.” It has often been noticed, for example, that there is both continuity and development between Nasir’s thought and the earlier ideas of Abu Ya‘qub Ishaq ibn Ahmad al-Sijistani (d. after 361/971). Despite Nasir’s new reflections on the natural world and his own rejection of specific controversial views held within the earlier mission, much of the underlying theological and metaphysical principles remain intact. There is little reason to believe that Nasir’s theological statements incline toward, or even hint at, any distinctly Sunni ideas.

In answering the questions posed in al-Jurjani’s *qaṣīdah*, Nasir achieves his intention of uniting a modified Peripatetic natural philosophy with Fatimid Isma‘ili theology. As those who study Isma‘ili thought know well, the intention cannot be simplistically reduced to a borrowing of Peripatetic natural philosophy or an adaptation of Platonic metaphysics. The final result is a thoroughly unique Isma‘ili philosophical theology with its own soteriological aims and religious worldview. When approached in this way, Nasir’s project of harmonizing the rational and revealed wisdoms can bring forth many insights into the diversity of interpretations found within Islam’s classical intellectual traditions. At the very least, many modern readers may find in Nasir’s writing the inspiration to combine faith and intuition with an open spirit of scientific and philosophical investigation.

The inherited natural philosophy is often modified in interesting ways. For example, Nasir extends Aristotle’s four causes to a total of seven (p. 25).

He also believes that Aristotle held that there were five, as opposed to four, causes. In Nasir's formulation, he first lists the material cause by implicitly dividing it into [passive] material and [active] instrumental, then follows with the more standard definitions of the efficient, formal, and final causes. The two additional causes are the spatial and temporal causes. Similar modifications are also found in relation to his explanations on the four parts of speech, summaries of logic, and understanding of the natural elements. The discussions of cosmology remain relevant and interesting for his many esoteric insights into the sympathy and correspondence between the macrocosm of the universe and microcosm of humanity. Without exception, in almost every section where the natural world is discussed, terms and ideas specifically related to the Isma'ili mission are subtly woven into his natural philosophy. Like the writings of al-Sijistani, the correspondences between nature and religion are also often explained by using symbolic diagrams that are also included in the translation.

The most intensely argued sections are those that seek to polemically refute the metaphysical understandings of God's attributes, as well as the proofs for His existence, belonging to other non-Isma'ili theological schools. Nasir systematically lays out the positions of the Ahl-i Taqlid, the Karmites, and the Mu'tazilites, before presenting the true *tawhīd* of his own school (the Ahl-i Ta'yid), and the truths uncovered through the methodology of *ta'wīl*. His own view is the God's attributes are absolutely equivocal when compared to those of humanity possessing the same name. For example, he states: "Thus, it is clear that to call God – praise be to Him – 'knowing' is polytheism (*shirk*)" (p. 65). He concludes his polemic by praising the view of the divine held by Aristotle, whom he implies in this instance, once again, held a metaphysical position similar to his own. In later sections he further clarifies the distinction that the oneness of the Originator (*mubdi'*) is superior to the one-being (*wāḥid*) that is the Universal Intellect, while later explaining the correct understanding of the creative command of origination (*ibdā'*).

Perhaps no summary could do complete justice to the many issues covered within Nasir's pages. He sets out a complete angelology, discusses the mysteries of eternity and the nature of true happiness, and reveals the meaning of self-identity in what we might now designate as self-reflexive intentional statements. His courage does not even shy away from answering the famous question: Which comes first, the chicken or the egg?

Ormsby's translation from the original Persian stands out for the reason that it allows English-language readers further insight into this figure's mis-

sionary techniques and philosophical worldview during the later stages of his life. At a moment when biographical studies of Nasir have reached a peak, the future study and translation of his philosophy, cosmology, and poetry should continue to receive primary focus and prominence within the secondary literature. Following the recent insightful studies of Hunsberger and many others, Ormsby's translation will encourage a new generation of scholarship to continue investigating Nasir's contribution to Isma'ili thought and Persian literature as a whole.

Joel Richmond
Doctoral Student, Department for the Study of Religion
University of Toronto, ON, Canada