The Prophet Muḥammad in Imāmī Shī‘ism

Between History and Metaphysics

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Although Imāmī or Twelver Shī‘īs have always proclaimed that they are faithful to the person and the message of the Prophet Muḥammad, they have faced constant accusations from Sunni heresiographers that they neglect the Prophet in favour of the Imām. They themselves hold that the Sunnī perception of the Prophet is lacking an essential dimension: his relationships with the “People of [his] Family” (*ahl al-bayt*). These are Muḥammad’s cousin and son-in-law ‘Alī Ibn Abī Ṭālib (d. 40/661), the first Imām; his daughter Fāṭima (d. 11/632); his two grandsons, the children of ‘Alī and Fāṭima, called al-Ḥasan (d. 49/669) and al-Ḥusayn (d. 61/680), respectively the second and third Imām; and nine male descendants of the latter up to Muḥammad al-Mahdī, the twelfth Imām, in occultation since 329/940–1. In the Shī‘ī credo (*shahada*), mention of God and His Prophet Muḥammad is followed by the name of ‘Alī, “God’s close ally” (*walī allāh*).

In Shī‘ī as in Sunnī Islam, the representation and veneration of the Prophet Muḥammad are founded less on the Qur’ān than on the *ḥadīth*, the set of Prophetic traditions as relayed by witnesses or reliable reporters. Shī‘īs, however, reject most of the traditions recounted by the Prophet’s companions (*ṣaḥāba*), whom they consider to be traitors; for them the only true traditions are those established by the “People of the Family”, the Imāms and their followers. As a result, from the very beginning the Shī‘ī corpus of *ḥadīths* is very different from that of the Sunnī majority.¹ Here the figure of the Prophet is omnipresent, but inseparable from those of the *ahl al-bayt*, particularly ‘Alī. The Prophet shares with them the *‘isma*, the virtue of impeccability and infallibility conferred directly by God. Together they make up the pleroma of the fourteen ‘Impeccable Ones’ (*ma‘ṣūmūn*), without whom the person and function of the Prophet are incomprehensible. According to these traditions, Prophecy (*nubuwwa*) does not exist without the Alliance or Divine Friendship

1 See Kohlberg, “Shī‘ī Hadīth” 299–307; Amir-Moezzi, *Le Guide divin dans le shī‘isme originel*, 48–70 [Eng. Transl. *The Divine Guide in Early Shi‘ism*, 19–28].

(*walāya*), which makes up the nature and sacred mission of the Imām;² each Law-bearing prophet (*nabī rasūl*) is accompanied by a close ally (*walī*) who is also his heir (*waṣī*) and his lieutenant (*khalīfa*), and will himself be at the origin of a succession of allies and heirs. 'Alī's mission was to be Muḥammad's *walī*, and the Imāms descended from them also share this mission.

In order to shed light on the Imāmī figure of the Prophet, we will draw on sources belonging to four phases in the history of Shī'ism:³

- A. The formation of Imāmism under the historic Imāms until the Occultation; from this period we find the first collections of *ḥadīths* and *Tafsīrs* on the Qur'ān, the latter equally composed of *ḥadīths* attributed to the Imāms.⁴
- B. The establishment of Twelver Shī'ism during the Buyid period (334–447/945–1055); this period includes the work of the traditionalist Shaykh Ṣadūq, who began to prune away the elements of the corpus of *ḥadīths* considered to be too irrational and 'exaggerated' (*ghālī*).⁵
- C. The preservation of Imāmism under Sunnī hegemony from the fifth/eleventh century to the seventh/thirteenth, during which time many large-scale works on the lives of the fourteen Impeccable Ones were composed.⁶
- D. Finally, the pre-Modern and Modern periods, marked by the revivification of Imāmī Shī'ism after the Mongol invasion, and then by its institutionalisation as a state religion in Safavid Iran (907–1134/1501–1722); this period saw the emergence of Shī'ī gnosis (*'irfān* or *ḥikma*), which drew on the philosophy of Ibn Sīnā (d. 428/1037) and the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabī (d. 638/1240),⁷ as well as the rebirth of Imāmī studies of *ḥadīth*.⁸

2 On the meaning and place of *walāya* in Shī'ism, see Amir-Moezzi, *La preuve de Dieu*, 45–52.

3 For more on this evolution of Imami sources, see Amir-Moezzi, *Guide divin*, Introduction, 13–71 [*Divine Guide*, 5–28].

4 From this period we can date most of the book attributed to Sulaym b. Qays al-Kūfī (d. ca 76/695–6), *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays*; see also al-Ṣaffār al-Qummī (d. 290/902–3), *Baṣā'ir al-darajāt*; 'Alī b. Ibrāhīm al-Qummī (d. ca 307/919), *Tafsīr al-Qummī*; and Muḥammad b. Ya'qūb al-Kulaynī (d. 328/940), *Uṣūl al-Kāfī*. For more on these texts, see Amir-Moezzi, *Le Coran silencieux et le Coran parlant*.

5 Al-Shaykh al-Ṣadūq (Ibn Bābūya) (d. 381/991), *al-Amālī*, *ʿIlal al-sharāʿiʿ*, and *Kamāl al-dīn wa tamām al-niʿma*. From the same period, al-Shaykh al-Mufīd (d. 413/1022), *al-Irshād*.

6 Al-Shaykh al-Ṭabrisī (d. 548/1154), *ʿIlām al-warāʾ bi-aʿlām al-hudā*; Muḥammad b. 'Alī Ibn Shahrāshūb (d. 588/1192), *Manāqib Āl Abī Ṭālib*; 'Alī b. 'Īsā al-Irbilī (d. 693/1293), *Kashf al-ghumma fi ma'rifat al-a'imma*.

7 Sayyid Haydar Āmulī (d. after 782/1381), *Jāmiʿ al-asrār wa manbaʿ al-anwār*; *Naṣṣ al-nuṣūṣ fī sharḥ al-fuṣūṣ*; *Tafsīr al-Muḥīṭ al-aẓam*. Also al-Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī (d. after 813/1410–1), *Mashāriq anwār al-yaqīn fī ḥaqāʾiq asrār amīr al-mu'minūn*; Ibn Abī Jūmhūr al-Aḥsāʾī (d. ca 906/1501), *Mujlī mir'āt al-munjī fī l-kalām wa l-ḥikmatayn wa l-taṣawwuf*; Muḥsin al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī (d. 1090/1679), *Kalimāt maknūna*.

8 Among many others, Ibn Abī Jūmhūr al-Aḥsāʾī (d. ca 906/1501), *ʿAwālī l-laʾālī fī l-aḥādīth al-dīniyya*; Muḥammad Bāqir al-Majlisī, *Biḥār al-anwār*.

According to an axial vision of Imāmī Shī'ism, every sacred thing resembles God himself in possessing both an apparent, exoteric aspect (*ẓāhir*) and one that is hidden and esoteric (*bāṭin*).⁹ The biological and physical relationship of the Prophet with his family, especially 'Alī, thus becomes the reverse side of an ontological and metaphysical relationship, and has theological implications. The biographies of the Prophet, his family, friends and descendants are swallowed up in a historiosophy, i.e. a teleological philosophy of history, that embraces the entire temporal arc of Creation from pre-eternity to the final Resurrection.¹⁰ The oldest texts (A and B, above) adopt both perspectives equally. During the medieval period (C), the historical figure of the Prophet came to the fore, doubtless as a result of the dialectical conflict with Sunnism. During the latter period (D) the Prophet's metaphysical dimension developed again, thanks to the influence of external mystical and philosophical ideas, as well as to a return to scriptural sources. Although these two contrasting and complementary perspectives are inseparable within the Shī'ī consciousness, the following pages, for greater clarity, will present first the Imāmī account of the Prophet's history followed by the metaphysical concepts that underlie it.

1 The History of the Prophet in Shī'ī Traditions

In the same way as there is no established Shī'ī Qur'ān other than the shared Vulgate, there is no specifically Shī'ī version of the Prophet's *sīra*. The main episodes recounted in Ibn Hishām's *sīra* are recognised by Shī'īs, too, but as with the Qur'ān they have their own particular interpretations of these. The oldest texts (A) contain disconnected snatches of information on the circumstances of the Revelation, the birth, and the death of the Prophet. In later monographs on the fourteen Impeccable Ones (C), the life of the Prophet is recounted in its entirety, but this takes up only the first part of a series of biographies, relatively modest in extent in comparison with that devoted to the Imām 'Alī. In all of this historiography, the centre of gravity of the Prophet's life is his close relationships with his Holy Family, especially with 'Alī.

9 Amir-Moezzi and Jambet, *Qu'est-ce que le shī'isme?*, 27–40.

10 For more on the pre-existence and super-existence of the Imām, see Amir-Moezzi, *Guide divin*, Parts II and IV [*Divine Guide*, id.]; and *La religion discrète*, 109–133 [Eng. Transl. *The Spirituality of Shi 'i Islam*, 133–168].

1.1 *The Prophet's Birth and Childhood*

As in the Sunnī *sīra*, the Shī'ī account of the Prophet's life associates numerous miracles with the historical moment of his birth.¹¹ However, here the miracles are already prefiguring the equally miraculous birth of 'Alī. According to one tradition, when Muḥammad's mother Amīna spoke of the apparition of the angel Gabriel and of the light emanating from the new-born baby's head, Abū Ṭālib told his own wife, Fāṭima bint Asad, that in thirty years' time she would give birth to a son who would resemble this infant, except that he would not be a prophet.¹²

According to the commonly agreed version, Muḥammad was six years old when he became an orphan and was adopted by his uncle Abū Ṭālib.¹³ What little information there is on his childhood imbues his grandfather 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, and his adoptive father Abū Ṭālib – who, according to the Shī'ī sources, eventually converted to Islam – with a sacred character.¹⁴

1.2 *Muḥammad and 'Alī*

Muḥammad was thirty years old when 'Alī was born. Shī'ī traditions have it that the Prophet was the first living being that the newborn infant saw when he opened his eyes;¹⁵ on one occasion when Fāṭima bint Asad was ill, he allowed 'Alī to feed by sucking his (Muḥammad's) tongue.¹⁶ Here we encounter an initiatic practice called *taḥnīk*, "the giving of saliva", that the Prophet is said to have used, as we shall see, with all of the *ahl al-bayt* during his lifetime.¹⁷ When 'Alī was six years old, a few years before the Prophet began his mission (*risāla*), Muḥammad adopted him.¹⁸ For Shī'īs, 'Alī's proximity (*qarāba*) to the Prophet is an important argument in support of 'Alī's right to succeed Muḥammad; but above all, as far as we are concerned, this proximity is an essential characteristic of the Shī'ī figure of the Prophet. This extremely intimate relationship had an esoteric, initiatic dimension, as expressed in this declaration attributed to 'Alī:

11 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, II, 175–176.

12 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 271, § 1; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, I, 116.

13 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 82–83.

14 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 268, §§ 28–29; Shaykh Ṣadūq, *Kamāl*, 172, § 30. Sunnī tradition has it that Abū Ṭālib died an infidel.

15 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 82.

16 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 55–56.

17 Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 41–43 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 37–39].

18 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 83–84, underlines the parallels between the two childhoods.

You know how close I was to God's Messenger. He welcomed me into his bosom when I was a child. He held me against his heart, wrapped me in his bed, had me touch his body and breathe his smell, chewed things up and had me swallow them [...] I followed him as a child follows its mother. Each day he showed me a sign among his habits, and commanded me to imitate him.¹⁹

'Alī was ten years old when Muḥammad received the first revelations. He is said to have been the first male person to convert to Islam; moreover, to have been the first receiver of the revelation. According to numerous traditions, 'Alī had privileged access to the Prophet, visiting him for an hour each night, as no one else was allowed to do.²⁰ As one account attributed to him has it:

When I asked the Prophet questions he replied, and when my questions dried up, then he started [speaking]. Not one verse [of the Qur'ān] came down to the Prophet, by day or by night [...], that he didn't give it to me to recite, that he didn't dictate to me so that I could write it out in my own hand. He taught me its spiritual interpretation as well as its literal explanations (*ta'wīlahā wa-tafsīrahā*).²¹

The exclusive closeness of the Prophet to 'Alī is again demonstrated in an episode that was also known to Sunnī historians: the 'pact of chosen brotherhood' (*mu'ākhāt*), probably accompanied by the exchange of blood, practised by the Prophet among the Muslims of Mecca before the Hijra, or between *Muhājirun* and Anṣār upon his arrival in Medina.²² In both versions, Muḥammad chose 'Alī as his brother, declaring: 'You are my brother in this life and the Hereafter.'²³

1.3 *The Prophet and His Direct Descendants*

Imāmī sources report that the Prophet had two sons with Khadīja, who apparently both died in infancy, and also four daughters. Shī'ī biographers only mention in passing Muḥammad's son with Maria the Copt, Ibrāhīm, whose premature death is emphasised in the Sunnī sources;²⁴ they concentrate all of their attention on Fāṭima, although this does not prevent her reported date of birth from varying wildly. According to one frequently upheld tradition, she

19 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 84.

20 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 206–207.

21 Qummī, *Baṣā'ir*, I, 710, § 740.

22 Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 39–40 [*Spirituality of Shi'ī Islam*, 32–33].

23 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 100.

24 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, II, 133; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 139–141.

was conceived after the Prophet's 'celestial ascent' (*mi'rāj*), commonly held to have occurred two years before the Hijra, an account difficult to reconcile with the fact that Fāṭima bore two of the Prophet's grandsons while he was still alive. Nevertheless, this tradition, which is attributed to the sixth Imām, is important for Imāmī representations of the Prophet. It recounts that the Prophet was in the habit of kissing Fāṭima on the mouth, and that when 'Ā'isha reproached him for doing this, the Prophet said:

When I was elevated into the heavens, Gabriel admitted me to paradise, led me to the tree Ṭubā, and gave me one of its fruits, an apple. I ate it, and it was transformed into a drop of semen in my loins. When I descended to the earth again, I coupled with Khadija, and she fell pregnant with Fāṭima. Each time I desire to rediscover paradise, I kiss her and put my tongue in her mouth; there I taste the scent of paradise and of the tree Ṭubā.²⁵

The Prophet makes 'Alī his son-in-law (*khatan*) when he gives his daughter Fāṭima to him in marriage.²⁶ In numerous *ḥadīths*, he declares that 'Alī and Fāṭima are the two beings he loves the most.²⁷ Consequently, the births of his two grandsons are major events in the Prophet's life. According to ancient traditions, it is he who, at God's command, baptises them al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, translations of the names of Aaron's sons, Shabar and Shubayr; the angel Gabriel is said to have told the Prophet: "Alī is to you what Aaron was to Moses."²⁸ The Prophet always calls al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn his sons, perhaps because they are his only surviving male descendants.²⁹ Thus, in a paradoxical anthropological situation, the Prophet considers 'Alī to be by turns his son, his brother, and the second father of his sons.

The Prophet's relationship with his two (grand-)sons is inscribed within the hagiographies of the second and third Imāms.³⁰ His love for them is at once the proof that for him they were his spiritual and temporal heirs, and the vector transmitting that inheritance. Like the love he felt for 'Alī and Fāṭima, his emotion for his grandsons is inseparable from his person and his prophetic mission, which is why every Muslim is under an obligation towards them. The

25 Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 150; Majlisī, *Bihār*, VIII, 120, § 10; XVIII, 364, § 68 and XLVIII, 6, § 6; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, VIII, 62.

26 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 57.

27 Irbilī, *Kashf*, I, 95; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, VIII, 51–52; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 149–150.

28 Ṭabrisī, *I'lām al-warā*, 210–211 and 218.

29 See, for example, Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 218–219; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 49, 56; Irbilī, *Kashf*, I, 525.

30 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, IX, 43–58.

Prophet is said to have declared, indicating the two boys, 'Who loves me loves these two.'³¹ In Imāmī doctrine, love (*tawallī*) for the *ahl al-bayt* is a fundamental pillar of faith, with the Prophet himself providing the first example of this love.³²

These relationships were as physical and initiatic as those that preceded them. One day, when the Muslims were thirsty, Fāṭima brought al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn to see the Prophet. He offered his tongue first to al-Ḥasan and then to al-Ḥusayn, who sucked it until their thirst was quenched.³³ It is even said about al-Ḥusayn, through whose descendants the Imamate was to be transmitted, that "he was not breast-fed by Fāṭima, nor by any woman. The Prophet would go to him and put his thumb in his mouth; by sucking it al-Ḥusayn could get enough nourishment for two or three days. Thus al-Ḥusayn was formed from the flesh and blood of the Prophet."³⁴

The fusional and sacred relationships of the Prophet with his close family are synthesised in a famous tradition: one day, in Umm Salama's house, Muḥammad called 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, put a cloak over them, and himself joined them underneath it. Then he said: "O God! These are the people of my house [...] keep them away from what is unclean, and purify them completely!" And then verse 33:33 was revealed: "Remain in your houses; and display not your finery, as did the pagans of old. And perform the prayer, and pay the alms, and obey God and his Messenger. People of the House (*ahl al-bayt*), God only desires to put away from you abomination, and to cleanse you."³⁵ Consequently, these five members of the "Holy Family" (*ahl al-bayt*), including Muḥammad, would be designated "The People of the Cloak" (*ahl al-kisā'*).³⁶

1.4 Muḥammad's Premonitions

Another of Muḥammad's essential personality traits is his prescience and his tragic sense of what was to come throughout history. In spite of their fatalism, Shī'ī historians and theologians count his predictions among his "miracles of speech" (*mu'jizāt aqwālihi*).³⁷ For example, in a tradition said to be passed down from the fourth Imam, while 'Alī and his family were visiting him, the

31 *Ibid.* IX, 46.

32 Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 198–203 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 262–270].

33 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, IX, 53.

34 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 278–279.

35 Qummī, *Tafsīr*, III, 829–830; Majlisī, *Bihār*, XXXV, 206–207, § 1; al-Shaykh al-Ṭabrisī, *Majma' al-bayān fī tafsīr al-Qur'ān*, IV, 356–357.

36 See Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 44–45 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 40–42].

37 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, I, 327–328; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 33–34.

Prophet broke down and wept, saying to the little al-Ḥusayn, “My son! For you I have rejoiced with an unmatched joy. But Gabriel has come to tell me that you will be killed, and suffer many cruel twists of destiny”.³⁸ So the Prophet was particularly haunted by his prediction of the murder of al-Ḥusayn in Karbalā’ (which occurred in 61/680). A tradition attributed to the sixth Imām holds that the angel Gabriel announced both al-Ḥusayn’s birth and his violent end (at the hands of his own community, after the Prophet’s death) to Muḥammad at the same time. At first the Prophet was devastated, but when the angel told him that God had established that the Imamate, and thus the divine Alliance (*walāya*) and the Prophetic heritage (*waṣīyya*), would be passed down through the line of this child’s descendants, he was reassured, then communicated the angel’s message to Fāṭima, who also accepted it.³⁹ According to another tradition, it was after al-Ḥusayn’s birth that the Prophet had a dream-vision of his murder, waking up terrified and holding a handful of bloody soil from Karbalā’.⁴⁰

The Prophet’s life was haunted by other premonitions, such as the one in which he saw monkeys climbing on his mosque’s *minbar*, which announced the ill-omened reign of the Umayyads; after this vision, the Prophet was never again heard to laugh.⁴¹ His prophetic prescience about his family’s destiny and that of Islam as a whole must have been painfully affecting for a man as sensitive as Muḥammad. This confirms what the *ḥadīth* says: “No prophet has suffered as I have suffered”.⁴²

1.5 *The Prophet’s Battles*

The Prophet’s belligerent actions and gestures interest Shīʿī historians insofar as, on the one hand, they attest to ‘Alī’s bravery, and on the other, they foreshadow the final battle of the Mahdī; the battle of Badr (2/624) is one example of both these concerns. Sources report that during the battle of Uḥud (3/625) Muḥammad fell to the ground. The Muslims were in disarray when, all alone, ‘Alī rebuffed the infidels with his sabre. On this occasion the angel Gabriel is said to have uttered the phrase, now liturgical for Shīʿīs, “There is no brave youth (*fatā*) but ‘Alī and there is no sword but *Dhū al-Faḳār*”.⁴³ At the battle of Khaybar in 7/628, the Muslims were defeated twice, first when led by Abū Bakr and then by ‘Umar. The Prophet then chose ‘Alī as his standard-bearer, curing his conjunctivitis by spitting in his eyes, and the Muslims won the battle.

38 Ṭabrisī, *Iʿlām*, 34; Shaykh Ṣadūq, *Āmālī*, 105.

39 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 278, §§ 3–4.

40 Ṭabrisī, *Iʿlām*, 32. See below for the epilogue of this tradition.

41 Ṭabrisī, *Majmaʿ*, III, 424, exegesis of v. 17, 60.

42 Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, III, 43; Kāshānī, *Kalīmāt*, 195.

43 Ṭabrisī, *Iʿlām*, 81–82; Shaykh Muḥid, *Irshād*, 72–79, §§ 3–4 and 6–8.

This episode demonstrates the Prophet's magic powers, but also that he could appear indecisive.⁴⁴

In Shī'ī historiography, the Prophet is not presented as an invincible being. His vulnerability is even theorised as a way of justifying 'Alī's quietism when faced by the first three Caliphs. Temporary powerlessness (*ujz*) is the destiny both of prophets and of Imāms, and it does not detract from their impeccability (*iṣma*); the Qur'ān says that all the prophets were powerless at times, and Muḥammad too was constrained by fear (*khawf*) when he sought refuge in the cave of Thawr (v. 9, 40).⁴⁵

According to these sources, the Prophet's biggest triumph after Badr was not military; it was the trial by ordeal (*mubāhala*) to which the Prophet invited the Christians of Najrān in 10/631, as evoked in Qur'ān 3:61: "And whoso disputes with thee concerning him, after the knowledge that has come to thee, say: 'Come now, let us call our sons and your sons, our wives and your wives, our selves and your selves, then let us humbly pray and so lay God's curse upon the ones who lie.'" According to Shī'ī *Tafsīrs*, "our selves" refers to Muḥammad and 'Alī, "our wives" to Fāṭima, "princess of this world and of the final life", and "our sons" to al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn – together making up "the Five of the Cloak".⁴⁶

Finally, the meaning of the Prophetic wars becomes at once exalted and relativised in a tradition reported by 'Alī at the Battle of Ṣiffīn (37/657), according to which the Prophet told him long before, "You will fight for the spiritual interpretation (*ta'wīl*) [of the Qur'ān] as I fought for its literal revelation (*tanzīl*)."⁴⁷ From the Shī'ī perspective, the wars of the Prophet and those of the Imām are two halves of a single history, and both the apparent success of the earlier battles and the evident failure of the later ones should be looked at in a nuanced way. History's tragedy will finally be understood only with the coming of the twelfth Imām, who will bear Muḥammad's name and features, and fulfil his mission.

1.6 *The Prophet's End*

The end of the Prophet's life is taught in the most ancient Shī'ī sources; it is at the heart of an account that is essential to the definition of Imāmī Shī'ism. On his return from his farewell pilgrimage (10/631), in a place called Ghadīr Khumm, the angel Gabriel ordered the Prophet to designate 'Alī as the leader

44 Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 99.

45 Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī, *Raf' al-munāza'a wa l-khilāf*, 79–80.

46 Qummī, *Tafsīr*, 1, 156; Shaykh Mufīd, *Irshād*, 151–154; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 158; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, IX, 12–20.

47 See Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 238 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 317–318].

(*imām*) who would succeed him. As the Prophet hesitated, fearing that the community would oppose this, Gabriel spoke: "O Messenger, deliver that which has been sent down to you from your Lord; for if you do not, thou wilt not have delivered His Message." (5:67). So Muḥammad had 'Alī come to him, and convened a meeting of the Muslims, declaring to them: "I leave you two precious objects (*thaqalayn*); if you take good care of them, you will not go astray. These objects are the Book of God and my descendants, the people of my family (*'itrati ahl bayti*)."⁴⁸ He added, "Let he who considers me to be his master, take 'Alī here to be his Master (*man kuntu mawlāhu fa-hādihā 'Alī mawlāhu*). O my God, love the one who loves him [*'Alī*] and be the enemy of whosoever is hostile towards him".⁴⁹ Then verse 5:3 was revealed to Muḥammad: "Today I have perfected your religion for you, and I have completed My blessing upon you, and I have approved Islam for your religion". These declarations and verses are considered by Shī'īs to be incontestable scriptural proofs of the truth.

With regard to Muḥammad's mysterious and fatal illness, the poisoning thesis is generally retained among Shī'īs,⁵⁰ since the Prophet had predicted it, as well as foreseeing the martyrdom of his four family members.⁵¹ Some sources relay the information, known also to Sunnīs, that a Jewish woman was supposed to have served a poisoned meal to the Prophet after the conquest of Khaybar; the shoulder of mutton (*shāt*) spoke to warn Muḥammad that it was poisoned, but the few mouthfuls he had already eaten were enough to kill him. In spite of this fatal result, the episode is counted among the miracles attesting to Muḥammad's status as a prophet.⁵² According to other sources, the poisoners were none other than two of the Prophet's wives, Ḥafsa and 'Ā'isha, with their respective fathers 'Umar and Abū Bakr, after the Prophet had imprudently confided the details of a premonitory dream to Ḥafsa.⁵³ Although this very serious accusation disappears from later sources, the betrayal of Muḥammad by his closest companions and wives is a central theme in the Shī'ī representation of the Prophet. This opposition among those who surround him, between

48 On this tradition, see Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis in Early Imāmī Shīism*, 93–98.

49 See Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 202–203 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 269–270].

50 See Kohlberg, "Shī'ī Views of the Death of the Prophet Muhammad", 77–86; Ouardi, *Les derniers jours de Muhammad*, 164–178.

51 Qummī, *Baṣā'ir*, II, 804, § 5; *Kitāb Sulaym*, 233; Majlisī, *Bihār*, XXII, 516, § 21 and XXXIII, 266–267, § 534.

52 Qummī, *Baṣā'ir*, II, 804–805, §§ 5–6; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 25–26; Majlisī, *Bihār*, XXII, 516, § 22. For more on this subject, see Kohlberg, "Shī'ī Views" 79.

53 Qummī, *Tafsīr*, III, 1082–1083; Majlisī, *Bihār*, XXII, 239, § 4 and 516, § 23; *Ibid.* XXVIII, 20–21, § 28; Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī (third/fourth/ninth/tenth centuries), *Revelation and Falsification: the Kitāb al-qirā'āt of Aḥmad b. Muḥammad al-Sayyārī*, 36 and 103, n. 128; Kohlberg, "Shī'ī Views" 82–83; Ouardi, *Derniers jours*, 329, n. 51.

the impeccable people of his family and his felonious companions, is evidence of an outlook that is fundamentally dualistic.

It is to 'Alī that the Prophet confided his premonition of approaching death, telling him that he alone should wash the cadaver, since any other man who saw the Prophet's nudity would be blinded by it.⁵⁴ Weakened, he tried in vain to distance Abū Bakr and 'Umar from himself in his final days.⁵⁵ Then, according to a well-known tradition, he called for pen and paper, saying to the Muslims, "I will write something for you, after which you will never go astray". However, 'Umar did not allow this to happen.⁵⁶ Shī'īs believe that at this time the Prophet wanted to designate 'Alī as his rightful successor, in a final attempt to prevent the ineluctable fate of his family and his community.⁵⁷

'Alī is said to have been with the Prophet during the last moments of the latter's life; and according to the sources, these final moments of intimacy present a gnoseological aspect, as well as a dimension of reported sensory experience. Thus, "the Prophet never stopped embracing 'Alī until the moment when his soul departed"; "he was on 'Alī's knees when his soul departed"; "his soul [...] poured out into the palm of 'Alī's hand, and 'Alī put it back in [the Prophet's] mouth".⁵⁸ When he was asked what the Prophet had said to him, 'Alī replied, "He taught me the keys to a thousand doors into Knowledge [or to a thousand chapters of Knowledge], each of which leads to another thousand doors [or chapters]".⁵⁹ In one tradition, Fāṭima was present, and the Prophet in his death throes consoled her by telling her she would soon become the first of his family's people to join him.⁶⁰

The events that followed the Prophet's death no longer belong to the story of his life, but put a tragic seal upon it nevertheless. Before he was even buried his last wishes had been betrayed by his former companions, during the Saqīfa event.⁶¹ Three months later Fāṭima died as a result of an attack ordered by Abū Bakr and 'Umar.⁶² And, according to the epilogue of a source cited

54 Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 134.

55 Shaykh Mufīd, *Irshād*, 169–170; Ouadi, *Derniers jours*, 70–73.

56 *Kitāb Sulaym*, 210; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 135; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, II, 344–345. See Ouadi, *Derniers jours*, 130–146.

57 On this tradition, see Miskinzoda, "The story of 'Pen and Paper' and its interpretation in Muslim literary and historical tradition" 231–249.

58 Shaykh Mufīd, *Irshād*, 172–173; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 136; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, II, 347–348.

59 *Kitāb Sulaym*, 213; Qummī, *Baṣā'ir*, II, 146, § 2, 149, h. 8 and 153, h. 13; Shaykh Mufīd, *Irshād*, 33; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 136; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, v, 107.

60 Shaykh Mufīd, *Irshād*, 173; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 136.

61 This is the central topic of the *Kitāb Sulaym b. Qays*, possibly the earliest book of the Shī'īs. See Amir-Moezzi, *Coran silencieux*, part I, 27–61.

62 *Kitāb Sulaym*, 78–93.

above, the murder of al-Ḥusayn brought about the reappearance, or even the resurrection, of the Prophet: the night after the Karbalā' massacre, the Prophet, stricken, appeared to Umm Salama in a dream, announcing that his son al-Ḥusayn had been killed with the people of his family, and that he [the Prophet] had just buried them with his own hands.⁶³

2 The Metaphysical Prophet, from Early Shī'ī Tradition to Pre-modern Thought

Let us now examine the metaphysical ideas that underlie these historical accounts and extend them into a metahistorical "time". These ideas were already present in the oldest sources (A and B) and were developed in ways that were both more rational and more mystical by later thinkers (C and D), who imported philosophical and mystical ideas from outside the early Shī'ī tradition.

2.1 *The Pre-eternity of Muḥammad and of 'Alī*

According to early Imāmī doctrine, the historic birth of the Prophet on earth, and that of Imam 'Alī, were signs of an event that occurred in pre-eternity, before the creation of the world. Numerous traditions attributed to the Prophet report that the first thing God created was a column of light, which He placed in the loins of Adam; this divine Light was transmitted, in its purest state, to 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib, at which point God divided it in two, sending one half to the loins of 'Abd Allāh and the other to those of Abū Ṭālib. From the first was born the Prophet and from the second 'Alī; these two halves were re-united in al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn, the children of 'Alī and Fāṭima.⁶⁴ In other versions the singular original Light contained 'the Five of the Cloak' or all fourteen of the Impeccable Ones.⁶⁵ All the variants of this tradition express the idea that the first Entity to be created was of a spiritual nature, and contained within it the essences of Muḥammad and 'Alī. It is notable that this common origin is always affirmed by the Prophet himself, as in the synthetic tradition: "Alī is part of me and I am part of him" (*'Alī minnī wa-anā minhu*).⁶⁶ Muḥammad and 'Alī are therefore pre-eternal twins, in spite of the thirty years that separate their historic, earthly, births.

63 Tūsī, *Āmālī*, 278, § 635; Ibn Shahrāshūb, *Manāqib*, x, 37.

64 Shaykh Ṣadūq, *Ilal*, 1, *bāb* 159, ḥ. 11, 562.

65 Irbilī, *Kashf*, 1, 458; Kāshānī, *Kalimāt*, 192. For more on these traditions, see Amir-Moezzi, *Guide divin*, 101–110 [*Divine Guide*, 40–43].

66 Shaykh Mufīd, *Irshād*, 77, § 4; Ṭabrisī, *I'lām*, 158.

This ancient Shī'ī concept may be at the roots of the mystical Sunnī concept of the 'Light of Muḥammad' in Sahl al-Tustarī (d. 273/886), then of the 'Muḥammadan Reality' (*al-ḥaqīqa al-muḥammadīyya*) in the works of Ibn 'Arabī.⁶⁷ In a reciprocity of histories, this doctrine was then taken up and adapted by Imāmī thinkers such as Sayyid Haydar al-Āmulī (d. after 782/1385–6), Ḥāfiẓ Rajab al-Bursī (d. after 813/1410–1), and numerous later philosophers, who integrated the essence of 'Alī into the Muḥammadan Reality.

Thus the words of the Prophet, "What God created first was my Light",⁶⁸ are also associated with "What God created first was the Intellect (*al-'aql*)",⁶⁹ and in addition with "Alī and I come from one and the same Light." When God established the pre-existential pact with the prophets (*mīthāq al-nabīyīn*) and asked "Am I not your Lord?", Muḥammad was the first to reply "Yes, I testify!" (see Qur'ān, v. 7:172).⁷⁰ This is why he says "I am the first of the prophets to have been created, and the last to have been sent [to men]."⁷¹ In conceptual terms, "God's Messenger (Muḥammad) preceded all the other prophets in true reality (*min ḥayth al-ḥaqīqa*), and he succeeded them in formal existence (*min ḥayth al-ṣūra*)."⁷² But the Prophet is also reported to have said: "Alī was commissioned with all of the prophets secretly, and with me openly."⁷³ Moreover, the well-known *ḥadīth* of Muḥammad, "I was a Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay" is echoed in the *ḥadīth* of 'Alī, "I was an Ally [of God] (*walī*) [variant: heir (*waṣī*)] when Adam was still between water and clay."⁷⁴

From the metaphysical viewpoint, 'Alī necessarily accompanies Muḥammad, as divine Alliance or Friendship (*walāya*) necessarily accompanies Prophecy (*nubuwwa*). By virtue of this consubstantiality, the successive Imams are also considered to be emanations of the Prophet. Numerous traditions have the Prophet announcing that twelve Imāms will descend from him, leading to the eschatological Saviour (*al-qā'im*) who will bear his name: Muḥammad b. al-Ḥasan al-Mahdī.⁷⁵

67 Lory, *La dignité de l'homme face aux anges, aux animaux et aux djinns*, 218.

68 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 99; Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 60, 62, 121, 214.

69 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 99.

70 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 335, § 1.

71 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 122; Kāshānī, *Kalimāt*, 86.

72 Āmulī, *Muḥīṭ*, III, 248–249.

73 Āmulī, *Jāmi'*, 386, 401.

74 Āmulī, *Jāmi'*, 401, 460; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 121, 124; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 1341–1342.

75 Shaykh Ṣadūq, *Kamāl*, 248–249; Kāshānī, *Kalimāt*, 192.

2.2 *The Seal of Prophecy and the Seal of the Alliance*

Ancient Imāmī tradition affirms that Muḥammad is the last of the five messengers ‘with firm resolution’ (*ulū l-‘azm*), after Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus; he is the Seal of prophets as the Qur’ān is the Seal of holy books.⁷⁶ The parallel statement that ‘Alī is ‘the Seal of the allies (or friends) of God’ (*khātam al-awliyā*)’ appears later. Ḥaydar al-Āmulī borrows from Ibn ‘Arabī the idea of a distinction between an absolute and universal Prophecy (*nubuwwa muṭlaqa*) and a determined one (*muqayyada*); and between an absolute divine Friendship or Alliance (*walāya muṭlaqa*) and a determined one. According to a formula borrowed from Neo-Platonism, the absolute Prophet (Muḥammad) is to the determined prophets as the primary Intellect is to the partial intellects of men in the world; in the same way, the absolute Ally [of God], i.e. ‘Alī, is to the determined allies as the universal Soul is to the partial souls of men in the world.⁷⁷ Correcting Ibn ‘Arabī, al-Āmulī identifies the absolute Seal of the divine Alliance (*walāya*) as ‘Alī and the determined Seal of the divine Alliance as the Mahdī, using two of the above-mentioned traditions to justify the symmetry between the absolute seals of the Prophecy and the Alliance: “I [Muḥammad] was a Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay,’ and, ‘I [‘Alī] was an Ally [of God] when Adam was still between water and clay.”⁷⁸

In line with this doctrine, Prophecy is the exoteric aspect of divine Alliance (*walāya*), and divine Alliance the esoteric aspect of Prophecy. Prophecy is a mediation between God and His followers; Alliance is an unmediated relationship with God, through which the Prophet receives his prophecies and the Law. Every prophet is therefore first – not chronologically but ontologically – an ally of God, but every ally is not necessarily a prophet, and Muḥammad cannot take on the role of both Seals at once:

Thus did Muḥammad receive his prophecy from his absolute Alliance. But as the Seal of the prophets, the manifestation of absolute Prophecy, it was not possible for him to manifest his Alliance in its fullest measure at every time [...]. He had therefore to designate a deputy for this Alliance, and for his own succession (*khilāfa*), in the person of the man who was closest to him in form and in spirit, and that was [...] ‘Alī.⁷⁹

⁷⁶ Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 98–100, §§ 3–4.

⁷⁷ Āmulī, *Naṣṣ*, III, 1298.

⁷⁸ Āmulī, *Naṣṣ*, I, 226–395 et III, 1942–1943.

⁷⁹ Āmulī, *Naṣṣ*, III, 1264–1268.

This concept of the double Seal underwent major elaborations during the Safavid period while being linked to ancient philosophical ideas. In the following passage, by Mīr Dāmād (d. 1041/1630), we can observe that the attempt to establish a hierarchy between the Prophet and the Imām always leads back to their fundamental identities:

The primal Intellect is the light of the soul of the Seal of Prophecy [...] [The Prophet] says, in a *ḥadīth*: 'That which God created first was the Intellect', and in another '... my Light'. The proofs of the necessity of the Prophet's mission [...], by virtue of Heavenly providence, bring about an analogous judgement on the necessity for the Prophet to have an heir [...] who is his lieutenant (*khalīfa*) and like his soul, so that the divine Emanation (*al-fayḍ al-ilāhī*) might be propagated through him [...], in the same way as the Soul is the lieutenant of the Intellect in the conjunction of the divine Emanation with the worlds of Existence. [...] The Prophet sent to men is like the heart of the world's body; his heir and lieutenant ['Alī] is like its brain and spinal cord [...] The primal Intellect is therefore the Light of the Seal of the prophets, and the second Intellect is the light of the Seal of the heirs. Or, to put it better, the first Intellect is the Light of both of them together, for they are as a single soul. [The Prophet] says: "Alī and I come from one and a single light."⁸⁰

The Seal of the prophets is also conceptualised as the end, or the goal (Greek *telos*), of creation. For Ibn Abī Jumhūr, in Avicennian terms, the Prophet is the final cause of the existence of the created beings designated by the *ḥadīth qudsī*: 'Without you, I would not have created the [celestial] spheres'; he is the goal of eternal Providence (*al-'ināya al-azaliyya*), which pushes everything to realise its own perfection and contribute to the perfection of the whole.⁸¹ For al-Fayḍ al-Kāshānī, in Akbarian terms, the Muḥammadian Reality or Aḥmadian Light is the origin and the end of all realities. The perfecting of all the sons of Adam depends on his perfection and tends towards it, as indicated in the *ḥadīth*, "I am the Prince of the children of Adam."⁸² The Prophet is the goal of all of

80 Muḥammad b. 'Umar al-Kashshī, *Rijāl al-Kashshī – Ikhtiyār ma'rifat al-rijāl, ma'a ta'līqāt Mīr Dāmād*, 1, 232. The parallel between man as microcosm (*'ālam ṣaghūr*) and the world as Great Man or *macranthropos* (*insān kabūr*) is an idea with Pythagorean and neo-Platonic origins, diffused into Islam by the *Ikhwan al-ṣafā'* and then taken up by Ibn 'Arabī.

81 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 177–178.

82 In one of the most ancient versions: 'I am the Prince of the children of Adam, 'Alī is the Prince of the Arabs, Fāṭima is the Princess of women, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn are the

God's acts, according to the same *ḥadīth qudsī*: "Without you, I would not have created the spheres."⁸³

However, if Muḥammad is the goal of creation and his prophecy is the final aim of all prophecy, Muḥammad and his prophecy are not a goal or final aim for themselves. According to several ancient Imami traditions, the ultimate aim of Muḥammad's own mission is none other than 'Alī himself: "The angel Gabriel came to me and said: 'Muḥammad! Your Lord had designated for you the love of 'Alī and the proclamation of his Alliance [with God].'"⁸⁴ Al-Bursī takes up this version as follows:

All prophets sent to men called to Him [God], announced the good news of the coming of Muḥammad [...], and were attached to the Alliance of 'Alī [...]. God sent His Prophet Muḥammad, thus sealing the existing (*al-mawjūd*), as He had also, through him, initiated being (*al-wujūd*) [...]. God ordered him to ask his community to be guided by the love of 'Alī, for this love is 'the straight path' (*al-ṣirāṭ al-mustaqīm*).⁸⁵

In the ancient eschatological traditions on which later thinkers reflected, 'Alī and the Imāms play the principal roles, and the Prophet almost disappears from the image of the End of Times, of which he was the annunciator.⁸⁶ This corroborates M. A. Amir-Moezzi's recent hypothesis according to which, at least for early Shī'īs, Muḥammad came to announce the End of Times and the coming of 'Alī as the Messiah; however, the death of 'Alī and the postponement of the End of Times led them finally to assign the messianic function to the twelfth Imām, or Mahdī.⁸⁷

2.3 *The Knowledge of the Prophet and of the Imām*

In al-Kulaynī's *Book of Proof*, the Prophet Muḥammad is designated as the "Proof of God [for His creatures]" (*ḥujjat allāh*).⁸⁸ However, this function, which is ontological as much as it is pedagogical, is not exclusive to the Prophet,

Princes of the young people of paradise.' *Kitāb Sulaym*, 116, 209; Shaykh Ṭūsī, *Amālī*, 528, § 1240.

83 Kāshānī, *Kalimāt*, 190–191.

84 Qummī, *Baṣā'ir*, I, 297–298; Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 148 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 188]; Amir-Moezzi, *Preuve de Dieu*, 218–219.

85 Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 215–216.

86 For more on this, see Terrier, "Anthropogonie et eschatologie dans l'œuvre de Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī: l'ésotérisme shī'ite entre tradition et syncrétisme" 743–780.

87 Amir-Moezzi, "Muḥammad le Paraclet et 'Alī le Messie. Nouvelles remarques sur les origines de l'islam et de l'imamologie shī'ite" 19–54 [now in Id., *Alī, le secret bien gardé*, ch. 2].

88 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 95, § 2.

because the Imāms, as theophanic men, are also “proofs of God”, since the world is never without a Proof.⁸⁹ It is true that a distinction is made between the Prophet Messenger (*nabī rasūl*) and the one of whom the angels speak (*muḥaddath*), the Imām. The Messenger sees the angel in dreams and with his own eyes, and he hears the angel's voice; the Imām hears the angel's words but sees it neither with his own eyes nor in a dream.⁹⁰ But one prophetic tradition (among many) still calls into question this subtle distinction while maintaining the exclusivity of prophecy: “O ‘Alī, you hear what I hear and you see what I see, except that you are not a prophet.”⁹¹ Later in al-Kulaynī it is stated that Prophets and Imāms are the only human beings to possess the “holy spirit” (*rūḥ al-quḍus*), through which they know all things.⁹²

One of the prophetic traditions most frequently quoted by Shī'īs is “I am the city of Knowledge (*madīnat al-‘ilm*) and ‘Alī is its gate (*bāb*); whoever wishes to enter the city must pass through its gate.” In other words, knowledge of the Prophet comes only through the Imām. This *ḥadīth* is then associated with one already cited and attributed to ‘Alī: “He [God's Messenger] taught me the keys to a thousand doors into Knowledge [or to a thousand chapters of Knowledge], each of which leads to another thousand doors [or chapters].”⁹³ It suggests that, if all of the Imām's knowledge comes from that of the Prophet, then the Imām develops, extends, and perhaps even surpasses the Prophet's knowledge. From the Shī'ī viewpoint, the Prophet brought only the literal revelation (*tanzīl*) of the Qur'ān; it was the Imāms who provided its spiritual interpretation (*ta'wīl*), and they were specifically assigned this task by verse 3:7: “none knows its [the Book's] interpretation, save only God and those rooted in knowledge.”⁹⁴ Without doubt, as we have seen above, it was Muḥammad who taught ‘Alī the *ta'wīl*, but it was the Imāms who dispensed the *ta'wīl* in their *ḥadīths*.⁹⁵

The Prophet is also reported to have said: “We, the prophets, have been commanded to speak to men according to the measure of their intelligence,”⁹⁶ whereas the Imāms declare: “Our teaching is arduous; the only ones who can withstand it are a prophet sent to men, an angel of Proximity, or an initiated

89 Amir-Moezzi, *Preuve de Dieu*, in particular 159–166.

90 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 99, §§ 1–2.

91 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 122–123.

92 Kāshānī, *Kalimāt*, 84–85; Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 156, §§ 1–3; Amir-Moezzi, “Les Cinq Esprits de l'homme divin. Aspects de l'imamologie duodécimaine XIII.” 297–320; *Preuve de Dieu*, 226–227.

93 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 123.

94 Arberry's translation, modified in accordance with the Shī'ī interpretation of this verse. On this, see Bar-Asher, *Scripture and Exegesis*, 100.

95 On this conception, see Amir-Moezzi, *Coran silencieux*, especially 101–168.

96 Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 17, ḥ. 15; Shaykh Ṣadūq, *Amālī*, 305, ḥ. 6; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 125–126.

one whose heart has been tested by God for faith.”⁹⁷ They also say: “Our teaching is arduous; neither a prophet sent to men nor an angel of Proximity can withstand it.”⁹⁸ Some traditions have it that if the Imām must observe the keeping of secret (*taqiyya*) when teaching his knowledge, this is precisely to avoid being identified with a prophet.⁹⁹ And if there are numerous traditions attributing omniscience or divine Knowledge to the Imāms, by contrast, in the following quotation the Prophet recognises the limits of his own knowledge: “If you knew God with a true knowledge, solid mountains would crumble from the effects of your prayer. No one attains the essential foundations of knowledge of Him.” Muḥammad was then asked, “Not even you, O Messenger of God?” He replied, “Not even I! God is too high and too great for anyone to embrace the foundations of knowledge of Him.”¹⁰⁰ The omniscience of the Imām, and the possibility that he may possess knowledge superior to that of the Prophet, appear as sacred and taboo beliefs in Imāmī Shī‘ism; beliefs whose open expression would be considered to partake of “exaggeration” (*ghulūw*).

2.4 *The Celestial Ascent of the Prophet and Its Esoteric Meaning*

The account of the celestial ascent (*mi‘rāj* or *isrā’*) is incontestably important in Prophetic hiero-history, marking the superiority of Muḥammad over the other prophets. In Imāmī Shī‘ī versions of the story, it is also an attestation of the pre-eminence of ‘Alī over even the Prophet himself. According to one of these accounts, when the Prophet was raised by God to the ultimate degree, “two bows’- lengths away – or nearer” (Q 53:9), God spoke to him in ‘Alī’s language. Then God had Muḥammad pass through the worlds of the *Mulk*, of the *Malakūt*, and of the *Jabarūt* – respectively the worlds of Nature, Soul and Intellect – before arriving in the world of the divine entity (*al-lāhūt*), where ‘Alī was set on his shoulders.¹⁰¹ In another version, reported by al-Qāḍī Sa‘īd al-Qummī (d. 1103/1691), Muḥammad, having gone beyond the limits of the world of composition and then contemplated and left behind the ranks of the intellectual Soul, saw in the highest level of the divine Soul a luminous and

97 Qummī, *Baṣā’ir*, I, 131–142; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 129; Kāshānī, *Kalimāt*, 229; translated in Amir-Moezzi, *Divine guide*, 5.

98 Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 351 and 418; see also Kulaynī, *Uṣūl*, 239, §4, and Amir-Moezzi, *Preuve de Dieu*, 263.

99 Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 127–128.

100 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, IV, 132.

101 Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 217.

divine man (*insān ilāhī*) penetrating the veil of Light, and within it the Prophet recognised 'Alī's back.¹⁰²

For Ibn Abī Jumhūr, important declarations about the Knowledge of the Prophet and of the Imām originate in the Prophet's celestial ascent: "About the knowledge that the Prophet had of the [original] point of existence, on the night of his celestial ascent, he said, 'I hold the knowledge of the beginnings and the ends [...].'"¹⁰³ And about the knowledge that 'Alī had of these things, 'Alī said, "I am the point beneath the *bā'* [of the *bismillāh*, the opening formula of the Qur'ān]," and, "Ask me what is to be found beneath the throne."¹⁰⁴ This suggests that it was nothing less than the principality of 'Alī that was revealed to the Prophet on the night of his ascension, and that the Imām, though he was initiated by the Prophet, at that point gained knowledge only of himself.

According to another account, the Prophet, having reached paradise, entered a sumptuous palace in the centre of which was a coffer made of light, which Gabriel opened. Inside it he discovered poverty (*faqr*) and a patched cloak (*muraqqa'a*). The Lord said to him, "O Muḥammad, these are the things I chose for you and your community from the moment I had created them, and I give them only to those whom I love." Facing God, the Prophet put the garments on, and then, while coming back from his celestial ascent, clothed 'Alī in them, on God's command. The patched cloak, commonly called *khirqā*, was to be transmitted from Imām to Imām until the Mahdī, along with the other legacies of the prophets.¹⁰⁵ During the pre-modern period (D) such traditions are adopted by the defenders of a reconciliation between Sufism and Shī'ism, upholding as they do an Imami genealogy for Sufism.¹⁰⁶ For supporters of this view, the transmission of this archetypal *khirqā* gave rise to three Sufi initiatic paths, via three *khirqā* that were transmitted by the Imāms to their disciples: by the sixth Imām, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq (d. 148/765) to Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 234/848 or 261/874); by the seventh, Mūsā al-Kāzīm (d. 183/799), to Shaqīq

102 Al-Qāḍī Sa'īd al-Qummī, *Al-Ṭalā'ī' wa l-bawāriq*, 281; Jambet, "L'Homme parfait. Métaphysique de l'âme et eschatologie selon Qāzī Sa'īd Qummī", 417. For more on similar traditions, see Mohammad Ali Amir-Moezzi, *Religion discrète*, 136–140 [*Spirituality of Shī'ī Islam*, 171–176].

103 Amir-Moezzi, *Guide divin*, 193 [*Divine guide*, 76].

104 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, iv, 1338–1339.

105 Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Awālī*, iv, 130.

106 For more on this thesis, see Terrier, "The Defense of Sufism among Twelver Shī'ī Scholars of Early Modern and Modern Times: Topics and Arguments" 27–63. On the history of this tradition, see Gril, "De la *khirqā* à la *ṭarīqa*. Continuité et évolution dans l'identification et la classification des voies" 57–81, especially 65–66.

al-Balkhī (d. 194/809–10); and by the eighth, ‘Alī al-Riḍā (d. 203/818), to Ma‘rūf al-Karkhī (d. 200/815).¹⁰⁷

The same thinkers also referred to words attributed to the Prophet by a tradition that appears not to be of Imāmī origin: “The Law (*sharī‘a*) is my words; the Path (*ṭarīqa*) is my acts; and Reality (*ḥaqīqa*) is my [spiritual] states.” This citation offered them a scriptural proof of the reconciliation of exoteric religion, identified with the Law, with Sufism, identified with the Path, and with philosophical gnosis, identified with Reality. In the longer version the list continues, and concludes with “Poverty is my glory (*al-faqr fakhri*), and I am proud of it among all the prophets sent to men [before me].”¹⁰⁸ This tradition is particularly prominent among dervish Shī‘ī orders such as the modern-period Khāksārs, who lay claim to the spiritual and material poverty of the Prophet.¹⁰⁹ Thus the account of the Prophet’s celestial ascent plays a determining role in Imāmī Shī‘ism in general, and in Shī‘ī Sufism in particular.

2.5 *The Prophet, the Imām and the Divine Names*

Shī‘ī thinkers influenced by Ibn ‘Arabī also conceive of the Prophet and the Imām as manifestations of the Divine Names.¹¹⁰ According to them, each of the prophets makes manifest a particular Divine Name, and Muḥammadan Reality is the manifestation of the synthetic name *Allāh*. At the level just below, the Prophet Muḥammad and the Imām ‘Alī are manifestations, respectively, of the Names *al-Raḥmān* and *al-Raḥīm*, which are based on the same root. So, according to al-Āmulī, “the Merciful” (*al-Raḥmān*) is none other than Muḥammad and his essential universal reality, [he is] designated as “the Seal of the Prophets”, just as “the Compassionate” (*al-Raḥīm*) is formally none other than “the Seal of the friends of God” [‘Alī] [...]. The Merciful occupies the rank of the first Intellect, the Compassionate that of the universal Soul.”¹¹¹

Al-Bursī writes:

The prophets are manifestations of the Names of God. For the one among them who is the manifestation of a universal name, his Law is universal, too. As we know, all the Names can be reduced to the synthetic name, *Allāh*. [In the same way,] all the prophets and messengers can be reduced

107 Āmulī, *Jāmi‘*, 225, 431 and 614–615; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, 1245–1246.

108 Āmulī, *Jāmi‘*, 346; Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Āwālī*, I, 39 and IV, 125–126; Id. *Mujlī*, 1073.

109 See “Two Khāksār treatises of the 19th century. The Booklet of Poverty”, transl. M. Arabestani, 333–338.

110 See Terrier, “Noms divins et hommes divins dans la gnose shī‘ite imāmīte (VIII^e/XIV^e–XI^e/XVII^e siècles)” 335–356.

111 Āmulī, *Naṣṣ*, 1307.

to the seven names that are Adam, Idris, Abraham, Joseph, Moses, Aaron and Jesus [...]; all of these seven can be reduced to the single synthetic name Muḥammad.¹¹²

However, later in the same work, a citation from the Prophet himself is used to accord precedence to the name and person of 'Alī, and al-Bursī comments audaciously:

The Prophet declared: 'The one who wants to contemplate Seraphiel (*Isrāfīl*) in his elevation, Michael in his rank, Gabriel in his grandeur, Adam in his gravity, Noah in his patience and supplication, Abraham in his generosity, Moses in his courage, Jesus in his goodwill has only to look at 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib.' This indicates that ['Alī] is the supreme Name that runs through all things, that everything created by God has 'Alī as its master and meaning, for he is the Word of the necessary Being, the shining Light in the sky of existence and of what exists.¹¹³

Here again, it is Muḥammad himself who recognises the superiority and divinity of 'Alī. We are here at the core of Shī'ī esotericism, the expression of which is often considered as 'exaggeration' (*ghulūw*), even among Shī'ī scholars, since these are the most sacred and secret beliefs of Imāmi Shī'īs.

2.6 *The Prophet, the Imām and the Perfect Man*

This line of thinking leads to the identification of the Prophet and the Imām combined into the perfect Man (*al-insān al-kāmil*), another concept inherited from Ibn 'Arabī. For Ibn Abī Jumhūr, the Prophet is the most perfect of the created beings in that he contains a synthesis of the perfections possessed by each of the prophets and allies of God. Unlike al-Āmulī, Ibn Abī Jumhūr even calls Muḥammad the "Seal of Law-giving prophecy and of the divine Alliance".¹¹⁴ But in his explanation of the Prophet's doubleness, both human and divine, historical and metaphysical, the figures of the Prophet and of the Imām are mixed together anew, resulting in a paradoxical representation of the perfect Man:

Know that the lieutenant of Muḥammadan Reality is the Pole of poles [...]. His status as Lord of the world comes from the divine attributes that his rank accords him. As for his impotence, his quietism (*qu'ūd*) and any of the defects that could be ascribed to him, they are a function of his

¹¹² Bursī, *Mashāriq*, 66–67.

¹¹³ *Ibid.* 196–197.

¹¹⁴ Ibn Abī Jumhūr, *Mujlī*, III, 1047–8.

humanity, a humanity that came about through [his] determination and descent to the inferior world, in order to envelop the peculiarities of the apparent world with his own apparent dimension and the peculiarities of the hidden world with his own hidden dimension. Thus he is at the confluence of two seas, and in him are made manifest the two worlds. His abasement is also his perfection, just as his elevation to his original station is his perfection.¹¹⁵

This concept of the perfect Man allows the Prophet and the Imām to be embraced together and kept distinct at the same time, as in this passage by Ibn Abī Jumhūr:

The Prophet is the first Intellect in which are made manifest the properties of His Name that is specified for him, 'the Merciful.' This is because He makes himself manifest, from the esoteric point of view (*ma'nā*), within the perfect Man exercising governing control (*al-mutaṣarrif*), in a manifest manner and in a hidden manner, in the Unseen and in the visible world, designated as the Caliph, whereas from the apparent point of view the place in which He makes himself manifest is the Throne. The perfect Man is the first locus of manifestation [of God] for the spiritual world, as the Throne is for the physical world. [...] Among the horizons [the macrocosm] there are two Caliphs: the primary Intellect and the universal Soul, who are loci of manifestation for the Merciful and for the Compassionate [...]. Among souls [the microcosm] there are also two Caliphs: the Prophet and the Ally [of God], in whom are made manifest the Merciful and the Compassionate. [...] Humankind as a whole is a locus of manifestation of God in potentiality, but his nobility and grandeur appear only in His [God's] actual locus of manifestation, which is our Prophet among all the prophets, and 'Alī among all the allies [of God].¹¹⁶

For al-Kāshānī:

The perfect Man is either a prophet or an ally [of God] [...]. Absolute Prophecy is true prophecy that has arrived through eternity past and subsisting, for eternity yet to come [...]. The holder of this position is called supreme Caliph, the Pole of poles, great Man, true Adam, supreme Calamus, primary Intellect, and supreme Spirit. This is what these words

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.* III, 1049–1051.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.* III, 1051–1052.

of his mean: 'What God created first was my Light'; 'I was a Prophet when Adam was still between water and clay'. [...] The esoteric aspect of this prophecy is the absolute Alliance [with God]. [...] This is what these words of the Prophet mean: "Alī and I are from a one and single Light"; 'God created my spirit and that of 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib two thousand years before the rest of creation'; "Alī was commissioned with all of the prophets secretly, and with me openly"; along with this *ḥadīth* of Imām 'Alī: 'I was an Ally [of God] when Adam was still between water and clay'¹¹⁷

Finally, let us reiterate that Muḥammad and 'Alī always appear as impossible to dissociate from each other, and functionally equal, but that it is always for the Prophet to say so. In the order of discourse, if not in the order of reasons, Muḥammad remains the primary source and the ultimate reference.

3 Conclusion

Thus, throughout its evolution and in its different currents, Imami Shī'ism has never neglected the figure of the Prophet – far from it, as he has been essentially linked with the Holy Family and coupled with Imām 'Alī. In Shī'ism from its origins to the present, and for scholars as for simple believers, Islam is not a religion that was revealed to and by a single man, a historic figure and messenger prophet, but one revealed to and by two men who share the same spiritual and eternal substance, the Prophet and the Imām, Muḥammad and 'Alī. To bring together the historical and metaphysical, the exoteric and esoteric, one can say that the position of the Prophet is that of origin, foundation or principle of Revelation, but that the Imām is its final aim, completion or *télos*. In philosophical terms, the Prophet is the potentiality of the Imāms, and the Imāms are the full actualisation of the Prophet. The veneration of the Prophet, inseparable from that of the Imāms, is thus at the very core of Shī'ī Islam.

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¹¹⁷ Kāshānī, 188–189.

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