The Prophet Muḥammad and His Heir ‘Alī

Their Historical, Metahistorical and Cosmological Roles in Ismā‘īlī Shī‘ism

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1 An Ismā‘īlī *Sīrat al-nabī*

The Prophet Muḥammad is a central figure in the Ismā‘īlī movement, as in all Islamic currents. Nevertheless, it is exceedingly rare for any Ismā‘īlī text to focus on the ‘historical’ details of his mission. One exception to this rule is the first volume of *‘Uyūn al-akhbār wa funūn al-āthār* by Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn (d. 872/1468), which is entirely devoted to the Prophet’s life from conception to death.¹ This *sīrat al-nabī*, which cites many Sunnī sources (again, a rare approach in Ismā‘īlī literature), depicts the founder of Islam as a historical figure whose biography, overflowing with legends and full of hagiographical embellishments, follows the example of the best Sunnī historians.

Nevertheless, Idrīs is still presenting a Shī‘ī version of this biography, as is evident in the very title of the volume: ‘Presentation of the life of the chosen Prophet, of his heir (*waṣī*) ‘Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, killer of infidels (*qātil al-kuffār*), and of the lives of his family, the pure ones’. As early as the introduction, the author mentions the *waṣīyya*, the ‘sacred legacy’, entrusted by the Prophet to ‘Alī and transmitted down the uninterrupted lineage of the Imams.² It is true that the second volume of the *‘Uyūn al-akhbār* is entirely devoted to ‘Alī, but even while reading the first it is clear that in the decisive moments of the prophet’s life (revelations, battles, ambassadorial missions, organisation of the community), he never operated alone, but always in tandem with his ‘friend’ (*walī*), confidant and advisor ‘Alī. Their close interaction is emphasised in many *ḥadīths*, including those that report words spoken by the prophet to ‘Alī; for example, ‘You are to me what Aaron was to Moses, except that there is no prophet after me’, or, ‘Alī is part of me and I am part of him, he will be the friend of every

1 Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn, *‘Uyūn al-akhbār*, vol. 1. For a general introduction to the history, currents and doctrines of Ismā‘īlism, see Farhad Daftary, *A Short History of the Ismā‘īlīs*; De Smet, *La philosophie ismaélienne*.

2 Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn, *‘Uyūn al-akhbār*, 10–13.

man and woman who believes after me.³ Thus the entire *sīra* builds up to the apotheosis of the two men's relationship when, at Ghadīr Khumm while returning from the farewell pilgrimage, Muḥammad is said to have officially designated 'Alī as his heir, declaring 'Whoever is my friend is 'Alī's friend' (*man kuntu mawlāhu fa-'Alī mawlāhu*). For this reason, shortly before his death, the Prophet put into place the most important religious obligation (*farīḍa*), which would become the cornerstone of all the 'pillars of Islam', the *walāya*: loyalty to 'Alī and the Imāms among his descendants. For, as Muḥammad said, "'Alī is the rope (*ḥabl*), one end of which is in God's hands and the other in the hands of the believers".⁴

It is true that all these traditions are shared by many other Shī'ī currents, and there is nothing in this *sīra* compiled by Idrīs that is specific to Ismā'īlism. It is no doubt for this reason that the volumes of the *'Uyūn al-akhbār* appear in the curricula established by the Ṭayyibī community, to which Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn belonged, as works that were *ẓāhir*, 'exoteric', meaning even beginners could read them and they entailed no obligation to secrecy.⁵

Asrār al-nuṭaqā' ('the secret of the Enunciators') by Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman (d. ca. 346/957), another Ismā'īlī work, is quite different, although this text does also focus on Muḥammad's 'story' (*qisṣa*). In Ja'far's writings, we are no longer on the historical level, but closer to meta-history, or even hiero-history. Muḥammad first appears in Arabia as Jesus's cycle is coming to an end. The Syrian monk Baḥīrā, the last Imam of that cycle, is the 'terminator' (*mutimm*) whose task is to finalise the *da'wa* (mission) of the Christians and to prepare the advent of Islam. To facilitate this, Baḥīrā is assisted by two 'dignitaries' (*ḥudūd*) of his *da'wa*: the prophet's wife Khadija, and Abū Ṭālib, his uncle and 'Alī's father. In her role as *ḥujja* ('Proof'), Khadija reveals to Muḥammad that he will be the new prophet, Jesus's successor; Baḥīrā and Abū Ṭālib then help him to get settled and to organise his *da'wa*. When the time comes, they will officially transfer power to him, as a prophet. As soon as this happens, Muḥammad will choose his own dignitaries, whom he will send to the twelve regions (*jazā'ir*) of the earth to carry out propaganda in his name and train more disciples.⁶ Drawing inspiration from an episode in the *sīrat al-nabī* that was related by, among others, the Sunnī historians Ibn Ishāq and al-Ṭabarī (the young Muḥammad, accompanied by his uncle Abū Ṭālib, visits the monk

3 Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn, *'Uyūn al-akhbār*, 408, 496.

4 Idrīs 'Imād al-Dīn, *'Uyūn al-akhbār*, 480–87, especially 483–85. For more on this notion of *walāya*, which is central in Shī'ism, see Amir-Moezzi, *La religion discrète*, 177–207.

5 Fyze, "The Study of the Literature of the Fatimid *da'wa*", 239.

6 Ja'far b. Maṣṣūr al-Yaman, *Sarā'ir wa asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, 229–40; cf. Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qur'ān*, 96–98.

Baḥīrā, someone who will help Khadīja understand the prophetic task of her husband),⁷ Ja'far b. Manṣūr al-Yaman depicts Muḥammad as a chief of the Ismā'īlī *da'wa*, the secret mission in favour of the Imam, which sends its agents to each of the twelve regions in which, ideally, the organisation functions, in order to recruit new converts. In the *Asrār al-nuṭaqā'*, Muḥammad's story is preceded by those of the previous Prophets, including the five 'Enunciators' (*nuṭaqā'*) who each revealed a Law: Adam, Noah, Abraham, Moses and Jesus.⁸ Each of them proceeded in the same manner, following a stereotyped programme that was reproduced on each occasion from Adam to Muḥammad. This programme conveyed a prophetology and imamology that is specifically Ismā'īlī.

At the time of his designation (*naṣṣ*) by his predecessor (usually the last Imam of the previous cycle),⁹ the Enunciator (*nāṭiq*) receives an influx from the intelligible world. Through a complicated process¹⁰ he transforms this non-verbal influx into articulate speech in the language of the people to whom he is sent; he expresses himself in images and symbols adapted to his listeners' level of understanding: this is the *tanzīl*, the 'descent' of the revelation. The Enunciator will then surround himself with 'dignitaries' (Jesus's Apostles, Muḥammad's Companions ...) whose mission is to write down the revelation, organise the *da'wa*, and spread propaganda in the name of their prophet. But each Enunciator must face one or more adversaries (*aḍḍād*) sent by Iblis in order to sabotage his *da'wa* and falsify the text of his revelation (Pharaoh versus Moses, Judas versus Jesus, Abū Bakr and 'Umar versus Muḥammad and 'Alī). To oppose the sinister actions of his adversaries and guarantee the integrity of his revelation after his death, each Enunciator ties himself to an Heir (*waṣī*). Thus, pairs were formed: Adam and Seth, Noah and Shem, Abraham and Ishmael, Moses and Aaron or Joshua, Jesus and Simon Peter and, finally,

7 Guillaume, *The Life of Muhammad*, 79–83; Watt and McDonald, *The History of al-Ṭabarī* VI, 44–46, 68–73. There is a vast literature on the Christian and Muslim versions of the legend of the monk Sergius Baḥīrā; for example, see Roggema, *The Legend of Sergius Bahira*; Szilagyi, "Muḥammad and the Monk".

8 The story of Jesus receives by far the most extensive treatment; for a preliminary study of this, see De Smet, "Marie, Marie Madeleine, Zacharie, Jean-Baptiste et Simon-Pierre", 59–79.

9 Of course, there is a problem in the case of Adam, but the question of whether he was one of the Enunciators was a controversial one; see De Smet, "Adam, premier prophète et législateur?". As for Muḥammad, in Ismā'īlism he is not considered to be the final messenger: his cycle will end with the *Qā'im* or Resurrector, who will reveal the esoteric meanings of all previous revelations.

10 In which process the three mysterious hypostases, *al-Jadd*, *al-Faṭḥ* and *al-Khayāl*, participate; see De Smet, "La fonction noétique de la triade".

Muḥammad and 'Alī. Each Enunciator confides the entirety of his revealed text to his Heir, both on the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) level – giving the correct form of words and phrases (as opposed to the falsification, *taḥrīf*, of the Writings) – and on the esoteric level (*bāṭin*), offering his exegesis (*ta'wīl*) of the text (as opposed to the false interpretations of the *mufasssīrūn*, the 'exotericist' commentators).¹¹ The Heir will then transmit this science to the Imam who succeeds him; this continues for as long as the cycle of each Enunciator lasts. The Terminator, or last Imam of the cycle will, with his dignitaries, install the next Enunciator.¹²

In this cyclical conception of hiero-history, consisting of a succession of prophetic cycles joined together by an uninterrupted line of Imams, Muḥammad and 'Alī personify the Enunciator-Heir couple, *nāṭiq* – *waṣī*, as well as all the other related pairs of concepts such as *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, *tanzīl* and *ta'wīl*. This couple manifests itself through different people, with different names, throughout humanity's religious history. If Fatimid Ismā'īlī authors are prudent on this subject, they are nevertheless well aware of the numerous Shī'ī *ḥadīths* that endorse the pre-existence of Muḥammad and 'Alī as beings created by God well before the creation of the world, who manifest themselves in the physical vessels of the successive Prophets and Heirs.¹³ Ismā'īlī authors even flirted with the audacious thought of the Mukhammisa, according to which divinity shows itself to creatures under the guise of the five *ahl al-bayt*: Muḥammad, 'Alī, Fāṭima, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn;¹⁴ they also tried to adopt the triad of Essence (*ma'nā*), Name (*ism*) and Gate (*bāb*), respectively personified by 'Alī, Muḥammad and Salmān, and mostly propounded in the Nuṣayrī doctrine.¹⁵ While ancient traditions regarding the pentad and the triad reappear in the Ṭayyibī and Nizārī currents respectively, Ismā'īlīs, as we shall see shortly, generally preferred the pairing *nāṭiq* – *waṣī*, represented by Muḥammad and 'Alī.

In the pages that follow we shall examine how Ismā'īlī literature elevated this pair beyond meta-history, making them into eternal cosmological principles that have become an integral part of the very structure of the universe. Two thorny questions then remain to be asked: what is their relationship with

11 The question of the falsification of the text and meaning of the Qur'ān has been a pre-occupation for Ismā'īlīs, as for other Shī'īs; see De Smet, "Le Coran: son origine, sa nature et sa falsification".

12 Halm, *Kosmologie und Heilslehre der frühen Ismā'īliya*, 18–37.

13 For a detailed study of such traditions and their doctrinal background, see Amir-Moezzi, *Le guide divin dans le shī'isme originel*, 73–112.

14 Bear in mind that the main reference text for the doctrine of the Mukhammisa, the Persian treatise *Umm al-Kitāb*, was transmitted by Nizārī Ismā'īlīs from Central Asia; see Anthony, "The Legend of 'Abdallāh ibn Saba".

15 Halm, "Das 'Buch der Schatten'", 263–65.

God? And which of the two takes precedence over the other, Muḥammad or ʿAlī?

2 Muḥammad and His “Spouse” ʿAlī Are the Parents of Believers

Fatimid authors, close to the political and religious powers in Cairo, generally kept their distance from Shīʿi currents that upheld the superiority of ʿAlī and the Imams over the Prophet Muḥammad. This doctrinal stance had clear political implications. If it is the case that Muḥammad represents the letter (*ẓāhir*) of the Qurʾān and of the sharīʿa, and ʿAlī their esoteric meaning (*bāṭin*), to accord precedence to the latter would imply a preference for esoteric exegesis over outward practice of religion and law. This could lead to antinomianism, a well-known phenomenon among ‘extremist’ Shīʿi movements (*ghulāt*), but one that might be suicidal for a Muslim empire claiming allegiance to Ismāʿīlism.¹⁶

Given that this was the case, it’s hardly surprising that al-Muʿayyad fī l-Dīn al-Shīrāzī (d. 470/1078), missionary in chief (*dāʾī al-duʿāt*) of the Fatimid *daʿwa*, in one of his sermons, criticises “certain depraved and mendacious Shīʿīs”, who spread the “heresy” (*ilhād*) according to which the Qurʾān was revealed to ʿAlī and not to Muḥammad, and asserted that the verses in the Qurʾān making reference to this were falsified following the example of the *tahrīf* practised by Jews and Christians.¹⁷ For al-Muʿayyad, there is no doubt: the entire revelation (*ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*) was given to Muḥammad, who then transmitted it to his Heir, ʿAlī.

In order to clearly underline ʿAlī’s inferiority to the Prophet, al-Muʿayyad identified ʿAlī’s role with that of woman, the subordination of whom to man is clearly stated in the Qurʾān, in particular in Sūra 4, ‘Women’. The entire argument is based on an exegesis of verse 4:1 “Mankind, fear your Lord, who created you of a single soul (*min nafsin wāḥidatin*), and from it created its mate (*zawj*), and from the pair of them scattered abroad many men and women.” Al-Muʿayyad explains that according to the *mufasssīrūn* (exotericist commentators) the ‘single soul’ refers to Adam and the ‘mate’ refers to Eve (*Ḥawwāʾ*), created by God from Adam’s rib, and that this couple had many descendants, both male and female.¹⁸

16 For more on the antinomianism of radical Shīʿi movements, see Asatryan, *Controversies in Formative Shīʿī Islam*, 157–61.

17 Muʿayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 17, 80–81.

18 Muʿayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 17, 81. Bear in mind that neither the name of Eve nor the story of her creation from Adam’s rib are mentioned in the Qurʾān. However, commentators were aware of the Biblical story, and it was indeed in that sense that they understood Q 4:1 and similar verses; see Guiraud, “Ève”, 291.

However, the *ahl al-ta'wīl* (Ismā'īlīs who practise esoteric exegesis) have a more complex reading of this verse, which can be superimposed on the exoteric interpretation. In this version, Adam corresponds to Muḥammad: just as Adam is the first human form (*ṣūra bashariyya*) endowed with the gift of 'speech' or 'reason' (*nuṭq*), Muḥammad is the first form with the gift of speech established in the 'true community' (*al-milla al-ḥanīfa*) of Islam. Eve, Adam's spouse, corresponds to 'Alī b. Abī Ṭālib, the Prophet's 'spouse'. 'Alī embodies the 'spouse' "... because of his subtle soul and not because of his opaque body, that he may receive [from the Prophet], the deposit (*amāna*) of his religion, and that he may be depository (*mustawda*) of the secrets of his revelation, as the woman receives the sperm of the man and becomes pregnant." What's more, Qur'ān 4:1 must be understood in light of the *ḥadīth* in which the prophet says: "You and I, O 'Alī, we are the parents of the believers." The many men and women born of this couple are none other than all believers: here 'men' means the dignitaries of the *da'wa* whose function will be to teach the science of salvation to the 'women', who are the neophytes receiving teachings that bear fruit within them. For al-Mu'ayyad the conclusion is inevitable: since the difference (*fارق*) between Muḥammad and 'Alī is equivalent to the difference between men and women, how could we accept that the Qur'ān should descend on 'Alī and not on the Prophet, especially since 'Alī was created from one of the Prophet's ribs?¹⁹

Several of al-Mu'ayyad's other sermons developed this same theme of 'sexual relations' between the Prophet and his Heir, or between the Imam and his followers, while specifying that these interactions are not at all physical, but exclusively 'spiritual relations'.²⁰ Aside from Qur'ān 4:1 and the aforementioned *ḥadīth*, this is founded on Qur'ān 33:6: "The Prophet is nearer to the believers than their selves; his wives are their mothers." In this case, the paternity of the Prophet is a religious paternity (*ubuwwa dīniyya*); 'his wives' refers to the Heir and his Imams, who bring forth believers in a spiritual birth (*wilāda naḥsāniyya*).²¹ Muḥammad is 'father' inasmuch as he procures by means of the revelation (*waḥy*) the 'divine sperm' (*al-nuṭfa al-ilāhiyya*) for his 'spouse'

19 Mu'ayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 17, 81–82; cf. Alexandrin, *Walāyah*, 117, 164, 184–85.

20 The metaphor of the sexual act to describe the relationship between master and disciple, or an Imam and his dignitaries, is often used in 'extremist' Shī'ī groupings such as Nuṣayrism and Druzism, and this is one reason such currents are often accused of preaching libertinism and homosexuality; see Tendler-Krieger, "Marriage, Birth, and *bāṭinī ta'wīl*". But such metaphorical language also appears in Ismā'īlī exegesis; see Hollenberg, *Beyond the Qur'ān*, 72–73.

21 Mu'ayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 17, 82.

ʿAlī, in whom it is deposited, becomes fruitful and then passes on to the Imams of his descentance.²²

Just as Adam is “the cause of bodily descentance” (*ʿillat al-nasl al-jismī*), each Prophet, within his own cycle, plays the role of Adam, as the “cause of religious descentance” (*ʿillat al-nasl al-dīnī*). The words “unique Soul” in Qurʾān 4:1 refer to the Prophet as the father of religion; his spouse is the Heir, pregnant with his science and his secrets; this pregnancy leads to the birth of “men” and “women”. The “men” are the “scholars who give benefits” (*al-ʿulamāʾ al-mufīdūn*), whereas the “women” refer to the “students who obtain access to the benefits” (*al-mutaʿallimūn al-mustafīdūn*). The masculine element thus refers to Muḥammad, the Imams and the dignitaries (*ḥudūd*) of the *daʿwa*; the feminine element is found in ʿAlī and in the Respondents (*al-mustajībūn*), the neophytes who answered the call of the *dāʿī*. As for the order of precedence among them, the Qurʾān is clear: ‘Men are the managers of the affairs of women for that God has preferred in bounty one of them over another.’ (Qurʾān 4:34) In consequence, the Heir is subordinate to the authority of the Prophet, just as the student must obey the teacher.²³

Al-Muʾayyad here introduces a notion that is fundamental in Ismāʿīlī doctrine: the distinction between *ifāda* and *istifāda*, ‘to give and to receive a benefit’. These concepts fit into the emanationist and hierarchical scheme according to which the Ismāʿīlī universe is constructed, which is profoundly rooted in Neo-Platonism. An uninterrupted influx is propagated from the first created being (since the Creator is not a principle of emanation, as that would ruin his transcendent state). This influx is transmitted by different entities (called *ḥudūd*) that structure the intelligible world (universal Intellect, universal Soul), the physical world (celestial bodies and spheres, minerals, plants and animals), and the religious world (Prophet, Heir, Imams, dignitaries of the *daʿwa*). With the exception of the first created being who, as the source of the emanation, transmits this influx without receiving it, and of the neophyte who receives it without transmitting, all the other ranks are simultaneously *mufīd* and *mustafīd*, givers and receivers of the influx. As givers they are masculine, but when they are receiving they become feminine. This results in what Karen Bauer called a *gender hierarchy* in which most of the ranks are ‘bisexual’.²⁴ Now we understand why, in this ‘world of religion’ (*ʿālam al-dīn*), Muḥammad confiding the revelation to ʿAlī, and the Imams teaching esoteric knowledge

22 Muʾayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 99, 495; cf. Alexandrin, *Walāyah*, 181–82.

23 Muʾayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 79, 386–88.

24 Bauer, “Spiritual Hierarchy”, especially 37–39; cf. De Smet, « La valorisation du féminin », especially 110–13.

to the dignitaries of the *da'wa*, and these same dignitaries transmitting this knowledge to neophytes, are all called 'men', whereas 'Alī and the neophytes are cast as "women".²⁵

In a similar way, al-Mu'ayyad compares the relationship between Muḥammad and 'Alī to that between the Pen (*qalam*) and the Tablet (*lawḥ*). Remaining faithful to Muslim Neo-Platonism,²⁶ he identifies these Qur'ānic notions respectively with the Intellect and the universal Soul. As a pure act, the Intellect, like a pen, writes out the "forms of the heavens, of the earth, of the mountains and of minerals" on the "tablet" of the Soul, which receives them as models according to which it will construct the physical world. Similarly, the Prophet writes down his revelation on the 'tablet' that is his Heir, to whom he confides the demiurgy of the "world of religion". Just as the writing innate in the pen cannot be fixed without the tablet, the revelation brought by the Prophet needs to be fixed by the Heir. In other words, without the Heir and his Imams, religion would be inconceivable.²⁷

Our author then goes even further in his comparison. He tells his readers that if the Intellect and the universal Soul are the intellects of the intelligible world, the Prophet and the Heir are the intellects of the world of nature (*'ālam al-ṭabī'a*). However, while the universal Intellect and the intellect of the Prophet are perfect in essence and in act, the universal Soul and the intellect of the Heir are perfect in essence, but their act is only perfect in potentiality. In order to be actualised and become perfect intellects in actuality, the universal Soul and the Heir must be 'coupled' with their respective partners. This "coupling" (*izdiwāj*) with the Prophet will allow 'Alī and the Imams of his descent to operate as intellects in actuality, and thus they will themselves be able to actualise the potential intellects of their followers.²⁸

This particular way of conceptualising the relationship between Muḥammad and 'Alī, which is elevated to a cosmic level inasmuch as it reflects here below the relationship between the Intellect and the universal Soul in the intelligible world, is not unique to al-Mu'ayyad. It also appears in the work of his contemporary Nāṣir-e Khosraw (d. after 462/1070). After having, in his *Wajh-e dīn*, given the same exegesis as al-Mu'ayyad of the *ḥadīth* "You and I, O 'Alī, we are

25 In a complementary way Muḥammad is feminine in relation to the entity from the intelligible world from whom he receives revelation, and 'Alī is masculine in relation to the Imam who succeeds him, and so on.

26 Wakelnig, *Feder, Tafel, Mensch, passim*; De Smet, *La Quiétude de l'Intellect*, 383–84.

27 Mu'ayyad, *Majālis*, I, n° 33, 162; n° 36, 176–78.

28 Mu'ayyad, *Majālis*, III, n° 17, 51; cf. Alexandrin, *Walāyah*, p. 130. Imams play the role that the *falāsifa* attribute to the agent Intellect of Aristotelian tradition, that of allowing the human intellect to move from potentiality to actuality; see De Smet, *Quiétude*, 355–60.

the parents of the believers" and of Qur'ān 33:6, Nāṣir-e Khosraw undertakes a *ta'wīl* of the "pillars of Islam", of which there are seven in the Ismā'īlī tradition.

- 1) The profession of faith (*shahāda*) symbolises the Preceder (*sābiq*) or universal Intellect, ultimate source of the emanation of the universe and simultaneously the source of the revelation, through whom the Prophet-Enunciator (*nāṭiq*) receives the correct form of *tawhīd* (the profession of the unity and unicity of God).
- 2) The prayer (*ṣalāt*) is a reference to the Follower (*tālī*) or universal Soul, who is put in charge of the demiurgy (*tarkīb*) of the world and transmits the influx (*mādda*) of the inspiration (*ta'yīd*) to the Enunciator; this allows the latter to compile the *sharī'a*.
- 3) Alms (*zakāt*) signifies the Enunciator who names the Base (*Asās*) and confides his revelation to him.
- 4) The fourth 'pillar', that of pilgrimage (*ḥajj*), symbolising the Base (or Heir), completes the construction of the 'house of religion', built on these four foundations and composed of four walls.

The remaining pillars – (5) fasting (*ṣawm*); (6) jihad; and (7) loyalty (*walāya*) – refer respectively to the Imam, to the Proof (*ḥujja*) and to the missionary (*dā'ī*).²⁹

The goal of this equation between the two pairs: Intellect (male)/universal Soul (female), and Prophet (male)/Heir (female) is clearly to provide a cosmological basis for Muḥammad's superiority to 'Alī. The Prophet's masculinity makes him the absolute master of humanity. Nāṣir-e Khosraw could not be clearer on this point:

Those versed in esoteric understanding (*ahl-e bāṭin*) are like men, but the true man is the Prophet whom God the Exalted set over all mankind, all of whom are in relation to him on the level of women, because of his manliness. And since in the Law women are obliged to be obedient to men, and obedience to the Prophet is obligatory, it is clear that man is [at the level of] the Prophet, while all human beings in relation to him are in the position of women.³⁰

3 An Ambiguous Primacy: The Four Principles of al-Sijistānī

Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī (d. after 361/971), an Ismā'īlī *dā'ī*, was a member of the Qarmatian movement that considered the Fatimids to be imposters, though

²⁹ Nāṣir-e Khosraw, *Wajh-e dīn*, 203–6.

³⁰ Nāṣir-e Khosraw, *Kitāb Jāmi' al-ḥikmatayn*, 297; translated by Ormsby, *Between Reason and Revelation*, 262.

he joined their cause at a relatively late stage of his career.³¹ It was perhaps because of his former affiliation that Fatimid authors tended to suspect him of heterodoxy. On the delicate question of the relationship between the Prophet and his Heir, al-Sijistānī remains prudent. In his function as Envoy (*risāla*), the Prophet knows all of the ‘truths’ (*ḥaqāʾiq*), whereas the very function of Heir (*wiṣāya*) implies that ‘Alī’s science is a tributary of that of the Prophet, and that ‘Alī knows only what he receives from Muḥammad. The conclusion seems obvious: the Prophet is superior to the Heir and not vice versa.³²

Nevertheless, in the “Book of Sources” (*Kitāb al-Yanābīʿ*), al-Sijistānī elaborates his theory of the four principles with an ambiguity that leads to some divergent interpretations. These four principles are: the two “foundations” (*aṣḥān*) of the intelligible world, the Intellect and the universal Soul (also called the Preceder and the Follower, or the Pen and the Tablet), and the two “Bases” (*asāsān*), of the earthly world, the Enunciator and the Heir. Through these four principles divinity manifests itself in the universe.

Like all Ismāʿīlī authors, regardless of affiliation, al-Sijistānī insists upon the inaccessibility and total transcendence of the Creator (*mubdīʿ*). Unknowable and ineffable in himself, by an act of origination (*ibdāʿ*) that also escapes all understanding he creates a first creature who carries every name and attribute that the revealed texts ascribe to God. This primary creature, who is the God of revelation, is identified with the universal Intellect, the Preceder, or the Pen. Al-Sijistānī’s system does contain one quite particular aspect (rejected by most Fatimid writers): here Intellect is preceded by a created entity, linked to the act of creation and called *Allāh*, the Word (*kalima*), the Imperative (*amr*), or the Will (*irāda*, *mashʿā*). In any case, the ontological status of this intermediary between God and the Intellect, between the Creator and his creature, remains fluid.³³

These four principles by which the revealed God is expressed in the universe, are contained in the four letters of the name *Allāh*:

I say that the letters of the word *Allāh* are indications of the four well-springs that derive from God’s absolute unity [...]. The *alif* is the analogue of the Preceder who is the wellspring of divine inspiration (*taʾyīd*); the

31 As with most Ismāʿīlī *duʿāt*, we possess very little reliable information on his life; see De Smet, “From Khalaf to Ḥasan al-Ṣabbāḥ”, especially 445–46.

32 Abū Yaʿqūb al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Iftikhār*, 138–50 (on the *risāla*) and 151–66 (on the *wiṣāya*); Id. *Kitāb al-Maqālīd*, 296: only the Enunciator knows all of the *ḥaqāʾiq*; cf. Walker, *Early philosophical Shīism*, 26–27, 131–32.

33 De Smet, “Le Verbe-impératif”, 397–412; for more on the rejection of this theory, notably by Ḥamid al-Dīn al-Kirmānī, see De Smet, *Quiétude*, 142–44.

first *lām* is the analogue of the Follower, who is the wellspring of physical composition (*tarkīb*); the second *lām* is the analogue of the Enunciator, who is the wellspring of scriptural compilation (*ta'tīf*); and the round spherical *hā'* is the analogue of the Base (*asās*), who is the wellspring of interpretation (*ta'wīl*).³⁴

In other words, the Intellect is the source of the universe's emanation; the universal Soul composes the physical world; the Enunciator writes the book of revelation and the Base (or Heir), leads the procession back to its starting point through his exegesis, as indicated by the circular shape of the letter *hā'* to which he corresponds.

The four principles also occur in the four words that together form the *shahāda*, the Islamic credo. Al-Sijistānī explains this by interpreting a *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet is supposed to have said: "*lā ilāha illā Allāh* is the key to Paradise". According to our author, paradise is none other than the divine Word (*kalimat Allāh*) by which God has originated (*abda'a*) all things *ex nihilo*. The Preceder (*sābiq*) or Intellect is the key to all spiritual and material beings, whose shapes or archetypes flow from him by emanation. The Follower (*tālī*) or universal Soul is the key of beings possessing structure and harmony, because he is the principle of order that reigns in this sense-perceptible world inasmuch as he realises forms in matter. The Enunciator (*nāṭiq*) is the key to all of the statements relating to the forms of the Intellect and the compositions of the Soul that feature in the revelation and in religious law. Finally, the Base (*asās*) or Heir is the key of that to which the forms of Intellect, the compositions of Soul and the regimes (*siyāsāt*) of the Enunciators are brought back (*jamt' mā āla ilayhi*).³⁵

The key to Heaven has four teeth, which are the four words of the *shahāda*. The negation *lā* is the tooth that corresponds to the Base; these two letters represent exactly half the letters of the affirmation *Allāh*, the tooth that corresponds to the Preceder, for 'the Base leads to the appearance (*abraza*) of half of that which flows from the Preceder into the Enunciator'. While the arguments are far from clear and the text most likely corrupt, we propose the following interpretation: The four letters of *Allāh* correspond to the Preceder. Existing at the summit of perfection, the forms that he receives from the Word are not divided or split within his essence, but combine into perfect unity, which is expressed by the perfection of the number four. The tooth of the key that

34 Abū Ya'qūb al-Sijistānī, *Kitāb al-Yanābī*, § 10, p. 9; trans. by Walker, *The Wellsprings of Wisdom*, 45 (slightly modified).

35 Sijistānī, *Yanābī*, § 138–40, pp. 70–71; trans. Walker, *Wellsprings*, 91–92.

corresponds to the Enunciator is *ilāh*, composed of three letters – one fewer than *Allāh*, which signifies that it is situated at an inferior level. In his position as ‘lieutenant to the Preceder in the physical world’ (*khalīfat al-sābiq fi l-‘ālam al-jusmānī*), he does not have the fullness of powers that the Preceder possesses (a fullness symbolised by the number four), but has only three ranks: that of Envoy (*risāla*), of Heir (*wiṣāya*) and of Imam (*imāma*). The Follower corresponds to the particle of exclusion, *illā*, which implies that he brings about the appearance of physical beings to the exclusion of spiritual beings. Finally, the word that refers to the Base, the negation *lā*, only contains two letters, which indicates that it occupies the lowest rank of the four principles.³⁶

Despite the complexity of the text and the somewhat forced nature of the exegesis, the intentions of the author appear clear. The four principles emanate from the Word in a specific and descending hierarchical order: the Intellect and the Soul in the intelligible world, followed by the Prophet and the Heir in the physical world. It is explicitly stated that the Prophet is the ‘lieutenant’ of the Intellect in the physical world, which implies the Heir here represents the Soul. The Prophet is superior to the Heir because he combines in his being prophecy and imamat, *ẓāhir* and *bāṭin*, whereas the Heir does not possess the gift of prophecy. Consequently, here we find ourselves in the direct line of Fatimid orthodoxy.

However, it would be uncharacteristic of al-Sijistānī to fail to be somewhat ambiguous in his ideas. In this same “Book of Sources”, he returns once more to his four principles, the “carriers of unity” (*ḥawāmil al-waḥda*), which he detects in the four letters of the word *kalīma*, the divine Word that operates as the primary cause of all beings. He retraces the broad lines of the exegesis previously applied in his analysis of the four letters of the name *Allāh*. The letter *kāf* here corresponds to the Intellect, principle of emanation of all superior and inferior beings, in which resides spiritual and physical form. This represents the summit of perfection and is nothing other than the true essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of what the Qur’ān calls *kalām Allāh*, the speech of God. However, here the author also specifies that ‘the Base is united with the Preceder because of esoteric exegesis (*ta’wīl*)’. The privileged relationship is no longer between Intellect and Prophet, but between Intellect and the Prophet’s Heir.³⁷

The letter *lām* now corresponds to the Soul, which shines the light of the Intellect into the physical world; the *mīm* refers to the Enunciator, and, just as with the name *Allāh*, the circular letter *hā* indicates the Heir. In addition,

36 Sijistānī, *Yanābir*, § 141, pp. 71–72; trans. Walker, *Wellsprings*, 92–93.

37 Sijistānī, *Yanābir*, § 178, pp. 90–91; trans. Walker, *Wellsprings*, 107; cf. De Smet, ‘Le Coran’, 242–44.

the Enunciator's function changes and fluctuates: revelation alters from one Prophet to the next. Each Prophet has access to the revelation only to the extent that he is himself pure, and he writes a law that takes into account his own era and his own cycle. In these actions, he clearly behaves differently from the universal Soul, which organises the world in a constant and invariable way, just as he is different from the Heir, whose esoteric exegesis also remains unvaried, for 'Pure knowledge (*ʿilm maḥḍ*) is unsullied by divergence and contention. Divergence and contention exist, therefore, only in its exposed and not in its concealed aspects.' In other words, the *bāṭin* of the knowledge of the Heirs and the Imams is one and unvarying in the face of the contradictions and dissonances of the literal religions established by the Prophets, which, because of this, are imperfect.³⁸

The four letters of *kalima* inspired al-Sijistānī to find other correspondences. There are four modes of existence: essences (*dhawāt*) and psychic concepts (*humūm*) in the intelligible world, speech (*qawl*) and writing (*kitāba*) in the physical world; there are four activities: *taʿyīd* and *tarkīb* on high, *taʿlīf* and *taʿwīl* here below. Each element of these two series is respectively associated with Intellect, Soul, Enunciator, and Heir. However, al-Sijistānī tells us that the writing that supports the *taʿwīl* of the Heir has its equivalent in the essences and the *taʿyīd* of the spiritual world that comes from the Intellect. We can thus obtain the following order: Intellect – *taʿyīd* – *taʿwīl* – *kitāba* – Heir.³⁹ Although not explicitly mentioned in the text, it follows from this that the other series will necessarily be composed thus: Soul – *tarkīb* – *qawl* – Enunciator. We are thus in the presence of a complete reversal of what al-Sijistānī had previously said: here, the Heir corresponds to the Intellect and consequently is superior to the Prophet, whose alter ego is the universal Soul.

One last series of equations confirms all this, and indicates the reason for this reversal: Angels – *taʿyīd* – Intellect / Jinn – universal Soul / demons (*shayāṭīn*) – Enunciators, inasmuch as they are associated with the exoteric / men (*ins*) – Heirs as depositories of the esoteric. The author explains:

The 'devils' designate those who cling to the outward aspect (*ẓāhir*) of the Enunciators without penetrating to its true reality. In this they are far from the truth, having gone astray, 'And led astray many, and now again have gone astray from the right way.' (Q 5:77). 'Humans' designate the people of truth, who are conversant with the interpretation and are

38 Sijistānī, *Yanābīʿ*, § 179–81, pp. 91–92; trans. Walker, *Wellsprings*, 107–8.

39 Sijistānī, *Yanābīʿ*, § 182–84, pp. 92–93; trans. Walker, *Wellsprings*, 108–9.

saved from doubts and uncertainty. The interpretation has become their cave and place of refuge.⁴⁰

The Prophet's inferiority to the Heir is thus founded on a critique of exoteric religion and laws, which are considered to be punishments, to constitute an earthly hell.⁴¹ This attitude, which takes its place in a long tradition of Shī'ī antinomianism, can probably be explained by al-Sijistānī's Qarmatian past.

To sum up, al-Sijistānī's theory of the four principles is ambiguous in that it allows two readings. Either we recognise in it a vertical scheme of emanation, with decreasing levels of perfection: Intellect, universal Soul, the Prophet, the Heir – or we interpret the scheme as circular, a Neo-Platonic cycle in which the procession (*processio*) brings with it a return (*reditus*) to the source. The functions attributed to each principle tend to plead in favour of this latter alternative: the Intellect is the principle of the procession of emanation (*ta'yīd*); the universal Soul acts as the demiurge of the physical world (*tarkīb*); the Prophet takes charge of the demiurgy of the world of religion (*ta'līf*), whereas the Heir is the principle of the return to the source (*ta'wīl*). Since this is the case, 'Alī forms a pair with the Intellect, as both are sources of procession and of return, whereas Muḥammad and the universal Soul constitute a pair of demiurges. In both interpretations, the Prophet and the Heir have become cosmic principles, 'loci of manifestation' of the divine Word.

4 The Nizārī Reversal and the Downgrading of the Prophet

The proclamation of the 'Great Resurrection' by the Nizārī Imam Ḥasan 'alā *dhikrihi al-salām*,⁴² in the Alamūt fortress in 559/1164,⁴³ was part of a drastic 'alteration' of Ismā'īlī doctrine as formulated by moderate Fatimid authors such as al-Mu'ayyad and Nāṣir-e Khosraw. After this time, the predominance of the Imam over the Prophet is absolute and the pairing of Muḥammad and 'Alī is made into a triad with the addition of Salmān in his role as "Proof" (*hujja*) of the Imam.⁴⁴

40 Sijistānī, *Yanābīr*, § 185, p. 94; trans. Walker, *Wellsprings*, 109 (slightly modified).

41 De Smet, "Isma'īli-Shī'i Visions of Hell", 250–55.

42 Oddly, this eulogy seems to make up part of the Imam's name; he is generally so designated in Nizārī texts, and secondary literature follows this style.

43 Much has been written about this singular event; see, among others, Jambet, *La grande résurrection d'Alamūt*.

44 Salmān, nicknamed "the Persian" (*al-fārisī*), is said to have been the first of his compatriots to embrace Islam. Faithful companion of the Prophet, and favouring 'Alī, he became

Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, of which the Avicennian philosopher Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī (d. 672/1274) was one of the most important theorists, returns to the ancient concept of a divine Imperative or Word that mediates between God and the Intellect, an idea already found in al-Sijistānī, but that had been rejected by most subsequent Fatimid authors. Divinity, understood as the ultimate source of existence, so transcends the universe that it cannot be its cause; not being a cause, it cannot produce an effect. It rises above existence and non-existence, temporality and eternity, necessity and contingency; no attribute of essence or of relation can apply to divinity. Unknowable and ineffable in himself, God is made manifest by his Imperative (*amr*) or Word (*kalima*), which acts as a first cause and receives all the qualifications of perfection and completeness that were previously denied to divine essence. In other terms, the divine Word is the revealed God, the divinity of which the revealed texts speak. As first cause the Word produces the first Intellect, and through it the universal Soul. Perfect in its essence and its actions, the Intellect governs the intelligible world, whereas the Soul, which is imperfect by comparison with the Intellect, governs and animates the sense-perceptible world.⁴⁵

However, each being in the intelligible world (or “world of the Imperative”, *ʿālam al-amr*) has its equivalent in the physical world (or “world of creation”, *ʿālam al-khalq*). The intelligible entity is the source (*maṣḍar*) of the existant, to which it corresponds in the world of the senses, which is its locus of manifestation (*maḥḥar*). Moreover, the Word, the Intellect and the universal Soul are respectively the archetypes of the Imam, the Proof (*ḥujja*) and the Prophet: this is the ‘Alī – Salmān – Muḥammad triad seen as entities that precede the creation of the physical world. These three entities necessarily have a *maḥḥar*, a locus of manifestation, here below: the uninterrupted succession of countless Imams, Proofs and Prophets who have made their mark on the hierarchy of our world.

The elevated Word, the first Intellect and the universal Soul each have a locus of manifestation (*maḥḥar*) in this world. The locus of manifestation of the elevated Word is the Imam who is situated beyond representation and imagination (*taṣawwur wa taṣwīr*) and rises above description (*waṣf*) and negation [of the attributes] (*tanzīh*). The locus of manifestation of the first Intellect is the highest Proof (*ḥujja*) of the Imam, giving

an emblematic figure of Muslim esotericism, equally respected by Shīʿīs and Sunnī Sufis; see Massignon, “Salmān Pāk”.

45 Naṣīr al-Dīn al-Ṭūsī, *Sayr wa sulūk*, § 24–27, 30, pp. 35–37, 39; Id. *Rawḍat al-taslīm*, 8–20; Jambet, *Convocation*, 129–46.

form to perfection. The locus of manifestation of the universal Soul is the Prophet, who, at the beginning of the cycle, gives souls the capacity to receive this form, which is ultimate perfection.⁴⁶

The three 'loci of manifestation' take the form of a human being with ever-changing features, appearing at times as a newborn child and at others as a haggard old man, and in the four corners of the earth.⁴⁷

All the Imams are just the same as 'Alī [...]. It is he, who has neither a beginning nor an end, but in relation to the people he may appear as a father, as a son, or as a great-grandson. Sometimes he appears as a young person, as a child, or in a mother's womb; [sometimes] in concealment or manifest, as a king, in poverty or oppression, or forgiving and merciful. He makes all these appearances to human eyes from a physical perspective, so that all creatures may sustain their existence.⁴⁸

They take on themselves a body that must submit to the vicissitudes of biological functions (ageing, sickness, suffering, death), but they live in it as one lives in a house, without maintaining any substantial link to this body: this is the so-called "Docetism" that is so dear to ultra-Shī'ī movements.⁴⁹

In the 'Alī – Salmān – Muḥammad triad, the Imam 'Alī is the revealed God, the divine Word, to whom the ineffable God has delegated his powers and his attributes: "God dressed him in the habit of his own unity and granted him his own eternal existence beyond being".⁵⁰ The Imam is thus the centre of the heavens and the pole of the earth, without his presence, the world could not subsist for even a single instant. The angels, the jinn and humankind are placed under his command.⁵¹

As for Salmān, the Proof of the Imam, who receives the influx of science from him as the moon receives the light of the sun, his function consists in organising the *da'wa* and acting as intermediary between the Imam and his disciples. Corresponding to the agent Intellect of the philosophers, his teaching actualises the potential intellect of the dignitaries (*ḥudūd*), so that they are

46 Ṭūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 330, p. 95; Jambet, *Convocation*, 282.

47 Ṭūsī, *Sayr*, § 31–37, pp. 40–43; Id. *Rawḍat*, § 359, p. 106; Jambet, *Convocation*, 302; cf. *ibid.* 103–13.

48 Ḥasan-e Maḥmūd-e Kātib, *Haft bāb*, § 34, p. 63.

49 De Smet, "Les racines docétistes"; Jambet, *Convocation*, 96–97.

50 Ṭūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 351, p. 102; Jambet, *Convocation*, 294.

51 Ṭūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 350–351, p. 102; Jambet, *Convocation*, 293–95; Ḥasan-e Maḥmūd-e Kātib, *Haft bāb*, § 11–13, pp. 52–53.

able in their turn to move the intellect of neophytes from a state of potentiality to one of actuality.⁵²

Finally, Muḥammad, the Prophet, occupies a more modest rank, but is nevertheless indispensable to the economy of salvation. As he is “the man of the Law” (*ṣāhib al-sharī'a*), he belongs to a different ‘realm’ from that of the Imam and his Proof, who are placed under the sign of the Resurrection.⁵³ In Nizārī thought, Law and Resurrection, *sharī'a* and *qiyāma*, are antithetical principles that nevertheless coexist over long periods and ultimately complement each other: “Religious law (*sharī'at*) means the path, which is derived from *shārī'*; resurrection is destination (*maqṣad*)”.⁵⁴ In hiero-history's cyclical timespan there is an alternation between ‘cycles of occultation’ (*adwār al-satr*) and “cycles of manifestation” (*adwār al-kashf*). The ideal cycle of occultation contains six prophetic cycles, each initiated by a Prophet-Legislator who imposes a legalistic religion while the esoteric science that is indispensable to the resurrection of the believer is discreetly taught by the Imam and his Proof to an elite of initiated people, who must keep this secret (*taqīyya*). At the end of the last of these prophetic cycles, the Imam breaks the *taqīyya* by publicly proclaiming his divinity; he then abrogates the *sharī'a* and opens a cycle of manifestation, during which there is neither Prophet, nor Law, nor worship.⁵⁵ This is exactly what occurred at Alamūt in 1164.

Just as the universal Soul must undertake the unrewarding task of manipulating the matter of the physical world, the Prophet must sully himself with the law and submit to his own prescriptions. But his work is as necessary and beneficial as the demiurgic operation of the universal Soul: without a *sharī'a*, humanity could not survive during a cycle of occultation, because human fury would destroy the world and the path of salvation would be closed to all – for without revealed texts and legal prescriptions, there would be nothing from which to extract gnosis by means of esoteric exegesis (*ta'wīl*).⁵⁶ In addition, the Ghadir Khumm episode illustrates the complicity that exists between Muḥammad and 'Alī: the unification of the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*, of legalistic religion and the science of resurrection, for the entire duration of the cycle of Islam.⁵⁷ And, on the model of the universal Soul receiving the forms of the

52 Tūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 381–84, pp. 111–13; Jambet, *Convocation*, 311–13; cf. *ibid.* p. 317 n. 13–14.

53 Tūsī, *Āghāz wa anjām*, § 14–15, p. 56.

54 *Ibid.* § 15, p. 56.

55 Tūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 174–75, pp. 54–55; Jambet, *Convocation*, 214.

56 Tūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 317–35, pp. 92–97; § 412–18, 118–20; Jambet, *Convocation*, 278–85, 324–26; cf. Badakhchani, *Spiritual Resurrection*, 22–23.

57 Tūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 425, p. 121; Jambet, *Convocation*, 329.

Intellect, the Prophet received revelation from the Proof, Salmān, traditionally identified with the angel Gabriel.⁵⁸

The subordinate role of the Prophet, supposed to be stated explicitly in Qur'ān 13:7, "Thou art only a warner",⁵⁹ is accentuated in Nizārī literature written after the destruction of Alamūt by the Mongols in 654/1256. *Faṣl dar bayān-e shenākht-e imām*, by Khayrkhwāh-e Harātī (d. after 960/1553) opens thus:

The book on the recognition of the Imam, who is the locus of manifestation of the Imperative, of the Proof who is the locus of manifestation of the universal Intellect, of the missionary (*dā'ī*), of the higher licentiate (*ma'dhūn akbar*), of the lower licentiate (*ma'dhūn aṣghar*) and of the respondent (*mustajāb*), who are the loci of manifestation of the universal Soul.⁶⁰

When we compare this to the similar passage from al-Ṭūsī's *Rawḍat al-taslīm* cited above, the absence of the Prophet is obvious; here, his place as *mazhar* of the universal Soul is taken by the dignitaries (*ḥudūd*) of the *da'wa*.

In fact, this means that here the Prophet Muḥammad is explicitly designated a *dā'ī*. The angel Gabriel is none other than the *ḥujja* Salmān, who brings the revelation to the Prophet – that is, he trains his missionary for the mission with which he is to be tasked: the elaboration of the sharī'a of Islam. The *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, "If Abū Dharr knew what is in Salmān's heart, he would condemn him as an infidel", is explained as follows: if Abū Dharr were to learn from Salmān that his (Salmān's) position was superior to that of the Prophet, and that 'Alī is the creator and former (*khāliq wa muṣawwir*) of the world, he would consider him to be an infidel and kill him.⁶¹ The author then reports a curious tradition in which 'Ā'isha (!) declares that she never saw the Prophet ascend to the heavens, or receive a visit from the angel Gabriel. In fact, she is said to have reported that Salmān came to see the Prophet occasionally to whisper things in his ear. Afterwards, the Prophet would say that Gabriel had descended and revealed to him such or such a verse from the mouth of God himself.⁶²

Like all his predecessors, the Prophet Muḥammad is the man of law who, during the night preceding the dawn of the resurrection, veils the Imam and the

58 Ṭūsī, *Rawḍat*, § 470, p. 133; Jambet, *Convocation*, 348–49; cf. *ibid.* p. 319 n. 20.

59 Ṭūsī, *Āghāz*, § 14, p. 56.

60 Khayrkhwāh, *Faṣl dar bayān-e shenākht-e imām*, 13.

61 Khayrkhwāh, *Faṣl*, 17; cf. Jambet, *Convocation*, 108–9. Abū Dharr was one of the Prophet's companions. He favoured 'Alī and was thus held in high esteem by Shī'īs.

62 Khayrkhwāh, *Faṣl*, 18.

Proof with his sharīʿa. However, if we take into account their superior position to that of the Prophet, the Imam and his *hujja* are not obliged to observe this law, to the extent that Salmān openly broke it, in front of everyone. On the other hand, ʿAlī, despite his divinity, pretended to conform to the law and, after the Prophet's death, swore loyalty to Abū Bakr. If he had done otherwise he would have destroyed Muḥammad's mission, for no one would have followed the sharīʿa, and the world would have gone to its end, since the time of resurrection had, at that time, not yet arrived. Elsewhere, the sharīʿa is compared to the chain or rope that controls an obstinate donkey. In creating an instrument to keep his adversaries on their toes, the Prophet had usefully contributed to the public good. The treatise ends on this antinomian note, which is characteristic of radical Shīʿism.⁶³

Khayrkhwāh-e Harātī is a representative of Persian Nizarism. On the Indian subcontinent, Nizārī Ismāʿīlism, or *Satpanth* (the "straight Path"), which was spread by the *Pīrs* in the name of their Imam, who lived in Iran, was the vehicle for similar ideas, very much influenced by Hinduism. Thus, the 'brief' version of the famous *ginan Dasa Avatāra* ("the ten avatars"), attributed to Pīr Ṣadr al-Dīn (end of the eighth/fourteenth century) uses grandiose images borrowed in part from Hindu mythology to celebrate ʿAlī's sparkling divinity, presenting him as none other than the tenth and final avatar of the god Vishnu. On the other hand, 'Nabī Muḥammad Muṣṭafā' is mentioned only a single time here, as the "*guru* of the world".⁶⁴ Muḥammad also takes on this subordinate role as *guru* in the 'long' version of the *Dasa Avatāra* that circulated under the name of Imām Shāh (d. 919/1513). Identified with Brahma, *Guru* Muḥammad takes his place as a vizir alongside Shāh ʿAlī, who is 'seated upon cushions' as the tenth avatar of the supreme God Vishnu: "Then, as the tenth form [of Vishnu], the name of the Lord Murtaḍā ʿAlī has been taught [...]. Then know that the *guru* is the Prophet Muḥammad Muṣṭafā."⁶⁵ At the Last Judgement, the Shāh will refuse requests to intercede in favour of people if they have been proffered by *guru* Brahma, (Muḥammad): ultimately, as a divinity, ʿAlī is in sole charge and is under no obligation to obey his advisors.⁶⁶

63 Khayrkhwāh, *Faṣl*, 14, 21–23.

64 Hooda, "Some Specimens of Satpanth Literature", 112–15. For more on the literature of the *ginan*, religious hymns in different Indian languages, including Gujarati, see, among others, Asani, "Ismāʿīlī *gināns*".

65 Khakee, *The Dasa Avatāra*. 474–75; cf. *ibid.* 69, 376, and the commentaries by Khakee, 43–44. As a *guru*, Muḥammad occupies the same rank as Pīr Shams al-Dīn, the celebrated author of *gināns*, and is thus considered to be a close collaborator of the Imam; see Khakee, *The Dasa Avatāra*, 62, 64, 72, 87.

66 Khakee, *The Dasa Avatāra*, 436.

5 Divinity (*lāhūt*), Humanity (*nāsūt*) and Covering (*ghilāf*): The Ṭayyibī Triad

Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn, whom we have to thank for the only Ismā‘īlī biography of the Prophet, of which we spoke at the beginning of the present chapter, was also the author of an impressive manual of esoteric Ṭayyibī doctrine, *Kitāb Zahr al-ma‘ānī*.⁶⁷ Unlike the Nizāris, the Ṭayyibīs (their rivals) had always wanted to perpetuate the Fatimid tradition, including the use of the Arabic language. For them there was no question of downgrading the Prophet Muḥammad and making him ‘Alī’s subordinate. The founding father of Ṭayyibism, Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī (d. 557/1162) himself left no room for doubt on this topic: the three “loci” (*maqām*) of the world of religion, the Prophet, the Heir and the Imams, are all on an equal footing.⁶⁸

This being the case, Ṭayyibī authors frequently cited *ḥadīths* illustrating this equality between Muḥammad and ‘Alī. For instance, the latter is said to have declared: “Muḥammad is the topaz (*al-yāqūt al-ṣafrā’*) and I am the sapphire (*al-yāqūt al-ḥamrā’*)”. Another example: “I and Muḥammad come from one unique light, the light of God the Most High. God ordered that this light should split into two parts. He told the first half: ‘Be Muḥammad!’ and the second half: ‘Be ‘Alī!’”⁶⁹

The content of this second tradition demonstrates that the Prophet and the Heir are considered to be eternal, or rather pre-eternal, principles: God created them a long time before He made the earth. To support this, Ṭayyibī authors draw on a large stock of ancient ultra- Shī‘ī *ḥadīths*, some of which stem from the movement of the Mukhammisa (disciples of Abu l-Khaṭṭāb), which expanded the Muḥammad – ‘Alī pairing to include the five *ahl al-bayt*.⁷⁰ With this aim, Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn cites a long *ḥadīth* in which the Prophet declares:

God created me and he created my brother ‘Alī when there was neither heaven, nor earth, nor paradise, nor hell, nor Tablet nor Pen. When he wanted to create us, he uttered a word (*kalīma*), which became a light and a soul (*nūran wa rūḥan*). He mixed them together and created ‘Alī and me from this mixture. From my light, he made the Throne – I am superior to the throne – and from the light of ‘Alī he created the light of

67 Hamdānī, “A Compendium of Ismā‘īlī Esoterics”.

68 Ibrāhīm al-Ḥāmidī, *Kitāb Kanz al-Walad*, 200–201.

69 Muḥammad b. Ṭāhir al-Ḥārithī, *Kitāb al-Anwār al-laṭīfa*, 123.

70 This renewal of ancient pre-Fatimid doctrines and traditions is a wide-spread phenomenon in Ṭayyibism; see De Smet, “The Intellectual Interactions”, 299–321. For more on Abu l-Khaṭṭāb and the Mukhammisa, see Asatryan, *Controversies*, *passim*.

heaven, ʿAlī being superior to heaven. From al-Ḥasan's light he created the light of the moon and from al-Ḥusayn's light he created the light of the sun, establishing them both [the sun and the moon] as lights for the inhabitants of the earth. [...] From the light of Fāṭima, God Most High created something that took the shape of a candelabrum, and suspended it from the ring (*qurt*) of the Throne, so that it would illuminate (*azharat*) the heavens and the earth. For this reason, Fāṭima is called 'the radiant one' (*al-zahrāʾ*).⁷¹

Thus were created the "silhouettes of light" (*ashbāḥ nūrīn*), which represent the divinity (*lāhūt*) of the Prophet, of the Heir and, by extension, of the Imams who descend from him. On this subject, Idrīs cites a conversation between the fifth Imam, Muḥammad al-Bāqir, and his disciple Jābir b. Yazīd al-Juʿfī. The Imam teaches that the true essence (*ḥaqīqa*) of Muḥammad, which never ceases to exist, is none other than the first created being, the Preceder (*sābiq*) or universal Intellect. This essence is immutable and imperceptible to the senses, as is mentioned in Qurʾān 7: 198: "Thou seest them looking at thee, unperceiving." In order to manifest himself to humanity and bring it the guidance it needs, Muḥammad's *lāhūt* takes human shape; this is Muḥammad's 'humanity' or *nāsūt*. It is a "noble form, subtle and luminous" that believers may perceive if they are pure of soul. Finally, the *nāsūt* is made manifest within a bodily covering (*ghilāf*) that all can perceive – a covering that is susceptible to suffering and death. Al-Bāqir goes on to say that what applies to Muḥammad applies also to Fāṭima. All the calamities that befell her were calamities in appearance only (*ʿalā l-khayāl*): they touched only the veil (*satr*) that hides her divinity. The same is true for the other *ahl al-bayt*, ʿAlī, al-Ḥasan and al-Ḥusayn. Idrīs then confirms what the Imam says by invoking Qurʾān 4: 157, the famous verse on the crucifixion: the Jews crucified and murdered the bodily envelope of Jesus, but not his divinity.⁷²

Idrīs and the other Ṭayyibī authors clearly indicate how the *lāhūt* of the Prophets, the Imams and the Heirs should be understood. It does not mean that the transcendent Creator (*mubdiʾ*) "incarnates himself" in a human figure – this thesis is unanimously rejected as an "exaggeration" (*ghuluww*) and

71 Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn, *Kitāb Zahr al-maʿānī*, 176–77.

72 Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn, *Zahr al-maʿānī*, 179–82; cf. De Smet, "Racines docétistes", 105–6. A recurrent ambiguity occurs in Ṭayyibī texts because of the fact that they refer to Shīʿī *ḥadīths* that make a distinction only between the *lāhūt* and the *nāsūt*, while Ṭayyibism adds a third level, that of the *ghilāf*. Although it is considered to be a subtle body, the *nāsūt* is also corruptible. However, it does not experience sickness and bodily suffering – unlike the carnal covering in which it manifests itself.

condemned as “faithlessness” (*kufṛ*). The divinity of Muḥammad, of ‘Alī and of the Imams is the universal Intellect; they appear on earth in successive prophetic cycles under different names and appearances, but always in their roles as “loci of manifestation” (*maẓhar*) of the Intellect.⁷³ This is a “manifestation” and not an “infusion” (*ḥulūl*) of the divine principle, for there is neither incarnation, nor union of substance. Once again, we find the Docetism that we have already observed in the Nizārī tradition: the divinity “inhabits” the bodily covering just as we live in a house; this house is not part of us and is not physically bound to our body.⁷⁴

Their *nāsūt*, however, is a subtle and luminous body in human form, which serves as a veil (*ḥijāb*) to “mask and soften the blinding light of the *lāhūt*”, of which it is the *maẓhar*.⁷⁵ Often described as a “camphorous body” (*jism kāfūrī*), it can only be perceived by believers, “the holders of divine science and true knowledge”. But everyone who perceives it does so through the lens of his own disposition and according to the purity of his soul. Thus these scholars are in disagreement about the colour of ‘Alī’s *nāsūt*: some see it as white, some as brown and others in other colours.⁷⁶ Generated by a complex celestial alchemy, this luminous body is mortal; at the death of a Prophet or an Imam, the subtle substances that make it up return to the celestial bodies and are reused to make the *nāsūt* of a subsequent Imam.⁷⁷ After this, the *nāsūt* is veiled and protected by a bodily covering (*ghilāf*) that is visible to all. Most Ṭayyibī authors consider this to be a flesh and blood body, mortal and corruptible, although a more Docetic minority sees it as a mere cast, without biological functions.⁷⁸

If the material bodies of Prophets and Imams are to some extent denigrated as mere external coverings, their *lāhūt* and *nāsūt* are on equal footing with each other, because they reflect the equivalence between Muḥammad and ‘Alī, between the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*. Thus, Idrīs quotes a tradition according to which the sixth Imam, Ja‘far al-Šādiq, responds to a question from Muḥammad b. Sinān⁷⁹ about the Prophet Muḥammad and ‘Alī. The Imam declares that the name Muḥammad refers in fact to *Allāh*, the first creature, who proceeds

73 Al-Ḥāmidī, *Kanz al-Walad*, 200–201.

74 Al-Ḥārithī, *al-Anwār al-laṭīfa*, 121.

75 Idrīs ‘Imād al-Dīn, *Zahr al-ma‘ānī*, 279–80.

76 Al-Ḥārithī, *al-Anwār al-laṭīfa*, 112.

77 For a detailed study of this process, see De Smet, “La naissance miraculeuse de l’Imam ismaélien”.

78 De Smet, ‘Racines docétistes’, 100–108.

79 Muḥammad b. Sinān is an emblematic figure of so-called ‘extremist’ Shī‘ism; see Halm, “Buch der Schatten”, 236–40.

from the light of the Creator. Muḥammad is consequently the interior divinity (*al-lāhūt al-bāṭin*), hidden, but made manifest by the name ʿAlī, which refers to the apparent form (*al-ṣūra al-ẓāhira*) of the *nāsūt*. Muḥammad and ʿAlī are thus the two faces of a single reality, the *bāṭin* made manifest by the *ẓāhir*, the *lāhūt* exteriorised by the *nāsūt*. This is said to be the esoteric meaning of the *ḥadīth* of Ghadīr Khumm, “Whoever is my friend is ʿAlī’s friend”: Allāh, or Muḥammad, is hidden in his *bāṭin* but is made manifest by his *ẓāhir*, ʿAlī, who represents his *nāsūt*.⁸⁰ This complementary relationship between Muḥammad and ʿAlī, between the *lāhūt* and the *nāsūt*, is present in the essence of each Prophet and Imam.

6 Conclusion

For Ismāʿīlīs, in keeping with an outlook that is widespread in Shīʿism, the figure of the Prophet of Islam is inseparable from that of his Heir, ʿAlī, who is the guarantor of the esoteric dimension of the revelation. Their relationship easily becomes metahistorical, since Muḥammad and ʿAlī exemplify all the Prophet – Heir pairings that have succeeded each other since the time of Adam and Seth. Simultaneously, they are elevated to the cosmological level in relation with the Intellect and the universal Soul.

Ismāʿīlism is the direct heir of the Shīʿī currents of the early centuries of Islam, often originating from Kūfa, and often accused by their adversaries of exaggerating the status of the Prophets and the Imams to the point of deifying them. This accusation of *ghuluww* (exaggeration) was, inevitably, extended to the Ismāʿīlīs, who refute it unanimously. Despite all their doctrinal differences, they agree on one vital point: God, the ultimate Creator, remains inaccessible and cannot manifest himself directly in his messengers. These messengers are the ‘loci of manifestation’ (*maẓhar*) of the first created principles, such as the Word, the Intellect or the Soul.

The nature of the Muḥammad–ʿAlī pairing is, however, conceived in different ways during different periods and within different religious currents. “Fatimid

80 Idrīs ʿImād al-Dīn, *Zahr al-maʿānī*, 163–64. This tradition, reported by Muḥammad b. Sinān, is part of the beliefs of the Khaṭṭābī current, which considered Muḥammad to be the *bāṭin* of God, and ʿAlī or the Imams to be his *ẓāhir*. This does not conform to Ismāʿīlī doctrine, in which, inversely, Muḥammad is associated with the *ẓāhir*, and ʿAlī or the Imams with the *bāṭin*. But Idrīs reclaims this tradition in order to illustrate the complementary nature of the relationship between the two poles of this pairing. This kind of recycling of ancient traditions drawn from different Shīʿī movements introduces some elements of confusion into Ṭayyibism.

orthodoxy" wanted at all costs to avoid the antinomianism that follows from an overvaluation of esoteric exegesis over the letter of the law. Missionaries from this current, such as al-Mu'ayyad and Nāṣir-e Khosraw, upheld the superiority of Muḥammad, who combines the *ẓāhir* and the *bāṭin*, over 'Alī and the Imams, whose science depends entirely on the Prophet. Corresponding to the Intellect and the Pen, the Prophet, as the giving principle, represents the male element, whereas his "joint companion" 'Alī, as the receiving principle (associated with the universal Soul and the Tablet), forms the feminine component of the pair. This couple exists under Qur'ānic law, so the woman, of inferior status, submits to the man and must obey him.

However, this vision was not shared by all Ismā'īlīs of the Fatimid period, and some dissenting voices were still heard. One example is the former Qarmatian, al-Sijistānī, who was well-known for his antinomianism and who, with his theory of the four principles, opened up the possibility of a shift in the balance of power between Muḥammad and 'Alī. The sequence: Intellect, Soul, Prophet, Heir, corresponding respectively to the procession of emanation (*ta'yīd*), the demiurgy of the material world (*tarkīb*), the composition of the revelation (*ta'līf*) and its return through esoteric exegesis (*ta'wīl*), lends itself to a hierarchically vertical reading – in which case 'Alī is at the bottom of the ladder. However, the author also encourages a cyclical reading, on the model of the Neo-Platonic cycle of procession and return. In this reading, 'Alī, the principle of return, finds himself corresponding with the Intellect, principle of the procession, whereas Muḥammad takes the place of 'Alī on the lowest echelon, corresponding with the universal Soul.

This inversion becomes the position of Nizārī Ismā'īlism. The Great Resurrection of 1164 marks the beginning of a 'cycle of manifestation' and the abrogation of the shari'a; it represents the triumph of esoteric religion over the law. The Imam openly proclaims his 'divinity': he is the divine Word, and his companion, the Proof, is the universal Intellect. The Prophet, the 'man of the law' who is useful in his own time, is relegated to the lowest rank: he corresponds to the universal Soul, if he is not downgraded to the status of simple "missionary" or *guru*, as in Nizārī texts dating from after the fall of Alamūt. The former triad of the *ghulāt*: *ayn* ('Alī), *mīm* (Muḥammad) and *sīn* (Salmān), is once more primal, but in a modified order that accentuates its radical nature: *ayn*, *sīn*, *mīm* – with Muḥammad being inferior to both 'Alī and Salmān.

The rival branch of Ṭayyibīs, however, expresses its intention of staying loyal to Fatimid tradition by claiming an equivalence between Muḥammad and 'Alī. But, following the example of the Nizāris, it also returns to ancient Shī'ī traditions exalting the Prophet, 'Alī and the other *ahl al-bayt* as five principles that existed before the creation of the material world. These archetypes, which are

connected to the first Intellect, represent the divinity (*lāhūt*) of the Prophets and Imams, who show themselves to their followers in human form (their humanity or *nāsūt*), within luminous bodies that are inside a covering (*ghilāf*) of flesh and blood. The relationship between Muḥammad and ʿAlī thus typifies that between the *lāhūt* and the *nāsūt* of each Prophet and each Imam: at the heart of each pairing there is strict equality and perfect balance.

It is clear from this study that after the fall of the Fatimid Empire Ismāʿīlism returned to the ancient Shīʿi traditions from which it sprang, although the Nizārī and Ṭayyibī branches did so on paths that were divergent and sometimes contradictory.

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