Reason, Esotericism, and Authority in Shiʿi Islam

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Edited by

Rodrigo Adem
Edmund Hayes

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Note on Transliteration

This volume generally follows *IJMES* transliteration guidelines, with, however, all but the most commonly anglicized names being fully transliterated from Arabic and Persian. Thus:

ʿAbbasid, not ʿAbbāsid
Dinar and dirham
Hadith
Imam (not Imām)
Ismaili
Shiʿa
Shiʿi
Sunni
Baghdad
Kufa
Samarra
Basra instead of Baṣra

Abbreviations Employed

BSOAS	*Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies, London*
EI	*Encyclopedia of Islam, 1st edition, 4 vols, and supplement, Leiden, 1913–42*
EI^2	*Encyclopedia of Islam, 2nd edition, 1960–2005*
EI^3	*Encyclopedia of Islam, 3rd edition, 2007–*
EIr	*Encyclopedia Iranica, 1996*
IJMES	*International Journal of Middle East Studies*
JA	*Journal Asiatique*
JAL	*Journal of Arabic Literature*
JAOS	*Journal of the American Oriental Society*
JRAS	*Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society*

Introduction: On the Use and Abuse of Reason and Esotericism in Islamic Studies

Rodrigo Adem and Edmund Hayes

This volume brings together contributions on the relationship between reason, esotericism, and authority in Shiʿi Islam from its earliest recorded expressions up to the 20th century CE. Although the interrelationship of these three elements has not been neglected in Islamic studies,[1] all too often, scholarship has been impeded by the casting of rationalism and esotericism as diametrically incongruent. Far from arguing consequently for the deletion of "reason" and "esotericism" from the lexicon of Islamic studies altogether, in this introduction we aim to reflect critically on how these terms have been employed, thereby highlighting how key trends in Shiʿi thought still have more to teach us about the sociohistorical conditions which have guided them.

A critical locus for the intersection of reason and esotericism is the construction of authority, whether this authority refers to the socially-situated gatekeepers of an interpretive tradition, or a metaphysical guarantor of legitimate knowledge. The actual negotiation of such socio-epistemic norms takes place in living contexts. Within these living contexts, religious traditions which are typically studied apart interpermeate and coincide. This holds for the study of Shiʿism and beyond. Within Shiʿi studies itself, much energy has been devoted to the specifically political framework of authority underlying the Imamate, a paradigm which separates Shiʿism from Sunnism and Shiʿi sects from one another, yet more work remains to be done on the various socio-epistemic precommitments underlying Shiʿi religious normativity more broadly speaking.

While a certain intellectual orientation may manifest as more dominant for a given Shiʿi group at a particular time, it is our contention that it is a mistake to quarantine discussions of a particular idea or doctrine to a particular sect. Part of the viability of Shiʿism as a term for groups of co-religionists is that conversations on basic principles are shared, contested, and influence one other, just as what it means to be Muslim involves a broader contestation of terms

1 See, for example, the excellent recent volume edited by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Maria De Cillis, Daniel De Smet, and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, *L'Ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements: Shi'i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments* (Turnhout: Brepols 2016).

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and concepts over time and in multiple contexts. In this volume, we focus primarily on Ismaili and Twelver Imami Shiʿi thought, but the contributions of these groups must be understood as discursive acts within a larger ecosystem of truth claims, social configurations, and political mobilizations.

1 The "Esoteric" in Islamic Studies

For many scholars of Islam, the "esoteric" in Islam is limited to associations with the Arabic word *bāṭin*, with its counterpart *ẓāhir* standing in for the "exoteric". The terms *bāṭin* (literally "inward" or "concealed") and *ẓāhir* ("apparent", "manifest") are a well-known hermeneutical binary underlying not only the interpretation of texts, but also the interpretable signs and events manifest in the world. In this framework, the *bāṭin* refers to that interpretation which is not clearly evident, not accessible through common sense or the mundane operation of reason.

Yet the terms *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* fail to convey the full array of social and intellectual phenomena denoted by "esotericism" in the history of ideas. Within Islamic studies proper, "esotericism" has often been arbitrarily applied, in a catch-all manner irresponsibly reductive of real difference and detail between schools of Islamic thought.[2] Islamic thought's emic hermeneutical distinction between *bāṭin* and *ẓāhir* translates only tenuously with any outside etic analytical value presupposed by the terms "esoteric" and "exoteric."[3] In the academic study of Qūrʾānic exegesis in particular, this hermeneutic dichotomy has been used inconsistently, allowing the "esoteric" to figure as a negative concept of what is not "exoteric," while the meaning of "exoteric" itself remains similarly ill-defined.[4] Using such imprecise tools, scholars group "mystical," "Sufi," and Shiʿi hermeneutical practice into a catch-all category of esotericism to set them apart from presumed interpretive norms, and reinforce these perceived norms despite the fact that these boundaries are not fixed in actual practice and human life.

The habit of placing at odds the "esoteric" and the "rationalist" aspects of Shiʿi thought is evident in the divergent research patterns concerning the original core of Imami Shiʿism in the authoritative studies of H. Modarressi and

2 See Feras Hamza, "Locating the 'Esoteric' in Islamic Studies," in *Islamic Studies Today: Essays in Honor of Andrew Rippin*, ed. Majid Daneshgar and Walid A. Saleh (Boston: Brill, 2017), 354–56.

3 Hamza, 357, 363. See Amir-Moezzi, *L'Ésotéricisme Shiʿite*, 2.

4 Hamza, 362–66.

M.A. Amir-Moezzi. On his part, Modarressi has achieved much to historically document the rationalistic and legalistic strand within Imami Shiʿism in its earliest manifestations.[5] In his works, which presuppose the normativity of a proto-Uṣūlī Shiʿism, he portrays such Shiʿis as having been threatened by a type of infiltration by esotericists, whose doctrines they falsely attributed to the Imams in narrations which can now be found throughout the extant classical Imami hadith corpus. By contrast, Amir-Moezzi has argued that the true religion of the Imams was of the gnostic, esoteric tendency, but that this was a secret closely guarded from the uninitiated.[6] In his review of Modarressi's *Crisis and Consolidation*, Amir-Moezzi observed:

> Why should the thousands of non-rationalist traditions reported by prestigious early compilers be "extremist" forgeries, mixed into the sayings of the Imams, and why should only the theological and juridical statements with a moderate and inoffensive content be historically authentic?[7]

Amir-Moezzi's critique is well taken, but a similar criticism could be made of his own treatment of the legal and theological "rationalism" emphasized by Modarressi. Amir-Moezzi quarantines the juridical material in much the same way that Modarressi has excluded the esoteric material. Amir-Moezzi, has not, any more than Modarressi, proposed a clear framework to explain the incorporation of both aspects of early Shiʿism into a common model.

In order that Shiʿi studies should achieve a fuller maturity, we must ensure that our categories of analysis are able to encompass the multiple value systems operative under the rubrics of rationality and esotericism, coexisting and interacting within the various Shiʿi traditions. Among traditions we must think about social and intellectual interpermeability, reaching beyond the reified categories and traditionalist labels which otherwise mold our understanding.

2 Conceptualizing Shiʿi Esotericism beyond Islamic Particularism

In order to recover meanings "lost in translation", in the case of Islamicists' hapless equation of the "esoteric" with the *bāṭin*, we should be cognizant of

5 Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 48–51.

6 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shi'ism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

7 Review of *Crisis and Consolidation* in *Bulletin Critique des Annales Islamologiques*, 14 (1998): 55. Our translation from the French.

the fact that "the esoteric" taps into broader analytical frameworks and active conversations among intellectual historians and scholars of religion. The academic study of Shiʿi esotericism must therefore take stock of its own genealogy, as well as participate in the developing study of esotericisms in the plural within religious studies and intellectual history, and at times in conversation with the social sciences.

In Islamic Studies, the cradle of the European academic study of Shiʿi esotericism is undoubtedly to be found in the pioneering work of Louis Massignon. Massignon's life's work, however, simultaneously holds a special place for treating Islamic thought as intelligible within a broader universe of types operative within the History of Religions, connecting Islamic ideas and practices with cognate forms in Judaism, Christianity and beyond.[8] Massignon's scholarship in this domain typifies Shiʿism as a minority report of comparativist Abrahamic theology, inclusive of arcane and transformative spiritual initiatic methods and juxtaposed with the "exoteric" hermeneutic practices of Abrahamic traditions' more "orthodox" formulations. Massignon found a meaningful interlocutor in Henri Corbin, and the interpretive legacy of both has set the stage for the continued work of Amir-Moezzi and others. Despite the at times extremely profound heuristic utility found in this approach, it has had the tendency to parochialize the discussion of Islamic esotericism to a very particular pattern of mythical exegesis, and is informed considerably by the logic of the *ẓāhir/bāṭin* hermeneutic dichotomy to define esotericism.

Beyond the strict limits of Islamic studies, however, the contested relationship between human rationality and esotericism has been observed by intellectual historians to be one of the great legacies of the human past in the present. The supposed conflicts or harmonies of these two phenomena testify to varied attempts to create a holistic account of the historical development of religious identity, scientific knowledge, and political theory in the modern world.[9] The observable disconnect between studies of "Western" and "Islamic" esotericism pointed to here ought to give us cause for reflection: Such a gap is not only the natural outcome of disciplinary boundaries and institutional limitations but also stems from profounder questions concerning the viability of esotericism as an analytical category capable of spanning disparate cultural contexts.

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8 Patrick Laude, *Louis Massignon: The Vow and the Oath*, 168–9.

9 Egil Asprem, *The Problem of Disenchantment: Scientific Naturalism and Esoteric Discourse, 1900–1939* (Leiden: Brill, 2014). Wouter J. Hanegraaff, *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). *Philosophy Between the Lines: The Lost History of Esoteric Writing* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2014).

It has been argued that "esotericism" is intrinsically wed to specifically Christian or early modern European narratives of identity[10] and is thus bereft of a coherent definition outside of that cultural context.[11] Islamic "esotericism" might thus be neglected in a broader interdisciplinary framework precisely because of the supposed incommensurability of Western "esotericism" with traditions that do not share its own cultural specificities.

In response to this view, the analytic viability of "esotericism" as a broader human phenomenon across cultures, and expressly inclusive of Islamic and Jewish varieties, has been advocated from the perspective of the sociology of knowledge.[12] That is to say that beyond the specific doctrines characteristic of a certain cultural sphere, "esotericism" finds concrete social expressions in the practice of "secrecy" with respect to the creation and dissemination of "higher" or more "perfect" knowledge within society. From this perspective, "esotericism" can concretely and non-polemically denote strategies for the construction of social hierarchies whose authority is epistemologically implicated.

Of course, the claim to uniquely authoritative knowledge (*ʿilm*) was long ago identified by Marshall Hodgson as one of the primary factors for the formation of a distinctive Imami Shiʿi identity.[13] A mature integration of the concept of the esoteric for the study of Shiʿism would include thinking comparatively about how elite knowledges are constructed with respect to their conceptual frameworks and social conditions, and would thereby bring us beyond hermeneutic dualisms or Abrahamic primordialisms.

If we acknowledge that viable usage of the term "esoteric" for Islamic studies requires the proper integration of intellectual history within its social context, this still does not solve our problem, as the influence of a certain "politicized" interpretation of esotericism has left its mark on Shiʿi studies as well. The quintessentially "political" understanding of esotericism characterizes it as a distinctive mode of politico-ideological cultural production intrinsically conditioned in response to social persecution. In this tenor, the influential approach of Leo

10 Kocku Von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe: Esoteric Discourse and Western Identities* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 45–54.

11 Michael Bergunder, "What Is Esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problems of Definition in Religious Studies," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, no. 22 (2010): 9–36.

12 Von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 55–57. see Birgitta Nedelmann, *Secrecy and Concealment: Studies in the History of Mediterranean and Near Eastern Religions*, ed. Hans G. Kippenberg and Guy G. Stroumsa (Leiden: Brill, 1995), 1–16.

13 Marshall G.S. Hodgson, "How Did the Early Shîa Become Sectarian," *JAOS* 75, no. 1 (March 1955): 11. Marshall G.S. Hodgson, *The Venture of Islam: Conscience and History in a World Civilization* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1974), vols. 1, 260.

Strauss to Islamic and Jewish medieval esotericism is paradigmatic.[14] Along these lines, the idea of a distinctly Shiʿi mode of religious expression as the product of repressive violence has recently been emphasized by Amir-Moezzi to explain a uniquely Shiʿi worldview and form of religious expression.[15] For such politicized readings, the esoteric is "driven by political expedience in an environment where exegetical allegory, typology, and metaphor at large were vehicles for expressing dissent or elaborating "heterodox" ideas and concepts."[16] This persecution-based etiology of the esoteric impulse, it may be observed, presupposes an explicit ideologization of authority by hostile "exoteric" outsiders, to which the "esoterics" respond. Esotericism is a dissimulative reaction to that ideology of authority, encoding forms of antithetical ideological production in the language of the entrenched discourse of political "orthodoxy." This presupposes a consistent external structural power defining the rules of intellectual expression: Esotericism's telos is clearly only to be sought as a subversion of what is implied by that power structure, producing messages in a language which, when "properly" understood, imply that structure's overthrow.

This unmitigated conflation of intellectual and politico-ideological domains inhibits the ability of the field to ask such difficult questions as: Must esotericism necessarily find intelligibility primarily as a product of revolt against other historically more self-evident and rationally necessary systems – for example, governance and the rule of law, public ethical norms, and discursive sciences? Or, rather, should one allow "esoteric" discourses to be understood as more autonomous in that they respond to distinct internal stimuli? The answers to these questions are only possible when Islamic studies moves beyond the limits of these hermeneutic dualisms into the proper study of how the intellectual and social domains of human activity interact.

3 Modes of Rationality

In looking for frameworks for integrating a socio-political perspective with a nuanced reading of intellectual discourses, we are forced to acknowledge the

14 Leo Strauss, *Persecution and the Art of Writing* (New York: The Free Press, 1952).

15 Amir-Moezzi, "Dissimulation Tactique et Scellement de la Prophétie," *JA* 302 no. 2 (2014): 432 ff. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Introduction" *L'Ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements: Shi'i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments* edited by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Maria De Cillis, Daniel De Smet, and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (Turnhout: Brepols 2016), 7.

16 To use the words of Hamza, "Locating the 'Esoteric' in Islamic Studies," 362.

way "reason" and "rationality" have been discussed in sociology. Rationality and rationalism, terms which we must cautiously admit have a definite analytical utility, also face the danger of activating the toxic baggage of whiggish Western triumphalism in the face of an East flavored by irrationalities of which esotericism is one form. The deterministic reading of Weber's explanation for Western industrial capitalism[17] as driven by a certain kind of rationality has been dismissed by many scholars in Islamic history and beyond.[18] Yet historians of Islam continue to deploy Weberian concepts (charisma, authority, and so on) precisely because he provided a vocabulary for scrutinizing the relationship between subjective values and objective social realities without collapsing the two. In spite of certain receptions of Weber as a social determinist, his discourse on rationality provides tools for escaping a reductionist readings of rationalism as it is embedded in society.

Rationality is not an unchanging essence that is either present or absent in a discourse or a society. Instead "rationality" is a relative phenomenon, being distinguishable primarily in the goals it seeks to actualize. A type of rationality, then, differs according to specific goals aligned with distinct ideological precommitments and possibilities of action, and this variegation is applicable to modern scientific worldviews and pre-modern religions alike. What is more, within a single religious denomination the application of multiple rationalities is to be found: Thus, rather than being characterized by one particular type of rationality, we must expect different religious traditions to combine various manifestations of instrumental rationality (Weber's *Zweckrationalität*, which tends towards the actualization of utilitarian goals) as well as substantive-value rationality (*Wertrationalität*, which underlies actions undertaken for the actualization of abstract human values and ideal types). Thus, for example, the Ismaili Fatimids embraced an effective political instrumental rationality in their realpolitik concurrently to the value-dominant intellectual practice of esoteric exegesis (*ta'wīl*)[19] and Neoplatonic speculation. Esoteric exegesis was, in this context, subordinated to buttressing the institution of a concrete

17 Note, it has been argued that such readings are, reductive of the nuances in Weber's argumentation across his oeuvre. Stephen Kalberg, "Max Weber's Types of Rationality: Cornerstones for the Analysis of Rationalization Processes in History," The American Journal of Sociology, vol. 85, No. 5 (Mar., 1980): 1145–1179.

18 Said Arjomand, "The Consolation of Theology. The Shi'ite Doctrine of Occultation and the Transition from Chiliasm to Law," *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 4, (1996): 568; Juergen Paul, "Max Weber und die Islamische Stadt," in *Max Webers Religionssoziologie in interkultureller Perspektive*, edited by Hartmut Lehmann, Jean Martin Ouédraogo, Göttingen (Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht) 2003, 109–37.

19 See Walker's contribution to this volume.

authority, namely the Imam.[20] The prestige (amongst the Ismaili core) of the esoteric authority of the Imam was such that it may well have facilitated the ability of the Fatimid Imamate to order its administrative activity, along the lines of instrumental rationality, for example in its ability to innovate new, but still "Islamic" taxation categories to profit from the expanding Mediterranean trade.[21] Substantive value-rationality, therefore, is not a code word for irrationality. The erection of values for thought in a society is not irrational, but a key for systemic coherence, since no propositions are possible without assuming certain initial postulates or non-negotiable values.[22]

If values-based rationality can be detected in the social praxis of so-called esotericist communities, it is even more significant for us to take stock of explicitly rationalist discourses which challenge commonplace conceptions of reason's antagonism to esotericism. Neoplatonism holds a place of distinction in the study of Western esotericism for particular epistemic framings, contemplative processes, and personal goals it assembles under the usage of human reason. The transformative potential that Neoplatonism attributes to human reason was so great in fact, that it promised its devotees a state of cognitive capacity transcending discursive reason and its products. Neoplatonic epistemology and psychology at a certain point devalues discursive rationality as fundamentally flawed in its reliance on contingent representational forms while offering its practitioners speculative practices and rituals as solutions to the viability of attaining truth in a type of transcendental meta-rational state.[23] Neoplatonic approaches to the knowing rational subject also flatten the ontological divide between the human and the divine, an underappreciated legacy of late antique rationalism often forgotten in Western genealogies

20 See Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993), epilogue, "The Use and Control of Reason".

21 See, for example, the Fatimid innovation of new levies upon trade with Christian merchants from Italy by redefining the canonical Islamic category of *khums*, a redefinition that would seem to be impossible within the more conservatively literalist traditions of the Imami Shiʿa or the Sunnis. David Bramoullé, "A Tale of Two Services: Fatimid Public Services to Control the Maritime Trade," in *The Early Islamic Economy, eds. Fanny Bessard and Hugh Kennedy*, forthcoming.

22 So, for example, the "religious" appeal behind the rejection of independent reasoning (*raʿy*) by Imami Shiʿis or *ahl al-hadith* finds its rationale in maximizing epistemic certainty for the basis of possible correct action. See Robert M. Gleave, "Imāmī Shīʿī Refutations of *Qiyās*," in *Studies in Islamic Legal Theory*, ed. Bernard Weiss (Leiden: Brill, 2001), 267–93.

23 Sara Rappe, *Reading Neoplatonism: Non-Discursive Thinking in the Texts of Plotinus, Proclus, and Damascius* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000). With reference to both Neoplatonism and Islamic thought see Von Stuckrad, *Locations of Knowledge in Medieval and Early Modern Europe*, 72 ff.

of reason which bowdlerize history in their quest for antecedents of secular European Enlightenment – despite the fact that this aspect of *philosophia* has historically manifested prominently in both Christian and Islamic traditions.[24] The Shiʿi intellectual practices that most embody these specific aspects of Neoplatonism, such as Ismailism and *ʿIrfān*, are classified as esoteric or mystical due to such tendentious historiographies which cannot grant them full admission as "rationalism" despite the paramount role which rationality plays in them and their intellectual genealogies.

4 Intellectual Deep-Structures of Shiʿism

When thinking about Shiʿi Muslim practice and its relationship to esotericism and rationalism, we are thus led to reject the primordialist, sect-specific identitarian frameworks that tend to obscure the regional, communal, and ideological trends which more concretely shape ideas and practices. The emergence of distinctive Shiʿi forms of thought and piety are often treated wholesale by academics and journalists alike as a product of the civil wars (*fitna*, plural *fitan*) that the earliest Muslims underwent in the 7th century of the common era. In contrast to such political etiologies, however, specialists on the formation of the sects of Shiʿism tend to point to discursive developments in Shiʿi doctrinal and hermeneutic norms that reflect more widely-diffused aspects of religious belief, scholarly discourse, and social practice in the metropoli of the late antique Near East.[25]

Starting in the 8th century CE we can detect a form of self-representation within the flock of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq based on a unique relationship to knowledge (*ʿilm*) that eliminated the need for human speculation (*raʾy*) in the domain of religious normativity. This played out hermeneutically in a rejection of scriptural analogy (*qiyās*) for substantive law and a premium placed on unique interpretations of the Qurʾan only accessible via the Imams.[26] Thus, Imami Shiʿism as discourse in the Islamic marketplace of ideas took on its distinctive characteristics within Shiʿism and Islam less as a result of a primordial political split, and more due to its particular truth claims involving exclusive access to Imamic teachings, leading to the demotion of outsiders as "the general populace" (*al-ʿāmma*). These truth claims established for Imamism its

24 Crystal Addey, *Divination and Theurgy in Neoplatonism* (London: Routledge, 2016), 188–89.

25 See Josef van Ess, *Theologie und Gesellschaft im 2. und 3. Jahrhundert Hidschra*, 6 vols. (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 1991–1997).

26 See Meir M. Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī-Shiism* (Leiden: Brill, 1999).

own positioning vis-à-vis Muslim society in terms of the "perfect" knowledge it claimed to possess and allow us to contextualize Imami engagements alongside those epistemic practices and rhetorical strategies alternately viewed in modern scholarship as rationalist, such as speculative theology (*kalām*) and hermeneutics (*uṣūl al-fiqh*); or as esotericist, such as discussions of the *bāṭin* in Islam, speculative mythopoetics, *ta'wīl*, *taqiyya*, *waṣiyya* as an initiatic chain, and so on. We should, of course, point out that these dichotomies remain ideal types, and one can find admixtures of both throughout the canonical sources.

The need to overcome the political etiology for Shiʿi thought also has important implications for the quintessential topic of secrecy in Imami Shiʿism, discussed frequently through the term *taqiyya*, or "self-preservation." In recent talks and publications, Amir-Moezzi has characterizied *taqiyya* as the product of a singular type of violence played out on Shiʿis supposedly for the sustained belief in Prophethood after Muḥammad.[27] This thesis not only lacks historical evidence, but problematically pits Imami martyrological logic and narratives of sectarian exceptionalism against a presumed orthodoxy more imagined than real. It also exaggerates the extent of societal knowledge of Shiʿi beliefs, and fails to acknowledge that the most striking instances of violence against Shiʿis in early Islamic history were done in response not for theological difference but for armed rebellions against the state, whether in the case of "mainstream" figures like Ḥujr b. ʿAdī, Zayd b. ʿAlī, and al-Nafs al-Zakiyya – but also in the most controversial "exaggerators" such as Abū Manṣūr al-ʿIjlī and Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb who incurred the ire of the authorities and met their demise due to their armed political activity, not doctrine.

Etan Kohlberg's systematic exposition of the polyvalence of Shiʿi *taqiyya* reminds us of the diverse manner that "self-preservational" dissimulation with outsiders might take regarding specific doctrines and practices in distinct contexts. It could be as simple as acting prudently in mixed company, or a formalized juridical understanding between man and God about the extent of one's need to dissimulate under duress, and finally, there was an esoteric variety which was not conditioned by political necessity, but by the inherent exigencies of esoteric knowledge.[28] Shiʿi speculative mythopoetics as a discursive practice does not find its raison d'être in political *ressentiment* nor can the underlying values underlying esoteric systems of initiation be seen as such. Shiʿism is not

27 See Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Dissimulation tactique (*taqiyya*) et scellement de la prophétie (*khatm al-nubuwwa*) (Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine XII)", *JA* 302, no. 2 (2014): 411–438.

28 See Etan Kohlberg, "Some Imāmī-Shīʿī Views on Taqiyya," *JAOS* 95, no. 3 (September 1975): 395–402. Cf. Sean W. Anthony, *The Caliph and the Heretic: Ibn Saba' and the Origins of Shiʿism* (Leiden: Brill, 2012).

inherently esotericist due to its minoritarian position in Islam or antagonism with a supposed mainstream; rather, what manifests as the "esoteric" in Shiʿi thought reflects particular strategies of socio-epistemic value-ideation shaped by distinct social and intellectual contexts, some inherited from the past (such as Islamic "origins"), while others are newly-arising, embodied in the social and intellectual structures of Umayyad and Abbasid societies.

5 A Problem for the Field: The Term "*Ghulāt*"

One significant impediment to progress for the formulation of more precise models for the interplay between esotericism, reason and authority in Shiʿi thought is that esotericism in Imami Shiʿism has been infelicitously colored by the word "extremism," based on an inexact translation of the Arabic polemical term *ghulāt* ("exaggerators"). A more developed field than Shiʿi Studies is today would ideally have dispensed with the use of such a loaded terminology, and it is hoped that we can in the future replace it with more precise terms; the shortcomings of possible alternatives like "Gnosticism" have already been highlighted elsewhere.[29] Other terms are, however, available. In this volume, Rizvi usefully proposes the "maximalist conception of Imamology" as a way of precisely identifying one aspect of Imam-centric cosmology which is often branded as "*ghuluww*". Adem re-evaluates the use of "theophanic" to describe broad trends of "exaggerator" Muslim theology, and Hayes discusses the "political idealism" of said "exaggerator" groups that allowed them to reinterpret political events to conform with their cosmological doctrines. While such terminologies work their way through the scholarly ecosystem, it seems inevitable that, in the meantime, the unhelpful moniker of *ghulāt* will continue to be used, but if so, it should be understood that it requires considerable qualification.

The major justification for perpetuating the usage of the terms *ghuluww* and *ghulāt* is that they are quite prevalent in our textual sources. Used internally

29 Mushegh Asatryan and Dylan M. Burns have made a valuable step forward in describing what the *ghulāt* are not – i.e. they are not usefully to be described as gnostic; see "Is Ghulat Religion Islamic Gnosticism? Religious Transmissions in Late Antiquity," in *L'Ésotérisme shi'ite, ses racines et ses prolongements: Shi'i Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments* eds. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, Maria De Cillis, Daniel De Smet, and Orkhan Mir-Kasimov (Turnhout: Brepols 2016), 55–86. But in his monograph, Asatryan used the capitalized word "Ghulat" as a proper name for a set of Kufan doctrinal tendencies, the texts which carry them, and their heirs in Syria and elsewhere; Mushegh Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shi'i Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and Their Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2016).

by Shiʿis to critique their peers who believed in the divinity of the Imams,[30] the Arabic term *ghulāt* was lexically extracted from the Qurʾanic critique of Christian beliefs concerning Jesus.[31] Academic approaches to Shiʿi "exaggerators" have hitherto focused on the extra-Islamic sources for the divinization of imams to explain their "heterodoxy," thereby emphasizing the formative backdrop of diverse Christian, Manichaean, Jewish, and other Near Eastern religious forms in the newly conquered Islamicate territory of Iraq. But such genealogies are no formula for defining heterodoxy: not just the *ghulāt*, but Islam as a whole was heir to late antique Near Eastern religious and philosophical forms, the "orthodox" as much as the "heterodox."[32] The existence of pre-Islamic conceptual roots for Islamic religious forms should be no surprise; but it is striking how the imagination of academics has been captured by how the religious backdrop of the young caliphate's non-Muslim subjects provided the visionary repertoire by which Shiʿism's earliest *ghulāt* most deviated from Islamic doctrinal norms. The genealogy of "millennialist" and "antinomian" elements of Imami Shiʿism, those most predisposed to Mahdist "revolution" or the instauration of a new religious order or dispensation, have been associated with eclectic religious forms and ethnic milieus which contrasted with the broader shared values of the urban Arab elites at Islamic origins.[33]

It is necessary, though difficult, to undo the sway of this culture-clash etiology from our understanding of Shiʿi *ghuluww* and esotericism in general. The politicized angle predominates in discussions of Shiʿi origins as a whole, despite the fact that the sustained epistemic and hermeneutic norms of the Shiʿi "school tradition", by which Shiʿism was preserved as religious practice over centuries, display their own internal logic which makes such politicized speculations a moot point.

Much more than a politicized sectarian frame of the Arabo-Mesopotamian milieu, Imami "esotericism" finds its core in the universalist figure of the Imam, a uniquely Islamic intellectual product, in as much as it resolves problems of meaning primarily intelligible to the Islamic worldview of "believers" and the questions posed by adherents to its community. Imamology, as it is

30 This had been a shift from earlier practices; see Wadad al-Qadi, "The Development of the Term Ghulāt in Muslim Literature with Special Reference to the Kaysāniyya," in *Akten des VII. Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft*, ed. Albert Dietrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1976), 295–319.

31 Qurʾan: *Al-Māʾida* (5:77), "Say: O People of the Book don't exaggerate (*taghlū*) in your religion with no justification…."

32 See e.g. Garth Fowden, *Before and After Muḥammad: Refocusing the First Millennium* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014).

33 See William F. Tucker, *Mahdis and Millenarians: Shīʿite Extremists in Early Muslim Iraq* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008). Cf.

sometimes called, involved extended reflections on the Qur'an, the Deity of whom it speaks, Islamic worship, the standing of the Muslim believer, and the nature of universal religious authority in light of the Islamic dispensation. All these elements form the basis of the esoteric Imami tradition which is too readily flattened down to an essentialized "foreign" or "heterodox" sentiment as opposed to a distinctive brand of Islamic theology which arose organically from the intellectual and political raw materials at the disposal of the Muslim community, equally part of the "Islamic" as the disparate late antique elements that were forged into the Sunni synthesis.

6 The Islamic Vernacular of Esoteric Shi'ism's Central Binary of Meaning

In as much as what is studied now specifically as "esoteric Shi'ism" is framed by an external taxonomy, it does entail a discrete set of general characteristics. It emphasizes the abstraction of the figures of the Prophet Muḥammad and his cousin and son-in-law ʿAlī within a binary that represent a duality of religion as encountered on the societal and individual level. The oral sayings (hadith) in currency within a broader Islamic milieu in this light took on greater significance, such as Muḥammad's supposed statement to ʿAlī: "You will fight over the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of the Qur'an just as I fought over its revelation (*tanzīlihi*)."[34] This was interpreted as a delegation of roles between the two figures, one which also found a particular proof-text in the Qur'anic address to Muḥammad, "You are only a warner, and every people has its guide (*wa-li-kulli qawmin hādin*)," which inspired the Shi'i understanding that Muḥammad had been the "warner," while ʿAlī had been the "guide."[35] This is understood in early Shi'i *tafsīr* to mean that Muḥammad had brought the Islamic religion nominally adhered to by all, and that ʿAlī had brought the exclusive keys to its understanding, an understanding inherited by the subsequent Imams.[36]

34 See sources in Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "'The Warrior of Ta'wīl': A Poem About ʿAlī by Mollā Ṣadrā," in *The Spirituality of Shi'i Islam: Beliefs and Practices* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 318.

35 Qurānic verse *al-Ra'd* (13:7). See Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, ed. Mīrzā Muḥsin Kūcheh Bāghī al-Tabrīzī (Najaf: Maktabat Āyatollāh al-'Uẓmā al-Mar'āshī al-Najafī, 1404), 29–31. Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī, *Al-Kāfī*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1388) 1:191–192.

36 Meir M. Bar-Asher, "The Authority to Interpret the Qur'an," in *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Theology and Law*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 156–57.

A critical disjuncture between mere exclusivism and the structure of esoteric thought characteristic of the Shiʿi tradition is the particular manner in which the bifurcation of exoteric and esoteric religion is delegated between Muḥammad and ʿAlī, not as the historical accident of political crisis, but – critically – as a timeless religious archetype played out in every cycle (*dawr*) of sacred history. Within Ismailism and Nuṣayrism this is extended out to the fullest conclusion and has led to their particular association with a so-called "cyclical" vision of religion. The religious visionary referred to here, however, can be also be thought of as an extension of the Arabic and Qurʾanic hermeneutic of Islam, embodied in the Qurʾanic text's underlying "prophetology" as described by Sidney Griffith.[37] These theologians focused on the binary of the theophanic "name" (*ism*) and the "meaning" (*maʿnā*) represented by Muḥammad and ʿAlī, respectively. The so-called "esoteric interpretation" or *taʾwīl* of esoteric Shiʿism is merely the practice of making these interpretive structures explicit in every manifestation of religion.

The way the relationship between prophet, imam, and their intermediaries was conceived had deep implications for the articulation of thought as well as the elaboration of institutional representations of the Imamate as an expression of authority in broader society. The Gates (*bāb*, pl. *abwāb*) and agents of Imami Shiʿism ultimately gave way to professional scholars as spokesmen of divine guidance in Twelver Shiʿism, but not without a struggle between trained *mutakallim*s and charismatic intermediaries to the divine, a struggle whose echoes continue to resound until modern times as Cancian's contribution to this volume makes clear. Classical Nuṣayrism and Ismailism, on the other hand, continued to derive the symbolic hermeneutics of the theophanic model as it intersected with the existence of an initiatic elite accompanying the Godhead's appearance over religious history. Nuṣayrism retained the archaic forms replete with metempsychosis and perennial manifestations of God and his elect hierarchy. In Ismailism, this was replaced by the ever-present *ḥudūd*, ranks of initiates who represented varying degrees of ontological and hermeneutic knowledge.

The old slogan of the esoterics, "Religion is knowing who men are (*al-dīn maʿrifat al-rijāl*)," a type of spiritual *ad hominem*, measured the proximity or distance of the human to the Imam as divine theophany through an

37 See chapter 2 of Sidney H. Griffith, *The Bible in Arabic* (Princeton University Press, 2013). The importance of this Qurʾānic prophetological narrative for Shiʿi theology is not to be underestimated. At the same time, the work of Henri Corbin reminds us of the need not to dichotomize between theophany and prophetology when thinking beyond a rigid Judeo-Christian sphere of influences.

illuminated insight only granted by initiation. Both groups were infamous among the greater populace for advocating a dispensation from the *sharīʿa* in a present or future state: they did so precisely because of the primacy of the onto-anthropological structure of religious authority over the outwardly articulated forms of the Qur'an's message.

This abstracted structuring of religion was the central "secret" safeguarded by esoteric Shiʿism as its own distinct brand of perfect knowledge. The social capital found in Shiʿi esotericism as a form of Islamic scholarship is found in the devices it uses to explain a broader sacrohistorical framework culminating in Islam. It is valued precisely because it answers questions of meaning for Islam within a completely self-consistent form – self-consistent because of its tautological affirmation of the eternality of its own historical forms – and operating apart from the discursive reasoning of broader Muslim scholarship. This perfected "interpretation of Islam" is what esoteric Shiʿism explains itself to be in the Islamicate marketplace of ideas, creating a perfected harmony between socio-historical structures and the semantic markers of ideology. However much a degree of separation might be presumed of esotericist Shiʿi writers, they were, in fact, situated within an early economy of knowledge, assuring that their ideas existed on a continuum of broader religious scholarship in Islam, and as such had their own localized authorities, scholarly exchanges and debates, and pedagogically-oriented texts, which mirrored developments found among their counterparts in a broader Islamic context, and within an exclusivist soteriology expressed completely in the vernacular of Islam.

7 Shiʿi Rationalities at the Crossroads

The historical course of this esoteric tendency in Shiʿism in its persistent forms is to be contrasted with an increasingly influential trajectory for Imami authors since the 4th/10th and 5th/11th centuries which has colored our understanding of the relative place of esotericism and rationalism in Shiʿism. Not reducible to Buyid cosmopolitanism, or mere "influence" by Muʿtazilites, this was predicated on very specific changes within broader Islamic discourse at large. Discursive developments in Muslim intellectual centers such as Basra and Baghdad demanded that reason (*al-ʿaql*) be called upon to derive certain knowledge (*ʿilm*) as an incontrovertible argument (*ḥujja*) of truth. Much more than is commonly recognized, reason had become an arbiter of Islamic universality in merit of its acquisition of positive value with the rise of Islamic *kalām* and the Arabization of Hellenistic *philosophia* over the course of 2nd–3rd/8th–9th centuries.

Shiʿi adoption of reason's universality in the mode of *kalām* in particular meant that truth claims were to be made in the agreed-upon terms of a broader intellectual discourse and that Shiʿi scholars rearticulated their exclusive truth claims within the scope of a set of epistemic and ethical concerns shared by a broader Muslim audience. The moral objectivism at the heart of Muʿtazilī *kalām*, for example, allowed Twelver *mutakallimūn* to argue, without recourse to tradition, for the obligation of a truly beneficent God to provide an impeccable authority for all of humanity's needs: that is, the Imam. This new mode of grounding Imami normativity enabled the assertion of the rational necessity of an imam not physically evident who performed a soteriological function of grace (*lutf*) distinct from his function as a mouthpiece of positive law; the latter role was to be fulfilled instead by Twelver Shiʿi jurists who fully integrated themselves into broader rationalist discourses on *kalām* philosophical theology, hermeneutics (*uṣūl al-fiqh*), and Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) over the 3rd/9th to 5th/11th centuries.[38]

While the scholarly practices of early "Uṣūlī" tradition predominate over our understanding of Islamic "rationalism" for Shiʿism and Sunnism alike, it is imperative that they be contrasted with the alternate path of rationalism simultaneously adopted by Ismaili thinkers of the 4th/10th century, that of Neoplatonism. Rejecting *kalām*'s skeptical, atomist, and epistemically representationalist view of human and universe, they opted for a metaphysical and naturalistic unity bound by the actualizing power of emanated Reason. The entirety of religion was presented as a celestial and ecclesiastical hierarchy reflecting the great chain of being known by Neoplatonic meta-rational inspiration of the soul (*taʾyīd*). This cosmic order was to be read in nature and the world's major religions as a symbol of absolute order and authority, with the Imamate described as a manifestation of the "rational normativity" (*amr*) necessitated by an entity beyond being and non-being.[39]

The more emphatic claims about the anthropological and cosmological role of reason and rationality were undoubtedly made at the time by the Ismailis, but within a framework openly antithetical to the prevalent modes of reasoning practiced by theologians, jurists, and Qur'anic exegetes which Twelver Shiʿis increasingly advanced for a broader readership. In the Safavid period, however, Twelver political hegemony in Iran allowed for the type of cultural

38 For an intellectual history and sociological understanding of this process, see Said Amir Arjomand, "The Consolation of Theology: Absence of the Imam and Transition from Chiliasm to Law in Shiʿism," *The Journal of Religion* 76, no. 4 (October 1996): 548–71; see also the classic work of intellectual biography on the topic by Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022)* (Beirut: Libraire Orientale,1978).

39 Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, chapters 4 to 13.

confidence which allowed for the embrace of particularistic and "exaggerated" modes of Imamology previously suppressed (though never completely) as too "esoteric" or similar to the so-called *ghulāt*. This in turn may have been facilitated by the adoption of Neoplatonizing Sufi theosophies from Sunnī discourse which allowed for the "naturalization" of the terms of hiero-ontological authority (*walāya*) for the Imam within the broadening cosmopolitan discourse of Islam's post-classical period.[40]

The literature of Shiʿi school-traditions as they reach us from the past in both canonical and non-canonical texts serve as an archive of various stances toward particularism and universalism with relationship to the arbitration of truth, in as much as they reflect the currency of those values in a greater Islamicate marketplace of knowledge. They reveal to us when "playing by the rules" of external arbiters of reason increases as a social value as opposed to an anti-discursive Neoplatonic rationalism or exclusivist Shiʿi mythopoetical speculation, or when the harmonization of both is believed to be possible.

In the 20th century, Shiʿi discourses of legitimacy have intersected with communicative-value based rationalism, whether in the uncertain process of *ijtihād* by Twelver scholars and politicians, or the consensus-based project of universal human rights of the Agha Khan. Yet the strategy of presenting religion as a transhistorical "identity" provides an impetus for exceptionalist modes of self-representation that do not recognize the historical labors necessary for such processes of harmonization. For some, contemplation of the historical contingency of these processes may form a conceptual red-line for the viability of a modern religious identitarian project. Yet more must be done to surpass that consideration in freeing the study of Shiʿism from sectarian exceptionalism; i.e., a presupposed radical alterity which invalidates the study of its historical development along common sociological processes as an ontological betrayal of its "authentic" essence. This stance renders Shiʿism an esoteric trust unintelligible to any outsider and overturns its academic study, a position which must be flatly rejected.

8 The Chapters

Various aspects of authority in the Shiʿi tradition, both exoteric and esoteric, are treated in this volume. Contributions span conceptualizations of the

40 For elements of this phenomenon see Matthew Melvin-Koushki, "Powers of One: The Mathematicalization of the Occult Sciences in the High Persianate Tradition," *Intellectual History of the Islamicate World*, no. 5 (2017): 127–99.

Imam's authority as a socially-embedded and politicized individual (Hayes), as the source of statements or texts which either clarify revelatory scripture or require further interpretation themselves (Qutbuddin, Walker, Warner, Cancian), and a theophanic entity (Adem, Rizvi). Attention is likewise given to the various modes of authority embodied by the Imam's proxies such as "Gates" (*bāb*s) and missionaries (*dāʿī*s) (Adem, Hayes, Qutbuddin, Walker), Twelver Shiʿi scholars and exegetes (Warner, Rizvi, Cancian), and Shiʿi Sufis (Cancian), each of whom claim a special relationship with Imamic or divine authority through the mastery of their own specific forms of knowledge.

Adem's chapter reintroduces the study of early Ismailism as a variety of early esoteric Shiʿism, in conversation with scholarly discussions by Massignon and Corbin that have been elided in past decades. The roots of early Ismaili doctrinal origins are reconsidered with respect to beliefs about the Imam and the unique ranks of the Imam's followers. The distinctly theophanic vision of the Imamate held by the influential "*Mukhammisa*" (Pentadist) body of esoteric doctrines in 3rd/9th century Shiʿism is highlighted as an important source for the Ismaili perennialist vision of religious truth, an influence readily acknowledged with respect to the sources of early Nuṣayrism. Special attention is given to the language of theophany, speculations on the primordial duality of Muḥammad and ʿAlī as "speaking" and "silent," and the hierarchy of religious dignitaries headed by the Salmān al-Fārisī as "Gate" (*bāb*,) in *Mukhammisa* teachings as inspiration for the Ismaili religious worldview and *ḥudūd* religious hierarchy. Adem frames his investigations with a discussion of how contemporary research has ignored these themes in favor of a political or "dynastic" interpretation of Ismailism colored by the specific genesis of modern Ismaili studies.

Hayes's contribution is a detailed reconstruction of the historical circumstances of the counter-Imamate of Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī *detto* "the Liar", the man who was, for a time, the widely recognized 12th or 13th Imam of the Imami Shiʿa, in opposition to the claims of a hidden 12th Imam who was later canonized. Hayes shows that what are usually considered separate political entities (the esotericist *ghulāt* and rationalist "mainstream" Imamis) were in fact, not clearly to be demarcated from each other as distinct political entities in the years before and after the Occultation. Instead, both orientations can be detected on either side of the major split that arose following the death of the eleventh canonical Imam, al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, between the established agents loyal to the deceased Imam, and the followers of his brother Jaʿfar "the Liar". Instead of seeking to conflate political loyalties with doctrinal orientations, we should instead see how doctrines influenced the reception of political events. Thus, Hayes argues, we can see a certain kind of literalist rationalism as tending towards a "political

realism" (epitomized by the *Faṭḥī* Imamis) and resulting in the explicit acceptance of inconvenient political facts, which can be contrasted with "political idealism" which explained them away. The latter orientation allowed for the editing or reinterpretation of the outward form of political events in order to fit with pre-existing doctrines and cosmologies: for example, giving rise to the more esoterically-oriented doctrine of the hidden Imam. Political realists and political idealists, however, could and did find themselves taking up a common cause, as in the case of the alliance between the Kufan *faṭḥiyya* and the *ghulāt* followers of Fāris b. Ḥātim under the banner of the Imamate of Jaʿfar "the Liar".

Warner asseses the extent and role of esoteric concerns in an early Twelver Shiʿi hadith compendium, the *Kitāb ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ* of Ibn Bābawayh. Though this work has often been treated as a source of esoteric knowledge, the purpose of its composition remains unclear, due both to the unusual nature of the work, and the transitional period of Imami intellectual history in which it was written. Retrieving the author's discursive positionality via an analysis of the *ʿIlal*'s organization and its comparison to contemporaneous works, Warner's study uncovers a work whose primary concern is not hidden knowledge *per se* but rather upholding the authority of the Imams' hadith within a burgeoning economy of knowledge that straddled legal, ethical, mystical, and literary discourses in early Islam. Warner's study reminds us of the plasticity of hadith scholarship's role in Shiʿi thought, one that cannot be reduced to mere "traditionalism."

Qutbuddin and Walker both analyze Ismaili *taʾwīl* hermeneutics, and its relationship to esotericism and rationality, with, however, substantially different emphases.

Qutbuddin presents the legacy of mature Fatimid esoteric hermeneutics or *taʾwīl* as developed by eleventh century *dāʿī* al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078); a practice which has enjoyed almost a millennium of continuity up into the present Bohra Ismaili community. Focusing on the texts of al-Muʾayyad's Cairene teaching sessions, *al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya*, Qutbuddin lays out the strikingly rationalist program of the "esoteric" exegesis comprised therein in ten principles that together constitute the Fatimids' system of symbolic scriptural interpretation (*taʾwīl*). They are: (1) the rationality of faith; (2) the inversion of the literary perception of real and figurative; (3) the harmonization of the physical and spiritual worlds; (4) the mutual validation of the exoteric and esoteric aspects of the Shariʿa; (5) the substance of *taʾwīl* manifest in God's unity, God's call, and the system and hierarchy of spiritual ascension;(6) the concept of living history, with the stories of the prophets reflected in Muḥammad's mission; (7) the methodology of *taʾwīl*, presented through scriptural evidence and rational proofs; (8) *taʾwīl* as the true knowledge integral to salvation; (9) the

sole authority of the divinely-guided prophet, legatee and Imam to interpret the Qurʾan and Shariʿa; and (10) the rationale for *taʾwīl*. Together, these principles form a coherent hermeneutic for the Fatimids' understanding of the message of the Qurʾan and the precepts of the Islamic Shariʿa.

By contrast, Walker emphasizes the more *ad hoc*, case-specific nature of Fatimid *taʾwīl* as exemplified in an earlier, less institutionalized phase of the *daʿwa* in tenth century North Africa. Walker goes on to compare instructive examples of *taʾwīl* from four Ismaili authorities spanning the 4th/10th to early 5th/11th centuries CE: Ibn al-Haytham, Abū-l-ʿAbbās (brother of the famous *dāʿī* Abū ʿAbdallāh al-Shīʿī), Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī. In this treatment, Walker emphasizes the political utility of a *taʾwīl*-based system in which knowledge can only be accessed through a system of initiation by authorities within the hierarchy. This system, then, had the advantage both of giving members a sense of participating in something special which bound them uniquely to it; it also afforded higher members of the hierarchy a unique authority amongst their brethren.

Rizvi argues against the commonplace assumption that esotericist and "extremist" attitudes to the Imamate suddenly erupted in the Safavid period, pointing to the development of maximalist readings of Imamology already by the 14th and 15th centuries CE. These developments were part of a "neo-classicism" that presaged more well-known manifestations of the same in the Safavid-era scholarship, exemplified in a sanguine attitude towards the controversial apocalyptic traditions of the Imams' "return" (*rajʿa*) taught by 8th century hadith narrator Jābir al-Juʿfī; they also entailed the seeds of what is known as *walāya takwīniyya*, a particularly maximalist formulation of Imamic authority that drew on recent developments in Sufi theosophy. The lives and works of Imami scholars Rajab al-Bursī and al-Ḥasan b. Sulaymān al-Ḥillī are drawn upon by Rizvi to trace out this trajectory in Imami thought within broader intellectual currents in Iran, Iraq and beyond in the pre-Safavid period, and force us to reconsider our historical mapping of Imami esotericism and rationalism in the field of Islamic studies.

Cancian demonstrates the sociopolitical dimensions operative within the theoretical understanding of spiritual leadership among the Sufi orders of 18th to 20th century Iran. Despite the overt profession of adhesion to the tenets of modern Uṣūlī Shiʿism made on different occasions by the Gunābādī Sufis, their approach to the question of spiritual leadership remains problematic, to say the least, if analyzed against the usual enunciation of the theory of *marjaʿiyya* in Twelver Shiʿism. Cancian addresses this problem by analyzing the ideas of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, the eponymous master of the order.

The literature produced by the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi masters and intellectuals is punctuated with occasional outcries against the ignorance and arrogance of the "exoteric" scholars: the *ʿulamā-ye ẓāhir*. Their record of persecution suffered, even quite recently, speaks of a troubled relationship that never came to the point of an accommodation. In this respect, Gunābādī literature has hitherto been largely unexplored. Cancian's investigation into the textual corpus of this Sufi brotherhood, therefore, allows a better understanding of this relationship. Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh in particular seems to have proposed a binary structure of religious authority, whereby the *fuqahā'* are seen as custodians of one aspect of the *walāya* through an uninterrupted chain of transmission parallel to the one through which the Sufis have received their share of spiritual authority. Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, in other words, proposed an alliance between the *fuqahā'* and the Sufis whose unity he holds to have been broken during the Safavid era. It is clear from Cancian's chapter that the rational and the esoteric cannot be clearly demarcated or quarantined off from each other, if properly defined, they do represent distinct poles of enquiry and experience which are both legitimate objects of enquiry for the academic researcher, but also clearly identified as distinctions with a real significance for Shiʿi actors throughout history. He shows that although the intellectual lineage of the Gunābādī order is coherent, it must also be seen as reacting to the changing nature of political authority in Iran more generally, including the crystallization of the theory of *marjʿiyya* among the "exoteric" *fuqahā'*, who by the 19th century had taken on a triumphantly "rationalist" Uṣūlī guise. As Cancian shows, the Sufi masters expressed complicated responses towards these "exoteric rationalists" oscillating between rivalry and indignant reproach, and an uneasy recognition of separate domains of authority, comparable to the division between the classical division between law-giving prophets and the Imamic expounding of the interior dimensions of spiritual practice.

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CHAPTER 1

Early Ismailism and the Gates of Religious Authority: Genealogizing the Theophanic Secret of Early Esoteric Shiʿism

Rodrigo Adem

Studies of early Ismailism have witnessed a sea-change over the last century. After a millennium of hostile outsider accounts, slander, and baseless speculation, a paradigm shift has occurred for our understanding of Ismailism.[1] Thanks to the pioneering efforts of V. Ivanow, the generous contributions from private manuscript collections of the Ismaili community, and the scholarly travails of H. Hamdani, A. Hamdani, W. Madelung, H. Halm, P. Walker, I. Poonawala, and F. Daftary, we now possess an unprecedented ability to study early Ismailis beyond the standard but persistent heresiographical depictions of their hostile opponents. Early Ismailis can now speak for themselves through the numerous texts they have left behind. The doctrinal core of what was once Islam's most secretive, "esoteric" sect, has been brought to light.

Despite this progress, the study of Ismaili doctrinal origins is beset by a tension dictated by the twin concerns of genealogy and ideology in Shiʿi thought.[2] The particular conundrum created by this duality for the study of Ismaili Shiʿism will be redressed here with special attention to older avenues of research neglected in past decades and with reference to sources whose value for the topic has not fully been recognized. Although the approach and conclusions arrived at here may run contrary to recent consensuses, they remind us of the need for continued philological work on early Ismaili religious texts, as well as a more robust historicization of the phenomenon of "esoteric Shiʿism" in early Islamic thought within which Ismailism plays a quintessential role.

1 Compare the historiographical account by Farhad Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs: Their History and Doctrines*, 2nd ed. (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2007), chap. 1, with the earlier assessment by Bernard Lewis, *The Origins of Ismāʿīlism* (Cambridge: W. Heffer & Sons, 1940), 20–22.

2 See the reflections of Paul E. Walker, "The Resolution of the Shīʿah," in *Shīʿite Heritage*, ed. Lynda Clarke (Binghamton: Global Publications, 2001), 75–90.

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1 Ismailism beyond Dynastic Genealogy

ʿAlid genealogical lineage is sacred in Ismaili devotion, as in other varieties of Shiʿism. But the exact origins of Ismailism's particular vision of ʿAlid authority have only become accessible due to our newly gained capacity and willingness to use Shiʿi sources for the study of Ismaili origins. These sources have provided historians with tantalizing clues concerning Ismaili origins. Ismailism as it has been newly reconstructed in the 20th century is now understood as a Shiʿi sect that finds its genesis in succession debates over Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765).

The narrative is well-known: Ismāʿīl, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's youngest son and apparently designated successor, predeceased his father. Some Shiʿis claimed that Ismāʿīl had only appeared to die but would return one day as the messianic "Qāʾim."[3] Such people were referred to by Imami heresiographer al-Nawbakhtī (d. ca. 300/912) as the "pure" or "original" Ismailis (*al-Ismāʿīliyya al-khāliṣa*).[4] Others among Ismāʿīl's erstwhile followers acknowledged Ismail's death and subsequently followed his son Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl. When this Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl subsequently died in the last quarter of the second/eighth century, some of his followers claimed that he would return as the Qāʾim and these were classified by al-Nawbakhtī as *al-Ismāʿīliyya al-Mubārakiyya*. These "Mubārakiyya" Ismailis are what has been referred to in the research as the "nascent" Ismāʿilis, i.e., the 2nd/8th century precursors of those groups who emerged in the 3rd/9th century as a formidable political force that we now call Ismaili.[5]

The presumption of continuity between the heresiographer's Mubārakiyya of the 2nd/8th century and "Ismailism" as a religious and sociopolitical phenomenon of the 3rd/9th century is based on a supposed unified stance towards the succession to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq by Ismāʿīl and his son Muḥammad. It is an underappreciated fact, however, that the Fatimid Caliphs of Egypt, the sole known Shiʿi claimants of the lineage of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, only began to assert their genealogical continuity with that figure starting at the time of the "reforms" of Fatimid caliph al-Muʿizz li-Dīn Allāh (r. 341–365/953–975),[6] the founder of Cairo. At that time, al-Muʿizz codified a hitherto unstable narrative of "concealed Imams" (*aʾimma mastūrūn*) who had surreptitiously organized

3 On this term see Wilferd Madelung, *EI*^{2}, s.v. "Ḳāʾim Āl Muḥammad."

4 Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, ed. Hellmut Ritter (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿat al-Dawla, 1931), 58. This group is similar to the Wāqifiyya and Nāwūsiyya of the same time-period (believers in the messianism of Mūsā al-Kāẓim and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq respectively), and like the latter, rapidly dwindled to extinction.

5 Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 89–90.

6 Wilferd Madelung, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," *Der Islam* 37 (1961): 86–100.

the *daʿwa* between the 2nd/8th and 3rd/9th centuries[7] and maintained the integrity of this lineage.

Having contributed greatly to the reconstruction of this narrative,[8] Madelung also wrote thusly about al-Nawbakhtī's "Ismāʿīliyya" and "Mubārakiyya":

> Nothing is known about the further fate of these early Ismaili splinter sects if they deserve this description. They must have been numerically insignificant. An Ismaili movement did not emerge until a century later. There is no definite evidence for any continuous doctrinal tradition linking the early Kufan Ismailis and the movement of the second half of the third/ninth century.[9]

Whatever credence one may accord official Fatimid succession narratives and their variants, their reconstruction was nonetheless based on an important historiographical development: the rigorous usage of properly Shiʿi sources. This was an improvement over the prevalent reliance on exceedingly hostile accounts of Ismailis by medieval Muslim critics and earlier European Orientalists. The Ismaili Imams had been hitherto treated as willful heretics, affecting a Shiʿi veneer and forging an ʿAlid genealogy in order to undermine Islam from within on behalf of an atheistic Shuʿūbite conspiracy.[10] This credulous and sensationalistic aspect of the historiography of Ismailism explains the particular sensitivity with which discussions of Ismaili ʿAlid genealogy in modern academia are carried out.

And yet, despite the important redressal of earlier historians' wrongs, the persistent emphasis on Fatimid dynastic *genealogy* has elided more significant formative avenues of influence with regard to Ismaili religious *doctrine* specifically. In other words, the inordinate attention paid to the question of Ismailism's genealogical relationship to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq does nothing to explain Ismailism's particular esoteric Shiʿi beliefs which defy reduction to a dynastic succession dispute.

In contrast, studies on early Ismaili intellectual history specifically have emphasized its highly innovative aspects. Heinz Halm, author of the most thorough philological study of early Ismaili doctrine to date, concluded there

7 See Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 99–100, 104, 106–7.

8 Madelung, "Das Imamat," 43–48. For another ambitious reconstruction and reconciliation of opposing sources, see Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, trans. Michael Bonner (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 13–14, 19–20.

9 Wilferd Madelung, *Religious Trends in Early Islamic Iran* (Albany: Persian Heritage Foundation, 1988), 92.

10 See accounts by Daftary and Lewis in footnote number 48.

that 3rd–4th/9th–10th century Ismailism, "in spite of its older Shiʿi material reworked here and there," was a "new creation," and a fundamentally new religious form in Islam.[11] Similar emphasis on intellectual creativity is also found in the authoritative studies on Ismaili Neoplatonism by Paul Walker.[12] This was entirely natural. Such scholarship did not intend to defend an image of Ismailism as a static religious form from the 2nd/8th century to the 3rd/9th century[13] but merely to provide an account of what was actually to be found in early Ismaili texts.

Consequently, the historiographical duality of ancient succession disputes on one hand and new intellectual currents on the other produces a contradictory impression of Ismailism either as a 2nd/8th century dynastic lineage or a novel school of Islamic thought from the 3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries. This unfortunately has diverted our attention from the organic relationship between Ismailism's core doctrines and significant theological developments within Shiʿism during the 3rd/9th centuries, especially those esoteric in nature. Such an oversight is the outcome of the temptation of focusing on genealogies of succession, which naturalizes a framework of political "succession disputes" intelligible to insiders and outsiders, Shiʿis and non-Shiʿis alike. Meanwhile, a fuller elaboration of Ismailism's intellectual pedigree, and not its politico-genealogical one, remains an underdeveloped and neglected subject of inquiry within Shiʿi studies.

There is another layer of the modern study of Ismailism, however, which deserves proper mention. It is represented by Louis Massignon and Henri Corbin,[14] scholars who investigated the association between Ismailism and the followers of Imami arch-esotericist Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb (d. 167/783), a figure whose legacy looms large in Imami sources of all kinds. This line of research was justified for Massignon and Corbin by the many meeting points between Ismailism, Nuṣayrism, and esoteric doctrines within Imami Shiʿism broadly conceived that emphasized esoteric "gnosis" (*maʿrifa*) of the Imam over an

11 Heinz Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismāʿīlīya: Eine Studie zur Islamischen Gnosis*, Abhandlungen für die Kunde des Morgenlandes, XLIV, 1 (Wiesbaden: Kommissionsverlag Franz Steiner, 1978), 168. For the same conclusion restated some years later in English, see Heinz Halm, "The cosmology of the pre-Fatimid Ismāʿīliyyah," in *Mediaeval Ismaili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary, (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 82–3.

12 Paul E. Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1993).

13 Note, however, Halm's nod to the narrative of "concealed imams;" Halm, *Kosmologie*, 3–10.

14 See an overview of their contributions in Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 92–93.

exoteric practice of Islam shared by the broader populace.[15] However, their highly conjectural and eclectic approaches often failed to provide a firm grounding upon which to build more concrete hypotheses. That their findings (particularly regarding the interrelationship of proto-Ismailism and proto-Nuṣayrism) have found little acceptance among later scholars, is due to Halm's very sober examination of early Ismailism which has been influential for putting the association to rest.[16]

A corrective to Halm's assessment will be offered below, not solely by revisiting the sources used in his assessment, but also by demonstrating the tangible merits of the approach taken by Massignon and Corbin: in terms of what has preceded, their achievement lay in the location of intellectual sources for early Ismailism within the broader currents of Shiʿi thought precisely for the period between the life of Muḥammadb. Ismāʿīl and the rise of the Fatimid caliphate – the period almost euphemistically described now as that of the "concealed imams." Their interest in Ismailism as a manifestation of a uniquely indigenous Shiʿi *Weltanschauung*, typified in certain aspects by Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb's teachings, allowed them to entertain a greater sense of intertextuality and social diffusion than permitted by Halm. Michael Brett, in an article pointing out the problems of the "concealed imam" backstory for the historical study of Fatimid dynastic claims,[17] has also reevaluated the assumed irredeemability of Massignon's theories with respect to the specifically ideological or "creedal" elements of early Ismailism as it first coalesced.[18]

It is also crucial to remember the significant work in recent decades which has destabilized an imagined homogenous and insular Imami Shiʿi "tradition."[19] Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, in particular, has brought to light major threads of early Imami Shiʿism which were subsequently marginalized by Uṣūlī Twelver doctrine. In his *The Divine Guide in Early Shīʿism*[20] and other studies, he has demonstrated conclusively that Imami traditional lore, even in so-called

15 See in particular Louis Massignon, "Die Ursprünge und die Bedeutung des Gnostizismus Im Islam," in *Eranos-Jahrbuch 1937* (Zürich: Rhein Verlag AG, 1938), 55–77.

16 Halm chose to make a firm distinction between proto-Nuṣayrism and proto-Ismailism. Note his statement at the beginning of his study that, "… At the conclusion [of this work] the connections, *but above all else the differences* between Ismailis and Nuṣayrīs will be given special attention." [emphasis mine] *Kosmologie*, 17. See the conclusion of this chapter for some final remarks on Halm's verdict.

17 Michael Brett, "The Mīm, the ʿAyn, and the Making of Ismāʿīlism," *BSOAS* 57, no. 1 (1994): 36–37.

18 Ibid., 25–26, 39.

19 On problems with the term "Imami," see below.

20 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism: The Sources of Esotericism in Islam*, trans. David Streight (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994).

"canonical" collections, possesses an unequivocal inclination towards esotericism. Additionally, as Modarressi has shown in his *Crisis and Consolidation*, the contingency of Twelver "orthodoxy" for Imami Shiʿism is underscored by the rise of various esoteric Khaṭṭābite brotherhoods who were strong forces to be reckoned with during the third/ninth century, and are acknowledged by experts as having left an indelible imprint on the broader Imami textual tradition.[21] Key esoteric concepts preserved in Imami-Shiʿi texts from this period are foundational for early Ismailism, Nuṣayrism, and broader Shiʿi pieties alike, reminding us of the need to avoid any rigid notion that impedes the possibility of intellectual cross-pollination and influence among members of a common milieu.

Ismailism as "esoteric Shiʿism" reflects a significant if underappreciated strand of Islamic theology; one focused not on prophetic revelation, but rather, speculation on the sacrohistorical significance of the Islamic religious dispensation through the lens of a perennialist theophany. Yet while this trend is most strongly associated with Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and his followers (as Massignon and Corbin knew quite well), as a topic in intellectual history its significance goes far beyond such sectarian eponyms into a new form of Islamic universalism. As this study will demonstrate, the earliest Ismaili religious worldview and its initiatic structures not only find their conceptual and terminological roots in this intellectual trend; the leaders of the early Ismaili *daʿwa* in fact presented themselves as "Gates" (*abwāb*), the highest possible initiates within this body of esoteric knowledge, for many years before they claimed to be ʿAlid imams.

2 Ismaili "Khaṭṭabism" & Shiʿite Theophanic Perennialism

All classical Imami Shiʿi heresiographical discussions of Ismailism point unequivocally to a connection between the Ismailis and the followers of Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb al-Asadī (d. ca. 138/755), an important but controversial Kufan follower of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq.[22] The various associations asserted between the Khaṭṭābites and the proto-Nuṣayrī and proto-Ismaili communities constitute the principle reason for Massignon and Corbin's understanding that Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb's teachings had disseminated within a sizeable percentage of

21 See Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shīʿite Islam* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 1993), 21–49.

22 For a recent assessment and bibliography of this personage, see Mushegh Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and Their Beliefs* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 1, passim.

the Imami community at large. This esoteric orientation, they realized, could be found furthermore in mainstream Imami hadith collections, and even found initiates among socially prominent Baghdad elites such as the Āl-Furāt family of ʿAbbāsid viziers from the 3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries.[23] However, such a broad-minded appreciation of the vitality of this distinct tradition of Shiʿi mythopoetical speculation seems to have largely dissipated.

In his essential survey of Ismaili history, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, Farhad Daftary presents an overview of relevant research on the esoteric Shiʿi antecedents to Ismailism[24] but urges the reader to keep in mind that such a relationship "should not be exaggerated especially in the doctrinal domain, although certain ideas and terminologies attributed to Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and his followers were subsequently adopted by the early Ismailis."[25] What these "certain ideas and terminologies" are, however, is not explained; instead, Daftary stresses that Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and the Khaṭṭābites were rejected by official Fāṭimid doctrine, which seems to close the case definitively. However, Daftary's source for this condemnation comes from al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, who often chose to eschew more blatantly esoteric forms of presentation in his writings.[26] Furthermore, positive mention of Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb is to be found in Fatimid Ismaili works such as the *K. al-Kashf*[27] and *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*.[28] Daftary should have been aware of this second reference, since he cites the same section of the *Sarāʾir* to deduce Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar's birthdate.[29] Here then are two early Ismaili sources that take no issue with Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb, which suggests that the matter deserves renewed scrutiny.

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23 Louis Massignon, "Les origines Shi'ites de la Famille Vizirale des Banu'l-Furāt," in *Opera Minora*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Paris: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1969), 1:484–87; Louis Massignon, "Recherches sur les shiʿites extrémistes à baghdad à la fin du troisième siècle de l'hégire," in *Opera Minora*, ed. Youakim Moubarac (Paris: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1969), 1: 523–26.

24 Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 85–86, 90–95.

25 Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 93. Cf. Farhad Daftary, "The Earliest Ismāʿīlīs," *Arabica* 38.2 (July 1991): 225–26.

26 On this exotericizing tendency by al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān see Sumaiya A. Hamdani, *Between Revolution and State: The Path to Fatimid Statehood* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006).

27 Referred to as "Ibn Abī Zaynab" in the 1st epistle of that work, see [Pseudo-]Jaʿfar Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1984), 34. See below for further discussion of this text.

28 It is a narration stating that Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb had only been cursed by the Imam as a sign of his approval. See Jaʿfar Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1984), 256–57. On the theme of publicly cursing the spiritual elect in early Shīʿism, see Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism*, 130, 231–232 (nn. 690–691); Etan Kohlberg, *"Barāʾa* in Shiʿī Doctrine," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 7 (1986): 158–67.

29 See Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 91, n. 18.

Al-Nawbakhtī not only emphatically states in his *Firaq al-shīʿa* that, "as for the Ismailis (*al-Ismāʿīliyya*), they are the Khaṭṭābites,"[30] he also uses the same occasion of his description of Ismaili origins to introduce his full biography of Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and a sketch of his teachings. Subsequent to this, al-Nawbakhtī goes on to speak of a schism among Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb's "exaggerator" (*ghulāt*) followers who formed the subset of the Mubārakiyya from which the Qarāmiṭa [viz. the early Ismailis] emerged.[31]

Again, whether or not Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and his immediate disciples themselves had anything to do with Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar or Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl is a moot point.[32] What matters most is al-Nawbakhtī's heresiographical association between the Khaṭṭābites and the predecessors of the Qarāmiṭa. In contrast, al-Nawbakhtī's younger contemporary and Sunnī theologian Abū-l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿārī (d. 324/936) did not assert a Khaṭṭābite connection for the Ismailiyya, Mubārakiyya, or Qarāmiṭa sects in his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*. This is all the more significant since al-Ashʿarī actually drew on common sources with al-Nawbakhtī.[33] Al-Nawbakhtī's assertion that the Ismailis were "the Khaṭṭābites," even if polemical, can thus plausibly be interpreted as reflecting an insider Shiʿi perspective, and thus deserves to be parsed out.

Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and his followers are not primarily known in broader Imami history for advocating the Imamate of Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar or Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl. Instead, Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb is most prominently associated with the stance of "exaggeration" (*ghuluww*), or attributing divine status to the imams and their closest disciples,[34] and with inspiring later generations of esotericist Imamis who attributed to him the paradigmatic status of "the Gate" (*al-bāb*, literally "door"), a superlative exponent of Shiʿism's highest doctrines. Individuals who held this belief also adulated Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb's disciple al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar (d. b. 183/799) and considered him to have been a tremendous fount of wisdom as a transmitter from Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and a "Gate" himself.[35] This is attested to in the manuscript record by a rich literary production spanning the 3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries, which combines earlier Imam-centric theologies

30 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 58. Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī maintained the same framework in his version of the work; see Madelung, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," 47f.

31 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 61.

32 For a recent discussion, see Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam*, 52.

33 Both al-Nawbakhtī and al-Qummī shared common sources with al-Nawbakhtī; see Wilferd Madelung, "Bemerkungen zur imamitischen Firaq-Literatur," *Der Islam*, no. 43 (1967): 47, 49–50.

34 See the chapter on "Die Ḫaṭṭābiten," Heinz Halm, *Die Islamische Gnosis: Die Extreme Schia und die ʿAlawiten* (Zürich: Artemis Verlag, 1982), 199 ff.

35 Yaron Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawīs* (Leiden: Brill, 2010), 6, 74.

and cosmologies, textual traditions attributed to al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar, and celebrations of "Gatehood" in which Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb never strays too far from mind.[36]

Al-Nawbakhtī's contemporary Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī (d. 301/913–4) had access to sources for his *K. al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq* which were considerably well-informed about the early beliefs of these groups, including possibly the *K. al-Radd ʿalā al-ghulāt* by Imami theologian Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān (d. 208/823),[37] the student of Hishām b. al-Ḥakam (d. 199/814–5). The material that al-Qummī provides (which is lacking in al-Nawbakhtī's presentation) explains that, beyond the crude-term of Khaṭṭābites or "the followers of Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb," the more sophisticated terms of *Mufawwiḍa* ("Delegationists") and *Mukhammisa* ("Pentadists") were used to describe their adherents. The heresiographical tone of these terms should not deceive us – al-Qummī's reports actually reflect substantial detail about the doctrines and self-conception of Khaṭṭābite-Mufaḍḍalite teachings in the Imami community.

Although the number of adherents of these supposed "sects" of Delegationists and Pentadists cannot be precisely assessed, their prominent representatives are mentioned in Imami bio-bibliographical works. The broader literary evidence, however, suggests that these two names do not describe actual sects, but more aptly describe orientations or diffuse beliefs drawn upon by various groups.[38] Nuṣayrī exegete Ibn Shuʿba al-Ḥarrānī (active 4th–5th/10th–11th centuries), for example, when describing the composition of his theological work

36 This is now accessible to a wider readership in the recently published *Silsilat al-turāth al-ʿalawī*.

37 Al-Qummī explicitly cites a detailed and fascinating report on the "exaggerators" by Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān via Muḥammad b. ʿĪsā b. ʿUbayd b. Yaqṭīn. Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, ed. Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr (Tehran: Muʾassasat Maṭbūʿatī ʿAṭāʾī, 1963), 62–63. The title *K. al-Radd ʿalā al-ghulāt* is mentioned in Yūnus b. ʿAbd al-Raḥmān's entry of the *Rijāl* by al-Najāshī; Madelung, "Bemerkungen zur imamitischen Firaq-Literatur," 51–52.

38 "The Imami authors seem to denote with the names *Mufawwiḍa* and *Mukhammisa* noteworthy characteristics of certain types of *ghuluww* which can arise separated or combined in various subgroupings and specific doctrines;" Heinz Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten": Die Mufaḍḍal-Tradition der Ġulāt und die Ursprünge des Nuṣairertums (II)" 58 (1981): 61.; cf. the chapter on "Die « Verfünffacher » und die « Ermächtiger »," Halm, *Die Islamische Gnosis*, 218 ff. See also Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam*, 99–100. Although specifically "Mufawwiḍa" doctrines are important for early Ismaili theology with reference to divine transcendence, this article will focus primarily on aspects of the "Mukhammisa" pentadist doctrine.

Ḥaqā'iq asrār al-dīn, could talk about having books on "delegation" (*tafwīḍ*) and "pentadism" (*takhmīs*) at his disposal.[39]

Madelung cast al-Qummī's information on the "Mukhammisa" as reflective of beliefs in circulation among esoteric Shiʿi groups during the mid 3rd/9th century and contemporaneous to the 10th–11th Imams of Imamism[40] – an epoch which anticipates the emergence of Ismaili activity very closely.[41] Although the prevailing verdict in current research would say that Mukhammisa-doctrines are too distinct from Ismaili teachings to be considered a vital source of influence,[42] the following presentation reminds us that the Mukhammisa-doctrines described by al-Qummī, or "pentadism" as it will be described here subsequently, should not be taken for a precise sectarian classification, but rather, a set of associated beliefs accessible to a variety of Shiʿis contemporaneous to the origins of Ismailism and Nuṣayrism.

Our first lynchpin of dependency is the "pentadist" vision of religion as distillable to a perennial theophany. This was a cornerstone of esoteric Imamism writ broadly since at least the 3rd/9th century, and must be understood as the historical foundation for Ismailism's so-called "cyclical" view of prophets, imams, and initiates. The esotericist belief in a cyclically present theophany was an expansion of a latent perennialism ubiquitous in early Imami hadith collections asserting the perpetual existence of the Shiʿa in every past age.[43] As al-Nawbakhtī himself wrote, "Shiʿism is ancient" (*al-tashayyuʿ qadīm*).[44] Within this framework of perpetual revisitations of the same religious drama over sacred history, *walāya* or "proximity to the divine" embodied in past religious leaders of humanity could be seen as a static unity over time.[45] According to a more fully-fleshed esotericist framework, however, this perennialist aspect of Shiʿi religion was understood as constituting secret knowledge of an ever-present theophany over the ages of man's religious history.

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39 Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan Ibn Shuʿba, "Ḥaqā'iq asrār al-dīn," in *Majmūʿat al-Ḥarrāniyyīn*, ed. Abū Mūsā and al-Shaykh Mūsā, Silsilat al-Turāth al-ʿAlawī 4 (Lebanon: Dār li-Ajl al-Maʿrifa, 2006), 12. Cf. Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawīs*, 86–87.

40 Wilferd Madelung, *EI*^{2}, s.v. "Mukhammisa."

41 Modarressi has also pointed to the ascendancy of the "*ghulāt*" during the imamate of Muḥammad al-Jawād; see *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shīʿite Islam*, 11, 32–34.

42 Daftary, *The Ismāʿīlīs*, 95.

43 Etan Kohlberg, "Some Shīʿī Views of the Antediluvian World," *Studia Islamica*, no. 52 (1980): 41–66.

44 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 16.

45 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Notes à Propos de La *Walāya* Imamite (Aspects de l'imamologie Duodécimaine, X)," *JAOS* 122, no. 4 (December 2002): 733–37.

Al-Qummī's testimony on the "Mukhammisa" has idiosyncratic and archaic elements that must be unpacked, starting with their understanding of religious personages in sacred history: According to al-Qummī, the basis for the Mukhammisa's name is that God manifested in five[46] specters of light (*ashbāḥ*) corresponding to Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn, who in reality reduce to the same single Muḥammadan "meaning" (*maʿnā*). In this role as prime divine hypostasis, he tells us, Muḥammad was conceived by the Mukhammisa as "the first speaker to speak" (*awwal nāṭiq naṭaqa*). This speaking "Muḥammadan" hypostasis of the divine had emerged in the form of prophets such as Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus as well as in the form of different Persian kings. On their part, the Muslims had witnessed theophany in the form of the five members of the *ahl al-bayt* according to Imami conception,[47] as well as the Imams who came after them.[48]

This immanentist theology, fundamental to what we are calling "pentadism," walked in the footsteps of the earliest Shīʿite "exaggerators" of the 1st–2nd/7th–8th centuries who believed all prophets and imams of sacred history to have been vessels for the indwelling spirit or light of God.[49] Adherents to pentadism in the 3rd/9th century, however, clearly contemplated the modalities of divine theophany with more sophistication than their predecessors, reflecting the maturity of Islamic theology and Islamicate conceptual vocabulary.[50] They did so within a vernacular that was native to the Islamic dispensation, Qurʾanic revelation, and the Shiʿi religious drama as interpolated over scriptural sacral history. As we shall see, Ismailism's core religious vision was formed in the backdrop of pentadist contemplations regarding the specific manner by which the perennial theophany is cognized and accessed by initiated believers of the Shia.

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46 Regrettably the concrete significance of the number five for early Ismāʿīlism will not be discussed here, but will be revisited by the author of this study in a subsequent monograph on Ismaili doctrinal origins.

47 I.e., Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn; see Moshe Sharon, "*Ahl Al-Bayt* – People of the House," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 8 (1986): 172 ff. 172 ff.

48 Al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, 56–57.

49 See Wadad al-Qadi, "The Development of the Term *Ghulāt* in Muslim Literature with Special Reference to the Kaysāniyya," in *Akten des VII. Kongresses für Arabistik und Islamwissenschaft*, ed. Albert Dietrich (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck und Ruprecht, 1976), 295–319.

50 See Rodrigo Adem, "Classical *Naṣṣ* Doctrines in Imāmī Shīʿism: On the Usage of an Expository Term," *Shii Studies Review*, no. 1 (2017): 42–71; Alexander Key, *Language Between God and the Poets:* Maʿnā *in the Eleventh Century* (Oakland: University of California Press, 2018).

3 Pentadism and the Deep-Structure of Ismaili Esoteric Shiʿism

The beginning student of Shiʿi esotericism would likely say that Qummī's description of pentadism seems more relevant for Nuṣayrism than Ismailism, given the explicit divinization of the prophets, imams, and Persian kings, as well as the distinctive emphasis on the *maʿnā* of God – known Nuṣayrī precepts.[51] But to be precise, Nuṣayrism affirms that *ʿAlī* and not Muḥammad, is the *maʿnā* of God.

The precise relationship between the form of pentadism described by al-Qummī and the beliefs of the Nuṣayrīs and Ismailis is explicable, however, by exploiting the extant sources more fully: Al-Qummī's source on the "Mukhammisa" was in fact only describing a sub-sect of a broader milieu of Khaṭṭābites. Locating this sub-sect within its broader context of 3rd/9th century esoteric Shiʿism demonstrates the diverse manifestations of pentadist thought that supplied the "deep structure" of Ismaili theophanic thought as well as the conceptual repertoire that informed initiation into the "esoteric" spaces of ideological authority for the Ismaili religious hierarchy.

Indeed, right after al-Qummī's discussion of "the Mukhammisa" he tells us about another Khaṭṭābite group called "the ʿAlyāʾiyya" and explains where they and the Mukhammisa met and diverged theologically. He tells us that the ʿAlyāʾiyya, "agree with the "Mukhammisa" concerning the four persons of the pentad (other than Muḥammad), i.e., that they include the persons of ʿAlī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan, and al-Ḥusayn – but claim that "the reality (*al-ḥaqīqa*) is the person (*shakhṣ*) of ʿAlī." This means that they believe in the theophanic pentad as well, but disagree with the Mukhammisa with respect to the primary hypostasis of God; they choose ʿAlī over Muḥammad.[52] Qummī thus admits that adoration of the pentad is not exclusive to the members of the sect he taxonomized as the "Mukhammisa" or "pentadists." Other Shiʿis in close contact with them likewise adored the pentad while considering ʿAlī to be the primary divine hypostasis or *maʿnā*, not Muḥammad.

Al-Qummī tells us that despite the similarity of the two groups' doctrines, the Mukhammisa called the ʿAlyāʾiyya "the ʿAlbāʾiyya" via a crude polemical

51 Meir Michael Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, "A Tenth-Century Nuṣayrī Treatise on the Duty to Know the Mystery of Divinity," *BSOAS* 58, no. 2 (1995): 243–50; Meir Michael Bar-Asher, "The Iranian Component of the Nuṣayrī Religion," *Iran* 41 (2003): 217–27.

52 Al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, 59. He tells us that with respect to ʿAlī's preeminence, the ʿAlyāʾiyya "had put Muḥammad in the same station that the Mukhammisa had put Salmān [al-Fārisī]…."

etiology[53] because they failed to acknowledge Muḥammad's lordship. This information is significant, since al-Qummī's younger contemporary, the historian al-Masʿūdī, writing in the year 332/933, describes an earlier rivalry between two "exaggerating" Shiʿi groups called the ʿAlyāʾiyya and the Muḥammadiyya. He tells us that a prominent representative of the ʿAlyāʾiyya, Isḥāq al-Aḥmar (d. 286/899) – on whom see below – wrote his *K. al-Ṣirāṭ* affirming ʿAlyāʾiyya beliefs,[54] which in turn garnered written responses from the Muḥammadiyya.[55] The debate between the ʿAlyāʾiyya and Muḥammadiyya described by al-Masʿūdī undoubtedly concerned the relative merits of ʿAlī and Muḥammad as primary divine personage – the same ʿAlyāʾiyya-Mukhammisa debate described by al-Qummī.

Al-Shahrastānī's entry on the ʿAlbāʾiyya is confused,[56] but he imposes some order on the preceding material. He knows (like al-Qummī) that the ʿAlbāʾiyya are associated with belief in the five *ahl al-kisāʾ* of the Shiʿi *ahl al-bayt* as manifestations of a single essence. However, he does not taxonomize them or any of their peers as pentadist "Mukhammisa." Instead, he approaches the subject from another angle: The ʿAlbāʾiyya's original founder, al-Shahrastānī claims, had originally praised ʿAlī as divine, with Muḥammad as his subordinate, and considered the latter to be blameworthy. Al-Shahrastānī goes on to say, however, that individuals affiliated with this group in the end came to assert that both Muḥammad and ʿAlī were divine (in contrast to its original founder), but "gave priority to ʿAlī over Muḥammad with respect to the properties of divinity," by which they earned the name of "the ʿAyniyya." Al-Shahrastānī then tells us that another group associated with the ʿAlbāʾiyya, on their part, gave Muḥammad priority over ʿAlī with respect to divinity, and these were called "the Mīmiyya." In sum, he gives these two groups a common origin, despite their different points of view; pentadism is secondary for him with respect to both. What matters most is their respective positions on the first person of theophany.[57]

53 The Mukhammisa apparently said that the ʿAlyāʾiyya's founder Bashshār al-Shaʿīrī had been turned into a sea-bird called *al-ʿalbā*; al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, 59–60. I am not aware of what this bird connotes, but it is being invoked in a negative sense.

54 Mushegh Asatryan has shown where the extant fragments of the work are to be found; *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam*, appendix, 179.

55 Abū-l-Ḥasan ʿAlī al-Masʿūdī, *Murūj al-dhahab wa-maʿādin al-jawhar*, ed. Charles Pellat (Beirut: Publications de l'Universite Libanaise, 1965), 2:258.

56 He not only embraces ʿAlbāʾiyya as an authentic label but attributes it to ʿIlbā b. Ḍirāʿ, an otherwise non-controversial companion of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. He must have tried to make sense of the label, but did not have access to al-Qummī's polemical backstory. See Halm, *Die Islamische Gnosis*, 228–29.

57 Abū-l-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Shahrastānī, *Al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*, ed. Aḥmad Fahīm Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1992), 179.

Although two distinct 3rd/9th century groups believed in the theophanic pentad, al-Qummī only paradigmatically designated one of them as "pentadists" (Mukhammisa); namely, those esotericist Shiʿis who emphasized the preeminence of Muḥammad as the first divine person. As Halm astutely observed about the advocates of Muḥammadan priority, "bei Qummī werden sie als die eigentlichen Muḥammisa behandelt."[58] This is all the more striking when we consider the fact that the Muḥammadan variety of pentadism described by al-Qummī seems to have enjoyed no descendants in posterity. It is only the prioritization of ʿAlī (in ʿAlyāʾiyya, or ʿAyniyya fashion, as al-Shahrastānī would say) that continues on in the textual tradition formative of and elaborated in Nuṣayrism.[59]

As Michael Brett has pointed out, the names Mīmiyya and ʿAyniyya (or "the advocates of *Mīm*" and "the advocates of *ʿAyn*") are unattested before al-Shahrastānī's *al-Milal wa-l-niḥal*.[60] Yet the use of the Arabic letters *Mīm*, *ʿAyn*, and *Sīn* (for Muḥammad, ʿAlī, and Salmān al-Fārisī, respectively) are found in various texts from the 3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries which discuss Khaṭṭābite theophanies. For example, we find the use of "*al-Mīm*" to refer to Muḥammad in a text which recounts debates between Isḥāq al-Aḥmar and Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr that took place on the doorstep of eleventh Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī's Samarra residence; these discussions were concerned with the relative prioritization of Muḥammad and ʿAlī within the scope of divinity.[61] The *K. al-Mājid* within the "Jābir-corpus" attributed to Jābir b. Ḥayyān from the same time period also contains elaborate discussions of the viewpoints of the *aṣḥāb al-mīm*, *aṣḥāb al-ʿāyn*, and *aṣḥāb al-sīn* (advocates of the *Mīm*, *ʿAyn*, and *Sīn*) to describe esotericist Shiʿis who shared similar belief systems with respect to theophany and the abstract structure of sacral authority yet differed over

58 Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (11), 63. This means that they are treated as "the real pentadists." That is to say that the ʿAlyāʾiyya, a group clearly genetically originated from the same milieu as al-Qummī's Mukhammisa "Fivers", agreed with them on the significance of the theopanic aspect of the five *ahl al-bayt*, only differing on the topic of the first divine persona (ʿAlī over Muḥammad), yet is heresiographically not classified by al-Qummī as "pentadist."

59 Heinz Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten": Die Mufaḍḍal-Tradition Der Ġulāt Und Die Ursprünge Des Nuṣairertums (I)," *Der Islam* 55 (1978): 256. See Meir Michael Bar-Asher and Aryeh Kofsky, *The Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawī Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy* (Leiden: Brill, 2002).

60 Brett, "The Mīm, the ʿAyn, and the Making of Ismāʿīlism," 25.

61 Abū-l-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Baghdādī, "al-Majālis al-Numayriyya bayna Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr al-Numayrī wa-bayna Isḥāq al-Aḥmar," in *al-Munāẓarāt wa-l-rudūd*, ed. Abū Mūsā and al-Shaykh Mūsā, Silsilat al-Turāth al-ʿAlawī 11 (Beirut: Dār li-Ajl al-Maʿrifa, 2006), 8–10.

the precise role of Muḥammad, ʿAlī, and Salmān al-Fārisī within that system.[62] Ismaili usage of "*al-ʿAyn*" in reference to ʿAlī will be discussed below, likewise from texts dating to the 3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries. All in all, then, these discursive trends can be coherently assembled within a common milieu of contending models of pentadist esoteric Shiʿism, some of which are defunct, and others which continue in codified traditions, most notably Nuṣayrism as is more commonly recognized in the scholarship.

Such permeability of beliefs between distinct esotericist Shiʿi groups[63] underscores the following correspondences between al-Qummī's description of the "Muḥammadan" pentadist-doctrine and the teachings of Ismailism. Inclusive of the deep Shiʿi religious perennialism they display, both depict the major prophetic figures of sacral history as a reoccurring Muḥammadan theophany, described in its intrinsic nature as "speaking," or *Nāṭiq* in Arabic. Concomitantly, the archetypal role embodied by ʿAlī is that of a perennially appearing vehicle by which the true essence of God, in as much as it "speaks," is accessed in its purest essential manifestation.[64]

The Ismaili use of the word *Nāṭiq* or "Speaker" as an expression for the archetypal "Muḥammadan" figure who initiates religious cycles (*adwār*) of religious legislation (*sharāʾiʿ*) is as well-known as the Ismaili use of the word *Ṣāmit* or "Silent [One]" for the archetypal equivalent of ʿAlī in each religious cycle who follows said "Speaker." In this quintessential Ismaili schema of authority, the "speaker" enunciates the religious law in revelation (*tanzīl*), and "the silent one" provides its esoteric interpretation (*taʾwīl*). The following section will look at descriptions of "speaking" and "silent" theophanic manifestations in materials contemporaneous to the rise of early Ismailism. These materials document how the theophanic dyad gave rise to Ismaili conceptualizations of the distinct roles played by Muḥammad and ʿAlī.

62 Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, "Kitāb al-Mājid," in *Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān: Essai sur l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'islam. Textes Choisis*, ed. Paul Kraus (Paris: Librairie Orientale et Amèricaine, 1935), 115–25. Cf. Henri Corbin, "Le livre du Glorieux de Jâbir ibn Hayyân," in *Eranos Jahrbuch*, vol. 18 (Zürich: Rhein-Verlag, 1950), 47–114. Cf. Yves Marquet, "Quelles furent les relations entre 'Jâbir ibn Ḥayyân' et les Iḫwân aṣ-Ṣafâ'?," *Studia Islamica*, no. 64 (1986): 48. See also description of Ibrāhīm as manifestation of the *Mīm*, and mention of *madhhab al-mīm wa-l-ʿayn* in Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, "Kitāb Ikhrāj mā bi-l-quwwa ilā al-fiʿl," ed. Aḥmad Farīd al-Mazīdī (Beirut: Dar al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2006), 307–8.

63 See the instructive chart in Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (1), 237.

64 For parallels between Nuṣayrī and Ismaili cycles of religion see Bar-Asher and Kofsky, *The Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawī Religion*, 28 ff.

4 Pentadist *Nāṭiq* and *Ṣāmit* Doctrines Contemporary to Early Ismailism

Three instructive examples will be briefly presented here: 1) an archaic hadith of Muḥammadan Mukhammisa-doctrine which has survived in transmission via al-Majlisī's *Biḥār al-anwār*; 2) Excerpts from a book attributed to al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar transmitted by the founder of Nuṣayrism; and 3) excerpts from the corpus of material attributed to alchemy legend Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān with esoteric Shiʿi contents first identified by Paul Kraus.

4.1 *A 3rd–4th/9th–10th Century Muḥammadan Pentadist Hadith in the* Biḥār al-anwār

In his *Biḥār al-anwār*, the magisterial anthology of Imami literature, Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī (d. 1111/1699) narrates what he calls a "rare" transmission (a "*nādir*") concerning gnosis (*maʿrifa*) of the Imams, and says that it is something which his father Muḥammad Taqī al-Majlisī (d. 1070/1660) mentioned to him from an "ancient (*ʿatīq*) book" on the "merits" (*faḍāʾil*) of ʿAlī. He also states that he later found the narration himself recorded in another "ancient book" along with a number of other narrations.[65] Based on the chains of transmission he mentions from his father's book in the same section,[66] at least one of these sources could be a hadith book from the end of the 3rd/9th century, and is thus pertinent to our study of Ismaili origins. Al-Majlisī's own *isnād* simply states that it has been narrated from (*ruwiya ʿan*) Muḥammad b. Ṣadaqa;[67] this personage is identified by Shīʿite *rijāl* books as belonging to the generation of Mūsā al-Kāẓim and ʿAlī al-Riḍā, and narrating from them both. He is also considered a *ghālī* or "exaggerator" who narrated from Muḥammad b. Sinān, a leading disciple of al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar.[68] Al-Majlisī, whose intellectual orientation led him to place little credence in hadith criticism, however, says "I only singled out a chapter for these reports because their chains of transmission (*asānīd*) were lacking soundness (*ṣiḥḥa*) and because of the uncommonness (*gharāba*) of their contents," but he adds that he does not judge as to the "validity" or "falsehood" (*ṣiḥḥa*/*buṭlān*) of them, leaving knowledge of that to the Imams alone.[69]

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65 Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār al-jāmiʿa li-durar akhbār al-aʾimma al-aṭhār*, 2nd ed. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyāʾ al-Turāth al-ʿArabī, 1983), 26:1.

66 Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 26:8.

67 Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 26:1.

68 See Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (1), 236–41.

69 Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 26:17.

The narration is in the form of an homily addressed by ʿAlī to Abū Dharr and Salmān al-Fārisī concerning "gnosis" (*maʿrifa*) of him "by internal light" (*bi-l-nūrāniyya*) – a term commonly found in the texts gathered by Nuṣayrīs, derived from material by al-Mufaḍḍal's disciples. This hadith however, goes on to describe teachings wherein Muḥammad is viewed as the omnipresent personage of divine theophany underlying Islamic religious authority, and grants Muḥammad the status of "Speaker" (Nāṭiq) as divine hypostasis as described by al-Qummī's Mukhammisa. ʿAlī is also given the role of "Silent One" (*Ṣāmit*), as in these words put in ʿAlī's mouth:

> The Prophet and I were one light (*nūran wāḥidan*). The Prophet became Muḥammad al-Muṣṭafā, and I became his *waṣī* al-Murtaḍā, and Muḥammad became the "Speaker" (*nāṭiq*), and I became the "Silent One" (*ṣāmit*), and there must be (*lā budd*) a "Speaker" and a "Silent One" in each age among the ages.[70]

The significance of this narration is that it is the only "traditional" source we have for the perennial *Nāṭiq/Ṣāmit* duo as primordial theophany; it is actually presented as a hadith from the mouth of the Imam. This is significant for confirming its early date, because the tendency of esoteric Shiʿism on the whole is to transition from the thematic hadith compilations and Imam-disciple dialogues of the 9th and early 10th century CE to independently authored theological treatises, discussions, and commentaries in the later 10th century and beyond.[71] Before this transition, the early Shiʿi esotericist emphasis on hadith, as with their Sunnī counterparts, implied less agency or subjective imposition on the topic at hand by the author and arguably allowed for greater dissemination among an early Shiʿi readership outside of a properly initiatic framework, since such material was directly attributed to the Imams, and did not depend on recognition of the exegetical expertise of specific latter-day authorities such as Ibn Nuṣayr and his followers.

4.2 *The* K. al-Sirāṭ *Attributed to al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī*

A particularly elaborate example of such early literature is the *K. al-Ṣirāṭ*, a work in the beloved form of a dialogue between Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq and al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar.[72] The *K. al-Ṣirāṭ* reflects doctrines from the turn of the

70 Al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 26:4.

71 This is evident from a survey of the material in the *Silsilat al-turāth al-ālawī*.

72 For various examples of Mufaḍḍal-dialogues and a brief discussion, see Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (11), 80–82.

3rd–4th/9th–10th centuries, and was transmitted by al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Khaṣībī (d. 346/957–8 or 358/969), considered to be a chief formalizer of the thought of Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr within what is now called "Nuṣayrism."[73] The quintessentially Nuṣayrī contemplations which the text contains about divine "Name" (*ism*) and "Meaning" (*maʿnā*) intersect here with the teaching of the "Speaker" (Nāṭiq) and "Silent One" (*Ṣāmit*) on the basis of their shared hermeneutical implications.

The author writes that the "Name" (*ism*), which is the outward prophetic manifestation of God, always points to the inner divine "meaning" (*maʿnā*). Adam had Seth and Muḥammad had ʿAlī, and each prophet in between had their own "Meaning" (*maʿnā*).[74] We furthermore learn that the paradoxical manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) of the transcendent God's "apparent" (*ẓāhir*) and "speaking" (*nāṭiq*) aspects in different personages over time is in fact a "test" (*miḥna*) for humanity. The seemingly problematic diversity in divine manifestation, the author explains, is only a result of humanity's own imperfections, since God is irrevocably one and unchanging.[75] In reality, all outward manifestations point to the singular archetypal personage of divine "Meaning" (*maʿnā*):

> Know, O Mufaḍḍal, that the speaking personage (*al-shakhṣ al-nāṭiq*) at the time of manifestation (*waqt al-ẓuhūr*) must have, in turn, a silent personage (*shakhṣ ṣāmit*), [and] the "Speaker" (*nāṭiq*) points to the "Silent One" (*ṣāmit*). He points to him (*yadullu ʿalayhi*), and the Nāṭiq's indication (*ishāra*) of the *Ṣāmit* is an evidence (*dalīl*) of the "Meaning-ness" (*maʿnawiyya*) of the *Ṣāmit*, even though the "Meaning-ness" (*maʿnawiyya*) [only] manifests by speech (*nuṭq*) …
>
> Likewise, if the "Silent One" (*ṣāmit*) appears, then the actions of the "Speaker" (Nāṭiq) will appear from him, and he will show that they are not something that he [himself] ordered. If [the Nāṭiq] speaks (*naṭaqa*), he says "I am only given revelation from my Lord." If the "Silent One" (*ṣāmit*) acts and speaks, he says merely, "These actions are the actions of the one to whom the "Speaker" (*nāṭiq*) pointed (*ashāra ilayhi*)."[76]

Here, speech from the theophanic Speaker is understood as authoritative "revelation" which indicates the theophanic Silent One's status over a religious

73 Bar-Asher and Kofsky, *The Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawī Religion: An Enquiry into Its Theology and Liturgy*, 17 ff.

74 Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī, *Kitāb al-Sirāṭ*, ed. al-Munṣif Ibn ʿAbd al-Jalīl (Beirut: Dār al-Madār al-Islāmī, 2005), 135–36.

75 Al-Juʿfī, *Kitāb al-Ṣirāṭ*, 147–48.

76 Al-Juʿfī, *Kitāb al-ṣirāṭ*, 148.

community. Despite authority issuing from the Speaker, however, the speech act points to the semantic and thus ontological priority that the Silent One enjoys as placeholder for divine "meaning." In human society, the Silent One acts with the authority accorded to him by the Speaker's pronouncements (Muḥammad's authorization of ʿAlī, paradigmatically speaking). Nevertheless, the primacy of "Meaning" must be maintained for the Silent One, despite the Speaker's more evident outward authority, in a necessary paradox of value.[77]

4.3 *The Jābir-Corpus and the* K. al-Khamsīn

Paul Kraus long ago identified the importance of esoteric Shiʿi doctrines within the corpus of texts attributed to alchemy authority Jābir b. Ḥayyān, a figure about whom Ibn al-Nadīm said, "The Shiʿa have said he was one of their great men and one of their "Gates" (*abwāb*)."[78] Given this casually attributed "Gatehood", it is no wonder that the esoteric Shiʿi elements of the Jābir-corpus reflect pentadist terminology, not only as in the *K. al-Mājid* cited above, but in other epistles as well. In an important yet underappreciated 1942 study on an epistle from the Jābir-corpus entitled *K. al-Khamsīn*, Kraus identified the text as an archaic list and commentary of initiatic terms, some of which were uniquely Ismaili, but some of which were found in Nuṣayrī texts as well.[79] From the perspective of the current study, this text is evidence of how broadly the pentadist vocabulary, formative of Ismailism and Nuṣayrism alike, extended.

As early as 1930 Kraus identified important messianic themes and esoteric terminology in the Jābir-corpus which placed the authorship of a handful of its texts within the extended milieu of the Ismaili *daʿwa* between the late 3rd/9th century and the early 4th/10th century.[80] Given the nature of this material, a hypothesis can be taken with regards to the authorship of these texts,

77 This paradox occupied Isḥāq al-Aḥmar and Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr in their debates referenced above.

78 Muḥammad b. Isḥāq Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, ed. Ayman Fu'ād Sayyid (London: Mu'assasat al-Furqān li'l-Turāth al-Islāmī, 2009), vol. 2, part 1, 355.

79 Paul Kraus, "Dignitaires de La Hiérarchie Religieuse selon Ǵābir Ibn Ḥayyān." Paul Kraus, "Dschābir Ibn Ḥajjān Und Die Ismaʿīlijja," in *Alchemie, Ketzerei und Apokryphen im frühen Islam. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Rémy Brague (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994), 71-85.

80 See, for example, the 1930 article: Paul Kraus, "Dschābir Ibn Ḥajjān Und Die Ismaʿīlijja," in *Alchemie, Ketzerei und Apokryphen im frühen Islam. Gesammelte Aufsätze*, ed. Rémy Brague (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994), 27–46. Kraus' wish to explore the significance of this fact remained an important desideratum, as is evident from the unfinished conclusion of Kraus' Jābir trilogy (among his papers in University of Chicago's Regenstein special collections). The author of this article has studied and translated this manuscript from the German for possible future publication.

which, if inaccurate, is at least highly suggestive: it should not be forgotten that Ibn al-Nadīm describes al-Shalmaghānī (d. 309/922) – an important yet controversial figure within elite Imami circles both esoteric[81] and mainstream,[82] and sometime promoter of the Ismaili movement[83] – as a practicing alchemist who wrote a commentary on one of Jābir's works.[84] This makes him a feasible candidate for this pseudonymous material, or at the least, a vivid example of the sort straddling of sectarian labels which made such writings possible.

Most significantly for our current purposes, the *K. al-Khamsīn* provides a window into the theological dyad of the "Speaker" (*Nāṭiq*) and the "Silent One" (*Ṣāmit*) with more detail regarding the archetypal roles performed by Muḥammad and ʿAlī (and their perennial analogues) within sacred history:

> Manifestation (*al-ẓuhūr*) is only based on the sheathing of meanings in the human personage (*ighmād al-maʿānī fī-l-shakhṣ al-insānī*), and it is divided into a "Speaking" and a "Silent" [personage] (*yanqasim ilā ṣāmit wa-nāṭiq*) …
>
> Let us look into the role of "speech" (*al-nuṭq*), which is notification and giving rulings (*al-inbāʾ wa-l-iftāʾ*). It is the function of the Prophet to establish traditions (*an yasunn*), and [the function] of the Imam to defend the sacred (*dhabb ʿan al-ḥarīm*) with sayings and actions based upon them.
>
> And the reason (*al-ʿilla*) for this is that "the signified" (*al-madlūl ʿalayhi*) is superior to "the signifier" (*al-dāll*), because "the sign" (*dalīl*) seeks (*ṭālib*), while "the signified" is established (*qārr*) … The "Speaker" (*nāṭiq*) is a sign for (*yadullu ʿalā*) the "Silent one" (*Ṣāmit*) – while the "Silent one" (*Ṣāmit*) is not a sign for anything else (*lā yadullu ʿalā ayy shayʾ*)![85]

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81 See his highly esteemed poetic verse on the *maʿnā* quoted in a Nuṣayrī text, the *Akhbār wa riwāyāt ʿan mawālīnā ahl al-bayt*, Rudolf Strothmann, "Esoterische Sonderthemen bei den Nusairi: Geschichten und Traditionen von den heiligen Meistern aus dem Prophetenhaus," in *Abhandlungen der Deutschen Akademie der Wissenschaften zu Berlin, Klasse für Sprachen, Literature und Kunst 1956, Nr. 4* (Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1958), p. 8, section 229–230.

82 He was intimate with the highest level of Twelver Shiʿi leadership; see Said Amir Arjomand, "The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," *IJMES* 28, no. 4 (November 1996): 507–8.

83 As mentioned by the quite well-informed Ibn Ḥawqal, *Kitāb ṣūrat al-arḍ*, ed. M.J. de Goeje and J.H. Kramers, 2nd ed. (London: Brill, 1967), 296.

84 Ibn al-Nadīm, *Kitāb al-Fihrist*, vol. 2, part 1, 465.

85 Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān, "Kitāb al-Khamsīn," in *Jābir Ibn Ḥayyān: Essai sur l'histoire des idées scientifiques dans l'islam. Textes Choisis*, ed. Paul Kraus (Paris: Librairie Orientale et Amèricaine, 1935), 496–97.

Here, the theophanic duality of speech and silence have been parsed out beyond the paradoxes of divine semantic signification embodied in "Name" and "Meaning" to describe concrete human relationships between a Prophet, Imam, and religious community. The specification of these relationships, while dependent on an initially speculative hermeneutical theology, brings us beyond the strict terms of Imamic theophany, and into the conceptual prophetology and imamology of the type which will be developed to high sophistication in Ismailism.

The speaking Prophet (Muḥammad/Nāṭiq) creates and legislates for a religious community, over which he designates a silent Imam (ʿAlī/*Ṣāmit*), via a theophanic speech act. The situational dependency of the silent Imam's authority on such an articulated designation, however, paradoxically obscures his teleological priority. The paradox emerges in the sense that purposeful meaning is only made manifest by an act of signification even though that purposeful meaning must pre-exist the signifier. If "meaning" is "signified" by a "name" for that purpose, then that purposeful meaning ontologically precedes the name which points towards it, even if it is only identified as "meaning" due to "signification."

Furthermore, in contradistinction to the concessions to environmental, biological, and societal conventions which demand the Speaker's "mixed" nature, the Silent One's priority in the *K. al-Khamsīn* stems from its embodiment of an immutable divine "meaning" that remains constant behind a contingent plurality of Speaking signifiers. This priority of "Meaning" clearly puts the text within the milieu of the so-called ʿAyniyya,[86] but such delicate considerations would also later inform the prophetology and imamology of classical Neoplatonic Ismaili philosophers such as Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī.[87] For both, the environmentally determined "mixedness" of revelatory language from the Speaking manifestation demands a resolution and return to a purer ontological origin strictly enabled by the Silent manifestation.

The three texts studied above find their significance in their use of the immanentist theology of pentadism to mediate the religious implications of Muḥammad and ʿAlī as archetypal patterns of divine authority statically embodied in the world of flux and change. Esoteric knowledge of religion comes from recognizing these conceptual relationships and patterns in sacred

86 On the ʿAyniyya dimension of the epistle, see Marquet, "Quelles furent les relations entre 'Jâbir ibn Ḥayyân' et les Iḫwân aṣ-Ṣafâ'?" 48.

87 On the Silent One's resolution of problems created by the multiplicity of Speakers' religious rulings, see Paul E. Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom* (Salt Lake City: The University of Utah Press, 1994), 89–90 (paragraphs 132–134).

history, and understanding what remains unchanging as eternal theophany despite the variety of human languages, cultures, and religions in which the divine is embedded. This is the essential worldview of the forerunners of Ismaili and Nuṣayrī thought and constitutes the "perfect" knowledge exclusive to initiates of the divine hierarchy.

5 The Pentadist Backdrop of Ismaili *Nāṭiq*/*Ṣāmit* Teachings

While Nuṣayrī pentadism came to focus its attention more fully on the theophanic dualism of Muḥammad and ʿAlī as "Name" (*ism*) and "Meaning" (*maʿnā*) respectively, the "Speaking" (Nāṭiq)/"Silent" (*Ṣāmit*) dyad of early pentadist teachings permeated early Ismaili religious speculation. It can truthfully be said that the *Nāṭiq/Ṣāmit* dyad was for Ismaili prophetology and imamology what the *Ism/Maʿnā* dyad is for Nuṣayrism. The *Nāṭiq/Ṣāmit* teaching, however, was perhaps even more authentically "Khaṭṭābite" than the *Ism/Maʿnā* teaching, which no heresiographer ever claimed that Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb had taught. As Bernard Lewis first noticed,[88] although al-Ashʿarī and other Sunnī heresiographers never characterize "Ismailis" and "Qarāmiṭa" as "Khaṭṭābites," their sources on Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb *do* consider him the originator of a perennial Nāṭiq/Sāmit dualism archetypally represented by Muḥammad and ʿAlī.

This fact harmonizes well with the "Khaṭṭābite" nature of Ismailism asserted by the Shiʿi heresiographers al-Nawbakhtī and al-Qummī. Whether Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb himself or his followers invented the *Nāṭiq/Ṣāmit* duality is immaterial, as the doctrine was clearly "Khaṭṭābite" with respect to its latter-day adherents. The equivalence between the *Khaṭṭābiyya* and the *Ismāʿiliyya* referred to by al-Nawbakhtī and al-Qummī thus refers accurately to "Khaṭṭab-ism" as an ideological grouping of the late third/ninth century and not necessarily a specific sect originated in the second/eighth century by Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb himself.[89] The earliest Ismailis were "Khaṭṭābites" precisely in the sense that their doctrines originated with the pentadists (*mukhammisa*) and delegationists (*mufawwiḍa*) described by al-Qummī.

88 Lewis, *The Origins of Ismāʿīlism*, 33.

89 It was the lack of connection between Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb's immediate followers and belief in the imamate of Ismāʿīlī b. Muḥammad which convinced Madelung to downplay the Ismaili-Khaṭṭābite association made by Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī. See Madelung, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," 47–48. On the phenomenon of Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb as inspiration of later "gnostic" sects, and not their "actual" progenitor, see Halm, *Kosmologie*, 162–63.

Ismailism's diverse pentadist backdrop, however, is quite vividly depicted in an early Ismaili text that uses and explains the terms *Nāṭiq/Ṣāmit*, a text certainly intended to be disseminated among the Ismaili elect. This is the fifth epistle of the *K. al-Kashf*, a text which Wilferd Madelung identified in his seminal article on the Ismaili Imamate as a document of material from the reign of second Fatimid caliph al-Qā'im bi-Amr Allāh (r. 934–946 CE), but also containing material which preceded the Fatimid/Qarmaṭī split (i.e., before 899 CE). There we read:

> The meaning of *al-imām al-ṣāmit* is that he is the possessor of the inward meaning (*ṣāḥib al-bāṭin*), he does not articulate a system of religious norms (*sharīʿa*), he is only the Imam of the *sharīʿa* of the "Speaker" (*nāṭiq*) before him and he does not articulate a *sharīʿa*.[90]

This aligns with the delegation of roles between the archetypal figures of prophethood and Imamate performed by Muḥammad and ʿAlī in the pentadist texts studied above. However the text goes on further to explicitly embrace the theology of divine personhood when it explains the parallels between the Prophet Muḥammad and the current Imam, leading to the following encomium of the Fatimid caliph:

> Al-Qā'im bi-Amr Allāh Muḥammad Abī-l-Qāsim, blessings of God be upon him: The greatest *Ḥujja*; the *Ṣāmit* of today, namely because he has not appeared to enunciate the command of God; the seventh *Nāṭiq*, whose age is the seal of all His ages and the greatest of His intermediaries; the Great *ʿAyn* (*al-ʿAyn al-ʿaẓīma*), and the most glorious in his worth – and indication was made of the *ʿAyn* because it is the aim of every aim, by which the Great Creator is indicated, the one Whom the attributes of the creation do not fathom nor does impurity or the change of time touch (*wa-lā yalḥaquhu danas wa lā taghyīr zamān*). Nay, He is the creator of time and the "Meaning" (*maʿnā*) of every age and reality and period.[91]

In light of the pentadist materials presented above, we can see how a diverse set of theological concerns are unified. The second Fatimid Imam al-Qāsim is depicted as both *Nāṭiq* and *Ṣāmit*, embodying differing aspects of both archetypal roles, but most strikingly, he is also represented as the singular access point to the immutable *maʿnā* of God as the great *ʿAyn*, in the theophanic

90 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 98.
91 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 100–101.

terminology of the so-called ʿAyniyya. This desire for perfect theological uniqueness, incomparability, and immutability, known to experts as the justification for Nuṣayrī self-appellation as "the Monotheists" (*al-muwaḥḥidūn*), was of equal concern for early Ismailism, who imagined the divine hierarchy of prophets, imams, and initiates as representative placemarkers for the attributes of a wholly transcendent deity.

Of note is the fact that the *K. al-Kashf* lacks any of later Ismailism's characteristic Neoplatonism, and is profoundly archaic in its doctrinal formulations. It is an unequivocally "Fatimid-approved" text and thus invaluable for its documentation of early Fatimid Ismaili Imamate teachings, which accounts for its subsequent preservation in the rich Fatimid inheritance of the Bohra manuscript tradition. The fifth epistle of the *K. al-Kashf* was furthermore used by Madelung to set the record straight concerning the proclamation of the Fatimid Imamate after an initial period of messianic expectations for Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl. What this means for the reorganization of esotericist authority will be explained in the following section, requiring yet another foray into the pentadist perennialism at the core of Ismaili religious doctrine.

6 Salmān and the Imam: Rediscovering Early Ismailism's Pentadist Hierarchy

Ismaili dependence on pentadist doctrines is not confined to the more "obvious" Shiʿi dyad of Muḥammad and ʿAlī as *Nāṭiq*/*Ṣāmit*, but rather, the view that these theophanic manifestations include the perennial presence of an initiatic hierarchy solely accessible to true believers. The ranks of this hierarchy were embodied to some extent within a concrete form of social organization. In Ismailism, as in other pentadic strains of esoteric Shiʿism, recognition of the initiatic hierarchy's chief and minor actors, terminology, and forms of symbolic thinking were understood as the sole way to true knowledge of God and religion. Pentadist influence here is of particular importance for Ismaili thought, due to the prominent role that the initiatic hierarchy or *ḥudūd* plays in Ismaili doctrine, exegesis, and philosophical speculation. As Paul Walker has said:

> Perhaps no other doctrine is so characteristic of the Ismailis as the notion of hierarchies. While the majority of Muslims have avoided the creation of an authority structure in religious matters, the Ismailis have wholeheartedly embraced the idea of hierarchies and have, in several periods of their history, constructed their propaganda and ecclesiastical organizations (the *daʿwa*) on an ascending scheme of religious offices each

> more powerful and more important than the one below. Likewise, in their view of history, they have seen the course of man's worldly time controlled in cycles each governed by a hierarchy of prophets and imams; and in the higher world, too, they have conceived of yet another series of hierarchical powers. This emphasis appeared early in the history of this sect and continued to be prominent in their doctrine into modern times. The idea of hierarchies was therefore of considerable concern to the early theorists of Ismailism and in some ways it was consequently the area of their most original work.[92]

This hallmark feature of Ismailism did not spontaneously generate of its own accord, but must be understood in light of its pentadist forebears' adherence to a divine hierarchy headed by Salmān al-Fārisī as the "Gate" (*bāb,*).

According to al-Qummī's sources, pentadist initiatic ranks proceeded from highest to lowest as follows: the *bāb*, ("Gate"), the *yatīm* ("orphan"), the *najīb* ("noble"), the *naqīb* ("chief"), the *muṣtafā* ("elect"), the *mukhtaṣṣ* ("elite"), the "tested/initiated" ("*mumtaḥan*"), and the (probably uninitiated Shiʿi) "believer" (*muʾmin*). Al-Qummī also gives a brief explanation of some of the terms: the "Gate" (*bāb,*) was an embodiment of Salmān al-Fārisī, reenacted by the leader of the Mukhammisa in each age:

> All the predecessors such as Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb … [and other esoteric Shiʿi heresiarchs] … were prophets and "gates" (*abwāb*) by replacement of body and changing of name, but the "meaning" is the same, which is Salmān, and he is the "Gate" prophetic-messenger who appears with Muḥammad in every circumstance (*fī kull ḥāl min al-aḥwāl*), among the Arabs and non-Arabs.
>
> So these "Gates" always appear with Muḥammad (*taẓhar maʿa Muḥammad abadan*) in any form he takes (*fī ayy ṣūra ẓahara*). They appear, and they establish along with him [other] gates, orphans, nobles, chiefs, elects, elites, initiates, and believers.[93]

92 Paul E. Walker, "Cosmic Hierarchies in Early Ismāʿīlī Thought: The View of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī," *The Muslim World* 66, no. 1 (January 1976): 14. See Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*, chap. 10 "A Cosmic Anthropology," 107–113.

93 Al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, 57.

The "orphan" (*yatīm*) was archetypally embodied by ʿAlī's associates Abū Dharr and al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad, and represented an elevated rank in the initiatic hierarchy, divisible into "greater" and "lesser" orphans, respectively. The Shiʿi believer initiated into the pentadist elect was supposed to learn the meanings of these names and follow his initiatic superiors. As Qummī reports, "They said that whoever knew these people in these meanings was a "tested believer" (*muʾmin mumtaḥan*)."[94]

This vision of a timeless initiatic hierarchy harmonized with a burgeoning trope in Imami self-conception based on a singular vision of Islam's earliest years. In the closest thing to an early Imami *ṭabaqāt* work, Abū ʿAmr al-Kashshī, writing in the early part of the 4th/10th century, depicted the Muslim community after the passing of Muḥammad as being reduced to ʿAlī's companions Salmān al-Fārisī, Abū Dharr, and al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad alone.[95] These three individuals are characterized as being able to withstand the most difficult teachings and realities of religion. Muḥammad Bāqir is quoted as having said, "The people were apostates (*ahl al-ridda*) after the Prophet except for three." When asked who the three were he says, "al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad, Abū Dharr al-Ghifārī, and Salmān al-Fārisī".[96] Thus, according to Imami "sacral memory," access to religious truth was represented as a rarefied – esoteric – knowledge, guaranteed by submission to an elect distinguished as bearers of extraordinary knowledge beyond the ken of the general populace. Such hadith about ʿAlī's companions likely assuaged "lay-people" within the early Imami community that the self-same authority of ʿAlī's "original" Shiʿi followers was to be found in their own time, sparing them of the same type of blameworthy characteristics and doubts found elsewhere in Muḥammad's community.

That Abū Dharr as "orphan" is subordinate to Salmān al-Fārisī as "Gate" in the pentadist hierarchy described by al-Qummī replicates a theme seen in a widely transmitted Imami hadith of the 3rd/9th century where Salmān is depicted as a spiritual member of the of *ahl al-bayt*. This hadith suggested that Salmān

94 Al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, 57.

95 On this aspect of Imami sacral memory, see Etan Kohlberg, "Some Imāmī Shīʿī Views on the *Ṣaḥāba*," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 5 (1984): 143–75.

96 Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Kashshī, *Rijāl Al-Kashshī*, ed. Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī (Karbala: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlā, 1963), 12. This entire chapter on Salmān al-Fārisī (p. 12–27) is instructive for various traditions on these "three sole believers" of early Shiʿism. For more on Salmān's charismatic knowledge from the imam, see Etan Kohlberg, "The term *Muḥaddath* in Twelver Shīʾism," in *Studia Orientalia: Memoriae D.H. Baneth Dedicata*, 39–47 (Jerusalem: Magnes Press, Hebrew University, 1979), esp. 42–44.

represented the highest rank a "tested believer" (*muʾmin mumtaḥan*) could reach. In Kulaynī's *Kāfī* for example, we read the following from Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq:

> I mentioned *taqiyya* one day to ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn, and he said, "By God, if Abū Dharr knew what was in the heart of Salmān, he would have killed him even though the Prophet of God made them brothers, and I do not consider you all like the rest of the creation. Indeed, the knowledge of the knowers (*ʿilm al-ʿulamāʾ*) is beyond difficult (*ṣaʿb mustaṣʿab*); no one can bear it except a missionizing prophet (*nabī mursal*) or an angel brought nigh (*malak muqarrab*) or a believing slave whose heart God has tested for faith (*ʿabd muʾmin imtaḥana allāh qalbahu li-l-īmān*)."
>
> Then he said, "Salmān has only become one of the "knowers" (*al-ʿulamāʾ*) because he is a man from us, the *ahl al-bayt*, and this is why I attributed him to the *ahl al-bayt*."[97]

The sheer number of this hadith's chains of transmission (five in al-Kulaynī's *al-Kāfī* and thirty-two in al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī's *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*) make one wonder about the role it may have played in the formulation of Imami community identity. For example, how were the human intermediaries between imams and the lay people imagined? Would those who conveyed the imams' teachings to their followers be capable of doing so if they were not also unusually gifted? How could one's heart be "tested" for faith?

The pentadist conceptualization of Salmān al-Fārisī as the *Bāb* is known to have been enshrined as a sacerdotal office in Nuṣayrī religious tradition due to the prominent function it played in mediating the duality of the *ism* and *maʿnā* – as the third part of what has (unfortunately) been called a Nuṣayrī "trinity." In some variants of early esoteric Shiʿism, however, the *Bāb* virtually became an end unto itself: The *K. al-Mājid* of the Jābir-corpus, meticulously studied by Henri Corbin, uses the term *aṣḥāb al-sīn* to describe Shiʿis whose devotion to Salmān the *Bāb* overshadowed their devotion to Muḥammad and ʿAlī; the existence of such devotees to Salmān is confirmed by contemporaneous

97 Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *Al-Kāfī*, ed. ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1388), 1:401. See also 32 different narrations of this type of hadith in Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī, *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, ed. Mīrzā Muḥsin Kūcheh Bāghī al-Tabrīzī (Najaf: Maktabat Āyatollāh al-ʿUẓmā al-Marʿāshī al-Najafī, 1404), 20–28. For a more in-depth reading of the hadith, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Seul l'homme de Dieu est humain. Theologie et anthropologie mystique à travers l'exegèse imamite ancienne (aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine iv)," *Arabica* 45.2 (1998): 193–214.

sources such as al-Ashʿarī in his *Maqālāt al-Islāmiyyīn*[98] as well as an epistle of Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr.[99] Although the pentadist usage of the description "orphan" (*yatīm*) for Abū Dharr is not explained by al-Qummī, it seems to be an ideal-type of Shiʿi initiate.[100] The work of Qurʾanic exegesis (*tafsīr*) commonly attributed to al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī and transmitted by Ibn Bābawayh among others, uses the term "orphan" as a term for laypeople among the Imamis, "to denote a believer whose spiritual father (the Imam) has been imprisoned or is in hiding. Such a believer does not know how to conduct himself, and is thus in a worse plight than the orphan who has lost his parents."[101]

As we saw above from al-Qummī's testimony, the "Gate" and the "orphan" were part of a larger hierarchy leading up to the divine theophany. He goes on to inform us that knowledge of the hierarchical ranks was considered part of pentadist initiation: "They said that whoever knew these people in these meanings was a "tested believer" (*muʾmin mumtaḥan*)."[102] The paradoxical hadith about Salmān and Abū Dharr quoted above was inspirational for the construction of initiatic hierarchies or "ranks" (*daraja*, pl. *darajāt*; *rutba*, pl. *rutab*), in "proto-Nuṣayrī" and Nuṣayri texts.[103] Theoretically the "examined

98 He speaks of those who affirm "the divinity (*ilāhiyyat*) of Salmān al-Fārisī", Abū-l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt Al-Islāmiyyīn*, ed. Hellmut Ritter, 3rd ed. (Wiesbaden: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1963), 13.

99 Muḥammad Ibn Nuṣayr, *Kitāb al-akwār al-nūrāniyya wa-l-adwār al-rūḥāniyya*, ed. Abū Mūsā and al-Shaykh Mūsā, Silsilat al-Turāth al-ʿAlawī (Beirut: Dār li-Ajl al-Maʿrifa, 2006), 111.

100 See Nuṣayrī usage, see Strothmann, Die Nuṣairi innerhalb der Schia, p. 270 (Arabic Text) and index (*yatīm*). For usage in *Umm al-Kitāb* see W. Ivanow, Ummu 'l-Kitāb; p. 58 sec. 235; p.92 sec 73. See Halm, Kosmologie, 156. See the typically obtuse *K. al-Khamsīn* of (Pseudo) Jābir b. Ḥayyān, *Textes Choisis*, p. 492–493.

101 Etan Kohlberg, "Imam and Community in the Pre-*Ghayba* Period," in *Authority and Political Culture in Shi'ism*, ed. Said Amir Arjomand (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1988), 41–42. On spiritual fatherhood in Ismailism, see below.

102 Al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa-l-firaq*, 57.

103 The (*malak*) *muqarrab* and (*muʾmin*) *mumtaḥan* are also incorporated into various esoteric hierarchies related to Khaṭṭābite teachings. See for example, the *Umm al-Kitāb*; Arjomand, "The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," 507–9. Rudolf Strothmann, "Festkalender der Nusairier: Grundlegendes Lehrbuch im syrischen Alawitenstaat," *Der Islam* 27 (1946): see index, s.v. "mumtaḥanūn," "muqarrab." In the list of hierarchical terms of the *Kitāb al-Khamsīn* of the Jābir-Corpus, we see *malak*, *muʾmin mumtaḥan*; Ibn Ḥayyān, "Kitāb al-Khamsīn," 489–90, 495. "See some analysis on this in Paul Kraus, "Dignitaires de la Hiérarchie Religieuse selon Ǵābir Ibn Ḥayyān," in *Alchemie, Ketzerei, Apokryphen im frühen Islam*, ed. Rémy Brague (Hildesheim: Georg Olms Verlag, 1994), 73–74. Cf. Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shi'i Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and Their Beliefs*, 145 ff.

believer" could ascend to become a "Gate"[104] and at least in some understandings, an "orphan" could ascend to become Imam.[105]

In what follows, epistles 1, 3, and 5 from the early Ismaili work *K. al-Kashf* will be revisited with an eye to highlighting its reliance on pentadist religious hierarchies. This dependency reveals the document to constitute a "missing link" for documenting the evolution of Ismaili *ḥudūd* teachings from a pentadist backdrop. Both initiatic paradigms explain the perennial hierarchy as conforming to a particular grade of monotheistic knowledge and proximity to divinity. The conceptualization of religious authority in early Ismailism – in a practical, hierarchical sense, and not an eschatological one – was organized around this sensibility. Ismaili eschatology may have preached the return of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, but the *K. al-Kashf* shows us that the organizational leader of early Ismailism modeled their authority on the pentadist sacerdotal figure of the *Bāb* .

The opening of the first epistle of the *K. al-Kashf* merits special attention for its early and archaic description of the initiatic covenant (*ʿahd*), a fundamental part of Ismaili practice which fuses its perennialist beliefs and its hierarchical organization.[106] This begins with the claim that the first thing required of a believer is "knowledge of the Truth and its people" (*maʿrifat al-ḥaqq wa-ahlihi*), and to take a "covenant" (*ʿahd/mīthāq*) of absolute loyalty and secrecy. This prepares the reader for a list of figures in a chain of command which includes the terms *bāb*, *najīb*, and *naqīb* – terms we have seen from al-Qummī's list of pentadist dignitiaries– but now also the Ismaili terms of "missionaries" (*duʿāt*) and, last but not least, *Ḥujja*. The members of this hierarchy, the text tells us,

104 In the *K. al-Haft* we read a dialogue between al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī and Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq which shows how Qurʾānic verse (49:3) was used to derive the idea of an "examined believer." Thereafter Qurʾānic verse (24:61) is explained as follows: "This is regarding our *shīʿa* and every *muʾmin* who is elevated above the rank (*daraja*) of his companion. His companion who has not raised up a level ought to submit to him, and obedience is mandatory for him with respect to all of his believing brothers whom he is below. So he remains until he reaches the rank of the doorway (*al-bāb*)." (Pseudo-) Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī, *Kitāb al-Haft wa-l-aẓilla*, ed. ʿĀrif Tāmir and Ign.-A Khalifé (Beirut: Imprimerie Catholique, 1960), 44. On the archetypal movement between initiatic levels see also Bar-Asher and Kofsky, "A Tenth-Century Nuṣayrī Treatise on the Duty to Know the Mystery of Divinity," 244.

105 Pierre Lory, "Aspects de l'ésotérisme chiite dans le Corpus Ǧābirien: Les trois *Livres de l'Elément de fondation*," *Al-Qanṭara* 37 no. 2 (July–Sept 2016): 296. See also the *K. al-Khamsīn*.

106 For more on the initiatic oath in Ismailism, see Heinz Halm, "The Ismaʿili Oath of Allegiance (*ʿahd*) and the Sessions of Wisdom (*Majālis al-Ḥikma*) in Fatimid Times," in *Medieaval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 91–115. Since its origins, the covenant has remained a fundamental aspect of initiatic membership in the Ismaili *daʿwa*. To my knowledge the significance of this part of the *K. al-Kashf* has not been hitherto acknowledged in this light.

represent a relationship between the *awṣiyā'* and the *awliyā'*, i.e., the legatees of God, and the elect community who follow them.[107] The text polemically avoids associations with incarnationist doctrines of "the Christians" and "the exaggerators of the Muslims" (*ghulāt al-muslimīn*),[108] even as it invokes terminology more commonly associated with Nuṣayrism. However, this is suggestive not only of proximity, but a desire for distinctiveness. Even as the text utilizes pentadist models of religious authority, it purposefully alters them.

The most significant of these alterations was the creation of a new rank of authority called the *Ḥujja*, who held an analogous role to that of the "Gate." This was done in two stages: First the author of the epistle listed a series of religious authorities who accompany every prophet as "Gates;" Seth for Adam, Shem for Noah, Ishmael for Abraham, Joshua for Moses, Simon for Jesus, and ʿAlī for Muḥammad. These individuals are not typically considered "Gates" in any other form of esoteric Shiʿism. More importantly, the epistle goes on to establish an equivalence where the "Gate" of each prophet is considered to be his *Ḥujja* as well: In conclusion the reader is led to believe that each Prophet has a "Gate" as his *successor* who is *also* his *Ḥujja*. A list of the Shiʿi Imams from ʿAlī to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq is also provided, where the successor to each imam is also called a *Ḥujja*, and limited to al-Ṣādiq's descendants until the rise of the Qā'im. This unprecedented equation of *Bābs* with *Ḥujja*s, and *Ḥujjas* as successors to authority figures, had an important motivation behind it, as we shall see, bound to the Ismaili leadership's own claims to authority.

This strategy was only achievable, however, once the epistle addressed the existence of those figures typically considered *Bāb*s in pentadist belief. Hence we find Salmān al-Fārisī and Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb (among other esotericists) mentioned by name in the *K. al-Kashf*, but not as "gates." Instead, they are called "fathers" to the "orphans"[109] – the latter being a term we also know from the pentadist hierarchy. This demonstrates the intentional acknowledgement, but also downgrading of figures such as Abū'l-Khaṭṭāb who held pentadist "Gatehood;" neutralizing their authority by accomodating them as one of a number of spiritual or esoteric "fathers"[110] within a common set of iniatic brethren, a potent trope in early Ismaili recruitment and Qurʾanic *taʾwīl*.[111]

107 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 23–25.

108 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 27.

109 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 33–34.

110 On spiritual fatherhood (with reference to primary and secondary sources), see Lewis, *The Origins of Ismāʿīlism*, 44 ff. This specifically attracted Lewis' interest with regard to the controversial topic of Ismaili genealogy.

111 See the wondrous dramatization of this theme in Jaʿfar Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *The Master and the Disciple: An Early Islamic Spiritual Dialogue*, ed. James W. Morris (London: I.B. Tauris, 2001).

Once the pentadist "Gates" had been neutralized, their authority could all the more easily be transformed and appropriated for the sake of the *daʿwa*. A vivid example of this is in the explicit derivation of the *Ḥujja*'s authority from that of the *Bāb* in the third epistle of the *K. al-Kashf*. Here, Salmān al-Fārisī, Abū Dharr, and al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad are all imagined as the "gates" of ʿAlī to which the believer must direct himself. They are "his Gates (*abwāb*) whom he sets up for *daʿwa* to himself (*yuqīmuhum bi-l-daʿwa ilayhi*)."[112] "They are the *Ḥujja*s of the legatee (*waṣī*), and the legatee is the *Ḥujja* of the Prophet, and the Prophet is the *Ḥujja* of God."[113] This series of equivalences makes the authority of the *Ḥujja* transferable between prophets, legatees, and "gates" with respect to the delegation of authority implied in them. Salmān in particular is presented in a highly rarefied manner:

> [Salmān] is ʿAlī's "Gate" (*Bāb*), so whoever knows one has known the other. And whoever does not know *al-ʿAyn*, who is *Amīr al-Muʾminīn* in his realities (*bi-ḥaqāʾiqihi*) by means of the three[114] will not be saved from doom nor the sword![115]

It is important to note here that Salmān's "Gatehood" is not only linked with the "realities" of ʿAyniyya pentadism, but also associated with the role of a *Ḥujja* actively establishing a *daʿwa* during the absence of the Imam – a clear reflection of the messianic expectation of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl as the Qāʾim at the end of the 3rd/9th century. The association of the *Ḥujja* with a *daʿwa* underwritten by "the sword" also reflects the particularly militant mode of *daʿwa* activity which characterized early Ismailism (whether in the "Qarāmiṭa" movements or in the Yemeni and N. African context for the establishment of the Fatimid *dawla*) and is strongly contrastable with other documents of Imami esotericism (and later Ismailism) which do not use such language.

Having co-opted and neutralized the "Gatehood" of Abū-l-Khaṭṭab and his emulators, and equivocated between *Bāb* -hood and *Ḥujja*-hood, the initiatic leaders of the Ismaili *daʿwa* were ultimately able to claim the Imamate for themselves. There was a very specific contextual logic to their usage of the Arabic term *ḥujja*, however: As they invented the rank of the *Ḥujja* at the highest rank of *daʿwa* leadership they were surely aware that the term enjoyed

112 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 76.
113 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 76.
114 The three, i.e. the three *bāb*s described in this epistle: Salmān al-Fārisī, Abū Dharr, and al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad.
115 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 76.

currency in a broad Shiʿi milieu to denote a broader sense of authority embodied in all of God's authorities on earth, prophets and imams alike.

This term had furthermore taken on special significance for a number of Shiʿis after the death of Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī in 260/874, precisely the time in which the Ismaili *daʿwa* is presumed to have first emerged.[116] At that time, his followers and their associates disagreed about the identity, characteristics, or whereabouts of the Imam. Nevertheless, they were unified by a common providential mantra that "the world will never be devoid of (*al-arḍ lā takhlū min*)" an "argument" (*ḥujja*) made by God against humanity or an imam who establishes that argument. This creedal formulation, found in the earliest Imami hadith collections,[117] was invoked by al-Nawbakhtī's contemporaries to solve the problem of the succession to al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī (given the absence of his son) in a variety of configurations.[118] Al-Nawbakhtī refers to his own Twelver group among them as "al-Imāmiyya" in the earliest extant usage of that term we possess.[119] The rich and detailed Twelver creedal statement he presents, made up of an extensive array of hadith and exegetical dogmas, he attributes to "the Imami Shiʿis, those who are correct in their Shiʿism (*al-Shīʿa al-Imāmiyya al-ṣaḥīḥat al-tashayyuʿ*)."[120] Twelverism was not an inevitable outcome, however, despite the fact that it has defined our understanding of what "Imamism" is doctrinally.[121] In the commotion to locate God's "argument" over humanity, the founders of Twelver Shiʿism asserted that al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī had a son who was in hiding.

On their part, the early leaders of what we call "Ismailism" (they never referred to themselves as such) asserted the existence of an "argument" of their own to recruit young men from the Shiʿi community who grew in their skepticism about the hidden Imam of nascent Twelverism.[122] Among the skeptical

116 Based on the fact that al-Faḍl b. Shādhān who died in the same year is said to have written a refutation of the Ismailis.

117 See al-Kulaynī, *Al-Kāfī*, 1:177–180.

118 Nawbakhtī, a privileged insider within the burgeoning Imami community, describes the various attitudes justified by variants of this slogan. Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 80–81, 86, 90, 91. One group (al-Nawbakhtī, 87) said, however, that the *Ḥujja* could be removed by God if He were angry at mankind.

119 al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 90.

120 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 90–93.

121 Again: The only usages of "Imami" which we possess come from "Twelver" Shiʿis who emerge at the end of the 3rd/9th centuries and onward. We possess no information about any Shiʿis prior to al-Nawbakhtī who referred to themselves by that term.

122 For Ismaili appeal among Shiʿis based on access to the "argument" of God see the account of the intra-Shiʿi strategies for conversion in Karbala from ʿAlī b. al-Faḍl (d. 303/915); Heinz Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, trans. Michael Bonner (Leiden: Brill, 1996), 35. See also the

Imamis recruited into this movement were no less than the great *daʿwa* leaders Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī and his brother Abū-l-ʿAbbās, essential for the success of Ismailism in N. Africa, and Ibn Ḥawshab "the victorious over Yemen." The mysterious leader of the Ismaili *daʿwa* at Salamiyya literally called himself "the Argument" (*Ḥujja*) to underline his authority among recruits during this time of confusion. But he stylized the details of that authority on that of the "Gate" of pentadist teachings, a more deeply-rooted archetypal figure of authority which enjoyed great prominence at the turn of the third-fourth/ninth-tenth century, sometimes embodied in the figure of Salmān al-Fārisī. In the 5th epistle of the *K. al-Kashf* we read that the *Ḥujja* is "the ark in the age of Noah" for the salvation of true believers,[123] and "by the *Ḥujja* one is connected with the great *ʿAyn* who is the Imam (peace be upon him)."[124] An esoteric exegesis of Qurʾanic verse 3:97 states, "the *Ḥujja* is the pathway (*sabīl*) to the Imam by which he calls people to God."[125] Initiates were expected to believe that, "The *Ḥujja* in our age is our *shaykh* and our master and the master of every male and female believer."[126] This individual, a "Gate" acting as "Argument" of God in the absence of the Imam,[127] was supreme leader of the *daʿwa* during the era of expectation for Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl's return at the end of the third/ninth century.[128]

Yet as critically pointed out by Madelung this passage was later amended to explain that "the *Ḥujja*" was a reference to "al-Imām Muḥammad b. Aḥmad, upon him be peace," saying:

> At the beginning of his command (*amr*), he had concealed himself (*satara nafsahu*) from the hypocrites and put himself in the role of the *Ḥujja* calling to the Imam, but [in reality] he was calling to himself. No one knew this except a small elect of his proselytizers (*duʿāt*).[129]

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account of the Baghdad Shiʿi interrogated by ʿAbbasid vizier ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā in 315/927; Thābit Ibn Sinān, *Taʾrīkh Akhbār Al-Qarāmiṭa*, ed. Suhayl Zakkār (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Risāla, 1971), 50.

123 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 96. The image of Noah's ark is very important for Khaṭṭābite understandings of the *Bāb*.

124 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 96.

125 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 135.

126 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 97–98.

127 This matches with the characterization of Salmān as both *Bāb* and *Ḥujja* in the 3rd epistle, and the co-extensive relationship of *Bāb* and *Ḥujja* in the 1st epistle's list of past religious figures.

128 See Madelung, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," 55–57. See Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, 22. It is this messianic expectation of Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl which is responsible for Nawbakhtī's taxonomy of the movement as "Ismaili."

129 Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Kitāb al-Kashf*, 98. Madelung, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," 55–56.

In later Fatimid teachings, the *Ḥujja* Muḥammad b. Aḥmad was considered to have been the active Imam all along, the last of the so-called "concealed imams" of Fatimid sacred history[130] who was succeeded by his nephew Saʿīd, the first Fatimid Imam-Caliph known as "the Mahdī." In his initial modus operandi, however, the *Ḥujja* had been an initiatic authority figure modeled on the "Gate" of Shiʿi pentadist doctrines – a sublime intimate of the Imam wielding supreme authority to most Shiʿites who would never aspire to see the Imam for themselves.

7 Gatehood at the Turn of the 4th/10th Century

Among contenders for this position, the leader of early Ismailism was uniquely situated and quite successful among other candidates from his contemporaries. When appreciating this observation, it is imperative to understand how great the appeal of the pentadist "Gate" was around the turn of the 3rd/9th century. Beyond the general archetypal appeal of Salmān al-Fārisī's elevated status (as reflected in hadith), the need for such an absolute hierarch was a common trait to all major sects of Shiʿism at this time.

As is known, the appeal of the "Gate" was felt even in the Twelver "mainstream," as Twelver theologians may have referred to the four "ambassadors" (*sufarā'*) of the 12th Imam as "Gates" (*abwāb*) as well.[131] The most concrete attestation is by Abū Sahl al-Nawbakhtī (d. 311/924), the great theologian and uncle of the heresiographer, who in his *K. al-Tanbīh*, penned in approximately 290/903, suggested that there was a "Gate" (*bāb,*) acting as a "contact" (*sabab*) for the hidden Imam.[132] Competition for the position of the 12th Imam's "Gate" was famously contested by esotericists such as al-Shalmaghānī (connected with both Nuṣayrism and early Ismailism) in what Said Arjomand called a

130 Identified with Abū Shalaghlagh of outsider accounts; see Madelung, "Das Imamat in der frühen ismailitischen Lehre," 56; Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, 14–15, 59–62.

131 See Javad Ali, "Die beiden ersten Safire des zwölften Imams," *Der Islam*, no. 25 (1939): 198; Etan Kohlberg, *EI²*, s.v. "*safīr*" and Bernard Lewis, *EI²*, s.v. "*bāb*". Cf. Verena Klemm, "Die vier *sufarā'* des Zwölften Imām. Zur formativen Periode der Zwölferšīʿa," *Die Welt des Orients* (1984): 126–143. See also Edmund Hayes, "The Envoys of the Hidden Imam: Religious Institutions and the Politics of the Twelver Occultation" (Doctoral Thesis, University of Chicago, 2015). The Ismaili leader Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī is said to have mentioned that the Twelver *bāb*s acting on behalf of the hidden imam were justified on the precedent of Muḥammad Ibn al-Ḥanafiyya acting as *bāb* on behalf of ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn before he reached maturity; see Wilferd Madelung and Paul E. Walker, *The Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shi'i Witness* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2001), 92–93.

132 Hayes, "The Envoys of the Hidden Imam: Religious Institutions and the Politics of the Twelver Occultation," 281–82.

"crisis of hierocratic authority."[133] Early Twelvers were suspicious of a number of potential charismatic pretenders to this rank, a fact which according to Massignon may have been a political factor behind the demise of al-Ḥallāj. The concept of the "Gate" itself must have been felt as a liability among the rising Twelver scholarly hierarchy due to its contentious precommitments and logistical implications, and explains the unsustainability of the *safīr* position and reason for the eventual Greater Occultation. A message delivered on behalf of the 12th Imam as early as 282/895 by his second "Gate" like representative Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad al-ʿAmrī (d. 305/917) made clear that authority was in the process of being handed over to the *muḥaddithūn*, whose hadith collections would be considered God's "argument" (*ḥujja*) in the Imam's absence.[134] In Qumm, a paramount center of orthodox Twelver hadith scholarship, the al-ʿAmrī name had strong currency given the family role as the financial agents (*wukalāʾ*) to which Shiʿi believers directed their tithes;[135] this happy alliance for the Qummī traditionists was consolidated in 329/941, when the so-called "greater Occultation" of the 12th Imam began, and the locus of Twelver juridical authority could take hold.

In contrast to this ad hoc situation, the leaders of early Ismailism at Salamiyya confidently asserted the continuous presence of "Gates" in their movement actively working in secret since Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq established that role for them.[136] As they planned their transformation from into an Imamate, the *daʿwa* let circulate that Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl's "Gate" (*bāb*,) was of noble lineage, either from the descendants of ʿAqīl b. Abī Ṭālib or ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and had possibly received the Imamate himself.[137] Finally, the first Fatimid caliph al-Mahdī, in his letter to his Yemeni followers from the turn of the 3rd/9th century,[138] asserted the presence of "Gates" (*abwāb*) back to Jaʿfar

133 See Arjomand, "The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," 506–9.

134 Said Amir Arjomand, "Imam Absconditus and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation: Imami Shiʿism Circa 280–90 A.H./900 A.D.," *JAOS* 117, no. 1 (March 1997): 3, 7. On the importance of hadith for twelverism see Arjomand, "The Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shiism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," 99–105.

135 Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shīʿite Islam*, 80.

136 As cited above in the first epistle of the *K. al-Kashf*.

137 As recalled in the conversation between Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī and Ibn al-Haytham ca. 296/908. See Madelung and Walker, *The Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shiʿi Witness*, 91–92. The mention of ʿAqīlid lineage is significant, since anti-Ismail polemicist Abū Rizām mentioned that the *daʿwa* central command in Salamiyya had professed ʿAqīlid lineage; Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, 10–11.

138 Said to be written in 308/920, though possibly written earlier; see Abbas Hamdani and François de Blois, "A Re-Examination of al-Mahdī's Letter to the Yemenites on the Genealogy of the Fatimid Caliphs," *JRAS*, no. 2 (1983): 174.

al-Ṣādiq as the select few to know that ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq had been the true progenitor of the Imams who had concealed their identities over the preceding century as *Ḥujja*s.[139] Al-Mahdī thus acknowledged the role of the "Gate" for establishing authority in the absence of an Imam while fully exploiting how the *Ḥujja* as God's "argument" allowed for a blurring between the two roles of "Gate" and Imam with respect to their absolute religious authority. After the Fatimid Imamate was established, the "Gate"-like *Ḥujja*s could be remembered as only a temporary solution, despite the critical importance of their role when Ismailis had no Imam. Al-Mahdī, the founder of the Fatimid caliphate itself, was content with a "Fuṭḥite" genealogy for his lineage of former "Gates," and not an "Ismaili" one – the Qāʾim was Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl,[140] but the "Gate" was free to have another pedigree. Unlike the "dynastic" genealogical understanding of Ismailism, the *K. al-Kashf* shows absolutely no concern for the succession to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq,[141] nor does it mention the genealogy of the Qāʾim[142] – instead it places much more stock in the authoritative figure of the "Gate" as God's "argument," along with many accompanying layers of pentadist imagery and esoteric exegesis.

The increased prominence of the "Gate" during the absence of an Imam was not a solution first offered by Ismaili or Twelver leadership – but as might be expected, the esotericist followers of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, 11th imam of the Twelver lineage. Ibn Nuṣayr is commemorated by Nuṣayrīs as the "Gate" of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, a role he must have upheld as he challenged the authority of ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-ʿAmrī and Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān al-ʿAmrī, the first two financial agents who claimed to operate on behalf of the 12th Imam *in absentia*. Ibn Nuṣayr in turn was challenged by Isḥāq al-Aḥmar for the rank of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī's "Gate;" the latter's viability may have even grown in the immediate years after Ibn Nuṣayr's death.[143] Early Nuṣayrīs duly transmit texts on Isḥāq's authority,[144] and even "orthodox" Twelver scholars such as Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941) and al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022) relied on Isḥāq al-Aḥmar for unique reports on the miraculous youth of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī,[145] a reflection of Isḥāq al-Aḥmar's special access

139 Hamdani and de Blois, "A Re-Examination", 176.

140 Though the particularities of the second Fatimid caliph al-Qāʾim

141 As I have discussed elsewhere, the usage of *naṣṣ* for determining Ismaili teachings vis-à-vis the normative "Imami" (Twelver) lineage only began with al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, who brought Ismaili thought into a broader intersectarian discourse colored by *kalām*; Adem, "Classical *Naṣṣ* Doctrines in Imāmī Shīʿism: On the Usage of an Expository Term," 56.

142 I.e., Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl, the reason for classification of the sect as "Ismaili."

143 Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (1), 252–53.

144 Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (1), 245.

145 Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (1), 251 f.

to the eleventh Imam. In the text *Ādāb ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib* transmitted by Isḥāq al-Aḥmar, the importance of seeking out the "Gate" (*bāb*,) is highly emphasized.[146] His fervor for the initiatic teachings of theophany was such that any attempt at claiming prestige or authority on the basis of ʿAlid bloodlines was critiqued in no uncertain terms – a true ʿAlid (*ʿalawī*) was to be understood instead as a true initiate into sacred knowledge (*maʿrifa*).[147] For seekers of the "Gate," the doctrines of esoteric knowlege clearly spoke louder than blood.

Despite the widely recognized significance of the "Gate" for Nuṣayrī teachings, the followers of Ibn Nuṣayr historically failed to perpetuate that model of authority after his death. First, there was a bungled succession based on Ibn Nuṣayr's dying wish to be followed by a certain "Aḥmad." This was claimed by three individuals including his son and a member of the politically influential Furāt family of Abbasid viziers (who had earlier backed Ibn Nuṣayr financially),[148] but none of the three pretenders to succession were to be recognized by latterday Nuṣayrīs, who instead follow a reconstituted form of Ibn Nuṣayr's teaching synthesized by al-Khaṣībī – a Twelver Shiʿi two generations removed from the sect's eponym.[149] Even Ibn Nuṣayr's immediate student Ibn Jundub, chief transmitter and interpreter of his texts for future Nuṣayrīs, was considered only to be a high-ranking "orphan" and not a "Gate" himself.[150] Al-Khaṣībī on his part had only studied with Ibn Jundub's student al-Jannān, and did not profess his own synthesis of Ibn Nuṣayr's teachings before 314/926.[151]

By that time, the Fatimid Imam al-Mahdī had already taken control of the N. African *daʿwa*, furthered its conquests, and was living in his new capital of al-Mahdiyya in modern Tunisia. But we must not forget how successfully his predecessor had operated decades earlier from Salamiyya, Syria in the role of a "Gate" acting as God's "argument" before 286/899. This man may or have taken inspiration from Ibn Nuṣayr, whose claim to be "Gate" of eleventh Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī reverberated after the latter's death in 260/874 and inspired competition among esotericists; however, he clearly surpassed him in religio-political achievements, as Heinz Halm's *The Empire of the Mahdi* makes vividly clear. This makes it all the more striking that the head of the *daʿwa* in

146 Jaʿfar b. Muḥammad b. al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī, "Ādāb ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib," in *al-Majmūʿa al-Mufaḍḍaliyya*, ed. Abū Mūsā and al-Shaykh Mūsā, Silsilat al-Turāth al-ʿAlawī 6 (Beirut: Dār li-Ajl al-Maʿrifa, 2006), 281.

147 Al-Juʿfī, "Ādāb ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib," 268, 282–83.

148 Al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, 78. Massignon, "Les origines Shi'ites de la Famille Vizirale des Banu'l-Furāt " Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawīs*, 12–13.

149 Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī ʿAlawīs*, 17 ff.

150 Friedman, *The Nuṣayrīʿalawīs*, 14–15, 16–17.

151 Friedman, *The Nuṣayrī ʿAlawīs*, 22.

Salamiyya is not remembered as a "Gate" though he clearly outshone all other pretendants to the same title.

When "Muḥammad b. Aḥmad," the leader of proto-Fatimid Ismailism, finally transformed himself from a "Gate"-like figure to that of an Imam, he was also reinstituting the role of the Imam as God's proper "argument" (*ḥujja*) in the world.[152] The older rank of "*Ḥujja*" as hierocratic grandmaster was subsequently demoted in Fatimid Ismaili usage to a second-tier rank of twelve initiatic superiors analogous to the rank of "chieftains" (*nuqabā'*) in pentadist and Nuṣayrī thought. The term *Bāb* would later be used only intermittently as an epithet for the topmost *Ḥujja* or chief of the *daʿwa* (*dāʿī al-duʿāt*) directly subordinate to the Fatimid Imam.[153] The lower-rank *ḥujja*s, however, included among them the great authors of classical Ismaili thought, being men who inherited the top rank of their pentadist initiatic forebears in their license to independently create ideology on behalf of the imam due to an ontological status both supposedly shared.

8 Conclusions and Considerations

The leader of the Ismaili *daʿwa* prior to 286/899 claimed to be God's *Ḥujja* during the absence of the Qā'im Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl. This term operated as an epithet for the Imam in Shiʿi thought and conveyed the absolute authority of its claimant as God's sole "argument" in the world. The mediation of this individual's authority over his immediate subordinates, however, was expressed in the vocabulary of "pentadist" esoteric Shiʿism, which, over the 3rd/9th century, had formulated Shiʿi piety around the authority of the "Gate" (*Bāb*),

152 The appointment of al-Qā'im's successor, al-Manṣūr, was conceived of as the appointment of a Ḥujja, in this sense not an initiatic leader but the imam himself, as more commonly understood from the Twelver-Imami context; Paul E. Walker, "Succession to Rule in the Shiite Caliphate," *Journal of the American Research Center in Egypt* 32 (1995): 243–45.

153 See Farhad Daftary, "Bāb," *Dā'irat al-maʿarif-i buzurg-i islāmī*, editor Muḥammad Kāẓim Mūsavī Bujnūrdī (Tehran: Markaz Dā'irat al-Maʿarif-i Buzurg-i Islāmī, 1988-) 3:733–735. The repurposing of the term *Bāb* may have happened as early as Abū-l-Shalaghlagh's emergence as imam. See the account of Jaʿfar the chamberlain in Halm, *The Empire of the Mahdi*, 58. An early Ismaili text (likely intentionally misattributed to an early *dāʿī* who rejected the authority of the Fatimid imams) displays a transitional stage, where both the union of the *Ḥujja/Bāb* as found in the *K. al-Kashf* as well as the subordination of the *Ḥujja* in a lower rank are to be found; see Wilferd Madelung and Paul E. Walker, "The *Kitāb al-rusūm wa-l-izdiwāj wa'l-tartīb* Attributed to ʿAbdān (d. 286/899): Edition of the Arabic Text and Translation," in *Fortresses of the Intellect: Ismaili and Other Islamic Studies in Honour of Farhad Daftary*, ed. Omar Alí-de-Unzaga (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 103–66.

the supreme leader of a perennially existing divine hierarchy of initiates to a theophanic reality. Simultaneously, the authority of the Imam, whether in the abstract or in the concrete figure of the second Fatimid Imam al-Qāsim, was constructed on the pentadist concept of the *ʿAyn*, the theophanic symbol for ʿAlī. The pentadist dualism of Muḥammadan Speech (*nuṭq*) and ʿAlid Silence (*ṣamt*) likewise informed the basic hermeneutic duality upon which Ismaili prophetology and imamology was constructed for perpetuity.[154]

When considering the significance of the *K. al-Kashf* as a documentary source for this conclusion, it is important to note that the equation of the *Ḥujja* with the *Bāb* remains consistent over the course of the first, third, and fifth epistles of the *K. al-Kashf*. The interwining of pentadist terminology with the militant language of the *daʿwa* and chiliastic expectations of the Qā'im furthermore do much to locate this text in the late 3rd/9th century. The third epistle thus does not merely contain a later "gloss" of foreign "Nuṣayrī" material, as Halm has suggested,[155] but in fact constitutes one of a number of critical documents which retain their integrity for the preservation of proto-Fatimid Ismaili doctrine without any glaring Neoplatonic anachronism.

In his seminal *Kosmologie und Heilslehre* on early Ismaili doctrines, Heinz Halm was the first to examine certain those passages of the 1st and 3rd epistle of the *K. al-Kashf* which possessed terminology particular to what he called "the Mukhammisa-Nuṣayri-circle."[156] However, he considered this to be a "problem" because he considered these examples to be an "exception," which "from appearances, did not color Ismaili doctrine." Halm also inaccurately stated there that this terminology "is not found in the other four treatises of the *Kashf*." Halm thus concluded that since later (Ṭayyibī) Ismailis and even the Druze incorporated earlier Mukhammisa material, the *K. al-Kashf*'s text may have undergone exposure to this material in an analogous manner, i.e., as a much later and foreign intrusion.[157] To hit this conclusion home, Halm ended the *Kosmologie und Heilslehre* with the conclusion that "the divinization of ʿAlī, reincarnation, and the entirety of the vocabulary of the 'Mukhammisa' tradition is missing" from Ismailism, which leads him to irreconcilably separate the two traditions completely.[158] According to Halm's reading, the pertinent citations of the *K. al-Kashf* cited in this study are a product of manuscript

154 Note, that Ismaili thought will eventually depart from the term *Ṣāmit* and call ʿAlī the "foundation" (*asās*).

155 Halm, "Das „Buch der Schatten"" (1), 83–84.

156 Halm, *Kosmologie*, 150–53.

157 Halm, *Kosmologie*, 165–67.

158 Halm, *Kosmologie*, 168.

contamination or syncretism from a later stage which can tell us nothing about early Ismailism.

This can be responded to in several ways. First, regarding the thesis of pentadist influence on Ismailism, the scope ought not to be limited to merely terminological intrusions, but should take note of the deeply shared conceptual roots. 3rd/9th century pentadist material provided the conceptual foundation for quintessential aspects of Ismaili doctrine: This is the case for the idealized dyad of Muḥammad and ʿAlī as *Nāṭiq* and *Ṣāmit*, the perennial hierarchy which accompanies God's authorities in every age, and the concomitant importance of the initiatic covenant (*ʿahd/mīthāq*) for recognizing the hierarchy as placemarkers of divine theophany for a transcendent deity.[159] These conceptual frameworks are at the basis for the Ismaili "cyclical" view of sacred history as well as its initiatic hierarchy of *ḥudūd* which lie at the basis of its famous "esoteric interpretation" or *taʾwīl*.[160]

With respect to what Halm has claimed is "missing" from Ismailism a few comments can be made: ʿAlī's role as divine hypostasis is not only explicitly found in the *K. al-Kashf* but it is also in the later Ismaili work called the *Sarāʾir al-nuṭaqāʾ*.[161] The *Sarāʾir al-nuṭaqāʾ*'s discussion of the "meaning-ness" of ʿAlī is even implicitly referred to by an early Druze text which records confusion about this element of Ismaili *daʿwa* literature.[162] Finally, Halm's observation concerning the lack of Ismaili "reincarnation" doctrines fails to acknowledge its presence at play in the Ismaili belief in a perennially existing hierarchy, even if the language of "transmigration of souls" (*tanāsukh*) or "indwelling/incarnation" (*ḥulūl*) is avoided. Ismailism in fact shows a hermeneutic refinement of the symbolic aspect inherent to immanentist theology, and a conscious decision to distinguish itself from the erroneous ontological commitments of "exaggeration" (*ghuluww*), even as it creates a worldview fully based on its mythopoetical imaginary.

A considerable part of Halm's reluctance to fully acknowledge these pentadist elements of Ismailism comes from the rigorous and meticulous manner in which he reconstructed the full cosmological and eschatological universes of Nuṣayrism, Ismailism, and their pentadist forebears. Maintaining the integrity of these theological, cosmic, and salvific systems clashes with a hypothesis of dependency, since they each can be quite distinct. However, this stance falls

159 This last point draws on the teachings of "delegationism" (*tafwīḍ*), whose significance for Ismailism must be explained elsewhere.

160 This is only compounded with an inclusion of the significance of the number five, which this article leaves to be accomplished in a monograph on Ismaili doctrinal origins.

161 See Ibn Manṣūr al-Yaman, *Sarāʾir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqāʾ*, 74, 115.

162 See Daniel De Smet, *Les Épitres sacrées des Druzes* (Leuven: Peeters, 2007), 698.

short when it fails to appreciate the unlikeliness of the common elements of pentadism and Ismailism arising independently. "Pentadism" thus ought to be taken seriously as the most proximate and hence most likely antecedent for important Ismaili concepts which were formed in a broader Shiʿi milieu. That being said, the transmogrification of pentadist concepts by early Ismaili ideologues shows strong initiative in thinking out implications of the primitive sources of their thought and finding new pathways of inspiration.

Halm's thesis that the *K. al-Kashf* displays a later, and thus foreign "appropriation" of non-Ismaili ideas is too beholden to a notion of what "standard" Ismaili doctrine would become, particularly its more Neoplatonic variety from the fourth/tenth century. This type of material, written two generations after the material of the *K. al-Kashf*, should not be allowed to weigh too heavily on the latter's contents which in fact contain an archaic form of the Ismaili doctrine more thoroughbred in its Shiʿi esotericism, being completely innocent of Neoplatonism, and dependent instead both on common Shiʿi tropes from hadith as well as the intellectual discourses of archaic (pre-Nuṣayrī) pentadism and delegationism.

The 3rd/9th century creators of Ismaili doctrine were not the same as the *ghulāt* of the previous century, nor is there any evidence that they go back to a sect with continuous presence since Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb. The use of pentadism and delegationism are not "appropriations" from other sects, but form part of the variety of conceptual frameworks by which Shiʿis imagined the nature of religious authority. The esoteric Shiʿi theological tradition called "pentadism" earned that name due to its belief in the divinity of the five *ahl al-kisāʾ*, the *ahl al-bayt* of Imami tradition: Muḥammad, ʿAlī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. Conceptually prior to this emphasis on the five, however, came the first figure of divinity, whether Muḥammad (*al-Mīm*) or ʿAlī (*al-ʿAyn*). The version giving priority to ʿAlī survived in Nuṣayrism, but other early contenders were the Isḥāqiyya, followers of Isḥāq al-Aḥmar. Belief in the priority of the Muḥammadan hypostasis (as mentioned in al-Qummī's paradigmatic "Mukhammisa" entry) does not seem to have been successful and has no surviving sects, though arguably the Ismaili establishment of religious cycles on the basis of "speech" (*nuṭq*) reveals something of a Muḥammadan orientation. In contrast, it was only logical that the ʿAyniyya orientation of Nuṣayrism de-emphasized the binary of "speech" and "silence" for the sake of focusing on the duality of "name" and "meaning," within which ʿAlī evidently represents the more inward and ontologically prior element. The "Gate" who was the manifestation of Salmān (*al-Sīn*) and the worthy servant of ʿAlī in every age, was able to guide the "examined believer" to a brotherhood (or "fatherhood" in early Ismailism) of sincere believers that included men such as Abū Dharr

and al-Miqdād b. al-Aswad who formed ranks amongst themselves according to their initiatic level of knowledge and proximity to the hierarchy's apex. Texts such as *K. al-Kashf* and the *Sarā'ir wa-asrār al-nuṭaqā'* duly acknowledged Abū'l-Khaṭṭāb's presence within that inner circle of initiates.

Key texts of the *K. al-Kashf* were written under the instruction of a "Gate" who embodied the authority of Salmān al-Fārisī among other "orphans" such as Abū Dharr, and was God's sole "argument" (*ḥujja*) over humanity at a time of confusion, the sole means of accessing the *ʿAyn* "in all its realities." The ʿAyniyya element is striking, but it conceptually accords with the antinomianism of early Ismailism's prioritization of the *bāṭin* over the *ẓāhir*[163] in its emphasis of ʿAlī's "meaning-ness." Proselytes at a higher level were incorporated into an initiatic hierarchy under solemn oath and taught esoteric exegesis wherein the Qur'an could be understand as a parable for theophanic understandings of prophetology, imamology, and its auxiliary teachings.

The *daʿwa* was a secret confederation of initiated believers who, while not all knowing each other, individually prepared for the arrival of the Qā'im, and understood that its success had to be established by "the sword" (*al-sayf*). Eventually, the "Gate" explained to his initiates that he had in fact been the expected Imam from the beginning. Those loyal to him can be considered the founders of the Fatimid caliphate. The rest are typically grouped together as the so-called "Qarāmiṭa" and considered to be newly cut off from an original ʿAlid genealogy.

Yet the details of an ʿAlid genealogy were clearly a matter of secondary importance for the movement's early leadership. Ismailism's relationship to Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl was initially based on affirming his role as messianic Qā'im. The authority of the actual *daʿwa* leadership, however, was not based on ʿAlid genealogy, but embodying the role of the "Gate" acting as God's "argument" (*ḥujja*) during the Imam's absence. Once the *Ḥujja* whose named is documented as "Muḥammad b. Aḥmad" proclaimed himself to be Imam in 286/899, attention was naturally drawn to his genealogy, and his successor, the first Fatimid caliph al-Mahdī, claimed "Faṭḥī" ʿAlid lineage through ʿAbd Allāh b. Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, not Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar. Ostensibly, this Faṭḥī genealogy remained normative for the first half of the fourth/tenth century[164] until

163 "In the Fāṭimid context, the Mīm might stand for a broadly Muḥammadan Messianism, the ʿAyn for a specifically ʿAlid Jacobitism …;" Brett, "The Mīm, the ʿAyn, and the Making of Ismāʿīlism," 39. Any Jacobitism attributed to the ʿAyniyya would not be properly "ʿAlid," however, but rather an especially activist variety of prioritizing the *bāṭin* of the ʿAyn's *maʿnā* over the *ẓāhir* of the Mīm's *ism*.

164 In al-Qā'im's reign the didactic poem *al-Urjūza al-Mukhtāra* by al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān failed to mention the imams before al-Mahdī, nor was it a convention of early Fatimid *khuṭba*s

al-Muʿizz's "reform," when the dynastic lineage was canonized to belong to Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl.[165] The nature of the relationship to the ʿAlid genealogy could change, but what remained constant for higher initiates was the appeal of the Ismaili synthesis of pentadist Imami esotericism. Of course, the early Ismailis of this period never called themselves "Ismailis," though we continue to use this heresiographical term out of convenience.

Although the various (and infamous) leaders of the disparate groups whom we label as rebellious Qarāmiṭa may have conceived of themselves as *Bāb*s or God's *Ḥujja*,[166] the ideological tendency (severed from its original central command) was to focus less on concrete relationships to the Imam and focus instead on the messianic import of the Qāʾim (with all its antinomian implications), and diversify their intellectual horizons into Neoplatonism. As Paul Walker has discussed, the first known Ismaili Neoplatonists such as al-Nasafī and Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī belonged to the "Qarāmiṭa" side of the schism, and it was only their later intellectual successor Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (a. 971 CE) who was brought under Fatimid sway. The *K. al-Kashf* shows that the confident usage of esoteric Shiʿi terminology in the absence of Neoplatonic terminology was still possible as late as the reign of al-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh (r. 934–946). Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's Ismaili informants told him that semi-public pedagogical reading and discussion of *falsafa* was first patronized by the third Fatimid caliph al-Manṣūr (r. 946–953 CE),[167] a period which may very well have been a turning point for the transformation of the official Fatimid *daʿwa* along more "scientific" lines than had hitherto been the case. A hybrid text reflecting the two strains of thought (pentadist and Neoplatonic) is still extant in the *Asrār wa-sarāʾir al-nuṭaqāʾ*, either composed or redacted in 380/990, which, while demonstrating a Neoplatonic framework for esoteric interpretation, clearly retains more archaic *daʿwa* material of ʿAyniyya orientation as well, a fact which seems to have later puzzled new recruits into Druzism (an Ismaili offshoot) who evidently still knew this material from their time as Ismailis.[168]

An emphasis on the systematic "rationalism" of later and predominantly Neoplatonizing Ismailism has tended to present an impediment to

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to mention the previous members of the lineage; see Paul E. Walker, *Orations of the Fatimid Caliphs* (New York: I.B. Tauris, 2009), 68–69.

165 See the introduction to this chapter.

166 As in the case of Abū Ṭāhir al-Jannābī (d. 332/944); see Wilferd Madelung, "The Fatimids and the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn," in *Mediaeval Isma'ili History and Thought*, ed. Farhad Daftary (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 49.

167 Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Tathbīt dalāʾil al-nubuwwa*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm ʿUthmān (Beirut: Dār al-ʿArabiyya, 1966), 2:603.

168 See above.

historicizing the Shiʿi esotericist core which informs Ismaili religious speculation in its pre-scientific mode, i.e., prior to its self-awareness as an intellectual movement with respect to the ultimate sources of human knowledge, as embodied for example in the writings of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī.[169] It is not to be doubted, however, that the pre-theoretical and esoteric-Shiʿi mythopoetics of theophany are the matrix for the universalist profundities of Ismaili "religious philosophy."

It is precisely within the specific claims about sacral archetypes and access to the true nature of divine unity articulated by esoteric Shiʿi hierarchies that the *daʿwa* occupied a unified imaginal realm for the ideologization of authority in Islamicate society on metaphysical and social-symbolic levels. The prolonged existence of the *daʿwa* in North Africa, however, demanded the subordination of the original esotericist ideology into a more "realist" implementation of the Imami religio-political ideal, within which the "apparent" (*ẓāhir*) nomocratic element of religion was explained as balancing a "concealed" (*bāṭin*) aspect.

The trappings of Shiʿi law (*fiqh*) and political theology were applied to the Fatimid ruling lineage as within the dictates of broader Islamicate discourses on political authority or *imāma*. The theological-ontological tensions between the symbols of the *Nāṭiq* and the *Ṣāmit*, though explored in al-Sijistānī's philosophical writings,[170] were reconciled even as the term *Ṣāmit* would be replaced by *Asās*, the "foundation" who paradoxically gave internal (*bāṭin*) sense or meaning to all other divine manifestations through the process of *taʾwīl*.[171] Within the Ismaili divine hierarchy, Neoplatonic emanations and an angelic hierarchy replaced the five *ahl al-bayt* hypostases of pentadism with a more scientific veneer. This constituted a reintegration of the *daʿwa* within 4th/10th century intellectual tendencies of the Islamicate Near East and reflected the trajectory of Ismaili exegesis away from the common repertoire of Khaṭṭabite hadith collections towards a "freer" sort of exegesis than the sort practiced by the Ismailis' esotericist peers, who stayed faithful to the older "Gate"-based traditions of al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī. Another, more "esoteric" way to describe this genealogical positioning of Ismailism and its off-shoots vis-à-vis Nuṣayrism with respect to its *Bāb* -tradition would be found in Louis Massignon's observation that:

169 Walker, *Early Philosophical Shiism*.

170 See the above citation from *The Wellsprings of Wisdom*.

171 It is entirely possible that the *asās* came from the alchemical term *al-uss*, considering its "scientific" connotations about primary substances in a mixed "prophetic" world; see Lory, "Aspects de l'ésotérisme chiite dans le Corpus Ǧābirien: Les trois *Livres de l'Elément de fondation*," 289.

> As a theological school … Nuṣayrism represents the "conservative" and "archaisizing" wing (*ḥashwiyya*) of the *Salmaniyen* Shīʿite movement, of which the "progressive" and "intellectualizing" wing is formed of the Ismāʿīlīs and the Druze.[172]

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172 Louis Massignon, "Les Nusayris," in *Opera Minora*, ed. Y. Moubarac (Beirut: Dar al- Maaref, 1963), 1: 619. The term "Salmaniyen" could be replaced by "pentadist."

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CHAPTER 2

The Imam Who Might Have Been: Jaʿfar "the Liar" between Political Realism and Esoterist Idealism

Edmund Hayes

If, towards the end of the 3rd/9th century, you had asked an Imami Shiʿi who the incumbent Imam was, there is a good chance he or she would not have mentioned the Hidden 12th Imam recognized by modern Twelver Shiʿism, but instead Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī the son of the 10th Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī and the brother of the recently deceased 11th Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī (d. 260/874). The belief in the Imamate of Jaʿfar persisted for several decades,[1] although he came to be known to Twelver posterity as Jaʿfar "the Liar" (*al-kadhdhāb*), a moniker which distinguishes him from his venerable ancestor Jaʿfar 'the truth-teller' (al-Ṣādiq), and recalls famous false prophets and heretics of the Islamic tradition such as Musaylima the Liar.[2] Who were the followers of Jaʿfar "the Liar" and why did they ultimately fail to assert Jaʿfar's Imamate? After all, one might have thought that the claim of their living, visible candidate would have had much to recommend it against the claims of a hidden child purportedly born to al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī. Despite Jaʿfar's importance at the moment of the genesis of the Twelver denomination, little has been written about him as a political force.[3] This chapter will provide a detailed account of the phases of Jaʿfar's career, which revolves around several key moments:

1 Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 84. The Jaʿfarite faction splintered after the death of Jaʿfar's son ʿAlī and his sister Fāṭima who had taken over his legacy. Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, *Kitāb al-zīna* part 3, edited by ʿAbd Allāh Sallūm al-Samarrāʾī, appended to his *al-Ghuluww wa-al-firaq al-ghāliya fī al-ḥaḍāra al-islāmiyya* (Baghdad: Dār al-ḥurriyya li-al-ṭibāʿa, 1972), 292; Abū al-Fatḥ Muḥammad b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al- Shahrastānī, *al-Milal wa-al-niḥal*, edited by Aḥmad Fahmī Muḥammad (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 1413/ 1992), 1:172–3.

2 Watt, "Musaylima," *EI*[2].

3 Modarressi has written a condensed account of Jaʿfar's career, but he tends towards an anecdotal approach which obscures the difficulties in the source material. Modarressi, *Crisis*, 70–77. Modarressi's main interest in this work is theological, rather than political. Arjomand, in his oft-cited articles on the Occultation period, gives little attention to the role of Jaʿfar 'the Liar'. Instead, he emphasizes the decision-making capacity of the canonical agents of the hidden Imam, the ʿAmrīs, who "refused to come to terms with Jaʿfar." "Imam Absconditus and the Beginnings of a Theology of Occultation. Imami Shiʿism around 900 CE/280–290 A.H.,"

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249/863:[4] The death of Jaʿfar's elder brother, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad who had been designated as successor to the Imamate, and the consequent emergence of Jaʿfar's own claim to the Imamate.

248/ 862–3[5] and **250/ 864:** Two excommunication decrees for heresy and embezzling, levelled by Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī against his agent Fāris b. Ḥātim, who was Jaʿfar's supporter, and who was later assassinated.

254/868: The death of Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī and the beginning of the short and troubled Imamate of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, which was opposed by Jaʿfar "the Liar".

260/874: The death of Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, traditionally seen as the beginning of the Occultation, but considered by followers of Jaʿfar "the Liar" as the beginning of his Imamate.

I will consider the career of Jaʿfar "the Liar" as a way of understanding the politico-doctrinal faultlines in the community. While doctrinal and political affiliations do not map onto each other cleanly, the doctrinal does impose conditions and limitations on how political alliances are made and authority is constructed. In particular, the faultlines between Jaʿfar's esoterist and non-esoterist followers set boundaries for the idioms with which he could legitimate his authority. A key part of his downfall was his failure to establish an idiom of legitimacy which could appeal to all his constituencies. Along with financial problems and instrumentalized accusations of immorality, this failure meant that his assertion of Imamic authority did not sustain itself long beyond his death.

JAOS 117, no.1, (1997): 1. In applying this approach, Arjomand tends to reinforce the canonical Twelver narrative as inevitable. Neither Arjomand nor Modarressi provide the reader with clear presentations of the variant details of the reports regarding Jaʿfar. Jassim Hussain has provided a description of the splits amongst the supporters of Jaʿfar, though he tends towards a heresiographical presentation rather than investigating the political motives of the actors. Jassim Hussain, *The Occultation of the Twelfth Imam: a Historical Background* (London: Muhammadi Trust; San Antonio: Zahra Trust, 1982), 59–62. Hassan Ansari has recently produced a work on the intellectual and bibliographical framework of the Occultation, which allows us to see with greater precision the key participants and the chronology of the intellectual conflict between Jaʿfar and his opponents among the partisans of Ḥasan and the Occultation faction. Hassan Ansari, *L'imamat et l'Occultation selon l'imamisme: Etude bibliographique et histoire des textes* (Leiden: Brill 2017), 218, 224–229.

4 This date is contested. Modarressi follows sources which place the date later, at 252/865. See the discussion below.

5 No day or month is mentioned. Abū ʿAmr Muḥammad b. ʿUmar al-Kashshī, *al-Taʿlīqa ʿalā ikhtiyār maʿrifat al-rijāl*, edited by al-Sayyid Mahdī al-Rajāʾī (Qumm: Muʾassisat Āl al-Bayt, 1404 [1983–4]), 2:809–10.

In defining the faultlines that divided the community in this period, I will rely upon the oft-reproduced but not unproblematic distinction between esoterist and rationalist. This distinction is made using varying language, but often with the same assumptions. Much of the recent scholarship on this era suggests that the primary faultline in the Imami community was between the *ghulāt* orientation (sometimes translated as esoteric, gnostic or extremist) and the rationalist orientation. This view is most explicitly expressed by Modarressi, who depicts the preservation by the Imami community of copious statements on the supernatural abilities of the Imams as due to a process of infiltration by "extremist" elements.[6] This reasoning is circular, however, for this concept of infiltration is only possible if we define all early occurrences of such esoteric materials as intrinsically non-Imami in the first place. Arjomand is heavily indebted to Modarressi's textual analysis, but he also adds a further unsubstantiated dichotomy by repeatedly conflating the doctrinal heterodoxy of the *ghulāt* esoterists with the political antagonism of revolutionaries, thereby constructing a manicheean longue-durée conflict between rationalist-quietists and chiliastic *ghulāt* revolutionaries.[7] In contrast to dichotomizing paradigms, the Imami community appears to have had esoterist, incarnationist (or

6 See for example his statement that "although the *Mufawwiḍa* came to be regarded in theory as a heretical splinter group and their ideas were rejected unanimously by the Imami community, many of their teachings (although not their fundamental ideas on cosmological matters) that were put in the form of hadith, especially on the scope of knowledge of the Imām, found supporters among later Imāmites." Modarressi, *Crisis*, 48–9, and more generally on this split, 19–51.

7 For an example of Arjomand's conflation of chiliasm and *ghuluww*, see his comments on Hodgson in which he cites Hodgson's discussion of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's "disciplining of chiliastic extremism". "Crisis of the Imamate and the Institution of Occultation in Twelver Shi'ism: A Sociohistorical Perspective," *IJMES* 28, no.4, (1996): 493. However Hodgson's discussion on the page cited ("How did the Early Shia become Sectarian?" *JAOS* 75, No. 1 (1955): 12) does not refer to doctrinal 'extremists' at all, but rather to a Zaydi who repudiates Bāqir due to his *taqiyya* and his refusal to revolt. It seems that Arjomand, in reading Hodgson's remarks about such hermeneutically 'moderate' revolutionaries has conflated revolutionary tendencies in his mind with *ghulāt* estoterists. Hodgson does discuss the latter elsewhere in the article. This is a minor example, but this kind of conflation is visible throughout Arjomand's scholarship on this period. For a related conflation, see Arjomand's implication that chiliasm in Islam was a distinctively Persian phenomenon, "Crisis", 500, a rather faddish idea that has more to do with the scholarly aftermath of the Islamic revolution of Iran than the evidence of our sources. Instead, as Shoemaker and others have shown, the late antique near east was flooded with millennial expectation that cannot be connected more with Persia than with other areas, albeit there may have been distinctive Persian idioms for such ideas. Stephen Shoemaker, *The Death of a Prophet. The End of Muhammad's Life and the Beginning of Islam* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2012). See also the introduction to this volume for remarks on the legacy of politicized readings of Shi'i history.

theophanic) and delegationist elements as far back as our sources can bring us, and it would be difficult to identify elements as either mainstream or marginal without detailed research. Indeed, when detailed research on early Shiʿi doctrine has been done, such black-and white dichotomies tend to dissolve. Thus, Asatryan has clearly established that Modarressi's division between doctrinal "extremists" (*ghulāt*) and more "moderate" but still "heretical" *mufawwiḍa* delegationists cannot be sustained in the face of the evidence of the sources.[8] Ansari, meanwhile, emphasizes the priority of doctrinal diversity in Shiʿism, drawing the conclusion that scholars should immediately suspend coarse distinctions until more precise research has been done:

> … One cannot reduce Shiʿism to one or even several systems of spiritual and theologico-juridical belief. The roots of Shiʿism are to be envisaged through multiple social political and cultural factors which characterized the Islamic empire during the ʿAbbasid era, as also the Umayyad era….
>
> Even during the third century, the lines of demarcation and the boundaries between different Shiʿi tendencies are so blurry and permeable that the very clear distinctions established retrospectively by the later sources appear totally artificial. The total separation, which is usually made, into Zaydis, Imamis, Ismailis or "extremists" (*ghulāt*) seems often to direct research down false paths. It seems more methodologically prudent to "neglect", at least provisionally, not merely the boundaries between different Shiʿi movements, but also between Shiʿa and non-Shiʿa, in order to better study each stream of thought in its historical and geographical context, in close relation to the others.[9]

8 Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam: The Ghulat Muslims and their Beliefs* (London, New York: I.B. Tauris, 2017), 99–100.

9 "On ne peut pas réduire le shiʿisme à un ou même plusieurs système(s) de croyances spirituelles et théologico-juridiques. Les racines du shiʿisme sont à envisager à travers de multiples facteurs sociaux, politiques et culturels qui marquèrent l'empire islamique à l'époque Abbasside voire à l'époque omeyyade…. Même pendant ce troisième siècle, les lignes de démarcation et les frontières entre diverses tendances shiʿites sont tellement floues et perméables que la distinction très nette établie à posteriori entre elles par les sources plus tardives semble totalement artificielle. La séparation radicale, comme elle se fait d'habitude, entre Zaydites, Imamites, Ismaéliens ou shiʿites « extrémistes » (*ghulāt*) semble plutôt orienter la recherche vers de fausses pistes. Il paraît méthodologiquement plus prudent de « négliger », tout au moins provisoirement, les frontières non seulement entre différents courants shiʿites, mais aussi entre shiʿites et non-shiʿites afin de pouvoir mieux étudier chaque courant de pensée, dans son contexte historique et géographique, en relation étroite avec les autres." Ansari, *Imamat*, ix–x.

Thus, though there is no denying that there were, indeed, significant faultlines regarding the interpretation of texts and events between different Shiʿi movements, we need to understand the contextual nature of discourse. Although the actors who speak in early Shiʿi sources often assert the universality and timelessness of the boundaries they negotiated, the political valence of doctrinal discourses is usually localized and aimed at specific antagonists and constituencies. In particular, accusations of particular kinds of heresy should not be understood as objective descriptions of doctrinal positions, but as instrumentalized responses to doctrine in order to achieve political aims. Thus, in this contribution, I will attempt to put into practice Ansari's recommendation for close contextual study, but with the addition of a political perspective. In particular, I aim to puncture one key assumption prevalent in many of the black-and-white dichotomies between "reason" and "esotericism" that are reproduced by scholars: that doctrinal orientation predictably determines political affiliation. Instead, if we analyze the kind of support given to Jaʿfar "the Liar" and his opponents in the Occultation faction, we see "rationalist" and "esoterist" orientations on both sides.

As discussed in the introduction to this volume, the idea of a clear distinction between rationalist and esoterist orientations, while having some analytic utility, should never be left unqualified. In what follows, then, I will provide an analysis of the failure of Jaʿfar's appeal by reading the ideas of "reason" and "esotericism" through a number of related categories: political constituency, finance and patronage networks, doctrinal orientation within a specific interpretive milieu, and doctrines of succession. The distinction between doctrinal orientation and doctrines of succession is important. The doctrines of succession accepted by an Imam's followers are not identical to their understanding of the cosmological significance of these doctrines. By doctrine, I refer broadly to legal and theological precepts, especially those which become shibboleths for the distinction between factions. However, doctrine cannot simply be restricted to the content of specific precepts, but rather should be seen to exist in relation to the interpretive milieu in which a person is embedded, which allows her to derive meaning in distinctive ways from a set of authoritative sources that may be shared by very different interpretive communities. In this way, even common doctrines (such as the idea that *ṣalāt* prayer is a central part of Islam, or that the Imam is the representative of God's guidance on earth) may have very different implications in different hermeneutic millieux. While two parties may forge alliances on the basis of a common doctrine of succession, an alliance between mismatched interpretive communities may generate friction based on their incompatible methodologies for deriving meaning. On the other hand, alliances may provide the basis for a politically-motivated

harmonization or obfuscation of doctrinal differences. And doctrinal similarities do not presuppose the absence of tension. It is often groups who are most similar doctrinally whose relations are most acrimonious.[10] In thinking about the real activities of these groups, then, we should make the simple step to become equally attentive both to doctrine and to networks of political affiliation. The case of Jaʿfar allows us to understand in detail some of these inner workings of Imami politico-doctrinal contestation. A major contention of this chapter will be the idea that support for a particular Imam was not, as might be expected, primarily a matter of theological orientation (whether "rationalist" or "esoteric"), but instead a question of politics, doctrines of succession, and expedient alliances. I will, however, argue that we can make a distinction between doctrinal frameworks which tended towards a politically "realist" interpretation of events, and those which fostered a politically "idealist" interpretation. This distinction does not determine the outcome of political action, but it does influence the way in which decisions about political affiliation are made and resolved.

1 Sources

The main sources for the life of Jaʿfar "the Liar" are Imami Shiʿi, including heresiographies (particularly Nawbakhtī and Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī[11]), and doctrinal hadith narratives provided by scholars in the 4th/10th to the 5th/11th centuries like Kulaynī, Ibn Bābawayh, and Ṭūsī.[12] Kashshī's book of biographical reports, in particular, provides key details about some of Jaʿfar's supporters. The Nuṣayrī twelver[13] scholar Khaṣībī also provides a relatively large volume

10 For example, the followers of Isḥāq al-Aḥmar and Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr.

11 Al-Ḥasan b. Mūsā al-Nawbakhtī, *Firaq al-shīʿa*, written in 286/899, edited by Hellmut Ritter (Istanbul: Maṭbaʿat al-dawla li-jamʿiyyat al-mustashriqīn al-almāniyya, 1931); Saʿd b.ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Kitāb al-maqālāt wa al-firaq*, written sometime between 286/899 and 292/905, edited by Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr (Tehran: Muʾassasa-i Maṭbūʿātī-i ʿAṭāʾī, [1963]).

12 Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Yaʿqūb al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī* (Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, 1388–1391 H [1968–1971]); Muḥammad b. ʿAlī Ibn Bābawayh al-Qummī (known as al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq)'s *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-niʿma*, written between 368/978–9 and his death in 381/991–2, edited by ʿAlī Akbar al-Ghaffārī. Tehran: Dār al-Kutub al-Islāmiyya, (1395/1384 [1975]); Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ṭūsī, Shaykh al-Ṭāʾifa, *al-Ghayba* (Najaf: Maktabat al-Ādāb al-Sharqiyya, 1423 [2002]), 249–257.

13 I use the term "twelver" here to indicate someone who acknowledges of the canonical sequence of twelve Imams, without necessarily belonging to a particular denomination, as distinct from "Twelver" with a capital "T" which indicates the crystallized

of information. Sunnī heresiographies display little knowledge of the dispute regarding Jaʿfar, though there is a valuable mention of Jaʿfar's followers in the *Mughnī* of the Muʿtazilī al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār (d. 415/1025),[14] albeit based on a damaged manuscript. Perhaps the most important non-Imami source is the *Kitāb al-zīna* of the Ismaili Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. 322/933–4), whose wording is followed almost verbatim, with a few additional details, by Shahrastānī (d. 548/1153) in al-*Milal wa al-niḥal*. All these sources have more or less explicit polemical motives in transmitting information about Jaʿfar "the Liar". Modarressi has provided further insights into Jaʿfar's life and descendents by consulting works of ʿAlid genealogy and others, which have allowed him to suggest a date for Jaʿfar's death at 281/894–5.[15]

2 Political Realism and Esoteric Idealism in the Construction of Authority

The theory of the Imamate can usefully be divided into two major areas: the identity and the nature of the Imam. These two areas are developed differently according to the orientation of the interpretive community addressing them. Descriptions of the nature of the Imam result in the activation of different legal, theological and cosmological issues regarding the way in which the Imam embodies divine guidance, and the extent to which divine power touches his person. In what follows I will be primarily concerned by the question of the *identity* of the Imam, though this will always have some connection to the *nature* of the Imam, for the personal characteristics of a candidate are always an important aspect of his claim to the Imamate. The discourse on the Imam's identity revolves, in the Imami community, around the mechanisms of succession. The conception of Imamic identity and succession is necessarily a branch of knowledge which was wrapped up with Imamic family politics, the struggles between their followers, and the various constituencies of the community. The messy realities of these conflicts are visible to us mainly through attempts of the scholars to rationalize succession practice into a systematic

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denomination. In spite of their acceptance of the twelve Imams, the Nuṣayrīs, and the *ghulāt* in general tended to have a guarded attitude to the Imamis. As Asatryan notes, "The fact that almost none of the actual Ghulat books are mentioned in Twelver writings suggests that the Ghulat did not reveal their writings to outsiders," *Controversies*, 120.

14 Abū l-Ḥasan ʿAbd al-Jabbār ibn Aḥmad ibn ʿAbd al-Jabbār, al-Qāḍī, *Al-Mughnī fī abwab al-tawḥīd wa al-ʿadl*, volume 20, edited by ʿAbd al-Ḥalīm Maḥmūd, Sulaymān Dunyā (Cairo: al-Dār al-Miṣriyya li-al-Taʾlīf wa al-Tarjama [ca. 1965]).

15 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 83, n. 161.

theory or doctrine of succession. If, for the purpose of this study, we define orthodox Imamism as being represented by the early-Occultation heresiographers Nawbakhtī and Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī (whose objective was precisely to define orthodoxy in relation to historical errors),[16] then the orthodox Imami-Twelver doctrine of succession would consist of father to son succession (except in the case of Ḥasan and Ḥusayn) through *naṣṣ* designation.[17] However, there are many examples to show that, in practice, Imami doctrines of succession allowed for a relatively broad church including many more-or-less acceptable diversions from the party line which these heresiographers cleaved to. This broad margin of acceptability was expedient given the multiplication of doctrinal solutions which occurred at moments of crisis. Whenever a succession crisis was resolved politically, the scholars had to patch together *ad hoc* political theologies retrospectively, in order to fit them to the circumstances, through doctrinal solutions such as *badā'*,[18] the Faṭḥī acceptance of brother to brother succession,[19] the doctrine of the miraculous knowledge of the Imam[20] and other such elaborations and refinements. These *ad hoc* solutions were gradually weeded out and systematized over the generations, but during the period in which the Imamate was a living institution, there were always new sources of controversy to be solved and incorporated. Mainstream political theologies came to be adapted to support the position of widely-accepted

16 Orthodoxy is an appropriate term to use, though in doing so we should recognize that the work of the heresiographers was an attempt to construct orthodoxy, which does not tell us how successful they were in doing so. By using these two heresiographers as representatives of orthodoxy for the purposes of this article, I let it be understood that I mean orthodoxy from their perspective, rather than something timeless and universal. Orthodoxy, indeed, should always be understood as historically contingent and constructed by a particular person or group. More work is needed to determine exactly how orthodoxy in Imami Shiʿism at this time might have been constructed. For some of the problems, see Haider's comments on Ibn Barniyya in "Prayer, Mosque and Pilgrimage," 170–1, and Tamima Bayhom-Daou, "The Imam's Knowledge." Najam Haider's call for the importance of orthopraxy and geography in defining group identity is well-taken. Haider, *The Origins of the Shīʿa: Identity, Ritual, and Sacred Space in Eighth-Century Kūfa* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2011), and "Prayer, Mosque and Pilgrimage."

17 It is not easy to see when this crystallized as orthodoxy, and we should certainly not assume that it was widespread beyond the juristic-theological scholars who put it forward. See Rodrigo Adem, "Classical *Naṣṣ* Doctrines in Imāmī Shīʿism: On the Usage of an Expository Term." *Shii Studies Review*, 1 (2017): 42–71, for what is hitherto the most careful dissection of the early development of the Imami usage of this term.

18 Ignacz Goldziher and A.S. Tritton "*Badā'*", *EI*[2].

19 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 54–60.

20 Modarressi argues that this doctrine derives in particular from the moment at which Imams acceded to the Imamate as minors. *Crisis*, 32–3. See also Arjomand, "Crisis," 497.

Imams, while more marginal groups in the community adhered to marginal doctrines which suited alternative political visions and cosmologies.

In relation to the interplay between rationalism and esotericism, we may point out two contradictory orientations which shaped Imami responses to political developments: at one pole was the tendency to accept manifest political realities with as few amendments as possible. An example of this politico-theological realism was the insistence of the Faṭḥī faction on the Imamate of ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ, even though he was Imam for only seventy days before he died and ceded the Imamate to a rival brother, Mūsā al-Kāẓim. Orthodox Imamism ultimately preferred to make certain adaptations, excluding ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ from the canonical line of Imams, thereby simplifying the doctrine of succession by ignoring certain relatively minor political facts; for most Imamis had probably accepted the Imamate of ʿAbd Allāh at the time,[21] and there were many Imami Faṭḥīs who were too prominent to be excluded from the Imami community.[22] On the other end of the hermeneutic spectrum, there were those "idealists" who were prepared to jettison manifest political facts and resort to esoteric (*bāṭin*) explanations of these facts. Among the idealists we may count all those who denied the apparent death of a particular Imam, and insisted on his occultation and return,[23] as well as those who upheld the authority of a *bāb*, in spite of the Imam's condemnation. In the present case, we may count as "political idealists" those who denied the conflict between rival brothers Jaʿfar and Ḥasan by claiming that their feud was an instance of precautionary concealment of belief (*taqiyya*). As we will see, these opposing hermeneutic orientations (realist and idealist) fell into an expedient alliance as supporters of Jaʿfar "the Liar", but they experienced political tension and conceptual friction in attempting to legitimate his succession.

21 See Modarressi, based on Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī and Nawbakhtī, *Crisis*, 59.

22 See, for example, ʿAbd Allāh b. Bukayr, the nephew of the famous Zurāra b. Aʿyan: Shona Wardrop, "The Lives of the Imams, Muḥammad al-Jawād and ʿAlī al-Hādī and the Development of the Shiʿite organisation." PhD Diss., (University of Edinburgh, 1988), 23, n57; 253–3; Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shīʿite Literature Volume 1* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 140–1; Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra*, tr. John O'Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1:375, 380.

23 See for example the Nāwūsiyya (Modarressi, *Crisis*, 56) and the *Wāqifa* (Mehmet Ali Buyukkara, "The Schism in the Party of Mūsā al-Kāẓim and the Emergence of the *Wāqifa*." *Arabica*, 47, Fasc. 1 (2000): 78–99).

3 The Incubation of Jaʿfar's Claim during the Imamate of ʿAlī al-Hādī, the 10th Imam

The evolution of Jaʿfar's claim to the Imamate occurred in three stages: the first was during the lifetime of his father, the 10th Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī, who died in 254/868;[24] the second stage was during the tenure of the 11th Imam al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, 254–260/868–874; and the third phase was the decades after al-Ḥasan's death. The phase we know most about is the third, during which Jaʿfar was the only serious, visible candidate for Imamate. Information about the earlier phases has usually been filtered through the interpretations of this latter phase.

Jaʿfar's claim was precipitated by a crisis of succession which occurred when the expected candidate to succeed ʿAlī al-Hādī as Imam died before his father. ʿAlī al-Hādī had three sons who were involved in this crisis:

1. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad (the eldest, and initially heir apparent)
2. Al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī (who ultimately became the canonical Imam)
3. Jaʿfar "the Liar"

The eldest son of ʿAlī al-Hādī, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad, had been designated by his father to become the next Imam.[25] Some of the pro-Ḥasan sources assert that Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad was only *apparently* designated, but given the controversies that followed, it seems clear that this designation must have been made, and was widely expected and disseminated.[26] Controversy arose because instead of smoothly acceding to the Imamate Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad died before his father, as sons sometimes do.[27] The death of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad

24 "He was born (AS) half way through Dhū al-Ḥijja in the year 212. And it is also transmitted that he was born (AS) in Rajab 214 and died with four days left of Jumādā al-Ākhira in the year 254. And it was also transmitted he died (AS) in Rajab in the year 254, at the age of forty-one years and six months, or forty years according to the other birth date which was transmitted." Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 1:497–8.

25 Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 101.

26 Nawbakhtī states that the supporters of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad declared for him *after* ʿAlī al-Hādī's death, but this seems unlikely, as Muḥammad had already died, and why would a group create the problems of *badā'* and succession from Muḥammad for the sake of a dead Imam? Instead it is likely that Nawbakhtī or his source preferred to see the Imamate of Muḥammad as reactive and posthumous, rather than established during the lifetime of ʿAlī al-Hādī. Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 78. Khaṣībī goes to great trouble to provide explanations why the designation refers to al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, rather than to Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad. Nonetheless, had there not been an understanding that such a designation had occurred, there would have been no need for Khaṣībī to waste ink adducing these proofs. Khaṣībī *Hidāya*, 291–2.

27 This had happened once before, when Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's son Ismāʿīl had predeceased his father, after having been designated, giving rise to the Faṭḥiyya and Ismāʿiliyya doctrines regarding succession.

then opened the door for the two younger brothers, Ḥasan and Jaʿfar. While this premature death may have caused consternation, it was only upon the death of ʿAlī al-Hādī in 254/868 that open dissent emerged between the parties. Ḥasan was to win the support of a majority of Imamis, including the support of powerful agents and retainers of ʿAlī al-Hādī.[28] The Imami sources tell us almost nothing about Jaʿfar during ʿAlī al-Hādī's lifetime, other than a few comments disparaging Jaʿfar and asserting the canonicity of al-Ḥasan's succession to the Imamate.[29] Given Jaʿfar's challenge towards Ḥasan's Imamate after ʿAlī al-Hādī's death, we can assume that Jaʿfar's cause was already incubating during ʿAlī al-Hādī's lifetime. Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad died only a few years before his father, providing a short period for the incubation of the pro-Jaʿfar opposition.

4 The Strange Case of Fāris b. Ḥātim, Renegade Agent

The earliest phase of Jaʿfar's claim to the Imamate is murky, and intimately tied up with the case of a renegade financial agent, Fāris b. Ḥātim b. Māhūya al-Qazwīnī. Who was this Fāris? The *nisba* Qazwīnī suggests that he was a native son of the *Jibāl* region of western Iran, but Najāshī notes that he was a resident of Samarra,[30] in which town he was finally assassinated on the order of ʿAlī al-Hādī.[31] His residence in Samarra harmonizes with the fact that we know he was a financial agent (*wakīl*) collecting dues in the name of the Imam resident in that city. One of Kashshī's reports mentions that his story was famous

28 It is always dangerous to talk about demographic ratios in early Shiʿi history, but our sources do indicate with uncharacteristic explicitness that this was the case. As Nawbakhtī describes it: "And the rest of the partisans of ʿAlī b. Muḥammad [ʿAlī al-Hādī] declared for the Imamate of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī and established the Imamate for him by means of the testament [*waṣiyya*] of his father … except for a few, who leant towards his brother, Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī, and they said, "His father appointed him as successor (*awṣā ilayhi*) after the death of Muḥammad and he made his Imamate obligatory, and made his Imamate (*amr*, literally his 'affair') manifest. And they denied the Imamate of his brother Muḥammad, saying, "[ʿAlī al-Hādī] only did that [designated Muḥammad] in order to hide him [*ittiqā'an ʿalayhi*] and protect him, but the Imam in reality was Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī." Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 79. Most such reports, however, bear the stamp of having been rationalized in the post-ʿAskarī era. A key indication of powerful supporters among al-Ḥasan's followers is the support of the agent who came to be canonized as the first 'Envoy' (*safīr*) of the hidden Imam, ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd al-ʿAmrī. Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:844–8. Another is Ayyūb b. Nūḥ. Kashshī, 2:841. Wardrop, "Lives," 276.

29 See, for example, Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 79; Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 101.

30 Najāshī, *Rijāl*, 310.

31 Aḥmad b. al-Ḥusayn Ibn al-Ghaḍā'irī, *Rijāl*, edited by Muḥammad Riḍā al-Ḥusaynī al-Jalālī (Qumm: Dār al-ḥadīth, 1422 H), 387.

among the Shiʿa in the *Jibāl* region,[32] and so we must assume that it was this region to which he was appointed as *wakīl*, as befitted a local able to mediate effectively between his countrymen and the Imam in Samarra. It is likely that he received messages, monies and delegations in Samarra, and also travelled between Samarra and the *Jibāl* region to collect money or to direct its collection and maintain ties with his people.[33] He also seems to have had a wider network of associates in Iraq, especially Kufa, as we will see later with reference to a report in Khaṣībī's *Hidāya*.[34] Fāris had initially been a supporter of Imam Hādī's elder son, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad. When Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad died before his father, some of his supporters transferred their support to Jaʿfar rather than the majority candidate, Ḥasan.

4.1 *The Problem of Chronology*

A key problem for understanding the origins of Jaʿfar's movement is the fact that we cannot be sure whether Fāris leant his support directly to Jaʿfar, or if Fāris's supporters transferred their allegiance to Jaʿfar only after Fāris's assassination. Modarressi argues for the latter interpretation, but the fragmentary and allusive reports leave much room for doubt, and I will argue that Fāris probably did give his allegiance directly to Jaʿfar before he was assassinated. There is one set of reports which suggest that Fāris supported Jaʿfar directly, and another set of reports which suggest conversely that Fāris was assassinated before Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad died, and therefore never personally transferred his allegiance to Jaʿfar. A further set of key sources provide no clear clues: Nawbakhtī,[35] Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī[36] and al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār[37] are all silent about Fāris during ʿAlī al-Hādī's lifetime, only mentioning Jaʿfar's claims in relation to the period after the death of ʿAlī al-Hādī in 254/868.[38]

Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī* affirms that Fāris asserted the Imamate of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad but seems to suggest that Fāris's supporters might have

32 Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:808–9.

33 Compare with Aḥmad b. Isḥāq for Qumm.

34 "Our Lord [Imam Hādī] ordered them to be sought out, so they fled to Kufa and lived there until Abū Muḥammad [al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī] died." Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 291–2.

35 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 78–81.

36 Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 101.

37 Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī* 20 (2): 182.

38 Other reports also focus on the moment of ʿAlī al-Hādī's death. One report in Khaṣībī's *Hidāya* notes that Fāris's supporters followed Jaʿfar after ʿAlī al-Hādī's death: "And the Shiʿa (all of the guided ones) were unanimous in their consensus upon Abū Muḥammad [al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī] after his father, all except the companions of Fāris b. [Ḥātim b.] Māhūya, for they declared for the Imamate of Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī al-ʿAskarī." *Hidāya*, 291–2. See also similar statements in Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 79.

turned to Jaʿfar only after Fāris's assassination. This would mean that Fāris himself had no direct relationship with Jaʿfar. However, the manuscript is defective at the key point, and alternative readings are possible.[39]

There are two sources which suggest that Fāris lived long enough to pledge allegiance to Jaʿfar: a report in Kashshī's *Rijāl*; and Rāzī's comments in *Kitāb al-zīna*. Kashshī reports that a decree from ʿAlī al-Hādī stating that money should not be sent to Fāris was "the reason for [Fāris's] betrayal (*khiyāna*) followed by his act of turning away (*ṣarfatuhu*) to his brother."[40] If we understand "his brother" to refer to Ḥasan's brother Jaʿfar, it would suggest that Fāris did indeed support Jaʿfar during his lifetime. The reference to "betrayal" seems to suggest that Fāris had erred from the canonical line of Imams, which would only have been the case if he had outlived Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad and had time to reject the consensus heir, Ḥasan. Support for Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad during his lifetime would have been unremarkable, and could not have counted as "erring". Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī states in his *Kitāb al-zīna* that Jaʿfar was directly supported by Fāris, as well as Fāris's sister.[41]

Largely on the grounds of the equivocal testimony of al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār's *Mughnī*, Modarressi argues that Fāris was assassinated before Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's death, and therefore he would not have had time to transfer his allegiance from one brother to the other. However, there are conflicting sets of dates. One of ʿAlī al-Hādī's orders to curse Fāris is dated to 248/ 862–3,[42] and another to Rabīʿ al-Awwal 250/ 864,[43] at which times Fāris must presumably still have been alive. One report cited in Khaṣībī's *Hidāya* puts Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's death "four years and ten months" before his father's,[44] which would place it in Ramaḍān 249 (Oct-Nov 863), giving Fāris time to have been cursed at least once, to have heard reports of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's death, to have transferred his allegiance to Jaʿfar, to be cursed a second time and then assassinated soon afterwards. This fits quite well with Kashshī's reported statement, which suggests that Fāris first misappropriated funds, was decommissioned from his agentship by ʿAlī al-Hādī, then committed the act of "betrayal" by turning to the wrong brother.

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39 Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī* 20 (2), 182. I have not been able to consult the manuscript myself.

40 Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:808–9. See further discussion of this report below.

41 Rāzi, *Zīna*, 291.

42 No day or month mentioned. Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:809–10.

43 Tuesday the ninth of Rabīʿ al-Awwal 250, (April 20th 864), Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 218–19. See also Modarressi, *Crisis*, 72.

44 Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 291–2.

In order to square the circle, Modarressi has argued that other reports suggest more plausibly that Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's death was later, around 252/866[45] making it just two years before his father's death, and placing it well after the anathematization letters, and perhaps also after the assassination. Modarressi's strongest argument is based upon a report from Kulaynī that says that al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī was "about 20" when Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad died,[46] while if he had died in 249 as Khaṣībī's report suggested, this would place al-Ḥasan's age at the time at 17 or 18. (Ḥasan was born in 231/ 845–6[47] or 232/846–7.[48] Therefore, while the dating of 252 for Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's death fits, it is not inconceivable that the age of 17 or 18 would fit also into the range of "about 20," which would invalidate Modarressi's dating.

Modarressi also cites Khaṣībī for evidence of Fāris's death before Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad: Khaṣībī reports that, "Jaʿfar claimed that he was the *bāb*, of Abū Jaʿfar [Muḥammad] after Fāris b. Ḥātim b. Māhūya, and that was [on the authority of] our Sayyid Abū Muḥammad [al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī]," [49] thus suggesting that perhaps Fāris had by then already died, allowing Jaʿfar to claim *bāb*-hood in his stead. The problem with this assertion is that anyone who held to these beliefs cannot have been cleaving closely to manifest political facts: it is highly unlikely that Jaʿfar would have claimed to be his brother's *bāb*, and yet more unlikely that al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī would have supported this claim. Therefore, we cannot assume that those who generated this report would have required the death of Fāris b. Ḥātim to shift the identity of their *bāb* to Jaʿfar. Thus, the value of this account as an anchor for dating is doubtful, though it is an important record of a marginal doctrine of succession.[50]

My own inclination regarding the chronology of the Fāris-Jaʿfar relationship is to follow Kashshī's admittedly highly elliptical statement suggesting that Fāris had himself transferred his allegiance to Jaʿfar before his assassination. Whatever the relationship between Fāris and Jaʿfar, however, it seems clear that Jaʿfar's claim to the Imamate must have been catalyzed by the confusion

45 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 73, especially n97.

46 Kulayī, *Kāfī*, 1:327.

47 Date and month not mentioned, Ps-Masʿūdī, *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya*, 257–8.

48 In Rabīʿ al-Ākhar or Ramaḍān, according to Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 1:503; Ṣaʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 101–2.

49 Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 291–2.

50 Given that we know little about the logic which generated this group's extremely unorthodox doctrine of succession, we cannot rule out that Fāris may have been alive while Jaʿfar became *bāb*, as figures transitioned between Imamic hypostases in a kind of *siyāqa* (see discussion below). The report in which this claim is made, moreover, is characterized by intense and transparent polemic against the ludicrous ideas of Jaʿfar's supporters. We will return to this report later.

surrounding the death of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad. After a period of incubation, Jaʿfar's claim first emerged into the open upon the death of ʿAlī al-Hādī, but its association with the oppositional figure of Fāris created problems for the acceptance of Jaʿfar's Imamate by those who had hitherto been upholding the status quo represented by ʿAlī al-Hādī and al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī.

Now that we are equipped with a more precise sense of the chronology of these events we can conclude that late during the Imamate of ʿAlī al-Hādī the renegade financial agent Fāris b. Ḥātim al-Qazwīnī made a claim to authority for himself, in parallel with a recognition of the Imamate of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad. Upon the latter's death in 249 or around 251–2 Fāris transferred his allegiance to Jaʿfar "the Liar" as the next Imam. Fāris was anathematized in letters from Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī at least twice, in 248/ 862–3[51] and again in Rabīʿ al-Awwal 250/ 864,[52] and was then assassinated at the Imam's order.[53] However, the assassination of Fāris did not put a stop to the threat to the status quo: it was a family affair. Fāris's brother,[54] and particularly, his sister[55] continued to perpetuate his legacy during the short Imamate of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī and Fāris's supporters represented an important core of support for the Imamate of Jaʿfar "the Liar" both during ʿAskarī's lifetime and after his death.

4.2 *Esotericism and Finance: Understanding the Challenge of Fāris b. Ḥātim*

What was the nature of Fāris's claim? The political events surveyed above must certainly have played a part, but Fāris is accused of two distinct sins in the Twelver sources: the withholding of donations to the Imam; and doctrinal unorthodoxy (*ghuluww*). We will look at both of these aspects of Fāris's opposition as a way of understanding the beliefs of the core of Jaʿfar's supporters.

Before looking at doctrinal questions, it is worth emphasizing the financial aspect of Fāris's subversion of the Imamate. Kashshī reports several letters

51 Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:809–10.

52 Tuesday the ninth of Rabīʿ al-Awwal 250, (April 20th 864), Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 218–19. See also Modarressi, *Crisis*, 72.

53 We should probably dismiss as an error the implication reported by Ibn al-Ghaḍā'irī that the assassination took place during the Imamate of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī: "One of the companions of Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan killed [Fāris] in al-ʿAskar [the military encampment of Samarra]." Ibn al-Ghaḍā'irī, *Rijāl*, 387. In contrast, Kashshī provides various accounts of the dispute with Fāris as having occurred under Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī, including the order for Fāris's assassination. Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:806–810.

54 This we can glean from the fact that his brother is listed as a *ghālī*, presumably adhering to similar doctrines as his brother. Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, 428.

55 See below.

from Imam Hādī ordering the cursing and anathematization of Fāris in varying terms. The first of these letters appears to have been sent by the Imam in 248/ 862–3 in response to a question from two men, a father and son with the *nisba* Hamadānī. They were asking the Imam which of the two agents to send the Imam's revenues to, remarking that "people were confused between the two of them and they had started to anathematize each other."[56] An almost identical letter from the Imam is quoted as having been sent in response to the question, "Which one is appointed over [the collection of] my dues?"[57] The agent and hadith transmitter Ayyūb b. Nūḥ is represented in another epistolary exchange as the appropriate recipient of funds instead of Fāris.[58] The report, collected by Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī and reported by Kashshī, records an information-request regarding the Imam's decrees, suggesting that this information had not reached the community clearly. According to the report, Fāris had been sent various objects of value to forward to the Imam, which had never reached him. On discovering this, the Imam had written to Ayyūb b. Nūḥ to inform him of this problem and to warn the sender not to use Fāris any more, but rather to send his dues for the Imamate to Ayyūb b. Nūḥ:

> [The Imam] wrote: "The Jabalī wrote to me mentioning that he had sent some valuable items into the hands of Fāris the traitor (God has cursed him of old and again of new), and we informed him that they had not reached us at all, and we ordered him never to send anything to [Fāris] the accursed, but to pay his obligatory dues (*ḥawā'ij*) to you [i.e. Ayyūb b. Nūḥ]."

Thus, Ayyūb b. Nūḥ was also collecting dues from the community in the *Jibāl*, or at least the Imam recommended him to such a role. Ayyūb b. Nūḥ then makes the comment suggesting that this episode was the reason for Fāris's betrayal of the Imam. This implies that Fāris precipitated this crisis, less by his heterodox beliefs, than by misappropriating Imamic revenues. These details leave us in no doubt that Fāris's dissent had an important financial dimension.

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56 Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 1:809–810.

57 Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:807.

58 Modarressi portrays it as a rivalry between Fāris and one other *wakīl*, but the picture appears a little more complicated: the Imam attempted to install two separate men as alternatives for Fāris: Ayyūb b. Nūḥ and an agent known alternately as "The Sick One" and as ʿAlī b. Jaʿfar al-Yamānī. Khūʾī demonstrates that these two names are likely to belong to one and the same person. Abū al-Qāsim al-Mūsawī al-Khūʾī, *Muʿjam rijāl al-ḥadīth wa tafṣīl ṭabaqāt al-rīwāya*, fifth edition (Maktabat al-Imām al-Khūʾī, 1992) 12:318–323.

Doctrinal heterodoxy is one of the major accusations against Fāris, but it is difficult to extract any concrete information about the nature of Fāris's doctrines in contrast with more thoroughly documented Imami "heretics" like Ibn Nuṣayr and, later, al-Shalmaghānī. The lexicon used to describe Fāris presents us with a myriad of terms to describe his iniquities: *dāʿī ilā bidʿa, fattān, fāsid al-madhhab, takhlīṭ*,[59] *fājir*, *khiyāna*, *kadhdhāb*, *fāsiq, munḥarif*. These are rather generic terms which give us little insight into which species of heterodoxy he might be associated with. Imam Hādī's initial reponse to letters inquiring about Fāris's status in 248/ 862–3 were relatively restrained in their language, giving us few clues about his doctrines: "Avoid al-Qazwīnī so that you do not involve him in any of your affairs. It has reached me what he falsifies (*yumawwihu*) so do not turn to him."[60] This letter from the Imam does not specify what it is that he falsifies: it may be doctrinal, or may again relate to the question posed regarding to whom one must pay one's dues.

We can contextualize the doctrinal component of Fāris's challenge by looking at the company he keeps in heresiographical accounts, in which he is associated with other contemporary claimants to esoteric spiritual authority, whom Ṭūsī retrospectively grouped together as "Gates" (*bāb*). In his *Ghayba*, Ṭūsī provides a retrospective of those "who claimed *bāb*-hood" before and after the occurrence of the Occultation, quoting Ibn Hammām al-Iskāfī's statement that al-Sharīʿī (a follower of ʿAlī al-Hādī and al-ʿAskarī) "was the first to claim a position (*maqām*) that God had not placed him in … and lied against God and against his Proofs [the Imams], attributing to them things that do not apply to them."[61] The numerous challenges to the Imamate at this time correspond to a limitation in the Imam's freedom and the increased surveillance of the Imam's activities following his enforced removal from the Ḥijāz to the ʿAbbasid capital at Samarra in 233/1 May 848.[62] Kashshī cites one report in which Fāris is cursed alongside one of these *bāb*s, Ibn Bābā[63] and another report pairing him with Muḥammad b. Nuṣayr, the eponym of the Nuṣayrī sect, believed by the Nuṣayrīs to have been the *bāb* of the 10th and 11th Imams and who was also cursed by the 10th Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī. Apart from any unorthodox doctrines these *bāb*s may have held, their vision of spiritual authority as being vested in themselves implied a political threat to the central position of the Imam and those who administered his institutions.

59 Ibn al-Ghaḍāʾirī, *Rijāl*, 85.
60 Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 2:809–810.
61 Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 246–7.
62 Madelung, "ʿAlī al-Hādī," *EIr*.
63 Kashshī, *Rijāl* 2:805.

Following the declaration of the anathema against Fāris, Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī ordered his assassination. Why? None of the other heterodox *bāb*s operative during the Imamate of ʿAlī al-Hādī received such treatment. Fāris must have been perceived as an urgent threat to the Imam and his heir apparent. Two crucial differences between Fāris and other *bāb*s can be noted. Firstly, Fāris was associated with alternative candidates from the Imamic family: first Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad and then Jaʿfar. This would seem to point to Fāris's direct association with Jaʿfar before he was assassinated, and it suggests that Fāris posed a political threat to the Imamic succession. Secondly, Fāris was misappropriating Imamic funds. Accusations of heterodox doctrine were certainly an important part of the campaign to delegitimize Fāris's authority, and figured prominently in the logic behind the Imam's authorization of Fāris's assassination, as reported by Kashshī.[64] Accusations of doctrinal heterodoxy are used elsewhere as a way to meet challenges to religio-political authority.[65] Financial and doctrinal matters are not unconnected: the payment of canonical Islamic dues (*khums* and *zakāt*) to the Imam was an important gesture of commitment. The fact that Fāris collected and retained Imamic funds was an affirmation of his own semi-independent spiritual authority, and demonstrated a threatening degree of autonomy. His anathematization and assassination was due to his withholding of funds and probably his acceptance of a subversive vision of Imamic succession. His "lies" and "innovations" may well have related to the doctrinal explication of the passage of the Imamate from one Imam to another. An adherence to *ghulāt* doctrines alone would not have resulted directly in Fāris' cursing and anathematization, but these doctrines were associated with *bābī* claims to both institutional and spiritual authority which represented an unacceptable political threat.

5 Jaʿfar's Claims during ʿAskarī's Troubled Imamate

The sources point to the death of ʿAlī al-Hādī as the real starting point of Jaʿfar's claim to the Imamate. While Imami sources tend to emphasize the smooth and inevitable succession of one canonical Imam followed by another, non-Imami sources give us more of a sense of the difficulty of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī's accession. Imami sources report that, upon the death of ʿAlī al-Hādī, the supporters of al-Ḥasan were in the majority, and the only alternative claim came from

64 Kashshī, 2:807–8

65 A good example being the case of Abū Ṭahir al-Bilālī, an agent of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī who rejected the authority of the *Safīr*s during the Occultation.

the supporters of Fāris who transferred their support to Jaʿfar and formed a distinct minority. While such a picture is certainly part of a polemical strategy to legitimize Ḥasan by asserting a consensus[66] for him, we have no particular reason to suppose that Ḥasan was not the mainstream candidate. Nonetheless, the confusion surrounding the designation of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad caused problems for Ḥasan. *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya* by pseudo-Masʿūdī carries reports from otherwise loyal followers asking for verification of Ḥasan's Imamate. These requests started after the death of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad and continued after ʿAlī al-Hādī's death into Ḥasan's Imamate,[67] and criticism of Ḥasan continued throughout his tenure.[68] Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī's *Kitāb al-zīna* provides us with an unexpurgated version of the Jaʿfarite polemics against Ḥasan:

> [The followers of Jaʿfar] asserted the Imamate of Jaʿfar during the lifetime of Ḥasan. They said, "we have tested (*imtaḥannā*) Ḥasan and we have not found any knowledge in him." They nicknamed anyone who followed Ḥasan and asserted his Imamate "the Donkey Faction" (*al-Ḥimāriyya*), and asserted that they had followed al-Ḥasan without knowledge or intelligence (*ʿalā ghayr ʿilm wa-lā maʿrifa*).[69]

This report gives a sense of the intense bitterness that existed between followers of Jaʿfar and Ḥasan, a bitterness which prevented reconciliation of factions even after Ḥasan's death. One can sense the glee with which al-Rāzī, an Ismaili, reports this example of Imamis washing their dirty laundry in public. It is noteable that similar accusations of unsuitability for the Imamate were made against Jaʿfar "the Liar" upon the death of ʿAskarī, when a Qummī delegation arrived in Samarra looking for the Imam to give their donations to, but rejected Jaʿfar as lacking in knowledge and decorum.[70] Polemic often generates paired reports like this, and it is difficult to ascribe clear authenticity to either side of the pairing. However, it seems clear that the community as a whole was suffering from a general leadership defecit, which neither Ḥasan nor Jaʿfar could satisfactorily dispel.

In the realm of doctrines of succession, the tenure of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī was still haunted by the designation and premature death of Abū Jaʿfar

66 As Nawbakhtī says: "And the rest of the partisans of ʿAlī b. Muḥammad declared for the Imamate of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī … except for a few, and they leant towards his brother, Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī." Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 79.

67 *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya*, 260–1.

68 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 66–70.

69 Rāzī, *Zīna*, 291.

70 Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 223–224.

Muḥammad. Thus, the heresiographers tell us that some believed that Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad had not died, but had gone into occultation and was the messianic *mahdī*,[71] while supporters of Jaʿfar maintained that he had been designated directly by ʿAlī al-Hādī, and that Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's designation was merely an instance of *taqiyya* designed to protect Jaʿfar.[72] In order to limit the damage created by Jaʿfar's claim to the Imamate, reports from the mouth of al-ʿAlī al-Hādī were circulated condemning Jaʿfar,[73] and eventually it was reported that a *naṣṣ* designation for Ḥasan was circulated by the agent ʿAlī b. Jaʿfar al-Humānī, among others.[74]

6 Proliferation of Groups after the Death of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī

A new crisis was precipitated by Ḥasan's death without an obvious heir. In the words of Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī:

> Ḥasan died without a successor (*khalaf*) having been seen for him, or a child being known for him, and his visible inheritance[75] (*mā ẓahara min mīrāthihi*) was divided between his brother, Jaʿfar, and his mother … Ḥudayth.[76]

After this, Jaʿfar was the obvious choice for Imam, though the following report from Ibn Bābawayh's *Kamāl al-dīn* gives a sense of the ambivalence of Jaʿfar's reputation:

> [Abū al- Adyān al-Baṣrī said]: I was with Jaʿfar b. ʿAlī, his brother, at the door of the house, and the *shīʿa* were around him, offering their condolences and congratulating him. I said to myself, "If this is the Imam, then the Imamate is invalid (*bāṭil*)" because I know that he drinks date wine and gambles at the palace and plays the *ṭanbūr*."[77]

71 Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Al-Maqālāt wa-l-Firaq* edited by Muḥammad Jawād Mashkūr, (Tehran: Muʾassasa-i Maṭbūʿātī-i ʿAṭāʾī, [1963]), 101.

72 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 79.

73 See, for example Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 292.

74 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, 4:456.

75 The inheritance dispute was central to the divisions within the community. See my forthcoming monograph, *Agents of the Hidden Imam*.

76 Ṣaʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 102.

77 Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 223–224. Ibn Shahrāshūb provides a further accusation: that he was an alcoholic, *Manāqib*, 4:294. In spite of the feud between Jaʿfar and Ḥasan, even some of the agents who were later to recognize the Hidden Imam appear to have initially

This report suggests that most of the Shiʿa seem to have accepted Jaʿfar as Imam immediately after the death of Ḥasan, albeit in the case of this reporter, with grave reservations. There were few alternatives. It is true that one of the sects that Nawbakhtī mentions did claim that Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's son was the *qā'im* and the *mahdī*,[78] but no other reports exist of this son claiming the Imamate, so we must assume that this was not a viable political claim, and was short lived. Otherwise, Jaʿfar was the only viable claimant from the lineage of the Imams.

However, the bitter rivalry between Jaʿfar and Ḥasan meant that it was difficult for the usual consensus to legitimate a transition from the Imamate of Ḥasan to Jaʿfar. Scathing critiques were levelled at those who attempted to harmonize the claims of the two brothers, as reported by Nawbakhtī:

> And when it was said to them: "Al-Ḥasan and Jaʿfar continued to separate themselves from one another, cutting themselves off and treating each other with mutual hostility throughout their lives. But you have relied on the partisans of Jaʿfar and the opponents of al-Ḥasan [for information] in spite of [Ḥasan]'s bad relations with [Jaʿfar] during his lifetime and with them [the partisans] after his death regarding the division of his inheritance (*iqtisām mawārīthihi*)," they said [in response]: "That was only the appearance of things (*ẓāhir*), but in the esoteric reality (*bāṭin*), they were pleased with each other, getting along well, with no disagreements."[79]

Critics were convinced that the bad blood between Ḥasan and Jaʿfar, and, crucially between their protégés and retainers as well, was such that any attempt at harmonization was impossible. The upholders of the idea that Ḥasan had passed the Imamate to Jaʿfar had to resort to the hermeneutic escape-route of *taqiyya* to explain the contradiction between manifest political events, and their esoteric interpretation (*ẓāhir* vs. *bāṭin*). Such an explanation was

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accepted the succession of Jaʿfar as inevitable following al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī's death. For example, in a report from Abū al-Adyān, the *wakīl* Ḥājiz b. Yazīd al-Washshā' is portrayed as siding initially with Jaʿfar against the child Imam. Upon the sudden appearance of the child Imam at the funeral of al-ʿAskarī, Ḥājiz says to Jaʿfar, "Oh my Lord (*sayyid*), who is the boy so that we may set up proof against him (*li-nuqīma al-ḥujja ʿalayhi*)?" Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 475–6. This report is somewhat unreliable, given the prominent place it gives to the miraculous appearance of the child Imam, but it is likely to have been generated in a milieu which accepted as plausible a *wakīl*'s acceptance of the hated Jaʿfar. There is also the possibility, of course, that it might reflect some other influences, such as an inter-*wakīl* polemic aimed at undermining the figure of the briefly influential Ḥājiz.

78 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 84.

79 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 81–2.

characteristic of the hermeneutic strategies of marginal groups excluded from power. Thus, in a slightly later case, the followers of Shalmaghānī, who was cursed by the third canonical *Safīr*, Ibn Rawḥ, defended their leader through recourse to the cosmological role of the "Opposite" (*ẓidd*) of the Imam (*walī*). As Ṭūsī records, "A poet from amongst them (God curse him) said, "Oh you who curse the Opposite as an enemy, the Opposite is nothing but the exterior of the Friend (*walī*) …"[80]

6.1 *Anti-Jaʿfar Factions*

While some pro-Ḥasan figures attempted to square their support for Ḥasan with Jaʿfar, and some rejected Ḥasan entirely, an important subgroup developed into an anti-Jaʿfar camp. Some anti-Jaʿfar voices simply continued to support Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad or Ḥasan and claimed that one or other still lived as Imam in Occultation. The anti-Jaʿfar camp also generated alternative political theologies, including the ultimately successful Twelver doctrine of the Hidden Imam who was the son of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, which appears to have been associated initally with the claims of a posthumous pregnancy of one of Ḥasan's concubines who carried the next Imam *in utero*.[81]

Foremost among the anti-Jaʿfar voices were the mother of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī who litigated with Jaʿfar over the dead Imam's inheritance,[82] and certain agents of ʿAlī al-Hādī and Ḥasan like ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd and Aḥmad b. Isḥāq[83] who had pinned their colours too firmly to Ḥasan's mast to compromise. ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd had been directly involved in the opposing, cursing, and assassination of Fāris, and would have been loathe to accept the pro-Fāris core amongst Jaʿfar's original supporters.[84] Things continued to be confused, however, as the pro-Jaʿfar and the anti-Jaʿfar camps were both split into further competing tendencies with alternative possible solutions as to what had happened, who was the Imam, and by what means.

6.2 *Pro-Jaʿfar Factions*

After the death of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī an uneasy coalition of groups collected around the Imamate of Jaʿfar "the Liar", including the earlier followers of Fāris,

80 Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 254–5.

81 Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 1:505–6. See also the almost identical version in *Kamāl*, 475–6. See discussion in Hayes, *Agents*.

82 Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 1:505–6. *Kamāl*, 475–6. Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 85–6.

83 Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 1:329–330; Kashshī, *Rijāl*, 410.

84 See the case of ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd, above, and Modarressi, *Crisis*, 76. The son of ʿUthmān b. Saʿīd and his faction ultimately formed the core of the Occultation faction who rejected the Imamate of Jaʿfar. See Hayes, *Agents*.

who did not have to adapt their theories of succession very substantially, as well as pragmatists who accepted Jaʿfar as the only visible candidate but were impelled to make significant adaptations to their understanding of the transmission of the Imamate to fit current circumstances. Some attempted to harmonize the Imamate of Ḥasan with that of Jaʿfar. Others who had supported Ḥasan, however, came to doubt his Imamate retrospectively. Childlessness or infertility was a relatively common criterion for the rejection of the legitimacy of one's Imamate.[85] Erstwhile supporters of Ḥasan now entertained the possibility that Ḥasan's Imamate had been a sham and that, in fact, Jaʿfar had been the real Imam all along.[86] Out of the thirteen splinter-groups mentioned by Nawbakhtī, fully three of these proposed varying solutions as to how Jaʿfar might have inherited the Imamate.[87] While we must not imagine the numbers given by the heresiographers to necessarily represent real political groupings, this does give the sense of the convergence of diverse tendencies upon the Imamate of Jaʿfar. This included both those who accepted the manifest political realities, and those who resorted to *bāṭinī* esotericism to square any contradictions between political events and their non-negotiable theological principles.

Two major doctrinal factions emerge amongst the supporters of Jaʿfar: the followers of Fāris who had already declared for Jaʿfar, and the mainly Kufan Faṭḥite faction, who had accepted the Imamate of Ḥasan, but, unlike other Imamis, accepted the possibility that the Imamate could pass between brothers, therefore opening the door to the most obvious solution to the present doctrinal crisis: that Ḥasan had simply passed the Imamate directly to Jaʿfar. The pro-Jaʿfar groups, therefore, represented different combinations and adaptations of these pre-existing doctrinal tendencies to present circumstances.

The positions of Jaʿfar's supporters following Ḥasan's death can be summarized as follows:

Jaʿfar was the Imam, designated by al-Ḥasan. (Maintained by two distinct groups). As we have mentioned, some believed that al-Ḥasan had passed the Imamate to Jaʿfar, and that any apparent bad blood between them was mere

85 See Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 83–4; and for a Ismaili example suggesting the wider polemical inter-Shiʿi use of this issue, see Ḥamīd al-Dīn Aḥmad b. ʿAbd Allah Kirmānī, *al-Masābīḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma,* edited and translated by Paul Walker as *Master of the Age: An Islamic Treatise on the Necessity of the Imamate* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), 125.

86 See for example the eighth splinter group mentioned by Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, who claimed that Ḥasan's Imamate was a sham. *Maqālāt*, 110.

87 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 81–94. Note that Nawbakhtī introduces his count of Imami sects by saying there were fourteen splinter groups, but he only lists thirteen.

show.[88] Some of these drew support for their position from the arguments of the *Faṭḥiyya* sect, a natural doctrinal match, given their assertion that Imamate could pass between two brothers, as it had done in the case of Sādiq's sons, ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ and Mūsā al-Kāẓim.[89] We hear of three prominent Faṭḥite *kalām* theologians who leant their weight to support Jaʿfar "the Liar": Nawbakhtī mentions ʿAlī b. al-Ṭāḥī (or al-Ṭāḥin)[90] al-Khazzāz, a *mutakallim*, who went on to proselytize on Jaʿfar's behalf,[91] and Rāzī mentions al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī b. Faḍḍāl, a *mutakallim, faqīh* and hadith-transmitter.[92] In addition, Ibn Qiba authored a tract refuting a supporter of Jaʿfar called ʿAlī b. Aḥmad b. Bashshār, whom Modarressi speculates may have been one and the same as ʿAlī al-Ṭāḥī/Ṭaḥin.[93]

In reference to the Kufan Faṭḥite proselytizer, ʿAlī b. al-Ṭāḥī/al-Ṭāḥin, Nawbakhtī tells us that "he was aided in [his support for Jaʿfar] by the sister of al-Fāris b. Ḥātim b. Māhūya al-Qazwīnī, despite the fact that she denied the Imamate of al-Ḥasan b. ʿAlī and said that Jaʿfar's father appointed [Jaʿfar] successor rather than al-Ḥasan."[94] This is a polemical move on Nawbakhtī's part to indicate the inconsistency of the Jaʿfarite camp, but it clearly suggests an uneasy coalition between committed Faṭḥites who were new supporters of Jaʿfar, and the committed followers of Fāris who were new to the Faṭḥite idea. Political considerations sometimes override doctrinal diversity.

There was yet another Faṭḥite group that Nawbakhtī describes as being distinct. In the realm of the abstract doctrines of succession, the two Faṭḥite groups appear to have had a lot in common, but Nawbakhtī provides separate

88 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 81–2. Jawād Mashkūr, "An-Nawbaḫti. Les sectes sî'ites," *Revue de l'histoire des religions*, 153, No. 1 (1958): 65–66.

89 The Faṭḥite faction was distinctive among Imami groups in its belief believed that succession between brothers was not impossible, in opposition to most Imamis who believed that the Imamate must go from father to son after the exception of ʿAlī's sons Ḥasan and Ḥusayn. The Faṭḥite position had first developed as a response to the crisis after the death of the 6th Imam, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, when his son ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ had succeeded him, but died soon after, leaving the Imamate to his brother, Mūsā al-Kāẓim. In contrast to followers of the canonical line of Imams, the Faṭḥite splinter group, which was particularly strong in Kufa, had continued to include ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ within their line of Imams. Apart from the inclusion of ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ, the Faṭḥites did in practice follow the same Imams as the rest of Imamis. However, the fact that they allowed for the succession between brothers made their doctrines particularly relevant to the present crisis.

90 Ritter has al-Ṭāḥī. Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 82. Modarressi/Mashkūr reads Ṭāḥin.

91 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 82.

92 Rāzī, *Zīna*, 291.

93 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 146.

94 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 82. Fāris also had a brother who was remembered for his *ghuluww*. Ṭūsī, *Rijāl*, 428.

entries for them, suggesting that they represented distinctive constituencies. While Fāris b. Ḥātim is associated with *ghuluww*, Nawbakhtī seems to rather approve of the latter group of "pure Faṭḥites"[95] (*al-Faṭḥiyya al-khuluṣ*), calling them "the jurisprudents (*fuqahā'*) from amongst the [Faṭḥites]; a pious and worshipful people," including ʿAbd Allāh b. Bukayr b. Aʿyan and his associates.[96]

Jaʿfar was Imam, designated by his father, ʿAlī al-Hādī, not by al-Ḥasan.[97] This group left al-Ḥasan out of the line of Imams altogether, arguing that he must have been an imposter, for an Imam must always designate a successor after him, and the Imamate cannot pass between two brothers. The removal of al-Ḥasan from the line of Imams was possible given the brevity and instability of al-Ḥasan's Imamate, and was clearly engineered by those who wished to avoid the Faṭḥite solution and keep to the mainstream Imami position of a strict father-to-son succession. This resembles the canonical solution to the crisis upon Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's death which excluded the brief Imamate of ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ from the canonical line.[98]

Jaʿfar was Imam, designated by his brother Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad who died during the lifetime of ʿAlī al-Hādī. In Nawbakhtī's formulation, this group centered itself upon the claim that a trusted servant (*ghulām*), Nafīs, had been instrumental in the designation, acting as a temporary legatee (*waṣī*)[99] and taking all the sacred knowledge and objects of the Imam from Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad and transferring them to Jaʿfar.[100] Nawbakhtī mentions that this group claimed that al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī was an infidel (*kāfir*), while making *ghulāt* claims regarding Jaʿfar, claiming him to be the *Qā'im*, and preferring him to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib. Ultimately, Nafīs was reported to have been taken one night and thrown into a pool in a house and drowned.[101]

While Nawbakhtī counts the *Nafīsiyya* as one group, Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī mentions two subgroups of the *Nafīsiyya*. The first group maintained that ʿAlī al-Hādī had designated Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad then ordered

95 This does not mean pure not in any moral sense, but in the sense that they adhered strictly to the original parameters of Faṭḥī doctrine. The word is commonly used in this sense of categorical purity in heresiographical works.

96 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 93.

97 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 82–3; Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 109.

98 Their rejection of ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ is made explicit in Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 109.

99 There is a similarity between this claim and the claims that al-Ḥasan's mother, Ḥudayth, made regarding her role as the transmitter of Imamic authority. See below.

100 The idea of a servant-intermediary to the Imam reappears in Twelver reports in which a servant, sometimes called ʿAqīd or Badr acts as the special intermediary to the Hidden Imam. See Hayes, *Agents*.

101 Nawbakhtī, *Firaq*, 88–9.

that the Imamate be transferred to Jaʿfar afterwards. The second group denied this, but said that Abu Jaʿfar Muḥammad himself designated Jaʿfar. They also said that Jaʿfar was the speaking Imam (*nāṭiq*) while Abu Jaʿfar Muḥammad was the silent Imam (*ṣāmit*).[102] The dichotomy between speaking and silent Imams and prophets has a long history among gnostics and *ghulāt* thinkers on the fringes of Imamism,[103] notably among the *Khaṭṭābiyya* and the *Mukhammisa*, and perhaps other groups, eventually finding a permanent place in Ismaili cosmologies.[104] The role of the *nāṭiq* and the *ṣāmit* differ subtly according to which system one consults, and so it is unclear exactly what the *Nafīsiyya* might have understood by this. Judging by other early *nātiq-ṣāmit* formulations, in which the *nāṭiq* brings a law or scripture, and the *ṣāmit* brings the interior meaning of that law, the *Nafīsiyya* doctrine probably suggested that Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad had been Imam alongside Jaʿfar, rather than having preceded him, though given that Muḥammad was widely recognized as the heir to the Imamate during his lifetime, it is curious to imagine how his designation as *ṣāmit* might have been considered cosmologically effective. In addition, the formulation does not seem to provide any added value for interpreting the political crisis, and provides no solution for the problem of ʿAlī al-Hādī outliving Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad, which suggests that the surviving version of this doctrine may have been garbled. Nawbakhtī also indicates the heterodoxy of the *Nafīsiyya* by saying that this group claimed that al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī was an infidel (*kāfir*), while making *ghulāt* claims regarding Jaʿfar, claiming that he was superior to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib because he was the messianic *Qā'im*.

The exact role Nafīs played is unclear, but his possession of the Imams' knowledge and weapons, and the application of the word legatee (*waṣī*) to him suggests that some kind of spiritual rank was attributed to him, though perhaps not fully-fledged *bāb*, -hood.[105]

Khaṣībī offers further evidence, albeit problematic in its polemical context, for additional beliefs circulating among the pro-Jaʿfar camp:

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102 Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī, *Maqālāt*, 113

103 See Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects*, 314; and Rodrigo Adem's contribution to this volume.

104 See, for example Daftary, *The Ismāʿīls: Their History and Doctrines*, 86, 94, 97–8; Matti Moosa, *Extremist Shiites: The Ghulat Sects*, 314.

105 We may draw a comparison indicating the strategic importance of the *waṣī* in ensuring difficult successions in the Twelver reports in which a non-Imam acted as a *waṣī* legatee to safeguard the transition of the Imamate, for example the report which suggests that the mother of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī was his *waṣī* while looking after the 12th Imam as a child. Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 501.

Jaʿfar became Imam only after having succeeded Fāris as the *bāb*, of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad In his *al-Hidāya al-Kubrā*, Khaṣībī mentions this belief in two places. In one report, Fāris is said to have claimed to be the *bāb* of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad, after whose assassination, Jaʿfar "the Liar" himself claimed to be, not the Imam, but the *bāb* after Fāris.[106] This is a remarkable report, and one that should be taken with a pinch of salt. It seems highly unlikely that Jaʿfar, a man of Imamic blood, would have claimed to be the *bāb* to succeed the non-*ahl al-bayt* renegade Fāris, even if Jaʿfar did (as Ibn Qiba reports) express his approval of Fāris.[107] The idea of Jaʿfar's transition from being a *bāb* to being an Imam would seem to stem from a marginal esoterist milieu, rather than expressing Jaʿfar's own position. Following his brother's death, Jaʿfar had a strong claim to the Imamate as son of an Imam, without making such doctrinal leaps. The claim that Jaʿfar and Fāris were both *bāb*s must have been generated within a hermeneutic milieu in which it was conceivable that a *bāb* could become an Imam. The inelegance of this particular formulation must have resulted from a deeply-felt need to harmonize earlier formulations about Fāris's *bāb*-hood with the fact of his assassination, Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad's premature death and the rise of Jaʿfar after Ḥasan's short Imamate. It is fruitful to compare the strange theory of Jaʿfar's transitional *bāb*-hood to the equally peculiar *Nafīsiyya* beliefs that a *nāṭiq-ṣāmit* relationship existed between Jaʿfar and Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad. Both of these theories would have been repugnant to orthodox Imamis like the authors of our heresiographies. In both theories, Jaʿfar is not just given a place in the *linear* succession of Imams, but is slotted into a *vertical* cosmological hierarchy of *bāb*-Imam or *nāṭiq-ṣāmit*. After all, the *bāb* – while usually considered to have a lower spiritual rank to the Imam, is closely related to the idea of *nāṭiq*, being the *gateway* who speaks in the name of the Imam, and represents him to his followers. In addition, we might compare the idea that Jaʿfar had changed his state from *bāb* to Imam with the Nuṣayrī idea of *siyāqa,* in which different persons can switch between the different cosmological ranks or hypostases of the Imamic hierarchy.[108] This belief system is dependent upon the idea that the physical existence of actors in the real world might belie their inner reality, and that the Imam might be a hypostasis of God, a hypostasis that might afterwards transmit itself into a different person. If this is truly what lay behind the beliefs of some of the Jaʿfarites (namely the followers of Fāris and the *Nafīsiyya*) then it would explain the heresiographers' accusations of *ghuluww*. While the evidence for *ghulāt* beliefs

106 Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 291–2.

107 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 153, 164.

108 Friedman *Nuṣayrī-ʿAlawīs*, 15, 77, 79, 80.

among the followers of Jaʿfar are fragmentary, it seems clear that Jaʿfar was supported by both mainstream Faṭḥites, as well as people cleaving to more marginal *ghulāt* cosmologies. This is confirmed by Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī, albeit for a slightly later moment, as he says that after the deaths of Jaʿfar and his son and successor some of the Jaʿfarites veered into *ghuluww* heterodoxy.[109]

6.3 *Khaṣībī and the Polemical Depiction of Jaʿfar's Followers*

Did Jaʿfar sanction heterodox beliefs in his followers? While Ibn Qiba disapproves of the fact that Jaʿfar sanctioned Fāris in contravention of the curse enunciated by his father,[110] his disapproval may be directed at his disobedience of his father, the Imam. On the other hand, we do see Jaʿfar denouncing his unorthodox supporters in a report cited by Khaṣībī, in which a believer in search for the true Imam manages to get an audience with Jaʿfar. Jaʿfar explicitly repudiates the suggestion that he was designated by Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad. He rejects the ideas of the pro-Jaʿfar Abū al-Ḥasan ibn Thawāba and others who make such claims:

> May God curse Abū al-Ḥusayn b. Thawāba and his associates, for they lie against me and say what I did not say, and they deceive the people and consume their money, and they have intercepted money that was for me from a fiscal district (*nāḥiya*) which came to their hands.[111]

This resembles complaints of the 10th and 11th Imams regarding renegade and heterodox fiscal agents like Fāris b. Ḥatim, in fact. It seems possible that as well as inheriting followers with heterodox beliefs, Jaʿfar was now burdened by the legacy of Fāris's assertion of fiscal administrative autonomy from the Imam, as his followers persisted in redirecting revenues away from their Imam's central control. Having embraced the support of an oppositional group, perhaps Jaʿfar was now reaping what he had sown. Later in this report, Jaʿfar responds to questioning by stating clearly that he is the *waṣī* of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, not of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad, and that he is the Imam after his father, after God changed his mind about the eldest brother.[112] This might be polemic, but it makes sense that a serious claimant to the Imamate would prefer a mainstream means of legitimation, by seeking to establish his connection through

109 Rāzī, *Zīna*, 292.

110 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 153, 164.

111 Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 296.

112 In invoking the idea of God changing his mind, Jaʿfar was thereby appealing to a discourse current amongst the Imamiyya in various forms since the crisis of succession to Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq. Goldziher and Tritton, "*Badā*", *EI*[2].

the previous incumbent, rather than relying on the more problematic connection with their prematurely deceased elder brother

Among all the sources that deal with the followers of Ja'far, Khaṣībī is the most detailed. Why was this 4th/9th century Nuṣayrī leader so particularly interested in defeating the claims of the followers of Ja'far? It seems likely that it was because he came from a similar geographical milieu (around Kufa) and a hermeneutic milieu that shared ideas of the cosmological role of the *bāb*, or the *ṣāmit* and the *nāṭiq*, and the transition of the essence of the divine between *bāb* and Imam, so that he felt the need to engage with those who might have held to a similar cosmology. Politically, though perhaps not cosmologically, Khaṣībī was a pro-Occultation "twelver," who may even have accepted the authority of the canonical four *Safīr*s[113] of the Hidden Imam, with the provision that they should be considered religiously subordinate to the *bābs*.

Khaṣībī recounts a debate he himself had with the followers of Ja'far, including al-Ḥasan b. Thawāba and another, regarding the assertion that Ja'far was the *bāb*, of Fāris. In his debate with these followers of Ja'far it is notable that rather than accusing them of unorthodox beliefs, Khaṣībī says that he defeated his opponents using the weapons of the *muḥaddith*: superior knowledge of reports about the manifest proofs of succession to the Imamate.[114]

7 Conclusion

As I have shown, the expression of political affiliation and "rationalist" or "esoterist" hermeneutic strategies are intimately tied. However, the relationship between politics and hermeneutics does not lend itself to the simple dichotomies that have plagued the study of Shi'ism. The major division which emerged among Imamis upon the death of the 11th Imam was between the supporters of Ja'far and the supporters of a Hidden Imam. This division defies attempts to define it as a split between different doctrinal types such as rationalists and esoteric or "*ghulāt*" Imamis. The Occultation faction belonged to the established centre of the Imami community, but its doctrines were partly drawn from

113 While Khaṣībī's work, *al-Hidāya al-Kubrā* does include a section dealing with the four *Safīr*s, this section does not appear to belong to the main body of the work, and might have been added afterwards. While this section of Khaṣībī's work implies that the first, and second canonical Twelver *Safīr*s were legitimate, it is less positive about the third and the fourth. *Hidāya*, 392–7.

114 This debate is noteworthy in an interesting dichotomy it makes between proofs "*fī al-ẓāhir*" and proofs which are "*fī al-bāṭin*." However, this juxtaposition appears to be the difference between transmitted reports (*ẓāhir*) and rational proofs (*bāṭin*). Khaṣībī, *Hidāya*, 291–2.

earlier marginal groups like the *wāqifa* who upheld the Occultation of Mūsā al-Kāẓim. Jaʿfar's supporters on the other hand, combined support from Faṭḥī political realists who formulated doctrine as closely as possible in conformity with the political realities as they had been reported to the community, as well as esoterists whose doctrinal formulations were constructed in parallel with political events, rather than deriving from them. The major difference between the pro-Jaʿfar faction and the Occultation faction derives from relations with power: ʿAlī al-Hādī and ʿAskarī and their *wakīl*s had anathematized Fāris, and could not come to terms with the original followers of Jaʿfar who were inclined to some kind of "*ghuluww*" and *bābī* conceptions of sub-Imamic authority. We cannot, however see this as a contest between mainstream Imamis and *ghulāt*. There appear to have been *ghūlat* on both sides of the political divide, including those declaring for Jaʿfar (such as the *Nafīsiyya* and the *ghulāt* followers of Fāris b. Ḥātim), as well as those declaring for the Hidden Child Imam (such as the Nuṣayrīs).

Jaʿfar was ultimately unable or unwilling to unite the different wings of his supporters. If we believe Khaṣībī's reports that Jaʿfar refused to countenance the unorthodox claims that he had been the *bāb*, of his brother, Jaʿfar alienated a group that appears to have had similar beliefs about the transition between the divine hypostases of Imam and *bāb* as did the anti-Jaʿfar proto-Nuṣayrīs. Jaʿfar appears to have made the mistake of asserting an ideological purism at a moment when his support was still very fragile, anathematizing heterodox followers who appear to have been amongst the original core of his support base. Writing a refutation of the Jaʿfarite theologian Ibn Bashshār soon after the crisis, the Imami theologian Ibn Qiba highlights a key weakness in the claims of Jaʿfar's followers: they had no single consensus position on how Jaʿfar's accession to the Imamate was to be established, whether through his father or his brother.[115] Accusations of inconsistency are, of course, common tools of the polemicist, and were made against the Occultation faction also.[116] However, the marriage of convenience between the realist Faṭḥites and the esoterist followers of Fāris seems particularly liable to divorce: the *raison d'être* of the Faṭḥites was their insistence on incorporating the inconvient political fact of the brief Imamate of ʿAbd Allāh al-Afṭaḥ, while the followers of Fāris seem to have been ready to generate a narrative which bore little resemblance to the political reality if it fitted their cosmological beliefs.

115 Modarressi, *Crisis*, 151, 161.

116 Non-Imamis use the proliferation of explanations for the succession crisis at this point as ammunition to criticize the Imamiyya as a whole: Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār says that the Imamiyya (or as he calls them, Qaṭʿiyya: those who were sure that Kāẓim had died and had been succeeded by Riḍā) can hardly even be called a *madhhab*, so numerous and contradictory are their opinions. Al-Qāḍī ʿAbd al-Jabbār, *Mughnī*, 20 (2): 182.

In contrast to Jaʿfar's intransigence towards the *ghulāt* fringe of his constituency, the initial rescripts and anathemas issued by the Twelver agents in the name of the Hidden Child Imam were not primarily aimed at purging *ghulāt* elements, but rather at unifying support for their Imam, and consolidating the financial-sacral institution inherited from al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī.[117] Perhaps the most notable aspect of doctrinal discipline amongst the earliest Twelvers was the enforcement of the prohibition of naming the Imam, which ultimately must have been a promotor of unity by avoiding divisive debates about the identity and nature of the Imam.[118] In contrast to ʿAlī al-Hādī's cursing and assassination of Fāris as an unsanctioned *bāb*, versions of the new Twelver synthesis incorporated *bābī* elements,[119] and, the Occultation idea itself, which had earlier been associated with the term *ghuluww*, but now came to be rehabilitated as mainstream Twelver orthodoxy.[120] *Ghulāt* leaders and groups were not automatically excommunicated without political reason. In the Occultation period, it is the political opponents to the *Safīr*s who were cursed and excommunicated. Thus, though Ibn Nuṣayr's claims to authority first began during the Imamate of ʿAlī al-Hādī,[121] it seems that he was only cursed when he appeared to provide a threat to the second of the canonical *Safīr*s.[122]

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117 As an example of a collection of questions which were particularly urgent to early Twelvers, see the translation of a rescript issued in the name of the hidden Imam by the second canonical *Safīr*, Arjomand, "Absconditus," 3–4. For a further discussion see Hayes, *Agents*.

118 See, for example, the prohibitions on naming in Ibn Bābawayh, *Kamāl*, 93; Kulaynī, *Kāfī*, 1:329–330, 514; Ṭūsī, *Ghayba*, 226–7.

119 See, for example, Ibn Rustum al-Ṭabarī the Younger's *Dalaʾil al-imāma* for its enumeration of the *bāb*s of the Imams. They are referred to as "*bawwāb*" in the printed edition, perhaps a later amendation, but the role is clearly analogous to the role of *bāb* in Khaṣībī's *Hidāya*.

120 Al-Qāḍī, "*Ghulāt*," 301, 305.

121 A fact not recognized by Asatryan who states merely that Ibn Nuṣayr "lived during the lifetime of the eleventh Imam and advanced a claim to be his *bāb* after his death, " *Controversies*, 81. In Kashshī's *Rijāl* (2:805), Nawbakhti's *Firaq* (78), and Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Qummī's *Maqālāt*, (100) whose testimony is almost identical, Ibn Nuṣayr claimed to be a prophet (*nabī*) during the Imamate of ʿAlī al-Hādī, who espoused *ghuluww* regarding al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī, perhaps suggesting he divinized the 11th Imam. These sources do not clearly state that he claimed to be the Imam's *bāb*. In certain texts, Ibn Nuṣayr claimed that he was directly God's *bāb*, and in general the position of *bāb* seems to have been magnified at the expence of other divine hypostases which might have represented the Imam himself. This might explain why the Imami heresiographers portrayed him as presenting himself as a prophet. Asatryan, *Controversies*, 111–116.

122 Ṭūsī transmits a report indicating that it was Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿUthmān al-ʿAmrī who cursed Ibn Nuṣayr. See Ṭusī, *Ghayba*, 247. See also the cursing of the renegade *wakīl* of the Hidden Imam, al-Shalmaghānī. Sean Anthony, "Nawbaḵti Family," *EIr*.

Jaʿfar failed in his attempts to establish a stable following. As a result, following this most urgent crisis of succession, the Imami community separated itself from the direct leadership by the *ahl al-bayt*, and reconstituted themselves around a hidden Imam, with practical administration in the hands of non-*ahl al-bayt* agents. I would argue that it was primarily political dissent, or to be precise, dissent regarding the canonical doctrines of succession, and the corollary act of diverting revenue away from the Imam, which was the primary motivator for calling down opprobrium upon the heads of "heretics", rather than their heterodox cosmological beliefs, however unusual. Of course, the existence of heterodox beliefs were always useful in justifying the accusations. By comparison, the predominantly cosmologically moderate *wāqifa* at the time of Mūsā al-Kāẓim were anathematized for misappropriating the money of Imam ʿAlī al-Riḍā, while the cosmologically extreme Shalmaghānī was equally attacked for the challenge he posed to the political authority of the *Safīr* Ibn Rawḥ al-Nawbakhtī. Although we must assume that there were official doctrines of succession, or at least doctrines that were sanctioned by the weight of tradition, such doctrines were always malleable, changing to fit political circumstances. Doctrines of succession were ready to shift at moments of crisis, like the premature death of Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad or the death of al-Ḥasan al-ʿAskarī with no heir. At such times we should not understand political actors as passively following mainstream doctrine, but rather we should understand them as attempting to assert an orthodox doctrine by selectively adapting available doctrinal formulations[123] to current circumstances. In analyzing how religio-political actors attempted to assert orthodoxy, we may identify a certain affinity between political marginalization and doctrinal esotericism. Those who were institutionally embedded enough to be in control of key political processes may have had less incentive to rely on theories which allowed for a radical divergence between political events and esoteric interpretations of their "true nature".

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123 Of course, some of these available materials were more generally acceptable than others, and from this point of view we can consider them "mainstream".

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CHAPTER 3

Explaining Prayer: Hadith and Esotericism in al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq's *ʿIlal al-Sharāʾiʿ*

George Warner

The arrival of the 4th/10th century is often identified as something of a death-knell for Imami Shiʿi esotericism. By the time the century was over the fortunes of the Imamiyya had been transformed, both by the greater occultation of the Imam and the transition from Imami to Twelver Shiʿism, and by the arrival of the Buwayhid dynasty in Iran and Iraq, which permanently impacted upon the Twelvers' relationship to the intellectual traditions of their non-Shiʿi fellows. These developments were accompanied by a movement away from what is often characterised as the earlier esoteric character of Imami Shiʿism towards a Twelver Shiʿism that focussed on the outward concerns of the law and reasoned theology.[1]

A figure who is often placed on the boundary of this shift is Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Mūsā b. Bābawayh (d. 381/991), more commonly known as Ibn Bābawayh or by the honorific al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (hereafter al-Ṣadūq). Writing from around 350/960 onwards, al-Ṣadūq was active both at the very beginning of Buwayhid rule and during the earliest decades of the greater occultation. Though al-Kulaynī, a generation older, is already identified with an adoption of Muʿtazilism, al-Ṣadūq still appears as prior to the embrace of Muʿtazili *kalām* and *madhhab*-like structures associated with scholars of the next generation like al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022).[2]

1 For an authoritative account of this process see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Christian Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shîʿisme?* (Paris: Fayard, 2014), 90–95.

2 Studies of al-Ṣadūq remain few and, no doubt as a result of this, pronouncements on his role as a transitional figure between the Buwayhid and the pre-Buwayhid remain inconclusive. Melchert terms him a semi-rationalist (Christopher Melchert, "The Imāmīs Between Rationalism and Traditionalism," in *Shīʿite Heritage*, edited by Linda Clarke (Binghampton: Global Academic Publishing, 2001), 273–284), McDermott a traditionist with some Muʿtazili views (Martin J. McDermott, *The Theology of al-Shaikh al-Mufīd* (*d. 413/1022*) (Beirut: Libraire Orientale, 1978), 369). Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, meanwhile, cite al-Mufīd's rectification of al-Ṣadūq's creed as a key signal of the Buwayhid shift towards rationalism (Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shîʿisme?*, 90–95), but Amir-Moezzi and Ansari point rather to al-Kulaynī as the last repository of pre-Buwayhid "non-rationalism" (Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *The Speaking Qurʾān and the Silent Qurʾān*, trans. Eric Ormsby (New York,

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Al-Ṣadūq was certainly a *faqīh* first and foremost, with the great majority of writings ascribed to him (including several substantial extant works) being devoted to the law. Alongside these works, however, there remain among his extant writings several which appear to have a more esoteric character. Though al-Ṣadūq's theology, including the many hadith[3] he adduces on the subject, is certainly purged of the more colourful ideas found in earlier hadith compendia, two books in particular are framed by questions concerning the inner meaning of things. These are *ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ* ("the causes of laws")[4] (hereafter *ʿIlal*) and *Maʿānī al-akhbār* ("the meanings of traditions") (hereafter *Maʿānī*). Both works' title themes, the deeper meanings of Islam's laws and scriptures, encapsulate central concerns for the esoteric writings of other groups, most prominently the Ismailis and the Sufis, in al-Ṣadūq's era. Despite their overlaps with such writings in terms of content, however, these works are highly eccentric in form, to the point where the nature of their interest in their ostensive subject matter is difficult to determine.

This article will present an analysis of one of these works, *ʿIlal*, and ask what it is that al-Ṣadūq is undertaking to explain therein. In so doing we shall explore the extent to which *ʿIlal* may be considered an esoteric work, and thus the nature and significance of al-Ṣadūq's position in Twelver Shiʿism's oft-hypothesised shift away from esotericism during his lifetime. The focus of this interrogation will be *ʿIlal*'s lengthy section on the ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*). As well as being a topic of especial interest in esoteric literature that offers ready comparison with writings of al-Ṣadūq's contemporaries (more so, for instance, than the hidden meanings of almsgiving), this passage of *ʿIlal* has found a particularly enthusiastic readership among later Twelver authors; from al-Shahīd al-Thānī (d. 965/1558) to Khomeini, a long genealogy of Twelver writers on

Columbia University Press, 2016), 124–160). Sander seeks to assert theological continuity between al-Kulaynī and al-Mufīd, but this has a similar result of treating al-Ṣadūq as a less significant and less concretely defined intermediary stage (Paul Sander, *Zwischen Charisma und Ratio: Entwicklungen in der frühen imāmitischen Theologie* (Berlin: Schwarz, 1994), 165–166). A recent survey of al-Ṣadūq's extant oeuvre as a whole and its significance is provided by Newman (Andrew Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shīʿism: Ḥadīth as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000), 110–112.)

3 In subsequent centuries the terms *ḥadīth* and *khabar* will sometimes take on a technical distinction in Imami scholarship, the former referring to the words of the Prophet and the latter to those of the Imams. This is not a distinction visible in the writings of al-Ṣadūq, who uses the words quite interchangeably. For the purposes of this article, then, a hadith can refer saying either of the Prophet or of an Imam.

4 The work's full title is sometimes given as *Kitāb ʿilal al-sharāʾiʿ wa-l-aḥkām wa-l-asbāb*.

mystical themes have found al-Ṣadūq's assembled hadith on the topic to be of great use to their own interpretations of prayer.[5]

What we will see is that *ʿIlal* differs substantially from the exegeses of prayer produced by esoteric thinkers, both among his non-Twelver contemporaries and later Twelvers. Rather than attempting to offer a comprehensive, systematic explanation of prayer's forms and meanings, al-Ṣadūq attempts the altogether different task of demonstrating the inexhaustible knowledge regarding this topic that may be found in the Imams' traditions, his principle goal thus being not to guide his readers with the content of these interpretations but rather to inspire reverence for their source. As we will see, such an endeavour is deeply rooted in the circumstances of *ʿIlal*'s composition around the time of the onset of the greater occultation of the 12th Imam.

The analysis that follows rests on the acknowledgement that compilation is a form of authorship, and that the compiler of a hadith collection is very much its author. Though he assembles pre-existent texts, the compiler wields substantial agency in his selection, arrangement and presentation of these texts, and can draw on a plethora of tools and resources to shape how the reader responds to any given hadith. Thus, even though al-Ṣadūq rarely interjects directly between his collected hadith, we may learn a great deal from how he collects them about what he intends, both in terms of the immediate readerly response to a given text and of the broader objectives of the work as a whole.[6]

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5 For a survey of such works see Ruhollah Khomeini, *The Mystery of Prayer*, trans. Amjad H. Shah Naqavi (Leiden: Brill 2015), xxii–xl.

6 The importance of paying attention to how hadith are compiled and the value of this approach for understanding the objectives of a given work have been underscored in a number of recent studies. Burge, Fadel, Newman, Pouzet, Tokatly, Mourad and Lindsay have in their respective studies explored a variety of genres of hadith compendium, while Fadel and Tokatly have both illustrated the role of such considerations in how pre-modern Muslim scholars have read hadith compilations. Burge, in particular, has in a number of articles sought to set out the theoretical groundwork of a "compilation criticism." See Burge, "Reading Between the Lines: The Compilation of *Ḥadīṯ* and the Authorial Voice," *Arabica* 58, no. 3–4 (2011): 167–197; Burge, "Jalāl al-Dīn al-Suyūṭī, the *Muʿawwidhatān* and the Modes of Exegesis," in *Aims, Methods and Contexts of Qurʾanic Exegesis* (*2nd/8th–9th/15th C.*) edited by Karen Bauer (London: Oxford University Press, 2013), 277–307; Fadel, "Ibn Ḥajar's *Hady al-Sārī*: A Medieval Interpretation of the Structure of al-Bukhārī's *Al-Jāmiʿ al-Ṣaḥīḥ*: Introduction and Translation," *Journal of Near-Eastern Studies* 54, no. 3 (1995): 161–197; Mourad and Lindsay, *The Intensification and Reorientation of Sunnī Jihad Ideology in the Crusader Period: Ibn ʿAsakir of Damascus* (*1105–1176*) *and His Age, with an Edition, and Translation of Ibn ʿAsakir* The Forty Hadith for Inciting Jihad (Leiden: Brill, 2013); Newman, *The Formative Period of Twelver Shīʿism: Ḥadīth as Discourse Between Qum and Baghdad* (Richmond: Curzon Press, 2000); Pouzet, *Hermeneutique de la tradition islamique: le commentaire des Arbaʿūn al-Nawawīya de*

1 Accident and Design

ʿIlal amasses over a thousand hadith whose only uniting principle is an extravagantly wide-reaching concern with cause and explication. It is divided into over six hundred chapters, some containing ten or more lengthy hadith, but most restricted to one or two short texts. Each chapter's title identifies a particular phenomenon the cause of which it addresses. The variety of subjects is both immense and highly miscellaneous: they include why the sky is called the sky,[7] why corpses weep,[8] why the sunset prayer contains only three bowings,[9] why pregnancy interrupts menstruation,[10] why the world's peoples differ in appearance,[11] why ʿAlī was unable to lift the Prophet on his shoulders when smashing the idols in the Kaʿba[12] and why Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq stopped brushing his teeth two years before he died.[13] This diversity notwithstanding, about half of the book is given over to identifiable (though not demarcated) sections on the essentials of Islamic ritual law (*fiqh al-ʿibādāt*): purity and ablution, prayer, almsgiving, fasting and pilgrimage. The section concerning prayer is a series of eighty-nine consecutive chapters containing approximately 170 hadith.[14]

Such a survey already begs the question of what such curiosities have to do with esotericism, demanding in turn a working definition of the esoteric. The obvious concept from which to start in the context of Shiʿism is that of the *bāṭin* – the inner, the hidden, that which is opposed to the outer and the evident *ẓāhir*; the esoteric is simply that which is concerned with the *bāṭin*. Beyond this basic formulation, an important contextual factor is that the introduction of the *ẓāhir*/*bāṭin* dichotomy by Muslim thinkers is (polemics aside) almost always with a view to valourising the *bāṭin*, asserting that the inner dimension exists and is a (if not the) vital ingredient if the *ẓāhir* is to acquire value. This element of value is important because it is for this reason that *ʿIlal*'s discussions of the forms of the ritual prayer (to be discussed presently) are likely to appear more pertinent to matters esoteric than some of the

Muḥyī al-Dīn al-Nawawī (m. 676/1277): introduction, texte de arabe, traduction, notes et index du vocabulaire (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq and Libraire Orientale, 1982); Tokatly, "The *Aʿlam al-ḥadīth* of al-Khaṭṭābī: A Commentary on al-Bukhārī's *Ṣaḥīḥ* or a Polemical Treatise?" *Arabica* 92 (2001): 53–91.

7 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ* (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Aʿlamī li-l-Maṭbūʿāt, 2007), 10–11.

8 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 296.

9 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 311–312.

10 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 282–283.

11 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 17–22.

12 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 171–174.

13 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 286.

14 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 301–353.

questions listed above. Conversely, what maintains the relevance even of the most miscellaneous questions alongside the mysteries of the prayer is another concomitant of the *bāṭin*: the authority whereby it is understood. If something is by nature hidden, then those who claim to see it must justify their privileged insight. The Imams' knowledge of even the most dubiously useful trivia can thus bolster their esoteric authority inasmuch as it affirms their ability to know the unknowable.[15] Although the terminology of *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* is not invoked by al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*'s offer of hidden, inner meanings engages esoteric concerns, especially in its deployment of those meanings in contexts like that of the prayer where they might be expected to add value, and in its ascription of privileged knowledge to the Imams from whom its meanings and causes are sourced.

When it comes to *ʿIlal*'s chapters on prayer, however, this esoteric potential of their subject matter is complicated by how it is presented. What al-Ṣadūq presents here appears not as systematic guidance but an emphatically disparate array of reports that promise neither coherence between their proffered explanations nor certainty that any individual explanation is entirely trustworthy. A first feature of this inconclusive character is the variety of modes of explanation offered. Rather than subjecting prayer to an overarching, continuous rationale, al-Ṣadūq's assembled hadith explain prayer's many details by means ranging from cosmological assertions about the structure of the heavens to events in the Prophet's life to truths of human nature and how it may best be tamed. Not only are the registers of explanation different, but al-Ṣadūq often narrates different, even contradictory explanations of the same phenomena. While some of these are potentially reconcilable, others are less so. The reader may concede, perhaps, that the timing of the *ʿaṣr* prayer corresponds both to the hour when Adam ate the fruit of the tree and to a stage in his efforts after the fall to remove the black mark of shame from his face,[16] but probably less readily that the number of *rakaʿāt* in the sunset prayer were both ordained by divine command given during the *miʿrāj* and provoked by Muḥammad's joy at the birth of Fāṭima,[17] or that the seven *takbīr*s at prayer's opening originated both from the Prophet's attempts to teach the infant al-Ḥusayn to speak and from his proceeding through God's seven veils during the *miʿrāj*.[18] In the chapter on the prohibition of wearing gold in prayer, al-Ṣadūq offers one report declaring that such are the garments of those in hell, thus rendering them

15 For a survey of these elements that situates them in the wider currents of Islamic thought, see Alexander, Knysh, *Sufism: A New History of Islamic Mysticism* (Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2017), 70–109.

16 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 324–326.

17 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 312, 321–322.

18 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 319–320.

clearly inauspicious, but then supplies a second report that states rather that it is in heaven that gold rings are worn, and their prohibition is thus out of modest expectation.[19] To ask acceptance of both explanations as true seems in such instances to hold unrealistic expectations of the readerly imagination. In other compendia we see al-Ṣadūq dispelling such apparent contradictions in hadith with his own commentary, but here he lets them pass in silence.[20]

This eclectic, plural and sometimes openly contradictory character of *ʿIlal*'s text engenders important preliminary conclusions regarding the work's purpose. *ʿIlal* is not a book that supplies specific answers, nor is it intended to be. There can be little doubt (excepting inexplicable ineptitude) that al-Ṣadūq, unlike many of his contemporaries whom we shall discuss presently, is not trying to provide a comprehensive interpretation of the prayer that may be easily consulted by the faithful. The reader of *ʿIlal* who wishes to know for certain why and when the seven opening *takbīr*s were ordained or whether gold is worn in paradise or hell (or both?) is clearly out of luck.

That this inconclusive character of *ʿIlal* is no accident may first be illustrated by comparison with al-Ṣadūq's other writings. Nowhere is this plainer than with his most famous work, *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh*, "Every Man his Own Jurist." As its title suggests, *al-Faqīh* is a book devoted to providing precisely the kind of dependable answers in which *ʿIlal* seems so disinterested. In *al-Faqīh*'s introduction al-Ṣadūq sets out in no uncertain terms the book's purpose to educate the faithful in their religion. Accordingly, al-Ṣadūq structures *al-Faqīh* as an easily-consulted reference work, with topics addressed and arranged methodically and according to established sequences of the discipline. A reader with a specific query about the technicalities of almsgiving or the correct way to perform ablutions can locate the section wherein that question may be addressed with ease. This same reference-work structure, utterly germane as it is to Muslim religious literature of this period and far beyond,

19 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 334.

20 Such commentary is particularly prevalent in his *al-Tawḥīd*. Beyond the contradictions visible in *ʿIlal*'s pages, we may find other instances where a given explanation is contradicted by hadith narrated in al-Ṣadūq's other books. At *ʿIlal*'s beginning, for instance (al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 10), a set of cosmological questions are initially answered with a description of how the earth itself is balanced on the shoulders of an angel, who in turn stands on the back of a cow, which in turn stands on a rock which in turn is balanced on the back of an enormous fish. While *ʿIlal* lets the matter rest at that, in another work al-Ṣadūq offers a different cosmology, in which on top of the fish is balanced a rock, on top of which stands a rooster on top of which are balanced the heavens (al-Ṣadūq, *al-Tawḥīd*, 304). This capacity of *ʿIlal*'s contents to be contradicted by those reports al-Ṣadūq does not narrate as well as those he does is unlikely to have been lost on the reader, further reinforcing the uncertain quality of its contents.

is to be found in many of al-Ṣadūq's works, amongst them his oft-cited creed, *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, a shorter legal manual, *al-Muqniʿ*, and *al-Hidāya*, which combines a brief creed with legal instruction.[21]

In complete contrast, in *ʿIlal* we find a book constructed with minimal deference to the reader who might approach it in search of a particular answer, a book indeed wherein the reader is far more likely to come across information by accident than by design. As well as the features examined above, the book's broader structures render it a very different reading experience to *al-Faqīh*. The range of topics addressed within is prodigious, but *ʿIlal* offers no clear indication as to where discussion of any particular subject might be found. Larger structures between chapters, such as the sections on prayer, fasting etc., may be discerned, but these are simply mutely grouped sets of chapters that are not signposted by any larger subdivision into 'books' (*kitāb*) such as we see in *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh*. If, moreover, one were one to wend one's way to the appropriate section for one's query, the process of locating that question therein, even of establishing whether or not it is discussed, must be a time-consuming one.

Even if, by virtue of extreme perseverance or good fortune, one does encounter an answer to the question with which one set out, there is the further hazard of being unsure of the reliability of that answer. This is due to a further difference between *ʿIlal* and works like *al-Faqīh*, namely the very different way they each present hadith. *Al-Faqīh*'s introduction supplies an assertion that the hadith it contains are from reliable sources (even though al-Ṣadūq omits their *isnāds* for the sake of convenience).[22] No such guarantee is supplied for the texts compiled in *ʿIlal*. This is emphasised further by different ways that hadith are adduced in the two works. *ʿIlal* is almost entirely composed of hadith, with next to nothing in the way of commentary. *Al-Faqīh*, by contrast, contains a great deal of al-Ṣadūq writing *in propria persona*, with some articles outlined entirely in his own prose with no reference to hadith. More frequently the two forms are combined, the Imams' words accompanied by al-Ṣadūq's own

21 It is interesting that *al-Faqīh* furnishes a handful of topics with short, opening expositions of their causes. As brief asides in the context of a legal manual, the purpose of these digressions as secondary, additional interest to the matter in hand is clear. In such instances al-Ṣadūq narrates much-curtailed selections of hadith also found in *ʿIlal* (occasionally citing *ʿIlal* itself as a locus of more such material), drawing on a much-diminished array of sources. See al-Ṣadūq, *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh* (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Tārīkh al-ʿArabī, 1986), 2:5–8, 126–133.

22 Al-Ṣadūq, *al-Faqīh*, 1:12–14.

summaries, clarifying and expanding the meaning of the assembled texts.[23] In *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, *al-Muqniʿ*, and *al-Hidāya*, not dissimilarly, al-Ṣadūq will first state his position before supplying one or two hadith to ground it in scripture. In these works, then, hadith are adduced as proof-texts, supporting and subordinate to clear authorial assertions. In *ʿIlal* meanwhile, hadith are presented as answers unaccompanied, affording far less clarity regarding what they are supposed to be telling the reader and to what extent they can be trusted to do so reliably.

A final differential between these works is that of subject matter. *Al-Faqīh*, *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, *al-Muqniʿ* and *al-Hidāya* all treat one or both of two topics: theology and the law. The questions they answer so diligently are the familiar questions of the prescribed details of worship and transaction, and the correct teachings regarding such matters as the nature of the Imams' knowledge, of God's attributes and so on. In *ʿIlal*, conversely, the reader is confronted with questions like why one may be born in one country and die in another or why pigs were created,[24] questions discussed, nonetheless, by God's perfect appointed guides for humanity. This appears a very different vision of sacred knowledge, one wherein the limits of what the believer might need to know are rather less certain.[25]

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23 For an analysis of *al-Faqīh*'s mixing of hadith and al-Ṣadūq's own prose, and the significance thereof in the broader trajectories of Imami thought, see Robert Gleave, "Between *Ḥadīth* and *Fiqh*: The 'Canonical' Imāmī Collections of *Akhbār*," *Islamic Law and Society* 8, no. 3 (2001), 359–362 and *passim*.

24 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 298, 472.

25 Of some pertinence is Vilozny's observation regarding the content of a similar compilation by Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī (more on which below): "It is more than likely that this tradition is expected to be read by people to whom it is clear beyond any doubt that the Imam does not share his feelings with an audience unless he has a very good reason to do so." (Roy Vilozny, "Pre Būyid *Hadith* literature: The Case of al-Barqī from Qumm (d. 274/888 or 280/894) in Twelve Sections," in *The Study of Shi'i Islam: History, Law and Theology*, eds. Farhad Dafrary & Gurdofarid Miskinzoda (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 213. It is, of course, possible that the collection of such hadith may have been motivated, at least in part, by simple concerns of preservation. The Twelver tradition locates the earliest stage of its hadith corpus in the so-called four hundred *uṣūl* (sg. *aṣl*) – small collections noted down by the Imams' disciples, and the transition from this stage to large-scale hadith compendia remains poorly understood. When al-Ṣadūq names authoritative sources he cites compendia by previous hadith scholars rather than *uṣūl*, but it is not impossible that the desire to collect such scattered sources into larger works may shape *ʿIlal*'s content, either as directly felt by al-Ṣadūq or by earlier compilers such as al-Barqī upon whom he is drawing. See Etan Kohlberg, "Al-Uṣūl al-Arbaʿumiʾa," *Jerusalem Studies in Arabic and Islam* 10 (1987): 128–66; Hassan Ansari, "*Āthār-i mafqūd-i Shaykh-i Ṣadūq – chirā wa chigūneh?*" Kātibān, February 11, 2009, http://ansari.kateban.com/post/1735.

All these differences between *ʿIlal* and al-Ṣadūq's more straightforwardly didactic works also hold true when we compare the work's explanation of prayer to those given in other writings of the period. Two important works will suffice for comparison here: *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim* ("the interpretation of the pillars") by the Fatimid Ismaili scholar al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān[26] (d. 363/974) and *Ithbāt al-ʿilal* ("establishing causes") by the Sufi al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 318/930). To look at these compositions is to see precisely the systematic approach to explanation that al-Ṣadūq so conspicuously eschews in *ʿIlal*. The authors proceed methodically through core doctrinal areas (*Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim* structuring itself as a commentary on al-Nuʿmān's manual of faith and practice, *Daʿāʾim al-islām*), providing a synthesised interpretation that aspires to coherence and clarity. Writing for the most part *in propria persona*, al-Nuʿmān and al-Tirmidhī both draw on hadith, but they do so in support of their own arguments, presenting hadith as proof-texts that substantiate their books' contentions rather than encompassing them. In sum, these works are just what we might expect a book entitled "The causes of the *sharīʿa*" to be. When it comes to each work's section on prayer, both authors accordingly proceed methodically through the topic, each beginning with a general discussion of the reason for prayer and its significance, before addressing the preliminary components such as the call to prayer and turning to face the *qibla*, then central actions such as bowing and prostration, and finally subsidiary details like the varying number of bowings in different prayers (al-Nuʿmān's work, being a commentary, is a little more digressive).[27]

26 In addition to *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim*, Poonawala reports the existence of an unedited work attributed to the Fatimid caliph al-Muʿizz himself entitled *Taʾwīl al-sharīʿa*. See Ismail K. Poonawala, *Bibliography of Ismaʿili Literature* (Malibu: UCLA, von Grunebaum Center for Near Eastern Studies/Undena Publications, 1977), 65.

27 Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb ithbāt al-ʿilal*, ed. Khālid Zahrī (Rabat: Jāmiʿat Muḥammad al-Khāmis, 1998), 91–174; al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim* (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Aʿlamī li-l-Maṭbūʿāt: 2006), 1:182–370. For an overview of al-Nuʿmān's approach to the esoteric see Bulbul Shah, "Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān and the Concept of *Bāṭin*," in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought – Essays in Honour of Hermann Landolt*, ed. Todd Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 117–126. For a recent study of al-Tirmidhī's views on the subject, see Aiyub Palmer, "The Social and Theoretical Dimensions of Sainthood in Early Islam: Al-Tirmidhī's Gnoseology and the Foundations of Ṣūfī Social Praxis," (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2015), 26–27, 262–269.

2 Imamis and Udabāʾ

There is no doubt that *ʿIlal* differs profoundly from the works surveyed above. What al-Ṣadūq is attempting in *ʿIlal* is not yet certain, but we may be confident that it is not the same thing that he is attempting in *al-Faqīh* – systematic instruction in orthodoxy – nor is it the kind of correspondingly systematic instruction in the meanings of prayer given by al-Nuʿmān in *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim*. His hadith will later serve precisely such a purpose for al-Shahīd al-Thānī, Qāḍī Saʿīd Qummī et al., but this is not the purpose they serve here. There is nothing to suggest that al-Ṣadūq has included in *ʿIlal* material with which he actively disagrees (improbably self-defeating as that would be), but it is clear that he is content to leave the reader short of certainty on whether any particular given cause is bindingly, exhaustively true.

None of this means that *ʿIlal* is a flippant or even a failed work; that it does not instruct readers in the same way as those to which it has so far been compared by no means indicates that it does not seek to instruct. The very features that make *ʿIlal* baffling when placed alongside manuals of instruction like *al-Muqniʿ* and *Ithbāt al-ʿilal* are entirely germane to other literary contexts, the most important of which is *adab* literature. *Adab* flourished in the Buwayhid courtly setting in which al-Ṣadūq was active,[28] and al-Ṣadūq was among several noted Imami scholars to have engaged extensively with the medium. An examination of this engagement is vital, meanwhile, for an understanding of *ʿIlal*, in particular of what it aims to teach its reader and how.

28 *Adab* is notoriously difficult to define exhaustively. Its definition, however, naturally matters a great deal if we are to say that *ʿIlal* is somehow "*adab*-like". A useful distinction to be made in this regard is between *adab* as a concept and *adab* literature, the latter being somewhat more quantifiable. From this we may proceed a step further and refer specifically to the *adab* compendium. *Adab* compendia, being compilations of material, often from a very wide array of sources, collected for their potential to impart moral and intellectual improvement to the reader, proliferated in the ʿAbbāsid era especially from the 3rd/ 9th century onwards, with al-Ṣadūq's Buwayhid period producing such noted examples as Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī's *al-Baṣāʾir wa-l-dhakhāʾir* and Manṣūr b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ābī's *Nathr al-durr*. For "researchers' sketch maps" of *adab* compendia (prose and verse) and their place in the broader spectrum of *adab* literature see Bilal Orfali, "A Sketch Map of Arabic Poetry Anthologies up to the Fall of Baghdad." *JAL* 43, no. 1 (2012): 29–59; Hilary Kilpatrick and Stefan Leder. "Classical Arabic Prose Literature: A Researchers' Sketch Map." *JAL* 23, no. 1 (1992): 2–26. Broader discussions of the parameters of *adab* and *adab* literature are found in Susan A. Bonebakker, "*Adab* and the Concept of *Belles*-Lettres," in *The Cambridge History of Arabic Literature: ʿAbbasid Belles-Lettres*, eds. Julia Ashtiany et al. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 16–30, and Hilary Kilpatrick, "Adab," in *Encyclopedia of Arabic Literature*, eds. Julie Scott Meisami and Paul Starkey (London: Routledge, 1998) 1:56.

The value of *adab* as a context for Imami hadith compendia like *ʿIlal* has previously been pointed out with regard to the work's only clear precedent in extant Imami writings:[29] the *Kitāb al-ʿilal* in Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī's (d. 274/887 or 280/893) *al-Maḥāsin*. This work shares the key features of al-Ṣadūq's *ʿIlal* discussed here, again offering a diverse body of hadith united under the rubric of cause. In his analyses of this work and others like it in al-Barqī's oeuvre, Roy Vilozny has studied in detail the role of *adab* literature, as well as earlier Sasanid literatures of manners, in the unusual forms of these compendia.[30] Both works' defining structure, the gathering of diverse and colourful content around a more or less eccentric conceptual theme (flowers, numbers, primacy, loneliness etc.), is to be found in myriad *adab* compendia across the Buwayhid period and beyond. However far their content may be from that of the catechism, improving and instructing their audience is a key goal of such writings. As one pioneering *adīb* puts it, "The way to God is not a single way, nor is all that is good to be found in praying late into the night, continuous fasting and knowledge of what is licit and prohibited."[31]

29 Ṭihrānī lists thirteen other *Kitāb al-ʿilal*s from the 3rd/9th and 4th/10th centuries that have not survived (not including al-Ṣadūq's several other, smaller works on the subject, such as *ʿIlal al-wuḍūʾ*, which have not survived but are almost certainly incorporated into *ʿIlal* itself. This count also excludes books like *ʿIlal al-ḥadīth* or *ʿIlal al-naḥw*, which purport to be about something else entirely).

30 See Roy Vilozny, "Réflexions sur le *Kitāb al-ʿilal* d'Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Barqī," in *Le Shiʿisme imāmite quarante ans après: hommage à Etan Kohlberg*, eds. M.A. Amir-Moezzi and Meir M. Bar-Asher (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009), 417–435 (addressing al-Barqī's *Kitāb al-ʿilal* specifically); idem, "Pre Būyid *Hadith* literature: The Case of al-Barqī from Qumm (d. 274/888 or 280/894) in Twelve Sections," in *The Study of Shiʿi Islam: History, Law and Theology*, eds. Farhad Dafrary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014), 203–230 (examining *al-Maḥāsin* as a whole); idem, "A Concise Numerical Guide for the Perplexed Shiite: Al-Barqī's (d. 274/888 or 280/894) *Kitāb Al-Aškāl waʾl-Qarāʾin*," *Arabica* 63, no. 1–2 (2016): 64–88 (a study of another book of *al-Maḥāsin*, *al-Ashkāl wa-l-qarāʾin*, "The Book of Parallels and Comparisons"). Though the first of these is, of course, of the most direct relevance to us here, the analysis contributed in the other two is also highly valuable. Though *al-Ashkāl wa-l-qarāʾin*, like al-Ṣadūq's *al-Khiṣāl*, groups hadith according to numbers they mention rather than according to any interest in cause, this structure is puzzling for many of the exact same reasons that *ʿIlal* is puzzling. As well as links to *adab* and related literatures, Vilozny also explores other possible factors, chiefly that of al-Barqī's representing a 'pre-canonical' stage of Imami hadith and that these works seek to prevent the Imams' secret knowledge from being accessed by the uninitiated. See Vilozny "Réflexions sur le *Kitāb al-ʿilal*", 435; "Pre Būyid Hadith Literature", 204, 213–215; "A Concise Numerical Guide", 69, 73–75, 87.

31 ʿAbd Allāh b. Muslim Ibn Qutayba, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār* (Beirut: al-Maktab al-Islāmī, 2008), 1:3.

Not only was al-Ṣadūq substantially influenced by al-Barqī (perhaps more than any other single figure),[32] but unlike al-Barqī, we have a great deal of evidence to place al-Ṣadūq in conversation with the *adab* literature of his day. Living as he did well into the Buwayhid period, al-Ṣadūq saw arise a flourishing court literary culture in the urban centres of Iraq and Iran, one which moreover held a welcoming attitude to Imamis that was near-unprecedented. Imamis from Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Miskawayh (d. 421/1030) to al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā (d. 436/1044) are to be found participating and excelling in *adab* literature throughout the Buwayhid period. Al-Ṣadūq's native Rayy was at the very centre of this intellectual ferment, and his contemporaries there included such titans of *adab* literature as al-Miskawayh, Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī (d. 414/1023) (who cites al-Ṣadūq in one of his works[33]) and the vizier al-Ṣāḥib b. ʿAbbād (d. 385/995), to whom al-Ṣadūq dedicated one of his works and by whom he had the distinction of being banished.[34]

Al-Ṣadūq's writings further provide abundant evidence of interaction with this context. His works (quite unlike those of al-Barqī or, indeed, any other earlier Imami hadith compiler whose works remain extant) frequently cite figures spanning the range of the intellectual spectrum of his time, including litterateurs, historians, grammarians, chess-players and poets. More conspicuous by far, though, is the overall form and content of a number of his books. *ʿIlal* is not an isolated instance, rather we have a number of titles within al-Ṣadūq's extant oeuvre that are of a similar sort. The likeness is strongest in the case of two further works, *al-Khiṣāl* ("The Qualities/Quantities"[35]) and *Maʿānī*. Each of these follows the same pattern of uniting disparate material under a somewhat open-ended conceptual theme, in *Maʿānī*'s case that of meaning and in *al-Khiṣāl*'s case those of quality and number. Al-Ṣadūq also leaves works whose proximity to *adab* literature is of a different kind: *Muṣādaqat al-ikhwān* ("Sincerity amongst Brethren") compiles the virtues friendship and courtesy amongst fellow believers, a topic of central interest to *adab* writers of the

32 Al-Barqī is a regular presence in al-Ṣadūq's *asānīd*, transmitted from a number of his principle teachers, and in *al-Faqīh* al-Ṣadūq names al-Barqī's *al-Maḥāsin* among his principle trusted sources (al-Ṣadūq, *al-Faqīh*, 1:13–14). Bibliographies record that al-Ṣadūq wrote a commentary on al-Barqī's *al-Rijāl*, the only recorded incident of his having written a commentary on the work of a named author. The two authors' works on causes are only one of several pairs of parallel works, all of which feature substantial borrowing of al-Barqī's hadith by al-Ṣadūq. For a detailed analysis of al-Ṣadūq's use of al-Barqī's material in the specific case of the latter's *al-Ashkāl wa-l-qarāʾin* and the former's *al-Khiṣāl* see Vilozny "A Concise Numerical Guide", 72.

33 Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *al-Ṣadāqa wa-l-ṣadīq* (Damascus: Dār al-Fikr, 1964), 203, 291.

34 Abū Ḥayyān al-Tawḥīdī, *Akhlāq al-wazīrayn* (Damascus: Dār Ṣādir, 1965), 166–167.

35 This seems to be something of a pun on al-Ṣadūq's part.

period;[36] *al-Mawāʿiẓ*, "The Counsels," presents an Imami manifestation of the *adab* staples of wisdom literature and the sage's parting counsels to his son.[37] We further find titles of sadly lost works inhabiting a similar range, amongst them a book on history (*al-Tārīkh*), a book on poetry (*al-Shiʿr*), a commentary on an ode (*Tafsīr qaṣīda fī ahl al-bayt*) a book on firsts (*al-Awāʾil*) and one on lasts (*al-Awākhir*).[38]

3 Explanation and Obfuscation

Not only does *ʿIlal*'s clear resonance with al-Ṣadūq's broader interest in *adab* literature provide a valuable point of origin for its forms and style, but it also points us towards some of the purposes that such a form may serve. *Adab* literature of the period is filled with authors writing frankly about what they hope to achieve with their collections of the unusual and the edifying. Manṣūr b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ābī (d. 421/1030 or 432/1040) explains his method as follows: "Perhaps the light-hearted material (*hazl*) within this book will motivate the one who comes across it to peruse then the serious material that precedes, whereupon he will take to heart from it something that will benefit him,"[39] voicing an established concern by *adab* writers to lure unsuspecting readers into reading material that will improve them by mixing it in with the interesting and entertaining. Al-Ṣadūq in fact enunciates just such an approach in another of his works,[40] and this same strategy may clearly be identified in *ʿIlal*. Close attention to his presentation of the work's strange miscellany of

36 For a recent study of the importance of ideas of friendship in Buwayhid *adab* see Nuha Alshaar, *Ethics in Islam: Friendship in the Political Thought of Al-Tawhidi and His Contemporaries* (London: Routledge, 2014).

37 For wisdom literature's significance in and relation to *adab* literature see Dimitri Gutas, "Classical Arabic Wisdom Literature: Nature and Scope," *JAOS* 101, no. 1 (1981), 55–57, 62–69; Kilpatrick, "Adab," 55; Leder & Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature," 4.

38 The same is true of many lost volumes of al-Barqī's *al-Maḥāsin*, including recorded titles on mathematics, grammar, poetry and history.

39 Mansur b. al-Ḥusayn al-Ābī, *Nathr al-durr* (Beirut: Dār al-Kutub al-ʿIlmiyya, 2008), 2:5. Discussion of the use of such devices amongst ʿAbbāsid authors may be found in G.J.H. Van Gelder "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature: Part I," *JAL* 23, no. 2 (July 1992), 95–106; Van Gelder "Mixtures of Jest and Earnest in Classical Arabic Literature. Part II," *JAL* 23, no. 3 (November 1992), 169–172).

40 This is with regard to his inclusion of a long set of apparently Buddhist narratives in his surviving work on occultation, *Kamāl al-dīn wa-tamām al-niʿma* (al-Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-niʿma* (Qum: Muʿassasat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1429 (h.)), 603–667. For an analysis of the device's rather different role in that work, see George Warner, "Buddha or Yūdhāsaf? Images of the Hidden Imam in al-Ṣadūq's *Kamāl al-dīn*," *Mizan* 2, no. 1 (2017).

aetiologies reveals beneath it a recurring concern to school the reader, perhaps surreptitiously, in the core doctrines of al-Ṣadūq's Twelver Shiʿism.

ʿIlal for the most part purports to supply the unknown causes of known phenomena. Al-Ṣadūq's reader is most probably aware that some humans once turned to fire-worship, that earthquakes occur and that animals prefer to mix with others of their own species,[41] but in all probability not why. Similarly, the reader certainly knows the basic forms of prayer, but probably not their origin. Yet this pattern is not a universal one, rather it is often altered or even inverted, with far-reaching consequences for al-Ṣadūq's authorial address and for *ʿIlal*'s readers.

The simplest cases of this change are chapters in which the phenomenon explained is just as unknown as the cause. The permissibility or otherwise of praying in marshland, of omitting the call to prayer while sick, of decorating mosques or of wearing many items of clothing during prayer[42] is likely to be outside the legal erudition of the non-expert reader, never mind its cause. In such chapters the form of al-Ṣadūq's instruction to the reader has thus changed. He now pursues the familiar jurist's task of educating the faithful in how to pray, and readers of *ʿIlal* thus find their search for esoteric curiosity yielding the unexpected fruit of hard-nosed legal instruction.

The subject matter of the questions answered is only the beginning of this instructive substratum of *ʿIlal*, and we may see several further strategies by which it is reinforced, clearly relegating many chapters' discussion of causes to a secondary concern. In many chapters a single report that affirms both a doctrine and its cause will be accompanied by further reports that reaffirm only the former.[43] Elsewhere we see the legal ruling not only reaffirmed but elaborated upon, such as in the chapter on the requirement for prostration to be upon the earth or what comes from it, which, as well as telling the reader why this is the case, also clarifies that glass does not count as coming from the earth.[44] This shift in emphasis is also effected in those chapters wherein conflicting explanations are given; if al-Ṣadūq's reader is left unsure as to which of the afterlife's inhabitants wear gold, he is in no such doubt regarding the prohibition of wearing it during prayer.

Sometimes these brief assertions of detail give way to full-blown polemics. One such instance is the chapter regarding the prohibition of praying in black

41 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 10–13.

42 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 308, 314–315, 323, 324.

43 E.g. al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 314, 318, 328.

44 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 327–329. It is also to be noted that this chapter-structure of an opening, detailed explanation followed by briefer, corroborating reports is to be found in *Man lā yaḥḍuruhu al-faqīh*.

clothing (a rule rooted in Imami animosity towards the Abbasids). Al-Ṣadūq not only assembles several reports to assert that black is the garment of wrongdoers, but he follows these with a group of traditions in which the Imam seems to endorse the wearing of black. He then takes the highly unusual (in *ʿIlal*) step of supplying his own clarification, explaining that such apparently conflicting reports are a result of *taqiyya* on the part of the Imam.[45] Not only is the reader supplied with a wealth of proof-texts, but pre-emptively protected against the possible confusion of encountering conflicting texts elsewhere. A different means of assertion is found in the chapter on why it is permissible to combine prayers without cause for dispensation, a concession that remains a shibboleth of Imami law. As well as supplying a multitude of reports, al-Ṣadūq employs the common Imami probative strategy of using reports from sources accepted by non-Imamis. Four of this chapter's reports are narrated from the companion of the Prophet and of ʿAlī, ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿAbbās, whilst one comes from ʿAbd Allāh b. ʿUmar b. al-Khaṭṭāb, an improbable source for an Imami text, were it not for its capacity to anchor the text as broadly accepted amongst the wider scholarly community.[46]

Tellingly, such extended contentions appear in connection with subjects that were particularly disputed between the Imamiyya and their opponents. This especial concern of al-Ṣadūq to defend his Imami position is, moreover, observable in a broader layer of sectarian contention at work in *ʿIlal*, undertaking to assert and defend the authority of the Imams and thus of their hadith. This concern appears in the very first chapter of the section on prayer. Entitled "The Cause for Ablution, for the Call to Prayer and for Prayer," its single, long hadith offers a majestic telling of the *miʿrāj*, during the course of which we do indeed see Muḥammad instructed in these ordinances. These instructions, however, are accompanied by repeated assertions of Shiʿi legitimacy. Muḥammad rises gradually through the heavens as usual, at every stage being instructed in another ritual direction. At every stage he reaches, meanwhile, he is greeted by angels who also bid him pass their greetings to his brother, meaning ʿAlī. Muḥammad asks how the angels know of him, whereupon they reply, "Indeed we do! How could we not? For God has placed upon us your covenant and his covenant and the covenant of his Shiʿa until the Day of Judgment! We regard the faces of his Shiʿa five times a day!" These benedictions upon ʿAlī and

45 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 332–334.

46 The practice of drawing on hadith accepted (or supposedly accepted) by non-Shiʿis had by al-Ṣadūq's time already become established amongst Imamis in polemical contexts. Al-Nuʿmānī (d. 345/956), for instance, uses this means of argument extensively to assert the reality of the occultation of the 12th Imam. See Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nuʿmānī, *al-Ghayba* (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Aʿlamī li-l-Maṭbūʿāt, 2013), 65, 79–85.

the Shiʿa become increasingly elaborate as Muḥammad ascends further. He is informed of a scroll in heaven made of light, on which are written in light the names of Muḥammad, ʿAlī, all of the Imams and all of the Shiʿa. It is a resilient reader indeed who gleans from this text only information about the prayer and its origins.[47] Another chapter concerns the reason why ʿAlī on certain occasions delayed his afternoon prayers, such that the Sun came back up for him. In its first hadith we read that one day, after completing his noon prayers, ʿAlī turned to a skull lying on the ground and asked it its life story, which the skull proceeded to narrate at some length, delaying the Imam's prayers. When it had at last finished, ʿAlī, "Uttered three letters from the Gospels, so that the Arabs would not understand their meaning," and bade the Sun come back up so that he could pray in the correct circumstances. Two further hadith tell of two separate but very similar occurrences. Once again we have learned of a particular cause as advertised, but far more importantly we have been shown a remarkable demonstration of the Imam's power.[48]

Alongside legal questions and the rights of the Imams, there exists a third register of instruction between the lines of *ʿIlal*'s causes. This is the register of what may be called the pietistic – material that diverts attention from curiosities of cosmology and history to emphasise instead the importance of simple humility before the divine. Much of this material is noticeable only as a different type of given cause, often supplied for a different kind of phenomenon. For instance, in one chapter a man asks ʿAlī why he is unable to perform the night time prayer, and the Imam replies that it is because he is fettered by his sins.[49] A world away from the sweeping *miʿrāj* narrative with which the section began, here what are being explained are not ritual particulars to be practiced by all, but rather the spiritual woes of an individual. Correspondingly, the answer does not lie in the career of the Prophet or the mysteries of the cosmos, but rather in that individual's spiritual and moral state. Some chapters in a similar vein do not explain a known phenomenon or ruling but rather a proverbial moral truth. There is a chapter on the reason why two men may enter a mosque, one worshipful, one corrupt, and yet when they leave the pious one is corrupted and the corrupt one has become righteous, the answer being given that the worshipful man was conceited in his worship, whilst the corrupt man lamented his faults.[50] One of the chapters with the most narrations in this section is that on the nighttime prayer. These narrations supply a host of different

47 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 301–305.
48 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 336–338.
49 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 342.
50 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 339.

causes for the practice, but these do not present as conflicting explanations so much as a catalogue of virtues of this archetypal act of piety: prayer by night is dearer to God than the world, it brightens the faces of those who perform it, and it expiates sins committed during the day.[51] Al-Ṣadūq has again changed tone from elaborate aetiologies to tell his readers something more concrete.[52]

ʿIlal thus draws on staple strategies of *adab* literature to instruct its readers, its eye-catching curiosities drawing them into doctrinal instruction and exhortations to piety. Al-Ṣadūq is not averse to his readers learning more of what the Imams have reportedly said on where pebbles prefer to pray,[53] but the host of avoidable uncertainties that accompany *ʿIlal*'s treatment of such matters make clear that they are of only second-tier importance, their presence meanwhile serving the primary goal of inculcating due reverence for God and his Imams, a discourse that proceeds through the work with contrasting tenacity, exhibiting the very same mechanisms of probative force that are so conspicuously lacking in the book's explanation of causes.

While these observations give us a sense of what kind of instruction *ʿIlal* is trying to convey and how, they leave us none the wiser as to why. Though *ʿIlal*'s mechanisms are at home in *adab* literature, the work as a whole is less so, and there are major hurdles to considering *ʿIlal* an *adab* compendium in any usual sense. Most evident of these is the work's exclusive reliance on the hadith of the Imams. This transparently sectarian limitation of sources cannot but have prompted the reader to approach *ʿIlal* primarily as a piece of Imami writing rather than as an *adab* compendium, a book either addressing Imamis who take the Imams' words to be authoritative or seeking to persuade non-Imami readers of that authority.[54] Although one may learn a lot from *ʿIlal*, this will not include much in the way of amusing anecdotes, poetic craft or courtly manners. While individually most of these factors would be unremarkable in an

51 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 347–349.

52 Vilozny has noted a similar instructive voice in al-Barqī's works. Roy Vilozny, "Pre Būyid Hadith Literature," 230.

53 Al-Ṣadūq, *ʿIlal*, 308–309.

54 While many *adab* compendia are characterised by an extremely broad range of sources, from princes to prophets to buffoons to Brahmins, it is also true that others are far more restricted, sometimes on doctrinal grounds, with writers like Ibn Abī al-Dunyā (d. 208/823) selecting material largely from the Qurʾān, the hadith and notables of Islamic piety (See Kilpatrick, "Adab," 55; Leder and Kilpatrick, "Classical Arabic Prose Literature," 20; Stefan Sperl, "Man's 'Hollow Core': Ethics and Aesthetics in Hadith Literature and Classical Arabic Adab." *BSOAS* 70, no. 3 (2007), *passim*). However, al-Ṣadūq's reliance solely on the hadith of the Imams aligns his composition much more specifically, the grouping of these eleven individuals as authorities (the 12th being largely silent) being specific to the Imamiyya and their offshoots.

adab compendium, together they engender a work whose presence in *adab* literature by most definitions is at best marginal. While we can know little about the work's immediate reception, it has certainly been read exclusively as an Imami hadith compendium in subsequent centuries. This is to be contrasted with *adab* compendia written by other Buwayhid Shiʿis like al-Sharīf al-Raḍī (d. 406/1015), al-Sharīf al-Murtaḍā and al-Ābī, who include both the prominently placed words of the Imams and unapologetically Shiʿi sentiments, but do so in the context of the *adab* compendium's usual chorus, with the result that their works have found ongoing acceptance as such. This being the case, there is little in *ʿIlal* to indicate that its primary intended audience was anyone other than the Twelver faithful.

The question must therefore arise as to what all this is for. In the absence of any evidence for a substantially different intended audience from that of works like *al-Faqīh*, we must ask what al-Ṣadūq gains from instructing that same audience so differently in *ʿIlal*. If *ʿIlal* ultimately seeks to impart the same doctrines that are laid out in *al-Iʿtiqādāt*, what does al-Ṣadūq profit from rendering them here so obliquely? The *ʿIlal* at which we have arrived seems to enact almost a reverse-esotericism, detailing cosmic wonders behind earthly phenomena only to have those yield, in turn, to signifying the core tenets of al-Ṣadūq's creed.

4 Meaning and Dissonance

These uncertainties are to no small degree traceable to the fact that nowhere in *ʿIlal* does al-Ṣadūq explain what he is doing. In other works we often find him setting out his objectives as an author, but not here. A solution to this hurdle may be sought, then, in consulting a similar work by al-Ṣadūq in which he is more forthcoming. The best candidate is *Maʿānī al-akhbār*. *Maʿānī*, as mentioned above, is of all al-Ṣadūq's works the most similar to *ʿIlal*, assembling an expansive mixture of hadith on the basis of a closely related concept to cause, that of meaning.[55] Like *ʿIlal*, *Maʿānī* is divided into mostly brief chapters, each grouping a handful of hadith around the explication of a particular meaning (though its lacks *ʿIlal*'s identifiable larger sections). Unlike *ʿIlal*, however, *Maʿānī* begins with a discussion of the question for which it is named,

55 We have already seen how the cause of a phenomenon and the meaning behind it are often one and the same in *ʿIlal*. This semantic overlap is also present in the *Kitāb ithbāt al-ʿilal* by al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī and *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim* by al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān with "meaning" (*maʿnā*) appearing as a constant concern in both.

opening with a chapter on "The Reason Wherefore We Named This Book 'The Book of the Meanings of Traditions.'" This opening chapter first offers Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's words:

> You shall be the most knowledgeable of people when you know the meanings of our speech. A word may shift from meaning to meaning, and one can, if one wishes, change the meaning of one's speech without lying.

The second hadith continues in this vein:

> My son, you should recognise the stations of the Shiʿa according to their narrating of traditions and according to their knowledge, and that knowledge consists of understanding what they narrate …

The third and last of the chapter then concludes as follows:

> To understand a single hadith is better than narrating a thousand hadith. No man amongst you understands until he knows the ambiguities of our speech, and one word from our speech can shift between seventy different meanings, and the key to them all belongs to us.[56]

Al-Ṣadūq thus begins *Maʿānī* by laying down the profound salvific importance attached to questions of meaning. The worth of the Imams' sacred speech, he tells the reader, is in its being understood, and it is on the basis of their understanding thereof that the Shiʿa are judged. The reader is also informed of the daunting magnitude of this task, for meaning can change and even deceive, and the Imam may not mean what he appears to say.[57]

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56 Al-Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī al-akhbār* (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Tārīkh al-ʿArabī, 2009), 3.

57 The question of the Imams' capacity to speak in *taqiyya* and its implications for consulting their hadith is a matter of considerable concern for early Twelver hadith scholars. A particularly expansive exploration of the topic appears in the writings of al-Ṣadūq's father ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn b. Mūsā b. Bābawayh, "Ibn Bābawayh the Elder," who not only identifies this variable as the chief cause of (apparent) contradictions in the Imams' hadith (he does not even entertain the possibility that faulty transmission may play a role), but conceives of both the Imams' *taqiyya* and the 12th Imam's occultation as part of a wholly necessary dynamic of ongoing concealment within God's revelation of his will to humanity. See Ibn Bābawayh the Elder, ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn Ibn Bābawayh, *Al-Imama wa-l-tabṣira min al-ḥayra* (Qum: Madrasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, 1985), 15–18. Al-Ṣadūq himself describes a similar dynamic, at least with regard to the occultation (al-Ṣadūq, *Kamāl al-dīn*, 43–45).

This naturally makes for intimidating reading; the obvious response for the Shiʿi faithful to this information is to wonder how they can overcome these hurdles of myriad polysemy to access the meanings in which lies their salvation. Having opened such a fearsome epistemological can of worms at the beginning of his text, then, we can only expect that al-Ṣadūq will now allay these worries by providing a solution. All that is offered, however, is a text that is entirely similar in character to *ʿIlal*. *Maʿānī* no more offers a sustained explication of how the Imams' speech may be correctly understood than *ʿIlal* offers a coherent account of the causes of phenomena. Rather, we meet the same fragmented variations on a theme. Like *ʿIlal*, moreover, *Maʿānī* intersperses its eclecticism with flashes of focussed argument, and the preferred subjects of these interludes are the same as in the former: the sovereignty of the Imams and of God. *Maʿānī*'s discussions of the meaning of the Imams' sinlessness or of the Prophet's words at Ghadīr Khumm are thus predictably densely substantiated, in contrast to its discussion of the statement that camels are like devils or the meaning of "the river of excrement."[58] Like *ʿIlal*, too, the underlying message of many of its given meanings is an exhortation to piety: the meaning of calling blessings (*ṣalāt*) upon the Prophet is given as a reiteration of humanity's primordial covenant of obedience to God; the meaning of that which has its roots in the world and its branches in heaven is a brief votary formula to be recited after prayer; "the three back-breakers" are interpreted as the man who overestimates his deeds, forgets his faults and enjoys his own opinions.[59]

Maʿānī would thus threaten us with the exact same set of conundra that we have encountered in *ʿIlal*, were it not for al-Ṣadūq's brief opening statement of intent. By framing *Maʿānī* with his succinct account of the semantic challenges of seeking salvation in the Imams' words, al-Ṣadūq bids his reader seek answers in what follows, and we may therefore assume that *Maʿānī*'s text constitutes that answer.

We may proceed a little further by noting another pattern of *Maʿānī*'s assembled meanings. A repeated outcome of its reported interpretations is the softening of hadiths' apparently exacting content. Interpreting the injunction, "Whosoever is riding a beast of burden and falls to the ground and dies will enter the fire," al-Ṣadūq ensures the reader that God is not quite so arbitrarily malicious, that riding beasts of burden is fine and carries no inherent risk of damnation, and that this hadith is in fact a warning against the unsafe practice of doing so without holding the reins.[60] Another chapter addresses Jaʿfar

58 Al-Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī*, 56–63, 117–121, 278–279, 284.

59 Al-Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī*, 100–101, 280, 297.

60 Al-Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī*, 195.

al-Ṣādiq's apparent declaration that God hates the house in which meat is consumed, and clarifies that this refers only to the metaphorical cannibalism of speaking ill of the absent.[61] The Prophet's reported declaration that cupping breaks one's Ramaḍān fast is furnished with a multitude of metaphorical interpretations and lexicographical alternatives, all removing the apparent prohibition.[62]

Keeping in mind the grim epistemological stakes with which *Maʿānī* begins, this pattern presents an important message to the reader and a part of al-Ṣadūq's answer to his opening problem. The cumulative impression conveyed by interpretations like those above is that the Imams' speech, mysterious and many-layered as we know it to be, may appear more worrisome than it actually is. If the reader of *Maʿānī* comes across a hadith containing an apparently unreasonable command, she is encouraged by al-Ṣadūq's repeated examples to assume that this is due to faulty interpretation, and that the Imam's real meaning is perfectly manageable.

This strategy of instructive patterns may readily be found in the other recurring themes observed above. Just as *Maʿānī*'s readers are encouraged to postpone alarm at bewildering texts in lieu of proper interpretation, so they are also encouraged to infer that the multiplicity of the Imams' words and their meanings boils down to the basic truths to which *Maʿānī*'s disparate texts return again and again – the reality of the Imams' authority and the value of piety. Here, then, is al-Ṣadūq's answer to the question with which he begins. The Imams' hadith can be inscrutable, as befits their status, but this inscrutability need not be a threatening one. Surprising commands, when understood correctly are not as demanding as they appear; apparent contradictions in the corpus ultimately give way to proper interpretation; the Imams' inestimable unfolding knowledge all returns to a few basic instructions.

5 Esotericism, Authority and Text

Maʿānī's disparate structure is thus not a wasteful obfuscation of the valuable truths that it ultimately seeks to convey. Rather, it is essential to its goal of teaching the reader how to approach the Imams' hadith. By lacing standard elements of Twelver belief into an eclectic mix of hadith, it trains the reader to

61 Al-Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī*, 334.
62 Al-Ṣadūq, *Maʿānī*, 276.

find (or at least expect) those ideas in the Imams' reported words even when confronted with their apparent strangenesses and contradictions.[63]

Most elements of this approach map perfectly onto *ʿIlal*. Here again, al-Ṣadūq is teaching readers not to be discombobulated by the Imams' hadith about the role of cows in the fabric of the cosmos, but rather to identify the more important directives that those hadith will reliably supply. The difference comes with the books' governing themes. That questions about what hadith mean should be at the heart of *Maʿānī* is hardly surprising, but what does al-Ṣadūq gain from performing the same exercises on the apparently less essential question of causes?

To answer this we must return to esotericism, and to those texts from which *ʿIlal* appears so different. Though al-Ṣadūq does not offer an explicit frame question in *ʿIlal*, such a question remains loudly implicit in his choice of title. We began by observing that the causes behind the *sharīʿa* were common currency among esoteric traditions, and regardless of *ʿIlal*'s structural eccentricities, the work's title and ostensive subject matter inevitably evoke other works on the topic. In the context of all these other competing interpretations of the *sharīʿa*, we may be confident that many readers of *ʿIlal* were surprised by the book's refusal to lay down more conventional instruction on the subject. Clear from the outset, however, is that *ʿIlal* is a collection of the Imams' hadith. Its framing question may therefore be said to be not just "What are the causes behind laws and phenomena?" but rather "What can the Twelver Imams (and thus, in practice, their hadith) tell us about the causes behind laws and phenomena?"

It is precisely upon the esoteric character of this question that al-Ṣadūq's challenge in *ʿIlal* pivots. As discussed at the beginning of this chapter, claims to esoteric knowledge must rest on claims regarding the source of that knowledge. Thus, al-Nuʿmān and al-Tirmidhī each lay claim to the contrasting fonts of hidden wisdom whence their explanations of the law flow: al-Nuʿmān explains that the book's teachings are of the esoteric (*bāṭin*), supreme knowledge of which is the prerogative of the Fatimid Imam;[64] al-Tirmidhī, meanwhile, sets

63 This is entirely in keeping with the approach to the hadith corpus that we find throughout al-Ṣadūq's oeuvre. Though he authored (now lost) books on *rijāl* and was clearly no stranger to *isnād* criticism, it is an extreme rarity in his works to find him dismissing a hadith of the Imams on the basis of authenticity. Rather what he repeatedly does when faced with potentially difficult texts is to interpret away any problematic elements. Perhaps the most striking instance of this is in his *al-Tawḥīd*, wherein he rebuts potential criticism of the Imams' pronouncements on the question of predestination (*qaḍāʾ*) by adducing ten possible meanings of the word *qaḍāʾ*, thus rendering certain condemnation of any given text on the subject lexicographically impossible! See al-Ṣadūq, *al-Tawḥīd* (Beirut: Muʿassasat al-Aʿlamī li-l-Maṭbūʿāt, 2006), 419–424. We have, meanwhile, already noted his father's similar approach – see note 412 above.

64 Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim*, 1:47–49.

down the fruits of his own inspiration, acquired not by reason or book learning but through Sufi disciplines of the soul.[65]

As al-Ṣadūq presents his own competing authority – the Twelver Imam(s) – he must confront a formidable point of difference: in contrast to the Fatimid Imam and the Sufi saint, the Imam of the Twelvers was hidden in occultation, inaccessible and unconsultable to all until his return at the end of time. So it is that the engagement with esotericism, along with its concomitant claims to authority, that *ʿIlal* promises must necessarily also engage the particular circumstances in which Twelver believers access their own source of knowledge (esoteric and otherwise). It must confront the vicissitudes of the hadith corpus, and so, like *Maʿānī*, its fragmented, oblique form of instruction sets out to teach the reader how and where to seek guidance in that corpus. *ʿIlal*'s diversity of texts and of registers of explanation serves powerfully to illustrate that the Imams could, indeed, supply answers to any question imaginable, but it also shows the reader, with the same system of instructive patterns, how to cope both with this enormity of knowledge and with the medium of innumerable hadith in which it is accessed.

6 Imamology, Imamography, and Imam-as-Text

Al-Ṣadūq is writing in the second half of the 4th/10th century, that is to say in the immediate aftermath of the death of the last of the Hidden Imam's emissaries and the onset of the greater occultation. The consequences of this development for the nature and status of hadith for nascent Twelver Shiʿism are difficult to overstate – for the first time there was no Imam who could be directly consulted for guidance. Those who sought the words of God's *ḥujja* on earth now had no choice but to turn to the hadith corpus. The form of *ʿIlal* strikingly embodies this trauma of absence; the sustained prose of living authorities is shattered, replaced by the disjointed, discordant fragments recollected from Imams who are either hidden or dead.[66]

65 Al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī, *Kitāb ithbāt al-ʿilal*, 69–78.

66 It must be noted that the nature and extent of the disruption brought about by the death of al-ʿAskarī is a matter of considerable debate. While this is not the place to rehearse these discussions in full, it is likely that in some spheres at least the transition from a living to a hidden Imam, and with it the increasing epistemic authority of the community of scholars, was experienced as a gradual process. Indeed, the author of the *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya li-l-imām ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib* attributed to al-Masʿūdī, almost certainly a later fourth/tenth-century work, opines as much (ʿAlī b. al-Ḥusayn al-Masʿūdī, (Pseudo-Masʿūdī), *Ithbāt al-waṣiyya li-l-imām ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib* (Beirut: Dār al-Aḍwāʾ, 1988), 286). See Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shi'ite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 77–105; Etan Kohlberg, "From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-ʿashariyya," *BSOAS*,

This was an era wherein different imamologies were conceived, contested and given expression through the competing textual forms and models of knowledge-production in which they operated. Debates about the nature of the Imam, about his identity and authority, were not confined to the theoretical realm of theological speculation, rather 4th/10th-century Shiʿis' understandings of their Imams were inseparable from their literary endeavours to formulate ways to represent them and thus to communicate their authority, endeavours which carried profound, long-term results for the formation of the traditions in which they took place. Hadith were employed by all prominent Shiʿi groups, but they were only part of a broader literary spectrum. Zaydi Imams had been active participants in a scholarly community, penning their own learned treatises for the faithful to peruse.[67] The Fatimid Imams, meanwhile, could attach their seal of approval to the works of Ismaili scholars like al-Nuʿmān, many of whose writings begin with a declaration that they were passed before the Imam, who added corrections before sanctioning the work as an authentic document of his will. In other writings the Imams' words and deeds are narrated in the third person, but unlike hadith these narrations do not relate distant events reached by a long *isnād*, but the author's first-hand encounters. In al-Nuʿmān's *al-Majālis wa-l-musāyarāt* we encounter the Fatimid Imams, their words and exploits as immediately as al-Nuʿmān found them, in a sequence of fluently narrated scenes.[68]

In such a context, then, Twelvers had to realise and defend an Imamate that was only accessible in the form of hadith.[69] They had to affirm the capacity of the hadith corpus to function as a scripture just as ready to answer believers'

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no. 3 (1976), 521–534. It is nonetheless true that Twelver writers in the early decades of the occultation regularly bemoan the toll that the new state of affairs took on the faithful; see Kohlberg, "From Imāmiyya to Ithnā-ʿAshariyya," 524.

67 Abū Ṭālib Yaḥyā b. al-Ḥusayn al-Nāṭiq bi-l-Ḥaqq (d. 424/1033), an approximate contemporary of al-Ṣadūq, was one such Zaydī author-Imam.

68 A similar approach to more distant Imams is found in some Nuṣayrī writings of the period, for example *al-Majmūʿa al-mufaḍḍaliyya*, wherein again we find portrayed an Imam whose wisdom is recounted as long, unbroken dialogues. For a comparison of *al-Majālis wa-l-musāyarāt* with contemporary Twelver texts see Sumaiya Abbas Hamdani, *Between Revolution and State: The Path to Fatimid Statehood* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 93–112.

69 This does not, of course, mean that the Twelvers were not contending amongst themselves with competing notions of how the Imams' authority might be channelled. This contestation is most apparent, of course, in the office of the *safīr* of the Hidden Imam and its ultimate demise. See Verena Klemm, "Die vier *sufarā'* des Zwölften Imām. Zur formativen Periode der Zwölferšī'a," *Die Welt Des Orients* 15 (1984), 126–43; Hussein Abdulsater, "Dynamics of Absence: Twelver Shiʿism During the Minor Occultation," *Zeitschrift der Deutschen Morgenländischen Gesellschaft* 161, no. 2 (2011), 305–334; Edmund P. Hayes,

needs as an Ismaili or Zaydi Imam. Though the Hidden Imam is barely mentioned in its pages, *ʿIlal* may thus be read fundamentally as a defence of the occultation as epistemologically feasible, presenting the new, post-occultation reality of Imam-as-text as every bit as efficacious a guide as the faithful require, quite unthreatened by the pretenders of other sects. In choosing the esoteric fare of hidden causes and meanings, al-Ṣadūq is showing that his text-bound Imam can answer the hard, exclusive questions that nobody else can answer. He also, however, keeps the answers to such questions at a distance. In the era of occultation and of Imam-as-text, the faithful cannot expect answers to every question under the Sun, but they will always receive answers to questions that matter. The reader seeking to understand the forms of the ritual prayer will be taught about ʿAlī's miraculous powers over the elements, about the unique status of the Shiʿa, and that, regardless of the wonders of the *miʿrāj*, the foremost significance of prayer at night is that it wins God's favour.

7 Conclusion

In *ʿIlal* al-Ṣadūq sets out a vision for the place of esoteric knowledge among the Twelver Shiʿa in the era of occultation. Like the Hidden Imam himself, that knowledge is not so reachable as once it might have been. It is there to be encountered in the hadith corpus, now the sole repository of the Imams' wisdom, but the Imam encountered therein is unlikely to supply an exhaustive account. Nonetheless, it is reverence for the corpus itself that is the objective of this rather reticent stance. In addressing and shaping how Twelvers read hadith, al-Ṣadūq is centring the reading process itself, not the text, as the source of any difficulties. If the hadith seem problematic, the fault is with the reader. The texts are all that now remains of the Imam, and must be revered as such.

The foremost question raised by such a vision is where it leaves scholars like al-Ṣadūq. As the image of the hadith compiler as a faceless tradent becomes untenable, and the extent of the role of al-Ṣadūq and his fellows' authorial agency in presenting the Imams' hadith is increasingly recognised, the question of how Twelver scholars themselves understood this agency is a pressing one. In these early decades of the occultation we have yet to see articulated the ideas of scholars' deputyship to the Imam that are familiar from subsequent Twelver thought. As al-Ṣadūq enjoins unquestioning reverence for the hadith

"The Envoys of the Hidden Imam: Religious Institutions and the Politics of the Twelver Occultation Doctrine," (PhD diss., University of Chicago, 2015), 132–185, 268–361.

corpus, even while he himself sculpts it and imbues it with his personal didactic authority, we must wonder how he understood his own role.

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CHAPTER 4

The Doctrine of *Taʾwīl* in Fatimid Ismaili Texts

Paul Walker

Aside from the advocacy of the particular line of imams and the sacred lineage at the base of this dynasty, the area of doctrine most characteristic of the Fatimid Ismailis concerns various notions of esoteric interpretation of scripture and religious law, all of which might be subsumed under the single Arabic term *taʾwīl*. Although often translated appropriately as "allegorical interpretation," the range of what this word could mean, especially in the Ismaili context is far wider. Normally *taʾwīl* deals with two classes of verses in the Qurʾan, those that are admittedly ambiguous and those of fixed meaning. In Ismailism that distinction is only a beginning leading much further afield. The appeal (*daʿwa*) spread on their behalf insisted on the all-important distinction between the outward, literal, plain wording (the *ẓāhir*) of revelation and its inner, less-than-obvious meaning (the *bāṭin*). The latter component could and often was conceived of as an esoteric dimension, hardly accessible to ordinary worshippers because it was either difficult to find and understand or was beyond the intellectual reach of those who have failed to accept and join the system that conveys it. Commencing with the issue of Qurʾanic verses, the authorities writing for the *daʿwa* could and did explore ways of uncovering the esoteric dimensions of, not only scriptures, but of the very structures of the natural world, with seemingly the whole of scientific investigation brought into play. A *taʾwīl* might operate on the most mundane of objects as well as the most sacred of texts.

Enemies of the Ismailis hope to expose their esotericism as antithetical to true Islam, a perversion of correct and proper faith. Somehow the idea that the Qurʾan contained hidden content that is not available to ordinary Muslim scholars was anathema. But, even among many non-Ismaili authorities, the appeal to and use of *taʾwīl* was fairly common, particularly as a technique to bring harmony on matters of serious conflict between reason and revelation. Thus some forms of *taʾwīl* interpretation were shared with a larger body of Islamic doctrine and they do not distinguish Ismailis from other Muslims. But there certainly were additional aspects to this subject that move Ismaili esotericism away from the Islamic mainstream. A key test is the method employed to derive the *bāṭin*: Is it in some way discernable through the close examination or analysis of the outward form? Is there a logic connecting the two even if it is

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not clearly apparent to all? In some Ismaili examples that have come down to us, no such connection, or at least no obvious link, is obvious; the *bāṭin* in such cases is truly and really esoteric, a realm of knowledge in which no outsider can participate. *Taʾwīl* in this sense implies moving from a shared understanding based on common language, religious teaching, and culture into a secret world where interpretation can lead almost anywhere and in any direction.

Here, then, one begins to see how wide the gap separating the Ismailis from others can be. Two tendencies in Ismaili literature exploit, on one side, the possible ways interpretation can be used to explain the universe and its cosmic structure, from the smallest object or elements to the heavenly spheres of the pleroma, and, on the other, the meaning and significance of scripture, law and ritual performance as it is to be understood in terms of secret correlations with the history and hierarchy of the *daʿwa*. In the latter case, a given Qurʾanic verse is symbolic of matters no non-Ismaili would ever have thought of as being related.

Clearly then this is an area quite unfamiliar to all but those who have been initiated, either by having joined and been trained in the *daʿwa* or by serious scholarly endeavor working with those Ismaili texts that are now slowing emerging from a long concealment and obscurity. Fortunately, the latter task is less onerous than it once was; the number of properly edited and published writings by members of the *daʿwa* has grown steadily over the last several decades. And studies of this topic have begun to appear, most recently David Hollenberg's *Beyond the Qurʾan Early Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl and the Secrets of the Prophets*. Moreover this new work in part builds on several investigations by others before him.[1]

Hollenberg's particular concern in this book is an early emphasis among Fatimid North African authorities during the tenth century on what might be seen as the social role of *taʾwīl* in the formation, cohesion and preservation of Ismaili communities. Adherence to the *daʿwa* provided access to a doctrinal program no one else had the advantage of. The esoteric knowledge imparted to

1 As noted throughout by the author himself. See David Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qurʾan: Early Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl and the Secrets of the Prophets* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2016). It is useful here to add to those he cites specifically for this topic, particular chapters in my earlier works that deal directly with this subject. See my *Early Philosophical Shiism: The Ismaili Neoplatonism of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), chapter 12 "Interpretation and Its Institution": 124–33; and *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī: Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Ḥākim* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), chapter 4, "Double Observance by Works and Knowledge": 62–79. Perhaps the most important single study to date, aside from Hollenberg, is Ismail Poonawala's "Ismāʿīlī Taʾwīl of the Qurʾan," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qurʾan*, ed. A. Rippin (Oxford, OUP, 1988): 199–222.

the novice who joined the group made him or her a member of another world, one not shared by the outside. *Ta'wīl* under these secretive circumstances provided the new adept with a communal identity, a common bond of loyalty based in part on secret doctrines.

This subject as a whole is very large and complex with lots of material that we are only beginning to study in the detail necessary for a full understanding of it. Beyond his work there is much to do. Some interesting progress so far concerns mainly how Ismaili authorities have employed *ta'wīl* in their interpretations of Qur'anic material, a version thus of the broader topic of *tafsīr*.[2] For balance we need also look closely at how *ta'wīl* operates in the thought of the mid 10th century Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī and the early 11th century Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, the two most important figures from other regions (al-Sijistānī in Iran) and later periods (al-Kirmani from the time of al-Ḥākim (r. 996–1021). Both of these authors represent the philosophical wing of Ismaili thought. Another problem concerns the exact way the knowledge gleaned through *ta'wīl* is taught and distributed and on what authority. The role of the Imam is critical at least in theory, but how does it operate in practice? Who does *ta'wīl*, or perhaps who is allowed to do it? When is it not permitted and under what circumstances? Is (or has there been) false *ta'wīl* propagated by unauthorized persons, perhaps by enemies of the *da'wa*? Finally we need more works and examples, particularly to see if there was any standard to such knowledge. Was there a specific teaching or a doctrine? Is every *ta'wīl* of the same exoteric material alike,[3] or is, alternately, as has been suggested, *ta'wīl* interpretation open to different methods and results? Does it depend or respond to circumstances or different audiences? Unfortunately, for the purpose of an investigation of this topic, important works by al-Qādī al-Nu'mān, his *Asās al-ta'wīl* and *Ta'wīl al-da'ā'im*, which purely by title, most especially the first, appear to suggest some explanation of the process itself, in regard to the issue, have proven disappointing. And therefore an inductive approach whereby the evidence required accumulates from example to example works best under these less than ideal circumstances. In part evidence for this kind will have to be sought by investigating slightly odd perhaps unique instances, but the more examples the better.

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2 In addition to the work by Poonwala just cited, two important examples of this approach are Meir Bar-Asher, "Outline of Early Ismaili-Fatimid Qur'an Exegesis," *JA* 296, no. 2 (2008): 257–95; and Karen Bauer, "Spiritual Hierarchy and Gender Hierarchy in Fatimid Ismā'īlī Interpretations of the Qur'an," *Journal of Qur'anic Studies* 14, no. 2 (Oct. 2006): 29–46.

3 For some examples of quite different interpretations (*ta'wīl*s) of the same Qur'anic verse in Ismaili writings, see Poonawala, "Ismā'īlī Ta'wīl": 220–21.

An especially instructive case comes from the first years of the Fatimid state in early tenth century North Africa. Ibn al-Haytham, a newly minted *dāʿī*, comments near the end of his memoire about his earliest days in the *daʿwa* that, in his own words:

> There was no duly authorized *dāʿī* among them but that I learned from him with the permission of the shaykh Abū Mūsā. I harvested from their fruits both the exterior and the interior (*min thimārihim ẓāhira wa bāṭina*), and there was not one of them who did not stay with me and visit my home.... I shall never forget the *dāʿī* of Malūsa, the shaykh of the community and their legal authority, Aflaḥ b. Hārūn al-ʿIbānī. He combined his activity as a *dāʿī* with the sciences of the religious law. I frequently met with him.... He stayed with me many times ... I heard from him the summons for the women (*daʿwat al-nisāʾ*, the "*daʿwa* for women") and what types of proofs he would address to them that their minds will accept and retain. He would say, "God has the convincing proof (Q 6:149)". He said: "This means the proof with which the scholar addresses the one he teaches or the ignorant person, using only what that person comprehends." He would address women and employ as evidence in their case items of their jewelry, rings, earrings, headgear, necklaces, anklets, bracelets, dresses, head binding. Next he would cite examples pertaining to spinning, weaving, costume, and hair, and other items that suit the natural disposition of women. He would speak to the craftsman using the terms of his craft and thus, for example, address the tailor by reference to his needle, his thread, his patch, and his scissors. He addressed the shepherd using references to his staff, his cloak, his horn, and his two-pouched travelling bag.[4]

Here is solid evidence of the *daʿwa* in action giving us a few details of how authority functioned and how the appeal for allegiance to the *daʿwa* followed the path of opportunity. Is therefore *taʾwīl* here a tool being tailored to circumstances and audience?

From even earlier we now have a newly revealed document, a letter in fact, written by Abū-l-ʿAbbās, the brother of Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī.[5] Its true author was heretofore not understood because the later Ismaili tradition

4 Ibn al-Haytham, *K. al-Munāẓarāt*, in Wilferd Madelung and Paul E. Walker, eds. and trans., *The Advent of the Fatimids: A Contemporary Shiʿi Witness* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000): English 169–70, Arabic 121–22.

5 "*Mafātīḥ al-niʿma* (The Keys to Grace)," in Madelung and Walker, eds & trans, *Affirming the Imamate: Early Fatimid Teachings in the Islamic West, An Arabic critical edition and English translation of works attributed to Abū ʿAbd Allāh al-Shīʿī and his brother Abu'l-ʿAbbās* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2021).

wrongly attributed it to al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān. It must have been composed prior to Abū-l-ʿAbbās's death in 911. Most significantly it forthrightly explains the close connection between proven fidelity to the *daʿwa* and the payment of various dues in excess of the minimums required by ordinary demand, on the one hand, and access to the knowledge of *taʾwīl*, on the other. Simply put without appropriate payments, the *dāʿī* cannot and should not provide instruction in esoteric doctrine.

Here follow several examples of the kind of *taʾwīl* Abū-l-ʿAbbās gives in this instance.

> A) "*Did We not give him two eyes, a tongue and two lips, and guided him along the two highways*" [Q 90:8–10], meaning by the two eyes, the Speaker and the Foundation,[6] since they are the eyes of God on earth; the tongue is the Proof[7] because he proves for the believers the science of the interpretation and the revelation; and by the two lips the *dāʿī* and the *maʾdhūn*[8] because they are the gate to the Proof and they are the ones who strive for the religion of God. "*We guided him along the two highways*" means the two paths, the exoteric and esoteric, "*Yet he has not scaled the steep ascent*" [Q 90: 11]. Then He explained this saying: "*What will make you grasp what is the steep ascent? The freeing of a slave*" [Q 90: 12–13]. The meaning of "freeing" is for the novice to produce what his *dāʿī* has commanded of him, because he made that a trial for him. Hence patience during that trial is the scaling of the steep ascent so that God can judge the vicious from the good, "*so that he who was to die might perish after a sign and he who was to live might live after a sign*" [Q 8: 42].
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> B) "*When believing women come to you as emigrants, test them; it is God who knows their faith*" [Q 60: 10]. This is, in the outward meaning of the law, the coming of a woman from the abode of polytheism to the abode of Islam. So they are asked to swear that they have not come except out

6 The two terms Speaker and Foundation are specific to the Ismailis. The first, in Arabic *Nāṭiq* (plural *Nuṭaqāʾ*), denotes those prophets who have brought or issued a Law or Scripture. They are Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Jesus, Muhammad and the expected Messiah (the *Qāʾim*). The Foundation, in Arabic *Asās*, indicates the position of the one who initiates (or founds) the interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of that Scripture. For the era of Islam that means ʿAlī.

7 Proof here is the Arabic *ḥujja*, a term with slightly differing meanings in various Shiʿi contexts, but in general for the Ismailis, it refers to a high rank in the *daʿwa* coming just below that of the Imam. It can also indicate the Imam himself, as it seems to do in this passage. On the terms and its various usages, see F. Daftary, *Ismāʿīlīs*, index s.v. *ḥujja*.

8 *Maʾdhūn* means "the one who has a license, a permit" to teach or propagate doctrine on behalf of the *daʿwa*, in some contexts a person who acts as the assistant of the *dāʿī*. For a complete review of this term in Ismaili sources, see F. Daftary, *Ismāʿīlīs*, index s.v. *maʾdhūn*.

of love for Islam. This is its explanation in exoteric terms. As for the interpretation of it in this verse, it is that the women who believe in the religion of God are the students, since the male is like the teacher and the student is like the female. The meaning of emigration is the departure by the student from the threshold of ignorance to the state of seeking to understand and knowledge of the light and explanation. His saying: "*test them*", it is God who knows their faith best, that is, because their hearts are in the hand of God and no one else can know what is in them. The *dāʿī* knows of humans only what is apparent on the surface. Thus God orders him to exam the believers who seek the benefits of the religion to test out their secrets. If they bear the trial with patience, it is licit for the teacher to initiate them and raise them in the interpretive sciences. A person who breaks and perishes and does not bear up during the trial and ordeal is forbidden from being initiated. "*God knows their faith best*," meaning that it is He who has access to their consciences. "*So if you find that they are believers*" [Q 60: 10], that is, if they bear up during the trial and testing, "*do not return them to the infidels*" [Q 60: 10], that is, to the people of outward meaning which they previously upheld.

C) "*Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, the flesh of pigs, what has been offered up to other than God, the strangled animal, an animal killed by a blow or by falling, an animal mauled by animals, or one eaten by wild beasts except what you have duly sacrificed, and what is sacrificed to idols*" (to the end of the verse) [Q 5: 3], in order that you understand that what is meant by this it is the prevention of initiating some one whose initiation is not licit. The outward meaning of "carrion," in which there is no movement, is the search for wisdom, interpretation and the benefits of proof. The meaning of "blood" is the man who was a member of the *daʿwa* but who revealed the explanation and interpretation without the permission of his *dāʿī*. The meaning of "pigs" is he who affirms all the ranks, and what he hears of the explanation and wisdom, and yet denies the position of the Imam. That is because the cloven hoof of the pig resembles the hoof of the sheep devoid of its head because it is deformed. That is like his disavowal of the Imam of the time who is the head of the believers. What has been offered up to other than God means the one on whose neck is pledged to another than the true Imam since God has made the oath obligatory only to the true Imam. Thus one from whom the pledge was taken to someone else is not permitted to be initiated. The "strangled animal" is one who breaks the oath at the moment it is taken from him, so that he says: Give me time and have patience with me. The "animal killed by a blow" is the one the shepherd has beaten to death. The shepherd is

like the *dāʿī*, and beating with a staff is like putting him to the test. The sheep is like the novice. When the *dāʿī* puts the novice to the test and the novice bears up patiently through the ordeal, he is allowed to initiate him in the keys to knowledge. If he flees and does not bear patiently the ordeal, initiation in knowledge is forbidden. The "one killed by a fall" is the person who cannot bear the interpretation nor embrace its understanding. He may have once reached one of the ranks but then reverted to the outward meaning and its people. The "one mauled by wild animals" is he who argues with the *dāʿī* and debates without any understanding or insight. Then he does not cease from that when he is forbidden. The "animal eaten by a wild beast except the one you are able to properly slaughter" means him whom someone from the people of outward meaning has corrupted and who has turned his face from the *daʿwa* of the truth. He is not to be initiated, except when properly slaughtered, meaning someone who has renewed the oath of covenant. What has been sacrificed on a stone altar is he from whom a pledge has been taken to an imam who appointed himself without having been chosen for it by God, and even so he puts himself in the position of God's guardian and summons the people to himself. All these people are forbidden to be initiated in the explanation and the interpretation.

D) Regard here the *Sunna* concerning the newborn. When he exits from the womb of his mother, a dinar is paid on his behalf. He is anointed, swaddled, his head rubbed with honey and aloe, then made to drink milk after that. He is given a name on the seventh day and the middle of his head is shaved. An offering is given for it and his hair weighed in silver and a sacrifice slaughtered for him. The meaning of the newborn is the novice; the meaning of paying a dinar on his behalf is what is required of the novice in fulfillment of the private consultation; the meaning of swaddling is the oath by which he swears allegiance. The meaning of honey and aloe is what is revealed to him of the explanation and interpretation and what patience is required of him in keeping that secret. The meaning of his being named on the seventh day is revealing to him the Imam of the age because the Imam, who is the master of the age, is one of the seven Imams. The meaning of shaving the middle of his head is disclosing the matter of his chief who is the Imam of the age. The offering for him by the weight of his hair has the meaning of redemption, and the sacrifice for him has the meaning of breaking him, that is, the novice by another novice and the taking from him of the oath. That is because, when he reaches maturity, he is then able to educate another. About that God has said: "*Test the orphans until they reach the age of marriage; if you*

find sound judgment in them, turn over to them their property and do not consume it" [Q 4: 6]. In this sense God says: "*and what you taught the hunting animals to catch in the manner directed by God; eat what they catch for you*" [Q 5: 4], that is, take the oath from the one they have broken and control him, "*and mention the name of God*", that is, call upon him, when taking the oath of him, to maintain obedience to the Imam and the Proof. At the moment of the sacrifice, it is said: "In the name of God". "In the name of" (*bism*) consists of three letters, indicating thus the Proof (*ḥujja*); Allah has four letters, pointing to the Imam. For this reason God says: "*And when the children reach the age of puberty, let them ask for permission just as those before them asked for permission*" [Q 24: 59].

E) And take note of the actions of the pilgrimage and its rituals and the indication of what God imposed on every believer in producing his sacrifice by which he seeks to draw closer to God. God, the Exalted, says: "*A duty owed to God is the pilgrimage to the House for whoever has the means to do it*" [Q 3: 97]. Having the ability to do it involves provisions, riding animal, a secure passage, and expenditures for one's dependents. A person who has that must make the pilgrimage. There is no latitude in that for any Muslim by unanimous agreement. The meaning here of provisions is knowledge which is the nourishment of souls; the meaning of riding animal is the *dāʿī* who journeys with you in God's religion from rank to rank until he causes you to attain your place of safety and security and makes you understand what is obligatory, both for you and against you. He who finds a *dāʿī* is obliged to seek the Imam, until reaching him and accepting obedience to him, acknowledging the ranks of God's religion from the time of Adam to the Resurrection. The meaning of discarding the sown cloths you wore previously is your discarding knowledge of every imam of literal meaning that you had previously adhered to. Your putting on the covering and cloak is your entering into obedience to the Imam and the Proof. Your purification with water is your accepting the knowledge by which you are purified. Your saying: "*Labbayka*, O God, *Labbayka*" [Here I am, O God, here I am] is your responding to the Imam of the age when he sends the *dāʿī* to you to summon you to God and to knowledge of His religion, and you answered him with compliance, that is, affirmation. Your acceptance of the Proof is your acceptance of the knowledge and your acknowledgment that he is the gateway to the Imam, on whom be peace. Your circumambulation seven times is your affirmation of seven Imams. Your standing at al-Ṣafā and al-Marwa is your acknowledgment of the Speaker and the Foundation and your running back and forth between them is your seeking your sciences from them

both. Your coming to Minā is your coming to the one who bestows on you understanding and he is your *dāʿī*. Your prayer at Minā is your establishment of obedience to your *dāʿī* and submitting humbly to him. Your standing at ʿArafat and combining the prayers of midday and afternoon there is your maintaining obedience to the Speaker and the Qā'im and affirming both. Your ascending after that to al-Mawqif is your rising to understand the heavenly spiritual ranks and your praying at al-Muzdalifa the sunset and last evening prayer (*al-ʿashā' al-ākhira*) is your affirmation of the Founder and the Imam and those Imams who were concealed.[9] Your gathering of pebbles to the number of seventy is your affirmation of seventy ranks who are the elect of God gathered with every Imam. Your throwing twenty-one pebbles is your repudiating the opponents of the seven Speakers, the seven Executors and the seven Imams.[10] Your burying the rest of those pebbles is your shielding of the ranks of God's religion who are seven heptads. Your driving of your sacrificial animal is your hastening to pay what God has made incumbent on you and every believer as a redemption. That is your sacrifice by means of which you draw closer to God by purifying your soul. Your shaving your head is your disclosing your chief who is the Imam of your time and the recognition of him. Your breaking the fast on three days is your enunciation of the explanation and revealing what you used to keep secret of the knowledge of the Speaker, the Foundation and the Imam. Your returning to Mecca is your returning to your *dāʿī* in order to seek to learn from him what remains that you do not know and that you do not abide with the people of literal meaning and do not put their sciences in a position treasured or valued by you since they are mere shells having no saving value in them.

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9 Those "Imams who were concealed" is a fairly standard Ismaili Fatimid way of citing the Imams who immediately preceded the first caliph al-Mahdī. The usual enumeration would have three Imams between Muḥammad b. Ismāʿīl b. Jaʿfar and al-Mahdī, all of whom went into concealment as a protection against ʿAbbasid persecution. Typically their names are not given.

10 "Executors" (or alternately "Legatees") is the Arabic *Waṣī* (plural *Awṣiyā'*) referring here to what would otherwise be called the Foundation (*Asās*). The term Executor however emphasizes his role as the executor of the prophet's legacy by inheritance. Each Speaker-prophet has one and thus there are, at least potentially, seven in all, if the final Speaker, the seventh, has one. The Messiah, the Qā'im, would be the seventh and it is not clear how he would have a Foundation (*asās* or *waṣī*) let alone seven Imams after his advent, since he normally heralds the end of time. Is our author projecting a future event? Or, as specified in some early Ismaili texts, has the seventh speaker already appeared once, thus commencing a special era in which there is (or will be) an executor and a set of seven Imams, even though he will reappear again later?

Though not stated as clearly as we might like, these examples nevertheless reveal essential concerns at play in the process of interpretation, most especially of conditions for access. Here we find the ranks of the Ismaili *daʿwa* cited and an explanation of the key roles of the Imam of the time and his agents, the *dāʿī*s, the latter being the contact point for each individual novice. It is the *dāʿī* who takes from every new adherent an oath of covenant prior to which no esoteric knowledge is even possible. Next comes a test to separate those unfit or perhaps apt to violate a later trust, who might refuse to acknowledge the Imam, or who could be content with a false imam or an imam solely of outward literal meanings. Once tested by the rites of initiation, the new member only then goes on to learn the esoteric *taʾwīl* in the particulars forms of it taught by his or her *dāʿī*. Notice how little of such interpretation in this context depends on any explicit connection between the literal wording of the sacred text and its subsequent meaning as revealed by the science of *taʾwīl* as applied in these instances.

From these few quite early examples of Ismaili *taʾwīl*, we move now to the middle of the 10th century and to the writings of Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī whose discussion of this topic takes many forms, some quite like those provided above but others more theoretical, even philosophical.

A slightly unusual but extremely interesting type of *taʾwīl* of a different sort but not uncommon in Ismaili writings explains the significance of pre-Islamic religions. Al-Sijistānī offers us a curious example in his attempt to bring Jesus and Christianity under the control of the *daʿwa*. Here is part of what he says:

> The wood Jesus was crucified on was provided for this purpose by a group other than his own, and these people were the ones who crucified him on it, openly and manifestly. Accordingly, the explanation that the messiah [the Qāʾim] and his deputies, on whom be peace, will reveal concerns the sacred laws of the messenger-prophets who have come before him. The cross thus becomes a clear sign and evidence of all ranks of the hierarchy. [Christian] veneration of it is something required of them, as, similarly, our veneration of the [Islamic] profession of faith[11] is [required of us].
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> The profession of faith is built on denial and affirmation, beginning with denial and ending with affirmation. Similarly, the cross is two pieces of wood: a piece that stands on its own and another piece whose placement depends entirely on the placement of the other. The profession of faith is four words. Likewise the cross has four extremities. The end fixed in the ground has the position of the master of interpretation [*taʾwīl*] in

11 The profession is to say: "There is no god but God" (*lā ilāha ilā Allāh*).

> whom the souls of the seekers attain lasting security. The end opposite this, high in the air, has the position of the master of divine inspiration [*ta'yīd*], in whom the souls of the inspired ones attain lasting security. The two ends in the middle, which are to the left and the right, indicate the Follower [i.e. the universal soul] and the Speaking-prophet, of who one is the master of natural composition [*tarkīb*] and the other master of scriptural compilation [*ta'līf*]. One is opposite the other, with the end standing for the Preceder [intellect] sustaining all of the edges.[12]

The works of al-Sijistani contain many more examples of this type of *ta'wīl* but what is of particular significance is his discussion of interpretation in a more theoretical context, especially as paired or associated with "revelation" (*tanzīl*). The latter he says resembles something having an undeveloped, organic form. By contrast *ta'wīl* is like a product of the craftsman who works with the organic material in order to make it into something of greater benefit. His own example is wood, which in a natural state is good only as fuel for a fire but when crafted becomes an object of greater benefit such as a door, a box, arrows, spears, a pulpit or a chair. Thus *tanzīl*, the revelation in plain form, is a set of "subjective items and restricted phrases beneath which there are hidden meanings. *Ta'wīl* on the part of its master puts all of these into a proper context and extracts from each phrase what was intended by it." The master of *ta'wīl* approaches each word or phrase in order to adduce its original meanings. Here we have the idea of exploiting and/or nurturing what was originally only "seeded" in the scripture.

For al-Kirmānī, writing in the first two decades of the 11th century, a tendency already evident in al-Sijistānī, to rationalize the process of moving from the *ẓāhir* to the *bāṭin* – in effect to make it less mysterious and esoteric – becomes clearer as if to correct an earlier restrictive sense for *ta'wīl*. Where the older forms needed to be kept from public view, certain aspects of some statements of al-Kirmānī suggest the possibility of an open discourse almost as if to engage in debate. Al-Kirmānī was in part most concerned to deny enemies and detractors their claim that secret interpretations made of Ismailism a heresy. Or that, by adhering only to hidden notions of what the law actually meant, an Ismaili could avoid performing and following Islamic rites, rituals and ordinary belief. Al-Kirmānī would insist that both *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* must be accepted,

12 *The Wellsprings of Wisdom*: A study of Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī's *Kitāb al-yanābī'*, including a complete English translation with commentary and notes on the Arabic text. (Salt Lake City, Utah: University of Utah Press, 1994), paragraphs 146 and 147.

practiced and observed; one without the other was for him intolerable. Both together are absolutely essential. Here is what he says:

> When we specify the *ẓāhir*, we mean by it the acts ordained in the law in accord with the subordinate parts of the profession of faith, namely alms-giving, fasting, pilgrimages, *jihād*, and the implementation of the acts of submission to the persons in authority, on whom be peace. All these acts and rites in the law which, when they come into being, are perceptible to the senses, are commonly perceived by every creature that possesses senses that are sound, as is the case with regards to the heavens, the earth, and what is between them of the planets, the elements, the natural kingdoms, which, in that they are evident and obvious, are subject to sensation and every creature having sensation perceives them equally without any differentiation between one over another. If we specify the *bāṭin*, we mean by it the knowledge that accrues from knowing the existence of a thing and its elements and of its existing as a thing and whether it is manifest or hidden, of its measure and its form, of the cause of its existence, of the purpose because of which it has existence, which is a matter not subject to sense perception but is rather known by the mind, and of eternal punishment, the gathering, the reckoning, paradise and the inferno, the temporal contingency of the world and its annihilation, and other matters which, since they are esoteric (*bāṭinī*) in essence and hence not subject to sensation, all groups do not participate in perceiving but instead one group only is singled out to acquire it.[13]

He explains further:

> … The absolute oneness of God and an understanding of the hierarchy of beings is a truly difficult matter, but, by means of it, there is life for the souls and their eternity, and salvation from the world of nature…. Since it is so difficult, God knew that His servants as a whole would never achieve the level at which they could obtain a perfect understanding of God's hierarchy or of His own absolute unity. Therefore God favored among them all a single person in each age for that perfection and purity, as is the case with the Imam, may God bless him profusely. That is to say, God favored him with a perfection in which he receives completely the emanation that flows into the world of nature from the angels. This man, by

13 *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī: Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Ḥākim*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), 75.

> virtue of that emanation, is the guardian over the rest.... God has thus made obedience and love of him obligatory ...[14]

Several conclusions arise as a result of this brief survey of Ismaili *ta'wīl*. It is obvious from the samples given above that, although we possess a rich trove of materials produced by the *da'wa*, once carefully secluded but now available to us, many unanswered – or insufficiently answered – questions remain. Al-Sijistānī and al-Kirmānī's discussions of theory help, but they, too, prompt more questions. Still, since this area is a key feature of Ismaili thought in general, we need to pay it added attention both in the details of specific examples and in view of the broader scheme of their doctrinal program.

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14 *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī: Ismaili thought in the Age of al-Ḥākim*, 76, quoted from al-Kirmani's *al-Riyāḍ*.

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CHAPTER 5

Principles of Fatimid Symbolic Interpretation (*Taʾwīl*): An Analysis Based on the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* of al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078)

Tahera Qutbuddin

For Muslims, the Qurʾan and Shariʿa (divine law) brought by the Prophet Muḥammad in the early 7th century AD constitute God's message to humankind. Since the very beginning of Islam, they have sought to understand their true meaning. They grappled with some of the Qurʾan's apparent contradictions. For example, which verse should be taken at face value, the one that states, "Fresh faces will look at God on the last day," or the one that says, "Eyes do not see him"?[1] They also tried to make sense of the seeming arbitrariness of the Shariʿa. Why pray two cycles in the dawn prayer, for example, and three in the sunset prayer? Why fast in the month of Ramadan and not, say, Safar? The Fatimid hermeneutic answered these questions by harmonizing revelation and reason through the divinely guided authoritative exposition of the living Imam, from the line of the Prophet Muḥammad and his Legatee ʿAlī.[2] In

1 Qurʾan *al-Qiyāma* (75:23–24): وُجُوهٌ يَوْمَئِذٍ نَاضِرَةٌ إِلَىٰ رَبِّهَا نَاظِرَةٌ; *al-Anʿām* (6:103): لا تُدْرِكُهُ ٱلْأَبْصَار.

2 The Fatimids were an Ismaili Shiʿa dynasty who ruled a large part of the Muslim world from the 10th up to the 12th century, with their caliphal seat first in North Africa and then Egypt. They claimed descent from the Prophet Muḥammad through his daughter Fāṭima Zahrāʾ and her husband ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib, hence their dynastic title. Challenging the ʿAbbasids of Baghdad, they also claimed to be the sole rightful caliphs and Imams of the Muslim community, who had inherited Muḥammad's temporal and spiritual authority. They referred to their religio-political mission as the *daʿwa* (lit. "call") referring to the Qurʾanic verse, "The true *daʿwa* belongs to God" (Qurʾan *al-Raʿd* 13:14: لَهُ دَعْوَةُ الْحَقِّ). On Fatimid history, see Paul E. Walker, *Exploring an Islamic Empire: Fatimid History and its Sources* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2002); Heinz Halm. *The Empire of the Mahdi: The Rise of the Fatimids*, trans. Michael Bonner (Leiden: Brill, 1996); Farhad Daftary, *The Ismaʿilis: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007); Michael Brett, *The Fatimid Empire* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017); Shainool Jiwa, *The Fatimids: 1. The Rise of A Muslim Empire* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2018). For a summary of their philosophy, see Paul E. Walker, "The Ismāʿīlīs" in *The Cambridge*

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this article I draw on the collected lectures of the preeminent Fatimid scholar al-Muʾayyad fī-l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078) – *al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya* – to distill and analyze the principles of Fatimid symbolic interpretation, "*taʾwīl*."

No Fatimid text enumerates the principles of their hermeneutic system; these have to be inferred. Within the genre of Fatimid *taʾwīl*, al-Muʾayyad's *Majālis* is the culmination of their *taʾwīl* schematics. A deep mine of Fatimid philosophy, the *Majālis* systematically conceptualize knowledge in the early lectures, and then reference it and build upon it throughout. A few lectures also explicate the necessity for *taʾwīl*. The combination of these theoretical remarks on interpretive principles with rich and varied applications makes *al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya* the ideal source for analyzing the principles of Fatimid symbolic interpretation.

Basing my analysis on al-Muʾayyad's *Majālis*, – and drawing also on the works of two major Fatimid scholars before him, al-Qāḍī al-Nuʾman (d. 363/974) and Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī (d. ca. 411/1021) – I delineate in this article ten interdependent principles of Fatimid *taʾwīl*. They are: (1) the rationality of faith; (2) the inversion of the literary perception of real and figurative; (3) the harmonization of the physical and spiritual worlds; (4) the mutual validation of the exoteric and esoteric aspects of the Shariʿa; (5) the substance of *taʾwīl* manifest in God's unity, God's call, and the system and hierarchy of spiritual ascension; (6) the concept of living history, with the stories of the Prophets reflected in Muḥammad's mission; (7) the methodology of *taʾwīl*, presented through scriptural evidence and rational proofs; (8) *taʾwīl* as the true knowledge integral to salvation; (9) the sole authority of the divinely-guided Prophet, Legatee and Imam to interpret the Qurʾan and Shariʿa; and (10) the rationale for *taʾwīl*.

My analysis demonstrates that al-Muʾayyad did not randomly assign esoteric meanings on a case-by-case basis. His explication of these materials is governed by a systematic hermeneutic that, as I mentioned at the outset, harmonizes reason and revelation through the divinely guided *taʾwīl* interpretation of the living Imam. Together, these ten principles articulate a comprehensive, coherent, and logical system of symbolic scriptural interpretation.

Companion to Arabic Philosophy, eds. Peter Adamson and Richard Taylor (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005), 72–91. On their civilizational contributions, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "Fatimids," in *Cultural Sociology of the Middle East, Asia, and Africa*, vol. 2: *Africa*, ed. Edward Ramsamy (Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publications, 2011), 37–40. On Fatimid Qurʾan exegesis, see Husain K.B. Qutbuddin, "A Framework for an Ismāʿīlī Fāṭimid Commentary of the Qurʾān," (Ph.D. diss., University of Cambridge, 2009).

1 Fatimid *Taʾwīl*: Terms, Authors, Texts

When the Fatimids came on the political and scholarly scene, three major systems of dealing with questions of Qurʾanic hermeneutic had developed: The Sunni majority, influenced by Ashʿarite theology, believed scripture was literally true. God possesses a hand, they said, but "without-asking-how" (*bilā kayf*). The Muʿtazilites averred that scripture was figuratively true, to be interpreted in a way that was compatible with human reason. They rejected the Ashʿarites' anthropomorphization of the Creator, and construed God's hand, for example, as his power. The philosophers used cosmology to explain the nature of the universe, and denied key propositions of the Qurʾan such as bodily resurrection. Going against both the Ashʿarites and the Muʿtazilites, they often argued against the necessity of Prophetic guidance for the intellectual elite.

The Fatimids, while endorsing some of their competitors' techniques, firmly rejected all three conceptualizations and distinctly delineated their own. They asserted that faith is fully rational, and that this rationality is accessed only through its true, inner meaning. They maintained that pronouncements and rulings of the Qurʾan and Shariʿa contain a deeper, symbolic dimension that complements and validates the outer, exoteric aspect. They denoted this symbolic dimension by several technical terms, harnessing words with wider lexical applications to Fatimid hermeneutics: *bayān* ("exposition"), *ʿilm* ("knowledge"), *maʿrifa* ("recognition"), *maʿnā* ("meaning"), *ḥikma* ("wisdom"), *bāṭin* ("a concealed entity"), and last but not least, *taʾwīl* ("interpretation").[3] This is the term used in the present article. It is *taʾwīl*, the Fatimids argued, that conveys the true meaning of the Qurʾan and Shariʿa.

Several Fatimid *dāʿī*s – rank holders below the Imam in its spiritual hierarchy, who were also frequently agents in their religio-political mission,

3 *Taʾwīl* is a Qurʾanic term, used in several verses to denote the meaning of God's word: Qurʾan *Āl ʿImrān* (3:7); *al-Aʿrāf* (7:53); *Yūsuf* (12:6, 21, 36, 37, 44, 45, 100); *al-Kahf* (18:78, 82). A pre-Nahrawān oration attributed to ʿAlī b. Abī Ṭālib faults the Khārijites for not being "reciters of the Quran, or jurists in religion, or scholars of *taʾwīl*," (Muḥammad b. Jarīr al-Ṭabarī, *Taʾrīkh al-Ṭabarī: Taʾrīkh al-rusul wa-l-mulūk*, ed. Muḥammad Abū l-Faḍl Ibrāhīm, Cairo: Dār al-Maʿārif, 1960–690, 5:78, events of the year 37H; trans. Hawting, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The First Civil War*, ed. Ehsan Yar-Shater, 17:120). Some of the earliest Qurʾan exegetes use "*taʾwīl*" to mean simply "exegesis" or "interpretation," as is evident, e.g., in al-Ṭabarī's book title, "Collection of statements on the interpretation (*taʾwīl*) of verses of the Qurʾan" (*Jāmiʿ al-bayān ʿan taʾwīl āy al-Qurʾān*). On the development of the term *taʾwīl*, see Ismail K. Poonawala, *EI²*, s.v. "*Taʾwīl*,"and Claude Gilliot, *Encyclopaedia of the Qurʾān*, s.v. "Exegesis of the Qurʾān: Classical and Medieval." In addition to denoting *taʾwīl* for the Fatimids, the listed terms sometimes denote *ḥaqāʾiq* (lit. "truths," denoting the highest existential realities), and yet other times both together.

the *daʿwa* – expounded their system of *taʾwīl*.[4] The first substantial exposition came in the writings of the illustrious jurist al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān ibn Muḥammad (d. 363/974),[5] who was a confidant of the Caliph-Imam al-Muʿizz (r. 341–365/953–975). In addition to major legal, historical, and heresiographical works, al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān composed two foundational books on *taʾwīl*. Based on internal evidence from al-Nuʿmān's own writings, we can estimate that he wrote these two books during the last decade of his life, following the composition in ca. 349/960 of his jurisprudential magnum opus, *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* (Pillars of Islam). The *Asās al-taʾwīl* (Foundation of Symbolic Interpretation) presented the inner meaning of the first "Pillar" of allegiance to the Imam (*walāya*), grounding it in Qurʾanic tales of the Prophets. Its continuation, the *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim* (Symbolic Interpretation of the Pillars of Islam), interpreted the inner meaning of the divine law, and explicated the next six "Pillars": ritual purity (*ṭahāra*), ritual prayer (*ṣalāt*), the annual alms-tithe (*zakāt*), fasting (*ṣawm*), pilgrimage to Mecca (*ḥajj*), and struggle against evil (*jihād*). In his introduction to the *Asās*, al-Nuʿmān says that the *Asās* (presumably along with the *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim*) is the foundational book for Fatimid *taʾwīl*, just as the *Daʿāʾim* is the foundational book for Fatimid jurisprudence.[6] Between the *Daʿāʾim* and the *Asās*, al-Nuʿmān also wrote a now lost prefatory *taʾwil* book titled *Ḥudūd al-maʿrifa* (Boundaries of Recognition). He read out all four books – *Daʿāʾim al-Islām, Ḥudūd al-maʿrifa, Asās al-taʾwīl,* and *Taʾwil al-Daʿāʾim* – in regular teaching assemblies (*majālis*, sing. *majlis*).[7]

Half a century later, the Caliph-Imam al-Ḥākim's (r. 386–411/996–1021) "Chief Gate" (*bāb*, *al-abwāb*) Ḥamīd al-Dìn al-Kirmānī (d. ca. 411/1021) devoted a seven-point section in *al-Maṣābīḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma* (Illuminating Lights

4 In addition to the Fatimid *dāʿī*s mentioned here by name, others who wrote extant works of *taʿwīl* (and *ḥaqāʾiq*) are Abū Ḥātim al-Rāzī (d. ca. 322/934), Jaʿfar b. Manṣūr al-Yaman (d. after 346/957), Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971), Aḥmad b. Ibrāhīm al-Nīsābūrī (d. after 386/996), and Abū-l-Barakāt al-Ḥalabī (d. 526/1132). On the Fatimid *dāʿī*s generally, see Paul Walker, *EI*^{3}, s.v. "Dāʿī (in Ismāʿīlī Islam)."

5 For a summary of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's life and works, see Ismail K. Poonawala, "The Chronology of al-Qāḍī l-Nuʿmān's Works," *Arabica* 65 (2018): 84–162; Devin Stewart's introduction to al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Ikhtilāf uṣul al-madhāhib*, ed. and trans. Devin Stewart as *Disagreements of the Jurists: A Manual of Islamic Legal Theory* (New York: New York University Press, Library of Arabic Literature, 2015) ix–xv. On al-Nuʿmān's *taʾwīl* approach, see al-Ḥabīb al-Fiqī, *Al-Taʾwīl ususuhu wa-maʿānīhi fī-l-madhhab al-Ismāʿīlī: al-Qāḍi l-Nuʿmān* (Tunis: *Centre d'études et de recherches économiques et sociales*, 1976); Meir M. Bar-Asher, "Outlines of Early Ismāʿīlī-Fāṭimid Qurʾān Exegesis," *Journal Asiatique* 296, no. 2 (2008): 257–95 (also includes description of *taʾwīl* works by Jaʿfar b. Manṣur al-Yaman, d. late 4th/10th c.); Bulbul Shah, "Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān and the Concept of Bāṭin," in *Reason and Inspiration in Islam: Theology, Philosophy and Mysticism in Muslim Thought*, ed. Todd Lawson (London: I.B. Tauris, 2005), 117–26.

6 Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʾwīl*, ed. ʿĀrif Tāmir (Beirut: Dār al-Thaqāfa, 1960), 27.

7 Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʾwīl*, 23–27.

to Establish the Imamate) to prove the rationality of the Qurʾan and Shariʿa through *taʾwīl*.[8] Al-Kirmānī probably composed the work in Baghdad or Cairo between 402/1011–12 and 407/1016–17.[9]

Another fifty years later, al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī arrived on the exegetical scene. Al-Muʾayyad had translated al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Asās al-taʾwīl* into his native Persian under the title *Bunyād-i taʾwīl*, possibly during his tenure as *dāʿī* of Fars (ca. 411/1021 to 433/1042). He was also presumably well aware of al-Kirmānī's works, for he uses similar arguments about the necessity of *taʾwīl*. In the last twenty years of al-Muʾayyad's life in Cairo (450/1058 to 470/1078), during his tenure as the Caliph-Imam al-Mustanṣir's (r. 427–487/1036–1094) Chief *Dāʿī* and Chief Gate, al-Muʾayyad consolidated and elaborated the Fatimid *taʾwīl* system in his own eight hundred teaching assemblies, the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* (details of al-Muʾayyad's life and works follow shortly.)

Immediately after al-Muʾayyad, his Central Asian student Nāṣir Khusraw (d. between 465/1072 and 471/1078) wrote several Persian books that reflected his master's *taʾwīl* hermeneutic.[10] These works include *Jāmiʿ al-ḥikmatayn* (Encyclopedia of the Two Wisdoms), *Wajh-i Dīn* (Religion's Face), *Zād al-musāfir* (The Traveler's Provisions), *Khiwān al-ikhwān* (The Brethren's Banquet), and a substantial *dīwān* of poetry. The Persian-focused Nizārī Ismailis – who, during their formative period, were concentrated in Alamūt in northern Persia – access al-Muʾayyad's teachings through Nāṣir's works, which they revere and study.[11]

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8 Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, *Kitāb al-Maṣābīḥ fī ithbāt al-imāma*, ed. and trans. Paul E. Walker (London: I.B. Tauris, 2007), Part 1, *miṣbāḥ* no. 6:28–32 (text), 63–67 (trans.). See also al-Kirmānī's treatise *Khazāʾin al-adilla* in *Majmūʿat Rasāʾil al-Kirmānī*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Al-Muʾassasa al-Jāmiʿiyya, 1983), *khazāna* no. 27: *Fī ithbāt al-taʾwīl*, 207. On al-Kirmānī's life and works, see Daniel De Smet, *EI*[3], "al-Kirmānī, Ḥamīd al-Dīn," and Paul E. Walker, *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī: Ismaili Thought in the Age of al-Ḥākim* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1999), passim.

9 Walker, *Ḥamīd al-Dīn al-Kirmānī*, 31.

10 On Nāṣir's life and works, see Alice Hunsberger, *Nasir Khusraw: The Ruby of Badakhshan* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2000). On his *taʾwīl* interpretation, see Julie Meisami, "Symbolic Structure in a Poem by Nāṣir-i Khusrau," *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 31 (1993): 103–17; Shafiqe Virani, "The Days of Creation in the Thought of Nasir Khusraw," in *Nasir Khusraw: Yesterday, Today, Tomorrow*, eds. Sarfaroz Niyazov and Ramazan Nazariev (Khujand: Noshir Publishing House, 2005), 74–83; Diana Steigerwald, "Ismāʿīlī *Taʾwīl*" in *The Blackwell Companion to the Qurʾān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Malden, Mass.: Blackwell Publishing, 2006), 386–400 (also includes sketches of a handful of Fatimid and Nizārī Ismāʿīlī writers and their *taʾwīl* doctrines). Nāṣir died during the Imamate of al-Mustanṣir, around twenty years before the 487/1094 Mustaʿlī-Nizārī split.

11 The Nizārīs were Fatimid-Ismailis who professed the imamate of al-Mustanṣir's son Nizār during the split that occurred after al-Mustanṣir's death in 487/1094, and broke away from the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Mustaʿlī. On the Nizārīs, see Farhad Daftary, "Nizārī Ismāʿīlī History During the Alamūt Period," and "The Post-Alamūt Centuries and Modern Developments in Nizārī Ismāʿīlī History," in *The Ismāʿīlīs: Their History and Doctrines* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 301–504.

Meanwhile, the post-Fatimid Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* in Yemen and India carried forward al-Muʾayyad's direct legacy.[12] For a full five years in Cairo, al-Muʾayyad had trained the Yemeni Ṣulayḥid Qāḍī Lamak b. Mālik al-Ḥammādī (d. ca. 491/1097).[13] Lamak transported al-Muʾayyad's *Majālis* and other writings back to Yemen, and passed on al-Muʾayyad's teachings to his son, Qāḍī Yaḥyā (d. 520/1126). Yaḥyā, in turn, trained the first Ṭayyibī *dāʿī l-muṭlaq*, Dhuʾayb b. Mūsā al-Wādiʿī (d. 546/1151). The promulgation of al-Muʾayyad's teachings continued thus in the line of Ṭayyibī *dāʿī*s. Their texts also reflect al-Muʾayyad's teachings. The Ṭayyibī "*maʾdhūn*" (rank immediately following the *dāʿī l-muṭlaq*) Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Ḥārithī (d. 584/1188) also produced an important work, *Majmūʿ al-tarbiya* (A Collection for Rearing), in which he composed and compiled treatises on various aspects of *taʾwīl*, drawing heavily on al-Muʾayyad's *Majālis*. The third Ṭayyibī *dāʿī*, Ḥātim Muḥyī l-Dīn (d. 596/1199), wrote a two-volume abridgement of the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya* titled *Jāmiʿ al-ḥaqāʾiq* (Encyclopedia of Higher Truths). The fifth *dāʿī*, ʿAlī b. Muḥammad ibn al-Walīd (d. 612/1215), drew on al-Muʾayyad's arguments for *taʾwīl* in *Dāmigh al-bāṭil wa-ḥatf al-munāḍil* (Falsehood's Repudiator and Adversary's Death), a refutation of the anti-Ismaili polemic of the Ashʿarī Sunni writer al-Ghazālī (d. 505/1111).[14] In 945/1539, the seat of the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* moved from Yemen to India, where al-Muʾayyad's heritage continued to thrive. In India, the fifty-first *dāʿī* Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn (d. 1385/1965) – himself hailed as the "Younger Muʾayyad" (*Muʾayyad-i aṣghar*) – acknowledged al-Muʾayyad's pivotal role as father of the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa* in a much-recited verse, "These are *dāʿī*s who are aided by

12 The Ṭayyibīs were the continuation of the Mustaʿlī following of the Fatimid-Ismāʿīlīs who, after the death of his son the Caliph-Imam al-Āmir in 524/1130, professed the Imamate of al-Āmir's infant son al-Ṭayyib (b. 524/1130). They swore allegiance to the Concealed Imam Ṭayyib and the Concealed Imams in his line, represented among the people by his appointed *dāʿī al-muṭlaq* (*dāʿī* with full authority). On the Ṭayyibīs, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "The Daʾudi Bohra Tayyibis: Ideology, Literature, Learning, and Social Practice," in *A Modern History of the Ismailis: Continuity and Change in a Muslim Community*, ed. Farhad Daftary (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2011), 331–54; and Tahera Qutbuddin, *EI*[3], s.v. "Bohras." For details of al-Muʾayyad's role in the transfer of Fatimid learning to the Ṭayyibī *dāʿī*s, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry: A Case of Commitment in Classical Arabic Literature* (Leiden: Brill, 2005), 12–13, 96–97. On the role of his poetry in the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa*, see ibid., 299–333. On the role of his *Majālis* therein, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "The Daʾudi Bohra Tayyibis," 337; and Tahera Qutbuddin, *EI*[3], s.v. "Bohras," 57, 60.

13 On the Ṣulayḥid dynasty in Yemen and their religious and political allegiance to the Fatimids, see G.R. Smith, *EI*[2], s.v. "Ṣulayḥids."

14 ʿAlī b. Muḥammad Ibn al-Walīd, "Fī Tathbīt al-taʾwīl (Establishing *taʾwīl*)," in *Dāmigh al-bāṭil wa-ḥatf al-munāḍil*, ed. Muṣṭafā Ghālib (Beirut: Muʾassasat ʿIzz al-Dīn, 1982), 1:201–82.

the flow of al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī's blessings."[15] Indeed, the Fatimid *majālis al-ḥikma* (assemblies of wisdom), particularly al-Muʾayyad's *Majālis*, form the template for the core public teaching of the Ṭayyibīs, the "*waʿẓ*" discourse,[16] and these continue to be cited and invoked in their texts and assemblies. In tandem, the tradition of *taʿwīl*-based "Fatimid *daʿwa* poetry" founded by al-Muʾayyad flourished after him in the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa*. Through the centuries until the present day the Ṭayyibīs have continued to cherish and propagate al-Muʾayyad's *taʾwīl* legacy.

2 Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī: Life, Works, and Standing

Abū Naṣr Hibat Allāh ibn Mūsā al-Muʾayyad fī-l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī was born ca. 386–87/996–97 in Shiraz, the major city of the southern Persian province of Fars, into a prominent family of Fatimid supporters. His ancestors had proselytized for the pre-empire Fatimids, and his father was *dāʿī* of Fars under the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Ḥākim (r. 386–411/996–1021). Al-Muʾayyad's life falls into two distinct periods – the Shiraz period (ca. 386–436/996–1045) and the Cairo period (ca. 436–70/1045–78) – both devoted to the service of the Fatimid *daʿwa*.[17]

Al-Muʾayyad spent the first fifty years of his life in Shiraz. Early on, he served as aide to his father. After his father's death in the reign of the Fatimid Caliph-Imam al-Ẓāhir (r. 411–27/1021–35), al-Muʾayyad became *dāʿī* of Fars, and he continued in this role during the reign of al-Ẓāhir's successor, al-Mustanṣir

15 من دعاة قد أيّدتهم سواري * بركات المؤيّد الشيرازي. Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn, *Dīwān: Jawāhir al-balāgha al-ladunniyya* (Dubai: Ṭayyibī Daʿwa Publications, 1414/1993), 1:423.

16 On the Ṭayyibī *waʿẓ*, see Tahera Qutbuddin, "The Daʾudi Bohra Tayyibis," 337.

17 For al-Muʾayyad's biography, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *EI*^{3}, s.v. "al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī;" Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 15–100; and Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn, "Ḥayāt al-Muʾayyad fī l-Dīn: Dāʿī l-duʿāt," in al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī, *Dīwān*, ed. Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-Miṣrī, 1949), 17–50. For a personal narrative, see al-Muʾayyad's autobiography, *Al-Sīra al-Muʾayyadiyya*, ed. Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn (Cairo: Dār al-Kātib al-Miṣrī, 1949). On al-Muʾayyad's Persian period, see Verena Klemm, *Memoirs of a Mission: The Ismaili Scholar, Statesman and Poet al-Muʾayyad fi'l-Din al-Shirazi* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003); Rachel T. Howes, "The Qadi, the Wazir and the Daʿi: Religious and Ethnic Relations in Buyid Shiraz in the Eleventh Century," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 6 (2011): 875–94; Elizabeth R. Alexandrin, "Studying Ismaʿili Texts in Eleventh-Century Shiraz: al-Muʾayyad and the 'Conversion' of the Buyid Amir Abu Kalijar," *Iranian Studies* 44, no. 1 (2011): 99–115.

(r. 427–87/1036–94).[18] In Shiraz, and from time to time in Ahwāz, al-Muʾayyad pastored his Daylamite flock of Fatimid Shiʿa. He also cultivated the political establishment. In ca. 430/1039, after a series of public debates with local scholars, he won over the Buyid ruler Abū Kālijār (r. 415–40/1024–35) to the Fatimid religious and political cause. Abū Kālijār instated al-Muʾayyad as his teacher, and for the next three years, read al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Daʿāʾim al-Islām* with al-Muʾayyad on a weekly basis. Alarmed by this arrangement, several Sunni judges petitioned the ʿAbbasid caliph, who wrote to Abū Kālijār demanding al-Muʾayyad's incarceration. Abū Kālijār gave in and arrested him. After a volatile run of events, he managed to escape. Spending almost three years in hiding on the road or sheltering in various towns in Iraq and Syria, he arrived in Cairo in 436–37/1045–46.

Al-Muʾayyad spent the next and final thirty-three years of his life in proximity to his beloved Imam. However, he was a constant target of jealous courtiers trying to discredit him in al-Mustanṣir's eyes. The trials he faced in Cairo, coming as they did from within, were psychologically even more severe than the hardships he had encountered in Shiraz. Within this maelstrom, he held various state appointments. In 440/1048, he was drafted to write the weekly public *daʿwa* lectures to be read out by the chief *dāʿī*; al-Muʾayyad presumably gave private lectures himself even then, for Nāṣir Khusraw, who visited Cairo from 439/1047 to 441/1050, reverently praises al-Muʾayyad and his *majālis* in his poems.[19] In 443/1054, al-Muʾayyad was appointed head of the Royal Chancery (*dīwān al-inshāʾ*). In 448/1056, he was charged with liaising on the ground in Syria with the Turkmen general al-Basāsīrī (d. 451/1060) and various Syrian and Iraqi rulers against the Abbasids. With the help of al-Muʾayyad's skilled, bilingual negotiations, al-Basāsīrī took Baghdad under the Fatimid banner in 450/1058. Although the Seljuks retook it for the Abbasids the following year, this Baghdad conquest at al-Muʾayyad's hands would go down in history as the apogee of Fatimid expansion.

In the same year, 450/1058, al-Mustanṣir appointed al-Muʾayyad as Chief Gate (*bāb*, *al-abwāb*), the highest rank after the Imam in the Fatimid spiritual

18 After his father's death until the time of his elevation in Cairo to the rank of Chief Gate, al-Muʾayyad's specific rank in the Fatimid spiritual hierarchy was "*ḥujja*" (lit., "Proof"). The term "*dāʿī*" in Fatimid-Ṭayyibī literature sometimes denotes the rank of *al-dāʿī al-muṭlaq* or *dāʿī al-balāgh*, which are below the rank of *ḥujja*, but "*dāʿī*" is also used as general term indicating a *daʿwa* agent belonging to one of several ranks, including *ḥujja*. It is in this general sense that al-Muʾayyad is referred to frequently in the sources as *dāʿī*.

19 Nāṣir Khusraw, *Dīwān*, eds. M. Mīnovī and M. Muḥaqqiq (Tehran: McGill University, Institute of Islamic Studies, Tehran Branch, 1978), 265–74, 432–5; trans. Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 87–9.

hierarchy, and Chief *Dāʿī* (*dāʿī al-duʿāt*), head of the *daʿwa* administration. For the next twenty years – 450/1058 to 470/1078 – al-Muʾayyad wrote and read out the weekly "assemblies of wisdom" (*majālis al-ḥikma*) and supervised the *daʿwa* and *dāʾīs*, especially in Yemen and India. This tenure was interrupted by a one-year interlude when the vizier exiled him in 453/1061 to Jerusalem; al-Mustanṣir personally recalled him in 454/1062. From 456/1064 to 461/1151, al-Muʾayyad trained the aforementioned Yemeni Qāḍī Lamak in Fatimid wisdom.

Al-Muʾayyad died a few years later in Cairo in 470/1078. He was buried in his residence, the Dār al-ʿIlm (House of Learning), across the street from where the later Fatimid mosque of al-Aqmar would be built; the general location of the Dār al-ʿIlm is known at the present time, but not al-Muʾayyad's actual gravesite. In a singular honor, al-Mustanṣir conducted his funeral prayers.

Contemporary and later scholars alike acknowledged al-Muʾayyad as an intellectual giant. His own Imam al-Mustanṣir called him "a mighty peak of knowledge that no climber could scale."[20] The Syrian poet al-Maʿarrī (d. 449/1057) praised the powerful logic of his exposition, with the words, "Had Muʾayyad debated with Aristotle, he would have vanquished him. Had he debated with Plato, he would have shred and scattered his proofs."[21] In the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa*, as mentioned earlier, al-Muʾayyad was recognized as a font of divine grace and inspired knowledge. Sayyidnā Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn wrote the following high praise:[22]

> Al-Muʾayyad … was Imam al-Mustanṣir's Salmān [al-Fārisī]. He strengthened the foundations of the true faith by the grace (*baraka*) flowing from his noble, exalted *Majālis* and sublime, lofty, poems. God made the tree of al-Muʾayyad's grace sprout branches that became manifest in the divinely inspired (*muʾayyad*) *dāʿī*s. May God sanctify him and raise his station high among the assemblies of the angels who stand in rows and praise God. May God make us recipients of his inspiration, sublimity and affectionate benevolence.

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20 طود علم أعجز المرتقي. Al-Muʾayyad, *Dīwān*, 313; Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār wa-funūn al-āthār*, ed. Ahmad Chleilat et al. (London and Damascus: Institut français du Proche-Orient, 2007–2010), 7:75.

21 لو ناظر أرسطاطاليس لجاز أن يفحمه وافلاطون لنبذ حججه خلفه. Abū-l-ʿAlā al-Maʿarrī, *Rasāʾil Abī l-ʿAlāʾ al-Maʿarrī*, ed. Iḥsān ʿAbbās (Beirut: Dār al-Shurūq, 1982), 1:134.

22 Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn, *Risāla Ramaḍāniyya: Amthāl sidrat al-muntahā* (Bombay: Leaders Press, 1377/1958), 525. Salmān al-Fārisī (d. ca. 35/655), an eminent Companion of the Prophet of Persian origin, is believed by the Ṭayyibīs to be his *bāb al-abwāb*.

Each of al-Muʾayyad's works – eleven extant titles belonging to several distinct genres composed throughout his career[23] – directly or indirectly expound *taʿwīl*. (1) His *Dīwān* contains sixty-two "committed" poems composed at different times and places.[24] Its numerous panegyrics utilize *taʾwīl* concepts to formulate motifs of praise for the Fatimid Caliph-Imam.[25] Its few dialectical poems composed in Shiraz, in tandem with his formal debates there, explicate epistemological discourse and use many of the same arguments privileging human reason vis-à-vis *taʾwīl* that al-Kirmānī had touched on earlier.[26] (2) His autobiography (*al-Sīra al-Muʾayyadiyya*) chronicles his last years in Persia and his first few years in Egypt. It includes the texts of his Shiraz debates and correspondence during the Syria sojourn.[27] (3) His letters (*Rasāʾil*) to al-Maʿarrī, written during his first decade in Cairo, debate al-Maʿarrī's veganism and indirectly propagate Fatimid ideology.[28] (4–5) His twenty-nine prose supplications (*al-Adʿiya al-Muʾayyadiyya*) are grounded in *taʾwīl*, as are his special supplications for each day of the week (*al-Musabbaḥ al-sabʿ*). (6–9) Four shorter treatises are devoted to expositions of *taʾwīl* and *ḥaqāʾiq*: *al-Masʾala wa-l-jawāb*

23 On al-Muʾayyad's works, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *EI*[3], s.v. "al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī;" Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 358–68; Muḥammad Kāmil Ḥusayn, "Muʾallafāt al-Muʾayyad," in his edition of al-Muʾayyad, *Dīwān*, 58–65; Ismail K. Poonawala, *Biobibliography of Ismāʿīlī literature* (Malibu, California: Undena Publications, 1977), 103–9; Ismāʿīl b. ʿAbd al-Rasūl al-Ujjainī al-Majdūʿ, *Fihrist al-kutub wa-l-rasāʾil wa-li-man hiya min al-ʿulamāʾ wa-l-aʾimmah wa-l-ḥudūd al-afāḍil*, ed. ʿAlīnaqī Munzavī (Tehran: Chāpkhānah-i Dānishgāh, 1966), 41–44, 88, 173–75, 202–4 (contains summaries); Wladimir Ivanow, *Ismaili Literature: A Bibliographical Survey*. (Tehran: Ismaili Society, 1963), 45–47.

24 On al-Muʾayyad's poetry, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*; Tahera Qutbuddin, "Fatimid Aspirations of Conquest and Doctrinal Underpinnings in the Poetry of al-Qāʾim bi-Amr Allāh, Ibn Hāniʾ al-Andalusī, Amīr Tamīm b. al-Muʿizz, and al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī," in *Poetry and History: The Value of Poetry in Reconstructing Arab History*, eds. Ramzi Baalbaki, Saleh Said Agha, & Tarif Khalidi (Beirut: American University in Beirut Press, 2011), 195–246; Pieter Smoor, "'The master of the century.' Fāṭimid poets in Cairo," in *Egypt and Syria in the Fāṭimid, Ayyubid and Mamluk eras*, vol. 1, ed. U. Vermeulen and D. de Smet (Leuven: Peeters, 1995), 139–62.

25 Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 105–12, and passim.

26 Al-Muʾayyad, *al-Sīra*, 30–42, 57–60; al-Muʾayyad, *Dīwān*, 191–206; Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 26–43, 235–56.

27 On al-Muʾayyad's autobiography, see Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 15–100; Verena Klemm, *Memoirs of a Mission*; Rachel T. Howes, "The Qadi, the Wazir and the Daʿi: Religious and Ethnic Relations in Buyid Shiraz in the Eleventh Century."

28 On al-Muʾayyad's correspondence with al-Maʿarrī, see Kevin Blankinship, "Missionary and Heretic: Debating Veganism in the Medieval Islamic World," in *Insatiable Appetite: Food as Cultural Signifier in the Middle East and Beyond*, eds. K. Dmitriev, J. Hauser, B. Orfali (Leiden: Brill, 2020), 260–91.

(Question and Answer), *al-Masāʾil al-sabʿūn fī-l-taʾwīl* (Seventy Questions on Symbolic Exegesis), *Sharḥ al-maʿād* (Explaining the Return), and *al-Ibtidāʾ wa-l-intihāʾ* (The Beginning and the End). (10) Presumably written in Shiraz – for it seems likely that al-Muʾayyad would have more use for a translation in teaching his Persian followers, than later when teaching mostly Arabic-speaking followers in Cairo – al-Muʾayyad's single Persian work is his translation of al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Asās al-taʾwīl*, titled *Bunyād-i taʾwīl* (Foundations of *taʾwīl*). (11) His masterwork, of course, is the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya*.[29]

3 *Al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya*: Context, Structure, Contents, and Audience

During his tenure as the Caliph-Imam al-Mustanṣir's chief *dāʿī* between 450/1058 and 470/1078 in Cairo, al-Muʾayyad wrote a weekly lecture (*majlis*), which the Imam vetted, and then, every Thursday in the Dār al-ʿIlm, al-Muʾayyad read out this lecture in the Imam's name to a select group from the Imam's followers. Al-Muʾayyad may have compiled these lectures in an initial draft, but it is likely that Qāḍī Lamak gave them their present form later in Yemen. Today, we have a total of eight hundred lectures by al-Muʾayyad, divided into eight volumes of a hundred lectures each, called The First Hundred (*al-Miʾa al-awwala*), The Second Hundred (*al-Miʾa al-thāniya*), and so on. Together they comprise the *Majālis Muʾayyadiyya*, the work analyzed in the present article, al-Muʾayyad's magnum opus, and the summa of Fatimid *taʾwīl*.

The *Majālis* have a distinctive structure: Each *majlis* is bookended with praise of God and benedictions on the Prophet and his family in a "*taḥmīd*" (praise-and-blessings formula). Both the opening and concluding lines also feature a *taʾwīl* subtext foreshadowing and echoing the main theme of the lecture. Immediately after the opening formula, al-Muʾayyad addresses the audience as "O Assembly of Believers" (*maʿshar al-muʾminīn*), followed by two lines of prayer for them. The next paragraph typically contains pious counsel, urging the audience to be conscious of God and mindful of the transience of life, and to prepare for imminent hereafter by living a life of piety and virtue. The main body of the *majlis* follows, which customarily contains a *taʾwīl* exposition, usually of a verse from the Qurʾan or a hadith by the Prophet. Bolstering

29 The *Majālis*, *Dīwān*, *Sīra*, *Rasāʾil*, *Adʿiya*, and *Musabbaḥ* are published (see Bibliography for details). The four shorter treatises and the *Bunyād* remain in manuscript form, and copies are located in the Ṭayyibī Daʿwa library in Mumbai and Surat, and in the library of the Institute of Ismaili Studies in London.

the exposition, each *majlis* abundantly quotes Qur'an, hadith, words by ʿAlī and the Imams, as well as philosophical proofs (more on this methodology shortly in section 7 of the present article). Although individual lectures are self-contained, a topic frequently continues over two or more lectures. Moreover, we find cumulative progression within the lectures of each volume and from one volume to the next. These two main units of each *Majlis* – pious counsel and *taʾwīl* exposition – constitute a response to the Qur'anic verse enjoining the Prophet Muḥammad to "call to God's path with wisdom (*ḥikma*, here taken to mean *taʾwīl*) and good counsel,"[30] and encourage Fatimid followers to lead a pious life and prioritize the hereafter (Majlis 38).

The contents of the *Majālis* encompass major themes of Fatimid *taʾwīl* doctrine. In short, they expound God's unity, the soul's ascension, and the spiritual hierarchy of the *daʿwa*. Overall, they present a rich hermeneutics of Fatimid doctrine with symbolic *taʾwīl* applications on Qur'an verses, Prophetic hadith, and Shariʿa precepts. They emphasize rationality, harmonizing revelation with reason (contents discussed further in section 5 of the present article).

The *Majālis* may be categorized overall as a work of *taʾwīl*, but what that means in terms of genre is complicated. Its logical argumentation taps into the methodology of theology (*kalām*). Its substance is grounded in Qur'anic exegesis (*tafsīr*) and hadith commentary. Its counsel sections bring in hues of homily and sermonizing. Its eloquent language is a model of high chancery style that is distinct within works by Fatimid *dāʿīs*. Finally, it constitutes an important new chapter in the tradition of the Fatimids' ongoing assemblies of wisdom.

Compared to the mixed denominational public audience for al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Daʿāʾim* lectures, al-Muʾayyad's audience for the higher-level *taʾwīl Majālis* was more in line with the audience for al-Nuʿmān's *Asās al-taʾwīl* and *Taʾwīl al-daʿāʾim*. In his "Thursday morning" poem welcoming the day of the *Majlis*, al-Muʾayyad indicates that permission to attend his lectures was a special honor, "It is a rank (Ar. *rutba*) bestowed upon us by the Imam of the Age, Almighty God's trusted one."[31] Thus, al-Muʾayyad's audience consisted of believing men and women who had attained some level of religious learning. As such, he was working within a frame of assumptions, including belief in the Qur'an and Shariʿa as divine writ, and some understanding of their contents. He formatted the argument here differently than his debates that addressed non-Fatimid Muslims, or his poetry that addressed a mixed audience.

30 Qur'an *al-Naḥl* (16:125).

31 رتبة خصّنا بها صاحب العصر أمين الإله عزّ وجلّا. Al-Muʾayyad, *Dīwān*, 314–315, poem no. 61; Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 86–87.

4 Scholarship on the *Ta'wīl* Exposition of al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī's *Majālis Mu'ayyadiyya*

Many researchers have remarked on the importance of the Fatimid *ta'wīl* hermeneutic and some interesting scholarship has come forth. This includes articles by Binyamin Abrahamov, Meir Bar-Asher, Karen Bauer, Simonetta Calderini, Julie Meisami, Parvin Peerwani, Ismail K. Poonawala, Bulbul Shah, Diana Steigerwald, and Shafique Virani, as well as Paul Walker in the present volume. Monographs and dissertations by al-Ḥabīb al-Fiqī, ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Ḥijāzī, David Hollenberg, Husain K.B. Qutbuddin, and my own book on al-Mu'ayyad's *ta'wīl*-infused poetry also address Fatimid *ta'wīl*. (I have listed these works in the Bibliography, and, in the following pages, I engage with them where relevant.) Among these, some works briefly reference al-Mu'ayyad's *ta'wīl*. In a five-page article titled "Ismaili Exegesis of the Qur'an in *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya* of al-Mu'ayyad fī al-Dīn al-Shīrāzī," Peerwani argues that al-Mu'ayyad's exegesis makes the Qur'an continually applicable to humankind through the Imam's current interpretation. Though insightful, this is one aspect of many. Importantly, she misses the crucial role of reason, which, as I show here, is the starting point of al-Mu'ayyad's *ta'wīl* system. Finally, none of the authors mentioned above – notwithstanding their welcome contributions – probe deeply the full substance of the *Majālis Mu'ayyadiyya*, or expansively deconstruct its systemic aspects. This is the topic of the present article.

5 The Principles of Fatimid *Ta'wīl*

In the following pages, I focus on al-Mu'ayyad's *Majālis*, while also referring to the works of al-Qāḍī al-Nu'man and al-Kirmānī, to identify and analyze ten interdependent principles of Fatimid *ta'wīl*. Each principle is a complex proposition that could be discussed at much greater length, and additional tenets could be added. My goal, however, is to lay out a framework of Fatimid *ta'wīl*, rather than a comprehensive study of its content. As such, I limit my remarks on each principle to its primary facets, and include some sample quotations and illustrations.

5.1 *Rationality of Faith*

A vital principle of Fatimid *ta'wīl* is that religion is based on reason.[32] In the first two framing lectures of his *Majālis* and elsewhere, al-Mu'ayyad lays out

32 For an overview of Muslim expositions harmonizing revelation with reason, see Ian Netton, ed. *Islamic Philosophy and Theology: Critical Concepts in Islamic Thought*. Vol. 2:

proofs for the rationality of the Qur'an and Shari'a. The following is a summary paraphrase of his main arguments:

- The Qur'an addresses humans who are rational beings. Moreover, it addresses them *qua* people of reason in several verses, such as "Be conscious of God, people of reason!"[33] and "Truly, [the Qur'an] is remembrance for people of reason."[34] Describing the recipient of a message as rational would be meaningless if the message itself were irrational. Since its message is for rational beings, the Qur'an must be rational (*Majlis* 1).
- Creatures without mature intelligence – all animals and some humans: children, the mentally unstable, and the sleeping – are not legally responsible (*mukallaf*), that is, they are not expected to undertake the commands of the Shari'a or held accountable for contravening them. Since the Shari'a is required only of rational beings, and is predicated on their rationality, it must be based on reason (*Majlis* 1).
- God's message either has meaning or it does not. If it does not, then the case is that of a letter-writer who does not know the meaning of what he writes, and this is patently absurd. If it does have meaning but God does not reveal it, then why reveal the message at all? If you believe the Qur'an and Shari'a constitute God's message, you must believe that they have rational meaning (*Majlis* 54).
- Muḥammad either knew the rationale of the Shari'a directives he brought or he did not. If he did not, then his messengerhood would be flawed, for he would be expecting logical beings to follow a law whose logic he could not explain. If he did know the rationale but chose to hide it, he did not convey the message fully; it was incumbent upon him to teach the rationale to his community along with the law. If you are Muslim and revere and trust Muḥammad, it has to be clear to you that Muḥammad knew and conveyed the rationale of the Shari'a, for he stated in public, "God, bear witness that I have conveyed your message!" (*Majlis* 1).
- Believing in something entails accepting it as true, and one cannot accept something as true without understanding it. Reason is necessary to "see" the hereafter, which cannot be seen by sense perception. The Qur'an's expectation of Muslims' "belief in the hidden truths" (*īmān bi l-ghayb*)[35] – such as Paradise, Hellfire, God's throne and angels – is an expectation of them

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Revelation and Reason (New York: Routledge, 2007). Many other studies, before and after Netton, also address reason vs. revelation in Islam.

33 Qur'an *al-Mā'ida* (5:100): فَٱتَّقُواْ ٱللَّهَ يَٰٓأُوْلِي ٱلأَلۡبَٰب.

34 Qur'an *al-Zumar* (39:21): إِنَّ فِي ذَٰلِكَ لَذِكۡرَىٰ لأُوْلِي ٱلأَلۡبَٰب.

35 Qur'an *al-Baqara* (2:3).

to believe truths that may be hidden from sensory perception, but are disclosed to the perception of human reason (*Majlis* 46, 55).
- The Qur'an is God's message addressed to all humankind, whether or not they know Arabic. The proof of its veracity and its miraculous nature is embodied not in its language, but in its meaning (*Majlis* 2).[36]
- Reward and punishment are based on reason. If the Shariʿa were not based on reason, there could be no reward for carrying it out, and no punishment for not doing so (*Majlis* 2).
- The philosophers claim knowledge of the rational sciences, and Muslims generally consider them unbelievers because they deny the necessity of Prophetic guidance. If philosophers were to ask Muḥammad about the nature of the unseen and about the directives of the Shariʿa, would he say to them there is no rational proof? Would that approach support his prophecy? (*Majlis* 2).

Al-Mu'ayyad points out that if taken literally, the Islamic scriptures contain inconsistent pronouncements and random directives. Some I have mentioned earlier; here are further examples: In *Majlis* 1, al-Mu'ayyad asks why the Shariʿa mandates five ritual prayers and not six or seven. In *Majlis* 74, he cites two Qur'an verses about the creation of the heavens and earth, one claiming it took place in six days, the other that it happened in an instant upon God's command of "Be".[37] In *Majlis* 91, he gives several illustrations: One verse says God predestines human behavior, another asserts free choice.[38] One verse states that the sky was created first, while another states that the earth was created first.[39] In *Majlis* 81, al-Mu'ayyad says that the verse about God sending rainstorms "in order to stabilize your feet" is in its literal sense at odds with nature, for feet slip on wet ground rather than being steadied.[40] Fatimid *dāʿī*s posed similar destabilizing or "*tashkīk*" questions to potential converts.[41] In his

36 Similarly, Sulṭān al-Khaṭṭāb ibn al-Ḥasan al-Hamdānī (d. 533/1138) – the first Ṭayyibī "*maʾdhūn*" (rank immediately after the *dāʿī*) – argued in his *Risāla fī bayān iʿjāz al-Qurʾān* that the Qur'an's miraculous nature stems primarily from its meaning. The argument is paraphrased by Ismail K. Poonawala in "An Ismāʿīlī Treatise on the *Iʿjāz al-Qurʾān*," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 108, no. 3 (1988): 379–86. I find quite inexplicable Poonawala's concluding remarks in which he states that "most of the arguments advanced by the Ismāʿīlī authors … are the same as presented by the … Sunni … al-Bāqillānī," for the differences between the two are patently obvious, and have been discussed at length in the present article.

37 Qur'an *al-Aʿrāf* (7:54) and *Yā Sīn* (36:82).

38 Qur'an *al-Kahf* (18:29), and *al-Dahr* (76:30).

39 Qur'an *al-Nāziʿāt* (79:27–32), and *Fuṣṣilat* (41:9–11).

40 Qur'an *al-Anfāl* (8:11).

41 See discussion of this method, and relevant primary citations, in Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Muʾayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Daʿwa Poetry*, 240–42.

Majālis, al-Muʾayyad – like al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān and al-Kirmānī before him – declares that *taʾwīl* is what makes rational sense of the Qurʾan and Shariʿa. He maintains that assertions in the Qurʾan that appear contradictory and rulings in the Shariʿa that appear arbitrary are in fact not contradictory or arbitrary at all. On the level of their inner meaning, they are fully rational and consistent.

5.2 *Inversion of the Literary Perception of Real and Figurative*

Another principle of Fatimid *taʾwīl* is the belief that the Qurʾan contains only absolute truth (*ḥaqīqa*); nothing is figurative or metaphorical (*majāz*), in the sense of words used to indicate something different from the literal meaning.[42] Like its rationality, moreover, the Qurʾan's full truth is visible only through the lens of *taʾwīl*. Inverting the Ashʿarī and Muʿtazilī perception, al-Muʾayyad asserts that the outer, exoteric meaning is in fact the figurative one. *Taʾwīl* is the literal, real truth.

In *Majlis* 3, al-Muʾayyad explains this principle of *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz* at length. He writes that when the literal interpretation of a Qurʾanic verse does not make rational sense, Sunni literalists – who otherwise deny *taʾwīl* – are forced to interpret it figuratively. In these cases, they move from what they believe is the unintended literal meaning to what they believe is the intended figurative meaning. Al-Muʾayyad takes the example of the verse that describes "one who was dead, and whom We [i.e., God] gave life and granted a light with which he walks among people."[43] The literalists, he says, cannot claim this verse to be literally true for the obvious reason that dead people do not come to life and walk around in an envelope of light. So they put forward a figurative interpretation: The dead person is the disbeliever, God revivifies him by granting him true belief, and illumines him with the light of the Qurʾan.[44] Al-Muʾayyad

42 On *majāz*, see Hossein Modarressi, "Some Recent Analyses of the Concept of *majāz* in Islamic Jurisprudence," *Journal of the American Oriental Society* 106, no. 4 (1986): 787–91; Wolfhart Heinrichs, "On the figurative (*majāz*) in Muslim interpretation and legal hermeneutics," in *Interpreting Scriptures in Judaism, Christianity and Islam*, eds. Mordechai Cohen and Adele Berlin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016), 249–65. Al-Sharīf Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Raḍī, *Al-Majāzāt al-nabawiyya*, ed. Maḥmūd Muṣṭafā (Cairo: Muṣṭafā al-Bābī al-Ḥalabī, 1937); al-Sharīf Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Raḍī, *Talkhīṣ al-bayān fī majāzāt al-Qurʾān*, ed. Muḥammad al-Mishkāt (Tehran: Maṭbaʿat Majlis al-Shūrā, 1953).

43 Qurʾan *al-Anʿām* (6:122): مَن كَانَ مَيْتًا فَأَحْيَيْنَٰهُ وَجَعَلْنَا لَهُۥ نُورًا يَمْشِى بِهِۦ فِى ٱلنَّاس.

44 See, e.g., al-Jurjānī's metaphorical description of an ignorant person as dead, and someone who has knowledge of the unity of God as alive, citing this verse (ʿAbd al-Qāhir al-Jurjānī, *Asrār al-balāgha*, ed. Maḥmūd Muḥammad Shākir (Cairo and Jeddah: Dār al-Madanī, 1991), 74–82, sections 70–77).

agrees with the interpretation itself; what is this, he asks, but *ta'wīl*? However, he disagrees with the labeling, which is here not just a matter of semantics but actual conceptualization. He turns the claim of figurative interpretation on its head, asserting that what most people consider figurative or *majāz* is in fact the real or *ḥaqīqa* meaning, and what they consider the real meaning is in fact figurative. The natural life of a disbeliever, like the life of a grazing animal, is not real life. It may be called life only figuratively, for it is temporary; its end is death and annihilation. Disbelievers are in real terms "dead, not alive" (أَمْوَاتٌ غَيْرُ أَحْيَاءٍ), he says, quoting another Qur'anic verse.[45] The life of the soul, earned through true belief and through the beneficence of the Prophet, is in fact real life, for it is eternal. It is the person who believes, who is conscious of God, who is truly alive.

Asserting the absolute truth of the Qur'an in *Majlis* 76, al-Mu'ayyad accuses both literalist Sunnis and rationalist Mu'tazila of changing its meaning. Literalist interpretations that assign to God physical attributes of hands, face, and the like are anthropomorphic and thus akin to polytheism. On the other hand, the rationalist Mu'tazila's refusal to acknowledge the literal truth of these verses is an open refutation of God's word, for in order to make rational sense of some verses, they sometimes add words; for example, "When *God* comes"[46] becomes "When *the command of God* comes." Or they massage the language of the Qur'an; in the verse about God creating Adam "with his two hands," for example, they render God's two hands as one, in order to interpret God's hands as God's power.[47] Al-Mu'ayyad says in *Majlis* 95 that all Qur'anic verses are absolutely and literally (not figuratively) true, and this truth can be understood only when explained by its truthful and rightful interpreters, the Imams from among Muḥammad's descendants.

5.3 *Harmonization of the Physical and Spiritual Worlds*

The Fatimids assert the existence of perfect harmony between the physical and spiritual worlds. They say the visible world signifies for humans the unseen realm of the spirit. This is another major principle of their *ta'wīl*. The terms they use for this binary are "the world of creation" (*'ālam al-khalq*) and "the world of [God's] command" (*'ālam al-amr*), in reference to the Qur'anic verse,

45 Qur'an *al-Naḥl* (16:21).

46 Qur'an *al-Fajr* (89:66): وَجَاءَ رَبُّكَ وَالْمَلَكُ صَفًّا صَفًّا.

47 Qur'an *al-Mā'ida* (5:64): بَلْ يَدَاهُ مَبْسُوطَتَانِ.

"His is the creation and the command."[48] In the same context, they use the terms "the lower realm" (*al-dunyā*), that is, this world, the physical universe, and the realm of "religion" (*al-dīn*). They assert that these parallel spheres of existence are identically structured, the structure of the spiritual realm corresponding to that of the physical realm, and vice versa. They further posit that an understanding of sensory objects and phenomena (*al-maḥsūs*) leads to cognizance of abstract "intellected" concepts (*al-maʿqūl*).

Engaging a correspondence pointed out earlier by the 4th/10th century *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (Treatises of the Pure Brethren),[49] they bring in a third parallel sphere, the human body, as the microcosm (*al-ʿālam al-ṣaghīr*) which reflects the macrocosm (*al-ʿālam al-kabīr*) of earth and sky. Both the microcosm of the human body and the macrocosm of the universe further reflect the realm of religion. Endorsing this view with a scriptural proof-text, al-Muʾayyad recites the Qurʾan verse, "We will show them our signs in the horizons and within themselves, so that it becomes clear to them that [the Qurʾan] is indeed the truth."[50] In this interpretation, the horizons of the universe (*āfāq*) and our own persons (*anfus*) – the macro- and microcosms – are God's signs that lead us to him.

Citing another proof-text, this time a hadith of the Prophet Muḥammad, al-Muʾayyad says (in *Majlis* 72 and 128), "Truly God has structured his religion on the model of his physical creation, so that proof may be inferred from his creation for his religion, and from his religion for his oneness."[51] God's physical creation is the road map (lit. *sullam*, or ladder, *Majlis* 83) to his spiritual creation, and his spiritual creation guides humans to God.

Here are three examples from the *Majālis* demonstrating correspondence between the physical and spiritual worlds:

– Just as there is a sky and an earth in the physical cosmos, so too is the spiritual cosmos structured. The Prophet or Imam in every age is the sky that engenders the rain of divine knowledge. His spiritual "consort" (*zawj*) – the

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48 Qurʾan *al-Aʿrāf* (7:54): أَلَا لَهُ الْخَلْقُ وَالْأَمْرُ. Simonetta Calderini ("*ʿĀlam al-Dīn* in Ismāʿīlism: World of Obedience or World of Immobility?" *Bulletin of the School of Oriental and African Studies* 56, no. 3 (1993): 469) argues that the basis of the hierarchy is the concept of obedience to a higher principle, ultimately to God, and in practice, to the "official interpreters of the divine, the Ismāʿīlī ranks."

49 *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, n.d.), 2:24–26.

50 Qurʾan *Fuṣṣilat* (41:53): سَنُرِيهِمْ آيَاتِنَا فِي الْآفَاقِ وَفِي أَنْفُسِهِمْ حَتَّىٰ يَتَبَيَّنَ لَهُمْ أَنَّهُ الْحَقُّ.

51 إن الله أسّس دينه على مثال خلقه ليُستدَلّ بخلقه على دينه وبدينه على وحدانيّته. This hadith is also quoted by the Fatimid Imam-Caliph al-Muʿizz in his prose supplication to be recited every Sunday (cited from the MS source by Tāhir Sayf al-Dīn, *Risāla Ramaḍāniyya: Mafātīh al-yāqūta al-ḥamrāʾ* (Bombay: Leader's Press, 1373/1954), 73).

individual immediately after him in the spiritual hierarchy, the Prophet's Legatee (*waṣī*) and the Imam's "Proof" (*ḥujja*) – is the earth that accepts the rain.[52] Just as the earth's engagement with the sky's rain brings forth living physical beings, the Legatee's engagement with the Prophet's knowledge (and the Proof's with the Imam's), brings forth "luminous, eternal forms" which constitute the "pure harvest" of believers' souls (*Majlis* 36).

– Parallel with the sun and moon in the cosmos are the Prophet and his Legatee in the spiritual realm. The sun with its rays of light and warming heat is the source of life in the physical realm, and the Prophet with his life-giving knowledge is the source of eternal life in the realm of the spirit. The sun controls all cosmic entities, and the Prophet controls all functionaries and functions of the spiritual realm. The moon receives the sun's light and reflects it, and the Legatee receives the Prophet's knowledge and transmits it to believers; he plays the second principal role in the soul's acquisition of eternal life, and in the direction of the spiritual cosmos (*Majlis* 28). Following the same line of interpretation, the Imams are stars that help humanity navigate the darkness of this physical realm – they are the Prophet's true "Companions" signified by the hadith, "My companions are like stars, those who follow them will be guided" (*Majlis* 12). Parallel with the sun and moon in the cosmos are the heart and brain in the human body; in the spiritual realm, the Prophet and his Legatee are heart and brain (*Majlis* 29).
– Different types of people in the physical world represent different animal temperaments. Some resemble predators that tear apart other animals and devour their flesh; others resemble snakes and scorpions that sting and bite; yet others resemble cows and asses whose sole interest is to eat and mate. Just as a human's bestial traits are in constant conflict with his rational soul, so too bestial types of humanity are in constant battle with the Imam. This is the reason the Imam is the locus of trials in this world, and the focus of the enmity of the wicked (*Majlis* 59).

5.4 *The Mutual Validation of the Exoteric and Esoteric Aspects of the Shariʿa*

Another important principle of Fatimid *taʾwīl* is that the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*) aspects of the Shariʿa complement and validate each other.[53]

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52 On males and females in the Qurʾan as references to spiritual teachers and their students, see Karen Bauer, "Spiritual Hierarchy and Gender Hierarchy in Fāṭimid Ismāʿīlī Interpretations of the Qurʾān," *Journal of Qurʾanic Studies* 14, no. 2 (2012): 29–46.

53 The Fatimids upheld both outward *ẓāhir* and inner *bāṭin* for Shariʿa rites. However, for Qurʾanic tales of the Prophets, they believed it can be one or the other or both. Whatever is unacceptable in its outward form to human reason is intended only at its inner level. For e.g., al-Muʾayyad (*Dīwān*, 193–94) rejects the outward meaning of the Qurʾanic accounts of David's coveting of Potiphar's wife, of Adam and Eve's eating of the forbidden apple,

Although the Fatimids are known for their advocacy of *ta'wīl* and indeed, were often pejoratively termed Esotericists (*Bāṭiniyya*),[54] both their practice and their texts show that they assigned great importance to the Shari'a's physical aspect. In the *Da'ā'im al-Islām* and other legal works, al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān lays out in detail the Fatimid school's exoteric precepts, while in its esoteric counterpart, the *Ta'wīl al-da'ā'im*, he repeatedly counsels his audience to be even more assiduous in performing the worship rites now that they know the inner meaning. For by performing the ritual prayer, they are reiterating with their bodies what they acknowledge in their hearts. The outward practice and inner meaning are complementary aspects of a single whole, each endorsing the other.

Throughout his lectures, al-Mu'ayyad also consistently and firmly exhorts listeners to enact good deeds, to pray, fast, offer the alms-levy, and perform the pilgrimage to Mecca. He enjoins them to desist from all prohibited acts, including adultery and consumption of alcohol.[55] He condemns breakaway factions whom he calls Libertines (*Ibāḥiyya*) – possibly the Qarmaṭīs of Baḥrayn? – who, claiming that they knew the Shari'a's true meaning, reject its outward practices.[56]

In *Majlis* 21, al-Mu'ayyad encourages his followers to undertake the exoteric *ẓāhir* which he chastises them for slacking in, alongside the esoteric *bāṭin* which they acknowledged, in the following strong words:

> [The Fatimid Imam] invites you to enhance your deeds with knowledge. Knowledge is the soul and deeds are the body. Only if you have both will you obtain true life. Only by undertaking both will you stay on the Straight Path. "But the transgressors substituted another saying for that which had been given them."[57] Your Imam rejects those who change and alter.

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and of Abraham's believing the sun, moon and star to be God. Al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān (*Ta'wīl al-da'ā'im*, ed. Muḥammad Ḥasan al-A'ẓamī (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1982), 1:227) states that for non-Shari'a precepts, "sometimes just the outward is intended and not the inner, sometimes just the inner and not the outer, and sometimes both together … but as for that which conveys command and prohibition, encouragement, mandate and obligation, it has a categorically dual outward and inner signification.

54 See for e.g., al-Ghazālī, *Faḍā'iḥ al-Bāṭiniyya* (Gross Failings of the Esotericists), title and passim.

55 E.g., al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, ed. Ḥātim Ḥamīd al-Dīn (Bombay and Oxford: Oxford Printers, 1975–2011), *Majlis* 50, 76, 78.

56 E.g., al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 21, 23, 64, 67. See Madelung, *EI*^{3}, s.v. "Ḳarmaṭī."

57 Qur'an *al-Baqara* (2:59): فَبَدَّلَ ٱلَّذِينَ ظَلَمُواْ قَوْلاً غَيْرَ ٱلَّذِي قِيلَ لَهُمْ.

> He rejects those who discard a single pillar of the Sharʿia. He rejects those who claim that the ritual prayer is a symbol that indicates such-and-such, and the alms-levy is a symbol that indicates such-and-such, while invalidating its physical practice. God, bear witness! God, bear witness! God, bear witness!

Unlike the Qarmaṭīs, the Fatimids professed adherence to the Islamic Shariʿa. But what differentiated them from other Muslim denominations who also undertook its outward practices was their equal emphasis on understanding its inner meaning. Condemning crude literalism, the Fatimids declared that the exoteric aspect of religion is incomplete without the esoteric one. Al-Muʾayyad asserts that each of the two interdependent aspects that make up a human being – corporal and spiritual, body and soul – is expected to proffer worship to God in its own domain (*Majlis* 4):

> When a person faces the direction of prayer, he faces the corporal Kaʿba with his corporal body, and the sublime Kaʿba with his sublime soul. He faces with his corporal body that into which it will assimilate, and with his sublime soul that to which it will return.

The Kaʿba in this example is the symbol for the Imam. You should worship God with your body by praying in the direction of the physical Kaʿba. You should worship God with your soul by pledging allegiance to the Imam and obeying him. For he is God's vicegerent in this world, and will lead you to true knowledge of God.

The symbol and the entity it symbolizes are termed by Fatimid authors *mathal* and *mamthūl*.[58] When the symbol is a religious object like the Kaʿba, or a cosmic body like the sun, the entity symbolized is its spiritual counterpart. When the symbol is a theological concept like the Straight Path or the Pilgrimage to Mecca, the entity symbolized is its physical embodiment.

58 In addition to the terms *mathal* and *mamthūl* (or its equivalent, *mumaththal*), al-Muʾayyad used several further terms to denote the symbol and the entity that is symbolized, many used also by philosophers, theologians, and Sufis: *dalīl* and *madlūl* (lit. indicator and entity indicated, *al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 78); *maḥsūs* and *maʿqūl* (lit. that which is apprehended by the senses, and that which is apprehended by the intellect, *Majlis* 78); *kathīf* and *laṭīf* (corporal and sublime, *Majlis* 87); *jism* and *rūḥ* (body and soul, *Majlis* 87); *ism* and *musammā* (the name and the thing named, *Majlis* 25); *khāṣṣ* and *ʿāmm* (lit. specific and general, *Majlis* 78). Cf. al-Fārābī's interestingly similar presentation of the acquisition of knowledge through symbols (*mithālāt*), in Abū Naṣr al-Fārābī, *Ārāʾ ahl al-madīnat al-fāḍila*, ed. Albir Naṣrī Nādir (Beirut: al-Maṭbaʿa al- Kāthūlīkiyya, 1959), 121–22.

The symbol carries heavy religious weight, but the entity symbolized is superior, being the basis for the reverence accorded to the symbol. In divine consideration, the entity symbolized is first. Hence, the name of the genre, *ta'wīl*, as mentioned earlier, the term being a derivative of *awwal*, "first." The symbol is enunciated later to denote the entity symbolized, and it may change with different Prophetic cycles, while the entity symbolized remains constant. Elsewhere, I have explained this creed in terms of "metaphor as manifestation."[59]

Following are two further paradigms through which al-Mu'ayyad argues for the integral role in human salvation of both the inner and outer aspects of the Shari'a. One is philosophical, the other is scriptural:

- The outward aspect of the Shari'a by itself (*ẓāhir fard*) resembles intense cold, and the inner aspect by itself (*bāṭin fard*) resembles intense heat. Neither can support life. Only a median clime is conducive to human existence. In the same way, it is only when *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin* come together that spiritual life – which generates the "virtuous forms," "angelic forms," and "children of the religious sphere" – is sustained (*Majlis* 38).
- The "pair of each kind" mentioned in God's instructions to the Prophet Noah in the Qur'anic verse, "Place on board [the Ark] a pair of each kind"[60] are the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) and esoteric (*bāṭin*). The Ark is the Imam who calls toward both aspects of the Shari'a (*Majlis* 25, more later on the Ark and the hadith endorsing its *ta'wīl* as the Imam).

5.5 *Substance of* ta'wīl*: God's Unity, His Call, and the System and Hierarchy of Spiritual Ascension*

In one *Majlis*, al-Mu'ayyad himself offers us a summary of the contents of *ta'wīl*. Explicating the Qur'anic verse (*al-Baqara* 2:3) praising those who "believe in the concealed truths" (*al-īmān bi-l-ghayb*), he parses the "concealed truths" as *ta'wīl*, and enumerates its subjects as follows (*Majlis* 46):

> Knowledge of the Qur'an's *ta'wīl* may be categorized as knowledge of the hereafter, the angels, and the spiritual and corporal rank holders (i.e. the hierarchy in the heavenly abode, and the hierarchy in this world), and knowledge of the glorious Creator, gained by negating anthropomorphism as well as atheism.[61]

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59 Tahera Qutbuddin, *Al-Mu'ayyad al-Shīrāzī and Fatimid Da'wa Poetry*, 105–12.

60 Qur'an *al-Hūd* (11:40): قُلْنَا ٱحْمِلْ فِيهَا مِن كُلٍّ زَوْجَيْنِ ٱثْنَيْنِ.

61 ومعرفة تأويل القرآن ينقسم إلى معرفة الآخرة والملائكة والحدود الروحانيّة والجسمانيّة ومعرفة المبدع سبحانه من حيث نفي التشبيه والتعطيل.

Reflecting on the term "concealed truths," al-Muʾayyad argues that God does not ask you to believe in things you cannot see. That would go against the tenets of rationality. The concealed truths may be hidden from the senses, but the intellect's eye can see them. He further explains this argument as follows:

> People who believe in the concealed truths are those who acknowledge the Qurʾan's inner meaning – which is an intangible entity placed within it, and for which the Qurʾan was created like the body for the soul.... If the Prophet were to say, "Know that somewhere there exists ... Paradise and Hellfire," and people accepted this statement without proof, his message would have no merit and the acknowledgement of those who accept it would be invalid.

But, he says, it is incorrect to say that the Prophet has brought no proof for the existence of Paradise and Hellfire. For human reason understands these and all the other concealed truths when explicated by *taʾwīl*.

A detailed list of the *Majālis's taʾwīl* themes is gleaned from the work of the Yemeni Ṭayyibī *dāʿī* Ḥātim Muḥyī al-Dīn, who, in his abridgement titled *Jāmiʿ al-ḥaqāʾiq*,[62] compiles its contents into eighteen thematic chapters. Their headings (in my summary paraphrase) signal the broad substance of al-Muʾayyad 's *taʾwīl*:

1. God's unity (*tawḥīd*)
2. The First Creature (*al-mubdaʿ al-awwal*)
3. God's Messenger [Muḥammad]
4. The Messenger and his Legatee [Muḥammad and ʿAlī]
5. ʿAlī ibn Abī Ṭālib
6. The Imams among their descendants, and the continuity of the Imamate, father to son in their line, till the last day
7. The spiritual hierarchy (*ḥudūd al-daʿwa*)
8. Revelation and divine inspiration
9. Prophets and Imams
10. Necessity for the covenant (*ʿahd*) and for *taʾwīl*
11. Refutation of those who profess divinity for ʿAlī or the Imams, believe in the transmigration of souls, or would annul the Sharīʿa
12. Refutation of philosophers, free thinkers, atheists, and astrologers

62 Muḥyī al-Dīn Ḥātim, *Jāmiʿ al-ḥaqāʾiq*, ed. Ḥusām Khaddūr (Salamiyya and Damascus: Dār al-Ghadīr, 2012), 1:23–24 and passim.

13. Refutation of al-Maʿarrī's vegetarianism, and of an atheist named al-Thughūrī, the Muʿtazila, the literalist [Sunnīs], and the Jews[63]
14. On those who challenge the Prophet, Legatee or Imam in each age
15. Homilies, orations, prayer-poems, and the trials faced by God's elect in every age
16. Qāʾim al-Qiyāma, the last Imam
17. Recipients of reward in the hereafter
18. Recipients of punishment in the hereafter

As seen from this list, the substance of Fatimid *taʾwīl* concentrates on the workings of God's Mission (*daʿwa*) – particularly the mechanisms of the spiritual hierarchy in this world and in the heavenly abode – which leads ultimately to the exposition of God's unity, *tawḥīd*.

5.6 *Live History: Stories of the Prophets Reflected in Muḥammad's Mission*

Another major principle of the Fatimid *taʾwīl* system is their concept of living history. For the Fatimids, the Qur'anic accounts of the lives and missions of earlier Prophets and Prophetic "cycles" (*dawr*, pl. *adwār*) have full relevance to the present time. This relevance is explicated through *taʾwīl*. The stories of each of the Major Prophets (*nuṭaqāʾ*, sing. *nāṭiq*), Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses, and Jesus, and all the many Biblical and Arabian Prophets, are not merely records of events that have happened in the past, they are also an explanation of what is happening in Muḥammad's community in the present, and an indication of what will happen to it in the future.[64] In this context, al-Muʾayyad often quotes the Prophetic hadith, "You, my nation, will experience events experienced by nations of the past, shoe for shoe and feather for feather. If they went down a lizard's den, you shall go down it too"[65] (*Majlis* 21, 155). This quotation echoes the words of the Prophet Dāʿūd (the Biblical King David) cited often in the Ṭayyibī *daʿwa*, "What has happened will happen. What was known will be known. For there is nothing under the sun that is new."[66]

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63 See analysis of some of these refutations in Paul Kraus, "Beiträge zur islamischen Ketzergeschichte: Das *Kitāb az-Zumurruḏ* des Ibn ar-Rāwandī," *Rivista degli Studi Orientali* 14 (1934): 335–37.

64 See al-Muʾayyad, *al-Majālis al-Muʾayyadiyya*, 155–89, *Majlis* 21, 25, 26.

65 كائن في أمّتي ماكان في الأمم الخالية حذو النعل بالنعل والقذّة بالقذّة حتّى لو دخلوا جحر ضبّ لدخلتموه.

66 ماكان سيكون وما عُلم سيُعلم وما تحت الشمس بجديد. ʿImād al-Dīn Idrīs, *ʿUyūn al-akhbār*, 5:33; Ṭāhir Sayf al-Dīn, *Risāla Ramaḍāniyya: Al-Mashrab al-kawtharī* (Bombay: British

Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's *Asās al-taʾwīl* presents a comprehensive, chronological, Prophet-by-Prophet narrative of salvation history. Al-Muʾayyad's account of the Prophets is spread out over his lectures, but he too consistently applies the same principle. Here are three examples:

– Muḥammad said, "ʿAlī is to me as Aaron was to Moses, except that there is no Prophet after me."[67] Aaron was the Prophet Moses' Legatee and appointed successor, and the parallel between him and ʿAlī is a clear indication of ʿAlī's succeeding Muḥammad (*Majlis* 163).
– Moses said to the Israelites, "Enter the door prostrating."[68] Sunni exegetes interpret this Qurʾanic verse to mean the following: Moses built a low door (presumably as entrance to his house) that he called the Gate of Abasement (*bāb al-ḥiṭṭa*). He commanded his followers to come to him through it bowing, but in their arrogance, they entered the door backwards, bottoms first, so they would not have to bow down. The (true) *taʾwīl* interpretation is as follows: Moses commanded his followers to pledge allegiance to his Legatee Aaron and to obey him, and they disobeyed. Similarly, Muḥammad commanded his community to pledge allegiance to his Legatee ʿAlī and to obey him, and they disobeyed. The Legatee is himself the "gate," the conduit to the Prophet's knowledge. Muḥammad openly declared, "I am the city of knowledge and ʿAlī is its gate. Whosoever desires knowledge should come through the gate"[69] (*Majlis* 24, 41).
– Muḥammad said, "My kin are like Noah's Ark. Those who climb aboard are saved, those who waver drown."[70] In the Qurʾanic account of the flood in Noah's age, the Ark indicates Muḥammad's Legatee and the Imams from his family. Those who enter their *daʿwa* by pledging allegiance to them attain salvation. Those who do not enter the *daʿwa* drown in the sea of corporality (*Majlis* 24, 25, 73).

5.7 *Methodology: Scriptural Evidence and Rational Proofs*

The Fatimids harnessed scriptural (*sharʿī*) evidence and rational (*ʿaqlī*) proofs in support of their exegesis, which together produced a distinctly Fatimid

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India Press, 1340/1922), 81, with variant: وما تحت السماء. The text is also found in the *Old Testament*, "The Song of Solomon," Ecclesiastes 1:9, where it is attibuted to Solomon.

67 عليّ منّي بمنزلة هارون من موسى إلّا أنّه لا نبيّ بعدي.

68 Qurʾan *al-Baqara* (2:58), *al-Aʿrāf* (7:161): وَٱدۡخُلُواْ ٱلۡبَابَ سُجَّدٗا.

69 أنا مدينة العلم وعليّ بابها ومن أراد العلم فليأت الباب.

70 مثل أهل بيتي فيكم كسفينة نوح من ركبها نجى ومن تخلّف عنها غرق.

combination. Whereas al-Mu'ayyad's scriptural arguments were common to many Muslim thinkers, and included Qur'an, hadith, and sayings of ʿAlī and the Imams, the uniqueness in his philosophical line of argumentation was its underpinning notion that the world of religion resembles the physical world in all its manifestations. We have seen this idea and some resultant approaches including cosmology and anatomy earlier. Other techniques include function, numerology, and etymology, which the following examples illustrate:

- **Function**: The Imam is God's face, for just as a person is recognized by his face, the Imam leads you to true recognition of God. The aspect of *taʾwīl* connecting the Imam with God's face is his function of teaching humans about God (*Majlis* 76).
- **Numerology**: The 28 Arabic letters of the Islamic creed, "There is no god but God"[71] denote 28 rank holders in the spiritual hierarchy. The aspect of *taʾwīl* connecting the letters of the Islamic creed to the rank holders in the spiritual hierarchy is the number 28 (*Majlis* 10).
- **Etymology**: The Arabic word *nifāq* – which is usually translated as hypocrisy and denotes the *daʿwa*'s internal enemies – is derived from *nāfiqāʾ al-yarbūʿ* (a jerboa rodent's den), which has two exits. If you corner a jerboa in one, he exits from the other. Similarly, a hypocrite changes his position to suit his convenience. You cannot pin him down. The aspect of *taʾwīl* whereby a hypocrite (*munāfiq*) is called by this Arabic word is its etymology (*Majlis* 57).

Another aspect of *taʾwīl* methodology is the variety of possible interpretations for a single exoteric doctrine, each operable in a different setting. In other words, a single exoteric symbol could denote many different symbolized entities depending on the religious and intellectual context.[72]

In an indication of scholarly lineage, al-Mu'ayyad's methodology in providing proof echoes the *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*. In the Ikhwān al-Ṣafā"s narrative of a debate before the king of the jinn, the human orator declares at the onset of his speech that he will bring "scriptural and rational proofs" (*dalāʾil sharʿiyya samʿiyya wa-ḥujaj ʿaqliyya*) in support of his claim that humans are superior

71 لا إله إلّا الله.

72 See Imam Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq's explicit statement about seven, or even seventy, possible interpretations (al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʾwīl*, 27). Poonawala's comment that "differences in interpretation by various authors are glossed over" misses this point. His remark that "any *tafsīr* could be used for the external philological exposition of the Qur'ān" (Ismail K. Poonawala, "Ismāʿīlī *taʾwīl* of the Qur'ān," in *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, ed. Andrew Rippin (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1988), 221,200) is also way off the mark. This is clear, for e.g., from al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān's insistence on the sole interpretive authority of the Imam in exoteric legal matters, in *Ikhtilāf uṣul al-madhāhib*, 8–17, 23–31, and passim.

to animals.[73] The two-pronged Fatimid *taʾwīl* system was presumably in place before al-Muʾayyad. It is certainly visible in his own teaching many years before he taught the *Majālis*. In a poem he composed in Shiraz some years before his arrival in Cairo, he claims his exposition "harmonizes the Qurʾan with reason."[74]

When addressing the *Majālis'* audience, al-Muʾayyad expected them to be persuaded by scriptural proofs as well as by arguments based on reason. As Fatimid Shiʿa Muslims, their recognition of scriptural testamentary materials as absolute proof could be assumed. As believers who had studied the exoteric level Fatimid texts of jurisprudence and history and were looking for deeper truths and rationales, they were also primed to engage with rational proofs.

5.8 Taʾwīl *as the True Knowledge Integral to Salvation*

The Fatimids regarded the inner meaning of the Qurʾan and Shariʿa taught by the Imams from Muḥammad's descendants as the real knowledge (*ʿilm*) that, along with good deeds (*ʿamal*), leads to salvation (*Majlis* 74 and passim). Time and again, al-Muʾayyad intimates that his *Majālis* – which expound this true knowledge – are the water of life, the immortalizing light. Those among his audience who listen with a true heart ascend in level to spiritual perfection.

Here are two further analogies from the *Majālis* explaining the salvific effect of true knowledge:

- The believer's spiritual form is etched in his (or her) soul by the Prophet or Imam, who is his spiritual father. By virtue of the knowledge his soul acquires and the deeds he performs, it develops its full potential. When the physical form dies, the fully realized spirit returns to its Lord (*Majlis* 47).
- Like the development of the embryo into a human being through physical nourishment, the rational soul develops into an angelic being through its intake of the "food and drink" of knowledge (*Majlis* 58, 59).

The distinction made by certain denominations, particularly many Sufi writers, between the terms "*ʿilm*" (cerebral knowledge) and "*maʿrifa*" (intuitive recognition) is not maintained. In Fatimid thought, they are one and the same. *Maʿrifa* is "recognizing" the higher truths. *ʿIlm* is "knowledge" of the same higher truths.

5.9 *Sole Authority of the Divinely-Guided Imam to Interpret the Qurʾan and Shariʿa*

The principle that synthesizes the aforesaid principles of *taʾwīl* is belief in the sole and God-given authority of the Prophet Muḥammad, his Legatee ʿAlī,

73 *Rasāʾil Ikhwān al-Ṣafāʾ*, 2:206.

74 Al-Muʾayyad, *Dīwān*, 320, poem no. 62, v. 95.

and each living Imam after them to communicate and interpret God's message (*Majlis* 52 and passim). Just as the Prophet is the sole individual authorized to communicate the exoteric aspect of the Qur'an and Shari'a, *tanzīl*, so too the Legatee and Imams are the sole individuals in their time authorized to communicate the inner aspect, *ta'wīl*.[75] Each of these three spiritual rank holders – Prophet, Legatee, and Imam – is also referred to as the *Maqām* (lit. "station"). In Fatimid belief, God revealed the Qur'an and Shari'a to humankind through the Prophet, who encoded the message in the Arabic language. After him, his Legatee, and then the Imam in his line in every age, has the exclusive ability to receive direct divine communication.[76] He is thus the Speaking Qur'an[77] and the Living Sign,[78] the Interpreter who decodes God's message for humanity. Humans find the true path to God only by following the Imam's guidance, either directly, or through the *dā'ī*s and scholars that he authorizes and supervises.[79] Moreover, it is only through a human's acceptance of the Imam's rational interpretation of the Qur'an and Shari'a that the potential of his own reason is fulfilled. Al-Mu'ayyad commended the Mu'tazila's privileging of reason and their rejection of anthropomorphism, but he reprimanded them for refusing to accept the Imam's guidance. He emphasized the continuity of the divine message and declared that its living repository is the Imam of the Age, saying (*Majlis* 45):

> Truly, the knowledge with which Adam was sent, the knowledge with which the Prophets were given preference, is now with the Seal of the Prophets and his pure descendants. So why do you stray? Where do you go?[80]

The principle of the Imam's interpretive authority is intrinsically linked with the larger Shi'i conceptualization of the Imamate. According to the Fatimids, undertaking the primary pillar of Islam – *walāya*: mandatory allegiance to the Imam, including love for him and obedience to him – validates

75 On this, see also al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān's exposition in *Asās al-ta'wīl*, 31.

76 See al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 22, 49, 50, 88. The Imam's divine inspiration is usually differentiated in terminology from the Prophet's, the Prophet's is usually called *waḥy* and the Imam's is called *fayḍ* or *ta'yīd*, but the principle is the same.

77 Al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 92, Ar. *al-Qur'an al-nāṭiq*.

78 Al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 22, Ar. *āyāt ḥayya*.

79 Al-Mu'ayyad, *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 58.

80 إنّ العلم الذي نزل به آدم وما فضّل به النبيّون في خاتم النبيّين وفي عترته الطاهرين فأين يتاه بكم بل أين تذهبون.

a worshipper's performance of the other six pillars:[81] ritual purification, ritual prayer, alms-levy, fasting, pilgrimage, and jihad, and all Shari'a rites (*Majlis* 6, 28). For it is only the Imam's God-given knowledge that explicates the true meaning of the Shari'a, and it is only through allegiance to him that the worshipper can attain it.

First, al-Mu'ayyad brings scriptural arguments to prove the Legatee and Imam's singular authority to interpret the Qur'an and Shari'a:

- The Qur'an says: "[The Qur'an's] *ta'wīl* is known only to God and those who have a firm base in knowledge."[82] "Those who have a firm base in knowledge" are 'Alī and the Imams. The Sunni interpretation of the verse – that the Qur'an's deep meaning is known only to God – is illogical. (Sunnis pause after the word "God" in the verse, and begin a new sentence from the words "those who have a firm base in knowledge.) What is the point of revealing something to humankind whose meaning they can never know? (*Majlis* 72).
- Muḥammad said: "I leave two weighty things with you: God's Book and my descendants – you will not go astray if you cleave to both. They will never be separated until they come to me together at the celestial pool."[83] The Imam is the Qur'an's companion, the Speaking Qur'an who interprets it through divine guidance just as it was revealed through divine guidance. The hadith proves that "the Book does not exist except with [Muḥammad's] descendants, and [Muḥammad's] descendants do not exist except with the Book" (*Majlis* 23, 45, 86, 94).
- The Qur'an says: "Ask the *ahl al-dhikr* if you do not know [its meaning]."[84] "*Dhikr*" means "Remembrance," and it is generally accepted as referring to the revealed text. *Ahl*, placed grammatically in construct with *dhikr* (thus

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81 Fatimid doctrine lists these seven as pillars of Islam, compared with the Sunni five (the testament of belief, ritual prayer, alms-levy, fasting, and pilgrimage). Jihad refers to a righteous struggle against the forces of evil; the term can refer equally to battle with outside enemies or to combat one's own base nature. Al-Mu'ayyad has a concentrated discussion on *walāya* in *al-Majālis al-Mu'ayyadiyya*, *Majlis* 6. For a further comprehensive exposition on *walāya*, see al-Qāḍī al-Nu'mān, *Da'ā'im al-Islām*, ed. Asaf Fyzee (Cairo: Dār al-Ma'ārif, 1985), 1:3–98; translated as *The Pillars of Islam* by Asaf Fyzee, revised by Ismail Poonawala (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2002), 1:5–122.

82 Qur'an *Āl 'Imrān* (3:7): وَمَا يَعْلَمُ تَأْوِيلَهُ إِلاَّ ٱللَّهُ وَٱلرَّٰسِخُونَ فِي ٱلْعِلْمِ.

83 إنّي تارك فيكم ثقلين كتاب الله وعترتي ما إن تمسّكتم بهما لن تضلّوا بعدي وإنّهما لن يفترقا حتّى يردا عليّ الحوض. Sunni sources also cite this hadith, some as it is cited here, and others replace the word "descendants" with "sunna." For a discussion of Sunni sources for this hadith with citations of primary sources, see al-Saqqāf, "Ḥadīth al-Thaqalayn."

84 Qur'an *al-Naḥl* (16:43).

ahl al-dhikr), can mean "people of the Remembrance," or "family of the Remembrance." In this verse, Muḥammad is himself referenced as the Remembrance, the personified Qur'an, for he explains its commands and teaches his followers how to worship, to fast, and so on. His family is *ahl al-dhikr*, and the community is directed to solicit them for the true meaning of the Qur'an. The Sunni interpretation of *ahl al-dhikr* as people with earlier scriptures is absurd. Why would God command Muslims to ask Jews and Christians – who deny Muḥammad's prophecy – about the true meaning of the Qur'an? (*Majlis* 45, 82).

– The Qur'an says: "You are a warner, and for each [generation] of people [there is] a guide."[85] Imam Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) explains that Muḥammad was the warner, and after him, each generation of people has "a guide from among us, who guides them to the [religion] he brought" (*Majlis* 73).
– The Qur'an says: "If they revert with it to the messenger and the people of command among them, those from among them who derive (*istinbāṭ*) inference will know [its meaning]."[86] This verse indicates that there are certain individuals – the Imams from the Prophet's line – who are authorized to derive the meanings of the Qur'an (*Majlis* 45, 49, 68, 86).

Al-Mu'ayyad also argued with philosophical proofs for the Imam's authority. Here are some examples:

– The Prophet and his Legatee are spiritual parents and through their knowledge spiritual children come forth. So also are the Imam and his second-in-command, the *ḥujja* [*'uẓmā*]. "There is no difference between the Imams and other people in their corporality. The difference between them … is the difference between adults and children. In the world of faith, they are mature adults … and their followers are their children" (*Majlis* 67).
– Humanity is essentially distinguished by reason, and the Imam is the perfect human being, the one in whom the rational soul has reached perfection. The closer you come to him in faith, the higher you place on the ladder of humanity. The further you move away from him in faith, the further you move away from being human. The farthest point is reached by the arch-enemy who challenges the Imam and himself claims the Imamate. As a consequence of his enmity for the Imam, he loses his humanity, his true reason, completely, and becomes a mindless beast (*Majlis* 48).
– The eye can perceive only if it has light from outside. In a dark room, the blind and the sighted are equal. Similarly, the mind needs an outside source

85 Qur'an *al-Ra'd* (13:7): إِنَّمَآ أَنتَ مُنذِرٌ وَلِكُلِّ قَوْمٍ هَادٍ.

86 Qur'an *al-Nisā'* (4:83): وَلَوْ رَدُّوهُ إِلَى ٱلرَّسُولِ وَإِلَىٰٓ أُوْلِي ٱلأَمْرِ مِنْهُمْ لَعَلِمَهُ ٱلَّذِينَ يَسْتَنْبِطُونَهُۥ مِنْهُمْ.

> of light to see. The Prophet, Legatee and Imam are the sun, moon, and stars of the realm of religion. It is only with the light of their knowledge that the human mind can perceive the higher truths (*Majlis* 23).

The aforementioned Sunni theologian al-Ghazālī ridiculed the Fatimid notion of acquiring knowledge from the Imam, saying it was physically impossible to approach the Imam about every little thing.[87] But al-Ghazālī had either misunderstood or was deliberately misrepresenting the Fatimid epistemological system. As explained here, a believer does not seek out the Imam physically to ask him about every single thing. Rather, the Imam is a living, divinely guided authority for the age, who guides the community on its path to salvation by his very presence on earth as the spiritual head of God's mission, the *daʿwa*. After the Prophet Muḥammad, the Legatee and then the Imam form the communicatory link between God and humankind. He answers some questions personally, and trains some individuals directly, but on the larger scale, he emits his knowledge to all believers by appointing and supervising a spiritual hierarchy who conveys to them his knowledge. A clear picture of this system on the level of jurisprudence is found in the Caliph-Imam al-Muʿizz's letter of appointment for al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān as chief judge in his realm. After authorizing him to derive rulings from the Qur'an, hadith, and sayings of the Imams, and explaining the method of inference he should follow, al-Muʿizz instructs al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān that if he remains unsure on any point, he is to consult the living Imam, al-Muʿizz himself:[88]

> Whenever something continues to perplex you and thus be difficult for you, and remains obscure and thus intractable, refer it in the final instance to the Commander of the Faithful, so that he might direct you to the correct ruling on the issue, so that you might adopt it and act upon it accordingly, for he is the remnant of the Caliphs who were guided by God and the descendant of the Rightly Guided Imams, for God, exalted and sublime be His praise, has decreed that people consult them, draw from their knowledge, and refer matters of importance to them.

87 Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* (Cairo: Markaz al-Kitāb li-l-Nashr, 1991), 31–36 and *Faḍāʾiḥ al-bāṭiniyya*, passim. The Ṭayyibī *dāʿī* ʿAlī ibn Muḥammad in *Dāmigh al-bāṭil* refutes al-Ghazālī's accusations from the *Faḍāʾiḥ*, point by point. See *Dāmigh al-bāṭil*, passim, and analysis in Binyamin Abrahamov, "An Ismāʿīlī Epistemology: The Case of *al-Dāʿī al-Muṭlaq* ʿAlī b. Muḥammad b. al-Walīd," *Journal of Semitic Studies* 41, no. 2 (1996): 263–73.

88 Al-Muʿizz's letter of appointment is recorded by al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān in *Ikhtilāf uṣul al-madhāhib*, 38–39 (trans. Stewart). See *Ikhtilāf*, passim, for more on the interpretive authority of the Imam.

One of the greatest scholars of his age, al-Muʾayyad did not shy away from acknowledging the Imam as his own source of guidance. In a poem in praise of al-Mustanṣir, he wrote:[89]

> My master Maʿadd Abū Tamīm [al-Mustanṣir]
> Has guided me to the Straight Path

5.10 *Rationale for* taʾwīl

If the point is to inform humanity of God and their relationship to Him, why not just tell it like it is? Why have a separate inner meaning? Why have *taʾwīl* at all? Al-Muʾayyad addresses this question in several places in his *Majālis*. Two points in answer to this question have been mentioned earlier, and they may be recapped as follows: (1) *taʾwīl* harmonizes revelation with reason (section 1); and (2) God created the world of religion parallel to the world of physical creation in order to guide human beings into contemplating higher truths through observation of their physical universe (section 3). Here are three more:

– All humans are not alike in their cognitive capacity. They need both intelligence and training in order to reach a stage where they can grasp the higher truths. A graded system of learning ensures that only the deserving, those who are able to digest the higher truths, are given this knowledge (*Majlis* 68).
– Abstractions are grasped more easily when presented through physical images. For example, the Qurʾan uses the image of profitable trade, of buying and selling, to articulate the complex concept of achieving your ultimate purpose in life by performing good deeds and thus being rewarded in the afterlife with paradise (*Majlis* 59).[90]
– Humans are made of body and spirit, so their worship must be bodily and spiritual. In terms of Shariʿa rites, this necessitates both a physical and esoteric form (*Majlis* 68).

Like al-Qādī al-Nuʿmān and al-Kirmānī before him who gave a focused exposition on this question,[91] al-Muʿayyad dedicated at least two full lectures – *Majlis*

89 بمولانا المعدّ أبي تميم – هديت إلى صراط مستقيم. Al-Muʾayyad, *Dīwān*, 300.

90 Qurʾan *al-Baqara* (2:16) أُوْلَٰٓئِكَ ٱلَّذِينَ ٱشْتَرَوُاْ ٱلضَّلَٰلَةَ بِٱلْهُدَىٰ فَمَا رَبِحَت تِّجَٰرَتُهُمْ وَمَا كَانُواْ مُهْتَدِينَ; Qurʾan *al-Tawba* (9:11) إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ ٱشْتَرَىٰ مِنَ ٱلْمُؤْمِنِينَ أَنفُسَهُمْ وَأَمْوَٰلَهُم بِأَنَّ لَهُمُ ٱلْجَنَّةَ.

91 Al-Qāḍī al-Nuʿmān, *Asās al-taʾwīl*, 28–32 (as he mentions here, this is a summary of the detailed arguments put forward in his now lost introductory *taʾwil* book titled *Ḥudūd al-maʿrifa*). Al-Kirmānī, *K. al-Maṣābīḥ*, Part 1, *miṣbāḥ* no. 6: 28–32 (text), 63–67 (trans.).

72 and 128–to explicating the necessity of *taʾwīl*; I have noted his key arguments in this section and at various points earlier in this article.

6 Concluding Remarks

The Fatimid system of *taʾwil* is intrinsically connected with major topics in their larger system of belief, including the rationality of faith, the function of knowledge in achieving salvation, and allegiance to the Prophet, Legatee and Imam. Highlighting the role of *taʾwīl* in the Fatimid belief system, the trajectory of this system presented in broad strokes accentuates the main thrust of my analysis, which is as follows: Humans fulfill their existential potential and attain salvation by following the path shown to them by their creator. This path – delineated in God's message to humankind – is embodied in God's revelation encoded by the Prophet Muḥammad in the Qurʾan and Shariʿa. Now, despite the apparent contradictions in the Qurʾan and the seeming arbitrariness of the Shariʿa, the two are neither contradictory nor arbitrary. Rather, they have an inner rational meaning that underpins the exoteric literal one. God reveals these rational interpretations to humankind through one person in every age. The Imam, like the Prophet, is the only person in his age with the ability to receive God's direct communication. He is the rightful Imam, the true interpreter, the rightly-guided guide. He is the Speaking Qurʾan, the one who decodes God's message. As sole direct recipient and broadcaster of God's communication, he has divine authority to explain the meaning of God's revelation. Humans find the true path to God only by following the Imam's guidance, either directly or through the *dāʿī*s he authorizes and supervises. Accordingly, it is only through acceptance of the Imam's interpretation of the Qurʾan and Shariʿa that the potential of human reason is fulfilled.

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CHAPTER 6

Esoteric Shiʿi Islam in the Later School of al-Ḥilla: *Walāya* and Apocalypticism in al-Ḥasan b. Sulaymān al-Ḥillī (d. after 1399) and Rajab al-Bursī (d. c. 1411)

Sajjad Rizvi

Ever since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 when Shiʿi Islam first came to the notice of the public, not just the generally educated but also specialists in the study of religion and of Islam, there has been a clear struggle both among practitioners of the faith and a difference of opinion among specialists on the very essence of what Shiʿi Islam is. The normative question posed was whether (Twelver) Shiʿi Islam is an oppositional political theology of discontent and protest or whether it is a quietist (read: esotericist) doctrine, an other-worldly discipline of the arcane that viewed the truth as occluded in the world and believers as alienated from and by the ravages of history.[1] As Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi and Christian Jambet put it, this former position amounts to reducing Shiʿi Islam to a mere political doctrine (perhaps even a "political spirituality" as Foucault put it), whereas in their conception, Shiʿi Islam constitutes the "original, esoteric Islam".[2] Historians in particular have wanted to understand how the revolution of 1979 came about and where the roots of contemporary Shiʿi thought and practice lay.

Once the initial division between those who stressed the political aspects of Shiʿi Islam (or religion as identity or even as cultural politics) against the defenders of Shiʿi Islam as a distinct set of theological practices (or religion as belief and metaphysics) appeared, the former associated with scholars in political science and the latter in the study of religion, the normative question shifted to the theological sphere: what was the nature of the Imamology that

1 There are many examples of the former including Juan Cole and Nikki Keddie (ed), *Shiʿism and Social Protest* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1988), as well as Hamid Dabashi, *Shiʿism: A Religion of Protest* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2011). The leading proponent of the quietist/esotericist reading of Shiʿi Islam is Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi in his original contribution, *Le guide divin dans le shīʿisme originel* (Paris: Verdier, 1992), and with Christian Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shīʿisme?* (Paris: Fayard, 2004).

2 Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shīʿisme?* 13–15.

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lay at the core of Shiʿi doctrine, and how could one locate it within a spectrum of interpretation from the most esoteric to the most exoteric? This stark rethinking of Imamology had already appeared in the preaching of one of the archetypal reformists and activists of the modern period, the charismatic Iranian ʿAlī Sharīʿatī (d. 1977) who contrasted the dour, otherworldly, superstitious and fantastic doctrine of the Imam in "black" or "Safavid" Shiʿism (a religion of mourning) with the vibrant, dynamic, socially and politically engaged vision of the Imam as liberator and revolutionary leader in "red" or "ʿAlid" Shiʿism (a religion of martyrdom).[3] Such a phenomenon in the modern study of religion, in which the key relationships of doctrine with power, violence, and politics are clearly interrogated, is not unusual and has been noted for a

3 The lecture on Red versus Black Shiʿism was originally given in 1974 (the text and translations abound online), and the distinction between Safavid and ʿAlid Shiʿism was published in a book in Tehran in 1973. Sharīʿatī's key point was not just that Black/Safavid Shiʿism was superstitious and reflective of extreme beliefs but that it was delusional, sedating people's activism and aspiration and was essentially hypocritical. See *Tashayyuʿyi ʿalavī va tashayyuʿ-yi ṣafavī*, rpt. (Tehran: Ḥusayniyya-yi Irshād/Daftar-i tadvīn u tanẓīm-i majmūʿa-yi āsār-i Duktur ʿAlī Sharīʿatī, 1359 Sh/1980), especially 5–35, 113–120. Sharīʿati's programmatic reconceptualization of Shiʿi Islam as a political movement, a complete 'political party' oriented towards revolution, is found in *Shīʿa: shīʿa yik ḥizb-i tamām, masʾūliyyat-i shīʿa būdan, naqsh-i inqilābī* (Tehran: Ḥusayniyya-yi Irshād, 1356 Sh/1977). For a study, see Ali Rahnema, *An Islamic Utopian: A Political Biography of ʿAli Shariʿati* (London: Tauris, 2000), especially 7–10 and 300–306. Sharīʿatī's own reformist approach to the Safavid origins of Shiʿi beliefs and practices drew upon the work of an earlier eminent reformist intellectual Aḥmad Kasravī (d. 1946), especially his *Shaykh Ṣafī wa-tabārash*, *Dar pīrāmūn-i Islām* and especially *Shīʿīgarī*, all of which appeared in 1943 and 1944 in Tehran and remained in print until 1979 (and since were reprinted in Cologne in 1996) – the latter two were translated by Mohamed Reza Ghanoonparvar as *On Islam and Shiʿism* (Costa Mesa: Mazda Publishers, 1989), especially 134–57. On Kasravī, see M. Amini, "Kasravi," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, XVI.1 (2012): 102–105, and Lloyd Ridgeon, *Sufi Castigator: Ahmad Kasravi and the Iranian Mystical Tradition* (London: Routledge, 2006), especially 3–9. Kasravī represented a more clerical, internal critique of the dominant and maximalist Imamology that was prevalent and was also criticised by Sharīʿat-Sanglajī (d. 1944) especially in two works *Tawḥīd-i ʿibādat* and *Maḥv al-mawhūm* that targeted the maximalist conception of Imamology and *rajʿa* in particular – see Ali Rahnema, *Shiʿi Reformation in Iran: The Life and Theology of Shariʿat Sangelaji* (London: Routledge, 2015), 135–141. This clerical reformist tendency continued into the post-revolutionary period with Ḥaydar ʿAlī Qalamdārān (d. 1989) whose *Rāh-i najāt az sharr-i ghulāt* focused the critique upon the maximalist notion of Imamology and on *rajʿa*, although it went beyond reformism towards a more explicit Salafism – see the polemical (Salafi and anti-Shiʿi) website http://qalamdaran.com/en/content/biography-haydar-ali-qalmadran-may-allah-bless-him accessed 17 November 2018. This tendency of taking reform of Shiʿi thought outside of the Shiʿi fold accounts for the common dismissal of reformist thought as "wahhābī" or "salafī" in orientation.

number of traditions caught between "traditionalism" and "fundamentalism", the dilemma of modern public religions.[4]

Scholars such as Rasūl Jaʿfariyān have also pointed to the Safavid period as the key moment in which one finds the excavation and recovery of the heritage of Shiʿi Islam – and indeed this early modern epoch set the tone for the subsequent understanding of the Imami Shiʿi tradition. It is not so much that the Safavid religious establishment ushered in a new religious dispensation. They did not invent the particularity of Shiʿi Islam after the long period of "confessional ambiguity" that came before it, nor did they construct it anew.[5] Rather, Safavid thinkers reconceptualised the faith as part of a resilient political theology of empire that redefined certain key relations both between different types of Muslims and between Muslims and others in terms of their polemics. This took place both between the religious establishment and the Sufi orders, and between the court and coffeehouse, and the wider public sphere.[6] A confident, clear, and distinct Shiʿi doctrine lay at the heart of this formulation. The neo-classicism of the approach to narrations meant that there was a revival of interest in doctrinal elements of Imamology that were considered to be core to the primordial Shiʿi tradition. The recovery of a "long tradition" of ideas and doctrines concerning the Imam as the face of God was central to this process.

While this renaissance of an authentic Shiʿi faith, focused upon the themes of the cosmic authority (*walāya takwīnīyya*) of the Imams and their apocalyptic return (*rajʿa*) at the end of times, was distinctly manifest in a number of encyclopaedic texts that aimed at a neo-classical recovery of texts including *Biḥār al-anwār* of Muḥammad Bāqir Majlisī (d. 1110/1699), the works of his two disciples, namely, *ʿAwālim al-ʿulūm* of ʿAbd Allāh al-Baḥrānī and *al-Anwār al-Nuʿmānīyya* of Sayyid Niʿmatullāh al-Jazāʾirī (d. 1112/1701), as well as exegeses such as *al-Burhān* of Sayyid Hāshim al-Baḥrānī (d. 1106/1695) and *al-Ṣāfī* of Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1090/1680), there is evidence that such an Imamology was already a major interest of esotericists in al-Ḥilla in the

4 Jose Casanova, *Public Religions in the Modern World* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), and Hent de Vries, "Why Still Religion?" in *Religion Beyond a Concept*, ed. Hent de Vries, 8–62 (New York: Fordham University Press, 2008).

5 Much of the recent work on confessional ambiguity seems to me to exaggerate the absence of clear and distinct doctrines among both the elite and the commonality. One seminal instance of the position is Judith Pfeiffer in "Confessional ambiguity versus confessional polarization," in *Politics, Patronage and the Transmission of Knowledge in 13th–15th Century Tabriz*, ed. Judith Pfeiffer, 129–168 (Leiden: Brill, 2013), and in a conference that she organised on the theme in Oxford in September 2014 whose proceedings are forthcoming with Brill.

6 Rasūl Jaʿfariyān, *Siyāsat u farhang-i rūzgār-i ṣafavī*, 2 vols. (Tehran: Nashr-i ʿilm, 1388 Sh/2009); Rasūl Jaʿfariyān, *Ṣafavīyya dar ʿarṣa-yi dīn, fahang u siyāsat*, 3 vols. (Qum: Pazhūhishgāh-i ḥawza va dānishgāh, 1391 Sh/2012).

14th and 15th centuries.[7] The Safavids did not so much recreate and reconstruct a Shiʿi theology as emphasize a particular strand of esoteric, maximalist Imamology that was already prevalent in the Islamic East, and had its roots in early Islamic Kufa.[8] Taken together these two aspects of the authority of the Imam and his role in the eschaton make up what I shall term the "maximalist conception of Imamology".

This study examines esotericist thought in Timurid and Turkoman Iraq with a focus on two figures who were contemporaries: "Ḥāfiẓ" Rajab al-Bursī (d. c. 814/1411) and al-Ḥasan b. Sulaymān al-Ḥillī (d. after 802/1399), the latter supposedly a student of Muḥammad b. al-Makkī al-Jizzīnī known as the "First Martyr" (*al-shahīd al-awwal*, henceforth Shahīd 1) (d. 786/1385). In their works, purportedly based on a recovery of early Shiʿi texts and citations of the words of the Imams directly, one finds the construction of the Imami Shiʿi tradition as an esoteric and arcane lore with a focus on a particular definition of *walāya* which had earlier and later been defined as "extremism" or "going beyond the bounds of acceptability" (*ghuluww*). After an initial consideration of what I mean by esotericism, a contextualisation of the role of al-Ḥilla as an ambiguous space for Shiʿi learning in this middle period, and a brief presentation of intellectual biographies of these two figures, I discuss the ways in which they use and justify their sources, then examine the strategies that they use to construct their understanding of *walāya*, and then finally consider how their work was received in the Safavid period and later problematized within our more contemporary arguments about the nature of the authenticity of the Shiʿi tradition. I also juxtapose their thought with that of two of their contemporaries: Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī (d. after 786/1385), the quintessential "Shiʿi Sufi," and Ibn

7 On these three encyclopaedic works, see Āqā Buzurg Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa ilā taṣānīf al-Shīʿa* (Beirut: Dār al-aḍwāʾ, 1983), 2:16–27 §43 (on the 25 volumes of *Biḥār*), 15:356–357 §2282 (on the projected 100 volumes of *ʿAwālim* of which perhaps only 11 were ever completed), 2:446 §1729 (on *al-Anwār*). Majlisī's companion al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1104/1693) wrote an important defence of *rajʿa: al-Īqāẓ min al-hajʿa bi-l-burhān ʿalā-l-rajʿa*, ed. Mushtāq al-Muẓaffar (Qum: Dalīl-i mā, 1386 Sh/2007), 7–11 the editor provides a useful list of 45 works on the subject prior to al-Ḥurr (not all of which are extant).

8 A good way to gauge what the late Safavid period considered to be the Shiʿi tradition is to look at the list of works that were used as sources by Majlisī – see *Biḥār al-anwār al-jāmiʿa li-durar akhbār al-aʾimma al-aṭhār*, ed. ʿAlī Namāzī Shāhrūdī, rpt. (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 2008), 1:19–33. For other earlier snapshots, see Etan Kohlberg, *A Medieval Muslim Scholar at Work: Ibn Ṭāwūs and His Library* (Leiden: Brill, 1992), and for a slightly later period but pre-Timurid and pre-Safavid, see Aun Hasan Ali, "The Beginnings of the School of Ḥillah," PhD dissertation, McGill University, 2016. What is noteworthy from the earlier works is the absence of *Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, *Kitāb Sulaym* and even *al-Kāfī*.

Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī (d. after 906/1501) who, in his work, often prefigures the "synthesis" of Mullā Ṣadrā (d. 1045/1636) in the Safavid period.

Two large questions remain to which I will return. First, when we talk about esotericism in Imami Shi'ism does that necessarily entail a discussion of *ghuluww*? Is esotericism merely a non-pejorative way of speaking about the themes and doctrines that were often debated as *ghuluww* in the early period and especially in the "rationalising turn" of the Baghdad theologians of the Būyid period? Second, to what extent does this renewed focus on the mastery over the cosmos that the Imams possess and its implications for the eschaton overlap with the wider interest in the occult, apocalypticism, charismatic authority, and messianism in the Timurid world?

1 Esotericism?

What do we mean by esotericism, and how does it fit here? The contemporary field of esoteric studies is constantly debating the use and applicability of the terms "esoteric", "gnostic", "arcane" and "occult". Recent scholarship on Western esotericism has taken the debate in different directions: Wouter Hanegraaff's work has taken the esoteric in the direction of the gnostic and stressed the epistemological approach of esotericism, while Antoine Faivre has classified esotericism as a form of thought, a type of knowledge.[9] Certainly, much of what I discuss concerns the gnostic lore of the Imams. The authority that the Imams wield over the cosmos, and without which the cosmos would perish, is directly linked to their privileged knowledge as manifestations of divine knowledge to which only they had access. The gnostic lore of the Imams and their true identity is then guarded jealously and secretly by the initiates and the faithful of the community. However, although one might argue that modern esoteric studies stress the occult and the gnostic over all else, esotericism in the Shi'i tradition has a more holistic sense in which the ontological, soteriological, gnostic, and ethical nature of the Imams overlap and are intertwined. And this is fairly clear since they, in the language of the classical hadith collections, manifest the totality of the divine names and attributes.

9 For a summary of Hanegraaff's approach, see his entry "Esotericism," in *Dictionary of Gnosis and Western Esotericism*, ed. Wouter Hanegraff, 336–340 (Leiden: Brill, 2006), and his recent *Esotericism and the Academy: Rejected Knowledge in Western Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012). Faivre's position is neatly summarised in his *Access to Western Esotericism* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1994). Cf. Michael Bergrunder, "What is esotericism? Cultural Studies Approaches and the Problem of Definition in Religious Studies," *Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*, 22 (2010): 9–36.

The key notion of esotericism applied in this study derives from the work of Henry Corbin. For him, the intellectual history of esoteric approaches to religion is an unfolding of the sacred in history, an *hiéro-histoire*, in which the God that is hidden becomes manifest through discovering the inner meaning of Scripture.[10] Corbin's conception of spiritual hermeneutics, or *ta'wīl*, decodes the hidden meaning in the revealed book of scripture and of nature so that one can return to the original and essential meaning of the revelation: what is apparent and what is earthly is in this sense a pale imitation (a *ḥikāya* as he puts it, following Avicenna and Ibn ʿArabī) of the true life of the soul and of the prophets and friends of God who reveal the *deus absconditus*.[11] It is the true sense of the revelation, the wisdom account of the nature of God, for which the messengers were sent and to which the friends of God called. Insofar as the Shiʿi tradition in its essence, for Corbin, is predicated upon the notion of *walāya* that is the inner aspect of prophecy and the divine mission, it constitutes the esotericism of Islam.[12] However, Corbin tends to conflate the spiritual with the Shiʿi. Similarly, one might question his 'mystocentrism', as Wasserstrom terms it, that identifies gnosis with the faith of Islam as such.[13] Nevertheless, with our focus on the esoteric doctrine of *walāya*, the use of esoteric in this context overlaps with Faivre's notion of an initiatic "discipline of the arcane", a mode of gnosis, and a primordial tradition – the lovers of the Imam gain insight into the nature of reality through their devotion, the core of the Imam's supernal status relates to their gnosis that they pass onto their devotees, and the supra-historical nature of the Imams as sacred beings who define history locates them as an eternal chain that links believers over time back to the original state of humans attesting to the lordship of the divine and the authority of the Imams in pre-existence.[14]

10 Apophatic and mystical traditions tend to see the hiddenness of God as an opportunity, even a hermeneutical opening, while many in the philosophy of religion associate the problem with an evidentiary argument against the existence of God – see J.L. Schellenberg, *Divine Hiddenness and Human Reason* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), and *The Hiddenness Argument: Philosophy's New Challenge to Belief in God* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015). For a more balanced set of essays on the topic, see Daniel Howard-Snyder and Paul Moser (ed), *Divine Hiddenness: New Essays* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

11 Henry Corbin, *Face de Dieu, face de l'homme* (Paris: L'Herne, 1983), 43–44; Corbin, *Le paradoxe du monothéisme* (Paris: Cahiers de L'Herne, 1981); Corbin, *En Islam iranien I: Le shīʿisme duodécimain* (Paris: Gallimard, 1972), 3–51.

12 Corbin, *En islam iranien 1*, 186.

13 Steven Wasserstrom, *Religion after Religion: Gershom Scholem, Mircea Eliade, and Henry Corbin at Eranos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 239–241.

14 Antoine Faivre, *Western Esotericism: A Concise History* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 2010), 2–4.

In the context of this paper, by esoteric I mean what becomes the central pivot of the doctrine of the Imamate in the Safavid period but has strong roots before especially in the two centuries leading up to the establishment of the empire, namely the dual notions of the Imams having authority over the cosmos (*walāyat al-taṣarruf*, later called *walāya takwīniyya*) that drew upon a number of hadith in the early tradition and other texts (some of which were defined as *ghuluww*), combined with the doctrine of *walāya* formulated by the school of Ibn ʿArabī, especially in its Shiʿi version from at least the time of ʿAbd al-Razzāq Kāshānī (d. 736/1336) on the soteriology of *rajʿa*, the Imams' return to the world of generation and corruption to destroy evil once and for all and hence redeem the world before the reversion to God in the afterlife. Amir-Moezzi makes this clear when he defines the "primitive Shiʿi tradition" as an esoteric one that focuses on the supernatural knowledge and status of the Imams, their pre-existence in the world before (*ʿālam al-dharr/aẓilla/mīthāq*) who testified to divine lordship, their eclipse in this world and occultation, and their role in the eschaton, their return to this world of generation and corruption to redeem it as the last stage of the unfolding of the cosmos and the reversion back to God – and that tradition is defined through the core hadith transmitted by the school of Qum, often denigrated for being tinged with exaggeration (*ghuluww*), notably among them al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī (d. 290/903).[15]

The concept of the apocalyptic return of the Imams sometimes termed *rajʿa* (lit. return) and sometimes *karra* (lit. turn or cycle) or *karrāt*, as well as other notions controversially debated as "extremist" in the classical period, is often associated with a companion of the fifth Imam Muḥammad al-Bāqir, known as Jābir b. Yazīd al-Juʿfī (d. 128/746), who is sometimes linked with the early Shiʿi gnostic sectarian leader Mughīra b. Saʿīd al-Bajalī (d. 119/737), and who was roundly condemned by Sunni traditionists for his excessive regard (*ghuluww*) for the Imams and rejection (*rafḍ*) of their enemies, especially the first three canonical Sunni caliphs.[16] The return of the Imams (especially Imam al-Ḥusayn) and their enemies for a final conflict in some classical sources such

15 Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin*, 33–48.

16 William Tucker's assertion that Jābir succeeded Mughīra to the leadership of his esoteric sectarian movement is based on hostile Sunni sources – see his *Mahdis and Millenarians* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 56–57; cf. Kāmil Muṣṭafā al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila bayn al-taṣawwuf wa-l-tashayyuʿ* (Beirut: Dār al-Andalus, 1982), 1:135–139. See Abū-l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, ed. Muḥammad Muḥyī al-Dīn ʿAbd al-Ḥamīd (Cairo: Maktabat al-nahḍa, 1969), 1:73; Abū Yūsuf al-Fasawī, *al-Maʿrifa wa-l-tārīkh*, ed. Akram Ḍiyāʾ al-ʿUmarī (Baghdad: Dīwān al-awqāf, 1974), 2:715–716; Muslim, *al-Kunā wa-l-asmāʾ*, ed. ʿAbd al-Raḥīm al-Qashqarī (Medina: al-Jāmiʿa al-islāmiyya, al-majlis al-ʿilmī, 1984), 20; Abū-l-Qāsim Sulaymān al-Ṭabarānī, *al-Muʿjam al-awsaṭ*, ed. Abū-l-Faḍl al-Ḥusaynī (Cairo: Dār al-ḥaramayn, 1995), 7:322.

as *Kāmil al-ziyārāt* of Ibn Qūlawayh (d. 368/978), was the heart of the doctrine, debated earlier and dismissed by some as *ghuluww*, but defended even today by many in the seminary as core Shiʿi creedal positions.[17] The early (Sunni) traditionist Ibn Abī Shayba (d. 235/849) claimed that Jābir's prolific narrating was a deliberate ploy to confuse people and deflect them from the Qur'an.[18] The classical Imami traditionist Abū Jaʿfar al-Kulaynī (d. 329/941), on the other hand, cited his status as a favoured confidant to whom Imam Bāqir narrated hadith that were not made privy to anyone else.[19] Narrations about the esoteric knowledge and nature of the Imams are reported from him in the work of the Nuṣayrī leader al-Ḥusayn al-Khaṣībī (d. 358/969), even though their equivalents are not found in the Imami tradition.[20]

Hossein Modarressi describes Jābir as representing "populist late Umayyad Kufan Shiʿism" with its "exaggerations about ʿAlī and his descendants", for proposing an esoteric and gnostic ideal of the knowledge of the Imams, and declaring their messianic and apocalyptic role at the end of time.[21] This included various narrations about the advent of the messianic al-Qā'im at the end of time, and equating the "creature of the earth" (*dābbat al-arḍ*) of Qur'an 27: 82 with ʿAlī as an apocalyptic figure of the end of time.[22] Van Ess also describes Jābir as a key figure in the promotion of this esoteric doctrine, albeit building on earlier Kaysānī ideas and esoteric figures around ʿAlī such as Rushayd

17 Ibn Qūlawayh, *Kāmil al-ziyārāt* (Qum: Nashr al-faqāha, 1996), 259; on the rejection of *rajʿa* as *ghuluww* based on hadith criticism, see Amina Inloes, "Authentication of the hadith on the Rajʿah," MA dissertation, The Islamic College, London, 2009; on its affirmation as core belief, see Muḥammad Hādī Maʿrifat, "Rajʿat dar andīsha-yi shīʿī," *Mīrāth-i jāvīdān* 4.1 (1373 Sh/1994): 108–115; on *rajʿa* as a controversial polemic between Sunnis and Shiʿa, see Isḥāq Ṭāhirī Sartashnīzī, "Maʿnā-yi kāvī-yi rajʿat va rafʿ-i nazāʿ bīrūn-i firqa-ī," *Qabasāt* 12 (1386 Sh/2008): 147–170. The only Europhone academic study of *rajʿa* is the rather skewed and Safavid focused work of Colin Turner, "The Hadith of al-Mufaḍḍal and the Doctrine of *Rajʿa*: Evidence of *Ghuluww* in the Eschatology of Twelver Shiʿism?" *Iran: Journal of the British Institute of Persian Studies* 44 (2006): 175–195.

18 Ibn Abī Shayba, *Muṣannaf*, ed. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Afghānī (Bombay: al-Dār al-salafiyya, 1980), 9:52.

19 Abū Jaʿfar al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, gen. ed. Muḥammad Ḥusayn Dirāyatī (Qum: Dār al-ḥadīth, 1387 Sh/2008), Rawḍa, hadith §149, 15:375–376.

20 Al-Ḥusayn b. Ḥamdān al-Khaṣībī, *al-Hidāya al-kubrā* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-balāgh, 1991), 41–43, 70–73, 124, 153, mainly from Imām al-Bāqir. The Nuṣayrī corpus, while citing similar authorities, usually has differing material because of its distinction between the pure Shiʿi doctrine (Nuṣayrī) and the *taqiyya* doctrine (Imāmī).

21 Hossein Modarressi, *Tradition and Survival: A Bibliographical Survey of Early Shīʿite Literature Volume 1* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2003), 88–91.

22 Ibn al-Juḥḥām, *Taʾwīl mā nazala min al-Qurʾan fī-l-nabī wa-ālihi*, ed. Fāris al-Ḥassūn (Qum: Nashr al-hādī, 1420/1999), 221, 223, 215; al-Kulaynī, *al-Kāfī*, 1:264, 307, 8:394, 395.

al-Ḥajarī and Aṣbagh b. Nubāta.[23] He then points to the early exegetical tradition with figures contemporary with Jābir such as Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī (d. 148/765) discovering the doctrines in the Qurʾan, which were later narrated in the classical exegeses attributed to ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. c. 307/919) and others.[24] Sunni authors such as Abū-l-Ḥasan al-Ashʿarī (d. 314/936) and the Muʿtazilī theologian Abū-l-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāṭ (d. c. 300/913) identified the notion of *rajʿa* as a key belief of the "*rāfiḍa*" that constituted their esoteric doctrine.[25] In the classical period, al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (d. 381/991) defined it as a core doctrine in his treatise on beliefs.[26] However, in the modern period, the Iraqi *marjaʿ* Shaykh Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ (d. 1954) in a major defence of the origins of the Shiʿa insisted that one did not have to believe in *rajʿa* and dismissed it as an influence extrinsic to the Shiʿi tradition.[27] Other modern studies suggest that *rajʿa* grew out of the desire to flesh out the notion of the messianic and apocalyptic expectation of the last days; in early narrations the general concept is found, but gradually more detailed doctrinal positions developed in post-classical hadith sources.[28] Certainly, the broad doctrine is found in early Shiʿi texts.[29] It is also consonant with the Safavid proliferation of the doctrine in theological works alongside the doctrine of the cosmological authority of the Imams.[30]

However, it is worth considering whether theologians conflate the general idea of the *parousia* of the Imam and his final conflict with the forces of evil with a general resurrection of the good and the evil in the apocalyptic

23 Josef van Ess, *Theology and Society in the Second and Third Centuries of the Hijra*, tr. John O'Kane (Leiden: Brill, 2017), 1:341–345.

24 Van Ess, *Theology and Society*, 1:350–352.

25 Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Rajʿa," *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, published online July 20, 2005 available at http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/raja; al-Ashʿarī, *Maqālāt al-islāmiyyīn*, 1:46; Abū-l-Ḥusayn al-Khayyāṭ, *Kitāb al-intiṣār*, ed. Albert Nader (Beirut: Dar el-Machreq, 1957), 95. It is unclear how early the notion of *rajʿa* truly was – one of the most important early witnesses to issues of controversy the *Kitāb al-taḥrīsh* of Ḍirār b. ʿAmr (d. c. 200/815) does not mention it, even while discussing other issues of the cosmic nature of ʿAlī (eds. Ḥusayn Khānṣū and Muḥammad Keskin, Istanbul: Dār al-irshād, 2014, 50–53).

26 Al-Ṣadūq, *Kitāb al-iʿtiqādāt* (Beirut: Dār al-Mufīd, 1993), 60–63.

27 Muḥammad Ḥusayn Kāshif al-Ghiṭāʾ, *Aṣl al-shīʿa wa-uṣūluhā* (Beirut: Dār al-aḍwāʾ, 1990), 74.

28 Sājida Yūsufī and Muḥammad Jāvidān, "Nigāhī bā taṭavvur-i jāyigāh-yi rivāyāt-i rajʿat dar manābiʿ-yi imāmiyya," *Shīʿa-pazhūhī*, 2.6 (1395 Sh/2016): 7–26.

29 Sayyid Muḥammad Hādī Girāmī, *Nakhustīn munāsibāt-i fikrī-yi tashayyuʿ* (Qum: Dānishgāh-i Imām Ṣādiq, 1391 Sh/2012); Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin*, 279–301.

30 Muḥammad Jaʿfar Riżāʾī, *Jarayān-hā-yi fikrī-yi ḥawza-yi ʿilmiyya-yi Iṣfahān* (Tehran: Muʾassasa-yi pazhūhishī-yi ḥikmat u falsafa-yi Īrān, 1391 Sh/2012).

end of days. Early apocalyptic texts tend to conflate these ideas and seem rather amorphous; later one gives the events and turns of the last days more structure.[31] One of the most common expressions of belief in *rajʿa* is expressed in the testimonies of loyalty and salutations to the Imams on the visitation to their shrines. In the famous "comprehensive salutation recital" (*ziyāra jāmiʿa*) that is popular and reported from the 10th Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī (d. 254/868) to be proclaimed at the shrines of the Imams, one finds the following expression of desire:

> May God resurrect me in your camp (*zumratikum*) and bring me around again (*yakurru*) on your return (*rajʿatikum*) and bestow rank upon me in your rule (*dawlatikum*).

Most commentators see this as an explicit desire to be counted among the forces of good resurrected for this final conflict on earth against the forces of evil.[32]

Ultimately the debate over *ghuluww* and what constitutes the authentic Shiʿi tradition lies at the heart of this. Some scholars such as Hossein Modarressi have argued that it was the Safavid tradition that rediscovered the *ghulāt* tradition and placed it at the centre of its doctrine of *walāya* mixed with the school of Ibn ʿArabī:

> The introduction of Sufi ideas and interpretations into Islamic philosophy in the Safawid period brought about a new Shīʿite school of Islamic philosophy in the 11th/17th century and helped the Sufi cosmological theories of Ibn al-ʿArabī to be established in Shīʿite philosophical thought. Some of the adherents of this philosophical school put forward a theory of the Imām's "existential authority" (*al-wilāya al-takwīnīya*) that was virtually the same as the Mufawwiḍa's cosmological theory on the authority of the "first creature" or the "perfect man" in the creation and supervision of the

31 David Cook, *Studies in Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2002), and Said Amir Arjomand, "Islamic Apocalypticism in the Classical Period," in *The Continuum History of Apocalypticism*, ed. Bernard McGinn et al (New York: Continuum, 2003), 380–415. For an early 20th century text that is rich in apocalyptic material from the early period including discussions of *rajʿa*, see ʿAlī al-Yazdī al-Ḥāʾirī (d. 1333/1915), *Ilzām al-nāṣib fī ithbāt al-ḥujja al-ghāʾib* (Beirut: Dār al-Nuʿmān, 1971), especially 2:252–360.

32 Shaykh Aḥmad al-Aḥsāʾī (d. 1241/1826), *Sharḥ al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa* (Beirut: Dār al-mufīd, 1999), 3:184–190; Sayyid Ḥusayn Hamadānī Durūdābādī (d. 1343/1925), *al-Shumūs al-ṭāliʿa min mashāriq al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa* (Qum: Intishārāt-i Bīdār, 1384 Sh/2005), 670; Shaykh Jawād al-Karbalāʾī (d. 2011) *al-Anwār al-sāṭiʿa fī sharḥ al-ziyāra al-jāmiʿa* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 2007), 5:164–166.

> world. Although many of the followers of that Sufi philosophical school have not supported that concept of the Imām's existential authority to its full logical conclusion, others have done so. Those that have must be regarded as the true heirs to the Mufawwiḍa (even though they strongly deny it, at least verbally) because their doctrines are identical. Although always a very small minority, some of their ideas, which were in line with the pro-Mufawwiḍa reports in the collections of *ḥadīth*, as well as their terminology, have gained some degree of support in the community.[33]

Similarly, Rasūl Jaʿfariyān has placed this conceptualisation within the context of the revival of Shiʿi heritage in the Safavid period and the growing sectarian discourse that developed through conflict with the Ottomans and the Uzbeks.[34] Elsewhere I have examined the Safavid construction of *walāya*. However, it is quite clear that process did not emerge *ex nihilo*.[35] Rather, it drew upon what came just before it in the 14th and 15th centuries and I would argue that the work of four figures was central to the formation of what nowadays is called *ʿirfān-i shīʿī* or what we might term esoteric Shiʿism – namely, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī, Rajab al-Bursī, and Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī.[36]

A number of recent scholars have indicated the significance of the theme of messianic return and renewal including the notion of *rajʿa* to have been socially, politically, and spiritually significant in the Timurid and early Safavid-Mughal-Ottoman period, and it is worth asking the question whether what we see arising in the 14th and 15th centuries with al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī and Rajab al-Bursī is continuous with this wider tendency in the broader Persianate world – despite the fact that they were not Persians or writing in Persian – or

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33 Hossein Modarressi, *Crisis and Consolidation in the Formative Period of Shīʿite Islam* (Princeton: Darwin Press, 1993), 49.

34 Jaʿfariyān, *Siyāsat va farhang*, 1:11–123, 165–212, 2:1047–1064, 1229–1258, 1347–1388.

35 Sajjad Rizvi, ""Seeking the Face of God": The Ṣafawid *ḥikmat* tradition's conceptualisation of *walāya takwīniyya*," in *The Study of Shiʿi Islam*, ed. Farhad Daftary and Gurdofarid Miskinzoda, 391–410 (London: Tauris, 2013).

36 It is perhaps worth pointing out that my intention in this paper is not to provide a full history of the concept of *walāya takwīniyya* and *rajʿa* up to the Safavid period. That would not be feasible nor is it the focus of my argument. Rather, I am interested in the reception of these ideas and the construction of an esoteric and maximalist Imamology before the Safavid period that inspired Safavid authors. The provenance of the apocalyptic material in its late antique milieu is similarly not my concern. On that latter theme, see David Cook, *Studies in the Muslim Apocalyptic* (Princeton: The Darwin Press, 2003), which does not pay much attention to early Shiʿi material, and his translation of the seminal *Kitāb al-malāḥim wa-l-fitan* of Nuʿaym b. Ḥammād, *The Book of Tribulations* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2017), and Guy Stroumsa et al (ed), *Apocalypticism and Eschatology in Late Antiquity* (Louvain: Peeters, 2017).

whether the tendencies in the work represent a more particular shift in Shiʿi thinking in the period not totally or hegemonically so but representing a major intellectual constituency that at times did erupt into messianic challenge and violence as in the case of the Ḥurūfīs, the Nūrbakhshiyya, the Mushaʿshaʿ and later the Nuqṭaviyya.[37]

In fact, some of these latter movements intersect with al-Bursī and al-Ḥillī who are discussed here: First, the Mushaʿshaʿ, who established a Shiʿi state led by their messianic leader Sayyid Muḥammad b. Falāḥ al-Mushaʿshaʿ (d. 866/1462), who had been a student and step-son of Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī (d. 841/1438) who was himself a student of al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī and a contemporary of Rajab al-Bursī.[38] The modern historian Shubbar narrates the anecdote that Ibn Fahd had a secret occult work (as he was known for specialising in *jafr* and *ʿilm al-ḥurūf* or lettrism) which he ordered to be thrown into the Euphrates. By a ruse, Sayyid Muḥammad managed to acquire it and harnessed its power to establish his polity from 844/1441, using Shiʿi symbols to appeal to the devotion of the masses.[39] Second, the Nūrbakhshiyya of Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (d. 869/1464), who was from a family hailing from al-Aḥsāʾ who had settled in Khurasan – the former area being the birthplace of the other significant 15th century figure Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī, and the latter where Rajab Bursī settled.[40] Ibn Fahd, the pivotal figure of study in al-Ḥilla, was himself known for his spirituality and was later consider to be a Sufi by Sayyid Nūrullāh Shushtarī (d. 1019/1610).[41] The period of Bursī and al-Ḥillī is bound before by the career of the eminent Shiʿi Sufi Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī and after

37 Shahzad Bashir, "The Imam's Return: Messianic Leadership in Late Medieval Shiism," in *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa*, ed. Linda Walbridge, 21–33 (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001).

38 Jāsim Ḥusayn Shubbar, *Imārat al-mushaʿshaʿīn wa-tarājim aʿlāmihā* (Najaf: Maṭbaʿat al-ādāb, 1965), 15, 21, 22; Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:270–293; Muḥammad ʿAlī Ranjbar, *Mushaʿshaʿiyān: māhiyyat-i fikrī-ijtimāʿī va farāyand-i taḥavvulāt-i tārīkhī* (Tehran: Nashr-i āgāh, 1382 Sh/2003), 202–208.

39 Shubbar, *Imārat al-mushaʿshaʿīn*, 22–23.

40 Al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:294–307; Shahzad Bashir, *Messianic Hopes and Mystical Visions: The Nūrbakhshīya between Medieval and Modern Islam* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2003), 29–75; Jaʿfar Ṣādiqiyānlū, *Aḥvāl u āsār-i Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh* (Tehran, 1351 Sh/1972). On the Mushaʿshaʿ and their association with al-Ḥilla, see Yūsuf al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya fī-l-Ḥilla khilāl al-qarn al-tāsiʿ al-hijrī* (Najaf: Dār al-turāth, 1434/2013), 89–95, 136–49.

41 He was the author of two devotional and mystically included works: *al-Taḥṣīn wa-ṣifāt al-ʿārifīn*, ed. ʿAlī Jabbār Gulbāghī (Qum: Intishārāt-i Lāhījī, 1377 Sh/1998), and *ʿUddat al-dāʿī wa-najāḥ al-ṣāʿī*, ed. Aḥmad al-Qummī (Qum: Dār al-Murtaḍā, 1987). See Sayyid Nūrullāh Shushtarī, *Majālis al-muʾminīn*, eds. Ibrāhīm ʿArab-pūr et al (Mashhad: Bunyād-i pazhūhishī-yi islāmī, Āstān-i quds-i rażavī, 1392 Sh/2013), 3:598–602.

by that of Ibn Abī Jumhūr, both figures who also cited and promoted some of the same narrations on the nature of *walāya* and *raj'a* and who were similarly influenced by the Sufi metaphysics of *walāya* formulated by Ibn ʿArabī, albeit in a modified form. What these 'messiahs' of this period shared was both their sayyid descent as well as their intersection with Sufi messianism that often arose within currents of the Kubrawī tradition, and arguably lay at the crossroads between an ʿAlid devotional Sunni Sufism and Shiʿi Islam proper – thus in the accounts of Sayyid Nūrbakhsh, Shiʿi works stress his link to Ibn Fahd while other works, including Sufi-inclined ones, focus on his spiritual master, the Kubrawī Shaykh Ishāq Khuttalānī (d. 826/1423). As Bashir suggests, the link with Ibn Fahd may well be a fiction of Shushtarī since he himself was not only a Shiʿi apologist and polemicist but also affiliated to the Nūrbakhshī order.[42]

This is not to say that what I will set out is the essence of Shiʿi theology and metaphysics in the period. It was in fact probably the later Safavid embrace that made the esoteric reading of Imamology dominant, though one wonders how a mainstream and hegemonic tradition can remain wholly esoteric and wedded to a small closed elite. Nevertheless, there were other strands of Imamology, some of which stressed the authority and special nature of the family of the Prophet, practiced "moderation", even citing approvingly the early caliphs, and accommodating them.[43] ʿAlī al-Irbilī (d. 692/1293) in his work explicitly mentioned that he wished to defend Shiʿi doctrine by presenting material that would not be offensive to Sunni readers and to cite narrations that were broadly accepted by Sunnis as well.[44] The intersection with Sufi spirituality also varied from the soft Shiʿi preference for ʿAlī and ʿAlid-centred devotion alongside Sunni ritual practice to the more radical Shiʿi Sufis such as the Safavids themselves. If Imamology is considered as a spectrum of positions, then it ranged from those who saw the Imams as privileged figures in their time (though perhaps not infallible by all accounts and constrained by their humanity), all the way to those who emphasised a maximal notion of the power and knowledge of the Imams and even placed them within the category

42 Bashir, *Messianic Hopes*, 55.

43 There are numerous examples of the "moderates" in the period including ʿAlī b. ʿĪsā al-Irbilī (d. 692/1293) and his popular biographical work *Kashf al-ghumma fī maʿrifat al-aʾimma* (Beirut: Dār al-aḍwāʾ, 1985), and even Abū Saʿīd al-Ḥasan b. al-Ḥusayn Vāʿiẓ Bayhaqī/Shīʿī-yi Sabzavārī (fl. 757/1356) who, also like Bursī, served the Sarbadārids and was the author of some significant theological works in Persian including *Maṣābīḥ al-qulūb* (ed. Muhammad Sipihrī, Tehran: Intishārāt-i bunyān/Mīrāth-i maktūb, 1375 Sh/1996) and *Rāḥat al-arvāḥ* (ed. Muḥammad Sipihrī, Tehran: Mīrāth-i maktūb, 1375 Sh/1997). Like our thinkers, he was also associated with the students of Shahīd I.

44 Al-Irbilī, *Kashf al-ghumma*, 1:5.

of the divine. The "lesser", broadly non-esoteric approaches to Imamology stressed a more ecumenical ʿAlid approach, but there were also other forms of esotericism that tied Imamology to the conceptions of the school of Ibn ʿArabī and other non-Shiʿi strands of thought.

2 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī and Ibn Abī Jumhūr

Sayyid Ḥaydar, born in Āmul in 719/1319, was a prominent figure at the court of the Āl-i Bavand in Āmul, serving as vizier to Fakhr al-Dawla al-Ḥasan (d. 750/1349). Probably at his death or just before, Āmulī left for the shrine cities of Iraq, where he died sometime after 787/1385 – the date of his last known work.[45] From Najaf, we know that he went on *ḥajj* in the year 751/1350. In his own works, he stated that he spent his youth studying Shiʿi theology from an exoteric approach in his hometown in Khurāsān and in Iṣfahān until he was thirty years old.[46] In his commentary on Ibn ʿArabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* (Ringstones of wisdom) entitled *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ* (Text of texts) which he wrote in Najaf in 782/1381, he indicates his turn to the Sufi path already in Iran some years earlier, from 748/1347.[47] His first spiritual master was Nūr al-Dīn Ṭihrānī in Iṣfahān.[48] From this early period, he wrote his first work on the complementarity of the beliefs and practices of the exoteric and the esoteric entitled *Asrār al-sharīʿa wa-aṭwār al-ṭarīqa wa-anwār al-ḥaqīqa* (Secrets of the legal

45 Shushtarī, *Majālis al-muʾminīn*, 4:119–126; Mirzā ʿAbd Allāh Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ wa-ḥiyāḍ al-fuḍalāʾ*, ed. Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī (Qum: Kitābkhāna-yi ʿumūmī-yi Āyat Allāh Marʿashī Najafī, 1981), 2:219–225; Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt* (Beirut: al-Dār al-islāmiyya, 1991), 2:377–380; Mīrzā Muḥammad Ḥasan Zunūzī, *Riyāḍ al-janna*, ed. ʿAlī Rafiʿī (Qum: Kitābkhāna-yi Āyatullāh Marʿashī Najafī, 1991), 2:510–514; Khanjar Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī: dirāsa fī-l-ḥayāt al-rūḥiyya wa-l-fikriyya li-Ḥaydar Āmulī* (Beirut: Dār al-Hādī, 2004), 25–79; Morteza Agha Tehrani, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī: An Overview of his Doctrines," MA dissertation, McGill University, 1995, 29–72; al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:104–115. The Bawānids were eventually displaced by the Shiʿi Sarbadārids. His date of birth is calculated from his testimony in the prolegomena to *Naṣṣ al-nūṣūṣ* completed in 782/1380 when he says he was 63 years old – see Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *La texte des textes* [*al-Muqaddimāt min Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ*], ed. Henry Corbin and ʿUthmān Yaḥyā (Tehran: L'institut franco-iranien, 1975), 537.

46 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *La philosophie Shīʿite* [*Jāmiʿ al-asrār, Risālat naqd al-nuqūd*], ed. Henry Corbin and ʿUthmān Yaḥyā (Tehran: L'institut franco-iranien, 1969), 5; Āmulī, *La texte des textes*, 534; Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 32.

47 Āmulī, *La texte des textes*, 112, 256.

48 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Tafsīr al-muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam wa-l-baḥr al-khiḍamm*, ed. Sayyid Muḥsin Mūsawī Tabrīzī (Tehran: Wizārat al-thaqāfa al-irshād wal-islāmī, 1996–2010), 2:190; Tehrani, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī," 32.

path, ways of the Sufi path and lights of reality).[49] Once settled in Najaf, he studied with Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. 755/1354) receiving an *ijāza* in 755/1354, studying Sufi texts with ʿAbd al-Raḥmān al-Qudsī with an *ijāza* in 753/1351 and with the leading Shiʿi jurist Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī known as Fakhr al-Muḥaqqiqīn (d. 771/1369) from whom he obtained an *ijāza* in 761/1359 in al-Ḥilla – no doubt spending some time in al-Ḥilla.[50] Qudsī authorised him in the key Sufi texts *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* of Ibn ʿArabī (d. 638/1240) and its commentaries by Dāwūd al-Qayṣarī (d. 751/1350) and ʿAfīf al-Dīn al-Tilimsānī (d. 690/1291), *Manāzil al-sāʾirīn* (Stations of the Wayfarers) of Khwāja ʿAbd Allāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1088), works on which he later wrote commentaries – and this was in Najaf after his return from Medina.[51] His major work, *Jāmiʿ al-asrār wa-manbaʿ al-anwār* (Compendium of secrets and source of lights) was completed in the year 752/1351. The year 755/1352 saw him in Baghdad.[52]

The *ijāza* of Fakhr al-Muḥaqqiqīn was an extensive authorisation in a series of exoteric works including *Jawāmiʿ al-jāmiʿ* (The Most comprehensive exegesis), the Qurʾanic exegesis of al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154), the legal manual *Sharāʾiʿ al-islām* (Laws of Islam) of Najm al-Dīn al-Ḥillī (d. 676/1277), the legal hadith collection *Tahdhīb al-aḥkām* of al-Ṭūsī (d. 460/1067), *Sharḥ nahj al-balāgha* of Mītham al-Baḥrānī (d. c. 699/1300), and works of al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022).[53] Around that time, he wrote *al-Masāʾil al-Āmuliyya* on issues of jurisprudence and theology in conversation with Fakhr al-Muḥaqqiqīn, completed in 759/1358. Another *ijāza* from Fakhr al-Muḥaqqiqīn places Āmulī in al-Ḥilla at the end of Rabīʿ II 761/March 1360.[54] His Qurʾanic exegesis, *al-Muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam wa-l-baḥr al-khiḍamm* (The Great compass and the deep ocean), only constituted a series of prolegomena and was completed in 777/1376 in Najaf. Other works include *Risālat al-ʿulūm al-ʿāliya* (On the Higher sciences), his last known work completed in 787/1385, and a commentary on *Sharḥ manāzil*

49 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Asrār al-sharīʿa*, ed. Muḥammad Khwājavī (Tehran: Intishārāt-i mawlā, 1362 Sh/1983).

50 On Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Kāshī al-Ḥillī, see Muhammad Yetim, "The life of Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ḥillī al-Kāshī, a Little-known Commentator of the *Tajrīd al-ʿaqāʾid* Literature, his Academic Lineage, and his Works," *Nazariyat* 5 No. 1 (2019): 195–208.

51 Āmulī, *Tafsīr al-muḥīṭ al-aʿẓam*, 1:535; Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 39; Tehrani, "Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī," 37.

52 Āmulī, *La texte des textes*, 256.

53 Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 41.

54 Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, *Aʿyān al-shīʿa* (Beirut: Dār al-taʿāruf, 1983), VI: 273; see also Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 43.

al-sāʾirīn.[55] In all his corpus, he claimed to have been divinely inspired – much like the works of Ibn ʿArabī, whom he emulated.[56]

Āmulī was known for three main contributions (at least from the Safavid period onwards). First, he insisted on the complete complementarity between Sufism and Shiʿi Islam and thus continued the reception of the Ibn ʿArabī school in a Shiʿi context.[57] He was already popular because of this in the 15th century and the first Safavid century as attested in the work of Ibn Abī Jumhūr and Sayyid Nūrullāh Shushtarī (d. 1019/1610).[58] Second, following from the first point, he advocated the monism of Ibn ʿArabī based on a conception of God's unity as the singular reality that exists.[59] This is what he called pure, real and existential *tawḥīd* (*tawḥīd al-ṣirf al-wujūdī al-ḥaqīqī*) and insisted that the "return" (*rujūʿ*) that would be entailed in the governance of the Imam at his *parousia* would be a reversion to this so that it would be revealed to all that this is the truth, and just as under Adam, humanity would be a singular community united in this form of unity and recognition of existence.[60] Third, he adopted Ibn ʿArabī's conception of *walāya* and merged it with the classical Shiʿi tradition, modifying the position of the seal that emphasised – following Kāshānī – his Shiʿism.[61] ʿAlī and his descendants were considered to be the axes of the cosmos and those to be emulated by those who truly understood *tawḥīd*, and this *walāya* as a pivot of the cosmos, in which the reality of the perfect human, the Imam, sustained the cosmos was central to his doctrine.[62] The Imams were as essential to the endurance of the cosmos as the firmament and the heavenly bodies.[63] To this end, Āmulī cited the famous "sermon of the boast" (*khuṭbat al-iftikhār*) attributed to ʿAlī in which he says:

> I am the sign of the Compeller (*al-Jabbār*), I am the reality of the arcana, I am the evidence of the heavens, I am the intimate of Gabriel, I am the

55 Khwājavī, Introduction to Āmulī, *Asrār al-sharīʿa*, xxix.

56 As is well-known, Ibn ʿArabī claimed to have received his major work from the Prophet directly whom he met in Damascus at the end of Muḥarram 627/December 1229: Ibn ʿArabī, *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, ed. Sayyid Niẓām al-Dīn al-Ḥusaynī (Cairo: Maktabat Miṣr, 2015), 4.

57 Āmulī, *La philosophie Shīʿite*, part 1; Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 60–63; Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 3:178–90.

58 Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 63–65; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *al-Mujlī mirʾāt al-munjī*, ed. Riḍā Yaḥyāpūr Fārmad (Beirut: Dār al-maḥajja al-bayḍāʾ/Jamʿiyyat Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī li-iḥyāʾ al-turāth, 2013), 2:484–485; Shushtarī, *Majālis al-muʾminīn*, 4:14, 94.

59 Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 150–98.

60 Āmulī, *La philosophie shīʿite*, 100–101

61 Ḥamiyya, *al-ʿIrfān al-shīʿī*, 375–453.

62 Āmulī, *La philosophie shīʿite*, 10, 14, 223, 422.

63 Āmulī, *La philosophie shīʿite*, 238.

> chosen companion of Michael, I am the commander of the nations, I am the true promise, I am the manifest (*al-ẓāhir*), I am the hidden (*al-bāṭin*).[64]

This sermon was particularly influential already with Bursī and later with Ibn Abī Jumhūr, with the former citing a longer version in the *Mashāriq* as we shall see. Thus, in Āmulī we see the clear articulation of an esoteric conception of *walāya* even if his messianism does not have a marked focus on *raj'a*.

Ibn Abī Jumhūr was more clearly inclined to esoteric Shi'ism and had a better understanding of the hadith tradition than Āmulī. Wilferd Madelung was the first modern author to write about Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī and the way in which he prefigured some of the themes in the Safavid period.[65] He noticed the presence of doctrines usually associated with the *ghulāt* in al-Aḥsā'ī's magnum opus *Mujlī mir'āt al-munjī fī-l-kalām wa-l-ḥikmatayn wa-l-taṣawwuf* (The Brilliant treatise, a salvific mirror on *kalām*, the two philosophies and Sufism), a super-commentary on his *al-Nūr al-munjī min al-ẓalām* (Light that saves one from Tenebrity), which itself was a commentary on his own *Kitāb masālik al-afhām fī 'ilm al-kalām* (Way of the minds to knowledge of theology).[66] It is interesting that no serious study has yet emerged of his intriguing hadith collection that indicates to a far greater extent his espousal of esoteric doctrines

64 Āmulī, *La philosophie shī'ite*, 10. On this sermon, see Mas'ūd Bīdābādī, "Nigāhī bih khuṭba-yi iftikhār va khuṭba-yi taṭanjiyya," *'Ulūm-i ḥadīth* 25 (autumn 1381 Sh/2002): 69–81.

65 Wilferd Madelung, "Ibn Abī Ǧumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī's Synthesis of Kalām, Philosophy and Sufism," in *La signification de bas Moyen Age dans l'histoire du monde musulman: Actes du 8ème Congrès de l'Union européenne des arabisants et islamisants* (*Aix-en-Provence, 1976*) (Aix: Edisud, 1978), 147–56. Sabine Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölferschiitischen Islam des 9./15. Jahrhunderts. Die Gedankenwelten des Ibn Abī Ǧumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī* (*um 838/1434–35 – nach 906/1501*) (Leiden: Brill, 2000); Schmidtke, "New Sources for the life and work of Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī," *Studia Iranica* 38 (2009): 49–68; *Dū majmū'a-yi khaṭṭī az āthār-i kalāmī falsafī fiqhī-yi Ibn Abī Jumhūr Aḥsā'ī* (*m. pas az 906 h./1501 m.*)*: Nuskha-yi bargardān-i dū dastnivīs-i Kitābkhāna-yi Madrasa-yi Marvī* (*Tihrān*), Persian introduction and indices by A.R. Raḥīmī Rīseh, English introduction by S. Schmidtke (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi pazhūhishī-yi ḥikmat va falsafa-yi Īrān, 1387 Sh/2008), ii–xxii; Mūsā Hādī Bū-Khamsīn, *al-Shaykh Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī: qudwat al-'ilm wa-l-'amal* (Beirut: Dār al-bayān al-'arabī, 1993[reprinted 2013]); 'Abdullāh Ghufrānī, *Fihras muṣannafāt Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī* (Beirut: Dār al-maḥajja al-bayḍā'/Mu'assasat Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsā'ī li-iḥyā' al-turāth, 2013). There is a growing body of work on him including the establishment of a research institute dedicated to him led by scholars from the Eastern province in Saudi Arabia championing him as their intellectual forebear.

66 The original lithograph of the text was reprinted by Sabine Schmitdke (Tehran: Mu'assasa-yi pazhūhishī-yi ḥikmat va falsafa-yi Īrān, 1387 Sh/2008).

on the Imamate.[67] That collection, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī al-ʿazīziyya fī-l-aḥādīth al-dīniyya* (Precious pearls on the narrations of the faith) is prefaced with a treatise defending its author from charges of excessive regard for the Imams (*ghuluww*) by the famous *marjaʿ* and bibliophile Sayyid Shihāb al-Dīn Marʿashī Najafī (d. 1990).[68] It is actually, like elements of his theology, an eclectic compilation including narrations of a rather Sunni nature transmitted from Ibn ʿUmar, ʿĀʾisha and other similar authorities (although these are also often in a polemical context to show up the shortcomings of ʿUmar).[69] There are also the standard reports on the *walāya* of the Imams, on their privileged knowledge and on their pre-existence.[70] There is even a narration on Nowruz reported from Muʿallā b. Khunays, a famous and controversial companion of Imam Ṣādiq, in a genre of hadith that is usually considered to be a Safavid invention.[71]

Shams al-Dīn Abū Jaʿfar Muḥammad b. Zayn al-Din ʿAlī, better known as Ibn Abī Jumhūr, was born in the village of al-Taymiyya in al-Aḥsāʾ in 838/1439.[72] After his initial studies with his father, he moved to Najaf where his main teacher was Sharaf al-Dīn al-Ḥasan b. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Fattāl al-Gharawī (fl. 870/1465–66), the custodian of the shrine and briefly a student of Jalāl

67 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī al-ʿazīziyya fī-l-aḥādīth al-dīniyya*, ed. Mujtabā ʿIrāqī, 4 vols (Qum: Maktabat Āyatullāh al-Marʿashī, 1983).

68 Sayyid Shihāb al-Dīn Marʿashī, *al-Rudūd wa-l-nuqūd*, in Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī*, 1:33–48.

69 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī*, 4:9–11.

70 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī*, 4:123–125.

71 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *ʿAwālī al-laʾālī*, 3:41. Cf. John Walbridge, "A Persian Gulf in the Sea of Lights: the Chapter on Naw-Ruz in the *Biḥār al-anwār*," *Iran* 35 (1997): 83–92.

72 The standard biographical sources do not mention a date of birth. But in his disputation with a Sunni scholar of Herat (probably in Mashhad), he wrote that he was forty years old and the date of that disputation was 878/1473. See Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, 7:27; cf. Fārmad's introduction to *al-Nūr al-munjī* (Beirut: Dār al-maḥajja al-bayḍāʾ 2013), 1:65. The standard sources for his life include Shushtarī, *Majālis al-muʾminīn*, 3:602–620; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Amal al-āmil*, ed. Sayyid Aḥmad al-Ḥusaynī (Baghdad: Maktabat al-Andalus, 1966), 2:253; Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 5:50–51; Zunūzī, *Riyāḍ al-janna*, 2:103–106; Yūsuf al-Baḥrānī, *Luʾluʾat al-Baḥrayn*, ed. Sayyid Muḥammad Ṣādiq Āl Baḥr al-ʿulūm (Najaf: Maṭbaʿat al-Nuʿmān, 1966), 166–168; Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, 7, 26–34; Mirzā Ḥusayn Nūrī, *Mustadrak al-wasāʾil* (Najaf: Maktabat al-ʿilmiyya, 1963), 3:361; Muḥammad ʿAlī Mudarris-i Tabrīzī, *Rayḥānat al-adab fī tarājim al-maʿrūfīn bi-l-kunya wa-l-laqab* (Tabriz: Chāpkhāna-yi Shafaq, 1349 Sh/1970), 7:331; ʿAbbās Qummī, *al-Kunā wa-l-alqāb* (Najaf: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Ḥaydariyya, 1963), 1:192; ʿAbbās Qummī, *al-Fawāʾid al-raḍawiyya* (Tehran: Kitābkhāna-yi markazī, 1339 Sh/1960), 2:282; ʿAbd Allāh Māmaqānī, *Tanqīḥ al-maqāl* (Najaf: al-Maṭbaʿa al-Murtaḍawiyya, 1934), II: 150; Khayr al-Dīn al-Ziriklī, *al-Aʿlām* (Beirut: Dār al-ʿilm li-l-malāyīn, 1990), 6:288; Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölferschiitischen Islam*, 14–24; Jaʿfar al-Muhājir, *Jabal ʿĀmil bayn al-shahīdayn* (Damascus: IFEAD, 2005), 185–190; al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:315–324.

al-Dīn Davānī (d. 908/1502) who was passing through Najaf and taught him *Ḥikmat al-ishrāq* (Wisdom of illumination) of Suhrawardī (exe. 587/1191), and for whom he wrote his short treatise *al-Zawrā'* (The Luminous treatise).[73] It was probably from this teacher that al-Aḥsā'ī learned the philosophical traditions of the Avicennians and Illuminationists, the *ḥikmatayn* as he called them. From there he set off for the *ḥajj*, stopping in Syria on the way and studying hadith in Karak Nūḥ with Shaykh ʿAlī b. Hilāl al-Jazā'irī (fl. 900/1495), himself a student of the famous mystically inclined jurist Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī (d. 841/1438), in turn a student of Shahīd I (exe. 786/1385); al-Jazā'irī marked their meeting with an *ijāza* dated 877/1472.[74] Returning to his homeland, he passed through Iraq, significantly stopping in al-Ḥilla, and then set off for Mashhad, writing *Zād al-musāfirīn* (Provision for the Travellers) on *kalām* along the way, arriving in Mashhad later in 878/1473 where he was hosted by a future student Sayyid Muḥsin al-Raḍawī (d. 931/1525) to whom he dedicated his own gloss – and major work in *kalām* – *Kashf al-barāhīn fī sharḥ zād al-musāfirīn* (Revealing the arguments, a commentary on provision of the travellers).[75] His disputation with a Sunni scholar of Herat dates from the end of 878/1474.[76] Heading to his hometown, he stopped again in al-Ḥilla, where he gave an *ijāza* to ʿAlī b. Qāsim for transmitting the *Qawāʿid al-aḥkām* (Rules for legal precepts) of al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī in 888/1483.[77] On his return to al-Aḥsā', he finished composing the draft of *al-Nūr al-munjī* on 3 Shaʿbān 893/13 July 1488, and later the commentary on it *Mujlī* was completed in a corrected version on 16 Ṣafar 896/December 1490 in Mashhad, and he may have taught a part of it a year before in Najaf before he presented it to his student Sayyid Muḥsin al-Raḍawī.[78] The year 901/1496

73 Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamā'*, 1:199–200; Āqā Buzurg al-Ṭihrānī, *Ṭabaqāt aʿlām al-shīʿa*, ed. ʿAlī-Naqī Munzawī, rpt. (Beirut: Dār Iḥyā' al-turāth al-ʿarabī, 2009), 6:38–39; Qummī, *al-Fawā'id al-raḍawiyya*, 102; Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, 7:32; Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, *Aʿyān al-shīʿa* (Beirut: Dār al-taʿāruf, 1983), 5:201–202; Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölferschiitischen Islam*, 17; Reza Pourjavady, *Philosophy in Early Safavid Iran: Najm al-Dīn Maḥmūd al-Nayrīzī and His Writings* (Leiden: Brill, 2011), 8.

74 Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamā'*, 5:27; al-Muḥājir, *Jabal ʿĀmil*, 189–190, 195–196. Ibn Abī Jumhūr's own *mashyakha* for *ʿAwālī* gives details of his teachers and the lineages of his hadith transmission – see Muḥammad Ḥusayn Wāʿiẓ Najafī, *Ijāzāt al-ḥadīth allatī katabahā al-ḥakīm al-ilāhī Muḥammad ibn ʿAlī ibn Abī Jumhūr* (Beirut: Mu'assasat Ibn Abī Jumhūr, 2018), 405–423. Most of the lineages go through Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī.

75 Al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 151–155; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Kashf al-barāhīn fī sharḥ zād al-musāfirīn* (Beirut: Mu'assasat Umm al-qurā, 2002).

76 See http://www.rafed.net/books/aqaed/mnzrtima/m60a.html accessed 23 March 2014.

77 Sayyid ʿAbd al-ʿAzīz al-Ṭabāṭabā'ī, *Maktabat al-ʿAllāma al-Ḥillī* (Qum: Mu'assasat Āl al-bayt li-iḥyā' al-turāth, 1999), 2:140–141; al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 154.

78 *Mawsūʿat Ṭabaqāt al-fuqahā'*, 9:245; al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 155.

finds him in Astarābād where he completed *Durar al-laʾālī* (Essence of pearls).[79] Three years later, he completed his commentary on al-Ḥillī's *al-Bāb al-ḥādī ʿashar* in Medina.[80] The last we hear of him is an *ijāza* that he gave to al-Shaykh ʿAlī b. Qāsim b. ʿAdhāqa on 9 Rajab 906/January 29, 1501.[81] Noticeable in his oeuvre is a growing inclination towards mysticism. A highly prolific author, in one *ijāza* to Muḥammad b. Ṣalāḥ al-Gharawī al-Ḥillī dated 14 Jumāda I 896/25 March 1491 in Mashhad, he lists his works (24 of them) and his lineages of hadith transmission all the way back to the Imams.[82]

What can we say about Ibn Abī Jumhūr's docrine of *walāya*? The key text for understanding his thought is the *Mujlī*. He presents two approaches. The first assimilates *walāya* to prophecy as aspects of the instrumentalisation of divine justice through the notion of facilitating grace (*lutf*): God is required to provide guidance through prophecy and *walāya* so that believers may fulfil their moral obligations.[83] This is entirely consistent with the medieval Shiʿi *kalām* tradition stemming from al-Ṭūsī and al-Ḥillī.[84] The second draws upon the Ibn ʿArabī tradition with its themes of *walāya* as the esoteric aspect of prophecy, focusing upon the notion of the seal of *walāya* that corresponds to the seal of prophecy.[85] *Walāya* is thus the perfection or completion of the prophetic function.[86] On the famous controversy over the identities of the absolute and Muḥammadan seals of *walāya*, Ibn Abī Jumhūr follows the Shiʿi school: the absolute seal was identified with ʿAlī and the Muḥammadan seal with the Hidden Imam.[87] The culmination of this is the early notion of *walāyat*

79 Al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 8:133.

80 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Sharḥ al-bāb al-ḥādī ʿashar*, ed. Riḍā Yaḥyā Pūr-Farmād (Beirut: Dār al-maḥajja al-bayḍāʾ/Muʾassasat Ibn Abī Jumhūr li-iḥyāʾ al-turāth, 2014); Sabine Schmidtke, "Ibn Abī Jumhūr al-Aḥsāʾī and his *al-Bāb al-ḥādī ʿashar*," in *Islam: identité et altérité. Hommage à Guy Monnot, o.p.*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, 367–382 (Turnhout, Brepols, 2013).

81 Najafī, *Ijāzāt al-ḥadīth*, 397–402.

82 Najafī, *Ijāzāt al-ḥadīth*, 293–330.

83 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī mirʾāt al-munjī fī-l-kalām wa-l-ḥikmatayn wa-l-taṣawwuf*, ed. Riḍā Yaḥyā Pūr-Farmād (Beirut: Muʾassasat Ibn Abī Jumhūr li-iḥyāʾ al-turāth, 2013), 3:861–863, 875–878; cf. Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölferschiitischen Islam*, 181.

84 Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *Kashf al-murād fī sharḥ Tajrīd al-iʿtiqād*, ed. Ḥasan Ḥasanzāda Āmulī (Qum: Muʾassasat al-nashr al-islāmī, 1433/2012), 490–492; Ibn al-Muṭahhar al-Ḥillī, *al-Bāb al-ḥādī ʿashar maʿ sharḥayhi al-Nāfiʿ yawm al-ḥashr wa-Miftāḥ al-bāb*, ed. Mahdī Muḥaqqiq (Tehran: McGill Institute of Islamic Studies, 1365 Sh/1986), 32–33.

85 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 1049–1055; see also Schmidtke, *Theologie, Philosophie und Mystik im zwölferschiitischen Islam*, 189, 193.

86 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 3:877–879.

87 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 3:1060–1062. For a discussion of this issue, see Michel Chodkiewicz, *Seal of Saints: Prophethood and Sainthood in the Doctrine of Ibn ʿArabī*, tr. Liadain Sherrard

al-taṣarruf that later morphs into *walāya takwīniyya*. The reality of the perfect human not only sustains the cosmos, but in the person of ʿAlī it wields absolute authority in the entire realm of contingency (*ʿālam al-imkān*).[88]

In his various *kalām* works, he reiterated the maximalist conception of *walāya* as a primordial status of the Imams that coalesces with the notion of the *ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*.[89] But as a corollary, he also affirmed the importance of the concept of apocalyptic *rajʿa* as the resurrection of the good and the evil during the *parousia* of the Imam. He criticized the idea, articulated by al-Sayyid al-Murtaḍā in the classical period, that the return merely refers to the reversion of authority and power to the descendants of the Prophet.[90] Instead, in a number of texts, he insisted that *rajʿa* entails the actual resurrection of the good including the Imams and of their enemies so that the latter can be chastised and the Imams' prior martyrdoms can be avenged.[91] On this, he claimed not only the consensus of the community but also the many corroborating hadith that have multiple chains of transmission (*mutawātir*).[92] Although he acknowledged that the hadith seem to talk in general terms, he made clear that one can still affirm the resurrection of specific historical figures, which is the scholarly consensus of the Shiʿa.[93] In *Mujlī*, he stressed that the return to life of the supporters of the *walāya* of the Imams at the *parousia* of the Mahdī was partly so that they could rejoice and participate in his governance and witness

(Cambridge: The Islamic Texts Society, 1993), 116–140. Chodkiewicz asserts that the Shiʿi interpretation starts with Ḥaydar Āmulī (*Texte des textes*, 173, 175, 182, 233) and says that his attempt to appropriate Kāshānī is mistaken. Āmūlī's discussion on this is comprehensive and he cites Kāshānī – see *Texte des textes*, 188–210, 221–226. In this discussion on Qurʾan 17:79, Kāshānī seems to associate the seal of Muḥammadan *walāya* with the *parousia* of the Mahdī – see *Tafsīr Ibn ʿArabī* (*al-Taʾwīlāt*), ed. Samīr Muṣṭafā Rabāb (Beirut: Dār iḥyāʾ al-turāth al-ʿarabī, 2001), 1:386. For another discussion on the Shiʿi position, see Parvin Kazemzadeh and Maryam Davarnia, "The Sealness of the Wilayah of al-Mahdi and the Specification of his Ancestors Accordng to Ibn Arabi and Some Commentators," *Religious Inquiries* 3 No. 5 (2014): 63–81, and Muḥammad Khwājawī, *Khaṭm al-awliyāʾ az dīdgāh-i Ibn ʿArabī va Ḥakīm-i Tirmidhī* (Tehran: Intishārāt-i Mawlā, 1387 Sh/2008).

88 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 4:1342, 1503.

89 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Sharḥ ʿalā l-Bāb al-ḥādī ʿashar*, ed. Riḍā Yaḥyā Pūr-Farmād (Beirut: Muʾassasat Ibn Abī Jumhūr, 2014), 2:535–537.

90 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Sharḥ ʿalā l-Bāb*, 2:788.

91 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Sharḥ ʿalā l-Bāb*, 2:786–789.

92 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 4:1550–1553.

93 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *al-Mashhadiyya fī uṣūl al-dīn*, in *Rasāʾil kalāmiyya wa-falsafiyya*, ed. Riḍā Yaḥyā Pūr-Farmād (Beirut: Muʾassasat Ibn Abī Jumhūr, 2014), 1:398, and *Maslak al-afhām*, in *Rasāʾil kalāmiyya*, 1:349.

the victory of the family of the Prophet, and the resurrection of their enemies was to be so that vengeance could befall them.[94]

One of the features of the work of Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī and Ibn Abī Jumhūr is the confluence of Shiʿi notions of *walāya* with the Sufi tradition of Ibn ʿArabī. As we shall see, this was broadly absent from the Ḥilla tradition and is not central to the nature of esotericism in the two main thinkers that we will analyse, and that should alert us to the fact that we need to exercise some caution in directly associating esotericism in Islam directly with Sufism (or perhaps with explicitly Shiʿi Sufism). While we witness elements of the esoteric Imamology that we shall see in al-Bursī and al-Ḥillī already in Āmulī and later in al-Aḥsāʾī, there is a qualitative shift that attempts to recover the early Shiʿi hadith tradition.

3 The School of al-Ḥilla

Teaching in al-Ḥilla was earlier established through the patronage of the Mazyadids and then later in our period flourished under the Shiʿi rule of the Jalāyirids in the 14th century, partly, a result of being untouched by the earlier Mongol invasions and being allowed to continue self-governance.[95] Teaching focused on the master science of jurisprudence but central to instruction was a theological core with a strong mystical inclination, influenced somewhat by the school of Ibn ʿArabī and best exemplified in the jurist Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī.

Jamāl al-Dīn Abū-l-ʿAbbās Aḥmad Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī (d. 841/1437), a jurist and student of the students of Shahīd I and Fakhr al-Muḥaqqiqīn, was reported to be mystically inclined as one might gauge from his devotional manual *ʿUddat al-dāʿī wa-najāḥ al-sāʿī* (Provision for the supplicator and salvation of the one who strives) and his treatise *al-Taḥṣīn fī ṣifāt al-ʿārifīn min al-ʿuzla wa-l-khumūl* (The Fortifying text on the properties of the gnostics).[96] Born in 756/1356, he was a leading Shiʿi scholar of his time studying with figures such as al-Miqdād al-Siyūrī and Ḍiyāʾ al-Dīn ʿAlī (d. 856/1452), the son of Shahīd I.[97]

94 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *al-Mujlī*, 4:1497.

95 Al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 20–29.

96 Al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:257–269; Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:26; Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 1:64–66; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Amal al-āmil*, 2:21; Zunūzī, *Riyāḍ al-janna*, 1:341–346; Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, 1:80; al-Qummī, *al-Kuna wa-l-alqāb*, 1:435; al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 187–98; ʿAlī Ghulāmī Dihqī and Amīr Ḥasan Muẓaffarī-Zāda, "Ibn Fahd Ḥillī ṣūfī ya faqīh-i ʿārif," *Tārīkh dar Āyīna-yi pazhūhish* 4 (winter 1389 Sh/2011): 105–18; Ranjbar, *Mushaʿsha'iyyān*, 203–204.

97 On al-Miqdād, see the discussion in al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 178–85.

Ibn Fahd spent most of his life teaching in Karbala. Safavid sources starting with Shushtarī clearly defined him as a Sufi.[98] Various licenses to transmit that he received described him as the "pride of the ʿulema and the reference point of the scholars", an adept with mastery over both the scriptural and the rational sciences (*ʿulūm al-ʿaqliyya wa-l-naqliyya*) and an ascetic.[99] His students included Sayyid Muḥammad Nūrbakhsh (exe. 869/1464), and Ibn Falāḥ al-Mushaʿsha' (d. 870/1465). Given the controversy over Sufism in the modern day *ḥawza*, his inclination to Sufism is often questioned and replaced with a commitment to the more neutral and scriptural 'asceticism' (*zuhd*).[100] The *ʿUddat* is a popular manual of devotions and does not necessarily indicate clear mystical intentions – it is rather practical although it does provide "rational" arguments for the necessity and efficacy of petitionary prayer and liturgy.[101] *Al-Taḥṣīn* is not as well known but a very short text: the manuscript in the British Library is barely four folios and the printed edition around 30 pages in large script.[102] The text itself is divided into four sections, three on the nature of secluding oneself by devoting oneself to God, and a fourth on the praise of the *awliyā'*. In its practical nature, mixing advice on the importance of practices and how to perform, alongside the citation of supporting hadith, it seems geared towards Sufi style spiritual practice. Each chapter begins with definitions and practices that are followed by lists of hadith.

The learned Shiʿi tradition ascribed to him a central position in the transmission and development of law and jurisprudence. However, his association with some of his students – whether real or not – such as Ibn Falāḥ, Nūrbakhsh and even al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī, as well as his purported relationship with the supposedly "messianic" Shiʿi polity of the Sarbadārids makes him an important pivot in the account of esotericism in al-Ḥilla.[103] This links him directly to the author of the *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*.

98 Shushtarī, *Majālis al-mu'minīn*, 3:598; Baḥrānī, *Lu'lu'at al-baḥrayn*, 168; Khwānsārī, *Rawḍāt al-jannāt*, 1:71; al-Muhājir, *Jabal ʿĀmil*, 182–184.

99 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 104:423–424.

100 Al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 192–198 is more neutral. Shaybī is very clear on his esotericism and interest in the occult – *al-Ṣila*, 2:267–269.

101 Ibn Fahd, *ʿUddat al-dāʿī*, 15–16.

102 British Museum Add. 16839, fol. 254r–257v. See Ibn Fahd, *al-Taḥṣīn fī ṣifāt al-ʿārifīn*, ed. Sayyid Muḥammad Abṭaḥī (Qum: Madrasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, 1986).

103 They might have been a Shiʿi Sufi movement – or at least one inclined to *futuwwa* – establishing a Shiʿi capital in Sabzawār – see John Masson Smith Jr., *The History of the Sarbadār Dynasty* (The Hague: Mouton, 1970), 55–60.

3.1 *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*

ʿIzz al-Dīn (or Jamāl al-Dīn) Abū Muḥammad al-Ḥasan b. Sulāymān al-Ḥillī was born before 742/1341 in al-Ḥilla but probably moved later to Jabal ʿĀmil, which might explain the *ijāza* he received from Ibn Makkī al-Jizzīnī (al-Shahīd I, d. 786/1384) for the transmission of *ʿIlal al-sharāʾiʿ* of al-Ṣadūq on 12 Shaʿbān 757/10 August 1356.[104] Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn suggests that this was because he was an ʿĀmilī in origin (although it is telling that al-Ḥurr in his biographical dictionary devoted to ʿĀmilīs does not mention him as one).[105] Al-Ḥillī apparently studied with his contemporary al-Miqdād al-Siyūrī (d. 826/1422).[106] He also studied with a number of other figures and appears in the chain of narrators for *al-Ṣaḥīfa al-Sajjādiyya* in the recension of Shaykh Bahāʾ al-Dīn al-ʿĀmilī (d. 1030/1621) through his grandfather Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad al-Jubaʿī (d. 886/1481).[107] His other teachers in hadith were Sayyid Bahāʾ al-Dīn ʿAlī b. Ghiyāth al-Dīn Ḥusaynī Nīlī Najafī (d. after 803/1400), and Muḥammad b. Ibrāhīm al-Maṭārābādī.[108] He was still alive on 23 Muḥarram 802/25 September 1399, the date of the *ijāza* that he gave to Shaykh ʿIzz al-Dīn al-Ḥusayn al-Jūyānī for the transmission of *al-Khiṣāl* of al-Ṣadūq.[109] Another student of his, Zayn al-Dīn ʿAlī b. al-Ḥasan Astarābādī (d. 837/1433), described him as a major scholar of the second half of the 8th century AH.[110] Perhaps his most famous student seems to have been the major Ḥillī scholar Jamāl al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Muḥammad Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī. As contemporaries, it seems that Ibn Fahd taught al-Ḥillī jurisprudence and similar disciplines, and al-Ḥillī taught Ibn Fahd hadith and the esoteric disciplines.[111] He may have been considered

104 Al-Ṭihrānī, *Ṭabaqāt aʿlām al-shīʿa*, 3:41, 4:34; Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 3:374; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Amal al-āmil*, 2:66; Introduction to al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī, *al-Majmūʿa al-ḥadīthiyya al-maʿrūf bi-Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 11–14; see also al-Muhājir, *Jabal ʿĀmil*, 154, 158, 166; al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 161–163, 314, 324–325. Interestingly, Shushtarī seems to be unaware of him.

105 Al-Amīn, *Aʿyān al-shīʿa*, 5:106, but al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Amal al-āmil*, 2:66.

106 Sayyid Ḥasan al-Ṣadr, *Takmilat Amal al-āmil*, eds. ʿAbd al-Karīm al-Dabbāgh and ʿAdnān al-Dabbāgh (Beirut: Dār al-muʾarrikh al-ʿarabī, 2005), 2:352. He mentions that al-Ḥasan is often confused with a namesake who was a student of Shahīd I – see *Takmilat Amal al-āmil*, 1:103. However, other sources such as Afandī above cite the *ijāza* that seems to be our thinker.

107 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 104:213; see al-Ṭihrānī, *Ṭabaqāt aʿlām al-shīʿa*, 4:34.

108 According to Sayyid Muḥsin al-Amīn, Maṭārābād is in the vicinity of Basra – see *Aʿyān al-shīʿa*, 5:220, 6:390. My thanks to Professor Mushegh Asatryan for this information.

109 Muḥammad al-Samāmī al-Ḥāʾirī, "Ijāzat al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī li-l-Jūyānī," *Turāthunā* 10 (1408/1988): 107–114.

110 Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 3:411–12; al-Ṭihrānī, *Ṭabaqāt aʿlām al-Shīʿa*, 4:88.

111 Their mutual master-disciple relationship is rather common – a good example being Maytham al-Baḥrānī and Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī in the 7th/13th century.

as a Sufi since one later author, ʿAlī b. ʿAlī b. al-Ṭayy (d. 855/1451) in his transmission license of *al-Ṣahīfa al-Sajjādiyya*, cites him as *shaykh al-sālikīn*.[112] If at all considered in the Shiʿi biographical tradition, he is placed in the generation of the students of Shahīd I and of Fakhr al-muḥaqqiqīn and prior to the generation of Ibn Fahd (or an older contemporary). He probably died around the beginning of the 15th century.

He does not seem to have written much, and what there is consists mainly of collections of hadith, the most famous of which is the so-called *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, usually including his *Risālat al-Rajʿa wa-l-radd ʿalā ahl al-bidʿa*.[113] It is called a *Mukhtaṣar* because it claims to be based on the non-extant *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* of Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh al-Ashʿarī (d. 301/913).[114] In the Safavid period, it was better known as *Muntakhab Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* as attested by Majlisī and Afandī; the editor mentions 24 manuscripts, many of which date from the later Safavid period, especially the 1070s and 1080s AH.[115] The text clearly draws upon a number of earlier hadith compilations such as *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* of al-Ṣaffār, *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays al-Hilālī*, various *Kitāb al-ghayba* versions, *al-Kāfī* of al-Kulaynī and *ʿIlal al-sharā'iʿ* of al-Ṣadūq as well as a number of prayer manuals such as *Kāmil al-ziyārāt* of Ibn Qūlawayh and *al-Miṣbāḥ* of al-Ṭūsī. As such, the Imamology that it portrays harks back to the early period. Another work attributed to him takes up what became a major theme of Shiʿi religiosity in the Safavid period, namely the anathemisation of

112 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 107:213; al-Ṣadr, *Takmilat Amal al-āmil*, 6:73.

113 This particular *risāla* has been published separately before attributed to Sayyid Muḥammad Mu'min b. Dūst Muḥammad Ḥusaynī Astarābādī (exe. 1088/1677), son-in-law of the famous Astarābādī and hadith teacher of Majlisī. See Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 110:127–128; al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 1:94, 456. The only other work of al-Ḥillī that is published, and which indicates his adherence to a maximal theory of Imamology, is *Tafḍīl al-a'imma ʿalā-l-anbiyā' wa-l-malā'ika*, ed. Mushtāq al-Muẓaffar (Qum: Maktabat al-ʿAllāma al-Majlisī, 1388 Sh/2009). The contents (which are somewhat repetitive) affirm the ontological and moral superiority of the Prophet and his family over all of creation (including all the prophets and the angels) and the necessity of love for them that is particular to the Shiʿa and God's curse upon their enemies. It also includes a section on the *Parousia* of the Hidden Imam and his superiority over all creation including the prophets and angels.

114 Recently Hasan Ansari has argued that the text that we know as *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* of al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī is not his work as he was a juridically inclined tradent not known for transmitting theological doctrine, but rather a later recension of Saʿd b. ʿAbdullāh's lost work. See his blog on this text – http://ansari.kateban.com/post/2070 This would perhaps explain why there is a large element of overlap in the concerns of the *Baṣā'ir* and this *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* with practically identical chapter headings. However, Amir-Moezzi is not so sure – see *Le Coran silencieux et le Coran parlant* (Paris: CNRS, 2011), 134.

115 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 19–22; Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:25.

ʿUmar and celebration of his death: *ʿIqd al-durur fī tārīkh wafāt ʿUmar*. The four chapters of the work discuss the date of ʿUmar's death and the excellences of celebrating it, with a conclusion on poetry and literary celebrations of the date.[116]

The text of *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt* is broadly divided into two overlapping parts. Al-Ḥillī claims to follow the order of the text of Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh and even imitates the chapter headings. Part one includes various chapters on the doctrine of *walāya* and the theology of the Imamate – however, two important parts stand out as independent treatises that may have been incorporated: one is the aforementioned *Risālat al-rajʿa wa-l-radd ʿalā ahl al-bidʿa* that comprises material transmitted not in the work of Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh, but on the authority of Shahīd I starting with a long sermon of ʿAlī as well as excerpts of the famous *ziyāra jāmiʿa* narrated from Imam ʿAlī al-Hādī,[117] and the other is a series of narrations from Imam al-Ṣādiq rebuking the esotericism of Abū-l-Khaṭṭāb and instructing al-Mufaḍḍal b. ʿUmar al-Juʿfī (d. 145/762).[118] In this part is also a long series of narrations on the need to guard the esoteric doctrine – *kitmān al-ḥadīth*.[119] It seems to be a common strategy of al-Ḥillī to use those accused of *ghuluww* to condemn extremism and thus to rehabilitate their value as transmitters of the knowledge of the Imams.

The structure of part one is the following. The first section contains various reports on the knowledge and disciplines of the Imams and contains 54 reports mainly from *Baṣā'ir* of al-Ṣaffār and *al-Kāfī*; report 33 is a long letter from Imam al-Riḍā to Aḥmad b. ʿUmar al-Ḥallāl on how to know the next Imam. This includes the ability of the Imams to know all languages.[120] The second is an independent work on the cycles and their states (*al-karrāt wa-ḥālātiha*) that directly pertains to *rajʿa* and includes 46 narrations that include the report from al-Ṣādiq that there are three battles of God (*ayyām Allāh*): the battle when the Qā'im (the Avenger) rises, when the return (*al-karra*) takes place, and Day

116 Al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 15:289. It is possible that the text is actually by a Safavid author but refers back to the authority of al-Ḥillī. On the theme of celebrating the death of ʿUmar in the Safavid period, one of the best witnesses is Sayyid Niʿmat Allāh al-Jazā'irī (d. 1112/1701), one of the students of Majlisī – see *al-Anwār al-nuʿmāniyya* (Beirut: Dār al-Qāri', 2008), 1:84–91, 4:71–117.

117 Al-Ḥillī, *Muhktaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 155–204. The *Risālat al-rajʿa* is extant in independent manuscripts and is cited as a separate work – see al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 10:162; Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:16.

118 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 279–299. Much of the same material including the hadith of al-Mufaḍḍal is found in al-Jazā'irī, *al-Anwār al-nuʿmāniyya*, 2:54–77, and 1:30 where he cites it from Rajab al-Bursī.

119 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 327–350.

120 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 97–98.

of Judgement.[121] The third section is the independent *Kitāb al-rajʿa* that he says is based on narrations not from Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh. The chain of narration begins with various Ḥillī figures from Shahīd I and moves through al-Ṭusī to Ibn Bābawayh through to the sermon of ʿAlī.[122] It starts with him saying three times the famous phrase "ask me before you miss me", after which Ṣaʿṣaʿa b. Ṣawḥān asks him about the rising of the Dajjāl, the *dābba* and the rising of the Mahdī. This is immediately followed by a long hadith of Imam Ṣādiq from Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī again citing a sermon of ʿAlī that includes not only the notion that the primordial pact (of Qurʾan 7: 172) was to help the Prophet and his *waṣī*, but also a list of identifications of who he is (*anā ṣāḥib al-nār wa-l-janna*) reminiscent of Bursī's *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn* that includes the phrase "I am a cycle after cycles, and have return after return".[123] In all there are 49 narrations including from *Kitāb al-ghayba* of al-Ṭūsī. The fourth section reverts to Saʿd's text with a chapter on the people on the Aʿrāf (mentioned in Qurʾan 7: 48) that includes 13 narrations on the Imams (hence a return to the theme of *walāya* especially as some of the exegeses of the verse refer to the Imams as the people on the Aʿrāf). The fifth section is on the excellences of the Imams reported in the Qurʾan and includes 48 narrations. Once again do we find *walāya* and the stress upon the primordial ʿAlī, who, here, is the very definition of the "straight path" (*ṣirāṭ mustaqīm*) to/of God.[124] This is followed by two chapters dealing with submitting to what the Imams teach and refuting those who reject those teachings, with 36 narrations on the former and 24 on the latter that focused on the famous *ḥadīth al-thaqalayn*. These chapters are divided by section seven that is an exchange between Imam Ṣādiq and al-Mufaḍḍal made up of 5 long reports designed to demonstrate a rejection of the divinity of the Prophet and the Imams. Thus, it acts as a re-affirmation of cosmic *walāya* differentiating it from *ghuluww*. The eighth section is a short chapter of 4 reports on the necessity of recognising the attributes of the Imams. The last section is on the key notion of the *kitmān al-sirr* and the esoteric guarding of the arcana.

The second part resumes the selection from Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh on a variety of issues including the narrations that he transmitted on *rajʿa*.[125] Contained in this section is also an independent treatise on the origins of the creation of humans – on the pre-eternal world of the mote (*ʿālam al-dharr*).[126] Overall

121 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 117.

122 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 155.

123 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 161–162.

124 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 252.

125 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 511–586.

126 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 457–510. This text also exists in separate manuscripts and is considered an independent treatise – see Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 15:289.

what seems to be clear is the overlap that much of this material has with the so-called Mufaḍḍaliyyāt material associated with the *ghulāt*, or alternatively one could – with Amir-Moezzi – see these themes as central to the esoteric core of Shiʿi Islam in the classical period with its focus on the supernatural nature of the Imams, their pre-existence (and role in creation in *ʿālam al-dharr*), their cosmic authority (*walāya takwīniyya*), and their role in the eschaton (*rajʿa*).[127] Structurally, there are seven sections that almost alternate between these three themes. The first is on the difficulty of the cause of *walāya*, followed by the second section on the famous phrase that the "affair is a matter that is difficult and arduous" (*amrunā ṣaʿb mustaṣʿab*).[128] The third section is on the decree and determination of God. That is followed by a section on the divine will identifying it with the Imams. The fifth section is on the primordial reality of the nature in the world of the *dharr* and the acknowledgement of them. The sixth returns to the theme of *rajʿa*. The final section reverts to the primordial world and the recognition of *walāya* that must be recollected in this world.[129]

It is worth focusing on the three sections that pertain to *rajʿa*. The first is the section on the *karrāt* in which the term in used interchangeably with *rajʿa* and comprises 46 narrations, usually fairly short. Many are narrated through Imam al-Bāqir and Jābir al-Juʿfī and a group from Imam al-Ṣādiq. Only one is from Imam al-Riḍā and one from Imam al-Kāẓim (Abū Ibrāhīm). Throughout, there is an element of explaining Qur'anic verses as indicating the return, demonstrating the privileged knowledge of the Imams with respect to the revelation. Certain themes emerge. The first is the distinction between being killed (*al-qatl*) and dying (*al-mawt*) – all people are killed and taste death, but their death will only come after the *rajʿa* and then they will be properly resurrected for the final judgement.[130] No one will truly die until they are killed by the Mahdī or one of the Imams. This is linked to the reports on the three "days" of God: the first is the *parousia* of the Imam, the second is the *rajʿa* and the third is the resurrection and judgement.[131] The second theme is the connection between *rajʿa* and vengeance for the blood of Imam al-Ḥusayn since he will

127 Mushegh Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shiʿi Islam: The Ghulāt Muslims and their Beliefs* (London: Tauris in association with the Institute of Ismaili Studies, 2017); Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin*; on pre-existence, see Amir-Moezzi, *La religion discrète* (Paris: Vrin, 2006), 109–33.

128 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 395–411.

129 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 540–541.

130 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 121–122 hadith 7 in the section, 122–123 hadith 8, 127 hadith 14, 128 hadith 15, 134 hadith 21, 139 hadith 28, 140–141 hadith 31.

131 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 117 hadith 2, 128 hadith 15.

be the first to return.[132] Linked to this is the role of ʿAlī as avenger even for the blood of his son.[133] It is ʿAlī who will kill the Dajjāl and it is ʿAlī who is prophesied in Qur'an 74: 2 as the warner.[134] The third theme is that the *rajʿa* is the time for the vengeance against the Umayyads and the fulfilment of God's promise of the governance of the Ahl al-Bayt; all the Imams will return, will bring the evildoers to their death, and will rule.[135] The Prophet is reported on the day of the conquest of Mecca as prophesying the future return of his family to that city.[136] In another theme, there is an attempt to defend the doctrine as correct and rebut rationalist objections (coming from "Iraq") and those affirming free will and rejecting determinism (the Qadariyya) and also objections coming from the *ghulāt* who denied the killing and the death of the Imams; the simple fact that ʿAlī is killed, will return and die and then be resurrected is proof that he is not God and hence *rajʿa* rejects *ghuluww*.[137] The fifth theme is that *rajʿa* is as much about the punishing of the evildoers and the final victory over evil, and brings to an end previous cycles of the conflict between good and evil in which it seems that the latter always have a material victory.[138] The final narration in this section brings together the various themes and focuses on a major element of a maximalist notion of *walāya*, namely the vices of the caliphs:[139]

> Khālid b. Yaḥyā reported. I asked Abū ʿAbd Allāh [al-Ṣādiq]: Did the messenger of God really name Abū Bakr the truthful one (*al-ṣiddīq*)? He said: Yes, it was when Abū Bakr was with him in the cave. The messenger of God said to him: Truly I see the ship of the sons of ʿAbd al-Muṭṭalib coming into turmoil on the seas. Abū Bakr said to him: You truly see that? He said: Yes. He said: Messenger of God, you can see such things? He said:

132 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 119 hadith 4, 130–131 hadith 19, 135–136, hadith 23, 146 hadith 38, 146–147 hadith 39, 149–150 hadith 44, 150–151 hadith 45.

133 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 136–137 hadith 24, 140–141 hadith 31, 141–142 hadith 32, 143–144 hadith 35, 150–151 hadith 45.

134 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 115 hadith 1, 124 hadith 10, 143 hadith 34, 143–144 hadith 35.

135 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 120–121 hadith 6, 123–124 hadith 9, 138–139 hadith 27, 148–149 hadith 43.

136 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 115 hadith 1, 118–119 hadith 3, 125–126 hadith 12, 128–129 hadith 16, 131–134 hadith 20, 140 hadith 30

137 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 126–127 hadith 13, 130 hadith 18, 137 hadith 25, 139–140 hadith 29, 142 hadith 33.

138 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 119–120 hadith 5, 134–135 hadith 22, 147 hadith 40.

139 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 151–152 hadith 46. A variant is found in al-Qummī (attr.), *Tafsīr al-Qummī*, under supervision of Sayyid Muḥammad Bāqir Muwaḥḥid Abṭaḥī (Qum: Mu'assasat al-Imām al-Mahdī, 1435/2014), 2:415.

> Come close to me. He passed his hands over his eyes. Then he said: Look. And Abū Bakr saw the ship in turmoil on the seas. Then he saw the palaces of the people of Medina. He said to himself: Now, I have verified that you are a magician. The messenger of God said to him: Truthful, you are.
>
> Then I asked: Why did he call ʿUmar the separator (*al-fārūq*)? He said: Yes, he did – do you not see how he separated the truth from falsehood and how he made the people adopt falsehood?
>
> Do you fear the rising of Saʿd? He said: Yes, I do. Why is that? Because he will return and will be the one who kills ʿAlī.

One sees in this narration the themes of the return including the final conflict and even the death of the Imams, in direct refutation of the *ghulāt*.

The treatise on *rajʿa* and "refutation of the heretics" is transmitted on the authority of Shahīd I, as al-Ḥillī claims, from works that are not by Saʿd b. ʿAbd Allāh. It comprises 49 narrations. Most of these deal with Qurʾanic verses that indicate the *rajʿa*, many of which are cited from the exegesis attributed to ʿAlī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī: these verses include 21: 95, 27: 82, 27: 91, 27: 93, 28: 85, 40: 11, 40: 51, 44: 10–16, 50: 42, 50: 44, 52; 47, 68: 15, 80: 17, 93: 4 and 93: 5.[140] These hadith are arranged in their Qurʾanic order. Another feature is the narrations that are just about the appearance of the Mahdī at the end of times and his role in avenging al-Ḥūsayn.[141] Another feature is relying on prayer and devotional manuals like *al-Miṣbāḥ* of Ṭūsī that yearn for the *rajʿa* of the Imams.[142] The most important feature of this treatise is the apocalyptic role of ʿAlī as the "beast of the earth" and the avenger of the last days.[143] ʿAlī is also the master of the *rajʿa* as expressed in two apocalyptic sermons cited from him at the beginning of the treatise. The first of these begins with ʿAlī asking his close companions to ask him before they lose him and affirming that not only is he the "beast of the earth" and the one who possesses the ring of Solomon and the staff of Moses but that he is the apocalyptic avenger of the last days.[144] He describes the moral turpitude of the time before his rising:

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140 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 180 hadith 16, 181 hadith 18, 182 hadith 20 and 21, 184 hadith 22, 186–187 hadith 25 and 26, 188 hadith 28 and 29, 189 hadith 31, 190 hadith 32, 33, 34, and 35, 193 hadith 39 and 194 hadith 40 and 41.

141 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 196 hadith 42, 197 hadith 43 and 44, 198–199 hadith 47, 199 hadith 48.

142 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 165–166 hadith 3, 166 hadith 4, 167 hadith 5.

143 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 170 hadith 7, 176–177 hadith 12, 178–179 hadith 13.

144 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 155–160.

> Harken to the signs of this when the people will kill prayer, will not keep their trusts, they will make falsehood licit, they will consume unlawful gain, they will take bribes, they will sell their faith for the world, they will use the foolish, they will cut off kinship ties, they will follow their caprice, and they will shed blood. Wise consideration will be weak, and oppression will be rife, leaders will be tyrants, viziers will be oppressors, and scholars will be betrayers, reciters of the Qur'an will be open transgressors, testimony will be brought out by force, corruption will be plain to see, speech slander, sin rife, Qur'ans will be adorned, mosques highly decorated, minarets tall, evil given dignity … The leader of people will be the most vicious of them.
>
> It is in the midst of such times that the *rajʿa* will take place.

The second is reported from Abū Ḥamza al-Thumālī from Imam al-Bāqir and presents a sermon of ʿAlī within the context of the need for people to fulfil their primordial covenant and support the Imams in the apocalypse.[145] Then ʿAlī says:[146]

> I have a turn after turn (*al-karra baʿd al-karra*), I have a return after the return (*al-rajʿa baʿd al-rajʿa*), I am the master of returns and turns. I am the master of vengeance and dominion and of wondrous turns. I am the servant of God, the brother of the messenger of God, I am the trustee of God and his treasurer, the guardian of his secret and his veil, his countenance, his path and his balance. I am the one who gathers all towards God. I am the word of God through which the dispersed are gathered, and by which the gathered are dispersed. I am the most beautiful names of God and his loftiest similitudes, and the greatest of his signs. I am the master of paradise and of hellfire, I place the people of paradise in paradise and the people of hellfire in the hellfire. I have the authority to make pairs in paradise and to punish those in the hellfire. I am the one to whom people turn and everyone turns after it perishes. I have the accounting of all creation.
>
> I am the master of glad tidings. I am the caller on the heights (*al-muʾadhdhin ʿalā-l-aʿrāf*). I am the mover of the Sun. I am the beast of the Earth (*dābbat al-arḍ*). I am the apportioner of the hellfire. I am the treasurer of the heavens. I am the master on the heights. I am the commander of the faithful. I am the queen bee of the pious (*yaʿsūb al-muttaqīn*). I am the

145 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 160–164 hadith 2.

146 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣāʾir al-darajāt*, 162–164.

> sign of those who came before, the tongue of the enunciators, seal of the trustees, inheritor of the prophets, vicegerent of the Lord of the worlds, the straight path of my Lord and his garrison, and his proof over all peoples of the heavens and the earth, and what is in them and above them.
>
> I was God's proof over you at the inception of your creation. I am the witness of the day of judgement. I am the one who was taught the omens and the portents and the dreams. I preserved the knowledge of the prophets.
>
> I am the one to whom the clouds and the thunder and the lightening, the shadows and the lights, the winds and the seas and the mountains, the stars and the Sun and the Moon are all subjugated. I am the one who destroyed ʿĀd and Thamūd … I am the one who humiliates tyrants. Master of Midian, destroyer of Pharoah, saviour of Moses. I am the redeemer of the nation. I am the guide. I am the one who accounts for everything by the knowledge that God has placed in me.
>
> I am the one in whom God has made inhere his name, his word, his wisdom, his knowledge and his understanding. People, ask me before you lose me.

The wording of this sermon and its atemporal and apocalyptic tone as well as a clear expression of a maximalist notion of *walāya* are reminiscent of the sermons that we shall see in *Mashāriq*.

The final consideration of *rajʿa* is in the section of *varia* in part two and contains 55 narrations that are consistent with the themes already discussed.[147] Much of the material concerns portents of the Hour and the events at the *parousia* of the Imam. The role of Imam al-Ḥusayn is emphasised as the avenger and the initiator of the *rajʿa*. There are also various reports that repeat themes found in the earlier sections in variants. However, the one new theme is the notion of the types and anti-types present in the narrations and the renewal and repetition of cycles of history. For example, the second hadith makes a long comparison between Ismāʿīl and al-Ḥusayn as sacrifices and as one who will avenge in the future.[148] Past history – and what one can gather from narratives including the Qur'an – prompt the reader into expectation of what will come: sacred history is not linear but repeats itself until it culminates in the apocalypse.

While one can clearly see the impact of this material on the Safavid period, and especially in the Majlisī circle who may have been the first people to cite

147 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 511–585.
148 Al-Ḥillī, *Mukhtaṣar Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*, 512–513.

the text extensively, what one can gauge from the *Mukhtaṣar* of al-Ḥillī is an interest in a neo-classicist excavation and recovery of the tradition much like we see with Majlisī. There is a careful concern to provide sources and search for early texts and occurrences that will describe for the scripturalist the nature of the Shiʿi tradition with its unique Imamology and apocalyptic expectation of the last days in as much detail as possible. The text collects material on the twin pillars of what I am calling esotericism in this period – the notion of cosmic *walāya* and of *rajʿa*; in fact, on the latter, the *Mukhtaṣar* presents probably one of the most detailed and extensive collections of scripturalist material on the theme before the Safavid period and precisely for that reason seems to have been influential. In many of the themes and even in the specifics of some of the sermons and texts cited, the *Mukhtaṣar* prefigures – or perhaps records at the same time – some of the material with similar concerns that one sees in the work of Rajab al-Bursī.

3.2 *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*

Corbin famously identified Rajab Bursī as one of the proponents of an esoteric doctrine of *walāya* influenced by the integration of the school of Ibn ʿArabī into Shiʿi metaphysics.[149] Raḍī al-Dīn Rajab b. Muḥammad Ḥāfiẓ al-Bursī al-Ḥillī seems to have been born in Burs, a small town between Kufa and al-Ḥilla on the banks of the Euphrates around 743/1342,[150] and after training in al-Ḥilla – and after the opposition to his ideas that he indicates he faced there – he seems to have moved to Khurasan into the orbit of the quasi-messianic Shiʿi-Sufi Sarbadārid dynasty, where he died perhaps in Ṭūs around 843/1411.[151] On the

149 Henry Corbin, *Histoire de la philosophie islamique* (Paris: Gallimard, 1986), 456–457; other studies on him include: al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:224–256; Pierre Lory, "Souffrir pour le vérité selon l'ésotérisme chiite de Rajab Borsī," in *Le Shīʿisme imamate quarante ans après: Hommage à Etan Kohlberg*, ed. Mohammad Ali Amir Moezzi et al, 315–323 (Turnhout: Brepols, 2009); Todd Lawson, "The Dawning Places of the Lights of Certainty in the Divine Secrets of the Commander of the Faithful by Rajab Bursī (d. 1411)," in *The Heritage of Sufism volume II: The Legacy of Medieval Persian Sufism (1150–1500)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn, 261–276 (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999).

150 On this town and his association, see Yāqūt al-Ḥamawī, *Muʿjam al-buldān* (Beirut: Dār Ṣādir, 1961), 1:384; Fakhr al-Dīn al-Ṭurayḥī, *Majmaʿ al-baḥrayn* (Tehran: Kitābkhāna-yi Murtaḍawi, 1362 Sh/1983), 10:309; ʿAlī Aṣghar al-Burūjirdī, *Ṭarāʾif al-maqāl*, ed. Sayyid Mahdī al-Rajāʾī (Qum: Kitābkhāna-yi Āyatullāh Marʿashī Najafī, 1990), 2:161.

151 Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 2:304–310; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Amal al-āmil*, 2:304; Zunūzī, *Riyāḍ al-janna*, 3:57–59; Mudarris-i Tabrīzī, *Rayḥānat al-adab*, 2:11; al-Amīn, *Aʿyān al-shīʿa*, 6:465. Afandī rules out the *nisba* relating to the Anatolian town of Bursa, although he does cite Mīrzā Rafīʿ al-Dīn Muḥammad [Nāʾinī?] who claims it was in his refutation of Mīr Dāmād's *Shirʿat tasmiyat al-Mahdī*. Al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 163–176, 302, 315–316, 350–351. Again, interestingly Shushtarī seems to be unaware of him.

title Ḥāfiẓ, opinions differ: it either refers to his mastery of hadith or was part of an adopted pen-name as a poet.[152] While being a contemporary of the Ḥurūfī leader Faḍlallāh Astarābādī with whom he shared an interest in lettrism and of al-Ḥasan al-Ḥillī, as well as Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī with whom he shared a taste and influence of Ibn ʿArabī, there is no evidence that he was either aware of them or that he ever cited them.

The first person to have noticed him seems to be the tradent and prayer-manual compiler Taqī al-Dīn Ibrāhīm b. ʿAlī al-Kafʿamī (d. 905/1499–1500) in his *al-Miṣbāḥ* (The Lantern).[153] Of course, that would be no accident since he was a figure who promoted the same conceptualisation of *walāya* in his compilation that included not only texts like the *ziyāra jāmiʿa* and similar salutations that stressed the supernatural status of the Imams and their return to this world, but also occult materials on astrology and even a clear case of *rafḍ* such as the *Duʿā' ṣanamay Quraysh*.[154] Like al-Ḥillī, al-Kaʿfamī was associated with Jabal ʿĀmil and al-Ḥilla.[155] Later in the Safavid period, Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī (d. 1091/1680) cited Bursī in his *Kalimāt-i maknūna* (Hidden words).[156] Majlisī in his *Biḥār al-anwār* seems to be the first to condemn his exaggeration – he cites his *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn* and *Kitāb al-alfayn* (The Two thousand proofs) as sources but only insofar as they corroborate reliable reports since he accused him of strange ideas, exaggeration (*irtifāʿ*) and deliberately mixing correct with corrupt doctrine (a process known as *khalṭ*); his student Afandī is the first to provide a biographical notice on him.[157] Afandī describes him as a Sufi and a specialist in many fields, especially lettrism (*asrār al-ḥurūf*).[158] He mentions that al-Kafʿamī was the first to cite him, and that his works were well known and appreciated in the Safavid period. He does, however, mention that his teacher Majlisī (al-Ustād) and al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī (al-Shaykh) accused him of

152 Al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 165–167. He spends much time denying al-Shaybī's position that Bursī was from Khurāsān and hence a Persian – see *al-Ṣila*, 2:227.

153 Ibrāhīm al-Kafʿamī, *al-Miṣbāḥ* (Beirut [Qum, 1984]), 176, 183, 316, 363–364, (Beirut: Mu'assasat al-Aʿlamī, 1994), 243, 315, 416, 425, 523. See al-Shaybī, *al-Ṣila*, 2:232.

154 On al-Kafʿamī, see Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:26–27; Zunūzī, *Riyāḍ al-janna*, 1:87–88; al-Muhājir, *Jabal ʿĀmil*, 166, 211–212, 238.

155 Al-Shammarī, *al-Ḥayāt al-fikriyya*, 155–157.

156 Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, *Kalimāt-i maknūna*, ed. ʿAlī-Riżā Aṣgharī (Tehran: Madrasa-yi ʿĀlī-yi Shahīd-i Muṭahharī, 1387 Sh/2008), 48 citing *Mashāriq*, 14, 155 citing *Mashāriq*, 39, 212 citing *Mashāriq*, 264.

157 Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*, 1:22. Majlisī cites him copiously including 27:136, 226; 25:23; 32:32, 385; 47:382 inter alia. Cf. Zunūzī, *Riyāḍ al-janna*, 58 on the accusation of *ghuluww* and excess (*ifrāṭ*).

158 The significance of his influence on this point in the Safavid period is indicated by Jaʿfariyān, *Siyāsat va farhang*, 204, 208–209.

exaggeration (*al-ghuluww wa-l-irtifāʿ*) which is clear from his writings but that al-Bursī never deified the Imams. Afandī gives the following list of his works:

- *Mashāriq al-anwār* (which is the same as *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī asrār Amīr al-muʾminīn*)
- *Mashāriq al-amān fī lubāb ḥaqāʾiq al-īmān*, claiming that he has a manuscript that states it was completed in 811/1408
- *Risāla fī dhikr al-ṣalawāt ʿalā l-rasūl wa-l-aʾimma* (Treatise on invoking blessings upon the messenger and Imams)
- *Ziyārat Amīr al-muʾminīn*, about which Afandī says he had a manuscript
- *Risāla lumʿa kāshifa* (Treatuse on the revealing flash) on the meaning of the divine names and on lettrism, which seems to have been subsumed into *Mashāriq al-anwār*
- *Lawāmiʿ anwār al-tamjīd wa-jawāmiʿ asrār al-tawḥīd* (Flashing lights of glorification and compendia of the secrets of unity) which is probably not an independent treatise but the opening chapter of *Mashāriq anwār*
- *Faḍāʾil Amīr al-muʾminīn* (The Excellences of the commander of the faithful)
- *Kitāb al-mawālīd*, on the births of the Imams
- *Al-Durr al-thamīn* on five hundred Qurʾanic verses about Amīr al-muʾminīn.[159]

Another work of al-Bursī's is a commentary on *sūrat al-ikhlāṣ*, a rather straightforward theological work that refutes at the end the corporealism of the divine.[160]

Al-Bursī's best known work is *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī iẓhār asrār ḥaqāʾiq asrār Amīr al-muʾminīn* (Dawning points of lights of certainty manifesting the secrets of the reality of the commander of the faithful).[161] It was – as attested in one possibly autograph manuscript – completed 518 years after the birth of the Mahdī in 768/1367.[162] Afandī also mentions another manuscript that gives the date of 813/1410. It seems to have been identified already in the Safavid period

159 Rajab al-Bursī, *al-Durr al-thamīn fī khams miʾat āyatin nuzzilat fī mawlāna Amīr al-muʾminīn*, ed. Sayyid ʿAlī ʿĀshūr (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 2003). In a recent article, Amir-Moezzi has questioned the attribution of this text to Bursī; see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "*Al-Durr al-ṭamīn* attribué à Rağab al-Bursī: Un exemple des commentaires coraniques personalisés shīʿite (Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine XVI)," *Le Muséon* 130 (2017): 207–240.

160 Muḥammad ʿAlī Dirāyatī, "Tafsīr sūrat al-ikhlāṣ-i Rajab Bursī," *Āfāq-i nūr* 2 (winter 1384 Sh/2005): 29–34.

161 Muḥammad Riżā Rajabī, "Nigāhī bih kitāb *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*," *Haft Āsimān* 24 (winter 1380 Sh/2002): 121–146; Ghulām-Riżā Gulī Zavāra, "*Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī asrār Amīr al-muʾminīn* va muʾallif-i ū," *Kitāb-i māh: Dīn* 41/42 (farvardīn 1380 Sh/2001): 26–43; Masʿūd Bīdābādī, "Muʿarrifī-yi *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*," *ʿUlūm-i ḥadīth* 22 (winter 1380 Sh/2002): 134–169.

162 Afandī, *Riyāḍ al-ʿulamāʾ*, 2:306; al-Ḥurr al-ʿĀmilī, *Amal al-āmil*, 2:118; Lawson, "The Dawning Places," 264

as a serious work with a Persian commentary entitled *Maṭāliʿ al-asrār* written by a Shiʿi scholar in Mashhad called al-Ḥasan al-Qāriʾ Sabzavārī for Shah Sulaymān dated 1090/1680.[163] This was part of a significant Safavid process led by the court to translate, vernacularise and appropriate the Arabic Shiʿi corpus for the empire.[164] Just in Iran, according to the survey conducted by Dirāyatī, there are 117 codices of the text, many of which date from the Safavid period, and even two recensions in Persian (attested in four manuscripts further).[165] The work is prefaced – in the standard Beirut edition – with a short praise for God and the Imams that is probably identical to his work *Lawāmiʿ anwār al-tamjīḍ wa-jawāmiʿ asrār al-tawḥīd*.[166] In the introduction, he states that despite collating the very best narrations from the Imams (*zubdat al-akhbār*) concerning the arcanum and the esoteric doctrine of the Imams (*al-amr al-khafī, al-sirr al-khafī*), he faced much opposition from those who were jealous of him – jealous of his understanding, learning and perhaps poetic prowess – who found the work and opposed him, ostracised him, condemned him.[167] His only fault was to narrate the very cream of narrations and the very manifesto of the righteous (*zubd al-akhbār wa-zand al-akhyār*). He described his opponents as those who know nothing of religion (*laysa lahum ḥaẓẓ fī-l-dīn*) and who reflected a corrupt and vulgar Shiʿism because they fail to understand true doctrine. They took the material to some jurists (described as ignorant apes – *jahala qawmun min al-qirada*) who understood neither the intellectual nor the scriptural disciplines and they further condemned him because, alluding to the famous saying of Amīr al-muʾminīn, "people are enemies of what they are ignorant" and so they were incapable of separating out what was exaggerated doctrine (*qawl al-ghulāt*) from the arcana of the Imams (*asrār al-hudāt*).[168] He places himself in the category of those whose heart God has tested for faith by adhering to the difficult and arduous (*ṣaʿb mustaṣʿab*) doctrine of *walāya*.[169] In this association of himself of a *muʾmin mumtaḥan*, he recalls Āmulī. His uncompromisingly Shiʿi position is centred on the notion that the love of ʿAlī is the criterion (*miḥakk*) of faith and salvation. In the conclusion, he returns to the theme of

163 Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4:212. Afandī says that the work was in two volumes but not great as Sabzavārī was a Sufi and not a major scholar. There are around 8 manuscripts of the text just in Iran according to Dirāyatī, *Dinā*, 9:714.

164 Jaʿfariyān, *Siyāsat va farhang*, 2:1347–1388.

165 Dirāyatī, *Dinā*, 9:569–573.

166 Rajab Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār Amīr al-muʾminīn* (Beirut: Muʾassasat al-Aʿlamī, 1992), 5–13.

167 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 14; Lawson, "The Dawning Places," 265–66.

168 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 15.

169 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 16.

defending himself against the accusation of the "enviers".[170] He asserts that he was inspired to "reveal the secrets" of the Imams in order to help more people "enter paradise without any accounting" and that it was critical for him not to concern himself with "what the liars and enviers think". He actually completes the text with verses complaining against those who blame himself. Clearly, he was aware of accusations of *ghuluww* and confusion against him; the very fact that the introduction – or the introductory text – focuses on a beautifully ornate *sajʿ* presentation of an uncompromising monotheism is perhaps an apologetic acknowledgment of that. At various points in the text he returns to an attack on the *ghulāt* who follow their caprice and do not understand the nature of the secret of the Imams who are not divine but rather as "divine secrets placed in the form of creatures" (*fī-l-hayākil al-basharīyya*) and the "divine enunciating word placed in bodies of dust" (*al-kalima al-rabbānīyya al-nāṭiqa fī-l-ajsām al-turābīyya*).[171] *Ghuluww* is disavowed and his position distanced from it.

The text then comprises a number of narrations on the pre-existence of the Imams, their cosmic role, the arcana of each of the twelve Imams, the importance of an esoteric hermeneutics to reveal the true import of the revelation, the need to preserve and protect the arcana from those unworthy, a number of key sermons of Amīr al-muʾminīn such as the Boast (*iftikhār*), the Gulf (*taṭunjīyya*), the Exposition (*al-bayān*), and a number of Bursī's own verses in praise of the Imams.[172]

Underlying all this is a clear lettrist approach to the occult knowledge of the arcana. The lettrist theme which dominates the first third of the text connects al-Bursī with wider lettrist tendencies of his time expressed by Faḍlallāh

170 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 220–224.

171 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 69–70.

172 On these three sermons attributed to ʿAlī, the text is available in Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 164–166 (*al-Iftikhār*), 166–170 (*al-Taṭunjīyya*), 170–172 (*al-Bayān*). The Sermon of the Gulf (*taṭunjīyya*) is so named because of the *hapax legomenon* that occurs in the sermon (*taṭunjayn*) that is glossed as *khalīj* (*gulf*): "I am the one who stands between the two gulfs," as Bursī himself mentions, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 166; later commentators usually gloss it as referring to this world and the hereafter, or to the "returns" and the "cycles" (*al-akwār wa-l-adwār*) – see Sayyid Kāẓim al-Rashtī, *Sharḥ khuṭbat al-taṭunjīyya* (Kuwait: Jāmiʿ al-Imām al-Ṣādiq, 2001), 1:39–40. The first instance of elements of the sermon of the Gulf are found in the work of Sayyid Hibat Allāh al-Mūsawī (d. 703/1304), *al-Majmūʿ al-rāʾiq min aẓhār al-ḥadāʾiq*, ed. Ḥusayn Dargāhī, Tehran: Wizārat al-thaqāfa wa-l-irshād al-islāmī, 1417/1996, 1:452. For a discussion of their attribution, see Mīrzā Jawād al-Ṭabrīzī (d. 2006), *al-Anwār al-ilāhīyya fī-l-masāʾil al-ʿaqāʾidīyya* (Kuwait: Lajnat Umm al-Banīn, 1383 Sh/2004), 111 (these sermons are based on elements corroborated in hadith but in their form they have no reliable chains of transmission); see al-Ṭihrānī, *al-Dharīʿa*, 7:200–202 §988–989.

Astarābādī as well as Ibn Turka in Iṣfahān. He begins with an extensive discussion of the *abjad* and the values and significance of the Arabic letters.[173] For Bursī, the lettrism is even more markedly Shiʿi. Not only do the letters and the numbers that constitute elements and foundations of the cosmos, they reveal the divine names and indeed the realities of the Imams. ʿAlī is the combination of the greatest name of God and the secret of the disconnected letters (*al-ḥurūf al-muqaṭṭaʿāt*) that appear at the beginning of 29 chapters of the Qur'an.[174] As the primordial *walī*, he precedes those letters that are the foundations of the cosmos just as he pre-existed Adam.[175]

The theme of the pre-existence of the Imam, the Imam's cosmic authority and person and status outside of time is the central element of the whole text. The Imams on the one hand have an embodied historical existence – for example, ʿAlī was born in the Kaʿba in Mecca – however, the secrets of their nature extend because *walāya* stands outside of space and time.[176] The Imam as *walī*, is the "preserved tablet" of the divine that pre-exists, the "clear Imam" of the Qur'an in which all things are immanent and his reality encompasses all things and the entire cosmos (*huwa l-muḥīṭ bi-kulli shay' fa-huwa muḥīṭ bi-l-ʿālam*).[177] Only God is beyond the Imams; but insofar as divine attributes are the means for the communication between God and the cosmos, the Imams represent and personify those attributes, with knowledge and power as foremost in that list.[178] God as such has no similitude – but for his names to be communicable they must be personified.[179]

Al-Bursī's doctrine of *walāya* poses the agency of the Imam as having control over the cosmos, due to his role as *deus revelatus*, as part of a negative theology in which God is beyond being.[180] He cites a long hadith from Imam al-Bāqir that includes the following:

> We are the first and we are the last. We are the foremost (*al-sābiqūn*). We are the intercessors. We are the logos of God (*kalimat Allāh*) and we

173 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 20–37.

174 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 18, 25, 124, 147, 155. The association with the disconnected letters at the beginnings of some chapters is developed further in the Safavid period where it becomes a commonplace (found in Mīr Dāmād and Mullā Ṣadrā among others) to say that those discrete letters spell out the phrase "*ṣirāṭu ʿAliyyin ḥaqqun numsikuhu*" (the path of ʿAlī is the truth that we traverse).

175 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 38–40.

176 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 75–77.

177 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 125.

178 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 142.

179 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 198–201.

180 Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4:140.

> are the elect of God. We are the beloveds of God. We are the face of God (*wajh Allāh*). We are the trusted ones (*umanāʾ*) of God. We are the repositories of the revelation of God (*khazanat waḥy Allāh*). We are the gatekeepers of the mystery of God (*sadanat ghayb Allāh*). We are the mines of revelation. We possess the meaning of the *taʾwīl* [or we are the meaning of the *taʾwīl*]. Gabriel descends in our signs. The Command of God devolves to us. We are the culmination of the mystery of God (*muntahā ghayb Allāh*). We are the loci of the sanctity of God (*maḥāll quds Allāh*). We are the lamps of wisdom (*maṣābīḥ al-ḥikma*), and the keys to mercy and the springs of bounty and the nobility of the community, and the lords the Imams. We are the *wulāt* and the guides, those who call and quench, the protectors (*ḥumāt*). Our love is the path of salvation, the very essence of life – we are that path to water in this life and the hereafter, the strict way, the Straight Path (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*). Whoever believes in us believes in God. Whoever rejects us rejects God. Whoever doubts us doubts God. Whoever truly knows us knows God (*man ʿarafanā ʿaraf Allāh*). Whoever turns away from us turns away from God. Whoever follows us obeys God. We are the means to God, the link to the pleasure of God. Ours is the vicegerency, the guidance and the impeccability.[181]

This esoteric doctrine of *walāya* is further expressed in a set of seven sermons of ʿAlī that are located at the heart of the text. In those sermons, ʿAlī expresses his primordial reality that indicates his role in the eschaton as well as *rajʿa*. Lawson suggested that al-Bursī was not concerned with the eschatology of *rajʿa* – however, the text suggests otherwise.[182] The *khuṭba*s themselves indicate this. Also, the chapter on the arcana of the Mahdī clarify this as well: he is messianic remnant of God, the face of God, the redeemer, the seal of saints and the succour of the believers of the last days.[183]

The first sermon is more of a conversation between ʿAmmār [b. Yāsir] and ʿAlī, in which he says:

> ʿAmmār! The entities and all things were generated by my name. All the prophets called humanity by my name. I am the tablet. I am the calamus.

181 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 39–40; Corbin, *En islam iranien*, 4:144.

182 For example, the Sermons of the Boast and of the Gulf – Corbin, *En Islam iranien*, 3:184–185; Lawson, "The Dawning Places," 269–270; Lory, "Souffrir pour la verité," 320; Amir-Moezzi, "Remarques sur la divinité de l'Imam," *Studia Iranica* 25 (1996): 193–216.

183 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 102–103.

> I am the throne and I am the empyrean. I am the seven heavens and the most beautiful heavens, and the loftiest words.[184]

He continues by glossing the meaning of the opening phrases of *sūrat al-Baqara*. The "scripture about which there is no doubt" is ʿAlī. "Guidance for the pious": piety is what saves one from the hellfire and means the love of ʿAlī (*ḥubb ʿAlī*). The true reality of prayer (*ṣalāt*) is also ʿAlī because prayer is what connects the creature with God and that can only be through his *walī*. "Those who believe in the unseen" means those who believe in the days of God (*ayyām Allāh*, recalling al-Ḥillī): the day of *rajʿa* (*yawm al-rajʿa*), the day of the rising of the Mahdī (*yawm al-qāʾim*), and the day of resurrection and judgement (*yawm al-qiyāma*).

The second sermon is also known as the hadith of *maʿrifa bi-l-nūrāniyya* narrated by Salmān and Abū Dharr. ʿAlī says:

> Salmān! Jundab! A believer does not perfect his faith until he recognises me in luminosity and if he recognises me, then he is a believer whose heart God has tested for faith and whose heart God has expanded for *islām*. He becomes cognisant of faith and joyous. One who fails to do that remains an accursed doubter. Recognising me in luminosity is recognising God and recognising God is recognising me. That is the pure faith. His [God's] saying: the *ḥunafāʾ* refers to affirmation of the prophecy of Muhammad which is the *ḥanīf* faith. And His saying: establish prayer, meaning my *walāya* because whoever loves me, establishes prayer but this is difficult and arduous (*ṣaʿb mustaṣʿab*) … A tested believer is one who does not reject any aspect of our affair. We are the affair of God and God has made me his trustee over the creation and his vicegerent on his earth and in the lands and among his creatures. He bestowed upon me what no one can describe or recognise. But if you recognise me properly, then you are believers.
>
> Salmān! God said: Enjoin patience and prayer. Patience is Muḥammad and prayer is my *walāya* … The first of us is Muḥammad, the middle one is Muḥammad and the last one is Muḥammad. One who recognises us perfects his steadfast faith. Jundab! Salmān! Muḥammad and I were lights praising God before [there was anyone] praising, illuminating before all the creatures. Then God divided that light into two halves …
>
> Salmān! Jundab! Muḥammad was the enunciator and I the silent one, and every age needs an enunciator and a silent one. Muḥammad

184 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 159.

> is the master of the community and I am the master of the gathering, Muḥammad is the warner and I am the guide. Muḥammad is the master of paradise and I am the master of the *rajʿa*. Muḥammad is the master of the pool and I am the master of the standard. Muḥammad is the possessor of the keys and I am the possessor of paradise and hellfire. Muḥammad is the master of revelation and I am the master of inspiration. Muḥammad is the possessor of the arguments and I am the performer of miracles. Muḥammad is the seal of the prophets and I am the seal of the successors … Muḥammad is the gracious prophet and I am the straight path …
>
> I am the companion of Jonah in the belly of the whale … I and the scourge of the day of darkness. I am Khiḍr the teacher of Moses. I am the teacher of David and Solomon. I am the one of the two horns (*dhū-l-qarnayn*). I am the beast of the earth (*dābbat al-arḍ*) … I am the one who spoke on the tongue of Jesus in the cradle. I am Noah. I am Abraham. I am the master of the she-camel … I am the master of the earthquake. I am the preserved tablet …
>
> We are the signs of God and his proofs and veils and his countenance. I wrote my names on the throne where it remains and I raised up the heavens and spread out the earth and drove the winds and flashed the lightening and split the light and made the clouds rain and made the thunder terrible, and the night and the noon and the darkness. I gave light to the day by smiling.[185]

This is the doctrine of the primordial Imam standing outside of time, always existing in the present, the past and the future, including the critical role that he plays at the eschaton, at the *rajʿa*. Two further shorter sermons express these ideas in far less detail, the second of which is more polemical, insisting that it is ʿAlī who is the veracious one (*al-ṣiddīq al-akbar*) and the great redeemer (*al-fārūq al-aʿẓam*), and the one foretold in the earlier scriptures.[186] The three sermons that follow are the most famous: the sermon of the boast (*al-iftikhār*, that we encountered earlier in Āmulī), the sermon of the Gulf (*taṭunjiya*) and the sermon of the exposition (*al-bayān*).[187] These expound in detail the doctrine of esoteric *walāya*, of the Imam outside of space and time and indeed in control of the cosmos, space and time, and also indicate ʿAlī's role at the eschaton as the master of resurrection. While the language of *rajʿa* is less explicit in

185 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 160–162.
186 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 162–163.
187 Bursī, *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn*, 164–172.

these sermons, what is clearer is the notions of the *karrāt*, the turns and returns whereby ʿAlī exists esoterically at every cycle of time, past, present and future.

There is much in al-Bursī's work that made people uncomfortable in its uncompromising "revelation of secrets" – and continues to make people uncomfortable at the very least among modern Shiʿi reformers as well as pillars of the seminary. But the Safavid period and the exposition of the tradition in al-Bursī was enthusiastically received – one simple indication being the very many copies of the text that is extant in manuscript libraries dating from that period.[188]

4 Conclusion

It is worth considering whether the soteriological and messianic shift in this period in the presentation of *walāya* represents continuity with a theme that a number of recent scholars – the Chicago school as I would call it – have discerned about the nature of messianism, the occult and notions of kingship in the early modern world.[189] But much of that material, while articulating a connection with different modalities of Islam and indeed of Shiʿi Islam, does not explicitly locate that messianism in a normative, albeit esoteric Shiʿi idiom. The work of al-Ḥillī and Bursī is quite explicitly and exclusively Shiʿi in an unapologetic manner in which no concessions are given to others. The Timurid concern with the charismatic Sufi shaykh or messianic sovereign expresses concerns with raw power and imperial ambition which one cannot discern in the work of our two authors, and perhaps not surprisingly given the broad absence in Shiʿi political theology before the Safavid period of explicit claims to power and authority (outside that of the Imam himself). There is no sense of the impending kingdom of God on earth but rather ahistorical expectation of cycles of time to play out and eventually reveal the reality of the arcana associated with the Imams. In terms of the questions that I posed at the beginning, one can see certain common themes with the work of lettrists and esotericists but also much more than differentiates them. It is perhaps only in the Safavid period that one finds attempts to reconcile the two by postulating

188 The vast majority of the more than 100 copies of the text extant in Iranian libraries are from the Safavid period (only one is pre-Safavid) – see Dirāyatī, *Dinā*, 9:569–573.

189 Cornell Fleischer, "Shadow of Shadows: Prophecy in Politics in 1530s Istanbul," in *Identity and Identity Formation in the Ottoman World: A Volume of Essays in Honor of Norman Itzkowitz*, ed. Bazi Tezcan and Karl Barbir (Madison: Center for Turkish Studies, 2007), 51–62; Evrim Binbaş, *Intellectual Networks in Timurid Iran: Sharaf al-Dīn ʿAlī Yazdī and the Islamicate Republic of Letters* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

an intellectual milieu and trend that was at once ecumenical, universal and imperial but also polemical, exclusive and otherworldly. The Safavid maximalist conception of Imamology drew upon that earlier Timurid one that we have seen in the work of al-Bursī and al-Hillī. Through the connections with earlier tendencies in Kufa, one can discern the continuity of a esotericist, maximalist conception of the Imam running from the early period through to the Safavid and beyond.

As for the question of esotericism and exaggeration or *ghulūw*, the debates raged in the Safavid period and continue to do so today. In an enchanted world in which the cosmos is the countenance of the divine and in which elements of natural theology are easily discernible to the eye that can see and the heart tested for faith that can perceive – in which the esoteric is the very fabric of reality and a key that unlocks meaning and sits within the conceptual framework of thinkers – the esoteric notions of the status of the Imams outside of space and time, their mastery over the cosmos, and their eschatological role would not seem so difficult to grasp. However, after the ravages of modernity in which one finds the very notions of rationality and the arational, the scientific and the occult and esoteric questioned and debated and understood in the light of a post-Enlightenment world, the notion of *walāya takwīniyya* expressed in these Shiʿi texts from the Timurid period becomes more difficult to square with a shift in our conceptual frameworks.[190] In that sense, it becomes easier to understand the emphasis that both al-Ḥillī and al-Bursī (and indeed the classical tradition expressed by al-Ṣaffār) placed on the notion of the affair of the Imams, their *walāya*, their role in the unfolding of history and in the folding up and ushering in the eschaton as truly "difficult and arduous".

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190 For useful studies on this question in modern Iran, see Alireza Doostdar, *The Iranian Metaphysicals: Explorations in Science, Islam, and the Uncanny* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2018); Ata Anzali, *"Mysticism in Iran": The Safavid Roots of a Modern Concept* (Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2017), especially 196–235; Hossein Kamaly, *God and Man in Tehran: Contending Visions of the Divine from the Qajars to the Islamic Republic* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), especially 29–63, 110–175.

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CHAPTER 7

Sufi Mysticism and Uṣūlī Shiʿism: Practical Authority in Modern Iranian Shiʿi Sufism

Alessandro Cancian

A single report by William Miller, an English missionary in Iran in the early 20th century, affirms that one master of the Gunābādī branch of the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi order, Nūr ʿAlī Shāh II (d. 1337/1918), wrote a booklet in which he invited the Iranians to unite under the banner of Sufism to put an end to the fragmentation of the country that occurred in the years of the civil war following the Constitutional revolution.[1] In spite of the vagueness of the report,[2] the statement made by Miller highlights the ambiguous reception and inconsistent formulation of the notion of authority within Iranian Shiʿi Sufism in the early modern period and vis-à-vis the institutional transformation the state was undergoing in the first quarter of the 20th century. If Miller's report is to be given even minimal credit, the alleged claim of a Sufi master to political power places him within a framework of a religio-political tendency in Shiʿi Islam, in which religious leaders have the ambition to exert direct control on the political machinery of the modern state. This tendency is practically inseparable from the affirmation of Uṣūlīsm as the triumphant orientation within Twelver Shiʿism. It is on the bedrock of Uṣūlīsm that the doctrine of the

1 William M. Miller, "Shi'ah Mysticism (The Sufis of Gonabad)", *The Moslem World* 13, (1923): 343–363. Miller arrived in Khorasan five years after Nūr ʿAlī Shāh II's death, but did not have the opportunity to meet to the then master of the order, Ṣāliḥ ʿAlī Shāh. His main first-hand informant was the grandson of Mullā Ḥādī Sabzawārī, Hājji ʿImād al-Dīn, who was one of Nūr ʿAlī Shāh II's appointed shaykhs and presided over a sizeable community of Sufis in the town of Sabzawār.

2 We do not have evidence of Nūr ʿAlī Shāh having written such a book, although his unusually voluminous written production is still to be thoroughly studied. There is a chance that Miller may have referred to a declaration by Nūr ʿAlī Shāh published on the newspaper *Īrān* on 14/04/1918, in which the master touched upon the matter. The Intishārāt al-Riḍā have recently published a monumental series of volumes by Nūr ʿAlī Shāh II in 40 volumes (*Qulzum: uqiyānūs-i bī-karān-i maʿārif-i ahl-i bayt*, Mashhad: Intishārāt al-Riḍā, 1392/2013–14), an encyclopedia touching upon subjects as diverse as universal history, biography, theology, mysticism, magic, ethics, hadith and so on.

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modern *marjaʿiyya*[3] took shape and was consolidated,[4] and it is from it that the basis for the establishment of an Islamic government in Iran was gradually formulated over the 20th century.[5] One should not, however, be led to believe that the alleged call of Nūr ʿAlī Shāh (if it happened at all in the form reported by Miller) would act purely as a response to the gradual encroachment of Usūlī influence over the political sphere. Shiʿism moved towards the modern claim on political authority gradually, starting from the occultation of the 12th Imam and in connection with the emergence and success of a rationalistic hermeneutics with regards to hadith and a departure from its original gnostic/esoteric dimension,[6] to which Sufism is more closely aligned. Unconfirmed claims on political power of the Sufis are therefore independent of how rationalist or otherwise mystical Shiʿism was, or was not. A messianic dimension had always been present in Sufism (and more obviously in Shiʿism) and often, the messianic drive was the element upon which such claims had been advanced in the preceding centuries. The idea of a divinely inspired leader, endowed with God-given authority and a unifying mission, was a leitmotif of early Shiʿism, which saw a revival within Sufi mysticism in the post-Mongol era,[7] and culminated in the affirmation of a figure of saint-king, whose principal epitome is represented by the Safavid Shāhs and by their counterparts in the

3 On the *marjaʿiyya* see Linda S. Walbridge, ed., *The Most Learned of the Shiʿa: The Institution of the* Marjaʿ Taqlid (New York: Oxford University Press, 2001). See also, S.A. Kazemi Moussavi, "The Establishment of the Position of *marjaʿiyat-i taqlid* in the Twelver-Shi'i Community," *Iranian Studies* 18/1 (1985): 35–51. On this point see also, Juan Cole, "Imami Jurisprudence and the Role of the Ulama: Morteza Ansari on Emulating the Supreme Exemplar," in Nikki Keddie, ed., *Religion and Politics in Iran* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1983), 33–46.

4 See Zackery M. Heern, "Usuli Shiʿism: The Emergence of an Islamic Reform Movement in Early Modern Iraq and Iran" (Doctoral dissertation, The University of Utah, 2011).

5 Cf. Vanessa Martin, *Creating an Islamic State: Khomeini and the Making of a New Iran*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2003).

6 This is the thesis put forward by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Réflexions sur une évolution du shiisme duodécimain: tradition et idéologisation," in *Les retours aux Ecritures: fondamentalismes présents et passés*, Bibliothèque de l'Ecole des Hautes Etudes, 99, edited by Évelyne Patlagean and Alain Le Boulluec (Louvain and Paris: Peeters, 1993), 63–82. See also Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, "Remarques sur les critères d'authenticité du hadîth et l'autorité du juriste dans le shi'isme imâmite," *Studia Islamica* 85 (1997): 5–39; Amir-Moezzi, "Islam in Iran X: The Roots of Political Shiʿism," in Encyclopedia *Iranica*, online edition (http://www.iranicaonline.org/articles/islam-in-iran-x-the-roots-of-political-shiisms).

7 On this theme, see Orkhan Mir-Kasimov, "Esoteric Messianic Currents of Islamic East Between Sufism and Shiʿism," in *L'ésotérsime Shiʿite: ses recines at ses prolongements/Shiʿi Esotericism: Its Roots and Developments*, edited by Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi et al (Brepols: Turnhout, 2016), 643–664.

Subcontinent, the Mughals.[8] As much as his predecessors at the head of the Gunābādī order (and previously the Niʿmatullāhī in general) took a markedly apolitical stance, it is not far-fetched to contemplate the idea that a claim to political leadership might have been made by a Sufi master in the early 20th century, at a time when the national emergency triggered by the militant messianism of the Bābī movement had long receded. One should not forget that the title of the Niʿmatullāhī masters has been followed by the epithet "Shāh" since the foundation of the order. In the present essay I will address the issue of authority and spiritual leadership as developed in the Gunābādī branch of the Niʿmatulllāhī order, with specific reference to the way it was formulated by the eponymous master of the Order, Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī in his works.

1 Uṣūlīs, Akhbārīs and the Sufis

In the history of Twelver Shiʿi Islam, the presence or absence of a living and accessible Imam is the guiding criterion which has determined the general character of its jurisprudence. The living Imam is the ultimate source of juridical authority and his presence at the heart of the community ensured that a systematic legal theory developed later than in Sunni Islam.[9] This tardiness, however, does not imply by any means lack of sophistication, nor did it result in a less complex set of competing ideas.[10] The Shiʿi idea of authority and its practical implementation is defined by elements such as the way in which positive laws are deduced from the sources in the absence of the Imam, the class of people entitled to authoritatively deduce these laws, their capability to enforce those laws, and the degree of their involvement in the apparatuses controlling their promulgation. Grounded in the hermeneutics of the scriptural corpus (*akhbār* or *ḥadīths*) and mainly active at the juridical level, but not without consequences in other fields of religious scholarship, such as Qurʾanic exegesis and philosophy, Imami reflections on legal theory after the lesser

8 A. Azfar Moin, *The Millennial Sovereign: Sacred Kingship and Sainthood in Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2012).

9 On Sunni *uṣūl al-fiqh* see Wael B. Hallaq, *A History of Islamic Legal Theories: An Introduction to Sunnī* uṣūl al-fiqh (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press), 1997.

10 See Robert Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam: The History and Doctrines of the Akhbārī Shīʿī School* (Leiden: Brill, 2007). On the early developments of Shiʿi law see Hossein Moddarresi Ṭabāṭabāʾī, *An Introduction to Shīʿī Law: A Bibliographical Study* (London: Ithaca Press, 1984); Norman Calder, "The Structure of Authority in Imāmī Shīʿī Jurisprudence", PhD dissertation, London, School of Oriental and African Studies, 1980.

occultation (329/941) revolved around establishing the juridical status, value and authenticity of the sayings of the Imams. Two main tendencies emerged at an early stage: an anti-rationalist one, which was characterised by a less critical approach to the corpus of the traditions of the Imams and constituted the kernel around which the Akhbārī movement emerged in the 11th/17th century;[11] and a more rationalist one, which tended to interpret away those reports where the Imams condemned, or appeared to condemn the Sunni procedural reasoning in matters of jurisprudence, and which would later crystallise in the Uṣūlī school. What will later come to be called Uṣūlīsm (from the reliance on procedural "principles of jurisprudence", *uṣūl al fiqh*), possibly influenced by Shāfiʿī texts (Shiʿi jurists studied with Shāfiʿī scholars), incorporated the idea of *ijtihād*, coupled with the central concern about certain knowledge (*qaṭʿ*) and conjecture (*ẓann*), from the 7th/13th century.[12] The Uṣūlī movement, which has dominated Twelver Shiʿism with varying degrees of intensity, emphasis and nuance until its triumph in the 18th century, has undergone – it goes without saying – waves of change and development. A gradual tendency towards political activism is probably among its main features, which grew stronger alongside the definition of the framework of the Twelver notion of *ijtihād*.[13] This gradual movement took a decisive thrust in the 19th century, to the point

11 Whether Akhbārīsm existed as a proper school of thought before and in opposition to the increasing weight of *ijtihād* as formulated by ʿAllāma Ḥillī (d. 726/1325) as proposed by some scholars, or one can only talk about an Akhbārī school after its systematic set up by Muḥammad Amīn Astarābādī (d. 1033/1623–4 or 1036/1626) as explicitly affirmed by others (on the matter, see Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam*) is beyond the remit of this article. Astarābādī's "Akhbārī manifesto" is his *Al-Fawā'id al-madaniyya wa-l-shawāhid al-makkiyya* (Qum: Mu'assisat al-Nashr al-Islāmī, 1426).

12 Devin Stewart, *Islamic Legal Orthodoxy: Twelver Shiite Responses to the Sunni Legal System* (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1998), 61–110.

13 *Ijtihād* itself was subject to different views among the Uṣūlī scholars throughout the 18th and 19th century. Mullā Aḥmad Narāqī (d. 1245/1829) is usually considered the father of the modern concept of the "guardianship of the jurist" (*wilāyat al-faqīh*, the constitutional cornerstone for the office of Supreme Leader in the Islamic Republic of Iran), but his views on the political and social role of the *'ulamā'* is more nuanced than this popularization would have us believe (cf. ʿAbd al-Hādī Ḥā'irī, *Nakhustīn rūyārū-yi andīsha-garān-i Īrān*, Tehran: Amīr Kabīr, 1367/1988, 333–342). On the other side of the spectrum, there is Sayyid Jaʿfar Kashfī (d. 1267/1850), a jurist with mystical proclivities, whose idea of *ijtihād* encompassed the need for the trained *mujtahid* to be endowed with a supernatural intuitive faculty (*quwwa qudsiyya*), which along with his approach to hadith makes of him an Uṣūlī *sui generis* (cf. Saïd A. Arjomand, "Political Ethic and Public Law in the early Qajar period," in *Religion and Society in Qajar Iran*, ed. Robert Gleave, ed., London: Routledge Curzon, 2005, 26–29; ʿAbd al-Wahāb Farātī, *Andīsha-yi Siyāsī-yi Sayyid Jaʿfar Kashfī*, Qum: Bustān-i Kitāb, 1378).

of having been seen as a reform movement in its own right,[14] by turning itself from an intellectual trend into a powerful social movement which thereafter dominated Twelver Shiʿism.

Although the theory and practice of *ijtihād*, which is the cornerstone of Uṣūlī jurisprudence, was perfected in early modern times by Murtaḍā Ansārī (d. 1781–1864), who also played a key role in the establishment of the *marjaʿiyya*, it is the Iranian cleric Waḥīd Bihbahānī (d. 1205/1791) who is considered to be the main architect of the overturning of Akhbārī domination in the Shiʿi seminary of Karbala and subsequently in the main scholarly centres of Iraq and Iran in the 18th century.[15] The leader of a powerful and influential network of disciples who disseminated, defended and enforced Uṣūlī views, sometimes with weapons, it is not clear from the sources whether or not Bihbahānī persecuted the Sufis in practice, also because during his lifetime Sufism had not yet fully made its come-back to Persia. However, his son, the powerful jurist Muḥammad ʿAlī Bihbahānī (d. 1216/1801)[16] followed his father's custom of surrounding himself with armed mobs, who in the latter case would immediately enforce the sentences issued by the cleric, many of which were capital sentences passed against Sufis. Muḥammad ʿAlī Bihbahānī became famous with the nickname "the Sufi-killer" (*ṣūfī-kush*), and it is hard to resist the temptation of imagining him intent on finishing his father's job, targeting the Sufis rather than the defeated Akhbārīs, as the main recipients of non-rationalistic ideas and charismatic competitors in the field of authority and religious legitimacy.[17] Be that as it may, ʿAlī Bihbahānī's principal foes were the Niʿmatullāhī Sufis, whose charismatic masters had recently come back from the Deccan to Persia as leaders of a mystical order that was already, to all evidence, Imami Shiʿi, but whose formal doctrines hardly complied with a fully-fledged version of Uṣūlī

14 Cf. Zackery M. Heern, "Usuli Shiʿism: The Emergence of an Islamic Reform Movement in Early Modern Iraq and Iran," PhD dissertation, Salt Lake City, The University of Utah, 2011.

15 See Heern, "Usuli Shiʿism", 25–67; Robert Gleave, "Al-Bihbahānī, Muḥammad Bāqir," *EI3*, online edition, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-bihbahani-muhammad-baqir-COM_23029?s.num=1&s.q=bihbahani; Robert Gleave, *Inevitable Doubt: Two Theories of Shīʿī Jurisprudence* (Leiden, Boston and Köln: Brill, 2000); Muḥammad Sulaymān Tunikābunī, *Qiṣaṣ al-ʿulamā'* (Tehran: Shirkat-i Intishārāt-i ʿIlmī wa Farhangī, 1383), 248–254.

16 See Robert Gleave, "Bihbahānī, Āqā Muḥammad ʿAlī", in *EI3*, online edition, http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-3/al-bihbahani-aqa-muhammad-ali-COM_23025?s.num=2&s.q=bihbahani; Hamid Algar, "Behbahānī, Moḥammad-ʿAlī," *EIr*.

17 Cf. Leonard Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I: the Nimatullahi Order: Persecution, Revival and Schism", *BSOAS*, 61/3 (1998): 437–464.

Twelver Shiʿism as professed by the *ʿulamāʾ* of late 18th century Iran.[18] The first generation, the main target of Bihbahānī's campaign, was mainly represented by charismatic masters without juridical training and endowed with a non-legalistic mindset.[19] The second generation, on the other hand, initiated within the order a tradition of being guided by masters trained according to the formal Twelver Shiʿi curriculum. In other terms, the leadership of the order after the demise of Nūr ʿAlī Shāh I (d. 1212/1797), was composed of scholars who received formal juridical education in the seminaries, which, at the time, were under the firm grip of the Uṣūlīs.[20]

Despite their training as *madrasa* jurists, their approach to Uṣūlī Twelver Shiʿism was nuanced. In the seminary milieu, the masters kept a low profile when it came to their Sufi allegiance (Ḥusayn ʿAlī Shāh, the first of this generation, in particular) to the point that few, if any, of their peers knew about their being mystical masters, and no distinctive exterior sign of their background was worn anymore.[21] In Ḥusayn ʿAlī Shāh's thought, the idea of *ijtihād* and *taqlīd*, central to Uṣūlī jurisprudence, are subject to a nuanced critique, whereby the true *mujtahid* is not the one who masters the exoteric juridical sciences, but

18 The Niʿmatullāhi order is an offshoot of the Qādiriyya (through ʿAbd Allāh Yāfiʿī, d. 768/1367) and first flourished in Timurid Persia under the leadership of its eponymous founder, Shāh Niʿmatullāh Walī's (d. 834/1431). After him, the order's masters relocated to the Deccan, where, under the protection of the Bahmānī dynasty, they gradually switched their exoteric allegiance to Twelver Shiʿism. On descendants and disciples of Shāh Niʿmatullāh in India, see Nasrollah Pourjavady and Peter Lamborn Wilson, *Kings of Love: The Poetry and History of the Niʾmatullahi Sufi Order* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of Philosophy, 1978), 70–92; Terry Graham, "The Niʿmauʾllāhī Order Under Safavid Suppression and Indian Exile", in *The Heritage of Sufism III: Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501–1750)*, ed. Leonard Lewisohn and David Morgan (Oxford: Oneworld 1999), 165–200; Fabrizio Speziale, "À propos du renouveau *Niʾmatullāhī*: Le centre de Hyderabad au cours de la première modernité", *Studia Iranica* 42/1 (2013): 91–118. On the story of their return to Iran and the phases of their establishment in the motherland, see Pourjavady and Lamborn Wilson, *Kings of Love*, 93–159; Lewisohn, "An Introduction to the History of Modern Persian Sufism, Part I". See also the hagiographical work by Mīrzā Muḥammad Bāqir Sulṭānī Gunābādī, *Rahbarān-i ṭarīqat wa ʿirfān* (Tehran: Haqīqat, 1379), 188–214.

19 An excellent example of this first generation's thought and doctrine is provided in Michel De Miras, *La Méthode spirituelle d'un maître du Soufisme iranien: Nur Ali-Shah* (Paris: Sirac, 1973).

20 The masters in point are Ḥusayn ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1234/1818), Majdhūb ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1239/1823) and Mast ʿAlī Shāh (d. 1253/1837). A recent doctoral dissertation was devoted specifically to this turn in the Niʿmatullāhī order: Reza Tabandeh, "The Rise of the Niʿmatullāhī Shiʿite Sufism in early Nineteenth-Century Qājār Persia: Ḥusayn ʿAlī Shāh, Majdhūb ʿAlī Shāh, Mast ʿAlī Shāh and their Battle with Islamic Fundamentalism", unpublished Phd dissertation, University of Exeter, 2013.

21 Tabandeh, "The Rise", 43.

the one who is able to derive the substantive laws from the sources through his "spiritual faculty" (*quwwa qudsiyya*).[22] Majdhūb ʿAlī Shāh, himself a seminary trained jurist, and successor of Ḥusayn ʿAlī Shāh, in a rather Akhbārī stance, considered the imitation of the Imams as a divine command, whereas he did not deem it obligatory to imitate the *ʿulamāʾ*, thus putting the very idea of *taqlīd* under some criticism.[23] Mast ʿAlī Shāh, Majdhūb ʿAlī Shāh's successor at the head of the order, was even more explicit in attacking the exoteric scholars, marking a slight departure in tone and style from his predecessors. Going so far as to use derogative terms for them, his statements show a fair degree of solidarity with the Akhbārīs, who are defended from the excommunication coming from some Uṣūlīs, enabling us to put the Niʿmatullāhī order's Uṣūlīsm into perspective:

> Now, in the country of Iran I hear much incoherent discourse: Sufis are called apostates and atheists, Akhbārīs are named debauchees … A thousand bravos to this scientific knowledge, this faith and this religion! God be praised for this *ijtihād* and justice. We give thanks to God for this accusation of a pious, fasting, praying Muslim of being an infidel and the ordering of his execution![24]

These masters-scholars of the second generation functioned as a bridge between the first charismatic masters and the third generation of Niʿmatullāhī leaders who, rather than settling on the juridical stand of their predecessors, built on their legacy and readapted the pre-existing tradition, operating a synthesis of classical, non-juridically minded Persian Sufism and 18th and 19th century Uṣūlī Twelver Shiʿism, incorporating elements of Akhbārī thought in the process.

Not that their stance was absolutely original at the time. The Akhbārī-Uṣūlī conflict had already been played down earlier by such Akhbāris as Yusūf Baḥrānī (d. 1186/1772)[25] a fact that highlights the blurred divide that separated the two trends in some individual cases.[26] A tendency to compromise is found

22 Tabandeh, "The Rise", 189–190.

23 Tabandeh, "The Rise", 190.

24 Zayn al-ʿĀbidīn Shīrwānī "Mast ʿAlī Shāh", *Bustān al-Siyāḥa* (Tehran: Ḥaqīqat, 2010), 95–96 (transl. by Tabandeh, "The Rise", 288).

25 Robert Gleave, "The Akhbari-Usuli Dispute in *Tabaqat* Literature: The Biographies of Yusuf al-Bahrani and Muhammad Baqir al-Bihbihani," *Jusur*, 10 (1994), 79–109; Gleave, *Scripturalist Islam*, 56–58; Heern, "Usuli Shiʿism", 52–53.

26 On a comparative analysis of Baḥrānī and Waḥīd Bihbahānī's legal theories, see Gleave, *Inevitable Doubt*.

in biographical works composed near the end of his life, which, however, faded during the 19th and 20th century, leaving room for a sharpened polemical stance, at a time when Uṣūlī scholars became more confident and were likely to mark the difference in a harsher fashion.

2 The Gunābādīs and Uṣūlīsm

Mid- and late-19th century Niʿmatullāhī Sufism, at a time when the doctrinal foundations of modern Shiʿi Sufism were laid, embraced the compromising stance of a figure like Baḥrānī, cautiously highlighting how a resentful divide could harm society at large. This position poses the question of the Niʿmatullāhī's (and in this particular case, the Gunābādī Niʿmatullāhī's) Uṣūlīsm regarding approach to the issue of authority. Despite the overt profession of adhesion to the tenets of modern Uṣūlī Shiʿism made, on different occasions, by the Gunābādī Sufis, their views on spiritual leadership remains problematic, to say the least, if analysed against the mainstream enunciation of the theory of *marjaʿiyya* in modern Twelver Shiʿism.

It is particularly instructive to examine the thought and writings of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī (d.1327/1909),[27] the eponymous master of the order and thirty-forth *quṭb* ("pole") according to the Gunābādī lineage. The literature produced by the Niʿmatullāhī Sufi masters and intellectuals is punctuated with occasional outcries against the ignorance and arrogance of the *ʿulamā-ye ẓāhir*. The record of persecution suffered by the Sufi masters, including quite recently, speaks of a troubled relationship that was never fully resolved. In this respect, Gunābādī literature remains largely unexplored, and an investigation into the textual corpus of this Sufi brotherhood will provide a better understanding of this relationship. Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh in particular seems to have proposed a binary structure of religious authority, whereby the *fuqahāʾ* are seen as custodians of one aspect of Shiʿi spiritual authority (*walāya*) through an uninterrupted chain of transmission parallel to the one through which the Sufis have received their own. Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, in other words, proposed an alliance

27 On the life, work and legacy of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, see Sulṭān Ḥusayn Tābanda Gunābādī "Riḍā ʿAlī Shāh", *Nābigha-yi ʿilm wa ʿirfān dar qarn-i chahārdahum: sharḥ-i ḥāl-i marḥūm Ḥājj Mullā Sulṭān Muḥammad Gunābādī Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh* (Tehran: Ḥaqīqat, 1384); see also Shahram Pazouki, "Hazrat Sultan ʿAliShah Gonabadi: The Renewer of the Nematollahi Order in Iran", in *Celebrating a Sufi Master: A Collection of Works on the Occasion of the Second International Symposium on Shah Nematollah Vali*, (n.p., n.d), 69–83; Alessandro Cancian, "Translation, Authority and Exegesis in Modern Iranian Sufism: Two Iranian Sufi Masters in Dialogue", *The Journal of Persianate Studies*, 7 (2014): 88–10.

between the *fuqahā'* and the Sufis whose unity he holds to have been broken during the Safavid era.

Because the discourse on authority is intrinsically connected, in Qajar-era Shi'ism, to the discourse on political agency, it is opportune to look within the Gunābādī corpus in general, and the works of of Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh in particular, at those texts that address the theme of *walāya* and its ramifications.[28] While there is no systematic "political thinking" in the works of the Gunābādī order, advice on how to deal with political matters is scattered here and there in the literature and correspondence of Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh. Among the reasons for this glaring absence, is the political and social duress Sufism had met since its comeback to Iran.[29] Constantly accused of seeking political power, Gunābādī masters had always been quite careful to steer away from politics, lest they be accused of making claims to a kind of authority that went beyond the spiritual realm. Nonetheless, one can draw an outline of their approach to political matters from scattered references in the masters' works. We have mentioned Nūr 'Alī Shāh's alleged political booklet, but the same master authored a treatise on *'ilm al-uṣūl*, which deserves careful scholarly attention alongside the rest of the encyclopaedic production of Nūr 'Alī Shāh.[30]

While Nūr 'Alī Shāh can be regarded as an exception in the recent history of the order, his predecessor and father, Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh, calls at various points throughout his monumental work for his followers to take responsibility and assume an active role in social and political affairs. To be sure, he never provided details on how this activism should play out, but his stance may be seen as a synthesis between a cautious Sufi approach and the traditional Shi'i position according to which, in the absence of the Imam, no political power has full legitimacy, but, because society needs orderly functioning, it is necessary to compromise with the illegitimate powers that rule society. Sulṭān 'Alī Shāh's

28 On the matter, see Matthijs van den Bos, "Conjectures on Solṭān'alīshāh, the *Valāyat-nāme* and Shiite Sufi Authority", *Sociology of Islam*, 3 (2015): 190–207. See also Oliver Scharbordt, "The Quṭb as Special Representative of the Hidden Imam: The Conflation of Shi'i and Sufi *Vilāyat* in the Ni'matullāhī Order", in *Shi'i Trends and Dynamics in Modern Times* (*XVIIIth–XXth Centuries*)/*Courants et dynamiques chiites à l'époque modern* (*XVIII^e–XX^e siècles*), ed. Denis Hermann and Sabrina Mervin (Beirut: Ergon-Verlag, 2010), 33–49.

29 Cf. Lewisohn, 'An introduction, I'.

30 An overall study of this troubled and boisterous personality, who travelled the Middle East and South Asia for five years in open dissent with his father and Pole of the Gunābādīs (he is reported to have met his father in Mecca during his pilgrimage, but pretended not to have seen him (see Mīrzā Muḥammad Bāqir Sulṭānī Gunābādī, *Rahbarān*, 252)) and whose succession at the head of the order was highly contested, would be an invaluable service to the Study of early 20th century Iranian Sufism.

position on the matter is somewhat vague,[31] the same vagueness that emerges when one attempts to assess the master's stance on monarchy and the constitutional movement. Although this tells us little about Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's loyalty to Uṣūlīsm, it is not possible to separate the political from the religious at this point of the history of Iranian Shiʿism, or at any point in it. Some passages of the *Walāyat-nāma* have been read as an indication of the master's support for the monarchy.[32] One passage, in particular, in the chapter that deals with the administration of the country,[33] alludes to the injustice committed by a state officer as potentially leading to the end of the monarchical order.[34] The management of state affairs, however, is put into the wider perspective of the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm. This perspective is omnipresent in Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's work. As much as one needs to keep his own "little realm" (*mamlakat-i ṣaghīr*), that is the individual domain, in good functioning order, he has also a responsibility for the macrocosmic aspect of it, that is to say, the state of the governing bodies of the "greater realm" (*mamlakat-i kabir*).[35] Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's reply to constitutionalist villagers in Baydukht remains famous, and often quoted by today's Gunābādīs. At some unclear point these villagers confronted the master, requiring that his position on the matter be made clear. Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh said to them that he was,

> … only a village farmer and a dervish, and I do not know what "constitutionalism" and "despotism" mean. We have nothing to do with these things and we will obey the orders of the government, regardless of it being constitutional or despotic.[36]

On the other hand, there are reports of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh publicly targeting the wrongdoings of the Qajar monarchy, and even narrating how he prayed to God that He might expedite the death of Nāṣir al-Dīn Shāh, predicted by Saʿādat ʿAlī Shāh to happen in 1318/1901, and anticipate it by five years.[37] However, as it emerges from his own correspondence and advice to disciples, his neutrality with regard to the question of which form of government was entitled to

31 Van den Bos, "Conjectures", leans more on the side of "ambiguity" rather than vagueness.
32 Van den Bos, "Conjectures", 200–201.
33 Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, *Walāyat-nāma* (Tehran: n.p., 1363), 158–163.
34 The officer is later identified as Mīrzā Āqā Khān Shukūh al-Sulṭān (Riḍā' ʿAlī Shāh, *Nābigha*, 141); Van den Bos, "Conjectures", 200.
35 Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, *Walāyat-nāma*, 158.
36 Riḍā ʿAlī Shāh, *Nābigha*, 145.
37 Riḍā ʿAlī Shāh, *Nābigha*, 138.

run the affairs of the country was genuine,[38] as long as the government could secure stability and protect the country from chaos, and as long as the master's overarching hierarchy between microcosm and macrocosm is kept in mind.[39] This stance, which assigns an instrumental role to the form of government, is connected to Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's recurrent contention on the difference between Islam and *īmān*. Throughout his work, the master affirms that Islam is different to *īmān* in that the former only serves to "preserve the blood and property of the people".[40] In other words, Islam is seen as a set of social rules that exist to guarantee the orderly life of the community, while true faith can only be attained through initiation, which is the means that provides connection with the *walāya* of the Imams.

One has to keep this framework in mind when considering Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's place in the spiritual, religious and juridical topography of early modern Shiʿism. As it has been noted, Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh was a trained and authorised *mujtahid*:[41] a *faqīh*, therefore, like his three predecessors, part of the loosely organised hierarchy of Uṣūlī Shiʿism, and a few of his juridical opinions are scattered across his works, although not technically formulated as *fatwas*.[42]

To better appreciate Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's stance it is opportune to look specifically at his commentary, the *tafsīr*, *Bayān al-saʿāda fī maqāmāt al-ʿibāda*.[43] This Qur'anic commentary represents a comprehensive synthesis of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's understanding not only of the scripture, but more widely of religion and

38 Pazouki, "Hazrat Sultan 'AliShah Gonabadi", 78–79.

39 *Walāyat-nāma*, 154–157, on the "correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm" (*muqāyisa-yi ʿālam-i kabīr wa ʿālam-i ṣaghīr*), which introduces the chapter on the administration of the country.

40 Taking the "exoteric oath" of Islam is seen as a prerequisite (*muqaddima*) to "true faith" (*īmān ḥaqīqī*), which follows the acceptance of the "esoteric call" (*daʿwa bāṭina*). Islam only, without *īmān*, is the means for social stability and the orderly conduct of Muslims lives, and the protection of the life of the individuals of the community (*ḥifẓ al-dimā'*), the regulation of marriage (*jawāz al-munākiḥa*) and ensuring inheritance laws to work properly (*ṣiḥḥa al-tūrāth*). Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Bayān al-saʿāda fi maqāmāt al-ʿibāda*, 4 vols. (Tehran: Maṭbaʿa Dānishgāh-i Tihrān, 1344) 1:50–51. See also, for example, Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Bishārat al-muʾminīn* (Tehran: Ḥaqīqat, 1387), 187; Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Walāyat-nāma*, 43–47.

41 Pazouki, "Hazrat Sultan 'AliShah Gonabadi", 74.

42 The most famous is his prohibition of smoking opium, largely allowed by coeval Shiʿi jurists (*Bayān al-saʿāda*, 1:94). A number of his juridical opinion are found in Pazouki, "Hazrat Sultan 'Ali Shah Gonabadi", 74–76.

43 For a general introduction to this *tafsīr*, see Alessandro Cancian, "Exegesis and the Place of Sufism in Nineteenth-Century Twelver Shiʿism: Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī and his *Bayān al-saʿāda*", in *Approaches to the Qur'an in Contemporary Iran*, ed. Alessandro Cancian (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 271–290.

man's relationship with the divine. As such, it is a remarkable text, in which one can catch a glimpse of a late 19th century Iranian Sufi master's take on Islam, Sufism and Shiʿism, their interrelation and place in the debates on authority that were going on at the time it was written. To question what Shiʿism was to Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh is to penetrate his spiritual and intellectual world. In keeping with Shiʿi hierohistory, Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh understands history as the place where the initiatic message of the Truth is passed down from prophet to prophet, and from imam to imam, since the time of Adam.[44] This message of divine guidance will flow uninterrupted till the end of the world,[45] in its dual dimension of warning of the pitfalls of worldly pleasure (*indhār*) and bringing the glad tidings (*bishāra*) of spiritual beatitude, respectively corresponding to prophecy and Imamate. The message of the prophets is universal and does not discriminate the elite from the masses: it is aimed at everybody indiscriminately, because it is concerned with leading all within the boundaries of the Sharīʿa. In a sense, it has only a preparatory function, as it is the *walāya* that is able to discriminate the qualified from the unqualified. It is only to the qualified that the invitation (*daʿwa*) of the Imam is directed.[46] *Walāya* is nobler than *nubuwwa*,[47] and the prophetic message is instrumental for the perfection of religion, which is only achieved through the initiation to the knowledge of the Imams. Religion, then, is essentially esoteric: its exoteric aspect, the Shariʿa, being only there to ensure the orderly conduct of people's life and protect their life and property.[48] Muhammad is therefore the place of manifestation of the universal *walāya* (*maẓhar walāya kulliyya*),[49] whearas ʿAlī is the place of the full manifestation of the truth and of the absolute *walāya* (*walāya muṭlaqa*).[50] In his capacity of possessor of the secrets of the invisible world, ʿAlī's selected companions were called his partisans (*shīʿa*) and followed him in both the esoteric and the exoteric, as opposed to those who, during his caliphate, only

44 Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Saʿādat-nāma* (Tehran: Haqīqat, 1385), 124.

45 Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Saʿādat-nāma*, 124.

46 Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Saʿādat-nāma*, 125.

47 Without that implying that the *walī* is nobler than the *nabī*, as Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh makes clear, for prophets are possessors of *walāya* as well, even though their function is that of establishing the law and call people to it (Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh Gunābādī, *Saʿādat-nāma*, 125; *Bayān*, 2:472–473). However, hierarchical order is established that has the imams of Muhammad as nobler than the preceding prophets, cf. *Saʿādat-nāma*, 125).

48 *Bayān*, 1:50.

49 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 127. In another passage, Muhammad an ʿAlī, through their different functions in the economy of revelation and initiation, are identified respectively with the universal intellect (*ʿaql kullī*) and the universal soul (*nafs kullī*), in turn identified in their function with the *dalīl* and the *murshid* of the Sufis (cf. *Bayān* 2:16).

50 *Bayān*, 2:316–317.

followed him in his exoteric capacity.[51] Accordingly, they were also called refusers (*rāfiḍī*) as they "refused this world and their followers",[52] "gnostics" (*ʿārif*), in that they were aware of the divine secrets reflected in the mirror of the *walāya*,[53] and Sufi, because of their habit of wearing unpretentious and coarse wooden robes. So, Sufism is nothing less than Shiʿism, and the other way around, and has been around since the beginning of Islam. When the 12th Imam disappeared from the eyes of the believers, the "*walāya* was covered with the veil of occultation,"[54] and the Islamic community had split into different sects and schools, it was time for the appointed shaykhs of the Imam al-ʿAskarī to function as the guides of the Shiʿi elite.[55] With the protraction of the occultation and the passing away of that generation of guides, the other appointed shaykhs became unknown to the Shiʿa.[56] It is at this point that most of the Shiʿa, bewildered by the apparent absence of a connection with the authority of the living Imam, believed that the world was without a living connection with the Imam and turned to the Book and the traditions themselves, without a human guidance. Twelver Shiʿism then bifurcated: on one hand were those who thought that no act of devotion is accepted by God in the absence of the formal imitation of an authorised *ʿālim*. This passage is key to the clarification of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's approach to the question of the Akhbārī/Uṣūlī dispute. In it, the master seems to keep his discussion of the matter consciously ambiguous, and to declare his allegiance to Uṣūlīsm. The authorised *ʿālim*, who must be versed in the juridical sciences and able to interpret the Book and traditions, derives his authority from the chain of transmission and authorisation that connects him to one of the impeccable Imams.[57] This uninterrupted connection, existing among the *fuqahā'* as well as amongst the mystics, is valid until today, and those who are within it are called Sufis, gnostics and ascetics (*sālik*). On the other hand there are those who claim that following the Book and the tradition without the mediation of the *ʿālim* of the time (*ʿālim-i waqt*) is enough. As an effect of the enmity of the latter towards the former, accusations of impiety, heresy and unbelief were fabricated and took ground within the mass of the Shiʿa, to the point that even great personalities who in fact had regular authorisation were vilified, like ʿAllāma Majlisī. The aim of Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh in positioning himself and the Niʿmatullāhī order within the rank and file

51 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.
52 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.
53 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.
54 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.
55 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.
56 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.
57 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 128.

of Twelver Shiʿi orthodoxy, for which his *tafsīr* is a fundamental text, is therefore corroborated by his insights on the fundamental identity between Sufism and Twelver Shiʿism. This identity, for Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, is not just essentialist and ideal, it is historical.

Amongst legitimately authorised Twelver Shiʿi *ʿulamāʾ* and jurists who have promoted religion, there is no one that has denied the validity and blamed the path of this school [i.e., Sufism] in its fundaments. If there has been blame expressed in the books and works of the notables and the guides of religion with respect of this group, as is the case with the great ʿAllāma Majlisī, who expressed blame time and again (and in fact, whoever has blamed after him, has done it out of reading his books), it was expressed either before gaining thorough knowledge of their tenets, and before gaining insight and authorisation, or it was to bash the false [Sufis] in particular, but talking in general terms, as becomes evident from the very statements of Majlisī.[58]

3 Conclusion

This identity of Sufism and Shiʿism at the level of the essence allows Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh to restrict the words of blame uttered by great Twelver Shiʿi scholars with regard to Sufism to Sunni Sufism only. That Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh's definition of Sunni Sufism excludes much of historical Sufism, as demonstrated by, among other things, the master's recognition of his own *silsila*, is of little significance here: Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh subscribes to Twelver Shiʿi pre-18th century anti-Sufism by restricting it to an activity of denouncing deviant, non-Shiʿi or only nominally Shiʿi mysticism. Those deviant Sufis are all "deserving curse and blame" (*mustaḥaqq-i laʿn wa madhammat*).[59] The spiritual genealogy that Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh then produces includes big names of Twelver Shiʿism, regardless of their Uṣulī or Akhbārī leanings, such as Ibn Ṭāwūs, Naṣīr al-Dīn Ṭūsī, Ibn Maytham Baḥrānī, Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, al-Shahīd al-Thānī, Ibn Fahd al-Ḥillī, Qāḍī Nūr Allāh Shūshtarī, Ibn Abī Jumhūr Aḥsāʾī, Shaykh Bahāʾī, Mīr Dāmād, Ākhūnd Muḥammad Ṣāliḥ Māzandarānī, Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī, Fayḍ Kāshānī, ʿAbd al-Razzāq Lāhījī, Muḥammad Bāqir Sabzawārī and Mullā Mahdī Narāqī.[60]

58 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 134.

59 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 134.

60 *Saʿādat-nāma*, 134–135. This passage in the *Saʿādat-nāma* is a veritable plea: "I hope that the reader behold this with an equitable eye (*ba-dīda-yi inṣāf naẓar farmāyad*), and remove the veil of hatred and detestation from his eyes."

In keeping with a long tradition in Shiʿi gnosis, albeit with some variation due to his unique position as a master of a declaredly Shiʿi Sufi order, for Sulṭān ʿAlī Shāh, Shiʿism and Sufism in their true sense coincide, and the traditional divide between Akhbārīs and Uṣūlīs wanes.

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