

## al-Sijistani, Abu Sulayman Muhammad (c.932-c.1000)

*Al-Sijistani was one of the great figures of Baghdad in the fourth century ah (tenth century ad). He assembled around him a circle of philosophers and litterateurs who met regularly in sessions to discuss topics related to philosophy, religion and language. As a philosopher with a humanistic orientation, his concerns went beyond subjects of strictly philosophical nature. His philosophical ideas displayed Aristotelian and Neoplatonic motifs. He considered philosophy and religion to be totally different in nature and method, so that the two could not be reconciled. God is only prior to the world in essence, rank and nobility, not in time. Al-Sijistani insisted that in no way should one attribute to God the imperfections of created things. According to him, the soul is simple by nature and natural reason is capable of attaining a state of pure knowledge that enables one to distinguish between good and evil. Reason, if taken as a guide, could ensure happiness.*

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### 1. Life and works

Abu Sulayman Muhammad al-Sijistani, known as al-Mantiqi (the Logician), was born, c.ah 320/ad 932. His formative years were spent in Sijistan (now Sistan in Iran) but the mature phase of his career took place in Baghdad. He became one of the great figures of the Islamic humanist movement that flourished during the fourth century ah (tenth century ad) in Baghdad. He dominated his generation by the enlightenment of his judgments and the breadth of his knowledge. He was especially interested in ancient philosophy and its transmission into the world of Islam. He assembled around him a circle of friends, philosophers, scientists and litterateurs of various ethnic and religious affiliations. The circle met in regular sessions (*majalis*) and with open and critical minds discussed topics related to philosophy, religion, science and language. Al-Sijistani died c.ah 391/ad 1000.

Those of al-Sijistani's works that have reached us are not numerous. One of the most important attributed to him is [Siwan al-hikma \(Vessel of Wisdom\)](#), from which only selections have survived. The attribution to al-Sijistani of this collection of dicta and anecdotes of Greek and Islamic philosophers has been challenged by W. al-Qadi (1981), but Joel Kraemer (1986) believes that the work emanated from al-Sijistani's school, based upon classroom notes and texts. In addition to [Siwan al-hikma](#), al-Sijistani wrote short treatises on the first mover, the fifth nature of the celestial spheres, the perfection peculiar to the human species, principles of being, dream omens and logic.

In a Socratic fashion, al-Sijistani preferred oral instruction over writing. We owe to his student and protégé Abu Hayyan [al-Tawhidi](#) most of the information concerning his philosophical ideas and doctrines. Al-Tawhidi recorded the sessions

of al-Sijistani's circle in his works *al-Muqabasat (Conversations)* and *al-Imta' wa-al-mu'anasa (Book of Pleasure and Conviviality)*, which remain the major sources of information on the life and thought of al-Sijistani. Consequently we have to look at his teachings through the window of his pupil's writings.

## 2. Doctrines

As a philosopher with a humanistic orientation, al-Sijistani's concerns went beyond subjects of strictly philosophical nature. His philosophical ideas displayed Aristotelian and Neoplatonic motifs and touched on a wide range of subjects such as politics, aesthetics and friendship, among others. However, his chief preoccupation, and that of the circle members as reflected in al-Tawhidi's recordings, centred on the relations between philosophy and religion, the mind-body problem - why the soul was susceptible to virtues and vices, good and evil - the question of God's relation with and action in the universe, and finally the individual and society.

Al-Tawhidi represents his mentor as a man of deep religious sentiments but who regarded both religion and philosophy as true and valid. The two are independent and should not and cannot be reconciled. They differ in method and substance. In religion there are things which cannot be fathomed or understood but are to be accepted and assented to; the end of religion is proximity to God, whereas the aim of philosophy is contemplation. Al-Sijistani objected to the attempt by the Brethren of Purity to harmonize religion and philosophy, and lashed out at the Islamic theologians (*al-mutakallimun*) who claimed that their methodology was rationalist when in reality it was false rationalism (see [Ikhwan al-safa'](#); [Islamic theology](#)).

For al-Sijistani the universe is divided into the terrestrial and the intelligible according to the Platonic system, but God acts in accordance with the Aristotelian concept of first mover. Having accepted the view that matter is eternal, he held that this does not detract from the perfection of God since in the final analysis everything depends on his will. One should not attribute to God the imperfections of the created world. God is prior to the world in essence, rank and nobility, but not in time.

Knowledge implies two types: natural and supernatural. There are four degrees of knowledge: sensible knowledge possessed by non-reasoning animals; absolutely and exclusively intelligible knowledge possessed by the celestial bodies; the sensible-intelligible knowledge tied up with the imagination of those who have not reached perfect purity; and the intelligible-sensible knowledge which has been arrived at through rational and speculative investigation. This is the highest knowledge humans, including such persons as philosophers, augurs (*kahins*) and prophets, can acquire. Intuition, however, is the noblest kind of knowledge because it presents itself by itself in the soul and is not subject to generation and corruption. Through reason we overcome all obstacles to reach God through the intellect,

which is the medium between human beings and the supernatural world. Reason has the power to contact the super-sensible beings until it reaches the First Being.

Having been greatly interested in the body-soul relationship, al-Sijistani distinguished between soul (*nafs*) and spirit (*ruh*), considering the soul to be a simple substance imperceptible to the senses and not subject to change or corruption. According to him, human beings are so by virtue of having a soul and not by the possession of a body, although the soul cannot make a human being by itself. The soul is the principle of knowledge, the body the principle of action. Because of the rival elements, nature versus reason, that constitute a human being and pull him in opposite directions, it is important to take reason as a guide. It alone can ensure our ultimate happiness, namely the knowledge of God and the good which he has reserved for the virtuous. One should aim high towards the celestial world in order to reach eternal life (see [Soul in Islamic philosophy](#)).

See also: [Aristotelianism in Islamic philosophy](#); [Greek philosophy: impact on Islamic philosophy](#); [Neoplatonism in Islamic philosophy](#); [al-Tawhidi](#)

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### List of works

al-Sijistani (c.932-c.1000) *Siwan al-hikmah wa-thalath rasa'il (Vessel of Wisdom and the Three Treatises)*, ed. A. Badawi, Teheran: Bunyad Farhang, 1974; ed. D.M. Dunlop, *The Muntakhab Siwan al-Hikmah of Abu Sulaiman as-Sijistani, Arabic Text, Introduction and Indices*, The Hague: Mouton, 1979. (The Badawi edition includes, in addition to introductions in Arabic and French, the following treatises: *Fi anna al-ajram al-ulwiya tabi'atuha tabi'a khamisa (The Nature of the Celestial Bodies is a Fifth Nature)*; *Fi al-muharrrik al-awwal (On the First Mover)*; and *Fi al-kamal al-khass bi-naw' al-insan (On the Perfection Peculiar to the Human Species)*. Dunlop contains fragments, especially on medicine, that are not in the Badawi edition. He believes that sections dealing with the Greek philosophers are derived from Porphyry's *History of Philosophy*.)

al-Sijistani (c.932-c.1000) *Fi mabadi' al-mawjudat (On the Principles of Beings)*, ed. and trans. G. Troupeau, *Pensamiento* 25, 1969: 259-70. (Discusses the ranks of the first beings and the attributes by which the first essence is qualified.)

al-Sijistani (c.932-c.1000) *Fi al-kamal al-khass bi-naw' al-insan (The Perfection Peculiar to the Human Species)*, ed. and trans. into French by M. Kügel-Turker, *Pensamiento* 25, 1969: 207-24. (By using the intellect, man reaches perfection.)

## References and further reading

Jadaane, F. (1971) '*La philosophie de Sijistani*', *Studia Islamica* 33: 67-95. (A general introduction to al-Sijistani's philosophical ideas and their Greek sources.)

Kraemer, J.L. (1986) *Philosophy in the Renaissance of Islam, Abu Sulayman al-Sijistani and His Circle*, Leiden: Brill. (Major work which examines the extent to which al-Sijistani and his circle were conversant with technical discussions of philosophical issues treated in Greek and late antiquity.)

Leaman, O. (1996) '*Islamic Humanism in the Fourth/Tenth Century*', in S.H. Nasr and O. Leaman (eds) *History of Islamic Philosophy*, London: Routledge, ch. 10, 155-64. (Analysis of the nature of this important period of Islamic philosophy, concentrating on the ethical thought of the period.)

al-Qadi, W. (1981) '*Kitab Siwan al-Hikmah: Structure, Composition, Authorship and Sources*', *Der Islam* 58: 87-124. (Based on some internal evidence, concludes that the real author is the little known Abu al-Qasim al-Katib.)

al-Tawhidi (c.930-1023) *al-Imta' wa-al-mu'anasa (Book of Pleasure and Conviviality)*, ed. A. Amin and A. al-Zayn, Beirut: al-Maktaba al-'Asriyya, 2nd edn, 1953, 3 vols. (A record of night sessions in Baghdad in which al-Sijistani participated in discussing philosophical questions.)

al-Tawhidi (c.930-1023) *al-Muqabasat (Conversations)*, ed. T. Husayn, Baghdad: Matba'at al-Irshad, 1970. (A collection of 106 conversations on various philosophical subjects.)