Curse Signs

The Artful Rhetoric of Hell in Safavid Iran

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The scholarly study of Islamic eschatology has tended to focus on textual sources that deal with the signs of the hour, last judgment, and otherworldly spheres and events. During the pre-modern period, however, a number of manuscripts produced in Persian and Turkic cultural spheres were expanded by pictorial images. Such paintings added a distinctly graphic quality to heaven and hell, whose visual details resulted from creative expression via both word and image production. The most important of these illustrated manuscripts are two Timurid “Books of the Prophet Muḥammad’s Ascension” (*Mi’rājnāmas*), Safavid “Books of Omens” (*Fālnāmas*), and several Ottoman “Conditions of the Resurrection” (*Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*). The *Mi’rājnāmas* of ca. 1430–60 contain the most elaborate series of paintings depicting hell and the torture of sinners in the history of Islamic art (Figure 13.1).¹ Equally important yet less well-known are the Ottoman illustrated copies of the *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*, possibly produced in Istanbul around 1600.² Although the latter text is indebted to earlier eschatological treatises composed in Arabic,³ the various manuscripts’ paintings—including one illustrating the chasm between heaven and hell (Figure 13.2)—appear to connect closely with the apocalyptical imagery developed in antecedent Timurid “Books of Ascension” and Safavid “Books of Divination.”⁴

1 On the Timurid *Mi’rājnāma* of ca. 840/1436, see Séguy, *Miraculous journey*. On both *Mi’rājnāmas*, see Gruber, *Timurid Book of Ascension*, esp. 338–44; Sims, *The Nahj al-Faradis*.

2 For a brief mention of the Ottoman *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma* manuscripts, see Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 74 and n. 37. For these and other Ottoman manuscripts depicting the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell, see And, *Minyatürlerle* 240–65.

3 For a Turkish transliteration of the illustrated Ottoman *Aḥwāl al-qiyāma* manuscript in the Süleymaniye Library, see Yıldız, *Aḥwāl-i qiyāmet*. For the kind of Arabic-language “Conditions of Resurrection” text it appears to have drawn upon, see Wolff, *Kitāb Aḥwāl al-qiyāma*.

4 On Safavid and Ottoman *Fālnāmas*, see most especially Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens*; Welch, *The Falnameh*; Bağcı, *Images for foretelling*.

FIGURE 13.1 *The punishment of sinners who did not pay the tithe. Anonymous, Mi'rajnāma (Book of Ascension), Herat, ca. 1436.*

BIBLIOTHÈQUE NATIONALE DE FRANCE, PARIS, SUPPL. TURC 190, FOLIO 63R.

FIGURE 13.2 *The inhabitants and angels of heaven (on the right) and the demons, hellfire, scorpions, and snakes (on the left). Anonymous, Aḥwāl al-Qiyāma (Conditions of Resurrection), possibly Istanbul, ca. 1600.*

STAATSBIBLIOTHEK ZU BERLIN, BERLIN, MS. OR. OCT. 1596, FOLIO 27R.

In these Persian and Turkic illustrated manuscripts of the Prophet's ascension, the conditions of resurrection, and image-based divination, paintings helped convey concepts of the otherworld through the language of visual form, itself a powerful non-verbal mechanism that encodes and promotes a variety of ideological messages to a cultured audience conversant in signs—be these artistic motifs or the signs of the hour (*ishārāt al-sā'a*). By engaging with the sign, or *ishāra*, artists in effect sought to convey the immediacy of abstract soteriological concepts. As such, these pictorial representations paraded as manifest reality, optically observable and only secondarily mediated by language. Moreover, such images conveyed a number of narratives and worldviews, while their visual codes abided by, and in turn reinforced, political and religious agendas whose frequent reiteration (through texts, images, storytelling, sermonizing, and other private and public forms of communication) in effect amounted to convention.⁵ Picture-signs thus can be said to flow from as well as to strengthen the otherwise constructed concept of "tradition."

In Islamic lands, traditions about heaven and hell were quite pliable. They varied across time and space, and often took center stage in religious debates. During the early modern period, when eschatological imagery reached its peak in Persian and Ottoman painterly traditions, heaven and hell partook in a shared language of millenarianism. The growth in apocalyptic imagery also intersected with the Sunni Ottoman—Shi'i Safavid divide that emerged over the course of the tenth/sixteenth century, most especially during the decades leading up to the *hijri* millennium. At this time, the occult and prognosticative arts flourished in order to assist individuals chart a proper path toward Doomsday, itself described as an impending moment that would herald either salvation or damnation.⁶ To secure a felicitous course of action, individuals sought auguries from the *Dīvān* of Ḥāfiz,⁷ the Quran,⁸ and, last but certainly not least, illustrated books of omens. Within the latter, Safavid and Ottoman images of the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell could support a number of sectarian messages. In some instances, Safavid paintings might argue for the legitimacy of Shi'i Islam and the authority of the imamate while Ottoman illustrations might forward the Sunni cause. Thus both the concept and image of hell were matters of creative contention at this moment of increasing sectarian differentiation in the Islamic world.

5 On the sign as "saturated through and through with cultural convention," see Potts, Sign 31.

6 Babayan, Cosmological order; Fleischer, Ancient wisdom and new sciences.

7 On the use of Ḥāfiz's *Dīvān* for prognostication, see Ḥāfiz, *Fāl-i dīvān-i ghazālīyāt-i Ḥāfiz bā ma'nū*; Schmidt, Ḥāfiz.

8 On Safavid divination by the Quran (*fāl-i Qur'ān*), see Gruber, The 'restored' Shi'i *muṣḥaf*; Tourkin, Use of the Qur'an.

Although there exist a number of early modern Persian and Ottoman eschatological texts and images, this study offers a tightly focused analysis of Safavid cursing rituals and how these intersect with one particular Persian painting representing the Last Judgment, heaven, and hell (Figure 13.5). Through an in-depth exploration of its contents and motifs, religious and historical setting, related historical and theological texts, and its use in practices of divination, it will be argued that hell could at times function as a curse sign within a Safavid cultural milieu. Indeed, the Shi'i practice of ritually cursing Sunni and Ottoman opponents flourished in Safavid religious practices during the mid-tenth/sixteenth century, at which time the Last Judgment painting was executed. Via royal and popular storytelling, preaching in mosques and public squares, and practices of divination, Shi'i maledictions intersected with the visual arts in a number of social and cultural arenas. As a result, in a number of instances hell could be envisioned as the ultimate punishment not only for unbelievers and sinners but, more precisely, as a sign of damnation for opponents of Imam 'Alī, the imamate, the Safavid state, and Shi'i Islam in general.

1 Safavid Cursing

In Safavid Iran, a number of paintings promoting the Shi'i cause were developed by artists enjoying royal patronage. The implementation of overtly sectarian imagery was precipitated by the dynasty's founder, Shāh Ismā'īl I's (r. 907–930/1501–24) declaration of Imami Shi'i Islam as the official religion of the Safavid domain even though he himself harked from more mystical-messianic origins.⁹ A number of Safavid chronicles describe Ismā'īl's declaration of religious affiliation as part of his coronation address upon his accession to the throne. In their descriptions of the shah's coronation, these histories also note that he delivered a sermon (*khutba*) in which he publicly professed the *walāya*—that is, declaring that “Alī is the Friend of God” (*‘Alī walī Allāh*)—and then cursed the first three caliphs, Abū Bakr, ‘Uthmān, and ‘Umar.¹⁰ During and after his coronation, Shāh Ismā'īl's Qızılbaş (“Red Head”) forces helped implement the ritual curse by intimidating and subjugating those who continued to abide by the Sunni faith and refused to damn the three *rāshidūn* and other Sunni foes. Later Safavid sources also inform us that Sunnis at times were threatened with decapitation for refusing to vilify the three caliphs.¹¹

9 Babayan, *Mystics*; eadem, Safavid synthesis.

10 Quinn and Melville, Safavid historiography 241; Stanfield-Johnson, The Tabarra'iyān 47.

11 Ibid., 54, 57, 67.

This early Safavid method of “proactive” conversion to Shi‘i Islam is attested to in at least one surviving eleventh/seventeenth-century Safavid manuscript illustration depicting Shāh Ismā‘īl’s accession to the throne (Figure 13.3).¹² The young ruler is shown wielding a sword as he stands on a stepped pulpit resembling a minbar, while the immanent Imam ‘Alī holds an open document—possibly declaring Ismā‘īl’s divinely decreed right to rulership—as he hovers above him in a *mihrāb*-like niche. On the right, the shah’s Qızılbaş forces—identifiable by their distinctive red headgear called “Ḥaydar’s crown” (*tāj-i Ḥaydarī*)¹³—approach a group of men on the left. Ismā‘īl himself holds his sword aloft, apparently ready to assail (perhaps even decapitate) any member of the assembly who refuses to abide to the Shi‘i faith and engage in ritual cursing. This form of sectarian subjection is so astonishing to several men that they bite their index fingers, a typical Persian gesture of astonishment, fear, and grief.¹⁴ With action and suspense, this image potentially records early methods of Safavid conversion to Shi‘ism by the sword, not the pen.

By the reign of Shāh Ṭahmāsp I (r. 930–84/1524–76), the practice of ritual cursing became more institutionalized through the establishment of a corps of professional “disavowers” (*tabarrā’iyan*). These cursers formed part of the ruler’s entourage in the palace and they also accompanied him while on the road. Additionally, they oversaw public cursing in mosques, markets, squares, and quarters in various cities, where they also doubled-up as spies.¹⁵ Without a doubt, they formed part of Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s larger anti-Sunni project to Shi‘ify Persian lands as well as to distinguish himself from his Ottoman counterparts.¹⁶

As a case in point, in his letter to Sultan Süleimān I (r. 926–74/1520–66), Ṭahmāsp linguistically and symbolically equates the third caliph ‘Uthmān to the eponymous founder and subsequent rulers of the House of Osman, all of whom were, to his mind, deserving of divine punishment. Ṭahmāsp warns the Ottoman monarch that he has gone astray of the right path—of the guidance of the *ahl al-bayt*—and that if he is to seek salvation, then he must proclaim

12 This painting appears in an illustrated history of Shāh Ismā‘īl produced in Iran during the 1090s/1680s. Detailed information about the manuscript can be found in Morton, Date and Attribution. A list of its paintings and its relation to other illustrated chronicles of Shāh Ismā‘īl are addressed in Wood, *The Tarikh-i Jahanara*, esp. 104, Table 3.

13 On the *tāj-i Ḥaydarī*, see in particular Moin, *The millennial sovereign* 81, 89–90.

14 See the entry on “finger” (*angusht*) in Steingass, *Persian-English dictionary* 114, especially the verbal expression “to place the finger in one’s mouth” (*angusht ba dandān gazīdan*, *angusht bar dahān nihādan*, and *angusht bar giriftan*) as well as the genitive construct for the “finger of amazement” (*angusht-i taḥayyur/ta‘ajjub/ḥayrān/ḥayrat*).

15 Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra’iyan* 48, 51.

16 On Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s anti-Sunni activities, see Stanfield-Johnson, *Sunni revival*.

FIGURE 13.3 *The young Shāh Ismā'il ascends to the throne, Ta'rikh-i Jahāngushā (The History of the World Conqueror), Iran, 1680s. BRITISH LIBRARY, LONDON, OR. 3248, FOLIO 74R.*

his obedience to ‘Alī.¹⁷ He then addresses the Ottoman request that the Shi‘is stop cursing the companions of the Prophet, retorting with aplomb: “Until the Last Judgment we will lift our heads from the dust of the grave and will curse ‘Uthmān, Abū Bakr, and ‘Umar.” Per Ṭahmāsp’s reasoning, this practice must continue because the three companions, much like the Ottoman dynasts themselves, are the evil “oppressors of the family of the Prophet and the enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*.”¹⁸ This particular conflation of past grievances and present politicking permeates Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s letter, much as they are elided in Safavid curse lists that include the names of Sunni enemies ranging from ‘Uthmān to the Ottomans.¹⁹ Such accusations did not go unnoticed or unanswered by the Ottoman Sunni ruler and members of his religious elite.²⁰

Ritual cursing was a hallmark of Shāh Ṭahmāsp’s reign. The “disavowers” under his predecessor Shāh Ismā‘īl I comprised a relatively impromptu force, while his successor Shāh Ismā‘īl II (r. 984–5/1576–8) banned the practice of *tabarru* altogether. To a large extent, the institutionalization and spread of cursing practices accelerated after 917/1511, when ‘Alī ‘Abd al-‘Alī al-Karakī (d. 940/1534) penned his treatise entitled “Breath of Divinity in Cursing Witchcraft and Idolatry” (*Nafahāt al-lāhūt fī la’n al-jibt wa’l-tāghūt*). Besides his treatise on the virtues of cursing, this Safavid Imami Shi‘i jurist was appointed *shaykh al-islām* (chief jurist) by Shāh Ṭahmāsp, from whom he received the authority to hire and dismiss all religious and military officials throughout Iran.²¹ Although al-Karakī’s oeuvre remains to be studied in detail, it is clear that he held a highly esteemed and powerful position and hence commanded profound influence over religious affairs and practices within Iran. In addition,

17 Navā’ī, *Shāh Ṭahmāsb* 227.

18 Ibid., 228–9.

19 For a discussion of the ‘Uthmān-Ottoman linguistic elision in Safavid ritual cursing, see Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 126–8. On the Qızılbaş notables who had cursers who preceded them in parades while crying out curses against the Ottomans, see Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra’iyan* 62.

20 The Ottomans likewise accused Shi‘is, especially the Qızılbaş, of disbelief. In his collections of fatwas, for example, Sultan Süleimān’s *shaykh al-Islām*, Ebüssu’ūd Efendi, accuses the Qızılbaş of disbelief and innovation (*küfr ü bid’atler*) because of their cursing of Abū Bakr and ‘Umar. He also notes that whosoever curses the Sunnis, from the Prophet’s companions to Mu‘āwiya, deserves punishment (*ta’zīr*) and must be thrown into jail (*hapis*). See Düzdağ, *Şeyhülislām Ebüssu’ūd Efendi* 174–5, 178.

21 On al-Karakī, see Abisaab, *Converting Persia* 27; idem, *The ulama of Jabal ‘Amil*; idem, *Karakī*; Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra’iyan* 59–60; Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 126; Arjomand, *Two Decrees*; Babayan, *Mystics, Monarchs, and Messiahs*, 306–7; Newman, *The myth of clerical migration*.

his strong anti-Sunni views are palpable in a number of Safavid elite and popular practices. One of these is ritual cursing, which, along with other cultural and religious activities during the Safavid century, served to enforced Shi'i ideology and religious cohesion within Persian lands.

Al-Karakī's treatise on cursing offers a fascinating "manifesto" on the merits of cursing and vilifying (*la'n va-ṭa'n*) Sunni opponents, itself a critical component of Safavid sectarian belief systems concerned with proper creed and hence salvation, heaven, and hell. In its structure, al-Karakī's text looks somewhat like a *tafsīr*, with selected Quranic verses that mention the benefits of cursing, followed by an overtly anti-Sunni explanation of the verses' meanings. The extracted verses put to this particular Shi'i hermeneutical exercise include, among others, "The curse of God is on disbelievers" (Q 2:89), "Certainly God will condemn the oppressors" (Q 11:18), and "Those who offend God and His Prophet are cursed in this world and the next. A shameful punishment awaits them" (Q 33:57).²² Al-Karakī explains that the damned disbelievers (*kāfirūn*) and oppressors (*ẓālimūn*) who will be punished on earth and in the afterworld (*fi'l-dunyā wa'l-ākhirā*) are Abū Bakr, 'Umar, 'Uthmān, and any individual who was unjust towards 'Alī and the *ahl al-bayt*. Cursing these Sunni enemies, he argues, is not just permitted (*jā'iz*) but a requirement (*wājib*), because expressing "hatred of God's enemies forms an integral part of one's faith (*īmān*)."²³ Ergo, for al-Karakī cursing and hatred are a virtuous endeavor and a "most beloved form of devotion" (*aḥabb al-ibādāt*).²⁴

Al-Karakī systematically aims to prove that the first three *rāshidūn* are deserving of ritual curse on earth as well as punishment in the afterlife. The reasons for retribution that he lists are many.²⁵ For example, he accuses Abū Bakr of having denied Fāṭima her rightful inheritance after the Prophet died; he castigates 'Umar as insincere in his support of Muḥammad since he fled the battlefield at Uḥud and Ḥunayn;²⁶ and, last but certainly not least, he reserves

22 Karakī, *Nafahāt al-lāhūt* 20.

23 Ibid., 26.

24 Ibid., 21.

25 For a list and study of Shi'i accusations against the Prophet's companions, see Kohlberg, *Some Imāmī Shi'i views*.

26 'Umar is also accused of having denied the Prophet a pen and tablet on his deathbed so that he could write an explicit will designating 'Alī as his rightful successor. This Shi'i accusation against 'Umar made him not only the subject of ritual cursing but also the centerpiece of a later Safavid festival known as the "feast of the killing of 'Umar" (*īd-i 'Umar-kushān*). In these festivals sponsored by Shāh 'Abbās I (r. 995–1038/1587–1629), straw mannequins and effigies (threaded with animal droppings) of the Sunni antagonist were ritually cursed, murdered, and burned in the main square of Isfahan. The curses

his most acerbic comments for ‘Uthmān, whom he accuses of having burned the Quran.²⁷ Al-Karakī’s attack on ‘Uthmān is surely intertwined with several Shi’i discourses on the Quran, which argue that the ‘Uthmānic codex (*muṣḥaf-i ‘Uthmānī*) was censured at the hands of the Sunnis. As a result of this alteration, references to ‘Alī and his vicegerency (*walāya*), the *ahl al-bayt*, and the Imams were expunged from the Quranic recension produced under ‘Uthmān’s supervision during the middle of the first/seventh century. Thus, the Quran of ‘Alī (*muṣḥaf-i ‘Alī*) underwent falsification (*tahrīf*), its original form only to be restored at the End of Time.²⁸

Although Safavid attitudes towards the ‘Uthmānic codex were not as antagonistic as those found in pre-Buwayhid texts, it is nevertheless clear from al-Karakī’s treatise on cursing that narratives about ‘Uthmān burning copies of the Quran were revived in Safavid clerical circles. For al-Karakī, ‘Uthmān’s putative burning of the Quran is “enough to show unbelief (*kufī*). No one does such a thing unless he is a disbeliever (*kāfir*) in the religion of the Prophet (*dīn al-Muṣṭafā*).”²⁹ ‘Uthmān is here divested of the believer’s title of “Muslim” and excommunicated from the Islamic *umma*. Along with ‘Umar and Abū Bakr, he thus joins the ranks of the disbelievers (*kāfirūn*), oppressors (*ẓālimūn*), and sinners (*fāsiqūn*) mentioned in the Quran as deserving of damnation and infernal tortures (*‘adhāb*).³⁰ Put simply, the only real Muslim believer (*mu’min*) is he who believes in ‘Alī.³¹

One last point raised by al-Karakī addresses another significant topic while also explaining his treatise’s peculiar title, “Breath of Divinity in Cursing Witchcraft (*jibt*) and Idolatry (*tāghūt*).” He reports that ritual cursing was practiced by the earliest members of the Prophet’s household, and it is therefore due to religious precedent that Safavid believers should emulate this meritorious

included a number of foul-mouthed invectives, including calling ‘Umar a “son of a whore, son of a dog, and excrement of the earth.” See Calmard, Shi’i rituals and power 161–3; Dakake, *Hiding in plain sight* 346; Massé, *Croyances et coutumes* i, 166–9.

27 Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt* 73–4, 99–115, 132.

28 On Shi’i interpretations of the Quran and the question of *tahrīf*, see in particular Kohlberg and Amir-Moezzi, *Revelation and falsification* 24–30; Kohlberg, *Some notes*; Lawson, *Note for the study of a ‘Shi’ī Qur’ān*; Tisdall, *Shi’ah additions*.

29 Karakī, *Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt* 132.

30 For the Shi’i doctrine of accusing the Prophet Muḥammad’s companions of disbelief (*takfīr ṣāḥāba*), see Kohlberg, *Some Imāmī Shi’ī views* 148.

31 For al-Karakī’s use of the term heretics (Q 5:47: “Those who do not judge in accordance with what God has revealed are heretics”), from which he extrapolates a detailed roster of the first three caliphs’ false decrees and evil deeds, see his *Nafaḥāt al-lāhūt* 99–113, esp. 104.

tradition of execrating the enemy. He notes, for instance, that ‘Alī himself used to ritually curse Abū Bakr and ‘Umar, whom he maligned as the “two idols of the Quraysh” (*ṣanamay Quraysh*).³² Although Shi‘i maledictions also included ‘Uthmān—forming a triumvirate of cursed ones (*malā’in thalātha*)³³—Abū Bakr and ‘Umar tended to be coupled as one unit. As a conjoined entity, they are referred to in Shi‘i textual sources by the subversive code names *jibt* and *tāghūt*, both of which mean false idol and appear in the title of al-Karakī’s treatise.³⁴ Without a doubt, the Safavid cleric forwards his anti-Sunni discourse by lifting both terms from the Quranic verses that enquire: “Have you not seen those who were given a portion of the Book (*al-kitāb*), who believe in false deities and idols (*al-jibt wa’l-tāghūt*)? [...] They are the ones whom God cursed (*la’anuhum Allāh*), and those who are cursed by God will have nobody to protect them” (Q 4:51–2). Sunni foes—past and present—are here shown by al-Karakī to be merely idolaters, polytheists, and heretics, whose ultimate punishment will be cursing by God. In Safavid Shi‘i theory and practice, then, the curse is not just a repeated slogan of dismissal or the assertion of a maledicting formula. Much more precisely, it is telling Sunni “non-believers” to go to hell.

During the Safavid century, cursing functioned as an orally uttered sign in early attempts to draw clearer boundaries between Sunnism and Shi‘ism. As Abisaab notes in this regard, “it made allegiance to the latter almost inconceivable without a rejection of the former.”³⁵ In some sense, the Shi‘i rejection of Sunni figures is tantamount to a breaking of icons, in which an agent impounds his opponents’ idols, figuratively obliterates them, and jettisons them to hellfire.³⁶ Such iconoclastic acts—be they oral, visual, or material—are never purely destructive, however. They creatively help build contrasting systems of faith and a new world order by radically transforming sacred entities and what they signify. Indeed, via Safavid maledictory metaphors, the founding fathers of Sunni Islam are symbolically recast into idols that are damned to hell. This “semioclasm”³⁷ causes a break in meaning through which iconoclastic acts are intended to invigorate and propagate the “true” (Shi‘i) faith through its “most beloved act of devotion”: that is, cursing and rejecting idols (Sunni figureheads) and damning to hell their idol-worshippers (members of the Sunni

32 Ibid., 161.

33 Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 122.

34 Dakake, *Hiding in plain sight* 344.

35 Abisaab, *Converting Persia* 27.

36 On the destruction of oppositional idols, see Latour, *What is iconoclasm?* 27–8.

37 On the Barthesian notion of “semioclasm” and semiotic breaks in meaning within iconoclastic acts, see Rambelli and Reinders, *What does iconoclasm create?* 24, 36.

community). In Safavid Iran, Shi'i ritual cursing was therefore nothing if not an iconoclastic illocutionary sign.

The Safavid conceptualization of idols transcended textual sources such as al-Karakī's treatise since it formed part of ritual cursing that took place in mosques, markets, city squares, and other public arenas. For these reasons, discourses about idols benefited from popular currency, influencing other spheres of Persian cultural and artistic expression during the tenth/sixteenth century. One such field of production was the painterly arts. Beyond the themes of idolatry and iconoclasm, Safavid paintings attest to an interest in, and intriguing alteration of, the story of the Prophet Muḥammad's return to Mecca and his breaking of the idols at the Ka'ba. Sunni biographical and historical sources describe the event as Islam's decisive triumph over Arab polytheism and hence a restitution of the monotheistic faith under the aegis of the last Messenger of God. Shi'i texts, however, expand the story by describing how Muḥammad lifted 'Alī on his shoulders so that his son-in-law could take a leading roll in this pivotal event.

While some Safavid manuscript paintings depict 'Alī on Muḥammad's shoulders, others Shi'ify the episode further by depicting 'Alī walking on top of the Ka'ba—where he swings his mace at silver and gold idols on its roof—while Muḥammad stands below, appearing as if a mere assistant and witness to the main action above (Figure 13.4). Even the gold pagan statuette on the ground is crushed under the feet of a little black devil, and not by the Prophet himself. This sectarian picturing of Muḥammad's biography is without a doubt inspired by Safavid-period *sīras*, including the painting's accompanying Persian text, Nizām's biographical poem entitled *Āthār al-Muẓaffar* ("The Exploits of the Victorious") completed in 974/1567.³⁸ Like other illustrated manuscripts of the Islamic tradition, the painting thus illustrates a particular narrative episode contained within the text proper.

Yet the image's meanings and messages do not simply halt there. On the contrary, it expands the textual narrative by including several iconographic details that are especially noteworthy within a Safavid sign system aiming for sectarian differentiation via ritual cursing and other overt tactics of disavowal. First and foremost, the inscribed band at the top the *kiswa* does

38 Nizām's *Āthār al-Muẓaffar* presents a Shi'i view on Islamic history. It is a Persian-language mathnavi poem that was composed during the reign of Shāh Ismā'īl I, i.e., during the first two decades of the tenth/sixteenth century. Its preliminary sections include a discussion of the Prophet, the Prophet's light, and how this light was invested in the Imams. On this Shi'i historical text, its illustrated copies, and the painting illustrated in Figure 13.4, see Rührdanz, *Illustrated Manuscripts*; Wright, *Islam* 182, fig. 135.

FIGURE 13.4 'Alī breaks the idols atop the Ka'ba as Muḥammad stands below, Nizām, Āthār al-Muẓaffār (*The Exploits of the Victorious*), Iran, 1567.
CHESTER BEATTY LIBRARY, DUBLIN, PER. 235, FOL. 55R.

not include the *shahāda* but rather the (repeated) Shi'i *walāya*, which proclaims that "There is no God but God, Muḥammad is His Prophet, and 'Alī is the friend of God."³⁹ As noted previously, the Shi'i *walāya*—also known as the "third *shahāda*"—is reported to have been declared by Shāh Ismā'īl I upon his accession to the throne. Thereafter, it became more widespread in Iranian visual culture via epigraphic inscriptions on buildings and Safavid manuscript paintings, especially those depicting the *kiswa* as a backdrop to 'Alī's (and not Muḥammad's) breaking of the idols at the Ka'ba. Just as the Shi'i *walāya* adds a third and final codicil praising the vicegerency of 'Alī, so too does the painting insert its own visual clause heralding the imam's leading role in the foundational iconoclastic act of Islamic history.

The Shi'i *walāya* is related to both communal prayer and ritual cursing. First, in Safavid Iran the call to prayer (*adhān*) was similarly expanded from Shāh Ismā'īl's time onward. At times, the traditional dual formula, "Come to prayer, come to salvation," was augmented by two additional phrases inviting the Shi'i faithful to "come to the best of deeds," and that "Muḥammad and 'Alī are the best of mankind."⁴⁰ According to Safavid belief and practice, then, prayer is an invitation to salvation not only through the performance of good deeds but, just as critically, by following the path of the best of men (*khayr al-bashar*), Muḥammad and 'Alī. Salvation is the promise of eternal life for those who believe and enact the "true" or "proper" faith, i.e., Shi'i Islam. Evidently, those who do not are doomed to hell.

Secondly, the Shi'i *walāya* was closely intertwined with—and construed as the polar opposite of—ritual cursing in Safavid Iran. The believer's association with 'Alī and the Imams was referred to as *walāya*, a politico-spiritual rapprochement or drawing close that appears to have been articulated in contradistinction to *barā'a*, itself a form of distancing or dissociation from a perceived enemy. The double credo of avowing and disavowing created a clear binary, sharpening the divide between Shi'i and Sunni Islam. Without a doubt, this attempt at signaling a chasm was delivered through both oral and visual signs.

Returning to the painting of the breaking of the idols at the Ka'ba, a similarly split structure of saved and damned in the image's foreground can be detected. Here, it appears that, on the left, Muḥammad, 'Alī, and the young, beardless Ḥasan and Ḥusayn find salvation through their iconoclastic act while two individuals on the right—might they be the "false idols," Abū Bakr and 'Umar?—seem to follow the little black devil below. As such, the manuscript painting

39 On the Shi'i *walāya*, see Takim, From *bid'a* to *sunna*.

40 Stanfield-Johnson, The Tabarra'iyan 57; and Calmard, Les rituels shiites 115.

invites its elite reader-viewer to witness the superiority of 'Alī, to declare the Shi'i *walāya*, and to reject all idols, be these statuettes of pagan gods or the double *jibt* and *ṭāghūt* of Sunni Islam.

2 Picturing Judgment Day

Just like ritual cursing, Safavid paintings could function as double signs positing *tawallā* against *tabarru'*. Unlike textual sources and oral execrations, however, images offer their viewers the "intensified illusion of having unmediated access to meaning,"⁴¹ since visual signs give the appearance of circumventing the intervention of a verbal code. Certainly this crafted semblance of manifest reality does not exist *qua* reality; rather, it is formed through an operation of codes to create what Stuart Hall has called a "communicative event."⁴² In occasions of avowing and disavowing, both Safavid preacher and artist encode their messages for respondents and observers who have benefited from exposure to Shi'i religious and political discourses in mosques, palaces, squares, and other arenas. Within Safavid Iran, the communication of Shi'i state ideology was widespread, its codes of engagement more or less naturalized as a "given" by the mid-tenth/sixteenth century.⁴³

At this time, sermonizing and the painterly arts became closely aligned, both within Safavid palatial spheres and more public contexts. One example of the intertwining of homiletic and pictorial practices is the practice of religious storytelling with pictures. As mentioned previously, textual sources record the presence of official cursers at Shāh Ṭahmāsp's court; they also make it clear that such cursers mingled with displayers of religious images and popular preachers in the main square of Tabriz. The most valuable record of this Safavid intermixing of cursing, preaching, and image-making is without a doubt the travelogue penned by the Italian traveler Michele Membré after his 1539–42 trip to the court of Shāh Ṭahmāsp. He describes these crowded public "communicative events" in the following words:

The Safavids paint figures, like the figure of 'Alī on horseback and with a sword, and when people see this figure said to be 'Alī, they grab their ears and take off their hats, as if in reverence. In their squares, there are many

⁴¹ Potts, Sign 31.

⁴² Hall, Encoding, decoding 92.

⁴³ On the sign's strongly fixed ideological value, and thus its position as a 'natural' sign, see *ibid.*, 97.

Persian popular preachers (*zaratani*, lit. “charlatans”) seated on a carpet on the ground. They have a number of large paintings (*carte longhe*) with figures. These preachers carry in their hands small sticks with which they show figure after figure. They predict the future and tell stories based on these figures, for which people give them money. There are still others with books in hand, from which they read about the battles of ‘Alī and the wars of ancient kings and Shah Isma‘il. People give money to hear [these stories]. Still others, known as the “cursers” (*teperrai* = *tabarrā’ī*), [are paid to] curse the Ottomans (*Ottomani*) and sing songs about how the Shah should go to Constantinople and install his brother Sam Mirza on the throne.⁴⁴

Membré offers a lively eyewitness description of Safavid folk practices in the main square of Tabriz. Here, preachers, cursers, augury-tellers, and storytellers armed with large painted images and hand-held manuscripts entertained the *hoi poloi* with Persian tales of kings, both past and present, and the battles of Shi‘i heroes, from Imam ‘Alī to Shāh Ismā‘il. Among the crowds were cursers, who denounced not just Sunni figureheads but the Ottomans as well. It is also clear from Membré’s account that picture storytellers delivered their image-based performances with sticks that functioned as pointers.⁴⁵ Finally, with or without visual aids, these Safavid deliverers of stories, sermons, curses, and auguries engaged in their respective trades for monetary gain, and not *pro bono*.

Such popular practices did not just take place in the public squares of Safavid Iran. Within palace quarters, Shāh Ṭahmāsp also had in his employ official cursers and augury-tellers. Moreover, it is evident from the large-scale *Fālnāma* paintings of the 950s/1550s that these images were used for foretelling in royal spheres as well. Combining elite and popular practices was not a novel endeavor in mid-tenth/sixteenth-century Iran; several decades earlier al-Karakī, the leading Imami jurist, had already turned the popular practice of cursing into a quintessential marker of Shi‘i orthopraxy. What was unprecedented, however, was the monumental scale of the *Fālnāma* paintings (at ca. 58 × 43 cm), their emphasis on eschatological themes, and their facing good or bad omens written in Persian.

44 Membré, *Relazione* 59.

45 Chelkowski argues that picture storytelling should be considered a Qajar practice supported by elite—not folk—patronage. See Chelkowski, Narrative painting 98. However, as Membré’s travelogue clearly proves, picture storytelling was indeed: 1) a Safavid practice; and 2) guided to a general public.

Today Shāh Ṭahmāsp's illustrated *Fālnāma* is dispersed, yet one of its paintings depicting the Last Judgment is of paramount importance (Figure 13.5).⁴⁶ While its accompanying textual augury does not survive, its many iconographic components offer a fascinating view into how Safavid eschatological concepts were expressed and promoted in Iran during the early modern period. For these reasons, it is critical to examine its figural elements and component parts in a detailed manner. The painting's iconographic details are many and its structure is clearly divided into three horizontal registers and include, from bottom to top: groups of male and female believers and sinners gathered on the Day of Reckoning (Figure 13.6); the Prophet Muḥammad and Imam 'Alī with angels in the middle ground (Figure 13.10); and eleven seated figures and a bundle of gold flames on either side of a tree in a lush landscape above (Figure 13.9).

The lowermost register depicts groups of women and men gathered on the Day of Judgment (Figure 13.6). To the right and observing the event stands the Angel Gabriel, who places his right hand on his cheek in a gesture of awe. Immediately adjacent to Gabriel sit a group of women, clad in white burial shrouds and without any facial deformations. These women surely must represent the believers, whose good faith and actions—as recorded in the books of deeds they grasp firmly in their hands—secure ultimate salvation for them. Conversely, the sinners and disbelievers bound for hell are represented outwardly through a variety of pictorial tactics, including black robes, black or gray faces and bodies, distended red tongues, and animal heads. These individuals' fates are made clear through the rendition of their external appearances, with a particular accent on the face. As Christian Lange has shown, the face is widely considered in Islamic thought to act as a seat of honor, the mirror of the human soul, and an indicator of innate characteristics (*al-akhlāq al-bāṭina*).⁴⁷ Within the Safavid pictorial rendition of the Last Judgment, the blackened face thus provides its viewing audience an outward and clearly legible sign of eschatological doom.

Other signs of damnation include the disfiguration of humans into animals, most especially pigs (or boars) and monkeys (or apes). In Islamic religious thought, monkeys are deemed a sign of doomsday. From the time of Quranic revelation, the ape served as the very emblem of depravity and turpitude.⁴⁸ In several verses in the Quran (inter alia, 2:65 and 5:60), believers are warned that God will transform sinners into accursed apes and swine on the Day of

46 The painting is published along with a one-page descriptive entry in Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 190–91, cat. no. 55.

47 Lange, "On that day" 438–9, 445.

48 Lichtenstädter, "And become ye accursed apes" 175.

FIGURE 13.5 *The Last Judgment, Ja'far al-Šādiq (attributed), Fālnāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.*

HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

FIGURE 13.6 Sinners gathered for the Last Judgment, Jaʿfar al-Šādiq (attributed), Fāhāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s. HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

Judgment.⁴⁹ Along with pigs, monkeys are therefore associated with eschatological metamorphic events as described in the Quran.⁵⁰ Further elaborated within hadith compilations and works of *tafsīr*, the monkey is also described as a portent sign of the end after a period of tribulations or civil strife known as *fitan*. In these texts, the human's deformation is referred to as *maskh*, or punitive metamorphosis.⁵¹ *Maskh* joins two other punishments—i.e., *khasf*, the engulfing of sinners, and *qadhf*, the pelting of stones against them—to form a triad of signs that herald the hour of Reckoning (*ishārāt al-sā'a*).⁵² This triple calamity of deformation, submersion, and lapidation warns sinful Muslims of apocalyptic retribution—itsself a rhetoric of admonishment that is echoed visually in the Safavid painting, in which groups of men with boar and monkey heads join other sinners with distended tongues and bloodied, truncated limbs (on the left) and men turned upside-down or engulfed in the ground (on the right).

Previously, scholars have argued that this painting represents specific groups of sinners destined for hell as described in Islamic eschatological writing.⁵³ Such sinners include the idolaters (monkeys), deceitful traders, transgressors, narcissists, hypocrites, false witnesses, hedonists, drunkards, spies, slanderers, and usurers (pigs).⁵⁴ Although the Last Judgment painting does include groups of the damned, their respective sins are not at all clear, however. With no pictorial labels and no surviving augury text, it is not possible to clearly identify the sinner's respective vices and violations. Despite a lack of labels and captions in the image, the painting's viewers could nevertheless engage in creative interpretation of these culturally inflected visual signs.

Such pictorial auguries and narratives were surely tinted by the cultural, political, and religious current present at the Safavid court during the 1550s. Among these varied currents was the ritual cursing of Sunni opponents as idolaters, heretics, and disbelievers doomed to hell. Within this particular context, images of the damned could take on correlative meanings and cater to contemporary discourses on salvation, especially in light of the impending millennium. The black faces of the sinners may provide one example of this potential double reading, fusing both general and specific narratives on the Last Judgment. The black-face trope finds its roots in Quran 39:60, which states

49 For the Quranic verses that describe the transformation of humans into apes, see *ibid.*, 156–7.

50 Cook, Ibn Qutayba and the monkeys 53–4.

51 For a general discussion of *maskh*, see Traini, *La métamorphose*.

52 Rubin, Apes, pigs, and the Islamic identity 91.

53 Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 191.

54 MacDonald, Day of Resurrection 159–60.

briefly: “On that day when faces will be white or black.” The day points to a moment of reckoning, when the white faces are said to belong to the faithful bound for paradise while the black faces are those of sinners, unbelievers, apostates, hypocrites, people of innovation, and people of erroneous opinion and sectarian or heretical inclinations (*ahl al-ahwāʾ*) destined for hell.⁵⁵ Without a doubt, much like Islamic textual sources, the Last Judgment painting makes a clear distinction between good and evil, saved and damned. However, the more probing question here remains: by what “sectarian” and thus “heretical” inclinations do hell’s denizens abide according to this painting and a Safavid Shiʿi worldview?

From the earliest Shiʿi texts, such the *Tafsīr* of Furāt al-Kūfī (d. 300/912), to al-Majlisī’s (d. 1110/1698) later Safavid compendium of Shiʿi hadiths entitled *Biḥār al-anwār* (“Oceans of Lights”), efforts were expended (especially during the seventeenth century) to couch the so-called “partisans” of the Sunni cause as pagans and non-believers embarked on a path towards perdition. A clear-cut dichotomy pervades Shiʿi texts, in which the people of paradise are posited against the denizens of hell, with the first referring to the Imams and the faithful initiates while the second encompasses the enemies of the Imams and their partisans.⁵⁶ For example, Furāt al-Kūfī notes that: “He who dies without having known his Imam dies the death of the ignorant pagans,”⁵⁷ in essence arguing that Sunnis do not belong whatsoever to the Islamic faith. He continues by lauding Imam ʿAlī and his ability to serve as an ultimate judge during the Day of Resurrection, noting that: “Without ʿAlī, truth would not be distinguished from falsehood, nor believer from non-believer.”⁵⁸ Echoing such words about the Imam, the Safavid ruler Shāh Ṭahmāsp, who commissioned the illustrated “Book of Divination” to which the Last Judgment painting belongs, recorded a *ḥadīth qudsī* (saying by God) in his autobiography, in which he states that God admonished: “Had everyone accepted the love of ʿAlī, then God would not have created Hellfire.”⁵⁹ Put simply, in Shiʿi exegetical works as well as in the Safavid ruler’s own memoirs, hell is both created *and* reserved for those who refuse to accept the Imam—namely, the so-called Sunni “heretics.”⁶⁰

55 Lange, “On that day” 430.

56 Amir-Moezzi, Pre-existence of the Imam 150.

57 Idem, Super-existence of the Imam 123.

58 Idem, Some remarks 118, citing Furāt al-Kūfī’s *Tafsīr*, no. 503.

59 Shāh Ṭahmāsp, *Tadhkira* 51.

60 For a discussion of the punitive deformation (*maskh*) of enemies of the *ahl al-bayt*, in which ʿUthmān is described as turned into a toad, see Amir-Moezzi, *The divine guide in Shiʿism* 16, 93, 129, 171.

Related evidence can be found in other illustrated Persian books of divination, including in a painting depicting hell (Figure 13.7). Here, the sinners sit, kneel, or stand among golden flames, as scorpions and snakes bite at their limbs and a large red demon wields a fiery mace. Above the painting is the Quranic verse stating that “It [hell] has seven gates: a class [of sinners] is assigned to each one of those gates.” (Q 15:44). While the Quranic excerpt only mentions seven generic classes of sinners, its facing augury gives further details by offering an inflected admonition: “You must keep company with a devout and pious person who loves the people of the family of the Chosen One [Muḥammad] and the Approved [‘Alī], so that evil and hardship leave you.”⁶¹ This image is thus semiotically restricted by its attendant text: its visual signs may appear vague or general at first glance, but upon its activation through augury its official readings are carefully enclaved to make clear to its elite viewer-reader that those who are pious and devout—and consequently deserving of paradise—are those who embrace the Shi‘i faith. Expanding the augury’s textual mention of hypocrites, infidels, and non-believers, the overt insinuation here is that these classes of sinners are, to some extent, by-words or code-names for the term “Sunni.”

These two Safavid divinatory paintings of hell are by no means exceptional. Other Persian texts and images engage in similarly sectarian tactics. For example, al-Varāmīnī’s *Aḥsan al-kibār* (The Best of the Grand Men), a history of the Shi‘i imams, was produced as a manuscript in 837/1433.⁶² Most paintings were added to the manuscript in 932/1526 by the portrait painter Qāsim ibn ‘Alī, who included epigraphic praises of Shāh Ṭahmāsp embedded within his paintings.⁶³ While the manuscript contains numerous paintings of the Prophet Muḥammad and the imams, one illustration accompanying a section of the text reporting a miracle performed by Imam Ḥusayn depicts hell (Figure 13.8). Here, the sinners are kneeling while chained together in a blaze of flames in the pit of hell, whose entrance (or mouth) is symbolically depicted

61 The full English translation of the Persian omen (Topkapı Palace Library, Istanbul, H. 1702, folio 57r), provided by Sergei Tourkin, is included in Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 292. For a discussion of this “Book of Divination” (but not its hell scene), see Bağcı, *Images for foretelling*.

62 The manuscript’s date of transcription has been read as 837/1433. However, its fully developed *nasta‘liq* script suggests that it is a Safavid, not Timurid, manuscript. On the question of dating, see Stchoukine, Qāsim ibn ‘Alī 45. For further information about this manuscript, see Akimushkina and Ivanova, *Persidskie miniatyuri* no. 35; Thompson and Canby, *Hunt for paradise* 108–9.

63 For further information on this late Timurid to early Safavid portraitist, see Blair, Qasim ‘Alī.

Due to rights restrictions, this illustration is not available in the digital edition of the book.

FIGURE 13.7 *Sinners tortured in hell, Jaʿfar al-Šādiq (attributed), Fālnāma (Book of Omens), Iran, ca. 1575–1600.*
TOPKAPI PALACE LIBRARY, ISTANBUL, H. 1702, FOLIO 56V.

by a large growling dragon in the lower right corner. A number of demons club the shackled sinners with maces or else force them to drink molten or putrid liquids. Snakes and scorpions also torment the denizens of hell under the infernal tree Zaqqūm, whose black and red fruits take the shape of human heads.⁶⁴ Finally, a white monster's head hovers in the hilly landscape to the right of the Zaqqūm.

While the painting remains relatively imprecise with regards to the identity of the depicted sinners, its accompanying text allows its reader-viewer to interpret its contents within carefully delineated parameters. Indeed, the narrative, related by Jābir 'Abdallāh Anṣārī, states that Imam Ḥusayn miraculously was able to open the gate of heaven. Therein were the Prophet Muḥammad, Amīr al-Mu'minīn [‘Alī], and the four companions of Ḥusayn, Ḥamza, Ja‘far, Tayyār, and ‘Aqīl. The Prophet then addresses Jābir, telling him that, “You would be a believer (*mu'min*) if you trust in whatever the Imams do and not question them.” Thereafter, Muḥammad shows Jābir hell, in which he sees the *shuyūkh*,⁶⁵ Mu‘awīya, Yazīd, Walīd, Mughīra, Abū Jahl, and others all chained together. Their tortures, he notes, are more severe than those of all other sinners in hell. The text thus invites the painting's viewer to identify these key opponents of the Prophet, ‘Alī, and Ḥusayn as the figures shown chained together and viciously beaten by demons. Their careful horizontal aligning across the painted page echoes the text's enumeration of names, and both the text and its image echo the roster of opponents who were ritually damned in Safavid cursing practices. Without a doubt, then, the manuscript owner and his circle of reader-viewers were invited—either directly, by insinuation, or via common cultural praxis—to see within images of hell the symbolic presence of Sunni “heretics,” thereby reinforcing the Shi‘i precept that heaven is reserved for those who believe in and follow the Imams.

Returning to the Last Judgment image belonging to Shāh Ṭahmāsp's *Fālnāma*, these many interrelated Safavid texts and images help explain why the eleven Imams are depicted kneeling in a paradise-like setting at the very top of the divination painting (Figure 13.9). Here, they sit as a collective, divided into two

64 On the Zaqqūm tree, see Q 37:62–67; and on the tree's representation in the Timurid “Book of Ascension,” see Caiozzo, *Une curiosité de l'enfer musulman*.

65 The exact meaning of the term *shuyūkh* is unclear here. It may refer to Sufi mystics or else to the spiritual leaders of the Sunni community. In the dual (*shaykhān*), it also refers to Abū Bakr and ‘Uthmān as the “older men” in comparison to the younger ‘Alī. On the *shaykhān*, see Kohlberg, *Some Imāmi Shi‘i views* 146–7.

FIGURE 13.9 The imams and Fatima (as a gold bundle of flames) sitting in heaven during the Last Judgment, Jafar al-Sādiq (attributed), Fāḩnāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.

HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

groups by a large tree, perhaps the Lote Tree of the Limit (*sidrat al-muntahā*).⁶⁶ Two of them touch their adjacent companions on the shoulder in a relational act suggestive of paternal-filial relations, thereby evoking the genealogical line of the Imams. Their faces are encircled by flaming gold and silver nimbi; the two Imams closest to the tree have white facial veils while all others bear no facial features.⁶⁷ It appears that the two veiled Imams are, on the right, the Mahdī (with an inscription reading *Ṣāḥib al-Zamān* or “Lord of the Age”) and, on the left, Ḥasan, whose name is not legible even though he sits next to a clearly identified Ḥusayn.

Whether they are depicted with white veils or a pink skin tone, all the Imams’ faces are rendered featureless in this Safavid painting. This particular technique of figural representation appears to emerge from, as well as to propel forward, the Shi’i belief that the Imams are pure and impeccable beings emerging from the pre-existential world of shadows or particles, in which they exist as light silhouettes (*ashbāh nūr*), spirits of light (*arwāḥ min nūr*), or shadows of light (*aẓillat nūr*).⁶⁸ Safavid paintings from Shāh Ismā’īl’s time onward depict the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imams as partaking in the same light—the light of God and the light of Muḥammad—their faces too sacred and radiant to behold.⁶⁹

Their appearance in a paradise setting is not unprecedented either. Indeed, ascension narratives penned by Shi’i authors relate that Muḥammad saw the Imams’ names inscribed on the Throne of God⁷⁰ or else witnessed their presence at the Throne as bundles of lights. One particularly apt saying by the Prophet records Muḥammad glancing at the feet of the Throne, stating: “I saw twelve lights each containing an inscription in green indicating the names of my legatees, from the first, ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib to the last, the Mahdī of my

66 In a Shi’i context, the tree can also symbolize the family tree of the Prophet, in which case this particular tree may well act as a nature metaphor for Muḥammad’s genealogy and the Imamate rather than the Lote Tree of the Limit. Such an allegory is found in a number of statements, including a saying attributed to Ja’far that notes: “Muḥammad is the trunk of prophecy and its branch is the Imamate.” The saying is cited in Amir-Moezzi, *Pre-existence of the Imam* 135.

67 Technical analysis suggests that these faces were most likely painted as such, their facial features not removed or repainted at a later date. See Farhad with Bağcı, *The Book of Omens* 323, fn 16.

68 Amir-Moezzi, *Pre-existence of the Imam* 140–41.

69 For a discussion of the Safavid pictorial use of the facial veil and its sectarian implications, see Gruber, *When nubuvvat encounters valāyat* 55–61.

70 Amir-Moezzi, *Imam in Heaven* 180.

community.”⁷¹ Ascension tales likewise record God speaking to the Prophet in the following words: “Muḥammad, I created you, Fāṭima, Ḥasan and Ḥusayn as figures of light out of my light. [...] Those who accept your authority become close companions in my eyes, and those who struggle against it become unbelievers.”⁷² From the hadith to ascension tales and omen-paintings, Shi‘i texts and images sought to memorialize the Imams’ pre-existence as light sources emanating from the heavenly spheres as well as to project their post-existence in paradise, the eternal abode promised for the righteously faithful.

In its upper section, the Last Judgment painting also includes a gold bundle of flames, which is inscribed with the name of Fāṭima and praise formulas in her honor. Her corporeality is entirely subsumed by the teardrop outline that is set ablaze, in some sense paying tribute to her honorific epithet, *al-Zahrā’* or “The Radiant One.” In a Shi‘i interpretative framework, this non-physical—even immaculate—abstraction of the Prophet’s daughter appears to render her as the so-called “confluence of the two lights” (*majma‘ al-nūrayn*)⁷³—that is, the intersection of the light of prophecy (as Muḥammad’s daughter) and the light of the Imams (as ‘Alī’s wife and maternal figure of the Imamate). Shi‘i hadith compilers and theologians likewise linked Fāṭima to the Quranic verse of light (*āyat al-nūr*, Q 24:35), stipulating that the verse’s expression “light upon light” should be interpreted as “Imam upon Imam.” The lamp is thus analogized to her womb, itself the birthplace of the Imamate.⁷⁴ Moreover, as recorded by al-Majlisī, beyond her inceptive role, Fāṭima is also believed to enlighten the Day of Judgment, illuminating a post-apocalyptic heaven like a sun guiding the Shi‘i community to salvation.⁷⁵ In sum, she serves as the Mistress of the Day of Judgment who both vindicates and redeems.⁷⁶ In the Safavid Last Judgment painting, therefore, the Imams and Fāṭima function as a visual sign, proof, and argumentation (*hujja*) in favor of the rightful restoration of sacred order according to the Shi‘i millenarian worldview espoused and publically promoted by Shāh Ṭahmāsp, who couched himself as both a *sayyid* and ‘Alid ruling on behalf of the hidden Imam.⁷⁷

71 Ibid.

72 Colby, Early Imami Shi‘i narratives 145–6, citing Furāt al-Kūfi.

73 Amir-Moezzi, Pre-existence of the Imam 133–4, 137.

74 Pinault, Zaynab Bint ‘Alī 74.

75 Cited in Ruffle, May Fatimah gather our tears 89.

76 Sered, Rachel, Mary, and Fatima 134.

77 Quinn, Dreams of Shaykh Ṣafī al-Dīn 138.

Beyond Fāṭima and the Imams, Muḥammad, ‘Alī, and the angels all hold preeminent positions within Shi‘i belief systems concerned with the eschaton. It is for these reasons that they occupy the central portion of the Safavid painting of the Last Judgment (Figure 13.10). In the image’s central register, the action’s main protagonists are depicted and they include, from left to right: the angel Isrāfīl, nicknamed the “Possessor of the Trumpet” (*ṣāhib al-qarn*), which is sounded to announce the Day of Gathering; and the angel Michael, who holds the scales of justice (*mawāzīn*) and is believed responsible for weighing the deeds of mankind.⁷⁸ As in the Last Judgment painting, this triad of angels (Gabriel, Michael, and Isrāfīl) is widely found in Islamic works on angelology. Just as significantly, they are central to sectarian views of the Last Judgment. In Shi‘i textual sources, for example, the three angels are described as appearing to the world during the advent of the Mahdī, at which time they rally the faithful to swear allegiance to him.⁷⁹ Moreover, a number of Shi‘i hadiths, such as those compiled by al-Majlisī, state that all three angels are the *malā’ika al-Qā’im* (the angels of the Riser/Mahdī) as well as the angelic companions of the Prophet Muḥammad and Imam ‘Alī, both of whom are depicted to the right of Michael.⁸⁰

‘Alī stands while gesturing to the Prophet, who himself sits on a carpet next to the so-called “banner of mercy” (*liwā’ al-ḥamd*), which is raised on the Day of Judgment and guarded by an attendant wearing an orange robe. Were it not for the captions inscribed above their flaming nimbi and the two long black tresses that are reserved for the Prophet (Figure 13.11), it would be almost impossible to tell the two protagonists apart. Both wear gold embroidered robes, both have white veils that hide their facial features (but not their ears), and both emit the same radiant bundle of light from their heads. Moreover, it appears as if the Prophet Muḥammad is here acting as if an observer, his capacity for intercession (*shafā’a*) on his community’s behalf in large part rendered dependent on ‘Alī’s agency or intermediacy. The prophetic prerogative is quite literally pushed to the side. Instead, it is ‘Alī who appears to rise to the occasion.

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- 78 The term *mīzān* (singular) is a general term for justice, whereas *mawāzīn* (plural) takes on a clear eschatological signification in the Quran (7:8–9; 12:47; and 13:102–3) as the scales of justice. It is believed that the scales will be set up for the Day of Reckoning in the Garden of Paradise (MacDonald, Paradise 336) or else on the “area of gathering” (*arḍ al-maḥshar*).
- 79 Madelung, *Angels in Shi‘ism* 219. Shi‘i texts also narrate that these angels spread their protective wings over the Imams. See Schimmel, *Deciphering the signs of God* 230.
- 80 On the *malā’ikat al-Qā’im*, see Majlisī, *Bihār lii*, ch. 27, 349, and liii, ch. 29, 62–63.

FIGURE 13.10 The angels Isrāfīl and Michael, on the left, and Alī and Muḥammad, on the right, interceding on behalf of sinners during the Last Judgment, Jafar al-Ṣādiq (attributed), *Fālnāma* (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.
HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

FIGURE 13.11 *Alī and Muḥammad, with identifying captions inscribed above their flaming nimbi, interceding on behalf of sinners during the Last Judgment, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq (attributed), Fāl-nāma (Book of Omens), Tabriz, 1550s.*

HARVARD ART MUSEUMS/ARTHUR M. SACKLER MUSEUM, CAMBRIDGE, 1999.302.

Besides becoming more “prophet-like” in his intercessory duties and pictorial appearance, Imam ‘Alī is also conceptually positioned within a greater Shi‘i eschatological landscape. Not only does he seem to surpass Muḥammad, he inches ever closer to God, becoming, to borrow Amir-Moezzi’s fitting expression, an “Imam-God.”⁸¹ This more sacred form of ‘Alī represents him as a final judge, who, like God, is entrusted with assigning heaven and hell. To give just a few further examples of ‘Alī’s quasi-deification, Shi‘i authors such as Furāt al-Kūfī, al-‘Ayyāshī (4th/10th century), and al-Majlisī record a number of statements that effectively serve to elevate the Imam to godly proportions, according to which ‘Alī is said to have declared: “I am the Rewarder (*dayyān*) of men on the Day of Reckoning; I am he who assigns the Garden or the Fire,

81 Amir-Moezzi, *Some remarks* 106.

no one enters without my designation; I am the Great Judge (between good and evil, *al-farūq al-akbar*); [...] I have learnt the science of fortune and misfortune. [...] I am the successor to the Messenger of the Lord of the worlds; I am the Judge of the Garden and Fire.”⁸² In such statements attributed to ‘Alī, hell is not strictly under God’s dominion; rather, it also falls under the purview of the Imam’s jurisdiction.

Similar statements are found in the corpus of Shi‘i hadith on the Mahdī or Qā‘im, especially as gathered by al-Majlisī. For instance, a number of sayings attributed to God make it clear that a refusal to accept the Imam’s vicegerency is tantamount to refusing Muḥammad’s prophecy, and hence constitutes a conscientious and deliberate refusal to enter paradise. This syllogistic premise posits that paradise is not granted but rather sought after and secured via swearing allegiance (*walāya*) to ‘Alī. For example, the belief in the Imam’s active agency is recorded in a statement made by God to Muḥammad, according to which: “Whoever denies [‘Alī’s] right, denies your right. Whoever refuses to accept him as his master, refuses to accept you as his master; and whoever refuses to accept you as his master, verily he refuses to enter paradise.”⁸³ Besides stressing individual responsibility in the process of salvation, Shi‘i hadiths continue to promote the Imam as judge-like, the distributor of paradise and hellfire, and the possessor of the Kawthar pond.⁸⁴ Last but certainly not least, Shi‘i hadiths describe the Day of Resurrection as a “time of realization,” when Muḥammad will hand over his standard to ‘Alī, who will then serve as chief of all created beings that will congregate under his flag.⁸⁵ Like these Shi‘i eschatological texts, the Safavid painting similarly suggests a handing over of the reigns of power, with Imam ‘Alī acting as Chief Intercessor and Master of the Day of Judgment.

3 Curse Signs

In its pictorial complexity, the *Fālnāma* painting invites its viewers to visually navigate and contemplate its many constituent signs. Its pictorial codes can be unraveled and deciphered via iconographic details, related textual evidence, and the cultural setting of its production. On the one hand, this image of the last judgment was certainly used as a pictorial omen for Safavid divinatory

82 Ibid., 117–8.

83 Majlisī, *Bihār li*, ch. 6, 69–70.

84 Ibid., liii, ch. 29, 96, 112.

85 Ibid., liii, ch. 29, 71.

practices, aiding inquirers in palace quarters determine whether a course of action was propitious to pursue or not. On the other hand, the painting also could fulfill a variety of other functions beyond its use for seeking auguries within the context of an approaching millennial mark by offering one mechanism (among many) to enact and strengthen an elite Safavid Shi'i religious worldview. Its character and use were saturated with possibilities, and it thus could catalyze multiple significations.

First and foremost, the painting should be considered a warning sign. It admonishes its viewers of what events lay ahead at the Day of Judgment, when believers will be separated from non-believers. The righteous and pious will be granted paradise, while the disbelievers and sinners will be thrown to hell. From stealing the wealth of orphans to engaging in backbiting, offenses that carry the punishment of hellfire are quite varied in the Islamic eschatological imagination. In the painting, various classes of sinners—from those whose faces turn black to those who are engulfed in the ground—are represented as suffering the punishments of hell already at the moment of Judgment. These sinners, however, are visually positioned against Imam 'Alī (as intercessor and judge) and the Imams (as eternal inhabitants of heaven), their transgressions strategically circumscribed by the overarching visual rhetoric of the Last Judgment scene. Through this pictorial bracketing and polarity, the viewer is hailed to interpret the transfigured sinners as offenders of the faith, and in this instance specifically as offenders and opponents of the Shi'i faith. While this interpretation is not clearly elucidated in the composition, it is indubitably insinuated by pictorial and compositional means. As such, the Last Judgment scene functions as a pictorial caveat, warning its audience that Shi'ism must be considered the only true religion (*madhhab-i haqq*).⁸⁶

Secondly, the painting functions as a covenant of the faith expressed in visual form. It provides an overt sign of the ascendancy and authority of the Shi'i faith within an apocalyptical landscape. Preachy and sanctimonious, it engages in a holier-than-thou visual discourse. Shi'ism here is not disguised or dissimulated as the doctrine of *taqiyya* would dictate. Instead, within the ascendant Safavid religio-political complex, the painting is not even a form of "hiding in plain sight."⁸⁷ Rather, as a large-scale image produced under the aegis of a ruling monarch of staunch Shi'i persuasion, it represents a total upturning of *taqiyya*: it is a pictorial oath of the faith, both binding and proudly declamatory.

86 Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 115.

87 This term is borrowed from Maria Dakake's discussion of the Shi'i doctrine of secrecy. See Dakake, *Hiding in plain sight*.

Thirdly, the painting's oratorical qualities mimic the Safavid practice of ritual cursing, itself a slogan or "external sign"⁸⁸ of the true faith. The political division between the Safavids and Ottomans became increasingly vocalized through the symbolic language of religion over the course of the tenth/sixteenth century. The Safavid cursing of Sunni opponents both past and present appears to have been an important component of the state-sponsored program to implement Shi'i ideology across Persian lands. This oral practice aimed to create a stronger binary of creedal concepts as well as a crisper definition and disambiguation of true vs. false faith. By placing *walāya* (association, allegiance, or avowal) against *barā'a* (dissociation, malediction, or disavowal), the uttering of maledictions also invited respondents to rejoin in kind by emitting curse formulas.

This responsorial activity could also be enacted by other loud "slogans," including paintings. Indeed, pictorial images act sometimes like rhetorical invitations to their viewers, who themselves can engage in a variety of responses, from active contemplation, to semiotic decipherment, to affective response. Within a Safavid context, therefore, one cannot help but wonder whether paintings—especially one that so clearly posits *walāya* versus *barā'a* as salvation versus damnation—could act as visual aids in both private and public, elite and popular, practices of cursing. In this instance, execrations could multiply across the classes and media, soliciting viewers and listeners to curse and vilify Sunni opponents in response, as per the dictates of the Shi'i rejoinder to ritual cursing: "Better too much than too little!" (*bish bād kam mabād*).⁸⁹

From warning to covenant and curse, the Safavid Last Judgment painting functions in a variety of ways. It is a vision (*ru'ya*), augury (*fāl*), and image (*ṣūra*) of the Day of Reckoning, an eschatological prophecy (*malḥama*), a pictorial allegiance (*walāya*) to Shi'ism and its figureheads, a manifestation (*mazhar*) of the true faith, and an invitation to curse (*la'n*) those destined for hell. It telescopes and channels these multiple meaning-laden visual modes, proving that an image is worth a thousand words, especially when it offers an intensified illusion of unmediated access to an "eternal now."

Just as significantly, the Safavid painting offers a sectarian vision of the Last Judgment and hell, revealing how painterly practices were deeply entangled with Shi'i, millenarian, and apocalyptic worldviews, royal and popular practices of divination, and sectarian claims to authority and intercession at a moment of growing religio-political divide between the Safavids and Ottomans. Transcending the purely linguistic domain, these sorts of images

88 Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 114.

89 On the response "*bish bād kam mabād*" in Shi'i Safavid ritual cursing, see Calmard, *Les rituels shiites* 129; Stanfield-Johnson, *The Tabarra'iyan* 48.

bolster a culturally encoded system of visual signage in order to allow hell's meanings to be both enclaved and open-ended all at the same time. As a sign, vision, augury, epiphany, and curse, the Last Judgment painting thus highlights how the visual imagination of otherworldly realms could provide an artful mechanism by which to reify the concept of hell within early modern Islamic eschatological thought.

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