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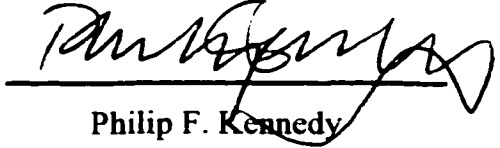
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Commentary (*tafsīr*) and Allusion (*ishāra*):

A Comparative Study of Exoteric and Ṣūfī Interpretation of the

Qur'ān in Classical Islam

by

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ABSTRACT

This study is a comparative textual analysis of exoteric and Ṣūfī commentaries on the Qur'ān from the classical period of Islam (10th to 15th centuries), which demonstrates a relationship between hermeneutical assumptions and exegetical styles. Part One examines statements made about the act of interpretation, its appropriate parameters, and the role of the interpreter. Part Two provides background information on specific exegetes before analyzing sections from their commentaries on three portions of the Qur'ān: verse 3:7, the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, and the Light Verse.

On the basis of these writings, the conclusion is made that exoteric commentators viewed the Qur'ān as a public message of salvation to all mankind and considered their task to be the explanation and clarification of philological, theological, and legal issues raised by the text. Their comments were considered to be sound if they were based on authenticated interpretations transmitted from the Prophet Muhammad and his Companions and Followers, and the valid reasoning and linguistic expertise of the commentator. The language of exoteric exegesis reflects these two sources of knowledge. While the transmitted material from the earliest period of Islam consists of relatively simple explanations and didactic narratives and messages, the classical commentator's response to this material utilizes the

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systematic reasoning and arguments of increasingly more complicated theological, philosophical, and legal discussions.

Classical Ṣūfī commentators accepted the validity of this kind of exoteric exegesis and most wrote it themselves. However, they insisted that the ambiguities of the Qur'ān represent an endless source of discoverable meanings beyond this basic understanding of the text. They believed that knowledge of these additional meanings can be granted only by God Himself to those who have prepared themselves through rigorous spiritual practice and discipline. The interpretations resulting from this kind of personal experience were not always considered necessary or beneficial to communicate publicly. What was recorded reflects its experiential source in the more visceral and aesthetic discourses of metaphor, wordplay, rhyme and narrative, and in the consistent attempt to contextualize the message of the Qur'an for the individual believer.

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INTRODUCTION

The interpretation of a sacred text is truly an awesome task for a believer to undertake. For Muslims, the Qur'ān represents the word of God revealed to Muhammad, and the interpretation of such a text requires a certain audacity. How can one begin to say what God "meant" by His revelation? How does one balance the praiseworthy desire to understand the meanings of the Qur'ān with the realistic fear of reducing it to the merely human and individualistic? Is interpretation an art, a science, an inspired act, or all of the above?

Commentators from the classical time period of Islam, the 10th to the 15th centuries, answered these questions in different ways based on their different assumptions regarding the nature of the Qur'ānic text and the sources of knowledge considered acceptable for its interpretation. The two types of commentaries which will be studied here are exoteric (*zāhir*) and Sūfī. Exoteric commentaries are commentaries which are primarily based on transmitted interpretative material from the Prophet and his Companions and Followers, and independent reasoning, while Sūfī commentaries are primarily based on mystical inspiration and experience. The words which exoteric and Sūfī commentators chose to describe their interpretative endeavours tell us something about their methods and objectives.

Classical exoteric commentators intially used two terms, commentary (*tafsīr*) and interpretation (*ta'wīl*). *Tafsīr* is the explanation, expounding, or interpretation of something, the act of rendering a thing apparent, plain or clear. *Ta'wīl* literally

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means the act of returning something to its source, hence the act of interpretatation or explanation. In the beginning of the Classical period *ta 'wil* was considered by many to be a synonym for *tafsir* but over time it developed a distinctive meaning, that of interpretation which turns a Qur'ānic verse from its apparent or obvious meaning to another possible, but less obvious, meaning. In this latter meaning, it refers to allegorical or metaphorical interpretation. Once the term acquired this connotation it was rarely used by exoteric commentators to describe their own commentaries.[1]

Classical Sūfī commentators described their exegetical activity with words such as "understanding (*fahm*)," "allusion (*ishāra*)," "striking similitudes (*darb al-mithāl*)," and "interpretation (*ta 'wil*)". Occasionally they used the word "commentary (*tafsir*)," but this was usually reserved for exoteric commentary. The term which became the most widely used was "allusion (*ishāra*)." For Sūfīs, *ishāra* referred to the different types of ambiguous discourse used to describe the knowledge which came to them in mystical states. While these forms of discourse were considered the best suited to describe this experiential knowledge, their ambiguity served as well to hide knowledge from those ill prepared to receive it and to protect Sūfīs from those who otherwise might attack them as heretics.[2]

It would be wrong to consider exoteric and Sūfī commentators as mutually exclusive groups. Many of the exoteric commentators studied here have Sūfī

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[1] For discussions of the terms *tafsir* and *ta 'wil*, see Rippin's article "Tafsir," Poonawala's "Ta'wil" in EI², Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* 1:126-7 and 2:2397, and Tabatabai's "The Concept of Ta'wil in the Qur'an."

[2] For discussion of the term *ishāra*, see Nwyia's article on "Ishāra," Knysh's article on "Ramz" in EI² and Bürgel's "Symbols and Hints".

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sympathies and most of the Ṣūfī commentators wrote exoteric commentaries in addition to their Ṣūfī works. Instead, these terms are meant only to distinguish different types of commentary. It should be pointed out that the terms "exoteric" and "Ṣūfī" are labels most often applied by outsiders to these groups. An early exoteric commentator refers instead to his predecessors as "the people of interpretation (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) and later exegetes use the word "commentators (*mufassirūn*)." The Ṣūfīs used many different phrases to refer to themselves, including "people of allusion and understanding (*ahl al-ishāra wa 'l-fahm*)," "people of meanings (*ahl al-ma'ānī*)," "people of love (*ahl al-ishq*)," "gnostics (*'ārifūn*)," "verifiers (*muhaqqiqūn*)" and "people of states (*mawājid*)," to name just a few examples from these commentaries. However, for the sake of simplicity, I have used the terms "exoteric" and "Ṣūfī" because these words convey the idea of two very different approaches to the Qur'ān.

Part I of this study addresses exegetical hermeneutics, that is to say what exoteric scholars and Ṣūfīs have to say about the process of interpretation. Part II presents selections from the commentaries themselves on three separate passages of the Qur'ān. The first of these is verse 3:7, a verse which addresses the nature of the Qur'ān and those who interpret it. The second passage is verses 18:60-82 which contains the story of the prophet Mūsā (Moses) and his journey with a wise man named al-Khaḍir. The third passage is verse 24:35, a verse which describes God as "the light of the heavens and the earth" and presents a similitude for this light.

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This work is not intended to be a comprehensive study of either exoteric or Ṣūfī commentary. Western scholarship has only just begun to scratch the surface of the vast literature included within the genre of Qur'ānic commentary, and this study represents only a small contribution towards a greater appreciation of the enormous variety of Islamic exegetical thought.[3] There are many issues raised by these texts which go beyond the scope of this study, such as the relationship between Shī'ī and Ṣūfī commentaries and the parallels between Islamic, Christian and Jewish exegesis. I have focused on a reasonable cross-section of exoteric and Ṣūfī hermeneutical and exegetical works in the hopes of making comparisons which illuminate the respective assumptions and objectives of these commentators.

The translations in this work are my own unless otherwise noted. I have benefitted greatly from the work of previous translators and the choice to use my own translations is due to a concern for consistency in terminology rather than a criticism of the translations of my predecessors. The translations of the Qur'ān have been made after consulting the translations of Arberry, Ali and Asad. I have taken the liberty of omitting the frequent phrases of blessings which occur in these texts for the sake of brevity and clarity. The transliteration system is that of the Encylopedia of Islam with the exception of *j* for *jīm* and *q* for *qāf.*

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[3] For a survey of the literature in this field see Rippin's "The Present Status of *Tafsīr* Studies" and his article "Tafsīr" in EI², as well as the forthcoming 4 volume *Encyclopaedia of the Qur'ān*, ed. Jane Dammen McAuliffe (Leiden: Brill).

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I. HERMENEUTICS

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1. THE METHODOLOGY OF EXOTERIC COMMENTARY (*tafsir*)

Interpretation of the Qur'ān was, from the death of the Prophet onwards, an area of controversy in which commentators attempted to justify their endeavors and determine the proper procedures for attaining knowledge of the Qur'ān without distorting its meaning or engaging in mere speculation.[1] The fact that some Muslims in the earliest period of Islam objected to any form of commentary whatsoever can be seen by the discussion of the necessity of interpretation in al-Ṭabarī's (d.923) introduction to his Qur'ānic commentary *Jāmi' al-bayān*, written some three hundred years after the death of the Prophet.[2]

Al-Ṭabarī on the necessity of interpretation

Against those Muslims who felt that any interpretation of the Qur'ān was forbidden, al-Ṭabarī demonstrated its praiseworthy nature by quoting Traditions regarding Companions of the Prophet who had learned commentary directly from the Prophet himself, or who had commented on the Qur'ān after his death. He found

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[1] This study addresses only the Classical period of *tafsīr*. For information on the Formative period, see McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians: An Analysis of Classical and Modern Exegesis*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1991, 13-28; Rippin, *Approaches to the History of the Interpretation of the Qur'ān*, Oxford: Clarendon Press 1988, and "The Present Status of *Tafsir* Studies," *Muslim World* 72 (1982) 224-238; Versteegh, *Arabic Grammar and Qur'ānic Exegesis in Early Islam*, Leiden: E. J. Brill 1993, 55-95; and Wansbrough, *Quranic Studies* Oxford: Oxford University Press 1977.

[2] For biographical information on al-Ṭabarī, see Part II.

further proof for the legitimacy of interpretation in Qur'ānic verses which exhort man

to ponder (*tadabbur*) and be mindful of (*tadhakkur*) the Qur'ān,[3]

> because it would be absurd to say to someone who does not understand what
> is said to him and cannot comprehend its interpretation (*ta 'wīl*), "Take heed
> from that which you do not understand and from words and explanations
> which you do not know," unless what is meant is that he should understand
> and comprehend it, and then he ponders it (*yatadabbaru*) and takes heed from
> it (*ya 'tabiru bihi*).[4]

It is impossible to command someone to ponder the Qur'ān if that person is ignorant

of its meaning as understood by speakers of the Arabic language. Without an

understanding of these meanings (*ma 'ānī*), commands given to human beings are as

meaningless as if they were given to beasts.[5]

In other words, al-Ṭabarī believes that there is a minimum amount of

knowledge regarding the Qur'ān which is essential for every Muslim, and that the

purpose of exegesis is to provide this knowledge. He explicitly adopts this as his

own goal in writing the *Jāmi' al-bayān*, by saying that he will provide explanations

of the meanings of verses of the Qur'ān which might otherwise confuse those "who

have not suffered the discipline of the sciences of the Arabic language and whose

knowledge of [the Qur'ān] is not deeply rooted in the multifarious aspects found in

eloquent native speech."[6] Al-Ṭabarī claims that his commentary "will incorporate

everything which people need to know about this Book."[7] This rather curious

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[3] 38:29, 39:27-28
[4] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān* 1:36; English trans. by Cooper, *The Commentary on the Qur'ān* 36.
[5] Ibid. 1:37
[6] Ibid. 1:4; English trans. 9.
[7] Ibid.

statement could be taken to mean that his commentary provides the most basic information needed for Muslims to be able to respond to the Qu'ràn's call to "ponder" and "reflect" upon it, or that his commentary includes everything which can be said without resorting to mere conjecture.

As for Muslims who believe Qur'ānic interpretation is forbidden, al-Ṭabarī insists they have incorrectly understood the *ḥadīth* they cite to support their view. Rather than suggesting a complete prohibition of interpretation, these *ḥadīth* demonstrate instead the praiseworthy cautiousness of many of the Companions who had knowledge of the Prophet's interpretations, but feared their ability to transmit this information accurately.[8]

Al-Ṭabarī on *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*

A prohibition on a specific kind of interpretation is found in a Tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās:[9] The Prophet said, "Whoever speaks of the Qur'ān from his personal opinion (ra'y), let him take his seat in the Fire."[10] Another Tradition has Abū Bakr al-Ṣiddīq saying, "What earth would carry me, what heaven shelter me, if I were to speak of the Qur'ān from my personal opinion (ra'y) or of what I do not know?[11] Al-Ṭabarī draws two conclusions from these reports. The first is that the use of personal opinion (ra'y) is not permissible for the interpretation of those

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[8] Ibid. 1:37-39; English trans. 37-39.
[9] ʿAbd Allāh b. al-ʿAbbās (d.ca.687) is the Companion of the Prophet most often quoted in *tafsīr*.
[10] Ibid. 1:34; English trans. 34.
[11] Ibid. 1:35; English trans. 34.

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Qur'ānic verses which can only be understood by means of an explanation of the Prophet. The second is that a *ra'y* interpretation will be blameworthy even if it is true because the commentator has spoken without the authoritative knowledge which can come only from the Prophet. He will not be like someone who is sure he is right (*muqīn annahū ḥaqq*) but rather like someone who guesses (*khāriṣ*) and surmises (*ẓānn*).[12] This is al-Ṭabarī's interpretation of a Tradition from Jundub in which the Messenger of God says, "Whoever speaks of the Qur'ān from his own personal opinion (*ra'y*), and is correct, has nonetheless erred."[13]

Al-Ṭabarī on the principles of sound interpretation

Having demonstrated the necessity of interpretation and the importance of avoiding mere personal opinion, al-Ṭabarī attempts to define what constitutes sound interpretation. On the basis of several verses of the Qur'ān,[14] al-Ṭabarī establishes three categories of interpretation:

1) the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of parts of the Qur'ān which is known only to God and hidden from man, such as when the Hour of the Resurrection will begin,

2) the interpretation (*ta'wīl*) of parts of the Qur'ān known only to the Prophet and, through his explanation or other indication, to his community, involving God's commands to mankind, and

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[12] Ibid. 1:35; English trans. 35.
[13] Ibid. 1:35; English trans. 35.
[14] 16:44, 16:64, 3:7

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3) the interpretation (*ta 'wīl*) of parts of the Qur'an known only to those who possess

knowledge of the Arabic language.[15]

He then quotes Ibn 'Abbās' four aspects (*awjuh*) of exegesis (*tafsīr*):

> There are four aspects to exegesis (*tafsīr*): an aspect which the Arabs know
> from their language, an exegesis which no one may be excused from not
> knowing, an exegesis which the learned ('*ulamā* ') know, and an exegesis
> known only to God.[16]

While Ibn 'Abbās' categories do not mention the Prophet, al-Ṭabarī is careful to

emphasize the centrality of his role, both in the above mentioned categories of

interpretation and in his description of the most correct interpreters with regards to

reaching the truth (*aḥaqqu 'l-mufassirīn bi-iṣābati 'l-ḥaqq*). They are

1) the clearest in proof (*awḍaḥuhum ḥujjaᵗ*) in their interpretations based on the

interpretation of the Prophet in the most authentic traditions, and

2) the clearest in proof (*awḍaḥuhum burhāᵗ*) based on knowledge of the Arabic

language, and

3) those whose interpretation and commentary does not deviate from what has been

said by the predecessors (*salaf*) among the Companions and the Followers, and the

men of knowledge in the community.[17] Elsewhere, al-Ṭabarī tells us that his method

will be to state that which has come down to him whose proof (*ḥujja*) is agreed upon

(*ittafaqat 'alayhi*) in the community (*umma*). Where there has been disagreement in

the community, he will explain the reasoning of their different teachings (*madhāhib*)

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[15] Ibid. 1:33-34, 41; English trans. 32-3, 40
[16] Ibid. 1:34; English trans. 34.
[17] Ibid. 1:41; English trans. 40.

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and clarify in the most succinct way possible that which seems the most sound to him.[18]

Although commentators after al-Ṭabarī often repeated the arguments for the necessity of interpretation, there does not seem to have been any remaining opposition for this debate; the only real remaining controversies concerned what kind of commentary was permitted. How much the interpreter's role went beyond the transmission of authenticated Traditions and the explanation of Arabic grammar and words, as well as the problem of what exactly constituted the prohibited *tafsīr bi'l ra'y*, continued to be a problem for Muslims long after al-Ṭabarī. Most commentators showed their respect for the interpretative tradition transmitted from the Companions and the Followers while extending legitimacy to the comments of later generations of Muslims as well, a position al-Ghazālī (d.1111)[19] was influential in defending. Opposing this position were those like the reformer Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328)[20] who insisted upon the overriding excellence and sufficiency of the tradition transmitted from the Companions and the Followers, and who criticized many of the later generations of Muslim commentators for including corrupted material in their *tafsīrs* which distorted the true message of the Qur'ān.

Al-Ghazālī on *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*

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[18] Ibid. 1:5; English trans. 9. The procedure al-Ṭabarī describes here is that of the independent exercise of judgement (*ijtihād*).

[19] For biographical information on al-Ghazālī, see Part II.

[20] For biographical information on Ibn Taymiyya, see Part II.

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Al-Ghazālī's views on Qur'ānic interpretation can be divided into those

pertaining to the acceptable parameters of commentary and those pertaining to the

methodology of Ṣūfī exegesis in particular. In this section the first of these two

views will be analyzed.

Al-Ghazālī's understanding of what constitutes *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* is set forth in

his *Iḥya 'ulūm al-dīn*.[21] His objective was to defend Ṣūfī commentary in particular,

but the argument works as well for any exegete wishing to go beyond the

interpretations of the first generations of Muslims. The argument was, in fact,

adopted by one of the most famous exoteric exegetes, al-Qurṭubī (d.1272),[22] who

quotes al-Ghazālī almost word for word in the introduction to his *tafsīr, Jāmi' li-*

aḥkām al-Qur'ān, although he never mentions his name.[23] Al-Naysābūrī (d.1327),[24]

whose commentary entitled *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān* contains both extensive exoteric

material taken from Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī (d.1209)[25] and al-Zamaksharī (d.1144)[26]

and esoteric material taken from the Kubrawī Ṣūfī Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī Dāya

(d.1256) provides an unattributed abridgment of Ghazālī's arguments.[27] The

relevant passage from al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā* is as follows:

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[21] Al-Ghazālī *Iḥya' 'ulūm al-dīn*, 5: 128-81; English trans. by Abul-Quasem, *The Recitation and Interpretation of the Qur'an* 86-104.
[22] For biographical information on al-Qurṭubī, see Part II.
[23] Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qur'ān* 1:33-4. Of course it is possible that al-Ghazālī is quoting someone else's work without attribution. He frequently quotes Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb* in the *Iḥyā'*, but this does not appear to be the case for this passage. The content and style of writing resembles other works of Ghazālī, so I tend to think they are his own words.
[24] For biographical information on al-Naysābūrī, see Part II.
[25] For biographical information on Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, see Part II.
[26] For biographical information on al-Zamaksharī, see Part II.
[27] Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān* 1:56-7.

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What is intended by [the prohibition on commentary of the Qur'ān] must either be a restriction to what has been transmitted (*naql*) or heard [from authorities] (*masmū*), abandoning any deduction (*istinbāt*) and independent understanding (*istiqlāl bi'l-fahm*), or what is intended by it is something else. It is completely wrong to think that what is intended is that one should not speak about the Qur'ān except according to what one has heard, for several reasons.[28]

Al-Ghazālī presents four arguments for not confining commentary to the transmitted tradition. First, the *hadīth* traceable to the Prophet explain only part of the Qur'ān. Most of the transmitted exegetical tradition comes from Companions such as Ibn 'Abbās and Ibn Mas'ūd and represents their own opinions, not what they heard from the Prophet himself. It can therefore be called *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*. Secondly, the material from these Companions and other early exegetes is contradictory in some cases. Thirdly, there is a distinction between interpretation and revelation. This is demonstrated in the Prophet's prayer for Ibn 'Abbās, "O God, instruct him in religion and teach him interpretation (*ta'wīl*)." Al-Ghazālī asks, "If interpretation was what has been heard [from authorities] (*masmū*) like what has been revealed (*tanzīl*), what would be the purpose of giving him that?"[29] Fourthly, the Qur'ān confirms the possibility of deduction (*istinbāt*) independent of transmitted knowledge in verse 4:83: *Truly, those among them who are able to deduce it (yastanbitūnahu) would know it* (4:83).[30]

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[28] Al-Ghazālī 5:136; English trans. 90. Cf. al-Qurṭubī 1:33 and al-Naysābūrī 1:56.
[29] Al-Ghazālī 5:140.
[30] Al-Ghazālī 5:137-41; English trans. 90-2. Cf. al-Qurṭubī and al-Naysābūrī, ibid.

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Having discussed what the *ḥadīth* on *tafsīr bi'l ra'y* does *not* mean, al-Ghazālī

continues with what he believes *is* the correct interpretation of the ban on *tafsīr bi'l-*

ra'y:

The prohibition is for one of two reasons: The first is where someone has an opinion (*ra'y*) regarding something to which he is inclined by his nature (*ṭab'*) and his passion (*hawā*), so he interprets (*yata'awwalu*) the Qur'ān in accordance with his opinion and passion so that he can argue for the authenticity of his own objective (*gharaḍ*). If he did not have that opinion and passion, that meaning would not have appeared to him from the Qur'ān.

Sometimes this is done knowingly like the one who argues for the authenticity of his innovation (*bida'*) by means of some verses of the Qur'ān, knowing that that is not what is meant by the verse, but he seeks to deceive his opponent by it.

Other times it may be done unknowingly, but, since the verse has a potentiality for more than one meaning, his understanding of it inclines to the sense which agrees with his objective, that view having been preferred because of his opinion and passion. He has commented by means of his opinion, i.e., his opinion has led him to that commentary. If he did not have that opinion, then he would not have preferred that sense.

Other times he may have a sound objective, and so he seeks some indication (*dalīl*) for that from the Qur'an and then proves it with something he knows was not intended for that....This is like one who calls for struggle with the hard heart and says, God says, *"Go to Pharoah. Truly, he has transgressed."*(20:24) and he points to his own heart and indicates that that is what was intended by Pharoah. This kind is what some preachers do with sound intentions of beautifying their talk and attracting the listener, but it is prohibited. The *bāṭiniyyā*[31] have utilized this with corrupt intentions to deceive people and invite them to their false school of thought. In accordance with their opinion (*ra'y*) and school of thought, they bring the Qur'ān down to matters which they most certainly know are not what was intended by it.

These categories are the first of the two reasons for the prohibition of *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y.* What is meant [in the *ḥadīth*] by personal opinion (*ra'y*) is the false personal opinion which agrees with passion (*hawā*) without sound personal effort (*al-ijtihād al-ṣaḥīḥ*). Personal opinion (*ra'y*) includes the true and the

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[31] The term *bāṭiniyya* was a derogatory term applied specifically to Ismā'īlīs because of their distinctive method of interpreting the Qur'ān according to its inner sense (*bāṭin*). It was also applied generally to any group (including the Ṣūfīs) which interpreted the Qur'ān allegorically or symbolically, especially if the external sense (*ẓāhir*) of the text was abandoned. See Hodgson's "Bāṭiniyya" article in EI[2].

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false. That which agrees with passion (*hawā*) can be designated by the term "*ra'y*."[32]

Al-Ghazālī is making a distinction between two types of personal opinion (*ra'y*).

Sound personal effort (*al-ijtihād al-ṣaḥīḥ*) is praiseworthy while opinion biased by

passion (*hawā*) is not. It is blameworthy whether or not the interpreter is aware of

his distortion of the meaning of the Qurān, and whether or not his intention is sound,

as in the case of the preacher, or unsound, as in the case of the *bāṭiniyya*. His

example of the sound-intentioned but nonetheless blameworthy interpreter who

suggests that what is meant by Pharoah is the hard heart is a strange one, given that

this is exactly the kind of interpretation practiced by some Ṣūfīs. Al-Ghazālī himself

justifies it in his other works, developing a theory of correspondences, as we shall

see in the section on Ṣūfī methodology.

Ghazālī continues with the second reason for the ban on *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*:

The second is where someone hastens to comment on the Qur'ān on the basis
of the external sense of the Arabic without seeking help from listening [to
authorities] (*samā'*) and transmission (*naql*) regarding the strange words
(*gharā'ib*) of the Qur'ān, its obscure and alternate expressions, its abridgment,
elision, ellipsis, and word order. One who does not master the exoteric aspect
of commentary and hastens to deduce meaning purely on [his own]
understanding of the Arabic language will have made many errors and will
have joined the group of those who interpret the Qur'ān by personal opinion
(*ra'y*).
    Transmission (*naql*) and hearing [from authorities] (*samā'*) in the external
aspect of commentary (*tafsīr*) are necessary for him first, so that by means of
it, he will be wary of situations of error. After that, understanding (*fahm*) and
deduction (*istinbāṭ*) will be expanded. The strange words (*gharā'ib*) which
can be understood only through hearing [from authorities] (*samā'*) are many.
We will point out some of them so that one can seek information about words
like them and know that it is not permissible to neglect the memorization of

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[32] Al-Ghazālī 5:141-4; English trans. 92-3. Cf. al-Qurṭubī 1:33-4 and al-Naysābūrī 1:56-7.

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exoteric commentary first; there is no hope of reaching the inner sense (*bāṭin*) before mastering the exoteric sense (*zāhir*). One who claims to understand the secrets of the Qur'ān without mastering exoteric exegesis is like one who claims to have reached the inside of the house before crossing through the door, or the one who claims to understand what Turks mean in their speech without his having understood their language. Truly, exoteric commentary is the same as learning the language which is necessary for understanding, and there are many areas which can only be learned by hearing from [authorities] (*samā*) and there is no hope in reaching the inner sense (*bāṭin*) before mastering the external sense (*zāhir*).[33]

Al-Ghazālī is stating that transmitted information *is* essential in order to properly

understand the Arabic language of the Qur'ān, even for one who knows Arabic. Like

al-Ṭabarī, he is stressing the importance of understanding the language of the Qur'ān

before one can respond to the call to ponder and be mindful of it, and the value of

exoteric commentary in providing that basic linguistic understanding.

We have seen above how al-Ghazālī distinguishes between praiseworthy and

blameworthy personal opinion (*ra'y*). One of the areas in which he finds the use of

personal effort (*ijtihād*) praiseworthy is in the interpretation of passages of the

Qur'ān whose literal meaning can be definitively shown to be absurd. He addresses

this problem in his *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, developing a methodology for ascertaining

which Qur'ānic verses require a non-literal interpretation and which must be

accepted without interpretation.

Al-Ghazālī on the principles of sound interpretation

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[33] Al-Ghazālī 5:144-5; English trans. 94; Cf. Al-Qurṭubī 1:34 and al-Naysābūrī 1:57.

Al-Ghazālī's *Faysal al-tafriqa* is a book which deals with taxing others with

disbelief (*takfīr*), written to console an unnamed colleague upset by attacks on al-

Ghazālī himself.[34] Al-Ghazālī states that the problem of excessive *takfīr* stems from

a lack of distinction between those who deny the message of the Prophet and those

who have different interpretations of that message. Those who deny the message of

the Prophet are guilty of disbelief (*kufr*), a serious charge in Islamic societies. Those

who differ in their interpretations of that message may either be correct or wrong. If

they are wrong, they are guilty of innovation (*bida'*) or error (*khata'*), which are

lesser charges than disbelief.

Interpretation is essential for those verses of the Qur'ān and *hadīth* whose

meaning, if taken literally, would be absurd. This interpretation is incumbent on

every Muslim, however literal-minded, if they are not to prove themselves

completely stupid and ignorant. However, since al-Ghazālī agrees that some

interpretations *do* constitute disbelief, he provides a system for evaluating

interpretative activity.[35]

The system is based on a conception of existence (*wujūd*) as comprised of

five degrees (*marātib*), each of which has a different relationship to interpretation.[36]

The first degree is essential (*dhātī*) or absolutely real existence (*al-wujūd al-mutlaq*

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[34] Al-Ghazālī, *Faysal al-tafriqa*, English trans. by Richard J. McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment*, 145-174.

[35] For a comparison of the views of al-Ghazālī and the philosopher Ibn Rushd (d. 1198) on interpretation (*ta'wīl*), see Bello, *The Medieval Islamic Controversy Between Philosophy and Orthodoxy*. Another work by al-Ghazālī which attempts to define the parameters of acceptable *ta'wīl* is his *Qānūn al-ta'wīl*, which will be discussed in Part II.

[36] Al-Ghazālī 9-15; English trans. 151-5.

al-ḥaqīqī), made up of the heavens and the earth, the animals and the plants which exist whether or not we perceive them. Al-Ghazālī asserts that there is no need for interpretation (*ta 'wīl*) of this degree of existence because it entails what is manifest (*al-ẓāhir*). Significantly, al-Ghazālī includes in this category the Throne (*'arsh*), the Footstool (*kursī*) and the Seven Heavens mentioned in the Qur'ān and the Traditions of the Prophet, elements of the Unseen world which he insists are solid, real things and therefore not subject to interpretation.

The second degree of existence is sensible (*ḥissī*), that which we see but which has no existence outside of our perceptions. Included in it are the dreams and hallucinations of ordinary people and the visions of prophets and saints. An example of a Tradition which corresponds to this level of existence is the one in which the Prophet says, "The Garden was shown to me in the breadth of this wall." The person who has proof (*burhān*) that physical bodies do not intermingle and that the small cannot contain the large, knows that this means that the likeness of the Garden appeared (*tamaththala*) to the senses (*al-ḥiss*), so that it was as if the Prophet was witnessing it.

The third degree of existence is the imaginary (*khayālī*), referring to those things which we create in our imaginations which are absent from our senses, e.g. the likeness of an elephant which exists in our brain but not outside of it. The Tradition used to illustrate this degree of existence is one in which the Prophet relates that "It

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was as if I were looking at Yūnus..."[37] Al-Ghazālī interprets this to mean that the

Prophet was not really seeing (*lam yakūn ḥaqīqa al-naẓar*), but it was *like* seeing

(*ka 'l-naẓar*). However, he seems unsure of his own example, saying that it would not

be farfetched to say he was really seeing it, as described in the sensible degree of

existence.

The fourth degree of existence, mental (*'aqlī*) existence, is based on the

difference between a thing's meaning (*ma 'nā*) and its form (*sūra*). The hand is the

form (*sūra*) for the meaning (*ma 'nā*) "the ability to strike." When the Qur'ān or

ḥadīth speak of God's hand, the person who has proof (*burhān*) of the absurdity of

God's having a sensible or imaginable hand attests to God's having the power to

strike, give, and withhold, which is the the meaning or reality of "hand."

The fifth degree of existence is analogical (*shabahī*) and refers to something

which does not exist in any of the prior degrees of existence and can only be

understood by its resemblance (*ishbāh* or *munāsaba*) to the attributes or qualities of

something else. The examples al-Ghazālī gives are the qualities such as anger,

longing, joy and patience, when they are attributed to God. The person who has

proof (*burhān*) knows that God cannot really possess qualities which imply

imperfection, so he understands anger, for example, as the will to punish.

It is the last two degrees of existence which produce the most radical

interpretations through the use of metaphor (*majāz*) and figurative speech (*istiʿāra*).

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[37] The prophet Jonah.

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Al-Ghazālī insists that this kind of metaphorical interpretation is unavoidable. He supports his claim by stating that even Aḥmad ibn Ḥanbal, the man most opposed to this form of interpretation, found himself unable to avoid it completely.[38] Having established the necessity of metaphorical interpretation, al-Ghazālī sets forth a rule of interpretation (*qānūn al-ta'wīl*) so as to define the parameters of its permissibility.

In any given text of the Qur'ān or *ḥadīth*, the interpreter must accept the literal sense (*ẓāhir*) based on its essential existence (*al-wujūd al-dhātī*) unless he has proof (*burhān*) of its absurdity. If it is absurd, he looks to the next degree of existence for its meaning, unless this too is absurd. The metaphorical interpretation required by the mental and analogical degrees will only be permissible if the interpreter has proof of the absurdity of interpretation based on all the other levels.

Al-Ghazālī concludes that disagreements over interpretation are based on the matter of proof, with the Ḥanbalī declaring there is nothing inconceivable about God's being described by the direction "above," and the Ash'arī declaring there is nothing inconceivable about the ocular vision of God. To avoid internal strife in the Muslim community, al-Ghazālī has two different recommendations, one for the common man untroubled by doubts in his faith, and one for intellectuals whose faith needs more proof. For the common man, he recommends the unquestioning acceptance of the literal meanings of the Qur'ān, *ḥadīth*, and the interpretations of the

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[38] Aḥmad ibn Hanbal (d.855) was the founder of the Ḥanbalī School of Law. Al-Ghazālī states that there were three *ḥadīth* which Ibn Hanbal interpreted metaphorically, but cites only two of these interpretations. One example will suffice here. The Prophet said, "The believer's heart is between the two fingers of the Merciful," Ibn Hanbal interpreted these fingers as the touch of the angel and the devil, by means of which God upsets the hearts of men.

Companions of the Prophet. Speculative thinkers whose beliefs are more troubled may cautiously use this method of going beyond the literal sense in order to strengthen their faith. They should not, however, charge others with disbelief, unless there is denial of one of the roots of the faith (belief in God, in His Messenger, and in the Last Day), or one of its branches when based on the soundest Traditions.[39]

One of the examples al-Ghazālī gives to illustrate those who deny the fundamental tenets of Islam, and therefore deny the message as a whole, are the philosophers who deny God's knowledge of particulars or the physical reality of the Garden and the Fire in the Afterlife. He charges them with having abandoned the literal meaning of the Qur'ān and the most sound *ḥadīth* on these matters without any valid proof of the inconceivability of these concepts. What is particularly damning to them is their belief that the physical Afterlife is merely a fiction devised for those unable to grasp the intellectual Afterlife. This belief implies that the Prophet engaged in a kind of lie, however well-meaning. This, according to al-Ghazālī, is what places them at the first degree of atheism (*zandaqa*).[40]

As for those who interpret matters which do not pertain to Islam's most basic beliefs, al-Ghazālī advises against accusations of disbelief, although one may still make accusations of innovation and error. Al-Ghazālī uses Ṣūfī interpretation as an example. He states that a certain Ṣūfī found it inconceivable that the prophet Ibrāhīm

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[39] Traditions based on multiple transmission (*bi-tawattur*). Ibid. 18-21; English trans. 157-9
[40] Ibid. 23-5; English trans. 160-1.

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(Abraham) could have believed that a star, the moon or the sun could be God.[41] He

considered this as proof that the celestial bodies mentioned represent something non-

physical, the angelic luminous substances (*jawāhir malakiyya nūrāniyya*).

Al-Ghazālī is critical, saying that this rejection of the literal sense is not based on

proofs (*barāhīn*) but on conjectural indications (*dalālāt zanniyya*). Nonetheless, he

insists that the Ṣūfī should not be taxed with disbelief as this matter is not one of the

fundamental beliefs.[42]

Al-Ghazālī does not identify himself as a Ṣūfī here, but rather says, "This is

their kind of interpretation." He adds:

> They have interpreted (*ta 'awwalū*) "the staff" and "the shoes" in God's
> words, *"Take off your shoes"* (20:12) and *"Throw down what is in your right
> hand"* (20:69). Perhaps conjecture (*zann*) in matters such as these which do
> not relate to the fundamentals of belief is analogous to proof (*burhān*)
> regarding the fundamentals, so there should be no accusations of disbelief or
> innovation. To be sure, if the opening of this door were to lead to confusing
> the hearts of the common people, then the author should be particularly
> charged with innovation in everything whose mention has not been related on
> the authority of the first generations (*salaf*).[43]

Al-Ghazālī is on uncertain ground here, because he has moved beyond his just stated

rule of interpretation which justifies interpretation only when the literal sense is

absurd. Clearly, Mūsā's staff and shoes can exist literally and do not have to be

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[41] The reference is to Qur'ānic verses 6:76-79: *When the night covered (Ibrāhīm), he saw a star. He said, "This is my Lord," but when it set he said, "I do not love that which sets." When he saw the moon appear, he said, "This is my Lord," but when it set he said, "If my Lord does not guide me, I will surely be among the people who lose their way." When he saw the sun appear, he said, "This is my Lord. This is the greatest." But when it set, he said, "O my people, I am free of your polytheism. Surely, I have turned my face to the One who created the heavens and the earth, in pure faith. I will never be one of the polytheists."*

[42] Ibid. 21-3; English trans. 159-60. As we shall see in the section on Ṣūfī methodology al-Ghazālī is referring to his own interpretation here.

[43] Ibid. 23; English trans. 160.

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interpreted metaphorically. But al-Ghazālī seems unaware of the inconsistency in his

argument and advocates tolerance of this kind of interpretation so long as there is no

clear harm. Clear harm would be caused by a Ṣūfī claiming to have been released

from the obligations of religious law. Al-Ghazālī recommends that such a Ṣūfī be

killed because, even if he is still a believer, his actions open a door to licentiousness

(*ibāḥa*) which cannot be closed, thereby causing great harm to religion.[44]

In the above quote, al-Ghazālī shows his respect for the first generations of

Muslims (*salaf*) as the model against which innovation may be judged. His respect,

however, is tempered by his understanding of the problems inherent in the material

related from them, as discussed in the section on *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* in the *Iḥyā'*. Al-

Ghazālī viewed the interpretative tradition from the first generations (*salaf*) as a

model for the independent exercise of judgement (*ijtihād*) and not as conclusive

proof (*ḥujja*) which demands acceptance.[45] Commentators who shared his viewpoint

were more likely to search for answers to questions raised by the Qur'ānic text by

other means, freely adopting the vocabulary and methods of disciplines outside of

ḥadīth scholarship such as theology and philosophy.

Others, most notably Ibn Taymiyya, were alarmed by this use of outside

disciplines, judging them to be heretical in both methodology and content. Instead,

they insisted upon the overwhelming superiority and sufficiency of the

interpretations of the first generations (*salaf*). Ibn Taymiyya outlined the basic

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[44] Ibid. 28; English trans. 163.
[45] On al-Ghazālī's rejection of the Companion's opinions as *ḥujja*, see his *Mustaṣfā* 1:400-9.

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principles for this kind of interpretation, which came to be known as "interpretation by the transmitted tradition" (*tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*) in his book entitled the *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-tafsīr.*[46]

Ibn Taymiyya on the principles of sound interpretation

According to Ibn Taymiyya, the most correct way to comment on the Qur'ān is to refer to the following sources in descending order until the explanation is clear: the Qur'ān, the Sunnah of the Prophet, the statements of the Companions of the Prophet (*saḥāba*), and the statements of the Followers of the Companions of the Prophet (*tābi'ūn*).[47]

This hierarchy of sources is not what makes Ibn Taymiyya's methodology unique, but rather the assumptions behind it.[48] The first and most important of these assumptions is that the Prophet completely explained the meaning of the entire Qur'ān to his Companions.[49] The second assumption is that the Companions and the Followers have greater authority in interpreting the Qur'ān than any generation of

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[46] The contrasting term "interpretation by personal opinion" (*tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*) is often used to describe Mu'tazilī *tafsīr*, but it should be noted that this is not a term which any Muslim commentator would have used to describe his exegesis because of the *ḥadīth* prohibiting it. In his influential study on *tafsīr*, Dhahabi further divides *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* commentaries into those which are praiseworthy (*maḥmūd*) and those which are blameworthy (*madhmūm*). As examples of the first he mentions the commentaries of al-Bayḍāwī, Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, and al-Naysābūrī. Examples of the second are the commentaries of al-Zamakshari and other Mu'tazilīs (*Al-tafsīr wa'l-mufassirūn* 1:284-7). The terms are problematic because they reflect religious judgements regarding these commentaries rather than accurate descriptions of their methodology.

[47] Ibn Taymiyya, *Muqaddima fī uṣūl a-tafsīr* 93-102; English trans. by Ansari 53-9. An excerpt has also been translated into English by McAuliffe.

[48] Syafruddin, "The Principles of Ibn Taymiyya's Qur'anic Interpreation" 113-118.

[49] Ibn Taymiyya 46-7; English trans. 12-5. Al-Ghazālī had stated that the material attributed to the Prophet relates to only part of the Qur'ān. (*la yuṣādifu illā fī ba'ḍi'l-Qur'ān*), Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā* V:137.

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Muslims after them, to the point where their consensus is conclusive proof (*hujja*).[50]

Ibn Taymiyya differed from other Sunnī Muslim commentators, not so much in his degree of reverence for the Prophet and the pious predecessors (*salaf*), but in his confidence in the comprehensiveness, accuracy and unity of the material transmitted from them.

Ibn Taymiyya knew that his argument for the superiority of the early interpretative tradition was weakened by the existence of divergent interpretations from the Companions and the Followers. His response to this was to insist that there is very little real disagreement in their *tafsīr*. Most of what appears to be disagreement among the first generations (*salaf*) represents not contradiction (*ikhtilāf tadādd*) but diversity (*ikhtilāf tanawwuʿ*). This diversity occurs either because the same ideas are expressed with different linguistic expressions, or because different examples are chosen to explain Qur'anic terminology.[51]

For Ibn Taymiyya, knowledge is either the result of authentic transmission (*naql muṣaddaq*) or verifiable deduction (*istidlāl muḥaqqaq*). The real and contradictory disagreements which occurred in *tafsīr* after the first generations (*salaf*) are the result of errors in these two areas. Errors in *ḥadīth* are avoidable since Ibn Taymiyya believes that it is entirely possible to ascertain the veracity of the most important *ḥadīth*, those which deal with what is necessary for religion. Sound

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[50] Ibn Taymiyya 46-7, 96-8, 100-2; English trans. 12-5, 54-5, 58-9. See Syafruddin, for other references in Ibn Taymiyya's works regarding the authority of the *salaf*, 50-9.
[51] Ibn Taymiyya 48-67, 97-100; English trans. 16-27, 56-8. The existence of divergent *salafī* interpretations was another of al-Ghazālī's reasons for not confining commentary to transmitted material. (*Iḥyāʾ* 5:137-9; English trans. 91).

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interpretation is based on these *hadīth* and the best commentators are those who are the most knowledgeable regarding *hadīth*. However, most of the *hadīth* related to *tafsīr* are problematic, a fact of which Ibn Taymiyya was aware. He quotes Ibn Hanbal as saying, "The *hadīth* regarding three things have no chain of narration (*isnād*): *tafsīr*, military campaigns, and battles." These *hadīth* are *mursal*, meaning that they are the words of the Prophet related on the authority of the Followers without the names of the Companions linking the two. Ibn Taymiyya explains that these *hadīth* can still be verified when reported through more than one person, after ruling out collusion or merely accidental agreement. His acceptance of *mursal hadīth* is necessary for his argument that the Prophet explained the whole of the Qur'ān and that this information has come down to us intact through his Companions and Followers.

The veracity of *hadīth* which relates to unimportant details, however, is not always verifiable. Ibn Taymiyya gives a few examples of this kind of material, citing controversies over the color of the dog of the People of the Cave, the name of the boy Khidr killed, etc. Much of this material comes from the People of the Book (*isrā'īliyyāt*) and is acceptable to relate so long as it does not contradict the truth found in the Qur'ān and *hadīth*. Ibn Taymiyya says that it is best to cite all the different views in controversies of this sort, and then to point out the insignificance of these issues, so that attention will not be diverted from more important matters.[52]

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[52] Ibid. 68-82; English trans. 28-41.

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The second real source of difference and contradiction in *tafsīr*, according to

Ibn Taymiyya, is related to errors in what can be known by deduction (*istidlāl*).

Mostly these errors have been the result of either preconceived ideas which are read

into the Qur'ān, or attention paid only to the words and not the context of the

revelation. Examples of the first type are the Mu'tazilīs, who twist the words and

meanings of the Qur'ān until it fits their false doctrines, and the Shī'īs, who interpret

verses allegorically, believing that they have found praise of 'Alī and his descendants

and censure of Abū Bakr, 'Umar and 'Uthmān. Examples of the second type include

many Ṣūfīs, preachers, jurists and others who have the correct meanings, but the

wrong Qur'anic verses to support these meanings. Ibn Taymiyya tells us that this is

the case for much of what the Ṣūfī Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī (d.1021) includes

in commentary, *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr*.[53]

The term *tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr* is a reasonable one to describe Ibn Taymiyya's

methodology because of the priority he gives to transmitted material, but it does not

convey the equally important concept of verifiable deduction (*istidlāl muḥaqqaq*).

Ibn Taymiyya agrees with al-Ghazālī and others that reason (*'aql*) can never

contradict revelation or tradition, but insists that apparent contradictions will never

be resolved by giving priority to reason. Instead, the contradiction will be resolved

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[53] Ibid. 83-92; English trans. 42-52. Although Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of al-Sulamī is somewhat
mild here, Böwering writes that Ibn Taymiyya issued highly critical judgements against his *tafsīr* in
his *Fatāwā* (Böwering, "Qur'ān Commentary of as-Sulamī," 52). For biographical information on al-
Sulamī, see Part II.

by determining authentic tradition[54] and by performing textual analysis through

verifiable deduction (*istidlāl muḥaqqaq*).[55] *Tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* is commentary without

knowledge,[56] and as Ibn Taymiyya states, he believes true knowledge results from

only these two processes.[57]

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[54] Obviously this applies only to the *ḥadīth* and traditions, and not to the Qur'ānic text whose soundness is accepted without question.

[55] The contrasting view can be seen in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī, who states that since reason (*'aql*) is the basis of tradition (*naql*), reason should be preferred when a contradiction between reason and tradition exists. When this contradiction occurs, that which has been revealed or transmitted should be either interpreted or entrusted to God. (Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition," 257, 271-2).

[56] Ibn Taymiyya 102-7; English trans. 60-5.

[57] Ibid. 68; English trans. 28.

28

2. THE METHODOLOGY OF ṢŪFĪ COMMENTARY

At the same time in the 10th century that al-Ṭabarī was addressing the
hermeneutics of exoteric commentary, his Ṣūfī contemporaries were demonstrating
their own distinctive understanding of the Qur'ān and man's relationship to it. While
al-Ṭabarī attempted to make comprehension of the Qur'ān manageable, claiming that
his commentary included all necessary knowledge regarding the Qur'ān, Ṣūfīs wrote
of the endlessness of the task of comprehension, emphasizing the vastness of the
knowledge to be found in the Qur'ān and man's potential for discovering level upon
level of meaning. Like al-Ṭabarī, they used Qur'ānic verses and Traditions to justify
and define their specific views on interpretation.

The plenitude of discoverable meaning

Although no exotericist would have disputed the awesome
comprehensiveness of the Qur'ān, the Ṣūfīs emphasized this plenitude of meaning in
their discussions on interpretation, thereby suggesting its discoverability. They cited
such Qur'ānic verses as *We have left nothing out from the Book* (6:38), *We have
counted everything in a clear register* (36:12), *There is nothing whose treasures are
not with us and we only send it down in a known measure* (15:21),[1] and, *If all the
trees on the earth were pens and the sea seven seas after it to replenish it, the words
of God would not be depleted* (31:27)[2] The image of the Qur'ān as an unending sea

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[1] Quoted in Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma* ' 73.
[2] Quoted in Al-Ghazālī, *Iḥyā* ' 5:99; English trans. 68; Rūzbihān, *'Arā 'is al-bayān* 3.

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was a particularly popular one, often referenced indirectly as time went on. Al-

Ghazālī embellishes the image in the beginning of his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*:

> I will rouse you from your sleep, you who have given yourself up to
> recitation, who have taken the study of the Qur'ān as a practice, who have
> seized upon some of its outward meanings and sentences. How long will you
> wander about the shore of the sea with your eyes closed to its wonders? Was
> it not for you to sail through its depths in order to see its amazing things, to
> travel to its islands to pick its delicacies, to dive to its bottom and become
> rich from obtaining its jewels? Don't you despise yourself for losing out on
> its pearls and jewels by continuing to look only to its shores and its exoteric
> aspects?
> Haven't you heard that the Qur'ān is an ocean from which the knowledge of
> all ages branches out just as rivers and streams branch out from the shores of
> the ocean? Don't you envy the happiness of people who have plunged into
> its overflowing waves and seized red sulfur (*al-kibrīt al-aḥmar*),[3] who have
> dived into its depths and taken out red rubies, shining pearls and green
> chrysolite, who have roamed its shores and gathered gray ambergris and fresh
> blooming aloes wood, who have clung to its islands and found an abundance
> in their animals of the greatest antidote (*al-tiryāq al-akbar*) and pungent
> musk?[4]

Al-Kāshānī (d.1330)[5] has a similar passage in the introduction to his commentary on

the Qur'ān:

> Their souls (*nufūs*) are purified by [the Qur'ān's] exoteric sense (*ẓāhir*)
> because it is water which flows copiously. The thirst of their hearts (*qulūb*) is
> quenched by its inner sense (*bāṭin*) because it is a surging sea. When they
> wish to dive in order to extract the pearls of its secrets the water crashes over
> them and they are submerged in its current. Yet the river beds of insights
> (*fuhūm*) flow from this deluge according to their capacities, and the streams
> of realizations (*'uqūl*) flow from the water trickling from their rivers. The
> river beds bring forth piercing jewels and pearls on the shores and the streams
> cause flowers and fruit to bloom upon the banks. Hearts (*qulūb*) take from
> the overflow as much as the can, filling their laps and sleeves, while souls

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[3] Said to be an elixer used to change silver into gold. See Ullmann's article "Al-Kibrīt" in EI².

[4] Al-Ghazālī, *Jawā'ir al-Qur'ān* 8-9; English trans. by Abul Quasem, *The Jewels of the Qur'ān* 19-20.

[5] For biographical information on al-Kāshānī, see Part II.

(*nufūs*) set out to harvest the fruits and lights, grateful for finding them, their desires fulfilled by them.[6]

When al-Kāshānī speaks of the exoteric (*zāhir*) and inner (*bāṭin*) senses of the Qur'ān, he draws upon an understanding of levels of meaning in the Qur'ān already well-developed by Ṣūfīs before him. Although the dichotomy of the exoteric and the inner has its basis in the Qur'ān,[7] its importance in hermeneutical discussions is more closely tied to a *hadīth* attributed to 'Abdullah b. Mas'ūd (d. 652). It is the *hadīth* most frequently quoted by the Ṣūfīs as proof of the many dimensions of the Qur'ān. Al-Ṭabarī quotes it as well but provides a significantly different interpretation of it. The *hadīth* is as follows:

> The messenger of God said, "The Qur'ān was sent down in seven *harfs*. Each of these *harfs* has a back (*zahr*) and and belly (*baṭn*). Each of the *harfs* has a border (*hadd*) and each border has a lookout point (*muṭṭala'*).[8]

Al-Ṭabarī includes this Tradition among several other Traditions about the seven *harfs*, and devotes several pages to the controversy over the meaning of the word "*harf*", concluding that the seven *harfs* refer to both dialects (*alsun*) of the Arabs and aspects (*wujūh*) of the revelation.[9] The meaning of this particular Tradition, according to al-Ṭabarī is as follows:

> "each *harf* has a border (*hadd*)" means that each of the seven aspects (*awjuh*) has a border delimited by God which no one may go past. As for his words "and each *harf* has a back (*zahr*) and a belly (*baṭn*)," its back (*zahr*) is that which becomes apparent (*al-zāhir*) in recitation and its belly (*baṭn*) is its interpretation (*ta'wīl*) which is hidden (*baṭana*). His words, "and each of the

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[6] Al-Kāshānī, *Ta'wīlāt* 3.

[7] 6:20, 6:151, 7:33, 31:20, 57:3.

[8] Al-Ṭabarī 12; English trans. 16. This Ḥadīth is also recorded in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Abū Bakr Muḥammad b. Ḥibbān (d.965), 1:243.

[9] Ibid. 11-42; English trans. 16-31.

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borders has a lookout point (*muttala'*)" means that each of the borders in which God has delineated the permitted and prohibited and the rest of His revealed laws (*sharā'i'*) has a measure of the rewards and punishments of God which will be seen and beheld in the Hereafter and met at the Resurrection, just as 'Umar b. al-Khaṭṭāb said, "If everything in the world belonged to me, assuredly I would ransom myself with it against the terror (*hawl*) of the lookout point (*muttala'*).[10]

For al-Ṭabarī, the inner sense (*bāṭin*) refers to events in the future, knowledge of which is not given to man until the Day of Resurrection. The word *ta'wīl* has different meanings in the Qur'ān; al-Ṭabarī seems to be using it here in its sense of the unfolding of events, not interpretation.[11]

Roughly contemporary with al-Ṭabarī, Sahl al-Tustarī's (d.896)[12] interpretation of this *hadīth* shows us a Ṣūfī understanding which is different in two important respects. The first is in its designating knowledge of the external sense (*ẓāhir*) as public ('*āmm*) and knowledge of the inner sense (*bāṭin*) as private (*khāṣṣ*). The second difference is in the interpretation of the lookout point (*muttala'*). Using the tradition from 'Umar, al-Ṭabarī understands this as an awesome vantage point on the Day of Resurrection. Al-Tustarī, on the other hand, understands the *muttala'* as a vantage point of the heart, an overview from which one can understand what God meant by certain verses of the Qur'ān while still in this life.

> Every verse of the Qur'ān has four kinds of meanings (*ma'nan*): an exoteric sense (*ẓāhir*), an inner sense (*bāṭin*), a limit (*hadd*), and a lookout point (*muttala'*). The exoteric sense is the recitation (*tilāwa*), the inner sense is understanding (*fahm*), the limit is what [the verse] permits and prohibits, and

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[10] Ibid. 32; English trans. 31. Lane understands the meaning of *muttali'* in this saying of 'Umar as the "*place whence one will look down* on the day of resurrection," *Arabic-English Lexicon* II: 1870.
[11] For an analysis of the different ways in which the word *ta'wīl* in used in the Qur'ān, see Tabatabai's "The Concept of Al-Ta'wil in the Qur'ān."
[12] For biographical information on Sahl al-Tustarī, see Part II.

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the lookout point is the elevated places (*ashrāf*) of the heart (*qalb*) [beholding] what was intended by it (*murād*) as understood from God Almighty. The knowledge of the exoteric sense is public knowledge (*'ilm 'āmm*) and the understanding of its inner sense and what was intended by it is private (*khāṣṣ*).[13]

Al-Tustarī does not specify in this passage exactly who possesses this public and private knowledge. He uses the terms "elect" (*khuṣūṣ*) and common people (*'umūm*) throughout his *tafsīr*, but does not elaborate on what he means by this distinction.[14]

Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996),[15] writing about a hundred years after al-Tustarī in his *Qūt ul-qulūb*, interprets the *ḥadīth* in much the same way as al-Tustarī, adding details regarding exoteric and esoteric knowledge, and confirming the view that the lookout point (*muṭṭala'*) refers to a vantage point attainable in this life. He seems to reference the saying of 'Umar found in al-Ṭabarī, but manages to soften its frightening aspect by a play on words:

> Its back (*ẓahr*) is for experts in the Arabic language (*ahl al-'arabiyya*), its inner sense (*bāṭin*) is for the people of certainty (*ahl al-yaqīn*), its limit (*ḥadd*) is for the exotericists (*ahl al-ẓāhir*), and its lookout point (*muṭṭala'*) is for the people of elevated places (*ahl al-ashrāf*) who are the gnostics (*'ārifūn*), loving and fearing; they have beheld (*'iṭṭala'ū*) the kindness (*luṭf*) of the One who looks down (*muṭṭali'*) after having feared the terror (*hawl*) of the lookout point (*muṭṭala'*).[16]

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[13] Al-Tustarī, *Tafsīr* 2-3. A similar interpretation is attributed to 'Alī in Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān*, 4 and Sulamī's *Haqā'iq at-tafsīr* (see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence in Classical Islam* 140).

[14] Böwering, 232.

[15] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī (d.996) was a Persian who grew up in Mecca and became part of the circle of al-Junayd (d.910) there. He later studied with Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj in Baghdād. His *Qūt al-qulūb* was extremely influential among Ṣūfīs, both in its original form and through al-Ghazālī's incorporation of it into his *Iḥyā'*. The *Qūt al-qulūb* is a relatively conservative Ṣūfī work which contrasts with al-Makkī's later treatise *'Ilm al-qulūb* which expresses more esoteric doctrines (Böwering, *Mystical Vision* 25-8).

[16] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt ul-qulūb* 102.

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By the time of al-Ghazālī, the lines seemed to have been even more clearly drawn between literalists and those who claimed access to deeper meanings of the Qur'ān. Without providing his own interpretation for the Ibn Mas'ūd *hadīth*, al-Ghazālī rhetorically asks what the *hadīth* means if Qur'ānic meanings are only to be found in that which has been transmitted from the early exegetes. He rather bluntly states that "the one who claims that the Qur'ān has no other meaning than what exoteric exegesis has provided, should know that he has acknowledged his own limitations and therefore is right with regards to himself, but is wrong in an opinion which brings everyone else down to his level."[17]

In his *'Ara'is al-bayān*, Rūzbihān al-Baqlī (d.1209)[18] sees the dichotomy between exotericists and Ṣūfīs as part of God's plan in Creation:

> Then he gave the external reins of [the Qur'ān] to the hands of the exotericists (*ahl al-ẓāhir*) among the scholars ('*ulamā*') and the wise (*hukamā*') so that they introduce its precepts (*ahkām*), limits (*hudūd*), regulations (*rusūm*), and laws (*sharā'i*), and He reserved the unseen of the secrets of His speech and the hidden subtleties of His signs (*āyāt*) for the best of His people (*ahli safwatihi*) over and He disclosed Himself in His words by the attribute of unveiling (*kashf*), eyewitnessing ('*iyān*), and explanation (*bayān*) to their hearts (*qulūb*), spirits (*arwāh*), intellects ('*uqūl*), and innermost secrets (*asrār*).
>
> He taught them the sciences of His realities (*haqā'iq*) and the phenomena of His intricacies (*daqā'iq*). He purified the degrees of their intellects by the unveiling of the lights of his Beauty. He sanctified their understandings by the splendor of His Majesty. He made them the places for the hidden deposits of the symbols (*rumūz*) of His speech, the obscurities of His secrets deposited in His Book, the subtlety of His allusions (*ishārāt*) to the sciences of the ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) and [other] difficulties of the verses. He Himself informed them of the meanings of that which He hid in the Qur'ān so that they would come to know by means of His causing them to

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[17] Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'* 5:129; English trans. 87.

[18] For biographical information on Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, see Part II.

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know. He anointed their eyes by the light of His nearness and communion (*wiṣāl*). He showed them the unseen mysteries of the brides (*'arā'is*) of different kinds of wisdom (*ḥikam*), the gnostic sciences (*ma'ārif*), and the meanings of the innermost understanding and innermost secret, the exoteric sense (*ẓāhir*) of which is a precept (*ḥukm*) in the Qur'an and inner sense (*bāṭin*) of which is an allusion (*ishāra*) and unveiling (*kashf*) which God (*al-Ḥaqq*) reserves for His purified ones and His greater friends (*awliyā'*) and His exiled beloved among the sincere and close companions (*muqarribūn*).

He veiled these secrets and marvels from others, those among the scholars of the external sense (*'ulamā' al-ẓāhir*) and the exotericists (*ahl-rusūm*) who have an abundant portion of the abrogating and the abrogated, and the comprehension, knowledge and gnosis of the permitted and prohibited, the limits and rules.[19]

While Ṣūfīs used the term "exotericists" (*ahl al-ẓāhir* or *ahl al-rusūm*), they did not call themselves "esotericists" (*bāṭiniyya*) because this was a derogatory term applied to those who rejected the literal sense of the Qur'ān and the exoteric practices of Islam, especially the Ismā'īlīs. None of the Ṣūfīs studied here rejected the external aspects of practice and knowledge, considering these the necessary prerequisites for proceeding with the inward aspects, as we have seen in the passage from al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā'*. The distinction for the Ṣūfīs was based on their awareness of multiple meanings. They were the elect because they knew inner realities unknown to people who see only the outward forms of things.

Al-Naysābūrī, in his interpretation of the Ibn Mas'ūd *ḥadīth*, echoes the thoughts of Rūzbihān. He states that the exoteric sense (*ẓāhir*) of the Qur'ān is what scholars (*'ulamā'*) know, and the inner sense (*bāṭin*) is what is hidden from them, and he adds, "and we speak of it as we have been commanded and entrust the knowledge

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[19] Rūzibihān 1:2-3.

of it to God most High." Al-Naysābūrī provides both exoteric and esoteric

definitions for the word *muttala'*. The first repeats the tradition of 'Umar found in

al-Ṭabarī regarding the lookout point on the Day of Resurrection. The second

definition confirms the Ṣūfī belief in the possibility of acquiring this vision in the

here and now. The *muttala'* is "the point of ascent (*maṣ'ad*), a place to which one

arrives where one understands [a thing] as it is (*yafhamu kamā huwa*)."[20]

Al-Kāshānī's commentary on the *hadīth* interprets the back (*zahr*) and the

belly (*batn*) as exoteric exegesis (*tafsīr*) and esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*).[21] He

understands the limit (*hadd*) as the place "where understandings of the meaning of

the words end" and the lookout point (*muttala'*) as the place to which one rises up

from the limit and "beholds (*yattali'u*) the witnessing of the all-knowing King."[22]

In all of these interpretations of the Ibn Mas'ūd *hadīth*, the division of the

Qur'ān is basically twofold, exoteric and esoteric. The exoteric is the external sense

(*zahr*) and the commands and prohibitions which constitute the limit (*hadd*). The

esoteric is the inner sense (*batn*) and the gnostic's lookout point (*muttala'*). In al-

Simnānī (d.1336),[23] the last and latest of the Ṣūfīs discussed here, this twofold sense

is expanded into a fourfold hierarchical interpretative process.

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[20] Al-Naysābūrī, 1:26.

[21] Although the terms *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* were interchangeable for al-Ṭabarī, al-Kāshānī uses them in one of the ways that they came to be understood, as denoting exoteric exegesis and esoteric interpretation. For a discussion of the different definitions of these terms as they were understood towards the end of the Classical period, see al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī ulūm al-Qur'ān*, 173-4.

[22] Al-Kāshānī, 4.

[23] 'Alā al-Dawla a-Simnānī (d.1336) was a member of the Kubrawiyya Ṣūfī order who is famous for refuting the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujūd* ascribed to Ibn 'Arabī (d.1240). He is said to have completed the Qur'ānic commentary begun by the founder of his order, Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā

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O seeker of the inner meaning of the Qur'ān! You should first study the literal level of the Qur'ān and bring your body into harmony with its commands and prohibitions. Secondly, you should occupy yourself with purifying your inner being so that you may comprehend the hidden meaning (*baṭn*) of the Qur'ān according to the instruction of the Merciful One and the inspiration of the Holy Angel. Thirdly, you should contemplate the gnosis of its limit (*ḥadd*) in the realm of hearts. [Only then] will you be distinguished with witnessing its point of ascent (*muṭṭala*] without thought or reckoning.[24]

The method of interpretation for each of the four levels of the Qur'ān is different.

The commentator on the exoteric dimension of the Qur'ān should rely exclusively upon his external sense of hearing through which he learned the verses himself. The mystic should rely on inspiration (*ilhām*) to comment on the esoteric dimension, while the accomplished Sufi who has truly declared the unity of God (*muwaḥḥid*) should only comment on the limit with divine permission . The individual who has attained the secret of the essence should not comment at all, but proceed in a faltering manner into the point of ascent of the Qur'ān.[25]

Al-Simnānī relates the four levels of meaning to four realms of existence: the

Human Realm (*nāsūt*), the Kingdom (*malakūt*), the Omnipotence (*jabarūt*) and the

Divinity (*lāhūt*).[26] Al-Ghazālī had provided a precedent for relating textual

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(d.1220) and his disciple Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī Dāya (d.1256). This commentary exists only in manuscripts at the present time, but an analysis of the thought of al-Simnānī, based primarily on these manuscripts can be found in Elias' *Throne Carrier of God.*

[24] Al-Simnānī, *Tafsīr najm al-Qur'ān*, in Elias 107-8. The English translation here is entirely that of Elias based on his reading of manuscript editions of al-Simnānī's *Tafsīr* in Istanbul and Damascus.

[25] Ibid. 108. Elias is paraphrasing al-Simnānī.

[26] The cosmological terms which al-Simnānī uses in his interpretation have a long history in Ṣūfism and can be traced to several sources (See Gardet's "'Ālam al-Djabarūt, 'Ālam al-malakūt, 'Ālam al-mithāl" and Arnaldez's "Lahūt and Nāsūt." in EI[2]) Elias suggests that al-Simnānī may have been the first to use these terms consistently in a hierarchial fashion. (Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God* 154-7.) The word "Kingdom" (*malakūt*) is Qur'ānic (6:75, 7:185, 23:88, and 36:83), and the word "Omnipotence" (*jabarūt*) occurs in the *ḥadīth*, but with meanings not clearly related to levels of existence. The terms "humanity" (*nāsūt*) and "divinity" (*lāhūt*) are not used in either the Qur'ān or the *ḥadīth*. The Ṣūfī al-Hallāj (d.922) used them, and there is some disagreement over whether he might have adopted these terms from Arab Christians or Imāmī theologians (Arnaldez 613). Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī used all four of these terms along with a fifth realm of Ipseity (*hahūt*) (Glassé, *The Concise Encyclopedia of Islam*, 128-92). The five realms were also discussed by the followers and systematizers of Ibn 'Arabī's thought in what was called the Five Divine Presences (*al-ḥaḍarāt al-ilāhiyyat al-khams*) (Chittick, "The Five Divine Presences").

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interpretation to levels of reality in his *Mishkāt al-anwār*, with his simpler version of two worlds, complicated only by the pairs of alternative terms provided for them: the spiritual (*rūhānī*) and the physical (*jismānī*); the sensory (*hissī*) and intelligible (*'aqlī*), the higher (*'ulwī*) and lower (*suflī*); and the world of dominion and witnessing (*'ālam al-mulk wa'l-shahāda*) and the world of the hidden and the Kingdom (*'ālam al-ghayb wa'l-malakūt*).[27]

In addition to the Ibn Mas'ūd *hadīth*, the Sūfīs found validation for their belief in the existence of deeper, discoverable meanings in the Qur'ān in sayings attributed to 'Alī (d.661) and Ja'far al-Sādiq (d.765), important figures for both Sūfīs and Shī'īs.[28] Some of the sayings attributed to 'Alī are:

> There is no good in an act of worship without comprehension, nor in a recitation without pondering.[29]

> The Messenger of God (peace and blessings of God be upon him), did not confide anything in me which he concealed from people, except that God most High gives a servant understanding of His Book.[30]

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[27] In his study of Sūfī exegesis (*Die Richtungen* 180-262) Goldziher suggests that the basis for all allegorical interpretation, be it Jewish, Christian or Muslim, is the Platonic distinction between a world of appearances and a world of ideas, and he counts Neoplatonism among the exernal influences on Sūfī commentators. The connection drawn between a type of interpretation and a cosmological scheme is probably a valid one, but does not necessarily prove that a Platonic or Neoplatonic concept was superimposed on an Islamic framework, since the idea of at least two distinct worlds is evident in the Qur'ānic text in such often repeated pairs as the heavens and the earth, the present life and the hereafter, the visable (*shahāda*) and the unseen (*ghayb*). Al-Ghazālī frequently mixes his terminology, sometimes sounding Platonic in his descriptions of the visible world (*'ālam al-shahāda*) and the world from which ideas (*al-ma'ānī*) descend (151), sometimes sounding more strictly Qur'ānic, as in his use of the terms "visable" (*shahāda*) and "unseen" (*ghayb*) (152). He is impatient with those who are confused by the variety of these terms, saying that the one to whom the realities have been unveiled makes the meaning primary and the terms secondary, while those who are weak do the opposite (152).

[28] Both men are claimed in most of the lineages of Sūfī orders, and are considered to be the first and sixth imams by the Twelver and Ismā'īlī Shī'īs.

[29] Abū Tālib al-Makkī 94; Al-Ghazālī 5:87; English trans. 63.

[30] Al-Ghazālī 5: 93-4, 129; English trans. 65-6, 87; Rūzbihān's version is a little different: It is related from Abū Juhayfa that he asked 'Ali whether he had any revelation (*wahy*) from the Messenger of

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If I had wished, I could have loaded seventy camels with commentary (*tafsīr*) on the *Fātiḥa* of the Book (the opening *sūra*).[31]

For the one who understands (*yafhamu*) the Qur'ān, thereby whole bodies of knowledge are explained (*fussira*).[32]

Those attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq are:

The Qur'ān is recited with nine aspects (*ajwah*): the Truth (*ḥaqq*), truth (*ḥaqīqa*), realization (*taḥqīq*), realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), oaths ('*uhūd*), contracts ('*uqūd*), limits (*ḥudūd*), the cutting off of attachments (*qaṭ' al-'alā'iq*), and the exaltation of the One who is worshipped (*ijlāl al-ma'būd*).[33]

The Qur'ān was sent down in seven modes (*anwā'*): to inform, entrust, awaken affection, ennoble, unite, frighten and restrain. Moreover, it was revealed as a command, a prohibition, a promise, a threat, an indulgence, a foundation, and a test. Moreover, it was revealed as an inviter, a guardian, a witness, a preserver, an intercessor, a defender, and a protector.[34]

The Book of God has four things: the clear expression ('*ibāra*), the allusion (*ishāra*), subtleties (*laṭā'if*) and realities (*ḥaqā'iq*). The clear expression is for the common people ('*awāmm*), the allusion is for the elite (*khawāṣṣ*), the subtleties are for the friends (*awliyā'*), and the realities are for the prophets (*anbiyā'*).[35]

Knowledge and Practice

In the above section, we have seen how Ṣūfīs emphasized the plenitude of meaning to be found in the Qur'ānic text. Their hermeneutic ideas were also distinguished by a belief that knowledge of deeper meanings is dependent on

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God other than the Qu'rān. 'Ali said, "By the One who created the seed and the breath of life, no, except for that God gives a servant understanding of His Book," 3.

[31] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī 101; Al-Ghazālī 5:129-30; English trans. 68, 87.

[32] Al-Ghazālī 5:135; English trans. 89.

[33] Al-Sulamī, *Ziyādāt ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* 2; Rūzbihān substitutes verification (*taḥaqquq*) for *taḥqīq*, 1:4.

[34] Ibid. The text of Rūzbihān reads "benefit" (*nāfi'a*) rather than protector (*māni'a*).

[35] Rūzbihān 4. According to Böwering, this saying occurs in Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq at-tafsīr* as well, a commentary which currently exists only in manuscript form.

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spiritual practice and ethics. This is not to say that man is capable of acquiring knowledge of the Qur'ān by himself; rather, God is the bestower, but He bestows this knowledge on those who conform completely to the code of behavior laid out in the Qur'ān and the traditions of the Prophet. Abū Naṣr as-Sarrāj (d.988)[36] explains this view in his *Kitāb al-luma'*, one of the first books to provide a methodology and defense of Ṣūfī exegesis.

He states that among the various types of people of knowledge, the Ṣūfīs are characterized by their practical application (*isti'māl*) of the verses of the Qur'ān and the Traditions of the Prophet which induce noble qualities and provoke higher states and virtuous actions. These manners (*adab*) are the manners of the Prophet. They are found in the books of scholars (*'ulamā'*) and jurists (*fuqahā'*), yet the understanding these people have of them is not as deep as their understanding of other sciences. Only the Ṣūfīs understand things like the various realities and attributes of states such as repentance (*tawba*), piety (*wara'*), trust in God (*tawakkul*), contentment (*riḍā'*), and so on, states which cannot be enumerated. The people who experience these states attain them in various degrees according to what God has apportioned to them.[37]

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[36] Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj (d.988), so far as we know, was the author of only one book, *Kitāb al-luma'*, a highly influential work which served both as a defense of Ṣūfism and a manual for its followers. It was used by al-Qushayrī (d.1072) for his *Risāla* and al-Ghazālī for his *Ihyā'* (Lory, "Al-Sarrādj" in *EI²*).

[37] Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj, *Kitāb al-luma'* 13-4; English abridgement by Nicholson 4-5. The *Kitāb al-luma'* was translated into German by Richard Gramlich (*Schlaglichter über das Sufitum*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1990).

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The Ṣūfīs are also characterized by their knowledge of the soul (*nafs*), its

characteristics and inclinations, the subtleties of hypocrisy (*riyā'*), hidden passion

(*al-shahwat al-khafiyya*), and hidden polytheism (*al-shirk al-khafīy*). They know

how to rid themselves of these vices by turning to God and giving up any sense of

one's own ability and power.[38]

The Ṣūfīs are distinguished as well by what they have discovered

(*mustanbatāt*) in sciences which are difficult for jurists and scholars to understand.

Their ability to loosen the knots and understand what is difficult comes from their

sacrificing the very core of their beings (*badhl al-muhaj*), so that when they speak of

these discoveries, they speak from direct experience of them (*ta'mihā wa dhawqihā*

wa nuqṣānihā wa ziyādatihā).[39] Because of what they have discovered, the people of

understanding (*fahm*) among the actualized (*muhaqqiqūn*) conform to the Qur'ān and

the practice of the Prophet externally (*ẓāhir^an*) and internally (*bāṭin^an*). When they act

in this manner, God bequeaths knowledge to them of that which they knew not,

knowledge of the deeper meanings of the Qur'ān and Traditions of the Prophet.[40]

The last part of this passage from Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj alludes to a *ḥadīth*

which is cited in full by al-Ghazālī in his discussion of this matter.

> Maybe you will say, "So demonstrate the purpose of the relationship between
> the two worlds, and why visions are by similitude (*al-mithāl*) and not the
> unambiguous (*al-ṣarīḥ*), and why the Prophet used to see Gabriel often in a
> form other than his own but only saw him twice in his own form."

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[38] Ibid.

[39] Ibid. 14-5; English abridgement 5.

[40] Ibid. 105; English abridgement 30.

Know that you have become arrogant and have reached quite a height if you think that the knowledge of this can come to you all at once without your undertaking the task of preparing yourself to receive it by discipline (*riyāḍa*), effort (*mujāhada*), complete renunciation of the world, disengagement from the tumult of creation, utter immersion in love of the Creator, and the search for Truth. Knowledge like this will be withheld from the likes of you and it will be said,

> You have come
> in order to learn the secret of my happiness
> but you will find me stingy with it.

Let go of your greed to attain this knowledge by means of exchanging letters. Seek it only through the door of effort (*mujāhada*) and piety (*taqwā*). Then guidance will follow and strengthen your effort, just as God said, *We will surely guide to Our paths those who have struggled (jāhadū) for Us* (29:69). And the Prophet said, "For anyone who practically applies what he knows, God will bequeath knowledge of what he does not know."[41]

This linking of the bestowal of knowledge to practice and behavior was not unique to the Ṣūfīs although the emphasis they placed on it was. Al-Sulamī quotes a ninth century Ṣūfī as saying, "The whole of Sufism is ways of behavior (*at-taṣawwuf kulluhu ādāb*)."[42]

Reading the Qur'ān with presence of the heart (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*)

One of the most important behaviors which Ṣūfīs emphasized was the cultivation of a kind of mindfulness while reciting or listening to the Qur'ān, without which there could be no understanding of its deeper meanings. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj says that

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[41] Al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* 32-33; English trans. 56-7.
[42] Al-Sulamī, *Ṭabaqāt al-ṣūfīyya*, ed. Sharība (Cairo, 1372) 119 (quoting a saying by Abū Ḥafṣ al-Ḥaddād, d.880 or 884), cited in Böwering, "The *Adab* Literature of Classical Sufism" 67.

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The people of understanding (*fahm*) among the people of knowledge (*'ilm*) know that the only way to correctly connect to that to which the Qur'ān guides us is by pondering (*tadabbur*), reflecting (*tafakkur*), being wakeful (*tayaqquz*), recollecting (*tadhakkur*) and being present with the heart (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*) when reciting the Qur'ān. They know this as well from His words, *A book which We have sent down to you as a blessing so that they might ponder its verses and so that those who possess understanding might recollect* (38:28). The people of understanding have concluded from this verse that pondering, reflecting and recollecting are only possible through the heart being present because God said, *surely in that there is a remembrance for one who has a heart (kāna lahu qalb) or will lend an ear with presence (aw alqā al-sam'a wa huwa shahīd)* (50:37), i.e., one who is present with the heart (*ḥāḍir al-qalb*).[43]

There were several different ways in which Ṣūfīs tried to awaken themselves to the task of listening with presence of the heart. One way was to remind themselves of the awesome nature of the revelation and its transcendent origins. An oft-repeated quote is attributed to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq: "I swear by God that God has disclosed himself (*tajalla*) to His creation in His speech but they do not see."[44] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī tells us in his *Qūt ul-qulūb* that there was a man from the first generations (*salaf*) who used to read a *sūra* and, if his heart wasn't in it, he would repeat it a second time.[45] Another method was proposed by Abū Sa'īd al-Kharrāz (d.899) as recorded in Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj:

> There are three ways to listen and to be present while listening. The first is to listen to the Qur'ān as if you were hearing the Messenger of God recite it to you.
> Then you should rise from this and hear it as if Gabriel was reciting it to the Prophet, because Allah said, *and surely it is the revelation of the Lord of the worlds. The trustworthy spirit descends with it upon your heart* (26:192-4).

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[43] Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj 73

[44] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, *Qūt al-qulūb* 97; Al-Ghazālī 5:122; English trans. 81; Al-Kāshānī, *Ta'wīlāt* 4.

[45] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, 95; Al-Ghazālī 5:85-6; English trans. 62.

Then you should rise from this so that it is as if you were hearing it from the Truth. That is God saying, *We revealed the Qur'ān which is a healing and a mercy to the believers* (17:84), and His words, *the revelation of the Book is from God, the exalted, the wise* (39:1) and it is as if you were hearing it from God most High. Likewise, *Ḥa. Mīm. The revelation of the Book is from God, the exalted, the knowing* (40:1).

In your listening [as if you were hearing it] from God, understanding (*fahm*) is brought out by the presence of your heart (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*) and your being devoid of any preoccupation with the world and your self by the power of witnessing (*mushāhada*), the purity of remembrance (*dhikr*), focused attention (*jam' al-hamm*), good manners (*ḥusn al-adab*), purity of the innermost secret (*sirr*) and sincerity of realization (*ṣidq al-taḥqīq*).[46]

The result of this approach is both sweet and awesome. Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī tells us

that a scholar said:

> I used to read the Qur'an but found no sweetness in it until I recited it as if I was hearing the Messenger of God reciting it to his Companions. Then I rose to a station above it and I recited it as if I was hearing Gabriel presenting it to the Messenger of God. Then God brought me to another waystation and now I hear it from the Speaker. Here I found from it a blessing and delight I could not resist![47]

He then tells the story of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq who was overcome by something during

prayers and fainted. When he came to he was asked about it and said, "I kept

repeating the verse in my heart until I heard it from its Speaker and my body was

unable to stand firm when I saw His power."[48] Al-Kāshānī quotes the tradition from

Ja'far al-Ṣādiq as well as his own experience:

> Frequently, I used to engage in reciting the Qur'ān and pondering its meanings by means of the faculty of faith. In spite of diligence in devotions, my breast was tight and my heart was agitated, my heart neither opening because of these meanings, nor my Lord turning me away from them, until

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[46] Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj 80; abridged English trans. 22-3. This three stage approach to reading the Qur'ān also appears in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī in a somewhat different version, 96-7; and in al-Ghazālī 5:121-2; English trans. 80-1.

[47] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī 100; Al-Ghazālī 5:123;English trans. 81-2.

[48] Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī, 97; Al-Ghazālī 5:122-3; English trans. 81.

finally I became familiar and intimate with them. I tasted the sweetness of their cup and their drink. Then my soul was animated, my breast opened, my mind broadened, my heart expanded, my innermost secret made spacious, the moment (*waqt*) and the state (*ḥāl*) made pleasant, and my spirit delighted by that opening. It was as if continually, morning and evening, meanings were being unveiled to me in every verse such as would fatigue my tongue to describe. There could be no power adequate to contain them nor enumerate them, nor any strength patient enough to divulge and disclose them...[49]

As in many other aspects of Ṣūfī piety, the various methods towards mindful reading were systematized by al-Ghazālī in his *Ihyā'*, drawing upon much of the material found in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's *Qūt ul-qulūb*,[50] expanding it and arranging it neatly into ten categories regarding the external courtesies of recitation (*ẓāhir ādāb al-tilāwa*) and ten categories regarding inner practices in the recitation of the Qur'ān (*'amāl al-bāṭin fī tilāwa al-Qur'ān*). The external courtesies, which will not be discussed here, have to do with the ritual state of the reciter, where and when he recites, the quantity, speed, volume and beauty with which he recites, the advisability of weeping while reciting, the ritual prostrations and supplications in reciting, and how the Qur'ān is to be written down.[51] The inner practices are as follows:

1) Understanding the exaltedness and grandeur of the speech of the Qur'ān, and God's grace and kindness to His creation in His descending from his exalted throne

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[49] Al-Kāshānī 1:4; Cf. English trans. by Murata, *Tao of Islam*, 226-7; Al-Kāshānī's version of the tradition from Ja'far al-Ṣādiq echoes the *hadīth* from Ibn Mas'ūd: It is said that Ja'far fell down in a faint during prayer and when asked about it said, "I kept on repeating the verse until I heard it from the Speaker of it and I saw that which comes to me sometimes from the secrets of the realities of the depths (*buṭūn*), the lights of the splendors of the heights (*muṭṭala'āt*) beyond what is attached to externals (*zawāhir*) or limits (*ḥudūd*) with a clearly delineated limit." 4-5.

[50] Richard Gramlich's German translation of the *Qūt al-qulūb* details each passage borrowed by al-Ghazālī in his *Ihyā'* (*Die Nahrung der Herzen*, Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1992-5).

[51] Al-Ghazālī 5:25-79; English trans. 34-55.

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to the level of their understanding. One of the examples used to explain this is a story of a wise man (*ḥakīm*)[52] who preached to a king. The King asks him how it is that man is able to bear the speech of God. The wise man tells him that God's speaking to man is similar to man's speaking to the animals, descending to their level through the use of sounds and whistles. It is also like the sun, the full gaze of which man is unable to bear, and yet he is able to attain what he needs from it.[53]

2) Exaltation of the Speaker. The reciter must be mindful[54] of the majesty of the Speaker, knowing that what he reads is not the speech of man, and that there is an extreme danger in reciting the speech of God. Just as only the ritually pure may touch the Qur'ān, only the inward part of the heart which is pure and illuminated by the light of exaltation and reverence will be able to understand its inner meaning. The act of exaltation of the Speaker will come about only when the reciter reflects upon the attributes, majesty and acts of God.[55]

3) Presence of the heart (*ḥuḍūr al-qalb*) and abandonment of the talk of the soul (*ḥadīth an-nafs*). Al-Ghazālī seems to be talking here about distracting thoughts. He says that a gnostic was asked, "When you read the Qur'ān does your soul talk about anything?" He said, "What would be more beloved to me than the Qur'ān so that my soul would talk of it?" This kind of mindfulness follows from the previously

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[52] In Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's version, the wise man is a friend of God (*walī*).
[53] Al-Ghazālī 5:80-3; English trans. 56-60; story in Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī 97-8.
[54] Literally, "bring to his heart (*yuḥḍiru bi'l-qalbihi*)."
[55] Al-Ghazālī 5:84-5; English trans. 60-1.

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mentioned exaltation which creates an intimacy without any inattentiveness, as the reciter finds unending delights in the Qur'ān.[56]

4) Pondering (*tadabbur*). Pondering goes beyond being present with the heart (*huḍūr al-qalb*), for one might not be reflecting on anything but the Qur'ān yet nevertheless be merely hearing it without pondering it. Al-Ghazālī tells us that this is the purpose of reciting the Qur'ān and it is why it is recommended to read it in a slow and distinct manner (*tartīl*). He quotes Alī b. Abū Ṭālib as saying, "There is no good in an act of worship without comprehension, nor in a recitation without pondering."[57] Al-Ghazālī's distinction here between the presence of the heart (*huḍūr al-qalb*) and pondering (*tadabbur*) is not one made by other Ṣūfī authors, who seem to use *huḍūr al-qalb* as a shorthand for all of the methods used in listening attentively. For example, Al-Qushayrī writes, "the method (*sabīl*) of the people of allusion (*ishāra*) and understanding (*fahm*) is listening with the presence of the heart (*huḍūr al-qalb*).[58]

5) Trying to understand (*tafahhum*). This is to seek to clarify each verse in a suitable manner by contemplating the meanings of the attributes and works of God, and the circumstances of the prophets and the people to which they were sent.[59]

6) The abandonment of the obstacles to understanding (*fahm*). Al-Ghazālī says that the veils to understanding are four: too much concern for the correct articulation

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[56] Ibid. 5:85-7; English trans. 61-2.
[57] Ibid. 5:87-92; English trans. 62-5.
[58] Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* 1:232.
[59] Al-Ghazālī 5:92-100; English trans. 65-9.

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of letters; rigidity and zealotry in following (*taqlīd*) a school of thought (*madhhab*) instead of allowing for insight (*baṣīra*) and witnessing (*mushāhida*); persistence in sin, being prideful, or being afflicted in general with a passion for the world with which one complies; belief that there are no meanings of the Qur'ān other than those transmitted from Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid[60] and others, and that all other commentary is that from prohibited personal opinion (*tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*).[61]

7) Personal application (*takhṣīṣ*). The reader should assume that every message in the Qur'ān is meant for him. Since God's message is intended for all people, it is intended for each individual. Al-Ghazālī here is inviting people to contextualize the text to their own experience, for if the reader assumes that he himself is being spoken to by God, he will not consider the study of the Qur'ān as work but, rather, will meditate upon it and act in accordance with it.[62]

8) Affectivity (*ta'aththur*). His heart should be affected by the various effects of different verses, so that for everything which he understands, his heart will be connected to a state (*ḥāl*) or strong emotion (*wajd*) such as grief (*ḥuzn*), fear (*kawf*), hope (*rajā'*), and so on. Whenever his knowledge is perfected, the predominant state of his heart will be awe (*khashya*), for constriction (*tadyīq*) predominates in the verses of the Qur'ān. Therefore, he will notice that the mention of forgiveness and mercy is connected to conditions he has yet to fulfill. The Qur'ān is meant to attract

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[60] Mujāhid b. Jubayr al-Makkī (d.722) was a student of Ibn 'Abbās and is one of the best known commentators from the Meccan school of the Followers.
[61] Ibid. 5:100-7; English trans. 69-72.
[62] Ibid. 5:107-10; trans. 72-4.

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these states and to cause one to act on it; otherwise, the trouble of moving the tongue with its letters is insignificant.[63]

9) Ascent (taraqqā). Al-Ghazālī repeats the three stations of reciting the Qur'ān from Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's Qūt al-qulūb and elaborates. The first station is the servant who assumes he is reading to God, standing before him, and He sees him and hears him. His state is one of petitioning, adulation, imploring, and supplicating. The second station is when he witnesses with his heart that God sees him and speaks to him with His kindnesses and whispers to him with His blessings and beneficence. Therefore, his station is one of modesty, exaltation, attentiveness (isghā') and understanding (fahm). The third station is when he sees the Speaker in the speech and the Attributes in the words. Therefore, he does not look to himself, nor to his reading, nor to his blessings but rather his attention is confined to the Speaker, his reflection devoted to him as he is immersed in witnessing the Speaker to the exclusion of anything else.[64]

10) Disavowal (tabrī'). This is the disavowal of one's own ability and power, and of considering oneself with approval and self-validation. The reciter will not consider himself among those who are pious, although he hopes to join them. Instead, he sees himself as among those who are disobedient and negligent.[65]

Abū Nasr al-Sarrāj and the methods of understanding (fahm) and allusion (ishāra)

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[63] Ibid. 5:110-21; trans. 74-80.
[64] Ibid. 5:121-4; English trans. 80-2; Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī 96-7.
[65] Ibid. 5:124-7; English trans. 82-5.

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The Ṣūfīs were as concerned as other Muslims in distinguishing between

incorrect and sound Qur'ānic interpretation. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj tells us that there are

three things the sound interpreter will never do: change the word order of the Qur'ān;

forget his basic servanthood by contesting the divinity; and distort words. While he

gives no examples of the first two errors, he illustrates word distortion (taḥrīf) with

several examples. Here are two of them:

> This is like what is related about someone who, when asked about His words,
> *When Job cried to his Lord, "Truly I have been touched by distress
> (massaniya al-ḍurr)"* (21:82), said that its meaning was, "I have *not* been
> touched by distress (*mā sā'anī al-ḍurr*)." We have heard that someone else,
> when asked about His words, *Did He not find you an orphan (yatīm) and give
> (you) shelter?* (93:6), said that the meaning of *yatīm* was understood as the
> singular, incomparable pearl (*al-durra al-yatīma allatī lā yūjadu mithlahā*).[66]

In contrast to these interpretative errors, Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj gives examples

from two methods of correct Ṣūfī exegesis, the method of understanding (*ṭarīq al-

fahm*) and the method of allusion (*ṭarīq al-ishāra*). One of several examples he gives

to illustrate the method of understanding is from Abū Bakr Al-Kattānī (d.934) on

verse 26:89, *only the one who brings to God a sound heart.*

> The sound heart is of three types according to the method of understanding
> (*fahm*). One of them is the one who comes to God with a heart in which
> there is no partner to God; the second is the one who comes to God with a
> heart uninterested in anything but God, not desiring anything but God; and
> the third is the one who comes to God, existing only in Him, having been
> annihilated from all things in God, and then annihilated from God in God.[67]

Another example is from Al-Shiblī (d.945) who was asked about verse 50:37,

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[66] Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj 90; English abridgement 26.
[67] Ibid. 90-1.

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> *Truly in this is a remembrance for the one who has a heart or will lend an ear with presence*, and he said, "For the one for whom God is his heart," and then he recited, "From me to You, a heart has no meaning. From me to You, every one of my limbs is a heart."[68]

The meaning of a "sound heart" or "listening with presence" is clear in these verses, but invites deeper contemplation and elaboration. The Ṣūfī interpretations given reflect Ṣūfī concepts such as the annihilation of the self and nearness to God, notions which were violently opposed by some Muslims, yet the interpretations do not radically change the topic of the verses.

The examples Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj gives for the allusive method of interpretation (*ṭarīq al-ishāra*), on the other hand, demonstrate more far reaching interpretative analogies. When Abū Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī (d. 874) was asked about gnosis (*ma 'rifa*), he replied with an interpretation of a Qur'ānic verse from the story of the prophet Sulaymān and the queen Bilqīs.

> He said, *Truly, when kings enter a village, they destroy it and debase the exalted among its inhabitants. Thus do they behave.* (27:34). What is meant by that is that it is the custom of kings, when they descend upon a village, to enslave its people and make them submissive to them, so that they can do nothing without the command of the king. Likewise, when gnosis (*ma 'rifa*) enters the heart (*qalb*), nothing remains in it that it does not uproot, and nothing moves in it that it does not burn.[69]

In the story of Bilqīs and Sulaymān, these words are spoken by Bilqīs, demonstrating her political sagacity in trying to avoid a violent confrontation with Sulaymān's forces. Al-Bisṭāmī creates an analogy between the force of an invading king and a

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[68] Ibid. 91.
[69] Ibid.; English abridgement 26-7.

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powerful knowledge which seizes the heart completely. It demonstrates what al-Ghazālī called the personal application (*takhṣīṣ*) of the Qur'ān.

Another example is attributed to al-Junayd (d.910). Considered a more "sober" Ṣūfī than al-Bisṭāmī, his allusive interpretation demonstrates the acceptability of this kind of interpretation for most Ṣūfīs.

> When asked about his silence and lack of movement during the spiritual concert (*samā'*), al-Junayd alluded to His words, *and you see the mountains, thinking them to be firmly fixed, but they will pass as the clouds pass: the artistry of God who perfects everything* (27:88).[70]

The verse is part of a passage describing the events of the Day of Judgment, but Junayd applies it to his spiritual state in the present world.

The method of allusion (*tarīq al-ishāra*) which Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj describes is the more problematic of his two methods because it goes beyond the literal sense of the text. The controversial nature of this kind of interpretation can be seen two hundred years later, in the writings of al-Ghazālī who struggles to distinguish its method from that of the *bāṭiniyya* and philosophers.

Al-Ghazālī and the method of striking similitudes (*darb al-mithāl*)

Al-Ghazālī's views on allegorical interpretation are somewhat inconsistent, perhaps as a result of the many battles in which he was engaged. As previously discussed, he mentions the allegorization of the Qur'ānic figure Pharoah as an

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[70] Ibid.

example of blameworthy interpretation in his discussion of *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* in the

Ihyā':

> This is like one who calls for struggle with the hard heart and says, God says, *"Go to Pharoah. Truly, he has transgressed."*(20:24), and he points to his own heart and indicates that that is what was intended by Pharoah. This is what some preachers do with sound intentions of beautifying their talk and attracting the listener, but it is prohibited. The *bāṭiniyya* have utilized this with corrupt intentions to deceive people and invite them to their false school of thought.[71]

Equating Pharoah with the hard heart would seem to be the kind of symbolic or allegorical commentary which Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj calls allusive (*ishāra*). In al-Qurṭubī's version, a significant phrase is added: "...it is prohibited because it is an analogy (*qiyās*) in language which is not permitted."[72] Al-Qurṭubī appears to reject allegorical interpretation outright, but what al-Ghazālī means is less clear. His examples of Ṣūfī interpretation in the *Ihyā'* are more vague hints than clear citations,[73] but appear to fall into Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's interpretative method of understanding (*ṭarīq al-fahm*) rather than finding allusions (*ṭarīq al-ishāra*).

Al-Ghazālī keeps himself at arm's length from allegorical interpretation in his *Fayṣal al-tafriqa* as well. He advises restraint in judging Ṣūfīs who interpret the Qur'ān allegorically, provided they do not violate the most fundamental beliefs of Islam. As mentioned above, al-Ghazālī gives two examples of Ṣūfī Qur'ānic interpretation in the *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*. The first is from an unnamed Ṣūfī who finds

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[71] Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā'* 5:142-3; English trans. 93; Cf. al-Qurṭubī 1:33-4 and al-Naysābūrī 1:56-7.
[72] Al-Qurṭubī, 1:33.
[73] Al-Ghazālī, 5:174-8; English trans. 102-4.

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the literal interpretation of the story of the prophet Ibrāhīm worshipping a star, the moon and the sun unacceptable. Instead, he interprets these celestial bodies allegorically as angelic luminous substances (*jawāhir malakiyya nūrāniyya*), an interpretation al-Ghazālī criticizes but does not consider a sign of disbelief (*kufr*). The second example is the allegorical interpretation of Mūsā's staff and shoes, an interpretation which goes beyond the literal sense without proving the need to reject it. Al-Ghazālī sees no danger in this as long as it does not cause confusion for common people.[74]

What is odd about these examples is that they are the same examples al-Ghazālī uses in his wholehearted endorsement for allegorical or symbolic interpretation in the *Mishkāt al-anwār* (The Niche of Lights). It is a book which includes both a methodology for symbolic interpretation and al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the Light Verse of the Qur'ān. Al-Ghazālī calls the methodology "the secret and method of creating similitudes (*sirr al-tamthīl wa minhājihi*)"[75] or "the method of striking similitudes (*minhāj ḍarb al-mithāl*)."[76] The phrase *ḍarb al-mathal* or *ḍarb al-amthāl* is used in various forms twenty-seven times in the Qur'ān, mostly to describe the analogies and parables created by God to explain things to mankind.

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[74] Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafriqa* 21-3; English trans. 159-60.

[75] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār* 25. The edition used here contains a complete English trans. by Buchman which faces the Arabic text. The translations given here are my own unless otherwise specified. Another English trans. is that of W.H.T. Gairdner.

[76] Ibid. 29.

Al-Ghazālī connects the method of "striking similitudes" to the existence of two worlds, worlds which he describes using both philosophical and Qur'anic terminology. The one world is spiritual (*rūḥānī*), intellectual (*'aqlī*), and supernal (*'ulwī*); it is the world of Sovereignty (*malakūt*) and the Unseen (*ghayb*). The other world is physical (*jismānī*), sensory (*ḥissī*), and lower (*suflī*); it is the world of Dominance (*mulk*) and the Visible (*shahāda*).[77]

The World of the Visible (*'ālam al-shahāda*) is the place from which one rises up to the World of Sovereignty (*'ālam al-malakūt*), an ascension made possible by the relationship (*munāsaba*) and connection (*ittiṣāl*) between the two. To help man's ascent, God has made the World of the Visible parallel to the World of Sovereignty. There is nothing in this world which does not have a likeness (*mithāl*) or several likenesses in that world, and there is nothing in that world which does not have a likeness or likenesses in this world.[78] To illustrate this, al-Ghazālī uses the example of Ibrāhīm's viewing the celestial bodies:

> Indeed, there are high and noble luminous substances (*jawāhir nūrāniyya sharīfa 'āliyya*) in the World of Sovereignty (*'ālam al-malakūt*) which are called angels (*malā'ika*). Because lights emanate from them to human spirits, they are called "lords" (*arbāb*) and God is the "Lord of lords." They have varying degrees of luminosity which have similitudes (*amthāl*) in the World of the Visible (*'ālam al-shahāda*): the sun, the moon and the stars.
> At first, the traveler on the way (*al-sālik lil-ṭarīq*) reaches a degree which is the degree of the stars, and the radiance of [the star's] light becomes clear to him. The fact becomes unveiled to him that the lowest world is entirely under its authority and the radiance of its light. Suddenly, from [the star's] beauty and sublimity, it becomes clear to him, and he says, "*This is my lord!*" (6:76). Then, when what is above [this star] becomes clear to him, the degree

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[77] Ibid. 25-6.
[78] Ibid. 27.

of the moon, he sees that the former has set in relationship to the latter, so he says, "*I do not love that which sets*"(6:76).

Likewise, he continues to ascend until he reaches that which has its similitude in the sun, and he sees that it is greater and more sublime. Yet he sees that it also has its similitude in its correspondence (*munāsaba*) to the others, and whatever has a correspondence with something imperfect is imperfect itself and "sets." From this, he says, "*I have turned my face to the one who created the heavens and the earth in pure faith (ḥanīf^{an})*" (6:79).[79]

Compare this with the passage in the *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*:

> Among men there are those who rush into interpretation (*ta'wīl*) with probable conjectures without decisive proof. However, one should not be equally hasty in declaring such a one an infidel (*takfīr*), but should rather carefully consider [the situation]. If his interpretation is unrelated to the fundamentals and most important aspects of belief, we should not charge him with disbelief.
>
> This is like one of the Ṣūfīs who said that what is intended by the Friend's (*al-khalīl*) seeing the star, moon and the sun and saying, "*This is my lord,*" is something other than the literal meaning of [these celestial bodies] (*ghayr zāhirihā*). Rather, they are the angelic, luminous substances whose luminosity is mental ('*aqlīyya*), not sensible (*ḥissī*). They have degrees of perfection and the relationship between them in their variations is like the relationship of the star, the moon and the sun.[80]

This interpretation by "one of the Ṣūfīs" is, of course, identical to al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the celestial bodies in the *Mishkāt al-anwār*. But in the *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, al-Ghazālī criticizes this unnamed Ṣūfī for rejecting the literal meaning. He analyzes his arguments and finds them inconclusive and therefore conjectural rather than decisive proof for the necessity of rejecting the literal sense. Nonetheless, since this matter is not one which constitutes a fundamental belief in Islam, he urges tolerance for the Ṣūfī's interpretation. Now, either al-Ghazālī is defending himself,

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[79] Ibid. 27-8.
[80] Al-Ghazālī, *Fayṣal al-tafriqa* 21-2; English trans. 159.

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making his defense all the more believable by seeming to disapprove of his own interpretation, or these two views represent a change in his thinking.[81]

The other example al-Ghazālī gives of tolerable Ṣūfī interpretation in the *Faysal al-tafriqa* is the allegorical interpretation of Mūsā's staff and shoes, although he gives no specific examples. His own interpretation of Mūsā's shoes occurs amongst many other allegorical interpretations used as examples of his interpretative methodology in the *Mishkāt al-anwār*. The context is God's speech to Mūsā in the Qur'ān, asking him to remove his shoes in the holy valley where Mūsā has seen a fire.[82]

> If the first waystation of the prophets is the ascent to the world sanctified from the turbulence of sense-perception and imagination, then the similitude (*mithāl*) of that waystation is the *holy valley* (20:12). And if it is not possible to tread that holy valley without removing the two worlds (*kawnayn*), meaning the present world and the hereafter, turning towards the One, God (*al-Ḥaqq*)...then the similitude of that removal is the *taking off of the shoes* at the time of switching to the pilgrims' garments in order to turn towards the holy Ka'ba.[83]

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[81] According to the chronology of al-Ghazālī's writings done by Hourani, the *Ihyā'* was written before the *Mishkāt al-anwār* and the *Faysal al-tafriqa*. Hourani states that the *Mishkāt al-anwār* is generally considered to have been written late in al-Ghazālī's life, based on its developed mystical doctrine. However, this has not been conclusively demonstrated. Many of the hermeneutical ideas in the *Mishkāt al-anwār* occur as well in the *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, which was written before the *Faysal al-tafriqa*. Although the authenticity of the last section of the *Mishkāt al-anwār* has been doubted, this does not include the material on the methodology of interpretation. The authenticity of the *Ihyā'*, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, and *Faysal al-tafriqa* has never been doubted. Hourani, "The Chronology of Ghazālī's Writings." See also Watt, "Al-Ghazālī" in EI².

[82] *Has the story of Mūsā reached you? When he saw a fire and said to his family, "Wait. I perceive a fire. Maybe I can bring you a firebrand from it or find some guidance at the fire. Then, when he came to it, a voice was heard, "O Mūsā, surely I am your Lord. So take off your shoes in the holy valley Ṭuwā* (20:9-12).

[83] Ibid. 30.

Al-Ghazālī strikes two similitudes for the removal of Mūsā's shoes. In the first, he

compares it to a spiritual state in which one distances oneself from concern for this

world or the next. In the second, he compares it to the ritual enacted during the

preparation for the pilgrimage.

Al-Ghazālī explains that the method of striking similitudes (*darb al-mithāl*) is

like the science of dream or vision interpretation (*ta'bīr*).[84] In applying this to the

Qur'ān he ignores the "law of interpretation" (*qānūn al-ta'wīl*) established in the

Fayṣal al-tafriqa stating that the literal meaning must be definitively shown to be

absurd in order to justify a metaphorical interpretation. In the *Mishkāt al-anwār*, al-

Ghazālī defines unacceptable interpretation as the repudiation or annulment of literal

meanings; his own allegorical interpretations exist side by side with the intact literal

meaning. Unacceptable interpretation would be like his saying that Mūsā did not

have any shoes, or that he did not hear the speech *"Take off your shoes"*:

> God forbid! Surely the annulment of the literal meanings (*zawāhir*) is the
> view of the *bāṭiniyya* who have looked one-eyed towards one of the worlds,
> not knowing the parallelism (*muwāzana*) between the two worlds, nor
> understanding this aspect. Likewise, the annulment of secrets (*asrār*) is the
> teaching of the *hashawiyya*.[85] Whoever looks only to the external sense
> (*zāhir*) is a *hashawī*, and whoever looks only to the inner sense (*bāṭin*) is a
> *bāṭinī*, and whoever joins the two is perfect (*kāmil*). Because of that [the
> Prophet] said, "The Qur'ān has an exoteric sense (*zāhir*) and an inner sense

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[84] Literally, "to make something cross over." Ibid. 29-32.

[85] Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī defined the *hashawiyya* as those "believing themselves bound to a blind and routine submission to the criterion of human authority and to the literal meaning of the revealed books" (*Iqtiṣād fī'l i'tiqād*, quoted in Halkin, "The Hashawiyya," 12). According to Halkin, the term was a derogatory term originally directed towards traditionalists (*ashab al-hadīth*) and Hanbalīs, but later used in an increasingly vague way by Ash'arīs, Ṣūfīs and even the Hanbalīs themselves (Halkin, 1-28).

(*bāṭin*), a limit (*ḥadd*) and a point of ascent (*muṭṭala*'). It may be that this is transmitted from 'Alī and stops with him (*mawqūf 'alayhi*).[86]

Rather, I say that Mūsā understood from the command to take off his shoes the removal of the two engendered worlds, so he followed (*imtathala*)[87] the command externally by taking off his shoes and inwardly by the removal of both worlds. This is "taking heed" (*'itibār*), i.e., the crossing over (*'ubūr*) from one thing to another, from the external sense (*ẓāhir*) to the secret (*sirr*).[88]

It is possible that the view stated here, accepting the literal and the symbolic senses of the Qur'ān equally, was what al-Ghazālī believed all along, and that any appearance to the contrary in his other works was a defensive position taken against those who would have been quick to accuse him of interpreting the Qur'ān like the *bāṭiniyya* or the philosophers. Al-Ghazālī's own aversion to their beliefs as well would have prompted him to make a sharp distinction between their interpretative methods.

To accept the literal and the symbolic at the same time is to accept two different kinds of language acts. In his *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, al-Ghazālī suggests that knowledge of the deeper meanings of the Qur'ān requires knowledge of the language of similitudes:

> I do not think you will be successful (in seeking out the secrets of the Qur'ān) if you obstinately proceed with your own opinion (*ra'y*) and intellect (*'aql*). How can you understand this when you do not understand the language of states (*lisān al-aḥwāl*)? Instead, you only believe in propositional speech (*maqāl*)! You will not understand the meaning of His words, *There is nothing which does not proclaim His praise* (17:44) nor His words, *They [the heavens and the earth] said, "We have come willingly"* (41:11) so long as you think that the earth has a language (*lisān*) and a life. You will not understand

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[86] Al-Ghazālī is saying that this tradition is either from the Prophet or from 'Alī.

[87] The root of this verb is the same as that for the noun "similitude" (*mithāl*). Literally, it could be translated as "he made himself similar to."

[88] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār* 32-3. "Taking heed" (*'itibār*) and "crossing over" (*'ubūr*) come from the same root as dream or vision interpretation (*ta'bīr*).

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the words of the speaker who said, "The wall said to the peg, "Why are you making a hole in me?" He said, "Ask the one who is hammering me and does not drop me! Behind me is the stone which hammers me." You are not aware that these words are true and more correct than propositional speech, so how will you understand the secrets which are behind this?[89]

The example of the talking inanimate objects, the wall and the peg, is one which appears in the commentary of al-Zamaksharī, written some twenty years after al-Ghazālī's death, in his interpretation of verse 41:11.[90] Either al-Zamaksharī borrowed from al-Ghazālī, which seems unlikely, or they both adopted the example from a previous commentator or theologian. Al-Zamaksharī understands the words spoken by the heavens and the earth, *"We have come willingly, "* as a figurative expression (*majāz*) which is either the creation of a similitude (*tamthīl*) or an imaginative representation (*takhyīl*) whose only purpose is to depict the effect of God's power over decreed things, having nothing to do with the real acts of speech and answering. He uses the example of the talking wall and peg both to illustrate the figurative use of speech and to confirm the meaning of the verse.

While al-Zamaksharī uses the concept of figurative language to solve the problem of the anthropomorphism of the verse, al-Ghazālī's objective is more far reaching. Perhaps he would have agreed with al-Zamaksharī's interpretation because it explains a verse which otherwise seems literally absurd. But al-Ghazālī is saying something more than that; he is asserting that metaphorical and symbolic ways of

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[89] Al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* 33; English trans. 57-8.

[90] Abul Quasem, translater of the *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān*, points this out (*The Jewels of the Qur'ān*, 57n.112). The passage from Zamaksharī's *Kashf* is found in 3: 445-6.

speaking are superior modes of expression for facilitating deeper comprehension of the Qur'ān. It is an idea which Ibn 'Arabī (d.1240)[91] develops, without the inconsistencies of al-Ghazālī.

Ibn 'Arabī and the method of allusion (*ishāra*)

Unlike al-Ghazālī, Ibn 'Arabī rejects rational interpretation (*ta 'wīl 'aqlī*) outright. While there are aspects of the revelation which reason declares impossible, this only proves the imperfection of man's rational faculties, not the necessity of interpretation.[92] Man has two faculties by which he obtains knowledge of God. The faculty of reason (*'aql*) in man works by means of reflection (*fikr*), using the language of abstraction. It is capable of knowing God's incomparability, how He is utterly different from His creation. The imaginative faculty (*khayāl*) in man, on the other hand, works through sensory perceptions, using the language of images. It is capable of perceiving God's similarity in His self-disclosures (*tajallī*) in His creation. Perfect knowledge combines both of these faculties. Use of only the rational faculty

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[91] Muhyi'l-Dīn Abū 'Abd Allāh Muhammad ibn 'Arabī (d.1240) is one of the best known and most influential of the Ṣūfīs because of the synthesis of Ṣūfism and other Islamic sciences he achieved in his works, and for the notoriety of the doctrine of the "unity of existence" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) ascribed to him. A *tafsīr* is said to have been written by Ibn 'Arabī which included sixty-four volumes and went as far as *Sūrat al-Maryam*, but it is not extant. The *tafsīr* written by al-Kāshānī has been often incorrectly attributed to Ibn 'Arabī (see Part II). Although not technically part of the genre of *tafsīr*, Ibn 'Arabī's best known works, the *Futūhāt al-makkiyya* and the *Fuṣūṣ al-hikam*, contain many interpretations of various verses of the Qur'ān. Interpretations from the *Futūhāt* have been compiled and put into canonical order in the four volume work by Mahmūd Ghurāb entitled *Al-rahma min al-Rahmān fī tafsīr wa ishārāt al-Qur'ān* (Damascus 1989). Ghurāb has also published a small *tafsīr* attributed to Ibn 'Arabī which goes up to verse 2:252 entitled *Ijāz al-bayān* (Damascus 1989). Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without a Shore*, 20, 134n.37, 138n.10,11.
[92] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 199-202.

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turns God into an abstraction and use of only the imaginative faculty leads to polytheism and anthropomorphism.[93]

The Qur'ān uses both abstractions and images to communicate its message, but the latter predominate because revelation entails a descent of meanings into the imaginal realm and sense perception and is an act of connection, not separation. The rational faculty is unable to understand the images of the Qur'ān and therefore seeks to interpret it so as to make it conform to the dictates of reason, but this leads to a distortion of its meaning. Prophets and friends of God, on the other hand, accept the whole of the Qur'ān because they understand the language of images by means of unveiling (kashf).[94] To use al-Ghazālī's example from above, the prophets and friends of God will understand what the verse They said, "We have come willingly" (41:11) means because they have experienced it through the seeing, hearing and tasting of the imaginative faculty.

Only the prophets and friends of God understand the principles of "striking similitudes" (ḍarb al-amthāl). They can strike similitudes themselves because God has taught them how to do this and they recognize the similitudes which God has struck for Himself because they have witnessed the connection between the similitude and the meaning it represents.[95] But "striking similitudes" (ḍarb al-amthāl) is not the term Ibn 'Arabī uses to describe Ṣūfī interpretation of the Qur'ān.

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[93] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* 67-73.
[94] Ibid. 73-76; *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 231, 245.
[95] Ibid. 76-77.

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Neither does he use the term *ta'wīl*, which he applies almost exclusively to the kind

of rational interpretation (*ta'wīl 'aqlī*) of which he is so critical.[96] The term Ibn

'Arabī prefers is "allusion" (*ishāra*). He explains that Ṣūfīs have chosen this word

over "commentary" (*tafsīr*) in order to defend themselves from the ignorance of

exotericists. The word *ishāra*, which literally means "to point," is used just once in

the Qur'ān (19:29), in a verse referenced by Ibn 'Arabī as part of his explanation for

the Ṣūfīs' adoption of the term. Just as Maryam (the Virgin Mary) "pointed" to the

infant 'Īsā (Jesus) so that he spoke in her defense against the accusations of her

people, so do Ṣūfīs "point" or "make allusion" to what they know so that they will

not be attacked by uncomprehending exotericists.[97]

Some of the examples of Ibn 'Arabī's own Qur'ānic interpretation in his

Futūḥāt al-makkiyya resemble Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's method of allusion (*ṭarīq al-*

ishāra)[98] and al-Ghazālī's "striking of similitudes" (*darb al-mithāl*), albeit with the

addition of his own technical vocabulary. Chittick translates one such example from

the *Futūḥāt* on verses 52:1-8 of the Qur'ān:

> *By the mount*--the body, because of the natural inclination within it, since it
> is not independent through itself in its *wujūd* [existence].
> *And a book inscribed* from a divine dictation and a right hand writing with
> a pen of potency.
> *On a parchment*, that is your own entity--by way of allusion, not exegesis.
> *Unrolled*, manifest, not rolled up, so it is not curtained.

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[96] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 199.

[97] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 244-50; Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without a Shore* 35.

[98] The distinction made by Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj between the method of understanding (*fahm*) and the method of allusion (*ishāra*) seems to have been ignored by later Ṣūfīs, for whom allusion (*ishāra*) described all Ṣūfī commentary. This is particularly apparent in al-Qushayrī's commentary entitled *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, where he uses the term continually, in spite of the fact that his commentary more closely corresponds to Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's method of understanding (*fahm*).

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By the inhabited house, that is, the heart that embraces the Real, so He is its inhabitant.

And the uplifted roof—the sensory and suprasensory faculties in the head.

And the burning sea, that is nature kindled with the ruling fire that necessitates movement.

Surely thy Lord's chastisement is about to fall. In other words, something from which the animal self, the command spirit, and the high intellect take refuge but which derives from the self's nurturing Master, who makes its affair wholesome, is about to fall and come down upon it. For the self possesses the low waystations absolutely in respect to its possibility and relatively in respect to its nature.

There is none to avert it, because there is only what I have mentioned. What we have is receiving His coming down and climbing up to His approach. Between these two properties become manifest the *barzakhs* [isthmuses], which possess towering splendor and firmly-rooted knowledge.[99]

In this interpretation, the five signs invoked to attest to the reality of the Day of Judgment are taken to refer to the spiritual makeup of man. Events which will occur at the end of time are taken to refer to events which happen in the here and now.

What makes Ibn 'Arabī's correspondence between these two realities unique is the way in which he connects them. The first verse of this *sūra* is *By the mount (wa 'l-ṭūr)*; as Chittick explains,

> The word *ṭūr* or "mount" derives from a root that means to approach something and to hover around it. The Shaykh takes the etymological sense as an allusion to the bodily nature's inclinations, which draw it toward things that it desires.[100]

It is this close attention to the etymological and grammatical possibilities of the text which distinguishes Ibn 'Arabī's approach to Qur'ānic interpretation, an approach based on the assumption that all the possible meanings which the Arabic language

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[99] Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God* 118-9.
[100] Ibid. 398-9n.35.

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allows for any given word or group of words in the Qur'ān are valid. To reject any one of these meanings is to limit God's knowledge, to imply that He was unaware of the various ways in which His Book could be interpreted.[101]

One example which shows the difference between this kind of "hyperliteralism" and a more purely symbolic or allegorical approach is Ibn 'Arabī's interpretation of the verse, "*laysa ka-mithlihi shay'un*" (42:11), which can be translated as, *there is nothing similar to him*. The *ka* means "like" and *mithl* means "similar." Ibn 'Arabī accepts the common explanation that the *ka* here merely serves to reinforce the meaning of *mithl*. He also endorses an interpretation in which *ka* retains its meaning, making it possible to translate the verse as *there is nothing like His similar*, and to understand it as a reference to the Perfect Man.[102] Although the common interpretation of this verse is that it asserts God's incomparability, Ibn 'Arabī's acceptance of all possible interpretations allows him to find in it confirmation for God's incomparability and His similarity. Ibn 'Arabī understood this interpretative approach as an extreme fidelity to the possibilities of the Qur'ānic text. His critics denounced it as a distortion of its meaning (*taḥrīf ma'ānī'l-Qur'ān*).[103]

Al-Naysābūrī and al-Kāshānī and the method of esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*)

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[101] Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean Without a Shore* 19-57; Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 242-4.
[102] Chodkiewicz 37.
[103] Ibid. 19-20.

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The hermeneutical legacies of al-Ghazālī and Ibn ʿArabī found expression in

two Ṣūfīs of the fourteenth century who wrote influential Qurʾānic commentaries.

Al-Ghazālī's influence is most clearly seen in the commentary of al-Naysābūrī. Like

the exoteric exegete al-Qurṭubī, al-Naysābūrī adopted the passage from al-Ghazālī's

Ihyā' on *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*, in an abridged and somewhat altered version which does not

mention al-Ghazālī's name. He includes the problematic section on the allegorical

interpretation of Pharoah, a fact which is particularly curious given that al-

Naysābūrī's commentary is very much characterized by just this kind of

interpretation. However, al-Naysābūrī's additional comments make it clear that, like

al-Ghazālī, he condemns the rejection of the literal:

> Know that the requirement of religion is that the Muslim should not interpret
> (*yu'awillu*) anything in the Qurʾān or the *ḥadīth* according to meanings which
> would invalidate the essentials (*a'yān*) which the Prophet and the pious first
> generations (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*) commented (*fassara*) on, like the Garden, the
> Fire, the Path, the Balance, the palaces, the rivers, the trees, etc. Instead, he
> must affirm these essentials just as they have been set forth.
>
> Then, if he understands from them other realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), symbols
> (*rumūz*), and subtleties (*laṭā'if*) which have been unveiled to him, there is no
> harm. For surely God has not created anything in the world of form (*'ālam
> al-ṣūra*) that does not have an equal (*naẓīr*) in the world of meaning (*'ālam al-
> ma'nā*). And nothing is created in the world of meaning, which is the
> Hereafter, which does not have a reality (*ḥaqīqa*) in the world of Truth (*'ālam
> al-ḥaqq*), which is the unseen of the unseen (*ghayb al-ghayb*). And nothing is
> created in the two worlds which does not have patterns (*namādhij*) in the
> world of mankind (*'ālam al-insān*). But God knows best.[104]

We can hear echoes of al-Ghazālī here in what is undoubtedly a reference to the

allegorical interpretation of the events of the Hereafter by philosophers. Also

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[104] Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān*, 1: 57. This section introduces his commentary on Ṣurat al-Fātiḥa.

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echoing al-Ghazālī is the explanation of the relationship between cosmology and interpretation, although al-Naysābūrī uses different terminology.

Another terminological difference is al-Naysābūrī's use of the terms "commentary" (*tafsīr*) and esoteric "interpretation" (*ta'wīl*). These were terms which were used interchangeably for the first three centuries of Islam, but later came to signify two very different interpretative approaches.[105] As we have seen, Ibn al-'Arabī rejected the use of the term *ta'wīl,* but al-Naysābūrī uses it unabashedly, dividing his commentary into descriptions of variant readings (*qirā'āt* and *wuqūf*), exoteric commentary (*tafsīr*) and esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

Writing in the same time period, al-Kāshānī uses the terms *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* in an equivalent manner, although he includes only *ta'wīl* in his own commentary. Al-Kāshānī brings a new understanding to the ongoing problem of defining the prohibited *tafsīr bi'l-ra'y* by suggesting that the prohibition applies only to *tafsīr* and not to *ta'wīl*:

> It is said that the one who interprets (*fassara*) by his own opinion (*ra'y*) has become an infidel (*kafara*). As for esoteric interpretation (*ta'wīl*), it never ceases because it varies according to the states of the listener and his circumstances in the stages of his traveling and his different phases. Whenever he rises from a station, a door of new understanding is opened to him, and he beholds (*iṭṭala'a*) by means of it the subtlety of a ready meaning.[106]

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[105] For discussions of the terms *tafsīr* and *ta'wīl* see Rippin, "Tafsīr" 84, Poonawala, "Ta'wīl," Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* 1:26-7 and 2:2397, and al-Suyūṭī, *Al-Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān,* 173-4.
[106] Al-Kāshānī, 1: 5. Cf. English trans. by Murata 227.

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In his analysis of al-Kāshānī's commentary, Lory makes a distinction between two types of *ta'wīl*, these being interpretation by reason (*ta'wīl 'aqlī*) and interpretation by unveiling (*ta'wīl kashfī*).[107] Rational interpretation (*ta'wīl 'aqlī*) is a commentator's interpretation by personal opinion after he has exhausted the resources of Arabic language study and Traditions. By way of example of this kind of commentary, Lory cites Mu'tazilī works. *Ta'wīl kashfī* is esoteric exegesis which is the product of direct and intuitive knowledge by unveiling, the method of deduction (*istinbāt*) used by al-Kāshānī and Ṣūfīs all the way back to Ja'far al-Ṣādiq.

In addition to the term *ta'wīl*, al-Kāshānī refers to "*tatbīq*," a word which means "to make correspondences." Prior to Lory's more extensive analysis of al-Kāshānī's commentary, Goldziher had suggested that *ta'wīl* was al-Kāshānī's word for the interpretation of passages whose literal meaning was obscure, and that *tatbīq* was his word for the symbolic interpretation of passages whose unambiguous literal meaning remains intact. Lory, on the basis of his more complete reading of al-Kāshānī, states that al-Kāshānī used *ta'wīl* as the broader term for all forms of esoteric interpretation, and *tatbīq* for the specific type of esoteric interpretation which uncovers the correspondences between Qur'ānic symbols and man's spiritual psychology and development.[108]

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[107] Lory, *Les Commentaires esoteriques du Coran d'apres 'Abd ar-Razzaq al-Qashani* 10-1. Unfortunately, Lory does not tell us whether these are his own terms or al-Kāshānī's.
[108] Goldziher 243; Lory 29-33.

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In the passage from his introduction above, al-Kāshānī suggests that *ta 'wīl* is

unending because of the different stages of the developing individual. Ṣūfī exegetes

were not unaware of the problem raised by conflicting interpretations among exoteric

exegetes. We have seen how Ibn Taymiyya attempted to prove that there were no

real and significant differences among the interpretations of the first generations

(*salaf*). This was important to demonstrate since he considered conflicting

interpretation a sign of error. Al-Kāshānī asserts that this is not a problem with

regards to the interpretation of deeper meanings, because this kind of interpretation is

not a matter of fixing the meaning of the text, but rather is a never-ending process of

finding new meaning as the reader changes and develops.

Al-Kāshānī's view was not without precedent. Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj had also

pointed out this difference between exoteric and esoteric commentary:

> [The Ṣūfīs] also differ in their deductions just as the exotericists (*ahl al-ẓāhir*)
> do. However, the differences of opinion between the exotericists lead to error
> while this is not so in the science of the inward (*'ilm al-bāṭin*) because the
> differences [represent] virtues, advantages, noble characteristics, states,
> morals, stations and degrees. It is said that the differences of opinion among
> the scholars (*'ulamā'*) in the science of exotericism (*'ilm al-ẓāhir*) is a mercy
> from God because the one who is right refutes the one who is wrong, thereby
> making the error of his opponent in religion clear to people so that they turn
> away from him. If this was not the case, people would leave their religion.
>   But the differences of opinion between the people of realities is also a
> mercy from God because each one of them speaks from where he is at the
> moment (*waqtuhu*) in response to his state, making allusions from his ecstasy
> (*wajd*). There is a benefit in their words for everyone from amongst those
> who observe acts of obedience and the lords of the hearts, the aspirants and
> those who are realized, according to their different capacities, characteristics
> and degrees.... [Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj demonstrates his point with different
> interpretations of what the "true *faqīr*" means from ten different Ṣūfīs....]
> They have all differed in their replies just as they have differed in where they
> were at the moment (*awqāt*) and their states, but all are sound (*ḥasan*). Each

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reply belongs to the group of people suitable for it, and each is a benefit, blessing, increase and mercy for them.[109]

Rūzbihān comments on this as well, speaking of the Ṣūfīs in the past:

> They spoke according to their stations (*maqāmāt*) in the presence of His Omnipotence (*jabarūt*) and according to the extent of their travelling in the open spaces of His Kingdom (*malakūt*). They spoke by means of convincing allusions (*ishārāt*) and suitable expressions (*'ibārāt*) from pure hearts, grounded intellects (*'uqūl rāsikha*), passionate spirits, and sanctified innermost secrets. The differences between their perceptions of the allusions of the Qur'ān is like their differences in degrees of what they have seen, the unveilings, states, approaches, visions of unseen things, and that which shines upon their innermost secrets from the lights of preeternal and everlastingly eternal things. What they attained is in what they said. They told of the depth of the sea of the Qur'ān because it is the qualities of the Merciful and all of its realities cannot be perceived by contingent beings.[110]

Al-Simnānī and commentary on the seven inner senses (*tafsīr al-buṭūn al-sabʿa*)

In the introduction to his Qur'ānic commentary, al-Simnānī explains that the "student of commentary on the seven inner senses" will have to learn special technical terms (*iṣṭilāḥāt*). The "seven inner senses" is a reference to a *ḥadīth* which states, "The Qur'ān has an exoteric sense (*ẓahr*) and an inner sense (*baṭn*), and its inner sense has an inner sense up to seven inner senses (*buṭūn*)."[111] The "special technical terms" (*iṣṭilāḥāt*) refer to spiritual faculties of man called "subtle substances" (*laṭā'if*), each of which corresponds to a prophet mentioned in the

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[109] Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj 107-8; English abridgement 31.

[110] Rūzbihān 1:3.

[111] This *ḥadīth* which is not mentioned in any of the canonical books of *ḥadīth* appears to be a variation on the seven *ḥarfs* of the Qur'ān mentioned in the *ḥadīth* attributed to Ibn Masʿūd and recorded by al-Ṭabarī.

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Table 1.
Al-Simnānī's theory of subtle substances (*latā'if*)

Seven subtle substances	Possessor of the subtle substance	Corresponding prophet
subtle bodily substance (*al-latīfa al-qālabiyya*)	man (*insān*)	Adam
subtle soul substance (*al-latīfa al-nafsiyya*)	civilized man (*al-insān al-madanī*)	Nūḥ (Noah)
subtle heart substance (*al-latīfa al-qalbiyya*)	submitter (*muslim*)	Ibrāhīm (Abraham)
subtle innermost substance (*al-latīfa al-sirriyya*)	believer (*mu'min*)	Mūsā (Moses)
subtle spirit substance (*al-latīfa al-rūhiyya*)	friend (*walī*)	Dāwūd (David)
subtle mystery substance (*al-latīfa al-khafiyya*)	prophet (*nabī*)	'Īsā (Jesus)
subtle reality substance (*al-latīfa al-haqqiyya* or *al-latīfa al-anāiyya*)	seal (*khātim*)	Muḥammad

Qur'ān.[112]

It is a system of correspondences based on verse 41:53 in the Qur'ān: *We will show them Our signs in the horizons (āfāq) and in their souls (anfus) until it becomes manifest to them that this is the truth* (41:53).[113] Knowledge and deeper understanding of the Qur'ān, as well as the ability to derive benefit from it, requires the discovery of the connection between the horizons (*āfāq*) and souls (*anfus*), between the prophets and the subtle substances (*latā'if*) of man. Man has the

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[112] Al-Simnānī, *Muqaddima tafsīr al-Qur'ān* 146-157. Part of the *Muqaddima* has been analyzed by Corbin in *The Man of Light* 121-31. Elias analyzes the concept of the seven subtle substances in *The Throne Carrier of God* 79-99.
[113] Ibid 146.

potential to develop spiritually from a speaking animal to the bearer of the trust of

God. At each level of his development, he becomes the possessor of a new subtle

substance (*latīfa*) as shown in Table 1.

The reader of the Qur'ān should recognize these correspondences so as to be

able to practically apply the lessons of the stories of the prophets to one's own

struggle. Al-Simnānī explains this process with examples from each of the seven

levels, as in this passage on the bodily subtle substance (*latīfa qālabiyya*) and the

prophet Ādam:

> Whenever you hear a part of the Book addressing Adam, listen to it with your
> bodily subtle substance (*latīfa qālabiyya*). Apply your bodily subtle
> substance practically in what has been commanded and prohibited for it, and
> take heed in the similitudes struck for it (*bi-mā duriba mathaf*ⁿ *lahu*). Know
> with certainty that the inner sense (*batn*) of this Book is connected to you in
> [the realm of] souls (*anfus*) just as its external sense is connected to Adam in
> [the realm of] horizons (*āfāq*), to enable you to benefit from the Speech of the
> Truth and so that you may be one of those who read [the Qur'ān] fresh and
> anew.[114]

On this initial level, the struggle is to respond to the Qur'ānic commands and

prohibitions pertaining to the body. On the next level, the level of the subtle soul

substance (*latīfa al-nafsiyya*) and the prophet Nūh, the struggle is to contain one's

passion and anger which will otherwise be like an overwhelming flood, and so on.

When one reads about the communities of each of these prophets, they should

recognize its believers, unbelievers and hypocrites as corresponding to the forces

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[114] Al-Simnānī 147; The English trans. here is that of Elias 87; Corbin 126-7.

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within each of their subtle substances (*laṭā'if*) which may act in harmonious or harmful ways.[115]

The discovery of these subtle substances and their correspondences with the stories of the prophets is an experiential one. Al-Simnānī explains that no one will believe what he has said until they have witnessed it for themselves. Echoing a similar passage in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*, al-Simnānī criticizes anyone who rejects either the exoteric or the inner sense of the Qur'ān.

> Know with certainty that anyone who rejects commentary on the exoteric sense (*ẓāhir*) of the Qur'ān regarding the human world of horizons (*al-'ālam al-āfāq al-nāsūtī*) is a stubborn *bāṭinī* apostate. Anyone who rejects commentary on the inner sense (*baṭn*) of the Qur'ān regarding the kingly world of souls (*al-'ālam al-anfus al-malakūtī*) after having affirmed its external sense is a stupid and anthropomorphic idiot. But the one who combines the external and the inner sense is a happy Sunnī *muslim*. The one who knows the limit (*ḥadd*) of the Qur'ān in the World of Dominion (*'ālam al-jabarūt*) is a rightly guided gnostic believer (*mu'min*). The one who ascends to the lookout point (*muṭṭalaʿ*) of the Qur'ān in the World of Divinity (*'ālam al-lāhūt*) is a perfectly virtuous man (*muḥsin kāmil*), witness for communities, looking out (*muṭṭaliʿ*) over unseen things, praiseworthy and noble.[116]

Besides the allusion to the Ibn Mas'ūd *ḥadīth* in this passage, cited in al-Ghazālī as well, al-Simnānī alludes to the *ḥadīth* in which the angel Gabriel comes before the Prophet in the form of a man and questions him about the meaning of submission (*islām*), faith (*imān*) and virtue (*iḥsān*).[117] The spiritual progression implied in the terms *muslim*, believer (*mu'min*), virtuous man (*muḥsin*) is further elaborated by al-

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[115] Ibid. 149-50.

[116] Ibid. 151.

[117] The *ḥadīth* is included in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* collections of Muslim, Īmān 1 and al-Bukhārī, Īmān 37. An English translation of Muslim version of this *ḥadīth* can be found in Murata and Chittick's *Vision of Islam*, xxv-xxvi.

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Simnānī's system of the seven levels attainable by man, each possessing their own subtle substance.[118]

Once this scheme has been understood, the reader will know with certainty that the Qur'ān has seven inner senses. Al-Simnānī gives an example of how these can be discovered in a single verse of the Qur'ān, verse 4:43. He addresses only the first part of it:

> O you who believe, do not come to prayers while intoxicated until you are able to know what you are saying; nor in a state of ritual impurity, unless you are traveling, until you have done the major ablution.

The external meaning of this verse is clear, admonishing the believer in a state of drunkenness or impurity to delay saying his prayers until he is sober and ritually pure. In al-Simnānī's commentary on the inner senses of the verse, the states of drunkenness and impurity refer to increasingly subtle forms of forgetfulness and attachment. In the first inner sense of this verse, drunkenness and impurity is the result of preoccupation with the affairs of the world. The ablution for it is the "water" of the traditional remembrance (al-dhikr al-rasmī). In the second inner sense of the verse, the state of drunkenness and impurity is brought about by passion (hawā) and its ablution is accomplished with the "water" of the instructional remembrance (al-dhikr al-ta'līmī). In each of the inner senses which follow, the believer risks intoxication and impurity resulting from the ever higher states he achieves. The ablution at each level is the "water" of the appropriate remembrance

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[118] Ibid.

(*dhikr*). Without a state of sobriety and purity, there can be no prayer or intimate

conversation with God.[119]

Just as drunkenness and impurity occur in different forms according to the

different states of the believer, the prohibited personal opinion (*ra'y*) takes on

different forms according to the different levels of interpretation of the Qur'ān.

> The one who interprets the external sense (*zahr*) of the Qur'ān by his own
> opinion (*ra'y*), without hearing from a commentator whose authority derives
> from the Companions (*kāna isnāduhu muttaṣif^{an} bi'l-ṣaḥāba*), has become a
> disbeliever because of his ignorance of most of its precepts (*aḥkām*), causes
> of revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*), and parables (*amthāl*).
> The one who interprets the inner sense of the Qur'ān by his own opinion
> (*ra'y*), without secret, spiritual, hidden or real inspiration (*ilhām sirrī aw rūḥī
> aw khafī aw ḥaqqī*), has becomes a disbeliever in all the allusions (*ishārāt*)
> coming from the presence of Lordship through the particulars of the powers
> (*al-daqā'iq al-quwā*) and the kingly subtleties (*al-laṭā'if al-malakūtiyya*).
> The one who interprets the limit (*ḥadd*) of the Qur'ān by his own opinion
> (*ra'y*), without the permission emanating from the Ka'ba of Divinity (*al-
> ulūhiyya*), has become a disbeliever in the gnosis of the tenuities of the
> qualities pertaining to the Dominion (*ma'ārif raqā'iq al-ṣifāt al-jabarūtiyya*).
> The one who interprets the lookout point of the Qur'ān by his own opinion
> (*ra'y*), before His permission to enter into the exalted presence and before
> obtaining great purity and comprehension of the core of the real subtle
> substance (*al-laṭīfa al-ḥaqqiya*) which nurtures the subtle "I" substance (*al-
> laṭīfa al-'aniyya*), has become a disbeliever in the realities of the Qur'ān.[120]

Just as a healthy and sound ear is a requirement for hearing the external sense of the

Qur'ān and learning its exoteric commentary, a healthy and sound "ear" of the heart

is a requirement for hearing the inner sense of the Qur'ān and learning its esoteric

commentary. Each higher level of comprehension requires a correspondingly

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[119] Ibid. 152-4.

[120] Ibid. 155-6. Some of the terms used here are difficult to understand without a broader overview of al-Simnānī's thought. Al-Simnānī is describing the descent of evermore subtle understandings of the Qur'ān, all of which may be denied at different spiritual levels. This descent can be understood in terms of his system of emanation, for which see Elias 72-77.

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healthy and sound "ear." Just as there are remedies for ailments of the physical ear,

there are remedies for these inner ailments, consisting of the abandonment of

attachments and various forms of remembrance (dhikr).[121]

Criticisms of the methodology of Sūfī commentary

Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1200)[122] and Ibn Taymiyya were Sūfīs themselves who

considered many of the practices and doctrines of their brethren to be deviations

from authentic Islam. In his book entitled Kitāb talbīs Iblīs (The Book of the Devil's

Deception), Ibn al-Jawzī set out to identify and correct the errors he saw amongst his

fellow Muslims, devoting approximately half of the book to Sūfīs. Many of his

criticisms relate to their ideas of knowledge, states, and the Qur'ān and highlight in a

negative way the distinctive methodology of Sūfī interpretation. The same kind of

criticisms can be found in the works of Ibn Taymiyya.

According to Ibn al-Jawzī, the starting point for all the delusions of the Sūfīs

is their turning away from seeking transmitted knowledge.[123] The devil deceives

them in this matter in several ways. First, he shows them how much work is involved

in seeking knowledge while making ease and comfort seem attractive. Some Sūfīs

have said that preoccupation with transmitted knowledge is idleness but this is only

because they have seen the commitment it requires.

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[121] Ibid. 156.

[122] Abū'l Farash 'Abd al-Raḥmān Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1200) was famous as a preacher and Ḥanbalī polemicist. For his connection to Sūfism see Makdisi's "The Hanbali School and Sufism" 69-71.
[123] Ibn al-Jawzī, Mukhtaṣar kitāb talbīs Iblīs 148, 268-279; English trans. of a portion of this by Margoliouth (1936) 355, (1937) 398-403.

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Secondly, he causes them to be content with just a little knowledge, so that

they believe that those who seek extensive knowledge of *hadīth* do so only for

prestige and their own pleasure. Ibn al-Jawzī concedes this desire for prestige, but

compares it to the desire for marriage, a desire which is necessary for the greater goal

of procreation.

Thirdly, he causes some of them to believe that the objective is practice

(*'amal*) without understanding that devotion to knowledge is the most perfect

practice.

Lastly, the Devil deceives the Ṣūfīs into believing that knowledge is acquired

from inner processes (*bawāṭin*) and inspiration (*ilhām*), without intermediary (*bi-lā*

wāsiṭa). Ibn al-Jawzī does not deny the possibility of inspiration but insists that it is

not knowledge in and of itself, but rather the *fruit* of knowledge and piety. He insists

that there can be no knowledge without the intermediary of transmitted knowledge;

otherwise, there would be no way of knowing whether the inspiration received is

sound or merely Satanic suggestion. Those who belittle transmitted knowledge

attack the Law (*sharī'a*), a charge tantamount to infidelity. Such is the case with Abū

Yazīd al-Bisṭāmī, whose comment on a conversation about men who learn

transmitted knowledge Ibn al-Jawzī quotes: "Poor people! They get their knowledge

dead from the dead, but we get our knowledge from the Living One who never

dies."[124]

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[124] Ibid. 271; English trans. (1937) 400.

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For Ibn al-Jawzī, there is never a point where one moves beyond the need for transmitted knowledge. He disapprovingly relates a story regarding the Ṣūfī Aḥmad ibn Abū 'l-Hawārī:

> Aḥmad ibn Abu 'l-Hawārī threw his books into the sea and said, "Yes, you were proof (dalīl), but devotion to proof after attainment (wuṣūl) is absurd." Aḥmad ibn Abū 'l-Hawārī had searched out ḥadīth for thirty years. When he attained all he could from them, he carried his books to the sea, submerged them and said, "O knowledge, I have not done this to you out of disdain, nor out of disdain for what is your due. Rather, I used to seek you out in order to be guided by you to my Lord. Now that I have been guided by you, I have no further need of you."[125]

Ibn al-Jawzī completely rejects the distinction made by the Ṣūfīs between exoteric knowledge ('ilm al-ẓāhir) and esoteric knowledge ('ilm al-bāṭin), a distinction which he believes leads to the rejection of the law (sharī'a). "Many of the Ṣūfīs make a distinction between the law (sharī'a) and the truth (ḥaqīqa) but this is an ignorant thing to say because all of the law is different kinds of truths (ḥaqā'iq).[126] Ibn al-Jawzī shows his awareness, however, of many Ṣūfīs who did insist upon the necessity and primacy of the Law.

In his discussion on the same topic, Ibn Taymiyya demonstrates a similar belief in the primacy of transmitted knowledge. He concedes the relationship between knowledge and practice, but insists that knowledge can never be received directly, without the intermediary of the ḥadīth and Traditions.

> What is claimed by some of the Bāṭiniyya,...as also found in the writings of Abū Ḥāmid [al-Ghazālī] and others, that it is possible for men who practice retreat, heart-purification, and self-elevation through worthy moral virtues, to

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[125] Ibid. 274.
[126] Ibid. 273; English trans. 402.

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know what the Prophets have informed about belief in God and the angels and the Scripture and the prophets and the Last Day, and details about the jinn and devils, without the medium of Prophetic information, is based upon this corrupt theory—namely that when they purify themselves this (knowledge) would descend upon their mind either through the Potential Reason, or some other agency.

Abū Ḥāmid (al-Ghazālī) particularly mentions this too freely, and it is one of the things in which Muslims have opposed him, expressing their disapproval in no mild terms, because he eliminates Prophetic intermedium for ascertaining transcendent things...

(On the other hand) some of the scholastics and analogous theologians have disapproved of what he has rightly said, thinking that the practice of spiritual and moral purification has no favourable effect whatsoever upon acquisition of knowledge. They too have erred (in their turn) in this denial. For the truth is that piety and purification are one of the strongest means of acquiring knowledge.

Of course, we must needs have recourse to *Kitāb* and *Sunnah* for knowledge as well as work(s). And it is impossible for anybody after the Prophet to know by himself what the Prophet has communicated of things Unseen, without Prophetic information in ascertaining the Unseen.[127]

Ibn Taymiyya also concedes a limited role for inspiration, but only in areas where there are inadequate *shar'ī* indications. In his *Sharḥ kalimāt li- 'Abd 'l-Qādir,* he writes

If the *sālik* has creatively employed his efforts to the external *shar'ī* indications and sees no clear probability concerning the preferable action, he may feel inspired—along with his goodness of intention and reverent fear of God—to choose one of two actions as superior (to the other). This kind of inspiration is an indication concerning the truth. It may be even a stronger indication than weak analogies, weak *ḥadīths*, weak literal arguments (*zawāhir*) and weak *istiṣhabs* which are employed by many of those who delve into the principles, differences, and systematizing of *fiqh.*[128]

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[127] Ibn Taymiyya from *Al-radd 'alā al-manṭiqiyyīn.* The English translation quoted here is from 'Abduṣ-Ṣamad Sharafuddīn, ed. in his Introduction to the *Majmū'at Tafsīr Ibn Taimiyya,* Bombay: Q Press, 1954, 13-4. I have been unable to locate this citation in *Al-Radd.*
[128] This English translation is that of Michel from his "Ibn Taymiyya's *Sharḥ* on the *Futūḥ al-ghayb* of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī" 8.

Another basic error of the Ṣūfīs, according to both Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn

Taymiyya, is their acceptance of the state they call ecstasy (*wajd*). As described

above, the Ṣūfīs found a model for Qur'ānic recitation in Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, who is said

to have repeated a verse continually in prayer until he heard it from the Speaker

Himself and fainted. Ibn al-Jawzī does not refer to this particular story, but states

that there are many examples in books on asceticism of men fainting, crying out, or

even dying upon hearing the Qur'ān recited. While acknowledging that there may be

some sincere believers amongst them, he nonetheless rejects what he sees as a loss of

control without precedence among the Companions of the Prophet. The Companions

had the purest of hearts but their strong emotion (*wajd*) did not go beyond weeping

and humility (*khushū*).[129] Ibn al-Jawzī rejects the notions of states altogether,

dismissing al-Qushayrī's descriptions of them in his *Risāla* as a worthless and

confused mess (*al-takhlīṭ alladhī laysa bi-shay*).[130]

Like Ibn al-Jawzī, Ibn Taymiyya was troubled by the ecstatic approach of

Ṣūfīs towards the Qur'ān. In his *Al-ṣūfīya wa 'l-fuqarā'*, he makes it clear that those

who faint or even die upon hearing a recitation of the Qur'ān are not to be emulated.

As discussed above, there are several different Ṣūfī versions of the three levels to

which one must ascend in listening to the Qur'ān, and the story of Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq

fainting is commonly used to illustrate the highest level. Ibn Taymiyya provides his

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[129] Ibid. 206-16; English trans. 393-8.
[130] Ibid. 150; English trans. (1936) 357.

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own three ranks of those listening to the Qur'ān, knowingly or unknowingly

contesting the order found in the Ṣūfī versions:

> Instead, there are three ranks [to those hearing the *Qur'ān*]. One of them is
> the state of those unjust to themselves, those who are hard-hearted, not
> yielding to the audition [of the *Qur'ān*] nor to the remembrance [of God], and
> they are comparable to the Jews...
> The [second rank] is the state of the pious believer who is too weak to bear
> what suddenly afflicts his heart. So he is the one who is struck down, death-
> struck or swooning, and that is due only to the power of the sudden seizure
> (*al-wārid*) and the weakness of the heart to bear it...
> But those who retain their reason, in spite of the fact that they acquired
> from faith that which others acquired, or similar to it or more perfect, they
> [the former] are more excellent than they [the latter] are. This is the state of
> the Companions—may God be satisfied with them—and the state of our
> Prophet—God bless him and give him peace. For he was made to travel by
> night into the heaven, and God revealed to him what He revealed. Yet, he
> awoke as he had spent the night; his state did not change. Thus, his state is
> more excellent than that of Moses—God bless him and give him peace—who
> fell swooning (Q. 7:143) when his Lord manifested Himself to the mountain.
> Moses' state is a splendid, exalted, and excellent state, but the state of
> Muḥammad—God bless him and give him peace—is more splendid, exalted,
> and excellent.[131]

Ibn Taymiyya's views on the subject of losing consciousness are more complex than

Ibn al-Jawzī's. Whereas Ibn al-Jawzī leans towards a more complete condemnation

of losing consciousness, Ibn Taymiyya carefully and clearly distinguishes the

insincere who seek unconsciousness even through alcohol and drugs from the sincere

who succumb because they have not yet realized the more perfect state of sobriety. It

is a discussion similar to that found in many Ṣūfī texts.

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[131] Homerin, his translation from "Ibn Taymiyya's *Al-Ṣūfīyah wa-al-fuqarā*," 225-8.

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In addition to criticizing Ṣūfī beliefs regarding knowledge and states, Ibn al-Jawzī specifically attacks the books of several different Ṣūfīs.[132] He mentions Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-luma'*, wherein are mentioned "repugnant beliefs" and "despicable statements." Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb* contains "false *ḥadīths*" and "corrupt beliefs." 'Abd al-Raḥmān al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* contains astonishing examples of Ṣūfī exegesis "which occur to them without the supports (*asnād*) of any of the fundamentals of knowledge." Al-Qushayrī's commentary is even more incredible than his *Risāla*. Al-Ghazālī's *Iḥyā* is full of false Traditions which al-Ghazālī does not know are false. Ibn al-Jawzī also refers to the interpretation of the story of Ibrāhīm and the stars, sun and moon. He claims that al-Ghazālī said that what was intended by these celestial bodies were not the objects we well know, but lights which are the veils of God. This, Ibn Jawzī says, is in the style of the *bāṭiniyya*.[133]

Ibn al-Jawzī analyzes examples of Ṣūfī exegesis, mostly taken from al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, and points out what he understands to be their errors. For example, he quotes the interpretation attributed to al-Junayd on verse 87:6, *We will teach you to recite and you will not forget (sanuqri'uka fa-lā tansā)*. Someone asked

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[132] Ibn al-Jawzī 149-51; English trans. (1936) 356-8.

[133] Ibn al-Jawzī is referring here to a passage in the *Iḥyā'* which states that God has seventy veils of light and that this is what is meant by the celestial bodies in the story of Ibrāhīm. Like Ibrāhīm, the Ṣūfī aspirant may make the mistake of judging any one of these veils to be the God, and al-Ghazāl specifically mentions al-Ḥallāj as one who made this error. (*Iḥyā'* 10:517-22). Cf. the passages from the *Fayṣal* and *Mishkāt* discussed above where the celestial bodies in the Ibrāhīm story are compared to angelic luminuous substances.

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al-Junayd about it and he said, "you will not forget to apply it practically (*lā tansā al-*

'amal bihi)." Ibn al-Jawzī rejects this interpretation, saying

> This is in no way commentary! The error in it is apparent because he has
> interpreted it as a prohibition but it is not so. Rather, it is a predicate, not a
> prohibition, and means "you will never forget (*mā tansā*)." If it were a
> prohibition, [the verb] would have been apocopated [*lā tansa*]. His
> interpretation is contrary to the consensus (*'ijmā*) of the scholars (*'ulamā*).[134]

Ibn al-Jawzī demonstrates many additional examples of Ṣūfī interpretations which he

objects to because of errors in Arabic grammar and etymology, and deviation from

the accepted interpretations of commentators (*mufassirūn*).

He also objects to interpretations which he sees as conflicting with the clear

and unambiguous parts of the Qur'ān (*khilāf li-ṣarīḥ al-Qur'ān*). One example which

he gives of this type of interpretation is commentary attributed to Sahl al-Tustarī on

verse 4:36: *Worship God and do not join any partners to Him. Do good to [your]*

parents and relatives, the orphans and the poor, your near and far neighbors (al-jār

dhū'l-qurbī wa'l-jār al-junub), the companion by your side and the wayfarer (ibn al-

sabīl)... Sahl is said to have said that "your near neighbor (*al-jār dhū'l-qurbī*)" is the

heart (*al-qalb*), your far neighbor (*al-jār al-junub*) is the soul (*nafs*), and the wayfarer

(*ibn sabīl*) is the limbs of the body (*al-jawāriḥ*).[135]

Some of Ibn al-Jawzī's objections are in the area of correct belief. He

particularly criticizes al-Hallāj's interpretations of God's "deception" (*makr*),[136]

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[134] Ibid. 280.

[135] Ibid. 282.

[136] The Qur'ān speaks in many places of God's deception (*makr*) and says that God is the best of
deceivers (*khayr al-mākirīn*) in verses 3:54 and 8:30.

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interpretations which Ibn Jawzī see as constituting "outright infidelity (*kufr*

maḥḍ)."[137] He concludes his analysis of al-Sulamī's *Haqā'iq* with these dismissive

words:

> All of the book is like this. I had intended to show quite a bit of it here but I
> see that time will be wasted in recording something which borders between
> infidelity (*kufr*), error (*khata*) and drivel (*hadhayān*). It is like what we have
> related from the *bāṭiniyya*. These are examples for anyone who wants to
> know what the book is like. If anyone wants to know more, let him look at
> this book.[138]

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[137] Ibid.
[138] Ibid.

3. CONCLUSION

The question of whether or not the Qur'ān should be interpreted was never seriously debated after al-Ṭabarī. Once the necessity of interpretation was generally accepted, the debate shifted to the question of the authority of the interpreter. Al-Ṭabarī defined the soundest interpreters as those who argue most conclusively based on their knowledge of the most authentic traditions of the Prophet and the Arabic language. Their interpretations will not deviate from those of the pious first generations (*salaf*) and the scholars of the community, any differences within that community being resolved by the independent exercise of judgement (*ijtihād*).

After al-Ṭabarī, the debate centers on the nature of the transmitted *salafī* interpretations. Al-Ghazālī argued that the transmitted material was insufficient to explain the Qur'ān. Authentic *ḥadīth* from the Prophet explains only a portion of the Qur'ān, and the interpretations of his immediate followers represent their own, sometimes differing opinions. This interpretation differs from revelation, leaving room for independent thinking as sanctioned by the Qur'ān. His view was adopted by exoteric commentators such as al-Qurṭubī who, as we have seen, quotes al-Ghazālī anonymously in his introduction. Ibn Taymiyya's hermeneutic differs from that of al-Ghazālī and al-Qurṭubī in its complete acceptance of the comprehensiveness, accuracy and unity of the interpretations of the pious first generations (*salaf*). The place for independent thinking, in his view, lies in the correct textual analysis of a hierarchy of sources for interpreting the Qur'ān: the

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Qur'ān itself, the *hadīth* of the Prophet, the statements of the Companions, and the statements of the Followers.

Al-Ṭabarī claimed in the introduction to his commentary that it would "incorporate everything which people need to know about this Book."[1] This statement can be contrasted with that of al-Ghazālī, who wrote that "the one who claims that the Qur'ān has no other meaning than what exoteric exegesis has provided, should know that he has acknowledged his own limitations and therefore is right with regards to himself, but is wrong in an opinion which brings everyone else down to his level."[2] This was the starting point of the Ṣūfīs who insisted upon the plentitude of discoverable meaning in the Qur'ān. Authority regarding these deeper meanings comes from the grace of God and the effort of the believer, not as a scholar of the Arabic language and the *hadīth*, but as a practitioner who has given himself up completely to devotion. As al-Ghazālī says,

> Know that you have become arrogant and have reached quite a height if you think that the knowledge of this can come to you all at once without your undertaking the task of preparing yourself to receive it by discipline (*riyāḍa*), effort (*mujāhada*), complete renunciation of the world, disengagement from the tumult of creation, utter immersion in love of the Creator, and the search for Truth.[3]

The explanation of the relationship between exoteric and Ṣūfī interpretations was of some concern to the Ṣūfīs because they were always vulnerable to the charge of having rejected the obvious sense of verses, thereby rejecting or distorting the

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[1] Al-Ṭabarī, 1:4. Quoted above in the section "Al-Ṭabarī and the necessity of interpretation."
[2] Al-Ghazālī, *Ihyā* 5:129. Quoted above in the section "The plentitude of discoverable meaning."
[3] Al-Ghazālī, *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* 32-33. Quoted above in the section "Knowledge and Practice."

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Qur'ānic message. The various terms used to describe Ṣūfī exegesis and the different

explanations of its methods can be seen as attempts to explain and justify

interpretations which were highly questionable to others in the Muslim community.

Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Taymiyya represent critics who did not accept these

explanations, finding in Ṣūfī exegesis instead the unacceptable methods used by the

bāṭiniyya. They saw the root of the problem as being the rejection of the primacy of

transmitted *salafī* interpretations and the corresponding acceptance of the validity of

ecstatic states.

II. COMMENTARY

In a religion as firmly based on a book as Islam, almost any writing which emerges can conceivably be classified as commentary on that book, leaving us with the difficult task of deciding which works merit the designations of *tafsīr*, *ta'wīl* or *ishāra*. The task of identifying the formal characteristics of *tafsīr* has been tackled with great skill by Calder.[1] He suggests that, first and foremost, a work of *tafsīr* must contain comments which sequentially address the complete, or nearly complete, text of the Qur'ān. Secondly, the *tafsīr* must allow for polyvalent readings through the citation of named authorities, a polyvalence which may, however, be limited by the selection of material included and the statement of preferred interpretations. Lastly, a *tafsīr* must measure the Qur'ānic text by use of outside disciplines, both linguistic (instrumental) and theological (ideological).[2] Although elements of these characteristics are problematic, as will be seen, the overall definition is a good one and has been adopted here in selecting texts to represent a fair cross-section of classical exoteric *tafsīr*.

Given these defined characteristics, Calder does not include Ṣūfī works within the genre of *tafsīr*,[3] and in this he keeps company with al-Wāhidī (d.1076) who wrote about al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*, "If he thinks that this is a *tafsīr*, he is

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[1] Calder, "Tafsīr from Ṭabarī to Ibn Kathīr."

[2] Calder includes orthography, lexis, syntax, rhetoric and symbol/allegory in the category of instrumental structures and prophetic history, theology, eschatology, law and Ṣūfism in the category of ideological structures, 105-6.

[3] Ibid. 134 and 134-5nn.2-3. However Calder accepts the use of Ṣūfī ideas as an ideological structure against which to measure the Qur'ān (see previous note).

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an infidel."[4] Al-Wāḥidī's statement is a reminder that defining what constitutes *tafsīr* is tantamount to defining what constitutes acceptable belief. While few would argue with Calder regarding the first and most fundamental characteristic of *tafsīr*, that of "canon and segmentation, lemma and comment" (and the Ṣūfī commentaries included here fit this description),[5] the second and third characteristics regarding the use of cited authorities and outside disciplines raises the issue of the competing epistemological assumptions of different groups of Muslims. When Ibn Taymiyya said that al-Rāzī's *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* contains everything in it except *tafsīr*, he was accusing al-Rāzī of creating an unacceptable syncretistic version of Islam combining the divine revelation to Muḥammad with pagan Greek philosophy.

The Ṣūfīs themselves often used the word *tafsīr* to describe their interpretations of the Qur'ān, and yet they recognized that these interpretations were of a sort different from those found in exoteric *tafsīr*, and they therefore used other words and phrases to describe the activity. The most commonly used terms were *ishāra* and *ta'wīl*, but one finds others such as *fahm* and *ḍarb al-mithāl* as well, as we saw in Part I.

Ṣūfī commentary has been described as "allegorical"[6] and "symbolic,"[7] but these terms do not adequately evoke the varied forms of discourse found therein.[8]

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[4] Quoted by Basyūnī in his introduction to al-Qushayrī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* 16.

[5] The commentaries of al-Tustarī and al-Ghazālī, however, fail Calder's requirement of "the presence of the complete canonical text of the Qur'ān (or at least a significant chunk of it)." Calder, 101; 134-5n2.

[6] See Goldziher's chapter "Koranauslegung der islamischen Mystik" in his *Die Richtungen* 180-262 and Rippin in his articles on "Tafsīr" for EI[2] and the Encyclopedia of Religion.

[7] Habil, "Traditional Esoteric Commentaries on the Quran" 25.

Ṣūfīs not only viewed Qur'ānic verses as symbols to be deciphered, they also created their own metaphor, wordplay, narrative and poetry as part of their exegesis and it is this use of language as much as specific Ṣūfī doctrines and beliefs which gives Ṣūfī commentary its distinctive character. A *tafsīr* such as al-Rāzī's *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* contains Ṣūfī interpretations, but is categorized here as an exoteric *tafsīr* because it's style and form more clearly follows the scholastic tradition of *tafsīr* as defined by Calder. The symbolism in al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* places it firmly in the Ṣūfī tradition, while other writings of al-Ghazālī contain exoteric exegesis. The commentaries chosen here to represent Ṣūfī exegesis represent a variety of influential works, but it should be noted that many important Ṣūfī commentaries remain in manuscript form. Works such as Jalāluddīn Rūmī's *Mathnawī* and Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* have not been included because, although they clearly present Ṣūfī interpretations of the Qur'ān, they do not follow the lemma and comment format of the genre of *tafsīr*.

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[8] See the Appendix on "Allegory, Symbol and Imagination in Ṣūfī hermeneutics" for a review of previous scholarship on these topics.

4. THE *MUFASSIRŪN*

<u>Al-Tabarī</u>

Abū Ja'far Muḥammad b. Jarīr b. Yazīd al-Tabarī was born in Tabaristān in northern Iran but spent most of his life in Baghdād, where he died in 923.[1] According to one story, he first arrived in Baghdād hoping to study with Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal but found that he had recently died. Al-Tabarī himself attempted to establish a separate school of law based on his own principles, but apparently it was not distinct enough from Shāfi'ism to survive his death. Instead, his fame rests upon two monumental works: his history of the world, *Mukhtaṣar ta'rīkh al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk wa 'l-khulafā'*, and his Qur'ānic commentary, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta 'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*. The commentary marks the beginning of the classical period of Qur'ānic commentaries, and is important for the vast amount of information it contains from the earliest sources of Islam.

In the edition used for this study, the *Jāmi' al-bayān* comprises thirty parts printed in twelve volumes.[2] Al-Tabarī usually begins his exegesis by paraphrasing a verse with the use of synonyms, prefaced by the phrase "He (God) says" (*yaqūlu*) or "He means" (*ya'nī*). He then provides philological information on the verse,

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[1] Information on the life and works of al-Tabarī can be found in Bosworth, "Al-Tabarī" in EI²; McAuliffe, *Qur'ānic Christians* 38-45; and Rosenthal's General Introduction to *The History of al-Tabarī* 1:5-134.

[2] Al-Tabarī, *Jāmi' al-bayān 'an ta 'wīl āy al-Qur'ān*, Egypt 1954-7. An abridged English trans. entitled *The Commentary on the Qur'ān* was begun by Cooper but only one volume of a projected five volumes has appeared (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987). Three volumes of an abridged French translation entitled *Commentaire du Coran* have appeared translated by Pierre Godé (Paris: Éditions d'Art Les Heures Claires, 1983-).

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including variant readings, definitions and etymologies of problematic words, and solutions to grammatical difficulties. These comments are based on named or unnamed reciters of the Qur'ān (*al-qurrā'*), Arabists (*ahl al 'arabiyya*), grammarians (*naḥwiyyūn*), and evidence from Arab speech patterns (*taqūlu al-'arab*) and poems.

After establishing the most basic meaning of the text, al-Ṭabarī addresses intratextual and extratextual problems of meaning, noting differences of opinion by the opening statement, "interpreters (*ahl al-ta'wīl*) have disagreed regarding...". This might include explanations regarding the circumstances of the revelation (*asbāb al-nuzūl*); the identification of unnamed people and places; and the identification of vaguely described groups of people (such as "those in whose hearts is a turning away" or "those firmly rooted in knowledge"), events (how the fish "took his way" in the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir), or things (which verses of the Qur'ān are the "clear verses" (*muḥkamāt*) and which are the "ambiguous" or "similar verses" (*mutashābihāt*). Very occasionally, al-Ṭabarī includes comments on the lessons to be learned from a verse.

The sources al-Ṭabarī uses to solve these problems of intratextual and extratextual meaning are the Qur'ān itself, the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet, and the exegetical Traditions attributed to his Companions and Followers. Al-Ṭabarī's commentary is often thought of as the first and foremost example of "interpretation by the transmitted tradition" (*tafsīr bi'l-ma'thūr*) because of the enormous quantity of *ḥadīth* and Traditions which he includes. When quoting *ḥadīth* he often gives

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numerous versions with different chains of transmission (*asānīd*). He also supplies the full chain of transmission for Traditions related from the Companions and Followers,[3] chains which end with al-Tabarī himself.[4] After quoting the *hadīth* and Traditions, al-Tabarī usually expresses his preferred interpretation, sometimes providing his reasons and sometimes not.

The style of al-Tabarī's writing is always straightforward and clear. Ibn Khuzayma wrote, "The *tafsīr* of Muhammad b. Jarīr is clear; it is clear from beginning to end. I know no one on the face of the earth more knowledgeable than Muhammad b. Jarīr."[5] Al-Tabarī moves through the text, sometimes word by word, sometimes dealing with whole verses at once, examining philological or textual issues by providing the relevant transmitted information and his own, briefly stated arguments. Because of the inclusion of variant forms of *hadīth* and Traditions, there is a good deal of repetition. Sometimes entire chains of transmission are followed by the simple statement "so and so said something similar" (*qāla...mithluhu*). By and large, the language reflects direct aural reports, such as "so and so said...", even when al-Tabarī refers to his own views (*qāla Ibn Jarīr*). Occasionally, however, the dialectical speech pattern of *kalām* appears, as in "if one were to say...then it would be said" (*fa-in qāla...qīla*).

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[3] Information on the Companions and Followers found in al-Tabarī is given by Cooper in his introduction, xv-xix.

[4] Bosworth notes that sources introduced by words such as *haddathanā, akhbaranā* or *kataba* indicate that al-Tabarī had the recognized license (*ijāza*) to transmit those sources. Where he had no such authority, he used words such as *qāla, dhakara, rawā,*and *huddithtu,* 13a.

[5] Quoted by McAuliffe 42.

Al-Ṭabarī's commentary has been admired by western scholars for what

Heath calls its "hermeneutic pluralism."[6] Heath points out that while al-Ṭabarī

makes his preferences known, he never explicitly rejects other interpretations.

> What remains is an exercise in humanism. A priori, the text has only one
> meaning, it is the word of God. But mainstream religious scholars and
> traditionalists (for aṭ-Ṭabarī typifies the mainstream approach here) refuse to
> determine it. Instead coexisting interpretations are left in suspension. The
> ultimate choice is left to the individual reader.[7]

Heath furthermore suggests that al-Ṭabarī's method is an indirect one; he surrounds

the text by his philological discussions and citations of ḥadīth and Traditions,

allowing his preferred interpretations to coexist along with others. According to

Heath, the determination of a single literal meaning would place interpretations on

the same level as the Qur'ānic text, removing its privileged status as the word of

God. He views al-Ṭabarī as a sensitive and intelligent scholar who demonstrated his

respect for the ineffability of God's speech by refusing to address it in a

reductionistic manner.[8]

Calder credits al-Ṭabarī with establishing the basic structures of the genre of

tafsīr, as Calder defines them.[9] He draws particular attention to the characteristics of

polyvalent readings through citation of authorities and the use of outside disciplines

to measure the Qur'ānic text. According to Calder, the use of independent

disciplines "enrich the quranic text by infusing it with the play of argument and

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[6] Heath, "Creative Hermeutics."
[7] Ibid. 186.
[8] Ibid. 204-5.
[9] Calder 134.

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ikhtilāf of layered meanings, of grammatical and rhetorical virtuosity."[10] Calder suggests that al-Ṭabarī enjoyed the diversity of his cited authorities and outside disciplines, as well as the opportunity to participate in the community represented therein by presenting his own arguments.[11]

But the use of the terms "hermeneutic pluralism" and "polyvalent reading" are problematic. Far from refusing to determine the meaning of the Qur'ānic text, al-Ṭabarī prides himself in illuminating its monovalent meaning by presenting the consensus of the community where it exists, and by arguing for what appears to him to be the soundest interpretation where there is disagreement.[12] Different views are expressed because they represent an authoritative source of knowledge which must be respected even when its contradictions are problematic. Their inclusion is not indicative of a belief in plurality of meaning, but reflects al-Ṭabarī's acceptance of his lower status in the hierarchy of authoritative interpreters even while he retains his right to make critical judgements. The better term to describe al-Ṭabarī's method is *ijtihād*, meaning the independent exercise of judgement, because it is a term which avoids conflating the results, intended and unintended, of the methodology with the methodology itself.[13]

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[10] Ibid. 126.

[11] Ibid. 123.

[12] As he states will be his methodology in the introduction to his *tafsīr* (see Part I) above.

[13] The term Bosworth chooses, 12a and 13a, and Rosenthal, 55-6. I am not suggesting that Heath and Calder are unaware of this issue–both demonstrate this in phrases such as "(t)he pluralistic view of the text that results" (Heath 185) and "(t)his citation of authorities and the consequent polyvalent reading of the text" (Calder 103)–but only that these terms may not adequately reflect al-Ṭabarī's own beliefs and objectives.

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Al-Zamakshari

Abū al-Qāsim Maḥmūd b. 'Umar al-Zamakshari was born in the province of Khwārazm south of the Aral Sea and died there in 1144 after years of studying and teaching which took him to such cities as Baghdād and Mecca.[14] He was a particularly sought after teacher in the areas of Arabic grammar and philology. His theology was unreservedly Mu'tazilī, as he proudly used to confirm when calling upon others, saying, "Abū Qāsim, the Mu'tazilī, is at the gate."[15] His best known work is his *tafsīr, Al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl,* a work which was greatly admired and quoted for its linguistic insights while censured for its Mu'tazilī views. 'Abd Allāh b. 'Umar al-Bayḍāwī (d.1286 or 1293) produced a commentary entitled *Anwār al-tanzīl wa-asrār al-ta'wīl* which is mostly an abridged version of *al-Kashshāf* purged of its suspect theology. Al-Rāzī appears to have used *al-Kashshāf* as a basis for his own commentary,[16] as did al-Naysābūrī.[17]

Al-Zamakshari's commentary comprises four volumes.[18] He is far more selective than al-Ṭabarī in the *ḥadīth* and Traditions he chooses to include; those he does cite are often quoted anonymously and without any chain of transmission (*isnād*), introduced merely by "it has been said" (*qīla*) or "it has been related" (*ruwiya*). The result is little repetition and a far more condensed style, although he

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[14] Information on the life and works of al-Zamakshāri can be found in Brocklemann, "Al-Zamakshāri" in EI[1]; and McAuliffe 49-54.
[15] McAuliffe 50.
[16] Ceylan, *Theology and Tafsīr* 16, 19-20 and Johns, "Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" 76-80.
[17] Ayoub, *The Qur'an and its Interpreters* 1:6.
[18] Al-Zamakshari, *Al-Kashshāf 'an ḥaqā'iq al-tanzīl,* Egypt 1966.

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shows an interest, like al-Ṭabarī, in expanding Qur'ānic narratives by providing

details such as names of people and places, and story background. Johns has noted

al-Zamaksharī's fondness for this material and the similarity between his accounts

and those found in al-Thaʿlabī's *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*.[19] More so than al-Ṭabarī, al-

Zamaksharī makes the occasional tentative step towards homiletics by suggesting

lessons to be learned from certain Qur'ānic verses.

Al-Zamaksharī's commentary is punctuated by the questions he asks of the

text using classic *kalām* speech: "For if you were to say..." (*fa-in qulta*), "I would

say..." (*qultu*). The questions pertain to either linguistic, narrative or theological

issues. An example of a narrative issue would be questioning how it was possible

that Joshua could have forgotten the fish who comes to life and miraculously swims

away in the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir. Examples of theological concerns are the

questions of how Mūsā could have had less knowledge than Khaḍir, or why the

Qur'ān contains ambiguous verses.

Al-Zamaksharī's discussions of linguistic issues are more involved and subtle

than al-Ṭabarī's, and are often used to support theological concerns, namely, the

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[19] Johns, 77. Al-Thaʿlabī's collection of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*, entitled '*Arāʾis al-majālis* is considered to
be the first independent collection of stories of the prophets (Nagel, *Kiṣaṣ al-Anbiyāʾ* in EI²;
Thackston, Introduction to *The Tales of the Prophets of Kisaʾi*, xvi.). This material from Jews and
Christians was considered problematic fairly early on in the Muslim community. Newby has
suggested that the *isrāʾīliyyāt* narratives included in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* already represent "the remains
of a moribund tradition" which found a more congenial home in the genre of *qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ* because
of its less exacting standards. (Newby, "Tafsīr Israʾiliyat"). Al-Thaʿlabī's *tafsīr, al-Kashf wa 'l-
bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qurʾān*, was criticized for its use of the same kind of material. Ibn Taymiyya
praised the exegete al-Baghawī (d. sometime between 1117 and 1122) for writing an abridged version
of al-Thaʿlabī's *tafsīr* purged of the "inferior traditions and heretical opinions," thereby producing a
tafsīr which Ibn Taymiyya judged superior to those of al-Zamaksharī and al-Qurṭubī (quoted in
Riddell, "Transmission of Narrative-Based Exegesis in Islam," 67).

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rejection of anthropomorphic interpretations and the affirmation of the miraculous

nature (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān. A case in point is the notion of *takhyīl*, a term which al-

Zamaksharī introduced into *tafsīr*. Literally, *takhyīl* means "creating an image or an

illusion (*khayāl*).[20] As applied to a Qur'ānic verse, al-Zamaksharī's use of *takhyīl*

means "a visualization of an abstract notion such as God's majesty and omnipotence

in a comprehensive picture, the parts of which cannot be individually connected back

to the notion expressed."[21] To label a verse *takhyīl* is to avoid anthropomorphic

literal interpretations without resorting to simple equivalencies such as suggesting

God's "hand" means His power. Al-Zamaksharī was very well aware that a *takhyīl*

construct evokes an emotional response which would be lost in these interpretations,

as can be seen in his commentary on Qur'ānic verse 39:67: *The earth altogether will*

be His handful on the Day of Resurrection and the heavens will be rolled up in His

right hand.

> The intention of this utterance, if you take it as it is in its entirety and totality,
> is the depiction (*taswīr*) of His majesty and putting before our eyes the
> essence of His majesticness and nothing else, without taking the "handful" or
> the "right hand" into the realm of the literal or that of the figurative. Similar
> in character is the tradition that a rabbi came to the Prophet–may God bless
> him and give him peace–and said, "Abū l-Qāsim, God will grasp the heavens
> on the Day of Resurrection with one finger and the [seven] earths with one,
> the mountains with one and the trees with one, the ground with one and the
> rest of creation with one, then He will shake them and say: 'I am the king!'"
> Whereupon the Prophet–may God bless him and give him peace–laughed out
> of amazement about what he had said and then recited in corroboration of it:
> 'They measure God not with his true measure etc.' (Surat al-Zumar 39/67, as
> above). The most eloquent of the Arabs–may God bless him and give him
> peace–laughed and was amazed for no other reason than that he understood

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[20] Heinrichs, "Takhyīl" EI[2] 10:129a.
[21] Ibid. 10:131a.

this exactly as the experts on imagery (or "clear expression"? *'ulamā' al-bayān*) do, i.e., without forming a mental image (*taṣawwur*) of grasping and a finger and shaking and anything of that sort. Rather his comprehension, from beginning to end [of the utterance], hit upon its essence and its point, which is to indicate [His] dazzling power and that gigantic deeds, about which thoughts and minds are bewildered and which even imaginations cannot probe, are easy on Him. This ease cannot be conveyed to the listener unless by steering the utterance on the *takhyīl* way, as it has been done here.[22]

As Goldziher points out, the methodology of al-Zamaksharī and other Mu'tazilīs is founded upon assumptions regarding the Qur'ān's use of metaphorical and figurative forms of speech.[23] For them, the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān means that it includes the most perfect examples of rhetorical beauty, and it is in this area that al-Zamaksharī's genius is most evident. Heinrichs writes, "Al-Zamaksharī had a very fine feeling for the uses and functions of figurative language and he developed a sophisticated array of technical terms in this field, ranging from the nondescript *majāz* via *kināya, istiʿāra* and *tamthīl* to the extraordinary term *takhyīl* 'symbolization.'"[24]

Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. ʿUmar b. al-Ḥusayn was born in the Persian town of Rayy five years after the death of al-Zamaksharī. The years after finishing his studies were difficult ones, as his outspokenness provoked the antagonism of Mu'tazilīs and Karrāmiyya[25] in the areas through which he travelled. He finally

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[22] Trans. by Heinrichs in "'Takhyīl and its Traditions" 239.

[23] Goldziher, *Die Richtungen der Islamischen Koranauslegung* 130.

[24] Heinrichs, "Scriptural Hermeneutics and Literary Theory" 262.

[25] Because few of their works remain, the views of the Karrāmiyya are known primarily through their opponents, who accused them of literalism and anthropomorphism. Al-Rāzī's polemical writings

found patronage, wealth and prestige in Herat where he spent most of his life before

dying in 1210.[26] Although still a thorn in the side of some, al-Rāzī was a popular

preacher and sought after teacher. He seems to have possessed a genuine piety

combined with both intellectual virtuosity and an abrasive personality. He is often

labelled a philosopher-theologian because of his interest in both areas of Islamic

thought. He studied the philosophy of al-Fārābī (d.950) and wrote critical

commentaries on works of Ibn Sīnā (d.1037). He was a strong defender of Asha'rite

theology although his works also show the influence of Mu'tazilism. However, he is

said to have regretted the time spent in studying and writing on these topics. In his

last testament, he wrote, "I have diligently explored the paths of *kalām* and the ways

of philosophy but have not found what quenches thirst or heals the sick; but now I

see that the soundest way is the way of (the) Qur'ān read deanthropomorphically (*fī*

al-tanzīh).[27]

   Al-Rāzī's connection to Ṣūfism is unclear. We know that Ibn 'Arabī sent him

a letter inviting him to consider the differences between mystical and rational

knowledge.[28] According to several biographical sources, he is said to have met the

Ṣūfī teacher Najm al-Dīn Kubrā and asked to become his disciple, but the outcome of

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concerning them constitute the last traces of them before their disappearance with the Mongol
invasions. See Bosworth, "Karrāmiyya" in EI[2].
[26] Biographical information on al-Rāzī can be found in Anawati, "Al-Rāzī" in EI[2]; Ceylan, *Theology and Tafsīr* 1-13; Kholeif, *A Study on al-Rāzī* 9-25; McAuliffe 63-76.
[27] Quoted and translated by McAuliffe 67.
[28] Chittick translates a portion of this letter in his *The Self-Disclosure of God* 124.

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this meeting is uncertain. The story is told that al-Rāzī was not prepared to turn his back on his intellectual life:

> The saint [Najm al-Dīn Kubrā] had one of his disciples set Rāzī up in a cell and ordered him to devote himself to the invocation. But he did not stop there: we are told that, projecting his spiritual energy (tawajjuh) upon Rāzī, he stripped him of all the book knowledge he had acquired. Now when Rāzī became aware that all the knowledge of which he had been so proud was being suddenly erased from his memory, he began shouting with all his force: "I can not, I can not." The experience stopped there. Rāzī left his cell and took his leave of Najm al-dīn Kubrā.[29]

Another source, however, states that it was during this time that al-Rāzī received the inspiration for his tafsīr.[30]

Wherever al-Rāzī's ultimate loyalties lay, his interest in philosophy, theology and Ṣūfism are all apparent in his tafsīr. He admitted himself to possessing an ornery and difficult personality and it may have been this which kept him from being a whole-hearted partisan in any camp. On the other hand, he prided himself in his clear and impartial presentations of the arguments of his supposed opponents, a practice for which he was often criticized by those who questioned his commitment to orthodox Sunnism. One caustically commented, "The heresy is in cash, the refutation on credit."[31]

Al-Rāzī wrote a great number of works in a wide range of areas. His tafsīr, known as either Mafātīḥ al-ghayb or Kitāb al-tafsīr al-kabīr, is considered his most important work. Classical Muslim scholars stated that al-Rāzī died before

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[29] Chodkiewicz, An Ocean Without Shore 31. (Chodkiewicz directs the reader to Fritz Meyer's Die Fawā'ih al-gamal wa fawātih al-galāl,Wiesbaden, 1957, 45-6 for sources of this anecdote).
[30] Ibid. 142 n.55.
[31] Kholeif 10.

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completing his work and that one or two other authors finished it. The continuity of style and content in *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr* however, has made it difficult to determine precisely which passages were authored by whom.[32]

As did al-Rāzī in his own life, the book has provoked both extreme praise and criticism in later generations. Ibn Taymiyya scoffed at the work, saying that it contained everything except *tafsīr*, while its admirers insisted that it contained everything else in addition to *tafsīr*. Some dismissed him as a mere compiler, others praised his originality. It is an encyclopedic work, similar in length to al-Ṭabarī's. The edition used for this study comprises thirty-two parts printed in sixteen slim volumes and is about the same length as al-Ṭabarī's commentary.[33]

Al-Rāzī usually begins his discussion of a verse by examining its place within the larger context of the *sūra* or the Qur'ān as a whole. Although he may have been the first commentator to engage in this type of *tafsīr*, the objective behind it is similar to that of al-Zamaksharī who demonstrate how the various forms of figurative language in the Qur'ān reflect its rhetorical excellence. Al-Rāzī found evidence of the inimitability (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān in the ordering and sequence of its verses. In his study of the Qur'ānic sciences, *Itqān fī 'ulūm al-Qur'ān*, al-Suyūṭī (d.1505) quotes al-Rāzī as saying,

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[32] For evidence regarding other authors, see Jacques Jomier's "Les mafatih al-ghayb de l'imam Fakhr al-Din al-Razi," *Mélanges de l'Institut Dominicain d'etudes orientales du Caire*. 13 (1977), 253-90 and "Qui a commenté l'ensemble des sourates al-'ankabūt à yāsīn (29-36) dans 'le *tafsīr* al-kabīr de l'imām al-Rāzī?," *International Journal of Middle East Studies*, 11 (1980) 467-85; and Lagarde, *Index du Grand Commentaire de al-Rāzī* 57-60.

[33] Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, Beirut 1980.

Whoever thinks of the art which exists in the ordering of this *sūra* will realize that the Qur'ān is inimitable in its arrangement and the order of its verses. Maybe those who claimed the Qur'ān is miraculous because of its style had this aspect in mind. Unfortunately, I have found the majority of the exegetes unaware of these fine points.[34]

After addressing such contextual issues, al-Rāzī sometimes points out the lessons to be learned by a verse before proceeding to his summaries of the transmitted exegetical tradition. Like al-Zamaksharī, he does not always identify the *salafī* sources for this material, but he is more likely to present the full range of interpretations. When he quotes *hadīth*, which is not very often, he sometimes cites the full chain of transmission[35] and sometimes merely says, "the Prophet said." Post-*salafī* commentators are referenced as well, either individually or collectively in such phrases as "religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) have said..." or the even shorter phrase "most have said..." (*qāla al-aktharūna*). The latter phrase is used frequently, both because al-Rāzī is often summarizing the work of his predecessors but also because he is inclined to draw attention to the majority opinion particularly when he is about to disagree with it. Al-Rāzī also demonstrates his independence from traditional exegetical discourse by including authorities such as Ibn Sīnā and Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī, although the traditional authorities he cites far outweigh the nontraditional.[36]

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[34] Quoted and translated by Ceylan, 24. Ceylan provides illustrative examples from al-Rāzī's *Tafsīr*, 24-28.

[35] Of course, unlike in al-Ṭabarī, the *isnād* does not reach al-Rāzī himself, but ends several generations previously with prominent *hadīth* scholars or Qur'ānic commentators.

[36] As can be seen in Lagarde's *Index*.

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As previously mentioned, al-Rāzī appears have used al-Zamaksharī's *al-Kashshāf* as a basis for his philological and grammatical comments, although in an abridged form and not uncritically.[37] When dealing with the narrative material of the Qur'ān, al-Rāzī somewhat sparingly provides additional narrative details, preferring to elicit the issues which interest him directly from the Qur'ānic text.[38] Al-Rāzī addresses the theological issues raised by the Qur'ānic text far more insistently and comprehensively than al-Zamaksharī, in such problems as free will and determinism, the infallibility of the prophets, and the nature of knowledge; and he searches for answers in a far more expanded intellectual universe, calling upon the ideas of Mu'tazilīs, philosophers, and Ṣūfīs in addition to their more orthodox Sūnni counterparts. Structurally, he conducts these discussions by dividing his commentary on individual verses into various "issues" (*masā'il*), "questions" (*as'ila*), "aspects" (*wujūh*), "topics" (*mabāḥith*), and "parts" (*aqsām*). Al-Rāzī's biographer, al-Ṣafadī commented on the originality of this method:

> He was the first one to devise this arrangement in his writings. He accomplished in them what no one before him had done, for he stated the question (*mas'alah*) and then proceeded to divide it and to classify further these sub-divisions. He drew conclusions on the basis of such probing and apportioning and no relevant aspect of the *mas'alah* eluded him. He defined the basic principles and determined the scope of the *masā'il*.[39]

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[37] Ceylon 16, 19-20; Johns 76-80. Although he abridges Zamaksharī, grammatic and linguistic issues still represent the largest part of his comments, according to Lagarde, 3.

[38] Al-Rāzī was critical of much of the *qiṣaṣ al-anbīyā* literature, mainly because he found it inconsistent with such theological notions as the infallibility of the prophets. See Johns, 80 and Mashīnī, *Madrasat al-tafsīr fī al-Andalus* 573-6.

[39] Translated and quoted by McAuliffe 69.

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McAuliffe compares the result to the *Summma Theologiae* of Thomas Acquinas.[40]

Ayoub comments on the difficulty of this style:

> Razi's *tafsir* is somewhat difficult for two reasons. Razi was a philosopher of high caliber and not primarily an exegete. He sets forth his opinions on verses in a complex and involved style with layer upon layer of arguments and counterarguments that are at best distantly related to *tafsir*.[41]

Kholeif compares the difficulty of his style to the relative simplicity of al-Ghazālī's:

> According to Ṣafadī,..."he states the problem, analyses it until he has considered all it aspects using the methods of analysis, enforcing the relevant rules and defining the question thereby." This method, is, however, exceedingly prolix, and confounds the reader in a maze of argument. I confess myself that in my reading of Rāzī's works I have frequently been unable to see the wood for the trees. As Ghazālī rightly observes, "Many an account is obscured by prolixity and detail." Indeed whenever I was unable to follow Rāzī's argument, I used to read over Ghazālī's treatment of the point in question, and there I would find clarity where in Rāzī there was obscurity. This is in my opinion the main difference between Ghazālī's writings and Rāzī's; the works of Ghazālī show clarity and delicacy, and reflect his pleasant and unassuming personality, while those of Rāzī are marked by prolixity and complexity, and reflect his harsh, aggressive character.[42]

Lagarde confesses that upon his first reading of al-Rāzī's commentary, he was

reminded of the opening lines of Dante's Divine Comedy where the narrator finds he

has lost his way in a dark wood.

> En effet, moi aussi, j'eus une impression désagréable d'égarement, d'immersion et de suffocation, tant le texte est compact et dépourvu de tout repère qui puisse servir de fil d'Ariane au cours de la lecture. Je me suis trouvé comme dans une immense forêt où les repérage sont impossibles, vu la densité des éléments qui la composent et l'absence totale de guide.[43]

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[40] Ibid.

[41] Ayoub 5.

[42] Kholeif, 22-3. Ceylan also compares the "straightforward and explicit manner of exposition favoured by al-Ghazālī" with the difficulty of al-Rāzī's style, xiv.

[43] Lagarde, 1.

Johns has attempted to demonstrate what he believes to be the spirituality and humanism underlying this complex and analytical exegetical arrangement.[44] He is a great admirer of al-Rāzī, going so far as to write, "al-Rāzī, it should hardly need saying, has the richest mind of all the classical commentators on the Qur'an."[45] What Johns finds unique in al-Rāzī is his "spiritual response" to the text and his concern for human psychology and dynamics. What he means by the first is the determined way in which al-Rāzī delves deeply into the various aspects of a verse, for example, finding theological subtleties in grammatical particles; analyzing the various opinions regarding who in Sulaymān's court was capable of miraculously transporting the Queen's throne; and speculating on the meaning of knowledge in God's words, *We bestowed upon Dāwūd and Sulaymān knowledge* (27:15). In the last example, Johns demonstrates how al-Rāzī betrays his mystical inclinations without abandoning the basic scholastic form and contents of his commentary. In this passage and others, al-Rāzī himself draws attention to the distinction between exoteric and Ṣūfī commentary and states that he will not be divulging the secrets of the latter here.[46] Johns suggests that al-Rāzī's methodology, in contrast to the inspired knowledge (*kashf*) claimed by the Ṣūfīs, is "the use of reason informed by the content of a positive theology, applied to the traditional techniques of Qur'anic

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[44] Johns. "Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" and "Al-Rāzī's Treatment of the Qur'anic Episodes"
[45] Johns, "Solomon and the Queen of Sheba" 59.
[46] Although sometimes al-Rāzī quotes a Ṣūfī interpretation among other possible traditional or philosophical interpretations.

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exegesis." Accordingly, al-Rāzī shows himself to be a true Ashʿarī, leaving room for both reason and mystery in faith.[47]

Johns also suggests that al-Rāzī, in the sensitivity he demonstrates towards human emotions and motivations, might be characterized as a "proto-novelist." What Johns means here is the interest al-Rāzī shows in the "primal emotions" of the prophets and other characters in the Qur'ān, such as Sulaymān's laughter at the ants seeking mercy before the feet of his army, and his anger at the absence of the hoopoe bird. In the story of the prophet Ibrāhīm and his wife Sarah, al-Rāzī presents nine reasons which might explain Sarah's laughter upon hearing the news that she would bear a child. Johns demonstrates by these examples and others the way in which al-Rāzī carefully reads condensed Qur'ānic narratives in order to tease out the recognizable humanity of Qur'ānic figures, thereby increasing the inspirational value of these stories, an exegetical style which Johns ties to al-Rāzī's skill as a preacher, although Johns remains aware that the richness of al-Rāzī's exegesis is somewhat obscured beneath his dense analytical style and format.[48] Others might consider this an understatement.

Another opinion on al-Rāzī can be found in the article on the genre of *tafsīr* by Calder, who is far less enamored with him than Johns (as we shall see, Calder's favorite is al-Qurṭubī). In comparing his commentary on the story of Ibrāhīm and the celestial bodies with those of other classical commentators, Calder acknowledges al-

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[47] Ibid. 71-4, 79-80.
[48] Ibid. 63-71, 79-80; "Al-Rāzī's Treatment of the Qur'anic Episodes" 89-93,111-3.

Rāzī's capability in referencing a wide range of Islamic disciplines to elucidate the Qur'ānic text, but finds this erudition hampered by a "particular theological message which is insistently imposed,"[49] an "intrusive and personal message,"[50] in this case referring mainly to al-Rāzī's preference for an Avicennian inspired symbolic reading of these verses. More positively, he characterizes his exegetical method as "visionary intellectualism." While I would agree with Calder that al-Rāzī privileges rational thought over the transmitted exegetical tradition, I disagree with him when he suggests that this reflects any less of a commitment to the multiple readings of the community. Instead, I would argue that al-Rāzī, by including the views of Ibn Sīnā, al-Ghazālī and various Muʿtazilīs and Shīʿīs, extends the boundaries of acceptable readings within the community. His readings are less individualistic than Calder suggests; often he is merely preferring readings which other exegetes find suspect. Calder's statements are based on the assumption that Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī "scarcely belong within the tradition of *tafsīr*."[51]

Al-Qurtubī

Abū ʿAbd Allāh Muḥammad b. Aḥmad b. Abī Bakr b. Faraj al-Anṣārī al-Khazrajī al-Andalusī al-Qurṭubī was born on the other side of the classical Muslim world, in Spain, although, like his predecessors, he travelled widely in his studies

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[49] Calder, 111

[50] Ibid. 112. Cf. the assesment of Ceylan, who suggests al-Rāzī's position is usually difficult to identify, xiv.

[51] Ibid. 114.

before settling in Egypt where he died in 1272.[52] He was an expert not only in *tafsīr*, but also *hadīth* and Mālikī Fiqh. The best known of his works is his Qur'ānic commentary entitled, *al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qur'ān wa 'l-mubayyin li-mā tadammana min al-sunna wa-āyāt al-furqān*. It is approximately the same size as the *tafsīrs* of al-Tabarī and al-Rāzī, comprising twenty slim volumes.[53]

Al-Qurtubī's commentary is renowned for the large number of *hadīth* he includes therein, many of which are not found in al-Tabarī. Al-Tabarī limits his *hadīth* and Traditions to those which directly comment on Qur'ānic verses whereas al-Qurtubī includes others as well which are thematically related. *Hadīth* are not related in variant forms, as they are in al-Tabarī, and the chain of transmission (*isnād*) is abbreviated or omitted. Usually, the canonical collection in which they occur is identified, and often their status as sound or weak is noted. The exegetical comments of the Companions and the Followers are usually quoted by name but without any chain of transmission. Sometimes these comments have been taken from the *tafsīr* of al-Tabarī.

Al-Qurtubī also makes extensive use of the works of post-*salafī* exegetes. Some of these are unsurprising, such as his fellow Andulsians, Abū Bakr Muhammad Ibn al-ʿArabī (d.1148), Abū Muhammad ʿAbd al-Haqq b. Ghālib b. Atiyya (d.1151), and al-Qurtubī's own teacher, Abū 'l-ʿAbbās al-Qurtubī (d.1259).

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[52] Information on the life and works of al-Qurtubī can be found in Arnaldez's "Al-Kurtubī" in EI².
[53] Al-Qurtubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-ahkām al-Qur'ān wa 'l-mubayyin li-mā tadammana min al-sunna wa-āyāt al-furqān*, Beirut, 1980.

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More surprising is the frequent use made of the *'Arā'is al-majālis* and *Al-Kashf wa 'l-bayān 'an tafsīr al-Qur'ān* of Abū Ishāq al-Tha'labī (d.1036) because of the increasing controversy surrounding the use of *isrā'īliyyāt* material in *tafsīrs*.[54] Another interesting source al-Qurṭubī uses is Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, an exegete whose Ṣūfī commentary on the Qur'ān we will be examining in the next section. Al-Qushayrī's exoteric commentary entitled *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr* is a collection of lectures recorded by his students. His son, Abū Naṣr, wrote a commentary as well, entitled *Al-Taysīr fī 'ilm al-tafsīr*. Ahmad has demonstrated that when al-Qurṭubī cites "al-Qushayrī," he sometimes means the father and sometimes the son, not always making a distinction between the two.[55] In addition to these and other specific references, al-Qurṭubī often quotes the post-*salafī* tradition generally, like al-Rāzī, saying "most religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) say..." or "most commentators (*mufassirūn*) say...." and, like al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī is assertive in following his citations of other opinions with his own.

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[54] Al-Qurṭubī shows himself to be aware of these controversies by sometimes offering critical comments relating to *isrā'īliyyāt* material. But, as Mashīnī demonstrates, al-Qurṭubī is inconsistent in his methodology, sometimes rejecting the narratives after assessing their source, sometimes including them without comment. (*Madrasāt al-tafsīr fī al-Andalus*, 101, 560-78, 827). Arnaldez states that al-Qurṭubī makes very little use of this material (5:531b), but the index to *Jāmi'* (*Farāris al-Jāmi' li-ahkām al-Qur'ān*) cites something like two hundred and fifty citations from al-Tha'labī alone. Ibn Taymiyya's criticism of al-Qurṭubī in this area has already been mentioned.

[55] Ahmad, "Abū al-Qāsim al-Qushayrī as a Theologian and Commentator" 34-41. Böwering is sceptical of Ahmad's claim here, calling it "nebulous" in his review of Gramlich's *Das Sendschreiben al-Qushayrīs über das Sufītum*, 571. The index to al-Qurṭubī's *tafsīr* lists one citation for Abū'l-Qāsim al-Qushayrī and one for al-Qushayrī, Abū'l Qāsim 'Abd Karīm Shaykh al-Ṣūfiyya. The rest of the citations attributed to al-Qushayrī are listed under Abū Naṣr 'Abd al-Rahmān b. 'Abd Karīm al-Qushayrī, *Fahāris al-Jāmi'*.

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Al-Qurṭubī demonstrates the virtuosity of a keen mind well aware of the complex issues which divided Qur'ānic exegetes as well as the Muslim community at large, and he often displays a jurist's desire to define the boundaries of acceptable thought and practice. Like al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī frequently divides his commentary according to the "issues" (masā'il) raised by one or more verses, although he does not resort to anything like al-Rāzī's extensive subdivisions, and his writing style is far more straightforward and clear. Often the area of concern is philological or linguistic, either a fairly simple problem or an extensive one such as the controversy over the existence of figurative or metaphorical language in the Qur'ān. At other times his concern is to provide additional details for the Qur'ānic narratives, showing far more interest in this material than al-Rāzī. For example, he spends four pages discussing the issue of al-Khaḍir's supposed immortality, a question not even mentioned by al-Rāzī.[56] At times, al-Qurṭubī demonstrates what might be called a literary sensibility, such as when he notes the parallel between al-Khaḍir's actions and prior events in Mūsā's life.[57]

Al-Qurṭubī is markedly less interested in theological issues than al-Rāzī. He often seems to be addressing these concerns because they have been raised by others, rather than from his own intrinsic interest. Of greater concern to him are the legal ramifications of the Qur'ānic text. This manifests itself not only where it would be most obvious, in comments on legislative verses, but in other areas as well.

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[56] Al-Qurṭubī 11:41-5.
[57] Ibid. 11:33.

Elements of a narrative may be taken to indicate legal points, as when al-Qurṭubī draws information on the duties of a guardian towards his ward from the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir. Al-Qurṭubī is interested as well in what he calls "the refutation of the people of deviation and errors (al-radd 'alā ahl al-zaygh wa 'l-ḍalālāt)."[58] By this he means not only an intellectual refutation of their positions, but the establishment of the proper juridical response as well. This is demonstrated in his commentary on verse 3:7 and in the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir where he delineates the punishments for those who advocate various kinds of false Qur'ānic interpretations. His interest in religious law takes on a more homiletic air when addressing issues reflecting personal piety, as in his extensive comments on proper behavior in the mosque in response to verse 24:36.[59]

In his article outlining the defining features of the genre of tafsīr, Calder suggests that it was al-Qurṭubī who most fully realized its possibilities.

> His genius lies in his presentation of past authorities, his embracing of polyvalent readings, his playing across the disciplines (solving narrative and theological problems by the discovery of grammatical and rhetorical devices etc.) and his even-handed sensitivity to all the scholastic disciplines (except tasawwuf,[60] which, though arguably scholastic in certain literary forms, is only marginally present throughout the tafsīr tradition until a very late date). In all formal respects, Qurṭubī belongs firmly within the tradition initiated and defined by Ṭabarī; his artistry, however, is measurably greater. Less measurable is the sense of playfulness, or irony, which can be detected in his work and is perhaps product of the security that comes from working in an established discipline, fully mastered. It is in these senses that one might claim for his tafsīr that it is the most complete fulfillment of the possibilities of the tradition.[61]

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[58] Ibid. 1:3.
[59] Ibid. 12:266-79.
[60] i..e., Ṣūfism.
[61] Calder, 109-10.

Calder is quite right to draw attention to al-Qurṭubī's proficiency with the disciplines necessary for this kind of Qur'ānic exegesis. Like al-Rāzī's commentary, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkām* is a fascinating window into the intellectual universe of the Muslims of his age. However, one piece of Calder's portrait of al-Qurṭubī as a commentator needs to be further examined, and that is his assessment that al-Qurṭubī rarely expresses his own preferences, accepting instead the polyvalent readings of the community. If al-Qurṭubī is vague in expressing his preferences in the story of Ibrāhīm analyzed by Calder, he is less reticent elsewhere. In the readings examined for this study, he frequently responds critically to the interpretations of others, using such phrases as, "I would say (*qultu*)..." or "the best of what has been said regarding it (*aḥsana mā qīla fī*)," or the emphatically negative, "in no way is this the meaning of the verse (*wa laysa hadhā min maʿna al-āya fī shayʾ*). Al-Qurṭubī is at his most decisive when expressing a juridical opinion, such as when he suggests guidelines for assessing the penalties for false Qur'ānic interpretation. The method, as I have suggested above in the section of al-Ṭabarī, is not "polyvalent reading" but *ijtihād*.

Ibn Taymiyya

Taqī al-Dīn Aḥmad b. Taymiyya was a Ḥanbalī theologian and jurisconsult who led an eventful life as an outspoken activist.[62] Born in Ḥarrān, Syria in 1263, he was forced at the early age of five to flee with his family from the Mongols to

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[62] Information on the life and works of Ibn Taymiyya can be found in Laoust's article "Ibn Taymiyya" in EI².

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Damascus where he lived most of his life. Coming from a family of renowned Ḥanbalī scholars, he took over his father's directorship of the *Sukkariyya* mosque and *madrasa* at the age of twenty and later taught at the oldest Ḥanbalī *madrasa* in Damascus, the *Ḥanbaliyya*.

Ibn Taymiyya's long career of controversial activism began at age thirty when he was briefly imprisoned for organizing a protest against the authorities' inaction with regards to a prominent Christian accused of insulting the Prophet. As was to be the case in the many incarcerations to follow, he spent his time in prison writing, producing his first great work. In the years that followed, Ibn Taymiyya's influence grew as he exhorted the people of Damascus to *jihād* against the Mongols and their Shīʿī supporters, and as he accompanied the fighting armies. Apparently unconcerned with his own safety or well-being, Ibn Taymiyya wrote treatise after treatise attacking any doctrine or practice, however popular, which he felt degraded the original pure message of Islam. The objects of his polemics included *kalām*, philosophy, popular saint worship, antinomian Ṣūfīs, the followers of Ibn ʿArabī, and Shīʿīs. His controversial views led to his detention on several occasions in Damascus and Cairo, and he died in a prison in Damascus in 1328.

Ibn Taymiyya's relationship to Ṣūfism is complicated. He appears to have been a member of the *Qādariyya* order[63] and wrote of his respect for several

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[63] See Makdisi in "The Hanbali School and Sufism" and "Ibn Taimiya: A Ṣūfī of the Qādiriya Order."

individual Ṣūfīs.[64] However he was fiercely opposed to many aspects of Ṣūfī doctrine and practice based on his assessment of their heretical nature. The extent of Ibn Taymiyya's criticisms is such that, using his credal criteria, few of the major writings of Ṣūfism would be considered sound. Nonetheless, he seems to have desired to reform the tradition from within as is evident in writings which seek to carefully separate the sound from the false in both Ṣūfī doctrine and practice. He writes approvingly of the moral and ethical focus of Ṣūfī writings while rejecting what he perceives to be faulty conclusions regarding the nature of the relationship between man and God. These faulty conclusions, according to Ibn Taymiyya, are the result of turning away from the teachings of the Prophet and the pious first generations (salafj, substituting their wisdom with the inferior tools of kalam and philosophy, and concepts based on excessive emotional states.[65]

Ibn Taymiyya managed to write profusely on many different subjects, producing creeds, legal judgements, polemical and exegetical works. In the last category, we have already examined his Muqaddima fī usūl al-tafsīr in Part I. Ibn Taymiyya did not write a complete tafsīr himself but rather commentaries on just a few Qur'ānic suras and ayāt. These commentaries reflect the epistemological principle laid out in his Muqaddima that knowledge is either the result of authentic transmission (naql musaddaq) or verifiable deduction (istidlāl muḥaqqaq). Although

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[64] Makdisi, "Ibn Taymiiya," 126-7 and Michel, A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity, 27-8.

[65] See Homerin, "Ibn Taymīya's Al-Ṣūfīyah wa-al-fuqarā', Knysh, Ibn 'Arabi in the Later Islamic Tradition, 87-111, " and Michel, "Ibn Taymiyya's Sharḥ on the Futūḥ al-Ghayb of 'Abd al-Qādir al-Jīlānī" and A Muslim Theologian's Response to Christianity 27-8.

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Ibn Taymiyya is most often associated with the term "transmitted interpretation (*tafsīr bi 'l-ma'thūr*)," it is the use of deduction (*istidlāl*) which is most striking in his exegesis. Al-Ṭabarī's commentary on *Sūrat al-Ikhlāṣ* consists of about four pages of transmitted material from the first generations of Muslims (*salaf*). This material is expanded to almost three hundred pages in Ibn Taymiyya's commentary with the presentation of Ibn Taymiyya's original arguments and reformulations, all firmly based on *salafī* views.[66] This intellectual virtuosity contrasts markedly with the style and content evident in the famous commentary of Ibn Taymiyya's student Ibn Kathīr. While Ibn Kathīr explicitly adopts the methodology of Ibn Taymiyya, even copying a portion of his *Muqaddima* in his introduction,[67] he is much more sparing in his use of deduction (*istidlāl*) in his commentary, confining himself almost exclusively to the process of sifting through the transmitted material and selecting what he deems most authentic. When he ventures beyond this, it is usually to serve as a spokesman for the more independent thought of his teacher.

Ibn Taymiyya's exegetical works deserve a study of their own because they represent a very different kind of *tafsīr* than the other exoteric works studied here, reading more like treatises than line by line commentary. His commentary on *Sūrat Nūr* is included among the exoteric works studied here because it's content most closely corresponds to that of other exoteric commentators. However, another work

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[66] See Syafruddin's analysis of this commentary in his "The Principles of Ibn Taymiyya's Qur'anic Interpretation" 78-97.
[67] Curtis, "Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts" 76-87; Syafruddin 122-3.

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of his, *Risālat al-'Ubūdiyya*, a commentary on Qur'ānic verse 2:21, contains many

sections which read more like Ṣūfī works in the use of poetry and a didactic style.[68]

Ibn Kathīr

'Imād al-Dīn Ismā'īl b. 'Umar b. Kathīr lived most of his life in Damascus,

Syria, where he died in 1373.[69] He was renowned as a preacher and a scholar of

ḥadīth and Fiqh. Although he was taught by and remained a Shāfi'ī, the primary

influence on his work was the Ḥanbalī Ibn Taymiyya, a fact which did not endear

him to many of his Shāfi'ī colleagues. His best known work is a history of the world

entitled *al-Bidāya wa 'l-nihāya* which, like al-Ṭabarī's, begins with the creation of the

world and ends with the time period of the author. His principal work in the field of

ḥadīth is the *Jāmi' al-masānid wa 'l-sunan*, a compilation of *ḥadīth* taken from the six

canonical collections, the *Musnad* of Ibn Ḥanbal, and other lesser works, and

arranged by the alphabetical order of the Companions who transmitted them. Ibn

Kathīr's *tafsīr*, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-'azīm*, represents a similar effort to present a

reference work from what Ibn Kathīr considered to be the soundest exegetical

sources. It fills four volumes in the edition used for this study.[70]

Ibn Kathīr usually begins his comments on a verse by paraphrasing it and, as

in the case with al-Ṭabarī, the act of paraphrasing sometimes betrays Ibn Kathīr's

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[68] For an English translation of the *Risāla*, see Pavlin's "The Concept of *'Ubudiyyah* in the Theology of Ibn Taymiyyah."

[69] Information on the life and works of Ibn Kathīr in Curtis 20-73; Laoust in "Ibn Kathīr" in EI[2]; and McAuliffe 71-76.

[70] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-azīm*, Beirut, 1986.

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preferred interpretation, not always made clear elsewhere. Then Ibn Kathīr presents the relevant *hadīth* and Traditions, including *hadīth* which are thematically related to the verse and not just those containing explicitly exegetical material. *Hadīth* are related with full *isnāds*, usually with name of the *hadīth* compilation in which they occur and with an assessment of their sound or weak status. Sometimes variant forms are included, but not to anywhere near the same degree as in al-Ṭabarī. Traditions attributed to the Companions and Followers are frequently cited with *isnāds* which end with the written sources from which they are cited, such as al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*. Sometimes the *isnād* is omitted and, very rarely, an interpretation is cited anonymously. Although Ibn Kathīr sometimes notes al-Ṭabarī's preferred interpretations, in general, he rarely references commentators living after the Companions and Followers.

It is this deliberate avoidance of post-*salafī* exegetical discussions which makes Ibn Kathīr's *tafsīr* so distinctive. Ibn Kathīr acts in his *tafsīr* as the *hadīth* scholar he was, pruning back centuries of exegetical speculations to reveal what he judged to be the only material with exegetical authority, the sayings of the Prophet and some of his immediate followers which could be authenticated by their *isnāds*. Unlike the other exegetes we have looked at so far, he did not ask his own questions of the Qur'ānic text, but rather considered his role to be the reiteration of the questions asked and answers given by the first generations of Muslims. It is this which gives his *tafsīr* the character of a reference book. As McAuliffe has pointed

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out, the achievement of Ibn Kathīr's commentary can only be appreciated when the theory behind it is acknowledged. Criticizing Laoust's characterization of the style of the *tafsīr* as "simplistic," she writes, "The *tafsīr* could more appropriately be characterized as the conscious and careful application of a well-developed hermeneutical theory."[71]

Ibn Kathīr's contribution for those who adopted Ibn Taymiyya's theory was to produce a valuable reference work. While McAuliffe shows some appreciation for what Ibn Kathīr was up to, Calder views him as "an interloper" to the exegetical tradition, appropriating the genre to create a larger canon while rejecting the rich post-*salafī tafsīr* tradition.

> He borrowed the external forms of a genre–to which he was not notably sympathetic–and added to them a new formal task which, simply in terms of quantity, quite eclipsed the older forms and, wrapped in an argument of authority, seriously compromised the status of the old tradition. Here begins a possibility of *al-tafsīr bi'l-ḥadīth* which retrospectively casts the whole tradition into the shade of *al-tafsīr bi'l-ra'y*.[72]

Calder also states that Ibn Kathīr strives for a monovalent and dogmatic reading of the Qur'ānic text, and this is true in so far as he rejects the authority or truth of any non-*salafī* interpretation. But within the *salafī* tradition, he proceeds very much like his predecessors, utilizing the process of *ijtihād* to make judgements where interpretations differ.

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[71] Laoust EI[2], 3: 818; McAuliffe 75.
[72] Calder, 130.

5. THE ṢŪFĪS

<u>Al-Tustarī</u>

Abū Muḥammad Sahl b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Yūnus b. ʿĪsā b. ʿAbd Allāh b. Rafīʿ al-Tustarī was born in the Persian province of Khūzistān and died in Basra in 896.[1] He became involved with Ṣūfism early in life under the influence of his uncle, a *ḥadīth* scholar and disciple of the Ṣūfī Maʿrūf al-Karkhī (d.815). Al-Tustarī came to be known for the extreme asceticism he practiced, at least during part of his life. His teachings are preserved in writings which reflect his own hand as well as the disciples who took oral instruction from him.

Al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* is the oldest continuous Ṣūfī commentary on the Qurʾān. Exegesis attributed to other early Ṣūfī figures exists in the compilation of Sulamī (d.937 or 942), *Ḥaqāʾiq al-tafsīr*, but al-Tustarī's commentary is the earliest work to survive independently. While there is as yet no critical edition of the commentary, which comprises a small book, Böwering has made a thorough study of it on the basis of six extant manuscripts.[2] He describes it as a disjointed work, which "resembles a collection of jottings, noted down in loose sequence and linked to each other without any apparent principle of logical order."[3] These jottings appear to come from three different sources: Tustarī's exoteric and esoteric interpretations of

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[1] For the life and works of al-Tustarī, see Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence* 7-75.
[2] Ibid. 100-9. The edition used for this study was published as *Tafsīr al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* in Cairo in 1911. Selected passages have been translated into English by Sells in *Early Islamic Mysticism*, 89-96.
[3] Ibid. 128-9.

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Qur'ānic verses, his aphorisms and stories taken from other works no longer extant, and additions and glosses inserted into the text, either by disciples of al-Tustarī or later Ṣūfīs.[4]

Given the nature of the compilation of this work, its rather eclectic content is not surprising. According to Böwering,

> There are literal and metaphorical interpretations of Qur'ānic phrases: illustrations from the Prophet's normative and customary behavior; examples from the legends of the prophets of old; traces of mystical views shared by earlier Ṣūfīs and anecdotes concerning their practical conduct; fragments of Tustarī's mystical themes, his religious thought, and ascetic practice; exhortations and guidelines for disciples and answers to their questions; and finally, episodes about Tustarī's life, glosses and explanatory insertions into the text.[5]

Al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* hints at the possibilities but leaves to others the task of a more conscious and comprehensive presentation of Ṣūfī exegesis.

Al-Sulamī

Abū ʿAbd al-Raḥmān Muḥammad b. al-Ḥusayn al-Sulamī was born in the city of Naysābūr (Nishapur in Persian).[6] Although he travelled extensively to study *ḥadīth* and perform the pilgrimage, most of his life was spent in his home city, where he died in 1021. Like the grandfather who educated him and the Ṣūfī teacher who initiated him, al-Sulamī was a Shāfiʿī scholar of *ḥadīth*. He was a prolific writer,

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[4] Ibid. 129-30, 262.

[5] Ibid. 129.

[6] Information on the life and works of al-Sulamī can be found in several of Böwering's works: "The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Sulamī," "The Major Sources on Sulamī's Minor Qur'ān Commentary," *Mystical Vision* 110-2, and the introduction by Böwering to al-Sulamī's *The Minor Qur'ān Commentary*, 15-21.

with more than one hundred books to his name, about thirty of which are extant. His *Tabaqāt al-sufiyya*, the oldest extant Ṣūfī hagiographical collection, and his two compilations of Ṣūfī exegesis, the *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr* and the *Ziyādāt haqā'iq al-tafsīr* are invaluable because they preserve oral teachings and written works from Ṣūfīs of the eighth to tenth centuries.

The *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr* is a voluminous work which exists in about fifty manuscripts from which Böwering is preparing a critical edition. Portions of the work have been published by Massignon and Nywia.[7] The *Ziyādāt haqā'iq al-tafsīr* is an appendix to the *Haqā'iq* recently discovered and published by Böwering in one volume[8]. According to Böwering, al-Sulamī gathered his material from both written and oral sources. The only written sources which al-Sulamī mentions explicitly are attributed to Abū 'l-'Abbās Ahmad al-Adamī, known as Ibn 'Atā' (d.921) and Ja'far al-Sādiq (765).[9] The most frequently cited authorities in the *Haqā'iq* are Ibn 'Atā'

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[7] Massignon copied the comments attributed to al-Hallāj in his *Essai*, 359-412 and Nwyia the comments attributed to Ja'far al-Sādiq in "Le Tafsir mystique attribué à Ja'far al-Sādiq." A few passages from the latter have been translated into English by Sells, 75-89. Additional material from the *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr* can be found as preserved in Rūzbihān al-Baqlī's commentary '*Arā'is al-bayān*.

[8] Al-Sulamī, *The Minor Qur'ān Commentary*.

[9] The inclusion of material attributed to Ja'far al-Sādiq has intrigued scholars since Massignon first noted it in his *Essai*, 201-6 (English trans. 138-142), because it raises the question of the relationship between Ṣūfism and Shī'ism in the early stages of Islam. How much Ja'far al-Sādiq's approach to interpretation influenced both Ṣūfīs and Shī'īs is difficult to determine. Ṣūfī exegesis came to be characterized by symbolic and literary interpretation based on mystical experiences, but the hallmark of Shī'ī exegesis was allegorical interpretation which found hidden Qur'ānic references to 'Alī, Fātima, and their descendents. Only one of the manuscripts of Sulamī's *Haqā'iq* contains anything like the latter, and this in only one passage which identifies five beings which received five of God's names: Muhammad, 'Alī, Fātima, Hasan and Husayn (Nwyia, 159 n.3; English trans. in Sells, 77-8). On the basis of an analysis of the *isnads* given for Ja'far al-Sādiq's sayings in al-Sulamī's works and the absence of this material in any previous Ṣūfī works, Böwering concludes that al-Sulamī was the first Ṣūfī to incorporate the body of teachings attributed to Ja'far al-Sādiq into Ṣūfism. This is not to say that Shī'ī sources were not used earlier than al-Sulamī. For example, al-Tustarī quotes the first four imams in his *tafsīr*, as well as other Shī'ī authorities (Böwering, *Mystical Vision* 67). On the

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(d.921) and Abū Bakr al-Wāsiṭī, known as Ibn al-Farghānī (d.932). Next in order of frequency are Sahl al-Tustarī, Abū Saʿīd al-Kharrāz (d.899), al-Junayd (d.910) and Abū Bakr al-Shiblī (d.945). In the *Ziyādāt*, the most frequently cited authorities are Sahl al-Tustarī, Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq, and Ibn ʿAṭāʾ. Both books include anonymous quotations as well. In general, al-Sulamī does not provide the *isnāds* for his citations.

In the introduction to his *tafsīr*, al-Sulamī states that he included two types of quotations in his compilation. The first he calls *āyāt*, by which he means interpretations of specific verses, and the second *aqwāl*, which are Sūfī sayings related to key Qurʾānic terms. Noting the wealth of written commentaries based upon the exoteric sciences and the relative lack of the same for Sūfī exegesis, al-Sulamī deliberately confines himself to the latter. Böwering remarks that, in preserving the earliest Sūfīs' exegetical comments, al-Sulamī performed a function similar to that of al-Ṭabarī in his *Jāmiʿ al-bayān*. In doing so al-Sulamī established Sūfī commentary by allusion (*ishāra*) as a distinct genre within the *tafsīr* tradition.[10]

The style of al-Sulamī's commentaries reflects their structure as a compilation. Because there is no unifying voice behind the many citations which follow one another, linked only by the verse being interpreted, themes remain underdeveloped and terms unexplained. Without a larger context, many of these comments are somewhat cryptic. The focus is on key Qurʾānic words, rather than on

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existence of mystical esotericism in early Shīʿism, see Amir-Moezzi, *The Divine Guide in Early Shiʿism*. Ibn Taymiyya accused al-Sulamī of lying about what Jaʿfar al-Ṣādiq said (Dhahabī 386).
[10] Böwering, "The Qurʾān Commentary" 56, and *The Mystical Vision* 110.

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larger segments of the verse and its context. This may be attributable to al-Sulamī's

method of including Ṣūfī teachings based on such words,[11] or it may reflect the

distinctive process itself of Ṣūfī interpretation, as Böwering has suggested.

Böwering understands this process as an encounter between key Qur'ānic words and

mystical experience.

> These allusions are the result of the merger between Qur'ānic keynotes and
> the matrix of the Ṣūfī world of ideas. The keynotes, Qur'ānic words and
> phrases striking the Ṣūfī's mind, may be taken up in total isolation from the
> actual context or, less frequently, presuppose familiarity with a wider frame
> of Qur'ānic reference. It is significant to realize that these keynotes are not
> studied as a text, but aurally perceived by men experienced in listening
> attentively to Qur'ān recital and intent on hearing God, the actual speaker of
> the Qur'ānic word. Listening to the Qur'ānic word, the Ṣūfī is captured by a
> keynote, a fleeting touch of meaning communicated to him by the divine
> speaker. This keynote signals to the Ṣūfī the breakthrough to God, revealing
> himself in His divine speech and opening a way to Himself through and
> beyond His divine word.
>   With these keynotes the listener associates a cluster of images emerging
> from the content of his personal experience. These images merge with the
> Qur'ānic keynotes and find their expression in the allusions that are jotted
> down in the commentary in a condensed, abbreviated form. These jottings
> thus reflect the gist of the listener's encounter with the divine word merging
> inextricably with the matrix of the Ṣūfī world of ideas. In this process the
> allusions achieve a synthesis that makes it impossible to discern where
> "exegesis" ends and "eisegesis" begins, and where the discovery of man's
> own existence disappears in the revelation of the divine word.[12]

This interaction between the Qur'ānic text and Ṣūfī experience in Ṣūfī

commentary was first noted by Nwyia. One of the most distinctive examples of this

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[11] The fact that later Ṣūfī commentaries are less atomistic in character would seem to support this
assumption.
[12] Böwering, "The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Sulamī" 51. Cf. *Mystical Vision* 136-7.

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is found in what Nwyia calls the "intériorisation des figures prophétiques." He writes,

> "Dans leur méditation sur le Coran, les figures prophétiques diviennent des prototypes de l'expérience mystique ou des figures de la conscience religeuse. Ce qui'ils lisent dans les *akhbār al-awwalīn*, ce ne sont pas des "histoires," mais une *'ibra*, une doctrine sur les rapports entre Dieu et l'homme. Ainsi Abraham devient la figure de la conscience éprouvée mais fidèle ou le prototype de l'amitié avec Dieu, Moïse figure l'expérience spirituelle comme dialogue avec Dieu, etc."[13]

This "interiorization" of the text is also accomplished by means of wordplay which uncovers layers of meaning within the text. For example in Qur'ānic verse 3:35, the vow of the mother of Maryam concerning her unborn child contains the word *muḥarrar*. Exoteric commentators explained that this word refers to the Jewish practice of consecrating their children to temples. In contrast, Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's gloss recorded in al-Sulamī recalls the literal meaning of the word, "to be emancipated," and suggests that Maryam was emancipated from the bondage of the world and its people, a servant to God alone. Many of the comments cited in the *Ḥaqā'iq* could be characterized as homiletic, especially when compared to the reticence of exoteric commentaries in this area. Others comments, however, are more obscure, using esoteric symbolism or technical Ṣūfī terminology which is left unexplained.

The *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* was recognized almost immediately as representing a very different approach to understanding the Qur'ān, an approach which was unacceptable to some. We have already seen the comment of al-Sulamī's near

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[13] Nwyia, *Exégèse Coranique* 178.

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contemporary, the Qur'ānic scholar al-Wāḥidī (d.1076), who said, "If al-Sulamī

thinks that this is a *tafsīr*, he is an infidel."[14] We have also reviewed the attacks on

the *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* by Ibn al-Jawzī (d.1200) in his *Talbīs iblīs*, attacks which were

based on the commentary's epistemological assumptions, its allegorical

interpretations, its distortions of grammar and etymology, and its deviation from the

consensus of religious scholars and commentators.[15] Critical judgements were also

made by later scholars such as Ibn Taymiyya (d.1328), al-Dhahabī (d.1348), and al-

Suyūṭī (d.1505).[16]

Al-Qushayrī

Abū 'l-Qāsim 'Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī (d.1074) was an Arab

from Northeastern Iran who studied with al-Sulamī after his primary spiritual teacher

and father-in-law, Abū 'Alī al-Daqqāq, died.[17] Upon meeting his first teacher, al-

Qushayrī abandoned his life as a wealthy landowner, and, at the urging of his

teacher, adopted the life of a scholar of *ḥadīth* and Ash'arī theology. This quiet life

was interrupted when the Saljūqs began to persecute al-Qushayrī and other

prominent and vocal Shāfi'ī-Ash'arīs. Al-Qushayrī was imprisoned for a short time

before escaping to live in exile, returning to Naysābūr only when the political

situation became more amenable to Ash'arīs.

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[14] Quoted by Basyūnī in his introduction to the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* 16.

[15] See Part I above. Ibn al-Jawzī, *Mukhtaṣar kitāb talbīs iblīs* 268ff.

[16] See Basyūnī, 16, and Böwering, "The Qur'ān Commentary of al-Sulamī," 52 for references.

[17] Information on the life and works of al-Qushayrī can be found in Ahmad, "Abu al-Qāsim al-Qushairī as a Theologian and Commentator," Basyūnī 19-27, and Halm's "Al-Kushayrī" in EI².

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Although al-Qushayrī wrote theological works and an exoteric Qur'ānic commentary, his fame rests upon his Ṣūfī works. The most famous of these is *Al-risāla fī 'ilm al-taṣawwuf,* considered by Ṣūfīs to be the classic formulation of their doctrine. His expressed purpose in writing the book was to reconfirm the orthodoxy of Ṣūfism against those Ṣūfīs who no longer observed the religious law (*sharī'a*). Al-Qushayrī was a cautious writer, avoiding the type of excessive statements attributed to al-Ḥallāj and other Ṣūfīs; consequently, his Ṣūfī commentary, the *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt,* has never been attacked in the manner of the commentaries of al-Sulamī and al-Kāshānī.

The *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt* consists of al-Qushayrī's own comments on Qur'ānic verses as well as anonymous Ṣūfī sayings. According to Basyūnī, the editor of a critical six volume edition,[18] al-Qushayrī's goal in writing this *tafsīr* was to help his fellow Ṣūfīs and, as such, is a better example of his school of thought than the *Risāla.*[19] Although many of the elements found in al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq* are present here, al-Qushayrī avoids the extensive use of Ṣūfī terminology and far-reaching wordplay and allegory, instead adopting a consistently homiletical style. Al-Qushayrī searches Qur'ānic verses for something to inspire the reader whether those verses are parts of narratives or religious legislation. The qualities of the prophets become lessons for the aspiring mystic. A verse on the distribution of booty prompts al-Qushayrī to comment on the booty to be enjoyed when one succeeds in capturing

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[18] Al-Qushayrī, *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt.*
[19] Ibid. Introduction by Basyūnī 42.

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the soul from the enemies of passion and Satan.[20] Foreshadowing al-Ghazālī's *Ihyā*,

al-Qushayrī continually stresses the importance of the inner aspect of acts of

worship, the need to go beyond mere bodily compliance to discover layers of

meaning in these acts.[21]

As Basyūnī points out, al-Qushayrī's method is more literary than

intellectual, a fact which he attributes to the Ṣūfī emphasis on "tasting" (*dhawq*) and

an appreciation for the inimitability (*'ijāz*) of the Qur'ān. This literary method is

apparent in the attention Al-Qushayrī pays to individual words and phrases, drawing

upon the roots of the language, etymology, inflections and rhetoric.[22] In addition to

showing his appreciation for the literary subtleties of the Qur'ānic text, al-Qushayrī

responds himself to the text in a literary manner by the use of elegant prose,

metaphors and poetry.[23]

Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī

Abū Ḥāmid Muḥammad b. Muḥammad al-Ṭūsī al-Ghazālī was born in Ṭūs

near present day Mashhad in Iran.[24] His studies brought him to Naysābūr as a young

man where he studied with the prominent Shāfiʿī jurist and Ashʿarī theologian Imām

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[20] Ibid.

[21] Ibid. 43-44 and Ahmad 60-5.

[22] Ibid. 47-9.

[23] In his *Takrīj abyāt laṭā'if al-ishārāt*, Muṣṭafā states that al-Qushayrī borrows some four thousand lines from Jāhiliyya and ʿAbbāsid poetry, adapting them to his own themes and purposes by spiritualizing their sensual references.

[24] Information on the life and works of al-Ghazālī can be found in Watt's "Al-Ghazālī" in EI² and *The Encyclopedia of Religion*. For a review of the scholarly research on al-Ghazālī, see Buchman's introduction to *Al-Ghazālī: The Niche of Lights*.

al-Haramayn al-Juwaynī (d.1085), a colleague of al-Qushayrī's. Al-Ghazālī then

resided in the court of the Saljūq vizier Nizām al-Mulk until he was appointed rector

and professor at the Nizāmīya *madrasa* in Baghdad. Four years later he resigned

from this prestigious position as the result of a personal crisis which he later

described in his intellectual autobiography, the *Al-Munqidh min al-dalāl,* which also

details al-Ghazālī's disenchantment with theology, philosophy and Ismā'īlism and

consequent adoption of Sūfism. Al-Ghazālī spent the next ten years practicing and

studying Sūfism in Damascus, Mecca and Medina before returning to his home town.

He taught once again in Naysābūr before he died in Tūs in 1111.

Al-Ghazālī is said to have written over four hundred works, of which about

seventy are extant in manuscripts. His writings cover a broad range of the

intellectual sciences of the classical Islamic world. Among his early works is an

exposition of Islamic philosophers entitled *Maqāsid al-falāsifa,* which was followed

by a criticism of the same in the *Tahāfut al-falāsifa.* Among his juridical works is

Al-Mustasfa min 'ilm al-usul al-fiqh, a work which is still used as a textbook on the

sources of Islamic law today. The *Faysal al-tafriqa bayn al-Islām wa-'l-zandaqa*

deals with the specific issue of taxing others with disbelief. The *Iljām al-'awāmm*

'an 'ilm al-kalām, written at the very end of al-Ghazālī's life, expresses his

reservations about the study of theology. Among al-Ghazālī's Sūfī works is the

Ihyā' 'ulūm al-dīn, a four volume book which attempts, as its title announces, "the

revivification of the religious sciences." Borrowing extensively from Abū Tālib al-

Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb*, al-Ghazālī reorganized and amplified this material into a

systematic work written in a clear and lucid style, addressing the topics of

knowledge, worship and behavior from a pietistic and mystical standpoint. His

shorter works include *Al-Risāla al-laduniyya* which deals with the distinctive

epistemology of Ṣūfism, the *Jawāhir al-Qur'ān* containing various theories regarding

the Qur'ān and its interpretation, and the *Mishkāh al-anwār*, a short hermeneutical

and exegetical work concerning the Light Verse of the Qur'ān and the Veils *ḥadīth*.

Al-Ghazālī is said to have written a forty volume commentary on the Qur'ān as well,

but an extant copy has yet to be found.[25]

Al-Ghazālī's commentary on the Light Verse in the *Mishkāh al-anwār* is

unique among the Ṣūfīs studied here in the extent to which it combines theory and

exegesis.[26] If al-Ghazālī abandoned philosophy and theology as a means for

attaining truth, he nonetheless continued to employ their analytical and logical tools

in his writing. We need not go so far as Ibn Taymiyya in saying, "Ghazālī went into

the belly of the philosophers (*falāsifa*) and when he wished to come out he was

unable to do so,"[27] but it could be said that al-Ghazālī's contribution to Ṣūfī exegesis

is more intellectual than poetic and literary, as it is in al-Qushayrī and al-Maybudī.

However, he writes in a very accessible and non-obscure manner, and therefore

functions quite effectively as an apologist for Ṣūfī theory. The style of the

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[25] Heer, "Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī's Esoteric Exegesis of the Koran" 235.

[26] The edition used here is a parallel English-Arabic text with English translation by Buchman. An earlier English translation was published by Gairdner in 1924.

[27] Quoted in Kholeif 13.

commentary is consistently allegorical, although, as we shall see, al-Ghazālī had distinctive ideas regarding the use of metaphors in the Qur'ān.

Rashīd al-Dīn al-Maybudī

We know very little of the life of Rashīd al-Dīn Abū 'l-Faḍl Aḥmad al-Maybudī (d.1135), the author of the 10 volume commentary *Kashf al-asrār wa-'uddat al-abrār.*[28] From his name we know he was from Maybud, a small town near Yazd in central Iran. On the basis of the contents of his commentary, Rokni has concluded that al-Maybudī was a Shāfi'ī Sunnī *ḥadīth* scholar who showed his respect for the Shī'ī tradition by quoting 'Alī 185 times and other Shī'ī imams 68 times.[29]

Al-Maybudī explained the purpose of his writing the *Kashf al-asrār* in his introduction. He had read and been greatly impressed by the *tafsīr* of 'Abd Allāh al-Anṣārī al-Harawī (d.1089) but was disappointed by its brevity, and so set out to expand it.[30] Although al-Anṣārī's commentary was purely mystical, al-Maybudī decided to add other dimensions of *tafsīr* as well. Dividing the Qur'ān into reading sections (*majlishā*), he further divided these sections into three parts. The first part in each section is a literal Persian paraphrase of the Qur'ānic Arabic verses. The second part, the largest of the three parts, is exoteric *tafsīr* written in both Persian and Arabic which addresses philological, narrative, juridical, and theological issues as found in

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[28] Al-Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār wa-'uddat al-abrār,* Teheran 1982-3.

[29] Rokni, *Laṭāyif-i az Qur'ān-i karīm* 31-6.

[30] Al-Maybudī 1:1. There are no independent extant copies of al-Anṣārī's commentary.

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the transmitted *salafi* and post-*salafi* exegetical tradition. The third part, also written

in both Persian and Arabic, contains what al-Maybudī calls "symbols (*rumūz*),"

"allusions (*ishārāt*)" and "subtleties (*latā'if*),"[31] and it is this part which makes his

tafsīr distinctive.

The *Kashf al-asrār* has sometimes been called the *tafsīr* of Khwāja ʿAbd

Allāh al-Anṣarī, but, in fact, al-Anṣarī is only one of the sources al-Maybudī used in

the third part of his *tafsīr*. When al-Maybudī quotes al-Anṣarī, he sometimes refers

to him by name and sometimes calls him "the pīr of the way (*pīr-i tariqat*)," or "the

learned one of the way (ʿ*ālim-i tariqat*)." Al-Maybudī's other primary source for this

part of his *tafsīr* is the *Latā'if al-ishārāt* of al-Qushayrī who is quoted or paraphrased

anonymously in Arabic or Persian translation. Other sources must have been used as

well for the sayings and interpretations attributed to early Ṣūfīs which he includes.

Böwering states that, at least in the case of those sayings attributed to Sahl al-Tustarī,

this material appears to have been taken from Abū Naṣr al-Sarrāj's *Kitāb al-luma*ʿ,

Abū Ṭālib al-Makkī's *Qūt al-qulūb*, and the hagiographical work, *Ḥilyat al-awliyā'*

wa-ṭabaqāt al-aṣfiyā' of Abū Nuʿaim al-Iṣfahānī (d. 1038).[32]

Rokni has identified three different types of interpretation within this third

part of al-Maybudī' *Kashf al-asrār*.[33] The first kind he calls *ta'wīl*, by which he

means interpretation which uncovers Ṣūfī doctrines and beliefs in Qur'ānic verses.

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[31] Ibid.

[32] Böwering, *Mystical Vision* 36.

[33] Rokni 115-21.

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Rokni illustrates this with al-Maybudī's commentary on verses 2:67-71, in which Mūsā commands his people, on God's behalf, to sacrifice a heifer and they question him regarding what kind of cow this might be. The qualities of the cow to be sacrificed are taken as an allusion to the qualities needed for the mystical aspirant. Another kind of *ta'wīl*, according to Rokni, is the juxtaposition of Ṣūfī terminology with Qur'ānic verses. His example is the commentary on verse 3:31. Al-Maybudī compares the first part of this verse, *Say, "If you love God,"* to the Ṣūfī concept of dispersion (*tafriqa*) and the second part, *"God will love you,"* to the concept of union (*jam'*).

The second kind of interpretation Rokni identifies in al-Maybudī's Ṣūfī exegesis is homiletic elucidation (*tawdīḥ...bi-ravish-i majlis-i ghūyān va khuṭabā'*). Adopting the style of preachers, al-Maybudī uses rhymed prose, poetry, puns, stories, similes, and metaphors to exhort and inspire the believer. The subject matter might be the inward qualities and outward practices of the believer, the stations of the prophets, or God's glory. It is in this kind of interpretation that al-Maybudī's literary skills are most apparent, and as Rokni points out, the value of the *Kashf al-asrār* lies in both its mystical and literary aspects, its Ṣūfī *ta'wīl* and its homilies.

Rokni's third type of interpretation occurs less frequently. He calls it *tashqīq*, by which he means the way in which al-Maybudī breaks apart a Qur'ānic verse and then expands these various parts by means of related verses, *ḥadīth*, or poetry. As an example he cites al-Maybudī's commentary on 3:191, *those who remember God*

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standing, sitting and on their sides, where al-Maybudī identifies three different types of people who remember God. The first type remembers God with the tongue while forgetting Him in the heart. This is the remembrance (*dhikr*) of the unjust. The second type remembers God with the tongue and a present heart. Yet he seeks reward, so this is the remembrance of those who adopt a middle way. The third type remembers God with a heart full of Him, while his tongue has become silent as one who knows God. This is the remembrance of those who have outdistanced all others (*sābiqūn*).[34]

Rūzbihān al-Baqlī

Abū Muḥammad Rūzbihān b. Abī Naṣr al-Baqlī began his life in the Persian town of Fasā (Pasā in Persian) born, as he put it in his autobiography, the *Kashf al-asrār,* "to ignorant folk who were a prey to drunkenness and error, gross and vulgar men like unto 'startled asses fleeing before a lion' (Koran 74:51)."[35] He claims to have experienced mystical states beginning in childhood, states which increased in intensity until he fled into the desert as a young man and was overwhelmed daily by visions in which he perceived the heavens and the earth as pure light. Following this period, he lived with Ṣūfīs and began to balance his extraordinary experiences by studying the exoteric sciences of Islam as a Shāfi'ī and an Ash'arī. Most of his life

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[34] *Sābiqūn,* is a Qur'ānic term used in verses 9:100, 23:61, 35:32

[35] Arberry, *Shiraz* 90. Information on the life and works of Rūzbihān can be found in Ernst, "Rūzbihān Baqlī" in EI[2] and *Rūzbihān Baqlī* 1-15; and Massignon, "La Vie et les oeuvres de Ruzbehan Baqli."

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was spent in Shīrāz, where he established a Ṣūfī lodge and a following and died in 1209.

Rūzbihān wrote over forty works in Arabic and Persian dealing with both exoteric and Ṣūfī topics, many of which are no longer extant or exist only in fragmentary form. Among those which have been published in critical editions, at least in part, are the aforementioned autobiography, *Kashf al-asrār*,[36] the *'Abhar al-'āshiqīn*[37] which presents Rūzbihān's theories on love and beauty, the *Sharḥ-i shaṭḥiyāt*[38] containing the ecstatic sayings of al-Hallāj and other Ṣūfīs, and the *'Arā'is al-bayān fī haqā'iq al-Qur'ān*, his Ṣūfī commentary on the Qur'ān.

The *'Arā'is al-bayān* has been published so far only in lithographic form, comprising two large volumes in the edition used for this study.[39] Godlas is currently working on a critical edition and English translation of this work.[40] The commentary on each Qur'ānic verse begins with Rūzbihān's own exegesis, followed by quotations from al-Sulamī's *Haqā'iq al-tafsīr* and *Ziyādāt Haqā'iq al-tafsīr*, and al-Qushayrī's *Laṭā'if al-ishārāt*.

The style of Rūzbihān's comments is quite distinct from the Ṣūfīs he quotes. Jāmī (d.1492) remarked on its difficulty, saying, "he has sayings that have poured forth from him in the state of overpowering and ecstasy, which not everyone can

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[36] Translated into English by Ernst in *The Unveiling of Secrets* and analyzed in *Rūzbihān Baqlī*.
[37] Discussed by Corbin in *En Islam iranien* 3:45-64.
[38] Discussed by Ernst in *Ecstatic Expressions* 14-21, 85-94.
[39] Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān fī haqā'iq al-Qur'ān*, Lucknow 1898.
[40] Godlas, "Psychology and Transformation" 55n4.

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understand."[41] The Moghul prince Dārā Shikūh (d.1659) was impressed enough

with Rūzbihān to have written an abridgement and update of his *Sharh-i shathiyāt*,

and to have had Rūzbihān's Qur'ānic commentary translated into Persian, yet he

found his style "fatiguing."[42] On the other hand, modern scholars, have noted the

literary merits of Rūzbihān's writings. Mu'īn writes,

> His speech is like a rose that flutters apart once grasped in the hand, or like an
> alchemical substance that turns into vapor when barely heated. His language
> is the language of perceptions; he praises the beautiful and beauty, and loves
> them both.[43]

Similarly, Schimmel writes,

> What so profoundly impresses the reader in Rūzbihān's writings, both in his
> commentary on the *Shathiyāt* and his *'Abhar al-'āshiqīn*–"*Le Jasmin des
> fidèles d'amour*," as Henri Corbin translates its title–is his style, which is at
> times as hard to translate as that of Aḥmad Ghazzālī and possesses a stronger
> and deeper instrumentation. It is no longer the scholastic language of the
> early exponents of Sufism, who tried to classify stages and stations, though
> Baqlī surely knew these theories and the technical terms. It is the language
> refined by the poets of Iran during the eleventh and twelfth centuries, filled
> with roses and nightingales, pliable and colorful.[44]

In his Qur'ānic commentary, however, Rūzbihān's role changes from creator of

symbols and metaphors to interpreter of those he locates in the Qur'ān, and in these

interpretations the influence of Ṣūfī theories and technical terms is more evident, and

above all, mystical experience. Unlike the popular homiletical and didactic style of

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[41] Quoted in Ernst, "The Symbolism of Birds" 356.
[42] Ibid. 355-6.
[43] Quoted in Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī* xi.
[44] Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 298.

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the commentaries of al-Qushayrī or al-Maybudī, Rūzbihān's is visionary and esoteric.

Al-Kāshānī

Other than the fact that 'Abd al-Razzāq Kamāl al-Dīn b. Abī 'l-Ghanā'im al-Kāshānī (or Qāshānī, Kāshī or Kāsānī) came from the province of Kāshān in Iran and died in 1329 we know little of his life.[45] He studied logic and philosophy as a young man before turning to Ṣūfism, where his philosophical bent found new expression in the school of Ibn 'Arabī.[46] Al-Kāshānī became one of the most widely read of the early interpreters of Ibn 'Arabī, having studied with Mu'ayyid al-Dīn al-Jandī (d.1291), himself a student of Ibn 'Arabī's stepson, Ṣadr al-Dīn al-Qūnawī (d.1274).

Al-Kāshānī wrote an influential commentary on Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam*, a commentary on al-Anṣarī's *al-sā'irīn*, and a dictionary of technical terms, the *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, intended to explain the terms found in his own and other Ṣūfīs' writings. His Qur'ānic commentary, the *Ta'wīlāt al-Qur'ān* has been published several times in two large volumes inaccurately attributed to Ibn 'Arabī.[47]

It has been shown that, in fact, al-Kāshānī had an attitude towards exegesis very different from Ibn 'Arabī. The school of Ibn 'Arabī, beginning with al-Qūnawī,

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[45] See Lory, *Les Commentaires ésotériques* 20-2 and Macdonald, "'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī," EI[2],
[46] On the term "school of Ibn 'Arabī" and the followers to which it refers, see Chittick, "The school of Ibn 'Arabī."
[47] The edition used for this study was published as *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-karīm* and attributed to Ibn 'Arabī, Beirut, 1968. The authenticity of the work is discussed in Lory, 19-20 and Morris 101n73. Translations of portions of the commentary have been paraphrased and translated into English in Ayoub's *The Qur'ān and its Interpreters* (but attributed to Ibn 'Arabī) and Murata's *The Tao of Islam.*

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focused on the more philosophical and abstract areas of Ibn 'Arabī's thought, reducing if not eliminating Ibn 'Arabī's strong emphasis on the role of imagination and Islamic practice.[48] Al-Kāshānī was no exception here. As Morris writes,

> Kāshānī's Koranic commentaries, like his other books, are all clearly distinguished by a thoroughgoing pedagogical concern and didactic procedure that is manifested in such interrelated characteristics as their rigorous systematization, the clarification and simplification of vocabulary (especially if compared with Ibn 'Arabī), and the conceptualization (often in an openly reductionistic manner) of what were originally multivalent symbols. These tendencies are not merely stylistic particularities; they also reflect a shift in the content and underlying intentions of Kāshānī's writing (when compared with Ibn 'Arabī) that brought him very close to the prevailing systems of Avicennan philosophy (especially in their interpretations of the phenomena and claims of Sufism) and related schools of kalam–to such a degree that their verbal formulations are sometimes virtually indistinguishable.[49]

Morris judges al-Kāshānī's commentary as an aberration from the usual norms of Ṣūfī exegesis, replacing personal spiritual realization with "the *application* to the Koran of a coherent metaphysical system."[50] Whereas Ibn 'Arabī emphasized the primacy of knowledge by unveiling (*kashf*) over reason (*'aql*), Morris suggests that al-Kāshānī alters or even reverses this perspective. The result is "a sort of allegorical reduction of the complex symbolism of the Koran and *hadīth* to a single (or at most twofold) plane of reference."[51]

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[48] Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge*, xvi-xx.

[49] Morris, "Ibn 'Arabi and His Interpreters," Part II (Conclusion) 103-4.

[50] Ibid. 102-3.

[51] Ibid. 105. It is this perceived privileging of reason over unveiling which causes Ahmad to suggest that there are two types of Ṣūfī commentary, symbolic (*ishārī* or *ramzī*) and speculative (*nazarī*), "Qur'anic Exegesis and Classical Tafsir" 104-5.

What Morris is responding to here is al-Kāshānī's primary methodology,

which is that of finding correspondences between Qur'ānic verses and spiritual

psychology and the stages of the individuals' spiritual path. According to Lory, this

is the methodology al-Kāshānī calls *tatbīq*.[52] Here is an example from al-Kāshānī's

commentary on the story of Mūsā and Khaḍir:

> *When Mūsā said to his boy* (18:60). Its obvious sense (*zāhir*) is as is
> mentioned in the story and its miracles are undeniable. As for its inner sense
> (*bātin*), it is as if it is said, *Mūsā*, the heart, *said to the boy*, the soul, at the
> time of the attachment to the body: *"I will not stop,"* i.e., I will keep
> travelling and journeying *until I reach the junction of the two seas*, i.e. the
> intersection of the two worlds—the world of the spirit (*'ālam al-rūḥ*) and the
> world of the body (*'ālam al-jism*) which are the sweet and the salty [seas][53] in
> the human form—and the station of the heart.[54]

Al-Kāshānī is not the first commentator to use this technique, but he is the first to use

it so extensively and exclusively, and the first to apply it to entire passages of the

Qur'ān. It is this method which invites the charge of allegorical reductionism, and

yet, however one judges the results, this was not al-Kāshānī's intention. In the

introduction to his commentary he characterizes the Qur'ān as a sea containing

endless treasures to be found, and describes his own experience in being released

from a dry reading of the text to a more ecstatic state of being overwhelmed by the

continual unveiling of meanings. He writes that *ta'wīl* never ceases because it

changes as the states of the commentator change.[55] Far from proposing that his

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[52] Lory, 28-33.

[53] Al-Kāshānī is referencing Qur'ānic verses 25:53 and 35:12 which mention two seas, one sweet and one salty.

[54] Al-Kāshānī 1:766.

[55] Ibid. 3-5. These passages have been translated in Part I. A French translation of the entire introduction can be found in Lory, 149-53.

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interpretations reflect the one, true meaning of the text, he sets them forth as examples for others who may, in turn, uncover new meanings according to their own capacities.[56]

Al-Naysābūrī

Nizām al-Dīn b. al-Hasan b. Muhammad b. al-Husayn al-Khurāsānī al-Naysābūrī (d.1327), known as Nizām the Lame, was born and lived in Naysābūr.[57] He was a renowned scholar who wrote on subjects ranging from astronomy and mathematics to morphology and Qur'ānic recitation. His most important work was his Qur'ānic commentary, *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān wa raghā'ib al-furqān*, printed in thirty parts in twelve volumes.[58]

The *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān*, like al-Maybudī's *Kashf al-asrār*, divides the Qur'ān into sections made up of both exoteric and Sūfī commentary. After quoting a group of Qur'ānic verses, al-Naysābūrī gives different readings (*qirā'āt*) and recitation pauses and stops (*wuqūf*). This is followed by commentary (*tafsīr*) primarily derived from al-Rāzī's *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, as well as al-Zamaksharī's *Al-Kashāf* and other commentaries. These sources are quoted without attribution throughout most of the commentary, although al-Naysābūrī acknowledges his debt to al-Rāzī and al-Zamaksharī in the introduction and names a few additional sources in a postscript.

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[56] Ibid. 5.

[57] Information on the life and works of al-Naysābūrī can be found in Dhahabī, *Al-Tafsīr wa 'l-mufassirūn* 1:321-2.

[58] Al-Naysābūrī, *Gharā'ib al-Qur'ān wa raghā'ib al-furqān*, Cairo, 1962-70. Portions of this commentary have been paraphrased and translated into English in Ayoub.

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He also states in his postscript that the final part of each section, entitled *ta'wīl*, was taken mostly from the *tafsīr* of the Sūfī Najm al-Dīn al-Rāzī Dāya (d.1256).[59]

Dāya was a disciple of the founder of the Kubrawī order, Najm al-Dīn al-Kubrā (d.1220). Kubrā is said to have begun a commentary on the Qur'ān which he was unable to complete before his death, a commentary which ends in *sūra* 51. A number of manuscripts credit Dāya with the work, and it is therefore unclear to what degree this commentary was co-authored or revised by him. The commentary of 'Alā al-Dawla al-Simnānī d.1336), also from the Kubrawī order, contains an introduction and commentary on the first *sūra* followed by commentary from *sūra* 52 to the end of the Qur'ān. It exists independently and as a work appended to the *tafsīr* of Kubrā and Dāya. This collective work of the Kubrawī order is sometimes called *Al-Ta'wīlāt al-najmiyya*. Dāya may have written a different, independent *tafsīr* as well.[60] Because these *tafsīrs* exist only in manuscripts it is difficult to ascertain at this point in time which *tafsīr* al-Naysābūrī used for his *ta'wīl*, and the extent to which his material is indebted to it.

In some ways al-Naysābūrī's *ta'wīl* resembles that of al-Kāshānī. Al-Naysābūrī frequently establishes correspondences between elements of Qur'ānic verses and the spiritual psychology and states of man, although, as we shall see, these are not always the same correspondences as found in al-Kāshānī. A brief example

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[59] Ibid. 30:223.
[60] Elias, *The Throne Carrier of God* 203-6; Godlas, "Sufi Koran Commentary," forthcoming article in the *Encyclopaedia Iranica*.

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will suffice for now. Where al-Kāshānī identified the *junction of the two seas* in the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir as the intersection of the world and the body, al-Naysābūrī calls it the junction of sainthood (*wilāya*) of the shaykh and his disciple.[61] Al-Naysābūrī, however, avoids philosophical terminology and is, in general, less theoretical than al-Kāshānī.

Sometimes al-Naysābūrī can be far more lyrical in his language and response to the Qur'ānic text. For example, in his commentary on the story of Maryam and her guardian, the prophet Zakariyyā, he uses Zakariyyā's emotional response to finding his ward miraculously supplied with food in her prayer niche to comment on the nature of God's involvement in His creation. Zakariyyā experiences jealousy and longing when witnessing the efficacy of Maryam's prayer, and is thereby moved to pray for a son for himself. Al-Naysābūrī finds a parallel between this and the story, found outside of the Qur'ān but told in most *tafsīrs*, in which Maryam's mother, identified as Hannah, is said to have prayed for a child after watching a mother bird feeding her young. Al-Naysābūrī comments

> There are secrets belonging to God in every single atom of all existing things and in every one of their movements (*ḥarakāt*) and God has secrets which only He knows. Look at what secrets God expresses through the bird's feeding its young and what signs and miracles He reveals from this moment to the Day of Resurrection through Maryam and 'Isā...Just as God made the bird feeding its young the cause of the movement (*taḥarraka*) of Hannah's heart to seek a child, so did He make the state of Maryam and the food given to her miraculously[62] the cause of the movement (*taḥarraka*) of Zakariyyā's heart.[63]

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[61] Al-Naysābūrī 16:17.

[62] Literally, "in violation of ordinary custom" (*khāriq al-'āda*).

[63] Al-Naysābūrī 3:186.

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In the introduction to his commentary, al-Naysābūrī provides a context in which to understand *ta 'wīl* as part of the methodology of "extracting many issues from brief expressions" (*istinbāt al-masā'il al-kathīra min al-alfāz al-qalīla*). These issues pertain to either topics of wording or content. Included in the first are matters related to recitation (*qir'ā'a*), lexicology (*lugha*), etymology (*'ilm al-ishtiqāq*), morphology (*'ilm al-sarf*), grammar (*'ilm al-nahw*), and rhetoric (*'ilm al-badī'*). Included in the second are matters related to meanings (*ma'ānī*), explanation (*bayān*), deduction (*istidlāl*), the fundamentals of religion (*'usūl al-dīn*), the fundamentals of jurisprudence (*'usūl al-fiqh*), jurisprudence (*fiqh*), and the science of mystical states (*'ilm al-ahwāl*). It is the science of mystical states which forms the basis for *ta 'wīl* interpretations.[64]

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[64] Cf. al-Suyūtī's list of the fifteen types of knowledge required for the commentator, the last of which is "bestowed knowledge (*'ilm al-mawhiba*) which is knowledge which God bequeaths to those who act on what they know," *al-Itqān* 180-1.

6. VERSE 3:7

He it is who sent down to you the book containing clear verses (ayāt muḥkamāt) which are the mother of the Book and others which are ambiguous or similar (mutashābihāt). As for those in whose hearts is a turning away, they follow what is ambiguous or similar (mutashābih) in it, seeking discord and seeking its interpretation (ta'wīl) but none knows its interpretation except God. Those who are firmly rooted in knowledge (al-rāsikhūn fī 'ilm) say, "We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord," and no one remembers except those who possess understanding ('ulū al-albāb).

Qur'ānic verse 3:7 was an important one for classical commentators because it addresses the nature of the Qur'ānic text and man's appropriate response to that text. Because the Arabic vocabulary and the syntax of the verse is problematic, interpretations differed on various points. The main exegetical disagreements concerned what constitutes the clear (*muḥkamāt*) and the ambiguous or similar (*mutashābihāt*) verses, and whether or not *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* is the beginning of a new sentence, as translated above, or is a continuation of the phrase *except God.* The latter interpretation would be translated as *but none knows its interpretation except God and those who are firmly rooted in knowledge who say, "We believe in it; the whole is from our Lord."*

Commentaries on this verse have been the subject of several recent studies. Selected translations and summaries from a variety of Sunnī, Shī'ī and Ṣūfī commentators can be found in Ayoub's ongoing project presenting Qur'ānic commentary to the non-Arabic reader.[1] McAuliffe's article compares the

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[1] Ayoub, ibid. 2:20-46.

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hermeneutical views of al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, based on the introductions to their *tafsīrs* and commentary on verse 3:7. Although she finds evidence of hermeneutical continuity, McAuliffe concludes that there are significant differences between the two commentaries. She identifies al-Ṭabarī's achievement as one of classifying the Qur'ānic verses and their potential interpreters, while Ibn Kathīr focuses on establishing a more explicit interpretative methodology.[2] An article by Kinsberg analyzes the various medieval definitions of the *mutashābihāt*, organizing them according to their adoption of the meaning "ambiguous" or "similar" and the Qur'ānic issues they address: the abrogating and abrogated verses, the parameters of acceptable interpretation, and the miraculous nature (*i'jāz*) of the Qur'ān. She characterizes her findings as constituting a wide variety of definitions for the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt* as well as contradictory approaches towards interpreting the *mutashābihāt*, without clear preferences. She attributes this to an ambivalent or cautious attitude towards Qur'ānic interpretation.[3]

In contrast to Kinsberg, I suggest that there are clear interpretative preferences which can be isolated regarding the issues this verse presents. Al-Ṭabarī sets the stage for this by arguing for his preferred interpretations from among the variety of opinions he presents from exegetes before him. If his opinions and those of the commentators after him sometimes seem obscure, this is because their

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[2] McAuliffe, "Quranic Hermeneutics." McAuliffe does not mention that the methodology Ibn Kathīr sets forth in his introduction is taken directly from Ibn Taymiyya's *Muqaddima fī uṣūl al-Qur'ān*. See Curtis, *Authentic Interpretation of Classical Islamic Texts*.

[3] Kinberg, Leah, "*Muḥkamāt* and *Mutashābihāt* (Koran 3/7)."

preferences are often identified by a few brief words easily lost in the wealth of surrounding material. With regard to McAuliffe's article, the study here augments her analysis by showing that the focus on methodology in Ibn Kathīr's commentary is one shared with several other commentators and is best understood in relation to them. Our discussion begins with al-Ṭabarī, who presents the transmitted material concerning this verse which will form the basis for all later discussions, and will therefore be discussed in the most detail. The concerns of the exoteric commentators will then be compared with that of Ṣūfī commentators.

Al-Ṭabarī

Al-Ṭabarī begins his exegesis by paraphrasing the first part of the verse and by elaborating on key words: *muḥkamāt*, *umm*, and *mutashābihāt*. The *muḥkamāt* are those verses which have been strengthened (*uḥkimna*) by clear explanation (*bayān*) and detail (*tafsīl*). Their proofs (*ḥujaj*) and indicators (*adilla*) have been firmly established regarding what is permitted and prohibited, promises and warnings, reward and punishment, command and rebuke, reports and parables, admonition and remonstrance. These verses have been called the mother (*umm*), meaning the root or origin (*aṣl*) of the Book because they constitute most (*muʿẓam*) of the Book and are a place of refuge for its people when they are in need.[4]

The term *mutashābihāt* presents more difficulties because it has two different meanings. The first, and more literal meaning, refers to things which resemble one

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[4] Al-Ṭabarī, *Jāmiʿ al-bayān* 3:170.

another. The second meaning refers to things which are ambiguous, a definition derived from the fact that when things resemble one another, it can be difficult to distinguish the one from the other. Because the interpretations discussed here are sometimes based on the meaning "similar" and sometimes "ambiguous," only the Arabic term will be used. Al-Ṭabarī chooses the more literal definition of the term, saying that "the *mutashābihāt* are those [verses] which are similar (*mutashābihāt*) in recitation (*tilāwa*), different in meaning."[5] Presumably, al-Ṭabarī means by this definition that the *mutashābihāt* resemble the other verses of the Qur'ān in language and style, but are different with regard to what they signify. As we shall see, his preferred interpretation of the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt* bases the distinction between the two on whether or not their meaning can be known by man.

Al-Ṭabarī records five different interpretations specifying which verses of the Qur'ān are the *muḥkamāt* and which are the *mutashābihāt*. The first interpretation divides the verses according to their practical application. Al-Ṭabarī quotes a tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās which states that the *muḥkamāt* are the abrogating verses, those which contain the permitted, the prohibited, the limits, the obligations, and what is to be believed in and practiced. Another tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās specifically identifies these verses as 6:151-3 and 17:23-39.[6] The

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[5] Ibid. 3:172.

[6] *Say: Come, I will recite to you what God has forbidden you. Do not associate anything with Him, do good to your parents, do not kill your children because of poverty for We will provide for you and them, do not approach shameful deeds whether they be outward or inward, do not take the life of which God has made sacred except for just cause. He has charged you with this so that you might use your intellects. Do not approach the property of the orphan except to improve it until he comes of age. Give full weight and measure. We do not burden any soul beyond its ability. When you speak,*

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mutashābihāt are the abrogated verses, prepositions and postpositions (*muqaddam wa mu'akhkhar*),[7] parables, oaths, and what is to be believed in but not practiced.[8]

The second interpretation states that the *muḥkamāt* are those in which God has made firm (*aḥkama*) the explanation of what is permitted and prohibited. He has made the *mutashābihāt* resemble (*ashbaha*) one another in meaning but differ in expression. A tradition from Mujāhid adds that the *muḥkamāt* contain what is permitted and prohibited and the like. All the other verses are *mutashābihāt* which confirm (*yaṣaddiqu*) one another. This is illustrated by the verses *He leads no one astray except those who transgress* (2:26), *Thus does God place filth upon those who do not believe* (6:125), and *He increases guidance for those who are guided and gives them their piety* (47:17).[9]

In the third interpretation, the *muḥkamāt* are those which can only be interpreted in one way while the *mutashābihāt* allow for various interpretations. This is explained with a tradition attributed to Muḥammad b. Ja'far b. al-Zubayr (d.728-38) who states that the *muḥkamāt* are a proof (*ḥujja*) from the Lord and a protection ('*iṣma*) for His servants because their meaning cannot be altered or distorted. The

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be fair even if it concerns close relations, and fulfill God's covenant. He has charged you with this so that you might recollect. This is My straight path, so follow it and not other ways which will separate you from His path. He has charged you with this so that you might be godfearing. (6:151-3).

Your Lord has decreed that you worship no one but Him and that you be kind to your parents. Whether one or both of them reaches old age with you, do not say any word of contempt to them, nor turn them away but speak respectfully and lower the wing of humility over them in mercy and say, "Lord, take care of them just as they took care of me when I was little." Your Lord knows what is in your souls. If you are righteous, surely He is forgiving to the penitent (17:23-5).

[7] In other words, verses which have elements which need to be read in context.

[8] Al-Ṭabarī 3:172.

[9] Ibid. 3:173.

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mutashābihāt, on the other hand, can be altered, distorted and interpreted. Both are trials from God to test man to see if he can conform to a religious law and refrain from distorting the truth.[10]

In the fourth interpretation, this textual division is applied only to Qur'ānic narratives. The *muḥkamāt* are the stories of the prophets and their communities which God has related in a clear manner. The *mutashābihāt* are these same stories when repeated elsewhere in the Qur'ān using the same linguistic expressions to represent different meanings or using different linguistic expressions to represent the same meanings. Al-Ṭabarī quotes the examples for this interpretation given by Ibn Zayd.[11] Clear verses are the first one hundred verses of the *sūra* Hūd, beginning with the declaration *Alif lam rā. It is a Book whose verses have been made clear (uḥkimat), then set forth in detail from the One who is Wise, Aware* (11:1). These verses describe various prophets and their communities, ending with the verse *These are some of the stories of cities We relate to you. Some of them are standing and some are stubble* (11:100). The examples of *mutashābihāt* given by Ibn Zayd represent only those which use different linguistic expressions to represent the same meaning. There are no examples given for the same linguistic expressions used to represent different meanings. One of his examples is the command given to Mūsā in verse 28:32, *usluk yadaka fī jaybika*, and verse 27:12, *adkhil yadaka fī jaybika*, both of which mean *put your hand in your breast*. According to Ibn Zayd, anyone whom

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[10] Ibid. 3:173-4.
[11] ʿAbd al-Raḥmān b. Zayd b. Aslam al-ʿAdawī (d.698).

God wishes to test and lead astray will say, "Why is this not like that? Why is that not like this?"[12]

The fifth interpretation is al-Tabari's preferred interpretation, and is attributed to Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh.[13] It confirms the hermeneutic al-Tabari established in his introductory section classifying which Qur'ānic verses may be interpreted by whom. He begins here by defining the *muḥkamāt* solely by the fact that they may be interpreted and understood by religious scholars ('*ulamā*'). The *mutashābihāt* are defined both by the fact that they may be interpreted only by God and by specific examples given of verses pertaining to future events or the disconnected letters which begin several *suras*.

> Others say: No, the verses which are *muḥkam* in the Qur'ān are those whose interpretation (*ta'wīl*) the scholars ('*ulamā*') know; they understand their meaning and exegesis (*tafsīr*). The *mutashābih* are those verses of which no one has knowledge; God has reserved knowledge of them exclusively for Himself and not His creation. This is like information of when 'Īsā son of Maryam will return, when the sun will rise from the west, the Coming of the Hour, and the annihilation of the world, and such, for no one knows these things.
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> They say: God has designated the disconnected letters (*al-ḥurūf al-maqaṭṭa'a*) at the beginning of some of the *suras* of the Qur'ān as *mutashābih* verses, such as *alif, lam, mim*...etc., because they are *mutashābihāt* in expression and correspond to the letters in alphabetic numerology (*ḥisāb al-jumal*). The group of Jews in the time of the Prophet wanted to gain knowledge regarding the duration of Islam and its people by means of these letters, so they would know how long Muhammad and his community would last. But God pointed out the lie in their talk and taught them that the knowledge which they sought could not be found, either by means of these *mutashābiha* letters or anything else. No one knows it but God.[14]

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[12] Ibid. 3:174. This interpretation is not repeated in the commentaries of al-Zamakshari, al-Rāzī, al-Qurṭubī, or Ibn Kathīr.
[13] A companion of the Prophet who died in 697.
[14] Ibid. 3:174-5.

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By identifying the *mutashābihat* as the verses of disconnected letters and the verses having to do with future events, al-Ṭabarī narrows the area of the unknowable in the Qur'ān, emphasizing its clarity in communicating all that is necessary for man's salvation. Any information required has already been granted to the Prophet to share with his community.

> ...all of the verses of the Qur'ān which God revealed to his Messenger were revealed as a clear explanation (*bayān*) to him and his community and a guidance to the worlds. It is not possible that anything could be included in it which they did not need, or anything which they did need but had no way of knowing by interpretation.
>   Since this is so, mankind has a need for everything in the Qur'ān even though there are some meanings they can do without and many meanings which they very much need. This is like when God says, *on a day when some of the signs of your Lord will come, no soul will benefit if it has not already believed or earned something good by means of its faith* (6:158). The prophet taught his community that the sign which God speaks of in this verse...is the rising of the sun from the west. What the worshippers needed to know was the time period in which repentance would benefit them without restricting it to years, months, or days. God explained this for them by means of the Book and clarified it for them by means of His messenger acting as an exegete (*mufassirᵃⁿ*). They do not need to know the length of time between the revelation of this verse and the appearance of this sign. They have no need of knowing it for their religion (*dīn*) or present life (*dunyā*). It is knowledge which God has reserved for Himself exclusively and not His creation, and He has veiled it from them.[15]

The *muḥkamāt* consist of everything except these verses having to do with future events and the disconnected letters. Although these verses could be interpreted in various ways, their intended meaning has been made clear elsewhere in the Qur'ān or in the explanations of the Prophet. The role of the religious scholar (*ʿālim*) is merely to present this intended meaning.

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[15] Ibid. 3:175.

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If the *mutashābihāt* are as we have described, everything else is *muḥkam* by virtue of its having only one meaning and one interpretation. No one hearing it would need any explanations for it. Or, it is clear despite its possessing many aspects and interpretations and the possibility of many meanings because there exists an indication to its intended meaning either through an explanation mentioned by God Himself or an explanation by His Messenger to his community. The knowledge of the religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) in the community will not go beyond that because of what we have explained here.[16]

In keeping with his narrow definition of what constitutes the *mutashābihāt*, al-Ṭabarī prefers the reading of the verse which limits knowledge of the interpretation (*ta 'wīl*) of the *mutashābihāt* to God alone, although he presents views from the Companions and Followers of the Prophet supporting the other reading as well.[17] Because the verses relating to future events make up a relatively small portion of the Qur'ānic text, al-Ṭabarī retains a broad role for the religious scholar in interpretation, because in this definition the *muḥkamāt* constitute the majority of the Qur'ān. Ibn al-Zubayr, who is recorded as preferring the other reading, delineates a more specific role for the interpreter. According to him, *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* know how to interpret the *mutashābihāt* because they understand how to explain them by means of the *muḥkamāt*.

Then they refer the interpretation of the *mutashābiha* to what they know of the interpretation of the *muḥkama* which admit only one interpretation. So

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[16] Ibid.

[17] Ibid. 3:182-4. According to al-Ṭabarī, those who supported the reading with the full stop after *and no one knows its interpretation except God* were 'Ā'isha, Ibn 'Abbās, Hishām b. 'Urwa, Abū Nahīk al-Asadī, 'Umar b. 'Abd al-'Azīz, and Mālik. Those preferring the reading which connects *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* to what comes before it were Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, al-Rabī' and Ibn Jubayr. Ibn 'Abbās occurs in both groups. According to one chain of narrators, he used to say: *and no one knows its interpretation except God, those being firmly rooted in knowledge* saying "We believe in it." According to another chain of narrators, Ibn 'Abbās said: I am one of those who know its interpretation.

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the book is harmonized by what they say, one part confirming another. By means of it, the proof (*hujja*) is established, victory appears, falsehood departs, and infidelity is refuted.[18]

The verse sets up a dichotomy between *those in whose hearts is a turning away* and *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* based on their attitude towards the *mutashābihāt*. Al-Ṭabarī presents three interpretations regarding *those in whose hearts is a turning away*. The first, related from Al-Rabīʿ b. Anas (d.756-8),[19] states that this verse was revealed regarding a delegation of Christians from Najrān who came to see the Prophet. They argued with him, saying, "Don't you claim that he (ʿĪsā) is the word (*kalima*) and spirit (*rūḥ*) of God?" He said, "Yes." They said, "That's enough for us." God then revealed this verse.[20] Commentators after al-Ṭabarī explain that the Christians were clinging to these descriptions of ʿĪsā in the Qurʾān while ignoring verses which made his humanity explicit, such as *the likeness (mathal) of ʿĪsā before God is as the likeness of Ādam whom he created from dust and then said, "Be," and he was* (3:59).[21]

The second interpretation, for which al-Ṭabarī provides no authority, says that the verse was revealed regarding Abū Yāsir b. Akhṭab, his brother Ḥuyayy, and others among the Jews in Medina who sought knowledge regarding the duration of Muḥammad's community by means of the disconnected letters at the beginning of some of the Qurʾānic *sūras*.[22]

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[18] Ibid. 3:183.
[19] A well-known exegete from the Medinan school of the Followers.
[20] Ibid. 3:177.
[21] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsir al-Qurʾān al-ʿaẓīm* 3:303.
[22] Al-Ṭabarī 3:177.

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The third interpretation states that *those in whose hearts there is a turning away* refers to any innovator (*mubtadi'*) who seeks innovation by interpreting Qur'ānic verses which are capable of various interpretations, even though their intended meaning has been made clear in the Qur'ān or the Sunna of the Prophet. This interpretation is based on a *hadīth* attributed to the Prophet's wife 'Ā'isha which states that the Prophet recited this verse and then said, "When you see those who argue regarding [the Qur'ān], they are those whom God meant, so beware of them."[23] Al-Ṭabarī says that whenever Qatāda[24] used to recite this verse, he would say, "If these are not the Harūriyya and the Sabā'iyya, then I do not know who they are!"[25]

Al-Ṭabarī finds the first interpretation unlikely because the situation of 'Īsā was explained by God to the Prophet and his community. This was well-known information not hidden from anyone. Instead, he accepts the second and third interpretations, meaning that the verse was originally revealed regarding the Jews seeking knowledge of future events through alphabetic numerology (*hisāb al-jumal*), but could also be applied more generally to any innovator seeking to deceive believers and seeking knowledge of the *mutashābihāt*. Al-Ṭabarī adds that this could be any kind of innovation, whether from Christians, Jews, Magians, Sabā'iyya, Qadariyya or Jahmiyya.[26]

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[23] Ibid. 3:178-80.

[24] Abū al-Khaṭṭāb Qatāda b. Di'āma (d.735), a Follower in the Iraqi school of exegesis.

[25] Ibid. 3:178. Ayoub notes that the Harūriyya were a Khārijite sect, 36. Sabā'iyya was the name given to followers of 'Abd Allāh b. Sabā al-Himyarī who is said to have considered 'Alī divine. See Momen, *An Introduction to Shi'i Islam* 46-7.

[26] Ibid. 3:180-1. "Majūsiyya" is a word which originally referred to the priestly caste in ancient Iran but which came to refer to all Zoroastrians. See Morony "Madjūs" in EI². "Qadariyya" was a

By expanding the category of *those in whose hearts is a turning away*, al-Ṭabarī would seem to be expanding his definition of what constitutes the *mutashābihāt*. Nonetheless, when detailing the different views regarding what is meant by *seeking its interpretation*, al-Ṭabarī prefers the view that what is sought is knowledge of future events which are known only to God. He rejects an interpretation attributed to Ibn al-Zubayr which states that what is meant here is interpretative error and distortion regarding verses capable of more than one meaning, specifically concerning the nature of God's actions and decrees. Al-Ṭabarī argues that there is no doubt concerning the meaning of His words, "We decreed," and "We acted," for "its interpretation is known by many of the ignorant polytheists, in addition to the people of faith and the people who are firmly rooted in knowledge among them."[27] While not always consistent, al-Ṭabarī is committed to the idea that the Qur'ān contains very little which is ambiguous or hidden. The majority of the Qur'ān, the *muḥkamāt*, can be interpreted correctly by religious scholars.[28]

Al-Ṭabarī's narrow definition of the *mutashābihāt* facilitates a simple interpretation of *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge*. He identifies them with religious scholars "who have perfected their knowledge and retained it and they have

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derogatory term applied to the proponents of free-will in early Islam. See Van Ess, "Kadariyya" in EI². The "Jahmiyya" were a group which attributed all actions to God alone, believed in the createdness of the Qur'ān, and denied the distinct existence of God's attributes. See Watt, "Djahmiyya" in EI².

[27] Ibid. 3:181-2.

[28] As we have seen above, in al-Ṭabarī's preferred interpretation of what constitutes the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt*, the *muḥkamāt* are defined as verses which can be understood by religious scholars (*'ulamā'*).

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protected it in such a way that no doubt or confusion enters into what they know."[29]

*They say, "We believe in it, "*means that they say, "We accept that what is similar or ambiguous (*mā tashābaha*) in the verses of the Qur'ān is true even though we do not know its interpretation."[30] He records as well a definition from the Prophet which correlates their knowledge with their spiritual practice:

> The Messenger of God was asked, "Who are *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge?*" He said, "The one whose right hand is generous, whose tongue is truthful, whose heart is upright, and whose body is chaste."[31]

Curiously, al-Ṭabarī does not comment on this *ḥadīth* which defines *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* by their inward and outward piety. Commentators after al-Ṭabarī are silent on this *ḥadīth* as well.

After al-Ṭabarī

Al-Ṭabarī's understanding of this verse rests upon his opinion that the *mutashābihāt* refer to future hidden events and the disconnected letters which are beyond the understanding of the interpreter. Although this view continued to be referenced by later commentators, it was Ibn al-Zubayr's definition of the *mutashābihāt* as verses capable of more than one interpretation which tended to be favored. It was an interpretation suited to an increasingly complicated theological landscape, as the *mutashābihāt* came to be defined primarily as those verses dealing with the difficult issues of God's attributes and actions.

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[29] Ibid. 3:184.
[30] Ibid. 3:185.
[31] Ibid. 3:184-5.

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A critique of several of the interpretations found in al-Ṭabarī can be found in

Al-mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl, written by al-Ghazālī. Although this is a book

regarding the fundamentals of jurisprudence (*uṣūl al-fiqh*) and not a *tafsīr,* the

passage quoted here is helpful to us because he is so clearly responding to al-Ṭabarī's

preferred exegesis. Al-Ghazālī notes the disagreement on what constitutes the

muḥkamāt and the *mutashābihāt* and, therefore, the necessity of looking to the

linguists (*ahl al-lugha*) and the original usage (*waḍ'*) of the terms.

> Their saying that the *mutashābih* are the disconnected letters at the beginning
> of the *sūras* and the *muḥkam* is everything else is not consistent with the
> original language usage (*waḍ'*). Neither is their saying that the *muḥkam* is
> what *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* know and the *mutashābih* is
> what God alone knows. Neither is their saying that the *muḥkam* are the
> promises and the threats, the permitted and the prohibited, and the
> *mutashābih* are the stories and parables. This is farfetched.
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> Rather, the truth is that that which is *muḥkam* has two meanings. One of
> them is that it is the disclosed meaning (*al-makshūf al-ma'na*) which admits
> neither obscurity (*ishkāl*) nor other possible meanings (*iḥtimāl*), and the
> *mutashābih* is that which contains contradictory possible meanings
> (*yata'āraḍu fīhi al-iḥtimāl*).
>
> The second meaning is that the *muḥkam* is that which can be usefully
> classified by apparent sense (*ẓāhir*) or interpretation (*ta'wīl*), there being
> nothing contradictory or controversial in it. The *muḥkam* is the opposite of
> confused and false, not *mutashābih.* As for the *mutashābih,* it is possible that
> it designates homonyms such as *qur'* [32] and His words, *the one in whose hand
> is the marriage contract* (2:238), since it can refer to either the spouse or the
> guardian, and *lams* which can refer either to "touch" or "land depression." It
> may also apply to what is mentioned regarding the attributes of God (*ṣifāt
> Allāh*) which need interpretation (*ta'wīl*) where [the Qur'ān's] apparent sense
> (*ẓāhir*) might make one believe in [God's possessing] direction (*jiha*) and
> similarity to His creation (*tashbīh*). [33]

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[32] *Qur'* has two contrary meanings; menstruation and purity from menstruation.

[33] Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Mustaṣfā min 'ilm al-uṣūl* 1:202-3.

Al-Ghazālī here completely rejects Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh's and Ibn 'Abbās'

interpretations, finding no linguistic basis for them. Instead, he adopts Ibn al-

Zubayr's explanation of the *muḥkamāt* as being those which can only be understood

and interpreted in one way. In his explanation of the *mutashābihāt*, al-Ghazālī takes

the rather breathtaking leap from the simple problems of homonyms to the complex

problem of the anthropomorphic passages of the Qur'ān. Nonetheless, like al-Ṭabarī,

he finds little in the Qur'ān which is truly unknowable. In response to the question

of whether or not *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* is connected to what

comes before it or not, he leaves the possibility for both interpretations open:

> Either [reading] is possible. For if what is meant by it is the time of the
> Resurrection, then [the reading with] the stop is best. If [this is not the case],
> then [the reading with] the connection, since it is apparent that God would not
> speak to the Arabs of something which all of mankind has no way of
> knowing.[34]

In order to defend this view, al-Ghazālī must demonstrate that everything but

eschatological events is knowable. With regards to the disconnected letters at the

beginning of some *sūras*, he provides several possible explanations. Some say that

they are names for those particular *sūras*. Some say that they were a tool to wake up

and focus the Arabs upon the message, without any other intended meaning. And

some say they refer to all of the Arabic letters, informing the Arabs thereby that there

was nothing in the Qur'ān which they could not understand.[35]

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[34] Ibid. 1:203.

[35] Ibid. Elsewhere, al-Ghazālī takes a different view of the possibility of interpreting the disconnected letters, claiming that their interpretation cannot be known "since no correct explanation of them has been transmitted." ("Al-Ghazali: The Canons of Ta'wil," trans. Heer, 52). For these and other interpretations of the disconnected letters, see Welch's "Al-Kur'ān" in EI², 412-4.

With regards to Qur'ānic verses describing the attributes of God, al-Ghazālī

insists that they can be interpreted. Here he seems to be saying that any believing

Arabic speaker could understand them, but this is a view qualified by his other

writings.

> If it were to be said, "The Arabs understood His words, *He is the Vanquisher
> over (fawqa) His servants* (6:18) and *The Merciful sat upon His throne* (20:5),
> only as possessing direction (*jiha*) and taking up residence (*istiqrār*), but this
> is not what was intended. So is it *mutashābih*?"
> I would say, "Ridiculous! For these are indirect expressions (*kināyāt*) and
> metaphors (*istī'ārāt*) which the believers among the Arabs understand. They
> confirm that God is not like anything and that these are to be interpreted with
> interpretations (*ta 'wīlāt*) consistent with the understanding of the Arabs.[36]

Al-Ghazālī's view restricting the permissibility of interpreting the *mutashābihāt* is

apparent in his other works. In his *Qānūn al-ta 'wīl*, he makes three

recommendations for dealing with verses whose literal meaning seems to contradict

what can be known by the intellect (*ma'qūl*). The first is not to aspire to fully know

their meaning. The second is to accept that interpretation is unavoidable because

reason does not lie. The third recommendation is to "refrain from specifying an

interpretation when the [various] possibilities [of interpretation] are incompatible."[37]

This is because the interpreter will only be guessing and this is acceptable only in

practical matters of religion. The best recourse is to say,

> I know that its literal meaning is not what is intended, because it contains
> what is contrary to reason. What exactly is intended, however, I do not
> know, nor do I have a need to know, since it is not related to any action, and
> there is no way truly to uncover [its meaning] with certainty. Moreover, I do

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[36] Ibid. 1:204.

[37] Al-Ghazālī, "The Canons of Ta'wil," trans. Heer 53.

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not believe in making judgements by guessing...This means that one should say, "We believe therein; the whole is from our Lord" (3:7).[38]

Although al-Ghazālī restricts the permissibility of interpreting the *mutashābihāt* here, he provides an exception elsewhere, in a book written towards the end of his life, the *Iljām al-'awāmm 'an 'ilm al-kalām*. It was a book written in response to a question regarding traditions attributed to the first generations (*salaf*) which would appear to interpret anthropomorphic descriptions of God literally. Al-Ghazālī not only denies any literal interpretations among the first generations (*salaf*), he claims that they established guidelines detailing how the general public (*'awāmm*) should understand the anthropomorphic verses of the Qur'ān. According to al-Ghazālī, the first generations (*salaf*) believed that the general public should avoid literal interpretations of anthropomorphic passages while, at the same time, avoiding any attempt to understand their true, nonliteral meanings. They should avoid paraphrasing the text or engaging in theological proofs and arguments regarding them. Instead, they should accept that these verses do have a meaning which is fitting to God, but that this meaning can only be understood by the Prophet, his leading Companions, saints (*'awliyā*) and those firmly rooted in knowledge (*rāsikhūn fī l-'ilm*).[39]

In *Al-Mustasfā*, al-Ghazālī had said that, unless what is meant by the *mutashābihāt* is eschatological events, verse 3:7 should be read with the connection,

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[38] Ibid. 54.
[39] Al-Ghazālī, *Iljām al-'awāmm* 51-86.

meaning that both God and *those firmly rooted in knowledge* know the interpretation

of the *mutashābihāt.* He argues this by saying that "God would not speak to the

Arabs of something which all of mankind has no way of knowing." In the *Iljām al-*

'awāmm, he presents the same argument with a more specific answer as to who is in

a position to know their interpretation.

> If you were to say, "What is the benefit in speaking to mankind about
> something which they do not understand?" Your answer is that the goal of
> this speaking is to facilitate the understanding of those who are worthy of it:
> the friends (*awliyā*) and those firmly rooted in knowledge (*rāsikhūn*
> *fī l-'ilm).*[40]

Important here is the definition al-Ghazālī provides for what he means by the general

public (*'awāmm*) on the one hand, and the saints and those firmly rooted in

knowledge on the other. Included in the first is the litterateur (*adīb*), the grammarian,

the *hadīth* specialist (*muhaddith*), the commentator (*mufassir*), the jurist and the

theologian (*mutakallim*). None of these people should attempt interpretations

(*ta'wīlāt*) nor act freely with the external sense of the words (*al-tasarruf fī khilāl al-*

zawāhir) of the Qur'ān or traditions. Al-Ghazālī warns that it is prohibited (*harām*)

to plunge into the sea if you are not a good swimmer, and the sea of the gnosis

(*ma'rifa*) of God is far more dangerous than the sea of water. Those who are

permitted to interpret the difficult passages of the Qur'ān are

> those whose devote themselves exclusively to learning to swim in the seas of
> religious gnosis (*ma'rifa*); who restrict their lives to this alone; who turn their
> faces from this world and the appetites; who turn their backs on money and
> fame, mankind, and all other pleasures; who devote themselves to God in the
> different types of knowledge and actions; who act in accordance with all the

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[40] Ibid. 60.

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ordinances of the religious law and its courtesies (ādāb) in performing the obediences and avoiding the objectionable; who have emptied their hearts from everything except God; who despise the world and even the Hereafter and the Highest Paradise next to love of God. They are the divers in the sea of gnosis.[41]

In shifting to metaphorical language, al-Ghazālī signals his shift from theologian to Sūfī. What is unclear in his other works is clear here: the only people qualified to interpret the mutashābihāt, after the Prophet and some of his immediate followers, are the Sūfīs, and their methodology is that of Sūfī practice.

Al-Zamaksharī understands and applies Ibn al-Zubayr's interpretation of this verse in a different way. Like al-Ghazālī, al-Zamaksharī rejects the view that the mutashābihāt refer to verses of which God alone has knowledge. But unlike al-Ghazālī, al-Zamaksharī's attention is drawn to the methodology Ibn al-Zubayr describes as that of those who are firmly rooted in knowledge, the method of referring the mutashābihāt to the muḥkamāt.[42] Al-Zamaksharī gives examples of how this is to be done, applying the method in support of Muʿtazilī views denying the possibility of the beatific vision and affirming man's absolute free will. According to al-Zamaksharī, the Qur'ānic verse Vision cannot encompass Him (6:103) is the muḥkam verse to which the mutashābih verse gazing at their Lord (75:23) must be referred. Likewise the muḥkam verse God does not command what

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[41] Ibid. 67-8.
[42] Quoted in the section on al-Ṭabarī above.

is shameful (7:28) makes sense of the *mutashābih* verse *When We intend to destroy a town, We command those who live in ease and they act sinfully therein* (17:16).[43]

According to al-Zamaksharī, *those in whose hearts there is a turning away* are the people of innovation (*bid'a*) who depend on the possible meanings of the *mutashābihāt* to support beliefs which contradict the *muḥkamāt*. *Those who are firmly rooted in knowledge*, on the other hand, believe that both the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt* are from God whose Speech contains no contradictions and whose Book contains no disagreements.[44] Instead of using seeming contradictions to create innovations, the believing faithful seek to clarify the Book.

> When he sees what appears to be contradictory in its external sense (*ẓāhir*), he is inspired to seek what would reconcile and unify it. He will examine it himself and check with others. Then God will grant him success and explain the correspondence of the *mutashābih* to the *muḥkam*, giving increase in the serenity of his belief and strength in his certainty.[45]

This is the challenge and the benefit of the *mutashābihāt*, for they motivate believers to study and reflect upon the Qur'ān. When God says, *and no one remembers except those who possess understanding*, He is praising *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* for their receptive minds (*ilqā' al-dhihn*) and beautiful contemplation (*ḥusn al-ta'ammul*).[46]

There is a problem underlying al-Zamaksharī's methodology which al-Rāzī points out in his commentary on this verse. One person's *muḥkam* verse is easily

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[43] Al-Zamaksharī, *Kashshaf 'an haqā'iq*, 1:412.
[44] Ibid. 1:413.
[45] ibid. 1:412-3.
[46] Ibid. 1:412.

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another's *mutashābih* and vice versa. In the process the potential exists for

undermining the very message of the Qur'ān:

> Know that among the apostates there is one who has attacked the Qur'ān
> because of its inclusion of the *mutashābihāt*. He said, "You say that the
> duties which mankind has been charged with are connected to this Qur'ān
> until the Coming of the Hour. Yet we see that [the disagreement over the
> *mutashābihāt*] reaches the point where each follower of a school of thought
> clings to it according to his school, so that the Jabarite clings to the verses of
> compulsion such as *We have placed veils upon their hearts lest they*
> *understand it, and heaviness in their ears* (6:25, 17:46, 18:57). The Qadarite
> says, "No, this is the school of infidels," indicating that God related this about
> the infidels when blaming them, saying, *They say our hearts are veiled from*
> *what you call us to and in our ears is a heaviness* (41:5) and in another place,
> *they say our hearts are enclosed in a covering* (2:88, 4:155).
>
> Also, the one who affirms the beatific vision clings to His words *on that*
> *day faces will be radiant, gazing towards their Lord* (75:22-3) and the denier
> clings to *Vision cannot encompass Him* (6:103). The one who affirms that
> God has direction clings to His words *they fear their Lord above them* (16:50)
> and His words *the Merciful sat upon the throne* (20:5), while the denier clings
> to His words *there is nothing like Him* (42:11).
>
> Then each one calls the verses which agree with his school *muhkam* and the
> verses which disagree with his school *mutashābih*. Maybe the situation of
> preferring one verse over another derives from covert preference and weak
> positions. So how can it be fitting for the Wise to make the Book which is
> the reference point for all of the religion until the Coming of the Hour thus?
> Wouldn't the objective be more likely attained if He had made it
> conspicuously evident and free of these *mutashābihāt*?[47]

Al-Rāzī's reply to this argument states the benefits of the *mutashābihāt* as related by

religious scholars. First, the difficulties of the *mutashābihāt* make the discovering of

truth more difficult and thereby increase the reward for doing so. Secondly, their

existence allows the followers of various schools to struggle in their attempt to

discern the truth instead of fleeing from what does not agree with their initially false

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[47] Al-Rāzī, *Al-Tafsīr al-kabīr*, 7:183-4.

beliefs. Thirdly, they cause one to seek out help from intellectual proof, thereby

freeing the reader from ignorance (*jahl*) and uncritical faith (*taqlīd*). Fourthly, they

cause one to learn the methods of interpretation (*ta'wīlāt*) and preferring one (verse)

over another (*tarjīḥ ba'ḍihā 'alā ba'ḍ*).

The fifth benefit of the *mutashābihāt* is the one al-Rāzī considers the

strongest. The Qur'ān is a message for both the elite (*khawāṣṣ*) and the general

public ('*awāmm*). If one of the general public heard evidence of an existence

without a body or spatial confinement (*mutaḥayyiz*), he would think that this

signified negation and the absence of God's attributes (*ta'ṭīl*). So it is better that the

general public be spoken to with expressions indicating that which they can imagine.

However, this will be mixed with that which indicates the unequivocal truth.[48]

Despite the dangers he has outlined for the method of "preferring one [verse]

over another" (*tarjīḥ ba'ḍihā 'alā ba'ḍ*), al-Rāzī accepts its validity and necessity, and

attempts to establish guidelines for how this is to be done. Adopting terminology

common to jurisprudence, he expands the classification of Qur'ānic expressions.

The clearest expressions are "fixed" (*naṣṣ*) because they can only be understood in

one way. The meaning of an expression which can be understood in various ways is

called "apparent" (*ẓāhir*) with regards to the "predominant" or "probable" meaning

(*rājiḥ*) and "interpreted" (*mu'awwal*) with regards to the less probable meaning

(*marjūḥ*). If an expression is capable of two meanings which are equally probable, it

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[48] Ibid. 7:184-5.

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is called a homonym (*mushtarak*) when referring to both meanings and equivocal (*mujmal*) when referring to one of those meanings. Expressions whose meanings are fixed (*naṣṣ*) or apparent (*ẓāhir*) are clear (*muḥkam*), while those whose meanings have been interpreted (*mu'awwal*) or are equivocal (*mujmal*) are ambiguous (*mutashābih*).[49]

Unlike al-Ghazālī, al-Rāzī distinguishes between simple homonyms like the Arabic word *qur'* where the mind can easily establish which of the two meanings is meant, and the more problematic case of expressions whose predominant meaning is false. Al-Rāzī gives several of these kinds of expressions from the Qur'ān. The first one, also used by al-Zamaksharī above, is the verse *When We intend to destroy a town, We command those who live in ease, and they act sinfully therein* (17:16). It's apparent meaning (*ẓāhir*) is that God commands some people to act sinfully, but this probable meaning (*rājiḥ*) is false and the less probable meaning (*marjūḥ*) is true. This is verified by the *muḥkam* verse *God does not command what is shameful* (7:28) and *When they act shamefully, they say, "We found our fathers doing it and God commanded us to do it* (7:28). Al-Rāzī's second example is the verse *They forgot God, so He has forgotten them* (9:67), the apparent sense of which attributes forgetfulness to God. The *muḥkam* verses in this case are *Your Lord is never forgetful* (19:64) and *My lord does not go astray nor forget* (20:52).[50]

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[49] Ibid. 7:180.
[50] Ibid.

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Like al-Ghazālī in his *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, al-Rāzī insists that the abandonment

of the probable meaning of any expression in the Qur'ān requires a clear-cut

indicator (*dalīl munfaṣil*)[51] which demonstrates the absurdity of the apparent sense

(*ẓāhir*). According to al-Rāzī, a clear-cut indicator can be either linguistic (*lafẓī*) or

rational (*'aqlī*). In this case, linguistic indicators will not be decisive but merely

conjectural and are therefore invalid. Only the establishment of a definitive rational

indicator (*al-dalīl al-qaṭ'ī al-'aqlī*) can justify the diversion of any Qur'ānic

expression from its probable meaning (*rājiḥ*) to a less probable meaning (*marjūḥ*) in

the process known as interpretation (*ta'wīl*). However, even though a definitive

rational indicator can demonstrate the absurdity of the probable meaning, the

intended meaning remains a matter of conjecture (*ẓann*). It will be a matter of

preferring one figurative expression (*majāz*) or interpretation (*ta'wīl*) over another

without the definitive linguistic indicator needed for certainty. Interpretations such

as this are permissible for legal matters but not the fundamentals of faith.[52] What al-

Rāzī seems to be saying here is that he can definitively show that the apparent sense

(*ẓāhir*) of *God forgot them* is false by means of the clear Qur'ānic verses which state

Your Lord is never forgetful and *My lord does not go astray nor forget*, but the

interpretation of the true meaning of *God forgot them* will remain conjectural. His

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[51] Al-Ghazālī uses the term "proof" (*burhān*), *Fayṣal al-tafriqa*, 18. See above Part I above.
[52] Al-Rāzī, 7:181-2.

view here corresponds with that of his fellow Ash'arī al-Ghazālī in his *Qānūn al-ta'wīl* discussed above.[53]

Like his predecessors, al-Rāzī generalizes the identification of *those in whose hearts is a turning away*. After repeating the views found in al-Ṭabarī regarding the Christians and the Jews, he mentions the views of the "verifiers" (*muḥaqqiqūn*)[54] who say that this applies more generally to all speakers of falsehood (*mubṭilūn*) and those who argue their falsehood based on the *mutashābih*. Al-Rāzī provides two examples of groups belonging to this category. The first are anthropomorphists (*mushabbiha*) who seek to validate their beliefs with the apparent sense (*ẓāhir*) of the verse *The Merciful sits on His throne*, even though it has been clearly established by reason (*thabata bi ṣarīḥ al-'aql*) that God cannot be characterized as confined in space (*ḥayyiz*). Likewise, the Mu'tazilīs use the apparent sense of various verses to validate their view of man's absolute free will even though it has been established by

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[53] Al-Rāzī wrote his own general rule (*al-qānūn al-kullī*) for interpretation, quoted here from Ibn Taymiyya's criticism and rejection of its validity in his *Dar' ta'āruḍ al-'aql wa 'l-naql*: "If traditional proofs and rational arguments are opposed to each other, or if tradition opposes reason, [there exist three possibilities]: either a. both [elements] should be combined, which is inconceivable, for it is a combination of contraries, or b. both [elements] should be cancelled, or c. tradition must be preferred (*yuqaddamu*), which is inconceivable, for reason is the basis of tradition. If we preferred tradition to reason it would infringe on reason, which is the basis of tradition, and the infringement of the basis of a thing means the infringement of the thing itself. Consequently, preference to tradition infringes on both tradition and reason. Therefore reason should be preferred, and as for tradition, it is to be either interpreted or entrusted to God (*yufawwaḍu*). (English translation by Abrahamov, "Ibn Taymiyya on the Agreement of Reason with Tradition"). Ibn Taymiyya rejects the preference of reason over tradition here, claiming instead that true reason will never be in contradiction with tradition. As seen above in Part I, he believes that seeming contradictions in the Qur'ān and Tradition occur because faulty tradition has been cited or incorrect deduction has been employed. For this reason, he rejects any abandonment of the literal sense of the Qur'ānic text, whether that abandonment leads to interpretation (*ta'wīl*) or entrusting its meaning to God (*tafwīḍ*).

[54] *Al-muḥaqqiqūn* are those who verify the truth. Al-Rāzī uses the term to refer to theologians whom he respects. Ṣūfīs use the term to refer to those who have verified the truth through mystical knowledge.

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rational proof (*burhān ʿaqlī*) that everything is by the decree, power and will of God.[55]

In his examples, al-Rāzī criticizes schools of thought other than his own for what he sees as their failure to correctly differentiate between the *muḥkam* and *mutashābih* verses of the Qurʾān. He does not consider himself a mere partisan of *his* school, however, because he claims that *his* proofs are definitive. Referring to the Muʿtazilī view of man's free will, he says

> Even if the people of heaven and earth agreed upon these indicators [of man's free will], they would not be able to defend them. When glaringly self-evident rational indicators (*al-dalāʾil al-ʿaqliyyat al-bāhira*) shine forth, how is it possible for any intelligent being to label Qurʾānic verses indicating the Decree and Power *mutashābih*?[56]

According to al-Rāzī, the rule most people follow is to proclaim the verses which agree with their schools of thought *muḥkamāt* and the verses which disagree with the same *mutashābihāt*. The "impartial verifiers" (*al-muḥaqqiqūn al-munṣifūn*), on the other hand, divide the Qurʾānic verses into three parts:

> The first of these are verses whose apparent sense (*ẓāhir*) can be confirmed by rational indicators (*al-dalāʾil al-ʿaqliyya*). These are the *muḥkam* in truth. The second of these are verses whose apparent sense (*ẓāhir*) has been shown to be impossible by definitive indicators (*al-dalʾāil al-qāṭiʿa*). These are those for which it has been determined that God's intended meaning is not the apparent sense. The third type are verses for which indicators like these cannot be found to either affirm or deny [one meaning or another]. Therefore, it would be fitting to stop with them, their being ambiguous (*mutashābihᵃⁿ*) in meaning. The one cannot be distinguished from the other unless probable conjecture (*al-ẓann al-rājiḥ*) results in proceeding according

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[55] Ibid. 7:186.
[56] Ibid. 7:187.

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to their apparent senses. This is what we think regarding this matter and God knows best what He means.[57]

Al-Rāzī's view of the interpreter's task, then, is to identify correctly which verses are clear and which are ambiguous. When it can be shown definitively that the apparent sense of a verse is impossible, the sound interpreter knows that what is intended is a figurative expression (*majāz*) for its reality (*haqīqa*). However, figurative expressions are capable of many meanings and the preference of one over another can only be a linguistic preference. Since this is not definitive proof, it is not permissible.[58] Accordingly, when *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* and *those who possess understanding* see something ambiguous in the Qur'ān, they accept that it has a sound meaning with God and believe in it without knowing its exact meaning.[59] Al-Rāzī, then, prefers the reading of this verse which stops after *and no one knows its interpretation except God*. However, far from belittling the role of the commentator, al-Rāzī understands this verse as praise for those who do exegesis correctly.

> This verse indicates the grandeur of the situation of the theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who search for rational indicators (*al-dalā'il al-'aqliyya*) and by means of them seek knowledge of the essence, qualities, and acts of God. They do not comment on the Qur'ān except by that which agrees with the indications of intellects (*al-dalā'il al-'uqūl*) and which conforms to the language and inflection ('*irāb*).
> Know that whenever there is something which is more noble, there is an opposite to it which is more contemptible. Thus, when the commentator of the Qur'ān can be characterized by this quality, his degree will be this degree of exaltedness by God. But when one speaks of the Qur'ān without being

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[57] Ibid. 7:187-8.
[58] Ibid. 7:189.
[59] Ibid. 7:191.

thoroughly knowledgeable in the science of the fundamentals and the science of language and grammar, he is at the utmost distance from God. Because of this the Prophet said, "Whosoever interprets the Qur'ān by his own opinion (ra'y), let him take his seat in the Fire."[60]

While al-Rāzī's commentary is distinguished by his admiration for the

interpretative abilities of theologians, al-Qurṭubī shows himself to be a jurist

interested in defining the punishments for those guilty of seeking discord through

their interpretations of the Qur'ān. His commentary begins with the remarkable

image of the Companion Abū Amāma coming upon the heads of dead Khārijites

planted on the steps of the mosque in Damascus. After cursing them, he weeps and

tells his companion that these former Muslims are the people meant by verse 3:7 of

the Qur'ān.

After this dramatic opening, al-Qurṭubī turns to the problem of identifying the

muḥkamāt and the mutashābihāt. The best interpretation, according to al-Qurṭubī, is

that of Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh, the interpretation also preferred by al-Ṭabarī:

> The muḥkamāt among the verses of the Qur'ān are those whose interpretation (ta'wīl) is known and whose meaning (ma'nā) and exegesis (tafsīr) are understood. The mutashābih are those for which there is no way for anyone to know them; God has reserved knowledge of them for Himself exclusively and not His creation.

The examples he gives of the mutashābihāt are the time of the Coming of the Hour,

the emergence of Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj,[61] the Dajjāl[62] and 'Īsā, and the disconnected

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[60] Ibid.

[61] Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj are mentioned in the Qur'ān, verse 18:94. Dhu'l Qarnayn, whom most commentators identified as Alexander the Great, came upon a people who asked to pay him tribute enabling him to build them a rampart to save them from the Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj peoples who were destroying their land. The breaking through of this rampart by the Ya'jūj and Ma'jūj is said to be one of the signs of the coming of the Last Hour. See Wensinck, "Yājudj wa-mādjūdj" in EI[1] and Asad.

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letters at the beginning of the *sūras*. Although al-Qurṭubī states that this interpretation is the best, he also accepts the definition of the *mutashābihāt* given by Ibn al-Zubayr, saying, "in this verse the *mutashābih* is a matter of potentiality of meaning (*iḥtimāl*) and obscurity (*ishtibāh*)."[63] He quotes Abū Jaʿfar al-Naḥḥās[64] as saying,

> The best of what has been said about the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt* is that the *muḥkamāt* are self-sufficient, not needing to be referred to anything else, like *there is nothing comparable to Him* (112:4), and *I am forgiving towards those who repent* (20:82). The *mutashābihāt* are like *God forgives all sins* (39:53) which must be referred to *I am forgiving to those who repent* (20:82) and *God does not forgive those who associate partners with Him* (4:48).[65]

According to al-Qurṭubī, this interpretation conforms to the original use of the language (*waḍʿ al-lisān*). Although the Qurʾānic examples used by Abū Jaʿfar al-Naḥḥās are different, the interpretative method here is the same as that discussed by al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī.

After noting the differences of opinion regarding the two readings of this verse, al-Qurṭubī, like al-Ghazālī, accepts both, depending on which type of *mutashābihāt* is meant:

> But the *mutashābih* are of various kinds. One of them is that which can definitely not be known, such as the matter of the spirit (*rūḥ*) and the Hour, knowledge of which God has reserved for Himself in His Unseen. No one

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The Message of the Qurʾān n.95 and100, p. 453-4. Yaʾjūj and Maʾjūj are associated with the Gog and Magog peoples mentioned in the Bible as forces who will fight with the Devil at the end of time (Revelation of St. John 20:8).

[62] The Dajjāl ("the deceiver") is described in the *ḥadīth* as a one-eyed man whose rule will be one of the signs of the end of time. See Abel, "Al-Dadjdjāl" in EI[2].

[63] Al-Qurṭubī, *Al-Jāmiʿ li-aḥkam al-Qurʾān* 4:10.

[64] A 10th century Qurʾānic scholar.

[65] Ibid. 4:11.

dares to pursue knowledge of this, not Ibn 'Abbās, nor anyone else. So any of the intelligent religious scholars who say *the firmly rooted* do not know the science of the *mutashābih* mean only this kind.

As for that which can be referred to aspects of the language and modes of Arab speech, it can be interpreted and its correct interpretation (*ta 'wīl*) known and anything connected to an incorrect interpretation removed, like His words concerning 'Īsā, *and a spirit (rūḥ) from Him* (4:171) and others. No one can be called *firmly rooted* except one who knows a great deal of this kind [of *mutashābih*] according to what has been decreed for him.

As for the one who says the *mutashābih* are the abrogated, he is correct in believing that the *firmly rooted in knowledge* are included [in knowing the *mutashābih*], but his designation of the *mutashābihāt* as being of this type is not sound.[66]

As for *those in whose hearts is a turning away*, al-Qurṭubī understands this as including every disbeliever, heretic (*zindīq*),[67] ignorant person, and innovator, although the specific allusion of the verse is to the Christians of Najran.[68] He then quotes the interpretations of his teacher Abū al-'Abbās[69] regarding the manner in which people *seek what is mutashābih in it*, adding his own judicial opinion for each. The first way people *seek what is mutashābih* is by creating doubt regarding the Qur'ān and misleading the general public. This is what is done by heretics (*zanādiqa*) and Qarmatians (*qarāmiṭa*)[70] who attack the Qur'ān. Al-Qurṭubī states that there is no doubt regarding their disbelief and that they should therefore be killed without giving them the chance to repent. The second way of seeking *what is*

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[66] Ibid. 4:18.

[67] Originally *zindīq* (pl. *zanādiqa*) referred to dualists but came to be applied to any heretic or atheist. See Massignon, "*Zindīq*" in EI[1].

[68] Ibid. 4:13.

[69] Abū al-'Abbās Aḥmad b. 'Umar al-Qurṭubī (d.1259),

[70] In the 9-12th centuries, the Qarmatians (*qarmaṭī*, pl. *qarāmiṭa*) were an offshoot of the Ismā'īlīs characterized by their political rebelliousness, their call for more egalitarian economic and political structures, their esoteric doctrines, and their allegorical interpretation of the Qur'ān. See Massignon, "Karmatians" in EI[1].

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mutashābih is by believing in the apparent sense of the *mutashābih*, as the corporealists do when they believe that the Creator has a corporeal body with a face, eyes, hands, etc. Al-Qurṭubī agrees with those who say that they must be charged with disbelief, since there is no difference between them and those who worship idols. They should be killed unless they repent.[71]

The third way of seeking *what is mutashābih* is by producing new interpretations (*ta'wīlāt*) and clarifying the meanings of the *mutashābih*. The permissibility of this is judged according to the permissibility of the interpretation. Al-Qurṭubī adds that it is well-known that the first generations (*salaf*) did not undertake the interpretation of the *mutashābihāt* despite their affirmation of the absurdity of the apparent sense. A few did produce new interpretations based on what the language can soundly bear, but they refrained from definitively determining whatever is equivocal (*mujmal*) in them.

The fourth way of seeking *what is mutashābih* is by asking too many questions, just as a man called Ṣabīgh b. ʿAsl did with the caliph ʿUmar. Al-Qurṭubī approvingly notes ʿUmar's behavior with Ṣabīgh. According to a tradition from Sulaymān b. Yasār,[72] Ṣabīgh came to Medina and began to ask questions about the *mutashābihāt* of the Qur'an. News of this reached ʿUmar, who sent for the man while preparing a bundle of stalks from dried date trees. When Ṣabīgh arrived ʿUmar hit him upon the head with the stalks until blood poured from his head, and Ṣabīgh

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[71] Al-Qurṭubī 4:13-4.
[72] Sulaymān b. Yasār (d.713-27) was a famous jurist in Medina.

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said, "That's enough, O commander of the faithful. God has taken away what I was making up in my head!"[73]

Ibn Kathīr begins his commentary on this verse by espousing the methodology of referring the *mutashābihāt* to the *muḥkamāt*. According to him, the *muḥkamāt* are clear statements of meaning (*bayyināt wa wāḍiḥāt al-dalāla*) which would confuse no one. The *mutashābihāt* include obscurity of meaning (*ishtibāh fī al-dalāla*) for many people or a few. Those who refer the *mutashābihāt* to the *muḥkamāt* are rightly guided and those who do the reverse are not. Although the *mutashābihāt* are capable of being interpreted in more than one way, Ibn Kathīr makes the important qualification that this is only in terms of language and syntax, not the intended meaning (*murād*). Ibn Kathīr relates the other interpretations attributed to the Companions and Followers defining the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt*, but clearly states his preference for Ibn al-Zubayr's view although he never mentions him by name. Instead, he provides a statement attributed to Muḥammad b. Isḥaq b. Yasār (d.767)[74] which is the same as the tradition from Ibn al-Zubayr except for the insertion of the negating word *laysa* in the second sentence:

> *Containing clear verses (muḥkamāt)* which are the proof of God and the protection (*'iṣma*) of the servants, and a defense to enemies and the one who is false. There is no alteration or distortion in them from what has been set down. There [also] is no (*laysa*) alteration, distortion or interpretation in the *mutashābihāt*, in truth. God tests the servants regarding them just as he test them regarding the permitted and the prohibited as to whether they will be altered to the false and distorted from the truth.[75]

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[73] Ibid. 4:14-5.

[74] A traditionist who wrote the first biography of the Prophet.

[75] Ibn Kathīr, *Tafsīr al-Qur'ān al-aẓīm* 3:353.

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The tradition, as attributed to Ibn al-Zubayr in al-Ṭabarī and al-Qurṭubī,[76] states that

the *mutashābihāt* can be altered, distorted, and interpreted, but Ibn Yasār's version

here does not allow it. It would seem that Ibn Kathīr is committed to a view of the

mutashābihāt which minimizes their true ambiguity. He has already said that their

meaning is obscure to "many people or a few," implying that the obscurity is only for

some. He has stressed that the possibility of interpreting the *mutashābihāt* in

different ways pertains only to language and syntax, not their intended meaning.

And he quotes Muḥammad b. Isḥaq b. Yasār approvingly here, confirming the

essential clarity of the *mutashābihāt* when correctly referred to the *muḥkamāt*.

As for the two readings of this verse, Ibn Kathīr accepts both of them, as do

al-Ghazālī and al-Qurṭubī, based on what is being interpreted. However, he supports

his argument in a different way, by citing the different meanings of the word

"interpretation" (*ta 'wīl*) in the Qur'ān itself as established by religious scholars.

> *Al-ta 'wīl* is a word which has two different meanings in the Qur'ān. The first
> of these is the *ta 'wīl* which means the true nature (*ḥaqīqa*) of a thing and its
> final outcome. An example of this is *O Father, this is the ta 'wīl of my dream*
> *before* (12:100),[77] and *Do they but look for its ta 'wīl? On the day its ta 'wīl*
> *comes...*(7:53), i.e., the truth (*ḥaqīqa*) of what they were told concerning the
> Hereafter (*al-ma 'ād*). If this is what is meant by *ta 'wīl*, then [the sentence]
> should stop after God, because the realities and essence of [these] matters is
> known clearly only to God, and the words *and those firmly rooted in*
> *knowledge* will be the beginning of a new sentence and *they say, "We*
> *believe in it"* will be its predicate.
>   However, if what is meant by *ta 'wīl* is the other meaning, the explanation
> (*tafsīr*), elucidation (*bayān*) and interpretation (*ta 'bīr*) of a thing, as in the

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[76] Al-Ṭabarī 3:174; Al-Qurṭubī 4:10-1.

[77] This is Joseph speaking to his father after their being reunited.

words *Tell us the ta'wīl of it* (12:36),[78] i.e., its explanation (*tafsīr*), then the stop should be after *those firmly rooted in knowledge*, because from this point of view they know and understand what has been addressed to them, even though their knowledge does not fully encompass the realities of things in their essence. According to this [reading], the words *"We believe in it"* is a conditional clause (*ḥāl*) and this is permissible...[79]

Those who *follow what is mutashābih in it, seeking discord* believe that they have authoritatively supported their innovations, but the Qur'an is a proof (*ḥujja*) against them. The example Ibn Kathīr provides for this is the Christians who argue that the Qur'ān speaks of 'Īsā as the word of God cast into his mother Maryam and a spirit from Him, but they ignore the evidence of the verses *he is only a servant whom We blessed* (43:59) and *the likeness of 'Īsā before God is as the likeness of Adam whom He created from dust and then said, "Be," and he was* (3:59).[80] *Those who possess understanding* (*'ulū al-albāb*), on the other hand, understand, comprehend and ponder the meanings in the correct manner (*'alā wahjihā*), possessing sound intellects (*'uqūl al-salīma*) and correct levels of understanding (*fuhūm al-mustaqīma*).[81]

The common thread throughout these commentaries is a concern for the clarity of the essential message of the Qur'ānic text, at least in terms of what is necessary for Muslim practice and belief. There is agreement that seeming contradictions such as 'Īsā's identification as both the word and spirit of God, as well as merely a man, can be resolved by reference to *ḥadīth* or the correct selection of the

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[78] This is the question the two men ask Joseph in prison about their dreams.
[79] Ibn Kathīr, 3:355.
[80] Ibid. 3:353.
[81] Ibid. 3:355.

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primary *muḥkam* meaning. Also agreed is that some verses exist whose meaning

cannot be understood, whether these be only those containing the disconnected

letters and eschatological details or, additionally, the anthropomorphic verses.

Either way, the result is that any ambiguity remaining in the text is made

nonthreatening to the essentially public and accessible message of the Qur'ān.[82]

Those who are guilty of false interpretation are identified both specifically, as the

Jews and/or Christians of Muḥammad's time, and the Kharijites who followed; and

generally, as innovators, disbelievers, false believers, and heretics. Correct

interpretation is based on knowing which verses to prefer over others, either through

knowledge of *ḥadīth*, language, or, as al-Rāzī puts it, definitive rational indicators

(*al-dalā'il al-qāti'at al-'aqliyya*). The issue of whether or not the reading of the verse

should or should not connect *God* and *those firmly rooted in knowledge* proves to be

a non-issue, as can be seen in the fact that al-Ghazālī, al-Qurṭubī, and Ibn Kathīr

accept both readings depending on the definition of *mutashābihāt* and *ta'wīl*.

The inclusion of a wide variety of interpretations in each commentary should

not be confused with a stance of relativism. Rather, this inclusion shows a respect

for the conduit of transmitted knowledge. The very fact that an interpretation can be

attributed to one of the accepted exegetes among the Companions and Followers is

enough to insure its mention, even if the commentator rejects it in favor of another.

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[82] Al-Ghazālī is the exception here. While arguing that God would not speak to man concerning that which he has no way of knowing, his *Iljām al-'awāmm* makes it clear that he believes that some of the Qur'ān's messages are intended for an elite group of people. This view is that of the Ṣūfīs as we shall see below.

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In this respect, al-Ghazālī's rather dismissive attitude towards the traditional exegesis

of this verse is unusual, but can perhaps be explained by the fact that his discussion

does not occur in the genre of *tafsīr* itself.[83] Al-Ghazālī states his opinions more

bluntly than most commentators, but they make their preferences known as well.

The result is tolerance of other opinions but not an acceptance of multivalence. It is

a tolerance, however, which has its limits, as can be seen in the legal boundaries al-

Qurṭubī attempts to establish in his commentary.

Sūfī commentaries

Al-Tustarī (d.896) is roughly contemporary with al-Ṭabarī (d.923), providing

us with the first example of the contrast between exoteric and Sūfī exegesis on this

verse. Al-Tustarī's commentary covers less than one page, in contrast to the

seventeen pages found in al-Ṭabarī. He does not address the issue of identifying the

muḥkamāt and the *mutashābihāt*, focusing instead on the issues of interpretation and

knowledge. Instead of identifying those who are guilty of misinterpretation, he

defines the inward process which leads to their error.

> *They follow what is mutashābih in it, seeking discord,* meaning disbelief
> (*kufr*) *and seeking its interpretation (ta 'wīl),* meaning its exegesis (*tafsīr*)
> according to what suits the passion (*hawā*) of their souls.[84]

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[83] The same could be said for Ibn Khaldūn in his *Muqaddima*, where he rejects several *salafī*
interpretations before declaring that only those verses concerning the attributes of God belong in the
category of the *mutashābihāt*. Ibn Khaldūn provides an interesting discussion of the various views of
the Muslim community on the problem of interpreting the attributes of God. His own solution to the
problem of the *mutashābihāt* resembles al-Ghazālī's linking of the issue of interpretation to the
concept of levels of existence in his *Faysal al-tafrīq*, although Ibn Khaldūn counts only four levels to
al-Ghazālī's five. (See Part I above). (Ibn Khaldūn, *The Muqaddimah*, trans. Rosenthal 3:55-75).
[84] Tustarī, *Tafsīr* 24.

Al-Tustarī then quotes the tradition attributed to Ibn 'Abbās in seeming agreement

with the reading that no one knows the interpretation of the *mutashābihāt* except

God.

> Ibn 'Abbās said that the Qur'ān was sent down in four modes (*aḥruf*): what is
> permitted and prohibited, ignorance of which is inexcusable for anyone; the
> exegesis (*tafsīr*) which the Arabs have explained; the exegesis (*tafsīr*) of the
> learned ('*ulamā*'); and the *mutashābih* which only God knows. So anyone
> who claims to know it other than God is a liar.[85]

But, according to al-Tustarī, God has made an exception for *those firmly rooted in*

knowledge. They have been protected from false interpretation and granted profound

knowledge.

> *Those firmly rooted in knowledge.* It has been related from 'Alī that they are
> those whom knowledge protects from the intrusion of passion (*hawā*) and
> arguments presented without [knowledge of] hidden things (*al-ghuyūb*),
> because God has guided them and given them power over his hidden secrets
> in the treasuries of the different kinds of knowledge ('*ulūm*). They say, "*We*
> *believe in it*," and God is thankful to them and has made them the people of
> firmrootedness (*ahl al-rusūkh*) and extraordinary accomplishment
> (*mubāligha*) in knowledge, an increase (*ziyāda*) from Him, just as He said
> *Say, "Lord, increase me in knowledge"*(20:114).
>
> God made an exception for *those firmly rooted in knowledge* in their
> saying, "*all of it is from our Lord,*" meaning the abrogating and the
> abrogated, the *muḥkam* and the *mutashābih*. They are those who have
> uncovered (*kāshifūn*) three kinds of knowledge because those who know
> ('*ulamā*') are of three kinds: those who devote themselves exclusively to
> knowing the Lord (*rabbāniyyūn*), those who devote themselves exclusively to
> knowing the Light (*nurāniyyūn*), and those who devote themselves
> exclusively to knowing the Essence (*dhātiyyūn*).[86] In addition, there are four

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[85] Ibid.

[86] The word *rabbāniyyūn* appears in the Qur'ān in 3:79, 5:44 and 5:63. Sibawayh defines the *rabbānī* as one who devotes himself to the knowledge of the Lord exclusively. (See Lane, *Arabic-English Lexicon* 1:1006-7 and Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* 79n62.) Al-Tustarī appears to be coining the words *nurāniyyūn* and *dhātiyyūn* using the same Arabic word form. Cf. Böwering who translated these three words as "those who perceive God as Lord," "those who perceive God as Light," and "those who perceive God as Essence," *The Mystical Vision of Existence* 228. See also Böwering on al-Tustarī's commentary on 3:79, 228-9.

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kinds of knowledge: revelation (*wahy*), God's self-disclosure (*tajallī*), [knowledge] from what is near [to Him] (*'indī*) and [knowledge] from [His very presence] (*ladunī*), as in His words *We gave him mercy from Us (ataynāhu raḥmat^{an} min 'indinā) and taught knowledge to him from Our very presence ('allamnāhu min ladunnā 'ilm^{an})* (18:65).[87]

What al-Tustarī means here is far from clear. However, it can be said with some

confidence that what he is describing is knowledge granted by God to select souls

which enables them to understand meanings of the Qur'ān in a far more expansive

way than is ordinarily suggested by the term "learned" (*'ulamā'*). Böwering,

supported by references from other passages in al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* and quotes

attributed to al-Tustarī in other Ṣūfī works, suggests that for al-Tustarī, "The

knowledge (*'ilm*) of God is a privileged means of mystic man, by which he becomes

aware of infinite reality."[88] This is God-given knowledge rather than knowledge

learned through transmitted traditions and the Arabic language.

For al-Ṭabarī, the explanations given by the Prophet to his community and

the comments of those who possess the necessary understanding of the Arabic

language have explained everything which is necessary for man to know about the

message of the revelation. All of this knowledge is accessible and public. But the

Ṣūfīs claimed that there is both public and private information in the Qur'ānic

message. While the public information provides all that is necessary for salvation,

the private information is necessarily limited to a few. The dissemination of the

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[87] Al-Tustarī 24. Qur'ānic verse 18:65 describes the man Mūsā meets, identified in the *hadīth* as al-Khaḍir.
[88] Böwering, *The Mystical Vision of Existence* 226.

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public information is essential, whereas full disclosure of the private information would not be beneficial for mankind. This concept is clearly seen in the commentary on this verse by al-Qusharyi.

> He has classified the discourse for them: from its apparent sense (*zāhir*) is the clarity of its revelation (lit., "its being sent down," *tanzīlihi*) and from its obscure sense (*ghāmid*) is the problem of its interpretation (lit., "its being brought back," *ta'wīlihi*). The first kind is for the purpose of unfolding the law and guiding the people of the outwardly manifest (*ahl al-zāhir*). The second kind is for the purpose of protecting secrets (*asrār*) from the examination of outsiders (*ajānib*).[89]

In addressing the problem of why the revelation is not all completely clear, al-Zamaksharī, al-Rāzī and al-Qurtubī suggested that the presence of ambiguities serves as a catalyst for the praiseworthy efforts of scholars, a virtue which might otherwise remain unmanifested.[90] Al-Qushayri is suggesting something completely different here, that the *mutashābihāt* exist to obscure information from those not suited to receive it while at the same time revealing it to those for whom it is intended. The methodology for receiving this information involves listening with the presence of the heart (*hudur al-qalb*).

> The way of those whose knowledge is firmly rooted (*al-ulamā' al-rasūkh*) in seeking its meaning is in accordance with the fundamentals (*usūl*). Whatever their investigation obtains is acceptable and whatever resists the effect of their reflection (*fikr*) they surrender to the World of the Unseen.
>   The way of the people of allusion and understanding (*ahl al-ishāra wa 'l-fahm*) is listening with the presence of the heart (*hudūr al-qalb*), so that the object of their levels of understanding (*fuhūm*), appearing from the things which are made known, is based upon the allusions of unveiling (*ishārāt al-kashf*).[91]

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[89] Al-Qusharyī, *Latā'if al-isharāt* 1:232.
[90] Al-Zamaksharī 1:312-3; Al-Rāzī 7:184; Al-Qurtubī 4:19.
[91] Al-Qushayrī, 1:232.

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Those who receive this knowledge do not share it with others without being

commanded to do so.

> If they have been asked to maintain the veil and conceal the secret, they feign
> dumbness. If they have been commanded to reveal and proclaim, they freely
> release the elucidation of the Truth and speak from knowledge received from
> the Unseen.[92]

Like al-Tustarī, al-Qushayrī does not identify external groups of people who are

guilty of false interpretation. Instead, he speaks in metaphors of those who

understand these deeper meanings and those who do not.

> Those who have been confirmed with the lights of insights (*anwār al-baṣā'ir*)
> are illuminated by the rays of the suns of understanding (*fahm*). Those who
> have been clothed in a covering of doubt have been denied the subtleties of
> actualization, so that states (*aḥwāl*) divide them and mere conjectures (*zunūn*)
> plague them, and they are swept away in the wadis of doubt and deception.
> They only become more and more ignorant, more and more estranged
> through their uncertainty.[93]

There can be no question of the superiority of those who possess these deeper

understandings. Al-Maybudī reiterates al-Qushayrī's commentary in Persian, adding

his own emphasis on the nobility of the interpretative elite.

> ...*containing clear verses (ayāt muḥkamāt) which are the mother of the book
> and others which are similar or ambiguous (mutashābihāt)*. There are two
> exalted parts to the Qur'ān. One of them is the clear apparent sense (*ẓāhir-i
> rawshan*) and one is the difficult obscure sense (*ghāmiḍ-i mushkil*). This
> apparent sense is the majesty of the law (*sharī'at*) and that obscure sense is
> the beauty of reality (*ḥaqīqat*). This apparent sense is so that the masses
> (*'āmma*) of mankind might understand and practice this in order to reach the
> prize (*nāz*) and blessing. That obscure sense is so that the elite (*khawāṣṣ*) of
> mankind might submit to and accept that in order to reach the blessing of the
> secret (*rāz*) of the friend. How great is the distance (lit., descent and ascent)

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[92] Ibid 1:233.
[93] Ibid.

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between the place of the prize and blessing and the place of intimacy and the secret! Because of the grandeur of that state and the nobility of that work, the veil of obscurity (*ghumūd*) and ambiguity (*tashābuh*) is not removed, so that not just any stranger could set foot in that quarter, since not everyone is worthy of the tale of the secrets of kings.

> Do not stroll around the royal curtain of secrets!
> What can you do since you are not a warrior?
> A real man ought to be peerless in each of the two worlds
> since he drinks the last drops of the draught of friends.[94]

Al-Maybudī creates a series of corresponding polarities here, of the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt* of the Qur'ānic text, the masses (*'āmma*) and the elite (*khawāṣṣ*), the law (*sharī'a*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*), and God's Majesty and Beauty. In doing so, he connects the structure of the Qur'ān to the structure of mankind and the cosmos.

The linking of the nature of the Qur'ānic text and the nature of existence can be seen in the commentary of Rūzbihān al-Baqlī. For Rūzbihān, the *muḥkamāt* are those verses which cannot be altered from how they were in pre-eternity. They are the verses belonging to the believers which contain the practical application of the commandments, functioning like medicine for the sick in healing mankind and strengthening faith. They provide all that is necessary for man's salvation. The *mutashābihāt*, on the other hand, give information to the few who are prepared to receive it about the mysterious way in which God manifests Himself in His creation.

> The *mutashābihāt* are descriptions (*awṣāf*) of the ambiguous wrapping (*iltibās*)[95] of the Attributes (*sifāt*) and the manifestation (*zuhūr*) of the Essence (*dhāt*) in the mirror of witnessings (*shawāhid*) and signs (*ayāt*).[96]

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[94] Al-Maybudī, *Kashf al-asrār* 3:24.

[95] *Iltibās* is a favorite concept of Rūzbihān's for describing the way in which God can be known through His creation. The root *lbs* creates two first form verbs, both of which occur in the Qur'ān: *labisa* means to wear something or to clothe someone, and *labasa* means to confuse something. Although Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon* defines the classical usage of the word *iltibās* as "to become

There is a superficial resemblance between Rūzbihān's interpretation of the *muḥkamāt* and the *mutashābihāt* and that of exoteric commentators who understand them as the clear verses which must be practiced and the more problematic verses describing the nature and attributes of God. But Rūzbihān is not interested in reconciling reason and revelation here, i.e., the problem of how to avoid both anthropomorphism and reductionistic interpretation of such verses as the Throne verse. Rather, he is saying that the *mutashābihāt* are indicators of the "entanglement" (*iltibās*) of the divine and human. This is not pantheism because Rūzbihān denies that God "dwells" in His Creation. Those who understand the meaning of the *mutashābihāt* see God in everything without misinterpreting their perception as God's incarnation in the world. Those who do not understand this mystery create chaos when they try to interpret the *mutashābihāt*.

> As for those in whose hearts is a turning away, they follow what is *mutashābih* in it. The people of blind imitation (*taqlīd*) plunge into the *mutashābihāt*, seeking unity (*tawḥīd*), but are cut off from witnessing it

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entangled" or "to become confused," Rūzbihān's use of the word appears to combine the meaning of ambiguity with that of being clothed with something. In 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī's glossary of Ṣūfī technical terms, al-Kāshānī defines *al-labs*, a noun derived from the first form verb *labasa* as "the elemental form (*al-ṣurāt al-'unsuriyya*) that clothes (*talbisu*) spiritual realities (*al-ḥaqā'iq al-rūḥāniyya*). He also cites the following Qur'ānic verse containing the verb *labasa*. The verse is a reply to the unbelievers who asked why an angel was not sent down to them:

> If we had made him (the Messenger) an angel, We would have made him (appear) as a man and We would have certainly confused (*labasnā*) them just as they are already in confusion (*yalbisūna*) (6:9).

Like Rūzbihān, al-Kāshānī understands the concept here as being the process by which God "clothes" His messages in forms which can be confusing or ambiguous to people. (al-Kāshānī, *Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya*, Arabic 45, English trans. by Safwat 35). Scholars of Rūzbihān's writings have translated *iltibās* in different ways. In his *En Iranian Islam*, Corbin translated *iltibās* as "amphibolie." Ernst finds this "an excessively abstract overtranslation" which "fails to convey the sense of the root L-B-S as 'clothing.'" He prefers the phrase "clothing with divinity" "when the context makes it clear that *iltibās* means a theophany clothed in visible form." (Ernst, *Rūzbihān Baqlī* 104 n.56.)
[96] Rūzbihān al-Baqlī, *'Arā'is al-bayān* 1:68-9.

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because they are the victims of illusion (*aṣḥāb al-wahm*), and the victim of illusion does not recognize the truth of temporally originated things (*al-ashyā' al-muḥdatha*). How can he recognize the existence of the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) by the mark (*rasm*) of illusion? If he tries to seek the different kinds of knowledge of the *mutashābihāt*, he will not reach the truth regarding them and may create discord (*fitna*). It is because of this that the Prophet said, "Reflect upon the bounties of God, not His Essence." One who has not traversed the seas of the realities of certainty has not seen the mirror of realization. The distinguishing mark (*rasm*) of the *mutashābihāt* falls short of that which has been marked for his faith. He does not grasp their meanings because this is the station of the lovers (*ahl al-'ishq*) who see the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) in everything. As one of the people of meanings (*ahl al-ma'ānī*) said, "I do not see anything without seeing God in it." This is the description of the manifestation of the Divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*) in the mirror of engendered existence (*kawn*). This does not mean that God is in things because He is free from all forms of incarnation (*ḥulūl*).[97]

Like al-Maybudī, Rūzbihān believes that those who are firmly rooted in knowledge possess warrior-like qualities. Because they are inwardly rooted in the knowledge of how things really are, they are outwardly calm, courageous, and self-effacing before life's vicissitudes.

> *Those firmly rooted in knowledge* are those who witness the quality of spirits (*arwāḥ*) [existing] prior to the bodies (*ashbāḥ*) in the court of pre-eternity, who have seen with their own eyes the concealed secrets of the particulars of the eternal types of knowledge. They have understood from them the end results of their situation in the pathways of subsistence (*baqā'*). They are firmly rooted in the sea of the source of certainty ('*ayn al-yaqīn*) and are not agitated by the appearance of worldly authorities who are characterized by change, transformation, deceit and treachery. They are not overwhelmed by acts of force and the fear they arouse; they stand firm before the blows of God, standing firm with God in that which appears from Him bearing the mark of effacement (*maḥw*) and obliteration (*ṭams*). They know that all of it is a trial and a test, so they remain tranquil in servanthood ('*ubūdiyya*) as their outward distinguishing mark and are firmly rooted in the witnessing of lordliness (*rubūbiyya*) in their inward absolute reality.[98]

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[97] Ibid. 1:69.
[98] Ibid. 1:69-70.

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The commentary of 'Abd al-Razzāq al-Kāshānī addresses the problem of how

God is present in His creation in a different way, defining the *muhkamāt* and the

mutashābihāt as reflecting unity and multiplicity, and drawing upon the exoteric

tradition's rule of interpretation by referring one to the other.

> Potentiality of meaning and ambiguity cannot touch [the *muhkamāt*]; they
> convey only one meaning. *They are the mother*, i.e. the root (*asl*) of the
> Book. *And others which are mutashābihāt.* They convey two meanings or
> more, and the truth and falsehood are ambiguous (*yashtabahu*) in them. That
> is because the Truth (*al-haqq*) has one face, which is the absolute abiding face
> after the annihilation of creation, not admitting multiplicity or plurality. He
> also has multiple additional faces in accordance with the mirrors of the loci of
> manifestation (*mazāhir*). [These faces] are what become manifest from that
> one face according to the preparedness (*isti'dād*) of each locus of
> manifestation. The truth and falsehood are ambiguous in them. The
> revelation appeared in this manner so that the *mutashābihāt* would turn
> towards the faces of the different forms of preparedness (*isti'dādāt*). So
> everyone clings to that which conforms to them and the test and trial become
> manifest.[99]

Those who are firmly rooted in knowledge are those who see unity and not

multiplicity, the abiding face and not the appearance of multiplicity in the mirrors of

created things. In other words, they see nothing but God in everything. Al-Kāshānī

understands the exoteric tradition of interpretation by referring the *mutashābihāt* to

the *muhkamāt* as interpretation through this mode of perception.

> The gnostic verifiers (*al-'ārifūn al-muhaqqiqūn*),[100] who recognize the
> abiding face in whatever form or outward appearance it takes, recognize the

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[99] Al-Kāshānī, *Ta'wīlāt* 1:167. When al-Kāshānī speaks of loci of manifestation (*mazāhir*), he is
employing a term initiated by Ibn 'Arabī to explain the nature of existence. God is One both in His
Essence and His attribute as the Manifest, while the loci within which He manifests are qualified by
multiplicity. "Preparedness" (*isti'dād*) is the term he uses to describe the receptivity of individual
created things and beings to the manifestation of God, each becoming a locus of manifestation
according to its innate capacity. See Chittick, *The Sufi Path of Knowledge* 89-94.

[100] As mentioned above, al-Rāzī uses the term "verifiers" (*muhaqqiqūn*) to refer to theologians. Al-
Kāshānī is following the usage of Ibn 'Arabī: "In general the Shaykh al-Akbar applies the term

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true face among the various faces which the *mutashābihāt* take and refer them to the *muḥkamāt*, following the example of the poet:

> There is only one face yet
> when you count the qualities there is multiplicity.

Those who are veiled, *those in whose hearts is a turning away* from the Truth, *seek what is mutashābih* because of their being veiled by multiplicity from unity. The verifiers follow the *muḥkam*, subordinating the *mutashābih* to it and choosing from its possible interpretations[101] what conforms to their religion (*dīn*) and school of thought (*madhhab*).[102]

The last sentence could be construed as a belief in relative truth, but elsewhere al-Kāshānī makes it clear that interpretation can be either false or true. He characterizes false interpreters as those who distort the Qur'ān according to their individual tendencies.

> *Seeking discord*, i.e. seeking to mislead themselves and others. *And seeking its interpretation (ta'wīl)* according to what conforms to their state (*ḥāl*) and method (*ṭarīq*). When the knife is crooked, its scabbard becomes crooked. Because they do not recognize the one abiding face among the other faces, it necessarily follows that they do not recognize the true meaning among the other [possible] meanings.[103]

In his comments on *but no one remembers except those who possess understanding*, al-Kāshānī uses a metaphor taken from the etymology of the phrase *those who possess understanding* (*'ulū al-albāb*).[104] *Lubb* (pl. *lubūb*) means the choicest part or the kernel of foods such as nuts or wheat. *Lubāb* (pl. *albāb*) is the choicest part of

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"Verifiers" (*al-muḥaqqiqūn*) to the highest category of the friends of God. They follow no one's authority (*taqlīd*), since in themselves they have "verified" (*taḥqīq*) and "realized" (*taḥaqquq)*--through unveiling and finding--the truth (*ḥaqq*) and reality (*ḥaqīqa*) of all things, i.e. the Real Himself (*al-ḥaqq*)." (Chittick 389 n.11.)

[101] Literally, "faces" (*wujūh*).

[102] Ibid.

[103] Ibid.

[104] The phrase occurs in the Qur'ān sixteen times. See Kassis' *Concordance of the Qur'ān* 732-3.

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anything. When said of a man, it means his intellect or understanding.[105] Referring

implicitly to this dual meaning, al-Kāshānī compares the "kernels" of the wise to the

"husks" of the foolish.

> *And no one remembers* that singular and decisive knowledge (*al-'ilm al-wāḥid al-faṣl*) within the ambiguous and manifold particulars (*al-tafāṣīl al-mutashābiha al-mutakaththira*) *except* those whose intellects (*'uqūl*) have been purified by the light of guidance and freed from the husk (*qishr*)[106] of passion (*hawā*) and habit (*'āda*).[107]

This metaphoric play on husks and kernels is continued in the commentary of

al-Naysābūrī, included within an extended meditation on the concept of

"remembered" knowledge. For al-Kāshānī, the contrast is between those who

perceive unity and those who perceive multiplicity. For al-Naysābūrī, the contrasts

are between ego existence and spiritual existence, the knowledge acquired in this life

(*'ilm kasbiyya*) and knowledge given directly to man by God (*'ilm ladunnī*) on the

Day of the Covenant.[108]

> *And no one remembers except those possessing understanding ('ulū al-albāb)*, those who follow the example the Prophet, leaving the darkness of the husks (*qushūr*) of their ego existence (*wujūduhum al-nafsānī*) for the light of the kernel (*lubāb*) of their spiritual existence (*wujūduhum al-rūḥānī*). They are those who are firmly rooted in the husks of the acquired types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-kasbiyya*) and who have reached the realities of the

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[105] Lane, 2:2643.

[106] *Qishr* (pl. *qushūr*) is a word which is used for an outer covering such as the husk of wheat, the shell of nuts, or the rind of fruit.

[107] Ibid. 1:168.

[108] The Day of the Covenant is a concept understood from Qur'ānic verse 7:172: *When your Lord took the seeds of their future progeny from the loins of the children of Ādam and made them testify regarding themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" (alastu bi-rabbikum) They said, "Yes. We testify." Lest you say on the Day of Resurrection, "We were not aware of this."* According to Schimmel, "The goal of the mystic is to return to the experience of the "Day of *Alastu*,"when only God existed, before He led future creatures out of the abyss of not-being and endowed them with life, love, and understanding so that they might face Him again at the end of time." (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* 24).

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kernel (*lubāb*) of types of knowledge received from His very presence (*al-ʿulūm al-ladunī*) from the very presence of one who is Wise, Knowing (min ladun ḥakīm khabīr) (11:1).

In the verse there is an allusion (*ishāra*) to the fact that the types of knowledge of *those who are firmly rooted* were all taught to them on the Day of the Covenant (*al-mithāq*), since He disclosed the attribute of lordship to the seeds of future humanity *and He made them testify regarding themselves* (7:172) by the evidence of lordship, *Am I not your Lord ?* (7:172). Through the witnessing of this evidence, the knowledge of unity (*tawḥīd*) was firmly embedded in the natural disposition (*jibla*) of the seeds of future humanity and *they said, "Yes."* All of the different types of knowledge are included in the knowledge of unity, just as He said, *and He taught Adam all of the names* (2:31).

The seeds were sent back to the loins and were veiled by the attributes of humanity (*ṣifāt al-bashariyya*), and were transferred to wombs and wandered through the ages from one state and place to another, from the most remote places to the process of birth. The speaking soul, which knew the knowledge of unity, was sent back to the lowest of the low forms, veiled in the veil of humanity, forgetful of these different types of knowledge and the speech regarding them.

But then his parents remind him of this knowledge by means of symbols (*rumūz*) and analogies (*qarāʾin*) until he remembers some of them from beneath the veils of human nature and stages of development. He speaks in the language of his parents, not the language with which he answered his Lord, saying *"Yes."* For that language was the kernel (*lubb*) of this language which is the husk (*qishr*). In a similar way, the entire outer and inner existence of man are husks of the kernel (*lubāb*) of that existence which heard and answered on the Day of the Covenant. His hearing is the husk of that hearing which listened to the speech of the Truth. His sight is the husk of that sight which saw the beauty of the Truth. His heart is the husk of that heart which understood the speech of the Truth. All of his different types of knowledge are the husk of those types of knowledge which were learned from the Truth.

Thus, the Prophet was only sent to remind him of the truth of these different types of knowledge, the husk of which his parents had reminded him, just as He said, *Remind! You are only a reminder!* (88:21). So the reminding is for everyone (*al-tadhkīru ʿāmm*) but only a few remember (*al-tadhakkuru khāṣṣ*). Because of this, He said, *and no one remembers except those who possess understanding (ʿulū al-albāb).*[109]

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[109] Al-Naysābūrī, *Al-Gharāʾib al-Qurʾān*, 3:138.

Al-Naysābūrī's mythic vision creates a very different image of the message of the Qur'ān than that found in exoteric exegesis. There the Qur'ānic message is sent down to remind mankind of their ultimate accountability and to clarify what it is they must do and not do in this life. In fairness to mankind, this message must be definitive and unambiguous. Hence, the concern of exoteric commentators is to demystify the text so as to make this message as accessible as possible. In the process, the parameters of acceptable interpretation are delineated. This is an objective of al-Naysābūrī, as well, in the exoteric portion of his commentary which closely follows that of al-Rāzī. In the *ta'wīl* section translated here, however, al-Naysābūrī is suggesting that the Qur'ānic message serves another function, reminding mankind of the vast knowledge of their primordial state. Instead of closing off the possibilities of meaning to be found in the Qur'ān so as to clarify the essential message of salvation, this reminder hints at infinite meaning but asserts that only a few will be able to hear it.

Throughout these Ṣūfī commentaries, the *muhkamāt* are seen as corresponding to the very clear and public message intended for all of mankind, while the *mutashābihāt* represent an essentially private message to select individuals with the capacity to understand them.[110] It is an interpretation based on the

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[110] The threat this belief poses for the exoteric systems of law and theology in Islam should be apparent. As Weiss points out in his article "Exotericism and Objectivity," most Muslim thinkers accepted two instruments whereby knowledge is obtained: the rational indicator (*dalīl 'aqlī*) and the verbal or transmitted indicator (*dalīl lafẓī* or *dalīl naqlī*). Cf. Ibn Taymiyya in Part I above. The knowledge thereby obtained becomes part of the public domain, becomes an object "out there" available to anyone. Ṣūfism, on the other hand, by accepting mystical experience as another valid form of knowlege, accepts a form of knowledge which becomes manifest privately and subjectively.

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connected reading of the verse, privileging *those firmly rooted in knowledge* with

information otherwise known only to God. The primary focus of the Ṣūfī

interpretation of this verse relates to the nature of this privately received knowledge

and those who possesses it. The many different forms of discourse chosen for this

task are particularly noteworthy, suggesting that what is being spoken about requires

something other than the construction of an argument. Tustarī classifies the different

types of God-given knowledge but provides little explanation of what these mean.

Qushayrī uses metaphors to compare those who possess this knowledge and those

who do not. Al-Maybudī relates a poem declaring the bearers of this knowledge

warriors, an image used by Rūzbihān as well. Both al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī

play with the double meaning of the word *albāb*, wordplay which al-Naysābūrī

weaves into a mythic narrative. Al-Ghazālī, who comments on this verse primarily

as a jurist and theologian and is thus included with the exoteric commentators on this

verse, signals the switch from an exoteric to Ṣūfī mode when he uses figurative

language to describe *those who are firmly rooted in knowledge* in his *Iljām al-*

'awāmm.

The use of poems, metaphors, and wordplay marks the movement from the

muḥkamāt to the *mutashābihāt*. For the Ṣūfīs, the role of the commentator depends

on which dimension of the Qur'ān he is addressing. The exoteric commentator is

obliged to share his knowledge of the Qur'ān, thereby clarifying the text for the

entire Muslim community. The Ṣūfī commentator, as al-Qushayrī tells us, is

sometimes obliged to divulge his insights and sometimes obliged to conceal them. The Ṣūfī sometimes takes on the one role, sometimes the other, as can be seen in the fact that most of the Ṣūfī commentators mentioned here wrote both exoteric and Ṣūfī works.

Exoteric commentators located *those in whose hearts is a turning away* in historical groups of Jews, Christians, and those deemed to hold corrupted beliefs within the Muslim community, finding them guilty of distorting what is manifestly clear in the Qur'ān. Ṣūfī commentaries, on the other hand, identify *those in whose hearts is a turning away* solely by their confused and deluded states. Their interpretative distortions are viewed as an inevitable consequence of their distorted perceptions, their inability to see things as they really are.

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7. VERSES 18:60-82 (THE STORY OF MŪSĀ AND AL-KHADIR)

And when Mūsā (Moses) said to his boy, "I will continue until I reach the junction of the two seas or spend years and years traveling. But when they reached the junction, they forgot their fish which took its way through the sea, as in a tunnel.

When they had gone on, [Mūsā] said to his boy, "Give us our meal. Truly, fatigue has overwhelmed us on our journey." [The boy] said, "Did you see when we betook ourselves to the rock? I forgot the fish and what caused me to forget to mention it was none other than Satan. It took its way through the sea in an amazing way!" [Mūsā] said, "That is what we were seeking." So they retraced their steps.

They found one of Our servants to whom We had given mercy from Ourselves and to whom We had taught knowledge from Our very presence (ladunnā). Mūsā said to him, "May I follow you so that you can teach me something of that which you have been taught, right judgement?" He said, "You will not be able to be patient with me. How can you be patient with what you do not fully understand?" [Mūsā] said, "You will find me patient, God willing, and I will not disobey you in anything." He said, "If you follow me, do not ask me anything until I myself mention it to you."

So they proceeded until they embarked on the ship and he made a hole in it. [Mūsā] said, "Did you put a hole in it in order to drown its people? You have done a terrible thing!" He said, "Didn't I say to you that you would not be able to be patient with me?" [Mūsā] said, "Do not call me to account for what I forgot and do not be hard on me for what I did."

They proceeded until they met a young man and he killed him. [Mūsā] said "Have you killed an innocent soul who has killed no one? You have indeed done a awful thing!" He said, "Didn't I say to you that you would not be able to be patient with me?" [Mūsā] said, "If I ask you anything after this, do not keep me in your company. You have had enough excuses from me."

Then they proceeded until they came upon a people of a village. They asked them for food but they refused them hospitality. They found a wall in it which was almost falling down, so he fixed it. [Mūsā] said, "If you had wished, you could have been paid for it." He said, "This is the parting between you and me. I will tell you the interpretation (ta'wīl) of that which you were unable to bear patiently. As for the ship, it belonged to some poor people who worked in the sea. I wanted to make it unusable because a king was behind them seizing every boat by force. As for the young man, his parents were believers and we feared that he would be hard on them on account of his insolence and ingratitude. We wanted that their Lord would give to them in exchange one better than he in purity and closeness of affection. As for the wall, it belonged to two young men who were orphans in the town. Underneath it was a buried treasure which was theirs. Their

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*father had been a righteous man so your Lord wanted them to mature and
reach their full strength and take out their treasure as a mercy from your Lord.
I did not do it for myself. That is the interpretation (ta'wīl) of that which you
were unable to bear patiently.*

Many stories are related in the Qur'ān in this elliptical manner, suggesting

that the first Muslims hearing these verses were already familiar with these tales, or

that they received further narrative detail or explanation from the Prophet himself. In

this case there is evidence for the latter in a *hadīth* transmitted on the authority of the

Jewish convert Ubayy b. Ka'b (d.642), a *hadīth* which identifies the servant of God

mentioned in these verses as al-Khaḍir (or al-Khiḍr), "the green man." All of the

exoteric commentators studied here quote extensively from this *hadīth*. Early

Western scholars attempted to identify external sources for the Qur'ānic story and

found common features in the Gilgamesh epic, the Alexander romance and the

Jewish legend of Elijah and Rabbi Joshua ben Levi.[1] Wensinck claims

unequivocally that the Qur'ānic story is derived from the Jewish legend.[2] More

recently, Wheeler has demonstrated that it is, in fact, the Jewish legend which can be

traced to Arabic sources.[3] Furthermore, he states that the common narrative

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[1] Wensinck, in his article "al-Khaḍir" in EI[2] identifies the common elements as follows. In the
Gilgamesh epic, Gilgamesh travels looking for his ancestor who lives at the mouth of the rivers and
has been given eternal life. In the Alexander romance, Alexander is accompanied by his cook
Andreas in his search for the spring of life. At one point in their difficult journey, Andreas washes a
salted fish in a spring which causes it to come alive and swim away. Andreas jumps in after it and
attains immortality. In the Jewish legend, the prophet Elijah travels with Rabbi Joshua ben Levi on
the condition that he accept his actions unconditionally. Elijah performs a series of seemingly
outrageous acts which are ultimately explained to the perplexed Joshua, 4:902b-903a.

[2] Wensinck, "Ilyās," Shorter Encyclopedia of Islam, 164b, following the earlier opinions of Y.L.
Zunz, Abraham Geiger and Israel Friedländer. For references for the latter see Wheeler, "The Jewish
Origins of Qur'ān 18:65-82?" 155.

[3] Wheeler 153-171.

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elements isolated by Wensinck and other earlier scholars conflate the Qur'ānic

version with material from later Qur'ānic commentaries. For example, the theme of

the water of eternal life, common to the Gilgamesh epic and the Alexander romance,

is mentioned explicitly in the story of Mūsā and Khaḍir only in the commentaries,

and not in the Qur'ān itself. Wheeler views the appropriation of themes from earlier

sources as part of a purposeful interpretative strategy for uncovering meaning rather

than as an attempt to "get the story straight." It should be pointed out, however, that

while Wheeler attributes these narrative elements to Qur'ānic commentators, the

classical commentators themselves attribute details such as the water of eternal life

and the salted fish which comes to life to the Prophet himself through the *ḥadīth*

attributed to Ubayy b. Ka'b, giving them a near canonical status.

Other Western scholars have responded to the figure of al-Khaḍir in what

they call his "transhistoric" aspect. Calling him Khaḍir-Ilyās (Elijah) because the

two are often paired and sometimes even identified with one another in Muslim

sources,[4] Massignon explores the role of al-Khaḍir in the devotional life of Muslims

and finds his alleged immortality and sainthood, and his reported apparitions and acts

of intercession functioning as a symbol of messianic hope for the poor and oppressed

similar to the role of Elijah in Judaism and Christianity. Massignon's article is

ecumenical in spirit, emphasizing the commonalties of Khaḍir-like figures in Islam,

Judaism and Christianity over the distinctive role of Khaḍir in Islam.[5] Corbin,

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[4] Although this is not the case in any of the sources studied here.
[5] Massignon, "Elie et son rôle transhistorique, Khadiriya, en Islam."

inspired by al-Khaḍir's role as a spiritual initiator in the life of Ibn ʿArabī and other

Ṣūfīs, uses concepts from both Ṣūfism and Jungian analytical psychology to analyze

the spiritual experience which he believes represents the act of recognizing oneself as

a disciple of al-Khaḍir. He views al-Khaḍir as both a person and an archetype who

leads each of his disciples throughout the ages to their own theophanies.[6]

Classical exoteric Muslim commentators, of course, worked within their own

methodologies, and for al-Ṭabarī, our first commentator, this means recording the

interpretations found in the *ḥadīth* of the Prophet and the traditions of the

Companions and Followers. As has been noted previously, *ḥadīth* material which

explicitly comments on the Qur'ān is rather sparse; this is not the case, however,

with the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir because of the rather lengthy *ḥadīth* transmitted

on the authority of Ubayy b. Kaʿb, material which comprises five pages in al-

Ṭabarī's commentary.

Al-Ṭabarī

The different versions of the Ubayy b. Kaʿb's *ḥadīth* are all prefaced by the

problem of identifying the two main figures of the story. In two versions, Saʿīd b.

Jubayr (d.714), a noted commentator among the Followers, tells his teacher Ibn

ʿAbbās about someone[7] who claimed that the Mūsā mentioned in these verses was

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[6] Corbin, *Creative Imagination in the Ṣūfism of Ibn ʿArabī*, 53-67. This aspect of al-Khaḍir is not addressed in the Ṣūfī commentaries studied here.

[7] That is Nawf al-Bikālī b. Faḍāla al-Ḥimyarī (d.ca.714) who spoke on the authority of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār. Kaʿb al-Aḥbār (d.ca.652) converted to Islam during the caliphate of Umar and was the source for much of the earliest Isrā'īliyāt material. Nawf was the son of the wife of Kaʿb al-Aḥbār.

Mūsā b. Mīshā (Manasseh).[8] Ibn 'Abbās calls this a lie and relates the *ḥadīth*

transmitted on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka'b confirming Mūsā's true identity as

Mūsā b. 'Imrān to whom the Torah was revealed.[9] Another report begins with a

disagreement between Ibn 'Abbās and another man concerning the identity of the

servant of God. Ubayy b. Ka'b passes by the two men and confirms, on the authority

of the Prophet, that this servant of God was al-Khaḍir.[10] The boy who travels with

Mūsā is identified by al-Ṭabarī as Yūsha' (Joshua) b. Nūn, although he does not

provide a source for this identification.[11]

In addition to confirming the identity of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, the *ḥadīth* of

Ubayy b. Ka'b contextualizes the Qur'ānic account by explaining the reason for

Mūsā's journey. Mūsā is looking for a man whom he has been told has more

knowledge than he does.

> Mūsā stood up amongst the people of Israel in order to preach. It was said,
> "Which person is the most knowledgeable?" Mūsā said, "I am." God
> rebuked him since he did not attribute knowledge to Him. He said, "Nay, I
> have a servant at the junction of the two seas." Mūsā said, "O Lord, what is
> the way to him? It was said, "You will take a fish and place it in a
> basket..."[12]

Ibn 'Abbās provides an embellishment of this dialogue, presumably his own:

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[8] Mūsā b. Mīshā b. Yūsuf b. Ya'qūb (i.e., grandson of the prophet Joseph). See al-Rāzī 20:143.
[9] Al-Ṭabarī 15:279-80. These *ḥadīth* are also related in al-Ṭabarī's *Al-Rusul wa 'l-mulūk*, English trans. William Brinner, *The History of al-Ṭabarī: The Children of Israel* 5-8, 13-4.
[10] Ibid. 15:282; English trans. in *History* 9.
[11] Al-Rāzī provides the *isnād* for the Prophet's identification of him as such, an *isnād* which leads back, as the others do, to Ubayy b. Ka'b. Al-Rāzī also mentions that there are some who believe that the boy was the brother of Yūsha', while al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī (d.728), a well-respected commentator among the Followers, believed he was merely a servant. Al-Rāzī 21:144.
[12] Ibid. 15:278; English trans. in *History* 6.

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Mūsā asked his Lord, "Lord, which of your servants is most beloved to you? He said, "The one who remembers Me and does not forget Me." Mūsā said, "And which of your servants is most judicious?" He said, "The one who judges by the truth and does not follow his own passion (*hawā*). Mūsā said, "O Lord, which of your servants is the most knowledgeable?" He said, "The one to whose knowledge the knowledge of the people aspire, that perhaps they might receive a word which would lead them to guidance or save them from ruin." Mūsā said, "Lord, is there such a one on earth?" He said, "Yes." Mūsā said, "Lord, who is he?" He said, "Al-Khaḍir." Mūsā said, "Where shall I look for him?" He said, "Upon the shore by the rock where the fish will slip away."[13]

When al-Khaḍir meets Mūsā, however, he emphasizes the complementary nature of their knowledge, saying, "O Mūsā, I have knowledge from God which he has taught me which you do not know, and you have knowledge from His knowledge which He has taught you which I do not know." Ibn 'Abbās, the narrator of this *hadīth*, provides an interpretation of their respective knowledge. Al-Khaḍir "was a man who practiced the knowledge of the Unseen ('*ilm al-ghayb*) which he had learned." When he says to Mūsā, *How can you be patient with what you do not fully understand*, he means, "you only understand external standards of justice (*innamā taʿrifu zāhir mā tarā min al-ʾadl*)."[14] Al-Ṭabarī adds, "*You will not be able to be patient with me* because I practice the inner sense of a knowledge (*bāṭin 'ilm*) which God taught me and you only have knowledge of the external sense of things (*al-zāhir min al-umūr*)."[15] As al-Khaḍir and Mūsā proceed on their journey, al-Khaḍir points out the relative insignificance of their knowledge. When the two board the boat, they see a

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[13] Ibid. 15:277; English trans. in *History* 11-2.
[14] Ibid. 15:280; English trans. in *History* 14.
[15] Ibid. 15:283.

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small bird pecking at the water, causing al-Khaḍir to remark that their combined knowledge takes from God's knowledge an amount equal to what the bird has taken from the sea.[16]

As mentioned above, the *ḥadīth* of Ubayy b. Ka'b contains details common to other stories of late antiquity which do not occur in the Qur'ānic verses. These details are explicit in only one of the versions of the *ḥadīth*.

> Mūsā set out with his boy and a salted fish. It had been said to him, "When this fish comes to life in a certain place, your companion will be there and you will have found what you are looking for." So Mūsā set out with his boy and the fish which they carried. He traveled until the journey wore him out and he reached the rock and the water, the water of life (*mā' al-ḥayāt*). Anyone who drank from it became immortal and nothing which was dead could approach it without coming to life. Then when they had stopped and the water touched the fish, it came to life *and it took its way through the sea, as in a tunnel*.[17]

In the Alexandrian romance, Alexander's cook Andreas follows the fish, jumping into the spring of life after him, thereby attaining an immortality which he does not know what to do with. A similar narrative appears in an account attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, but it is unclear upon whose authority he speaks.

> Ibn 'Abbās was asked, "Why don't we hear any mention of an account (*ḥadīth*) concerning Mūsā's boy even though he was with him?" Regarding this, Ibn 'Abbās said, "The boy drank from the water and became immortal. The wise man took him, found him a suitable boat, and sent him out into the sea. It will rock in the waves with him until the Day of Resurrection and that is because it was not for him to drink from it but he did."[18]

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[16] Ibid. 15:278-9; English trans. in *History* 7.
[17] Ibid. 15:279; English trans. in *History* 13-4.
[18] Ibid. 15:281; English trans. in *History* 16.

As for al-Khaḍir's immortality, it is not mentioned in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr*, but can be found in al-Ṭabarī's *Ta'rīkh al-rusul wa 'l-mulūk* where he mentions reports that al-Khaḍir drank from the water of life and became immortal and that he meets Ilyās every year in Mecca during the pilgrimage season.

Other details included in the *ḥadīth* attributed to Ubayy b. Kaʻb concern Mūsā's state of mind and the Prophet's reaction to him. In response to Mūsā's saying, *"If I ask you anything after this, do not keep me in your company. You have had enough excuses from me,"* the Prophet is reported to have said, " Mūsā was ashamed before God."[19] The Prophet is also said to have said when he prayed for someone, "May God have mercy on us and Mūsā. If only he had stayed with his companion, what wonders he would have seen! But he said, *'If I ask you anything after this, do not keep me in your company. You have had enough excuses from me.'"*[20] Ubayy b. Kaʻb also reported on the Prophet's desire to hear more of the adventures of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, saying that he said, "I wish that he [Mūsā] had been patient so that He could have told us [more of] their story."[21]

The Ubayy b. Kaʻb *ḥadīth* forms the core of al-Ṭabarī's commentary on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, becoming, as we have seen in the comments of Ibn ʻAbbās and al-Ṭabarī, a source itself to be interpreted and elaborated on. The balance of al-Ṭabarī's exegesis on Mūsā and al-Khaḍir is primarily devoted to

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[19] Al-Ṭabarī 15:278.
[20] Ibid. 15:288.
[21] Ibid. 15:279; English trans. in *History* 8.

philological or linguistic issues and further identification of details. Al-Ṭabarī's

comments on the first will not be dealt with extensively here, other than to say that

they comprise three basic types. One of these types of comments concerns the text

itself as established by the acceptable variant readings. Al-Ṭabarī discusses the

views of specialists in Qur'ānic recitation or the salafī Qur'ānic commentators on

these variations before giving his own opinion regarding which reading is the correct

one. Variant readings may or may not have an effect on meaning. An example of

one of these discussions concerns the word zakiyya which occurs in the verse

translated here as, "Have you killed an innocent soul (nafs zakiyya) who has killed

no one?" According to al-Ṭabarī, most of the reciters of the Ḥijāz and Baṣra read

this word as zākiyya and said that it meant a pure soul that had never sinned. Most

of the Kufans recited it as zakiyya with the meaning of a soul which has repented and

been forgiven for its sins. Some Kufans said the two forms of the word mean the

same thing, i.e., a soul which has not sinned. Al-Ṭabarī agrees with the last opinion

and adds that since it is so, either reading is correct since they mean the same thing.[22]

Another type of linguistic comment al-Ṭabarī makes concerns difficult or

problematic words or phrases. The authorities he quotes here are scholars of the

Arabic language or Qur'ānic commentators. An example of a problematic phrase

occurs in the verse translated here as They found a wall in it which was almost

falling down (yurīdu an yanqaḍḍa). Yurīdu is a conjugated form of the verb arāda,

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[22] Ibid. 15:276.

the basic meaning of which is "to want" or "to intend." If taken literally, then, the phrase would mean that the wall wanted to fall down. But al-Ṭabarī quotes Arabists and poetry to show that, in this case, *arāda* means "to be close to" (*danā*) or "to be about to" (*kāda*). He compares this use of language to other verses of the Qur'ān such as *When Mūsā's anger subsided (wa lammā sakata 'an Mūsā al-ghaḍab* (7:154) which, if taken literally, would mean that Mūsā's anger became silent, not its possessor. Another example he gives is *when the matter is resolved (fa-idhā 'azama al-amru)* (47:21) which, if taken literally, would mean that *the matter* is the subject of this resolve rather than the object.[23] All of these examples show that in correct Arabic speech, there are some verbs which imply the volition of an acting subject, but which can nonetheless be applied to subjects who have no such volition. Notably, al-Ṭabarī does not use the words *majāz* (the figurative use of language) or *istiʿāra* (metaphor) to describe this linguistic phenomenon, as will his successors.

Al-Ṭabarī's sources for providing details beyond those found in the *ḥadīth* attributed to the Prophet are individuals among the Companions and the Followers. These details, which describe the "who, what, when, and where" of the story, are often disputed. For example, according to al-Ṭabarī, the *junction of the two seas* is understood by Qatāda and Mujāhid as the meeting place of the Persian and Roman Seas whereas Ubayy b. Kaʿb said it was Tangier.[24] Other details describe what happened after the meeting of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir. Commentators differed as to the

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[23] Ibid. 15:279-80.
[24] Ibid. 15:271.

gender of the child God substituted for the boy al-Khaḍir killed, with some of the Followers saying that the child was a girl, and some saying it was a boy.[25] Other details are anecdotal, such as the speech between God and Mūsā attributed to Ibn 'Abbās quoted above. Another example of this type occurs in a discussion regarding what the *buried treasure* was. Although al-Ṭabarī agrees with those who rather prosaically claim that the treasure was money, he records the views of those who said that it was some form of recorded knowledge. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī is quoted as saying,

> [It was] a tablet of gold upon which was written: In the name of God, Most Merciful, Most Compassionate, I am amazed at how one who believes is sad and one who knows with certainty that he will die rejoices. I am amazed at how one who knows the world and its vicissitudes for people feels secure in it. There is no god but God and Muhammad in the Messenger of God.[26]

A similar tradition is attributed to Ja'far b. Muhammad al-Ṣādiq who states that this was the recorded knowledge:

> I am amazed at how one who is certain of provision toils and how one who is certain of the Reckoning is heedless. I am amazed at how one who knows with certainty that he will die rejoices.[27]

Al-Ṭabarī himself shows little evidence of homiletical concerns. His sole comment on the significance of this story is tied to what he claims is the occasion for its revelation. According to al-Ṭabarī, the story was meant to teach proper behavior (*ta'dīb*) to the Prophet, to refrain from seeking to hasten the punishment of the polytheists in Mecca who called him a liar and mocked him and his book. The story

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[25] Ibid. 16:3-4.
[26] Ibid. 16:6.
[27] Ibid. 16:5.

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was to inform Muhammad that, while the course of events might seem unjust, the final outcome would set things in order.[28] Al-Ṭabarī finds corroboration for his interpretation in verse 18:58 which precedes the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir:

> And your Lord is forgiving, full of mercy. If He were to call them to account for what they have done, then He would have indeed hastened their punishment. But they have their appointed time beyond which they will find no refuge.

Al-Ṭabarī does not broaden the scope of this lesson to include the believers at large, although he does include *hadīth* and traditions which do, such as the message left for the two orphans on the buried tablets and Ibn 'Abbās' dialogue between God and Mūsā. But these comments are few; the only other such example in this passage is a comment attributed to Qatāda regarding the boy who was killed by al-Khaḍir.

> His parents rejoiced when he was born and became sad when he was killed. If he had remained alive, their ruin would have been through him. So be content with what has been commanded by the decree of God, for truly God's decree for the believer in that which he dislikes is better for him than His decree in that which he loves.[29]

After al-Ṭabarī

Al-Zamaksharī's commentary on this story differs from that of al-Ṭabarī in several ways. By combining elements from the different versions of Ubayy b. Ka'b's *hadīth*, al-Zamaksharī creates his own condensed and non-repetitious

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[28] Ibid. 16:7.

[29] Ibid. 16:4. This is a reference to two Qur'ānic verses. One of these verses concerns the obligation of fighting: *it may be that you hate something which is good for you and you love something which is bad for you but God knows and you do not* (2:216). The other verse admonishes men to treat women kindly: *if you dislike them, it may be that you dislike something by means of which God brings about much good* (4:19).

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narrative, introduced merely by "it has been related" (*ruwiya*) or "it has been said" (*qīla*).[30] Traditions from the Companions and Followers are presented in the same abbreviated fashion, usually, but not always, anonymously. Although al-Zamaksharī generally quotes without comment, in one passage he rejects an interpretation of the *junction of the two seas* which states that the *two seas* were Mūsā and al-Khaḍir because they represent two seas of knowledge. Al-Zamaksharī judges this interpretation to be an innovation (*bid‘a*).[31]

Like al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamaksharī devotes a good amount of his exegesis to providing additional details concerning the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, and he repeats much of what is found in al-Ṭabarī. However, al-Zamaksharī also includes details not found in al-Ṭabarī, and as Johns has pointed out, these embellishments correspond to those found in al-Tha‘labī's *'Arā'is al-majālis*,[32] although the wording is different. In both al-Zamaksharī and al-Tha‘labī, Mūsā and al-Khaḍir are at first taken for thieves when trying to board the boat until the owner recognizes them as prophets.[33] When al-Khaḍir scuttles the boat, Mūsā is said to have stopped up the hole with his cloak.[34] The poor people who owned the boat were ten brothers, five of whom were disabled and five of whom worked the sea,[35] and al-Tha‘labī tells us on the authority of Ubayy b. Ka‘b and others that five of the brothers did not work

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[30] Al-Zamaksharī 2:490-1.
[31] Ibid. 2:490.
[32] For the Johns reference, see the biographical information on al-Zamaksharī above.
[33] Al-Zamaksharī 2:493; Al-Tha‘labī, *'Arā'is al-majālis* 127.
[34] Ibid.
[35] Al-Zamaksharī 2:495.

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because they were completely disabled with various problems which he lists while the other five who did work suffered from partial ailments which are also listed.[36] On the authority of Ja'far b. Muḥammad al-Ṣādiq, al-Tha'labī states that the child substituted for the boy who was killed was a girl who gave birth to seventy prophets, a tradition repeated anonymously by al-Zamaksharī.[37]

In the philological and linguistic area, al-Zamaksharī includes most of what is found in al-Ṭabarī but in a condensed form and usually without citation of authorities. In one passage, however, he shows an awareness of a linguistic-theological controversy which is not acknowledged in al-Ṭabarī. Al-Zamaksharī addresses the phrase *they found a wall in it which was almost falling down* in a manner similar to al-Ṭabarī, citing the same lines of poetry to demonstrate the use of the verb *arāda* with reference to inanimate objects. Unlike al-Ṭabarī, however, al-Zamaksharī uses the linguistic term *isti'āra* (metaphor, literally "borrowing") to describe this phenomenon, saying "volition" (*irāda*) is used metaphorically (*ustu'īrat*) for "coming close to" (*mudānāh*) or "approaching" (*mushārafa*). He cites the Qur'ānic verse *[The heavens and the earth] said, "We come willingly"*(41:11) without comment, a verse he uses elsewhere to discuss figurative language in the Qur'ān.[38] In a reference to those who tried to deny the existence of such language, al-Zamaksharī remarks that he has heard that one of those who corrupt the speech of

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[36] Al-Tha'labī 128.
[37] Al-Zamaksharī 2:496; Al-Tha'labī 128.
[38] See Part I on al-Ghazālī and the method of striking similitudes.

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God (*al-muḥarrifūn li 'l-kalām Allāh*) maintain that the subject of the verb *arāda* is

al-Khaḍir, not the wall. Al-Zamaksharī is scornful of the corrupter, saying that

> the plague of ignorance and meager intellect in him have caused him to
> regard the highest level of speech at a degree inferior to it. He has contrived
> to attribute to it what to him is more sound and pure in language, and
> according to him whatever is furthest from figurative language (*majāz*) is
> more readily included in the concept of inimitability (*i'jāz*).[39]

In al-Ṭabarī, the wording of this verse is purely a matter of comprehending the

Arabic idiom. For al-Zamaksharī, the issue is larger, and concerns the nature of

God's speech in the Qur'ān.[40]

Another way in which al-Zamaksharī differs from al-Ṭabarī is in the concern

he shows for resolving what might appear to be illogical aspects of the narrative.

One problem for him, for instance, is how Yūsha' could have forgotten to mention

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[39] Ibid. 494.

[40] The term *majāz* originally referred to the explanatory re-writing of idiomatic language in the Qur'ān, a procedure used by every Qur'ānic commentator, and described in an early work of the philologist Abū 'Ubayda (d.824-5), *Majāz al-Qur'ān*. It is what al-Ṭabarī does in his commentary on this verse although he does not identify it as such. By the tenth century, however, the meaning of the term began to refer not to the re-writing, but rather to the idiom itself, the figurative or "tropical" language (*isti'āra*) which was contrasted with "proper" language (*ḥaqīqa*). (For the transition in the meaning of *majāz*, see Wansbrough, "*Majāz al-Qur'ān*" and Heinrich's "On the Genesis of the *Ḥaqīqa-Majāz* Dichotomy" and "Contacts Between Scriptural Hermeneutics.") Al-Zamaksharī and others considered the existence of such figurative language in the Qur'ān proof of its rhetorical excellence and inimitability (*i'jāz*). It was not, however, the concept of *i'jāz* that created the controversy, but the exegetical use of the concepts *majāz* and *ḥaqīqa* to solve the theological problems raised by anthropomorphic passages in the Qur'ān, a hermeneutic first embraced by the Mu'tazilīs. In contrast to the Mu'tazilīs, the Ẓāhirīs denied the existence of non-literal language in the Qur'ān altogether, a position favored by some Ḥanbalīs as well. Their stance was an attempt to deflect any charges of falsity (*kadhib*) in the Qur'ān or lack of clarity, as well as a rejection of any form of metaphorical interpretation. Other Ḥanbalīs, just as concerned with these issues, solved the problem of Qur'ānic *majāz* by admitting to its existence while limiting its scope to rather pedestrian philological problems (Heinrichs, "Genesis" 115f, 137; "Contacts" 264-5). By insisting that the literal sense of the Qur'ānic text must never be abandoned, Ẓāhirīs and Ḥanbalīs avoided the problem which al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī had to face; both men attempted to establish the necessary rational criteria permitting metaphorical interpretation, recognizing that, without such criteria, any interpretation could be deemed legitimate.

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something as incredible as a dead fish coming to life and swimming through miraculously parted waters.

> If you were to say: How could Yūsha' forget that when it was a sign to them indicating that which they sought? And there were two miracles, the revivification of the salted fish from which they had eaten (and some say it was only half a fish), and the rising up of the water like an arch and the fish passing through it as in a tunnel! How could he remain oblivious so that they missed the appointed time and place, and they travelled by night until the following day and until Mūsā sought the fish?
> I would say: Satan distracted him by his whispering and his mind became completely empty as forgetfulness descended upon him. In addition, he was used to witnessing amazing things like that with Mūsā; he was familiar with such things and familiarity breeds inattentiveness.[41]

Sometimes the problem of consistency arises from a theological concern, such as the unseemliness of a prophet seeking knowledge from someone else. For this reason there were some who argued that the Mūsā portrayed here could not have been the bearer of the Torah.

> If you were to say: [Mūsā's] need to seek instruction from someone else in his time period indicates that he was, as it has been said, Mūsā b. Mīshā, not Mūsā b. 'Imrān, because a prophet must be the most knowledgeable person of his time and the leader to which they turn for matters of religion, then I would say: It is not a loss of prestige for a prophet to obtain knowledge from another prophet like him. He loses prestige only if he obtains it from someone who is beneath him.[42]

Finally, al-Zamaksharī shows himself to be as reluctant as al-Ṭabarī to explore the lessons of this story for believers. His only comment in this area concerns al-Khaḍir's warning to Mūsā: *If you follow me, do not ask me anything until I myself mention it to you.*

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[41] Zamaksharī 2:491.
[42] Ibid. 2:492.

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This means that "among the obligations of your following me is that when you see anything, and you know that it is sound but the manner in which it is sound is unknown to you, you must stop yourself from addressing me first with questions and from coming back to me regarding it until I address you first." These are among the manners (*ādāb*) of the student with the teacher and the follower with the one who leads.[43]

Al-Rāzī demonstrates little of al-Ṭabarī's and al-Zamaksharī's interest in details unless they provoke theological concerns or issues of historical or narrative consistency. Nonetheless, he includes portions of the *ḥadīth* narrative from Ubayy b. Ka'b (without identifying it as such) as well as the embellishment of details provided by earlier commentators. His linguistic comments, fewer in number and shorter in content than those of al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamaksharī, repeat their interpretations and discussions without adding anything original. Instead, what distinguishes al-Rāzī's commentary here is the way in which he uses the Qur'ānic narrative as a starting point for extended discussions on such topics as the nature of prophecy and knowledge.

An example of this is his treatment of the issue of whether or not al-Khaḍir was a prophet. Al-Ṭabarī never addresses this question and al-Zamaksharī, as we have seen, deals with it from one aspect only. Al-Rāzī, on the other hand, carefully lays out all the arguments for al-Khaḍir being a prophet and methodically rebuts them one by one.

The first argument is that God said *to whom We gave mercy (raḥma) from Ourselves.* Mercy (*raḥma*) is prophecy (*nubūwa*) as indicated by His words

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[43] Ibid. 2:493.

Is it they who apportion the mercy of their Lord? (43:32)[44] and *You did not expect that the Book would be sent down to you unless as a mercy from your Lord* (28:86). What is meant by this mercy is prophecy. To those who believe this, we concede that prophecy is mercy, however it does not necessarily follow that every mercy is prophecy.

The second argument is His saying *and to whom We taught knowledge from Our very presence (ladunnā)*. This requires that God taught him without the intermediary of the instruction of a teacher and the spiritual guidance (*irshād*) of a spiritual guide (*murshid*). Any person whom God teaches without the intermediary of a human being must be a prophet who knows things by means of revelation (*waḥy*). This deduction (*istidlāl*) is weak because different types of necessary knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-ḍarūriyya*)[45] are obtained initially from God but that does not indicate prophecy.

The third argument is that Mūsā said, *"May I follow you so that you can teach me"* and a prophet does not follow a non-prophet in instruction. This is also weak because a prophet does not follow a non-prophet in those types of knowledge with respect to which he became a prophet, but in types of knowledge other than this, this does not have to be the case.

The fourth argument is that the servant [of God] demonstrated his superiority over Mūsā when he said to him, *"How can you be patient with what you do not fully understand?"* while Mūsā showed humbleness when he said, *"I will not disobey you in anything."* All of that indicates that the learned one (*'ālim*) was above Mūsā and anyone who is not a prophet cannot be above a prophet. This is also weak because it is possible that a non-prophet could be above a prophet in types of knowledge which his prophecy does not rely upon. Now if they were to say that that is not possible because it would necessitate estrangement (*tanfīr*),[46] we would say that Mūsā's being sent to seek instruction from him after God's sending down the Torah to him and speaking to him without an intermediary necessitates estrangement. So if they say that this does not necessitate estrangement, the same holds true for

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[44] The verse before this one reads *And they say, "Why wasn't this Qur'ān sent down to some important man from one of the two cities?"* (43:31).

[45] Necessary or self-evident knowledge (*'ilm ḍarūrī*) is usually contrasted with acquired knowledge (*'ilm muktasab* or *kasbī*) in medieval Islamic theology, beginning with the Ash'arites Abū Bakr al-Bāqillānī (d.1013) and 'Abd al-Qāhir b. Ṭāhir al-Baghdādī (d.1037-8). The category of *'ilm ḍarūrī* includes sensory (*ḥissī*) knowledge from both internal and external sensory perceptions; intuitive (*badīhī*) knowledge of self-evident truths such as the fact of one's existence and the fact that one half of two is one; and information established by multiple reports (*mutawātir*). The category of *'ilm muktasab* was commonly divided into rational (*'aqlī*) and religious (*shar'ī*) knowledge. See Rosenthal's *Knowledge Triumphant*, 216-8, 227-30 and Wensinck's *The Muslim Creed*, 250f.

[46] *Tanfīr* is the verbal noun of the verb *naffara* which means to drive away animals or to estrange someone. In this case, it would seem to mean either a kind of rebuke to Mūsā or a more abstract alienation felt from his stature as a prophet.

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what they have mentioned [regarding the necessity of the servant being a prophet].

The fifth argument. Al-Aṣamm[47] argued for his prophecy by means of His words in the course of the story *and I did not do it for myself*. Its meaning is "I did it through the revelation (*waḥy*) of God" which indicates prophecy. This is also weak and its weakness is obvious.

The sixth argument is what is related regarding Mūsā when he reached him and said, "Peace be upon you," and [al-Khaḍir] said, "Peace be upon you O Prophet of the Israelites." Then Mūsā said, "Who told you this?" He said, "The one who sent you to me." They say that this indicates that he only knew this by revelation (*waḥy*), and revelation can only exist with prophecy. But to those who believe this, why isn't that possible by way of charismatic gifts (*karāmāt*) or divine inspirations (*ilhāmāt*)?[48]

If al-Khaḍir was not a prophet, then the knowledge which he possessed requires

further definition because it can no longer be considered revelation. In al-Ṭabarī's

commentary the knowledge of al-Khaḍir was described as knowledge of the Unseen

(*'ilm al-ghayb*) by Ibn 'Abbās and inner knowledge (*'ilm baṭinī*) by al-Ṭabarī

himself. Al-Rāzī goes far beyond these brief comments, using the phrase *to whom*

We had taught knowledge from Our very presence (ladunnā) to introduce a theory of

knowledge which includes the possibility of mystical knowledge for nonprophets.

It means that these types of knowledge were obtained by him from God without any intermediary. The Ṣūfīs call the types of knowledge obtained by means of unveilings (*mukāshafāt*) "God-given types of knowledge" (*al-'ulūm al-laduniyya*) and the Shaykh Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī has a treatise confirming them.[49]

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[47] Abū Bakr 'Abd al-Raḥmān b. Kaysān al-Aṣamm (d.816 or 817) was a Mu'tazilite theologian and Qur'ānic commentator.

[48] Al-Rāzī 21:148-9.

[49] Ibid.

The treatise which al-Rāzī is referring to here is most likely al-Ghazālī's *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya*.[50] Al-Rāzī does not discuss al-Ghazālī's work directly, preferring instead to "verify what has been said regarding this matter." He begins by saying that we become aware of things either by conceptualization (*taṣawwur*) or assent (*taṣdīq*).[51] Each of these types of perception, in turn, are either considerative (*naẓarī*) or acquired (*kasbī*).

> Considerative types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-naẓariyya*) are obtained in the soul (*nafs*) and the intellect (*'aql*) without acquisition (*kasb*) or study (*ṭalab*), like our conceptualization (*taṣawwur*) of pain and pleasure, and existence and nonexistence; and our assent (*taṣdīq*) that negation and affirmation cannot co-exist nor be mutually eliminated, and that one is half of two.
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> Acquired types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-kasbiyya*) are those which cannot be initially obtained in the substance of the soul (*jawhar al-nafs*) but rather

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[50] Watt, following Miguel Asin, does not consider *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya* an authentic work of al-Ghazālī's. He quotes Asin's observation concerning the similarity between the work and the *Risālat fī 'l-nafs wa 'l-rūḥ* of Ibn 'Arabī: Asin judged the terminology and ideology of the latter work to be distinctly that of Ibn 'Arabī's and therefore judged *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya* to be incorrectly attributed to al-Ghazālī. Watt judges the work inauthentic on this basis and his own assessment that the work is uncharacteristic of al-Ghazālī's thought, as demonstrated in works of indisputable authenticity. According to Watt, in *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya*, al-Ghazālī gives precedence to reason (*'aql*) over revelation, and he makes a distinction between revelation (*waḥy*) and inspiration (*ilhām*). The first idea is contrary to the precedence given to revelation in *Munqidh* and the second idea is not discussed in *Al-Munqidh min al-ḍalāl* or the *Mishkāt al-anwār*, an omission which Watt finds puzzling if this distinction was part of al-Ghazālī's belief. ("The Authenticity of the Works Attributed to al-Ghazālī" 33-4). In response to Asin's textual evidence, the mention of al-Ghazālī's *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya* in al-Rāzī's *tafsīr* demonstrates that a book on this topic attributed to al-Ghazālī existed before 1209, the year of al-Rāzī's death, at which time Ibn 'Arabī was in his early forties. It seems unlikely, then, that Ibn 'Arabī's *Al-Risālat fī 'l-nafs wa 'l-rūḥ* could have been the source for the *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya* mentioned here. The additional arguments that Watt makes on the basis of the content of *Al-Risāla al-laduniyya* are not, in my opinion, sufficient to disprove the authenticity of the work. Al-Ghazālī is not elevating the human faculty of the intellect over revelation in *Al-Risāla al-laduniyya*, but rather the Universal Intellect. The distinction between revelation and inspiration is found in early Sūfism, so its adoption by al-Ghazālī is unsurprising and is not inconsistent with the ideas found in his *Iḥyā'*.

[51] The division of knowledge into *taṣawwur* and *taṣdīq* occurs in manuals of Arabic logic from the 10th century onwards. For the common understanding of these terms, see Black's *Logic and Artistotle's Rhetoric and Poetics in Medieval Arabic Philosophy* 71-8, and Hallaq's *Ibn Taymiyya Against the Greek Logicians*, 4-5n.4. On their origin, see Wolfson's "The Terms *Taṣawwur* and *Taṣdīq*." According to Wolfson (p.114), the distinction between the two terms is that of "simple apprehension" versus "judgement," a definition which al-Rāzī confirms in the passage that follows comparing our consciousness of pain and pleasure, and existence and nonexistence with our judgement regarding *a priori* truths.

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their acquisition must be arrived at by means of some path. This path has two parts. One of them is where man takes on the composition (*tarakkub*) of these considerative, intuitive types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-badīhīyya al-naẓariyya*) until he reaches, by their composition, knowledge of unknown things. This way is called consideration (*naẓar*), reflection (*tafakkur*), pondering (*tadabbur*), contemplation (*ta 'ammul*), deliberation (*tarawwin*), and deduction (*istidlāl*). This mode of obtaining different types of knowledge is the path which can only be completed by effort (*jahd*) and study (*ṭalab*).

The second mode [of obtaining types of knowledge] is when man strives by means of spiritual disciplines (*riyāḍāt*) and efforts (*mujāhidāt*) in which the sensual and imaginative faculties (*al-quwwa al-ḥissiyya wa 'l-khayāliyya*) become weak. When they become weak the power of the rational faculty (*al-quwwat al-'aqliyya*) becomes strong and the divine lights (*al-anwār al-ilāhiyya*) shine in the substance of the intellect (*jawhar al-'aql*). Gnostic sciences (*ma'ārif*) are obtained and different types of knowledge (*'ulūm*) are perfected without the intermediary of effort (*sa'y*) or study (*ṭalab*) in reflection (*tafakkur*) and contemplation (*ta 'ammul*). These are what are called the God-given types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-laduniyya*).[52]

Al-Rāzī's use of the phrase "considerative types of knowledge" (*al-'ulūm al-naẓariyya*) here is confusing because he appears to be using it as a synonym for "necessary types of knowledge" (*al-'ulūm al-ḍarūriyya*), the phrase he uses in the previous passage discussing whether or not al-Khaḍir was a prophet. It is possible that he is using the adjective *naẓarī* in its broadest sense to refer to consideration (*naẓar*) by means of the five physical senses and the intellect before it engages in the processes of inference or deduction. But he then uses the noun "consideration" (*naẓar*) in the opposite category, to describe an acquired form of knowledge. It is this second usage which is the more common, and the term speculative (*naẓarī*) knowledge is often used as a synonym for acquired (*muktasab* or *kasbī*) knowledge.[53]

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[52] Al-Rāzī 21:150.
[53] See Rosenthal op. cit. and Wensinck op. cit.

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Al-Rāzī's discussion of types of knowledge here differs from that found in al-Ghazālī's *Ar-Risālat al-laduniyya* in that al-Rāzī's omits the cosmology explaining man's acquisition of knowledge. According to al-Ghazālī, the acquisition of knowledge is achieved either by human (*insānī*) or divine (*rabbānī*) teaching.[54] When it is the latter, it may be either an internal or an external process. The internal process is the process of reflection (*tafakkur*). Reflection (*tafakkur*) differs from knowledge gained by human teaching because reflection is what one gains from the Universal Soul (*al-nafs al-kullī*), while learning from another human being (*al-ta 'allum al-insānī*) is confined to what one gains from a particular individual (*al-shakhs al-juz'ī*). When the divine (*rabbānī*) teaching involves an external process, this will either be revelation (*wahy*) or inspiration (*ilhām*). When it is revelation (*wahy*), the teacher is the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kullī*)[55] and

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[54] Al-Ghazālī, *Al-Risālat al-laduniyya* 19-26; English trans. 360-8. Al-Ghazālī does not discuss necessary or self-evident knowledge (*al-'ilm al-darūrī*) in this treatise; his classification of such can be found in his *Mustasfā* and *Mi'yār al-'ilm* (see Weiss's "Knowledge of the Past: The Theory of *Tawātur* according to al-Ghazālī," 99-101).

[55] The notion of the Universal Soul (*al-nafs al-kullī*) and the Universal Intellect (*al-'aql al-kullī*) are found in the Neoplatonic teachings of Plotinus, as Smith points out in the introduction to her translation of this treatise, 181-6. Al-Ghazālī understands these metaphysical concepts as the equivalent of the Qur'ānic terms "Tablet" (*lawh*) (25; English trans. 367) and "Pen" (*qalam*) (Smith's introduction 196 n.6). The Qur'ānic usage of the word "Pen" occurs in 68:1, *By the pen and what they inscribe* and 96:1-5, *Recite! Your Lord is most generous who taught by the Pen, taught man what he did not know.* The Tablet is mentioned in 85:21-2, *Nay, it is a glorious Qur'ān in a preserved Tablet (lawh mahfūz).* A *hadīth* in al-Tirmidhī, related on the authority of 'Ubada b. Sāmit, begins with the phrase, "The first thing which God created was the Pen..." Al-Tirmidhī says that the *isnād* of this *hadīth* is *gharīb*, meaning that it is a tradition transmitted from only one Companion, or one individual from a latter time period (quoted in al-Tabrizī's *Mishkāt al-Masābīh*, Arabic text and English trans. by Siddiqui, 1:64). Al-Rāzī quotes two traditions in his *tafsīr* which begin with this phrase, one attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and one attributed to Mujāhid (Murata, *The Tao of Islam* 153). A noncanonical *hadīth* popular with the Sūfīs substitutes the intellect for the Pen: "The first thing which God created was the intellect" (Chittick, *Sufi of Knowledge* 250). For the different ways in which both the Qur'ānic and the Neoplatonic terms have been used by philosophers and Sūfīs, see Murata 12-3, 153-68 and Netton's *Allah Transcendent* (indexed under Intellect, Universal and Soul, Universal). Al-Ghazālī compares the relationship of the Universal Intellect and the Universal Soul to

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knowledge is inscribed within the sanctified soul (*al-nafs al-qudsiyya*) without

learning (*ta 'allum*) or reflection (*tafakkur*). Revelation (*wahy*) is reserved for

prophets alone.

Revelation (*wahy*) is engendered from the emanation (*ifāda*) of the Universal

mind (*al-'aql al-kullī*) while inspiration (*ilhām*) is engendered from the illumination

(*ishrāq*) of the Universal Soul (*al-nafs al-kullī*).[56] "Inspiration (*ilhām*) is the

awakening (*tanbīh*) of the individual human soul (*al-nafs al-juzīyyat al-insāniyya*) by

the Universal Soul (*al-nafs al-kullī*) according to the degree of its purity and

receptivity (*qabūl*), and the strength of its preparedness (*isti'dād*)."[57] The knowledge

received from this process, which occurs in both prophets and saints, is called God-

given knowledge ('*ilm ladunī*) and is the type of knowledge which al-Khaḍir

received.

What is common to the theories presented by al-Rāzī and al-Ghazālī here is

the way in which they both seek to confirm the possibility of individuals who are not

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that of Adam and Eve (24; English trans. 365). Ibn Sīnā makes the same comparison in his *Mi'rāj nāma* (English trans. by Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna* 134). It is adopted as well by Ibn 'Arabī in his *Futūhāt* (Chittick, *The Self-Disclosure of God*, 153).

[56] Cf. Ibn Sīnā, *Fī ithbāt al-nubūwwāt*, where he writes, "Revelation is the emanation and the angel is the received emanating power that descends on the prophets as if it were an emanation continuous with the universal intellect" (45; English trans. from Marmura, "On the Proof of Prophecies," 115; for an analysis of Ibn Sīnā's ideas on the nature of prophecy and the Intellect as a cause of human thought, see Davidson's *Alfarabi, Avicenna, and Averroes, on Intellect* 83-94, 116-23). Davidson demonstrates the influence of Ibn Sīnā on al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār* (129-44), an influence which is also apparent in *Al-Risāla al-laduniyya*. Curiously, a copy of *Al-Risāla al-laduniyya* exists in a manuscript attributed to Ibn Sīnā in a library in Istanbul. It is listed as *Al-'Ilm al-ladunī* in Anawati's comprehensive bibliography of works attributed to Ibn Sīnā (*Mu'allafāt Ibn Sīnā* 231) and has been published as such in 'Asī's *Al-Tafsīr al-Qur'āniyya wa 'l-lughat al-ṣūfiyya fī falsafa Ibn Sīnā*. Neither Anawati nor 'Asī mention that it is the same work as the work attributed to al-Ghazālī. For the manuscripts attributed to al-Ghazālī, see Smith, 1938, 12 and Badawī, *Mu'allafāt al-Ghazālī* 50.

[57] Ibid. 23; English trans. 365.

prophets acquiring God-given types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-laduniyya*); this validation is accomplished by incorporating *'ilm laduni* into existing philosophical and theological epistemological frameworks. Using the verse on al-Khaḍir's knowledge as a proof-text, al-Rāzī and al-Ghazālī provide a theoretical framework for the Ṣūfī's belief in knowledge through inspiration (*ilhām*). This expositional and apologetic approach differs from that of the Ṣūfī commentaries we will be examining shortly because these commentaries take this form of knowledge as a given.

More so than his predecessors, al-Rāzī demonstrates homiletical concerns, although this aspect of his exegesis is sometimes buried amidst the plethora of data, arguments and rebuttals. These concerns are most apparent in the beginning of al-Rāzī's commentary, where he notes the context of the story and the cause of its revelation.

> Know that this is the beginning of the third story which God has mentioned in this *sura* and it is that Mūsā went to al-Khaḍir in order to acquire knowledge from him. Although it speaks for itself, the story also determines what was meant by the previous two stories.[58] As for the usefulness of this story in replying to the infidels who boasted of their wealth and connections before the impoverished Muslims, it is that Mūsā, in spite of the plenitude of his knowledge and works, his high position, and the possession of the

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[58] The story in verses 32-44 is a parable of two men who own gardens and fields. One of them is arrogant, believing that his good fortune will last forever. He boasts of his wealth over that of the other man, who in turn tries to remind him of the uncertainties of life and the fact that protection and success can only come from God. Sure enough, the arrogant man sees his property come to ruin and bemoans the fact that he ascribed partners to God. The story in verses 9-22 tells of the Companions of the Cave, believing youths who hid in a cave with their dog to avoid the persecution of a heathen community, falling into a mysterious sleep lasting several hundred years. The Qur'ān mentions that the number of sleepers in this story is disputed and reminds us that God knows best. Most Qur'ānic commentators identified this as a Christian story and such a story can be found in written Christian sources dating from the sixth century. However, based on the cause of revelation referred to here by al-Rāzī, some commentators such as Ibn Kathīr believed the story to be originally Jewish. Otherwise, Ibn Kathīr argues, why would the Jewish rabbis have been eager to preserve the story? (Asad, *The Message of the Qur'ān* 438-9n.7 and Ali, *The Holy Qur'ān* 730n.2337).

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requirements of perfect nobility, went to al-Khaḍir in order to seek knowledge and he demonstrated humbleness towards him, and that indicates that humility is better than pride.

As for the usefulness of this story with regards to the story of the Companions of the Cave, it is that the Jews said to the infidels of Mecca, "If Muḥammad can tell you this story he is a prophet. If he cannot, then he is not." But this is nothing because Muḥammad's being a prophet from God did not necessitate his knowing all stories and events, just as the fact of Mūsā being a sincere prophet from God did not hold back God's command to him to go to al-Khaḍir in order to learn from him. It is obvious from what we have mentioned that this story is a story independent in itself; with that, it is also useful in repeating what is meant by the preceding two stories.[59]

The message regarding the superiority of the humilty over arrogance is meant not only for the infidels and the Jews, but for Mūsā himself and the believers at large. In analyzing the question of how Yūshaʿ could have forgotten to mention the amazing way in which the fish came to life and swam away, al-Rāzī refers to the explanation found in al-Zamaksharī, that Yūshaʿ had become accustomed to witnessing such things while travelling with Mūsā. Then al-Rāzī adds his own explanation.

> I have another response to it and it is that when Mūsā was full of pride for his own knowledge, God removed this self-evident knowledge (ʿilm ḍarūrī)[60] from the heart of his companion in order to warn Mūsā that knowledge can only be obtained by means of the teaching of God and his preservation of that knowledge in the heart and mind.[61]

In contrast to this initial arrogance, Mūsā becomes a model of humility for believers to emulate; al-Rāzī spends a full page identifying twelve different ways in which Mūsā demonstrated good manners (adab) and politeness (luṭf) when he met al-Khaḍir. The twelve points pertain mostly to the respectful manner in which Mūsā

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[59] 21:143.

[60] In this case, al-Rāzī is using the term ʿilm ḍarūrī to refer to the direct evidence of the senses.

[61] Al-Rāzī 21:146-7.

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addressed al-Khaḍir, his acknowledgment of his superior knowledge, and his

willingness to accept unconditionally the position of being a follower, despite his

prophetic stature.[62] This elaborate portrayal of Mūsā's polite demeanor and good

intent, however, is tempered by al-Rāzī's subsequent focus on Mūsā's inability to

accept the greater wisdom of his teacher. Commenting on al-Khaḍir's reply, *"You*

will not be able to be patient with me. How can you be patient with what you do not

thoroughly understand?," al-Rāzī presents Mūsā as if he were a theology student.

> Know that pupils are of two types, one who knows nothing and has not
> practiced talk and discourse, nor is he accustomed to argument and rebuttal;
> and one who has obtained many types of knowledge and has practiced
> deduction and rebuttal. Then, if [the latter] wishes to associate with someone
> more perfect than himself, he will reach a more complete and perfect level,
> and learning of this second type is quite difficult. That is because when he
> sees something or hears something, it may be objectionable with regards to
> externals (*al-ẓāhir*) while it is correct with regards to the real (*al-ḥaqīqa*).
> Because this pupil is used to talk and discourse and accustomed to dialectics
> (*kalām*) and debate, he will be misled by it external sense and, because of his
> lack of perfection, he will not understand its secret and true sense. Then he
> will begin to dispute, object and debate, and this is hard on the more perfect
> and erudite teacher. When he has seen something like this two or three times,
> he develops a complete aversion and powerful disgust.
>
> This is what al-Khaḍir alluded to in his words, *"You will not be able to be*
> *patient with me, "* an allusion to the fact that Mūsā was used to dialectics and
> accustomed to assertion and invalidation, deduction and rebuttal. His words,
> *"how can you be patient with what you do not thoroughly understand"* is an
> allusion to his being unaware of the true nature of things as they are. We
> have already mentioned that when the two events occurred, silence became
> difficult and teaching hard. The affair in the end led to antipathy and disgust,
> and there was a mutual severance of relations and mutual aversion.[63]

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[62] Ibid. 21:151.
[63] Ibid. 21:152.

Although Mūsā does not come off looking very well in this passage, al-Rāzī

continues to portray him as a model of humility while simultaneously using the

narrative to deliver a message regarding more ordinary pupils and teachers.

> Al-Khaḍir's saying to Mūsā, *"How can you be patient with what you do not thoroughly understand?"* relates to lack of knowledge and experience. Mūsā's reply to him, *"You will find me patient, God willing, and I will not disobey you in anything."* is very humble and demonstrates a complete willingness to endure and a powerful humility.
> All of that indicates that it is obligatory for the pupil to demonstrate humility to the utmost degree. As for the teacher, in making things difficult for the student, he should consider what will benefit and guide him to what is good. It will be necessary for the teacher to remind him for, if he is silent, he will allow the student to fall into deception and pride, and that will prevent him from learning. *"If you follow me, do not ask me anything until I myself mention it to you,"* i.e., "do not seek information from me about what you see, the intent of which you have no knowledge, until I begin to teach and inform you."[64]

Although al-Rāzī's initial comments on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir suggest a

general exhortation to humility, his exegesis becomes strikingly personal in his focus

on just the kind of teaching situation in which he himself was involved.

Of all the commentaries on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir studied here, al-

Qurṭubī's is the longest and most comprehensive. Like al-Ṭabarī and al-Zamaksharī,

he demonstrates a great deal of interest in presenting supplementary details to the

Qur'ānic narrative and the Ubayy b. Ka'b *ḥadīth*. Al-Qurṭubī includes most of their

material as well as additional details taken from the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of al-Bukhārī and the

'Arā'is al-majālis of al-Tha'labī. Sometimes he turns a critical eye towards the

source and content of these details, and sometimes he relates them without comment.

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[64] Ibid. 21:153.

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An example of his critical method can be seen in his comments on the interpretation of the *two seas* as Mūsā and al-Khaḍir. Al-Zamaksharī had dismissed this interpretation as an innovation without further comment but al-Qurṭubī explains the reason for the rejection.

> This is a weak report; it has been related from Ibn 'Abbās but it is not sound because the matter has been explained in the *ḥadīth* where it has been characterized only as a body of water.[65]

Al-Qurṭubī also quotes the source and content analysis of others, anonymously or by name. Concerning the various reports on what kind of child was substituted for the boy al-Khaḍir killed, he writes

> In one report God compensated [the parents] for [the killed boy] with a girl who gave birth to seventy prophets. Ja'far b. Muḥammad said this on the authority of his father. Our religious scholars ('ulamā') have said that this is unlikely because a great number of prophets are acknowledged only from among the Israelites and this woman was not one of them.[66]

Another such comment concerns the story attributed to Ibn 'Abbās concerning Yūsha' b. Nūn drinking the water of life and then being sent out to sea until the Day of Resurrection. The problem which this story addresses is the perceived gap in the narrative regarding the boy, who is not mentioned once al-Khaḍir appears.

> Al-Qushayrī[67] said, "If this is true, then the boy was not Yūsha' b. Nūn since he lived after Mūsā and was his successor. It is more likely that Mūsā sent the boy away when he met al-Khaḍir." Our shaykh Imām Abū 'l-'Abbās said that it may be considered sufficient to mention the one who is followed instead of the follower. And God knows best.[68]

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[65] Al-Qurṭubī 11:9.

[66] Ibid. 11:37.

[67] Most likely Abū Naṣr al-Qushayrī. See the biographical information on al-Qurṭubī above.

[68] Ibid. 11:39.

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While all of these comments argue against the authenticity of certain traditions, al-Qurṭubī sometimes argues in favor of a questionable detail. He does so extensively regarding the matter of al-Khaḍir's immortality, spending three and a half pages on an issue which was not even mentioned in the *tafsīrs* of al-Ṭabarī, al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī, although al-Ṭabarī does so in his *Ta'rīkh*. Al-Qurṭubī states that most people believe that al-Khaḍir died on the basis of a *ḥadīth* which states that not a soul living at the time of the Prophet would be alive one hundred years after his death. Al-Qurṭubī, however, sides with those who interpret this as a general statement for which there are exceptions including al-Khaḍir, 'Īsā (Jesus), Ilyās (Elijah), and the Dajjāl (Antichrist). Although the *ḥadīth* states that "no one will remain on the earth (*'arḍ*)", al-Qurṭubī argues that *'arḍ* here refers only to the Arab world. He finds additional support for al-Khaḍir's immortality in traditions which mention the yearly pilgrimage of al-Khaḍir and Ilyās to Mecca, and a treatise attributed to al-Qushayrī which contains many reports from pious men and women who have seen and met al-Khaḍir. Additionally, 'Alī is said to have received a private prayer (*du'ā'*) directly from al-Khaḍir. A *ḥadīth* in the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim tells of the Dajjāl's meeting with the best of men at the end of time, and al-Qurṭubī cites those who identify this man as al-Khaḍir and who say that the Dajjāl will finally end al-Khaḍir's long life. As always, though, he admits that "God knows best."[69]

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[69] Ibid. 11:41-5.

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Some of the details which al-Qurṭubī relates without comment come from al-

Thaʿlabī, whose reliability as a transmitter of traditions was considered suspect; these

details are often quite colorful. Commenting on Mūsā's reaction to al-Khaḍir's

scuttling the boat, al-Qurṭubī quotes al-Thaʿlabī:

> Ibn ʿAbbās said: When al-Khaḍir ruined the boat, Mūsā stepped off to one
> side and said, "What am I doing hanging around with this guy? Among the
> Israelites I used to recite the book of God to them morning and night and they
> used to obey me!" Al-Khaḍir said to him, "O Mūsā, do you want me to tell
> you what you are thinking?" He said, "Yes." Al-Khaḍir repeated his words
> to him and Mūsā said, "You are right."[70]

Another comment concerns Mūsā's reaction to the killing of the boy.

> When Mūsā said, "*Have you killed an innocent soul...?,*" al-Khaḍir became
> angry. He ripped off the left shoulder of the boy and then peeled the skin off
> of it. There, on the bone of the shoulder, was written, "An infidel who will
> never believe in God."[71]

This tradition would seem to warrant questioning because it so clearly contradicts the

Qur'ānic narrative in which al-Khaḍir refuses to explain his actions to Mūsā until

they part. But al-Qurṭubī is silent, and one wonders whether his choice to include

this material uncritically is based on his appreciation of the entertaining manner in

which it is written, an appreciation which may have taken precedence over problems

of narrative continuity. The genre of the stories of the prophets (*qiṣaṣ al-anbiyāʾ*), of

which al-Thaʿlabī's *Arāʾis al-majālis* is an example, was closely connected to the

preaching profession where the importance of keeping the attention of one's

audience with a story well told was understood.

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[70] Ibid. 11:19; Al-Thaʿlabī, *'Arā'is al-majālis* 127.
[71] Ibid. 11:21; Al-Thaʿlabī op cit.

Another interpretative element which seems to have originated in preaching

is a type of edifying literary analysis which one catches glimpses of in al-Qurṭubī,

although it was more fully developed in Ṣūfī commentaries, as we shall see.

> Ibn ʿAṭiyya[72] said that his father said that he heard Abū ʾl-Faḍl al-Jawharī say
> in his sermon: Mūsā went to speak privately with God (munāja)[73] and
> remained forty days without requiring food, but when he went to a man
> hunger overcame him in less than a day.
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> His words, fatigue or hardship (naṣab) means "toil" (taʿab); fatigue is toil
> (taʿab) and difficulty (mashaqqa). It is said that what is meant by it here is
> hunger. In this is an indication of the permissibility for men to tell of their
> pain and sicknesses. That does not diminish one's acceptance and
> submission to the decree of God so long as it does not stem from irritation or
> resentment.[74]

This passage compares Mūsā's conversation with God on Mount Sinai (Qurʾānic

verses 7:142-5) to his meeting with al-Khaḍir. Elsewhere, the comparison is

between the latter and Mūsā's flight into the desert after killing a man. He comes

upon a watering place in Madyan where he helps two women give water to their

animals (Qurʾān 28:22-8). Al-Qurṭubī addresses the issue of why Mūsā would help

others in this situation before asking for help himself, in contrast to his criticizing al-

Khaḍir for fixing a wall for villagers who refused to offer them hospitality. His

discussion begins in the more typical manner of exoteric commentary, attempting to

establish narrative and logical continuity, but ends with an anonymous quote of

different character.

> When Mūsā gave water to the two daughters of Shuʿayb he was in greater
> need than when he arrived at the village with al-Khaḍir, yet he did not ask for

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[72] Abū Muḥammad ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq b. Ghālib b. Aṭiyya (d.1151) was a Andulsian who wrote a
commentary entitled Al-Muḥarrar al-wajīz fī tafsīr al-kitāb al-azīz.
[73] A reference to when God spoke to Mūsā on Mount Sinai. See Qurʾānic verses 7:142-5.
[74] Ibid. 11:14.

provision and gave water [to them] first. But in the village they asked for provision. The religious scholars (*'ulamā'*) have many ways to resolve that; one of them is that Mūsā was alone in the account of Madyan whereas in the story of al-Khaḍir he was exerting himself on behalf of another. I say that this meaning is in keeping with His words, *"Give us our meal. Truly, fatigue has overwhelmed us on our journey."*[75]

It is said that when this was a journey to learn proper behavior (*ta 'dīb*) he was charged with the burden of bearing difficulty. But that was a journey of flight (*hijra*) and he was charged with providing help and assistance with provisions.[76]

The comparison of different "journeys" in the life of Mūsā is something we find addressed in al-Thaʿlabī's work, where we are told on the authority of the wise (*ḥukamā'*) that Mūsā had a total of five journeys.[77] The first of these was the journey of escape (*ḥarab*) after killing a man in Egypt.[78] The second was the journey to Ṭūr where Mūsā saw a fire and heard a voice.[79] The third was the journey of seeking (*ṭalab*) when he left Egypt with his people.[80] The fourth was the journey of war (*ḥarb*) when he exhorted his people to enter the Holy Land.[81] The fifth was a journey of hardship (*naṣab*) and this was his journey to find al-Khaḍir.

In addition to comparing Mūsā's different journeys, al-Qurṭubī identifies a symmetry between the three events Mūsā experiences with al-Khaḍir and three events from his past life. A similar passage can be found in al-Thaʿlabī although al-Qurṭubī does not mention him by name here. Both are in response to al-Khaḍir's

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[75] Presumably because here, too, Mūsā is acting on behalf of his companion as well as himself.

[76] Ibid. 11:24.

[77] Al-Thaʿlabī 123.

[78] Al-Thaʿlabī quotes Qur'ānic verse 26:21 here.

[79] He quotes Qur'ānic verses 27:8 and 28:30.

[80] He quotes Qur'ānic verse 20:77.

[81] He quotes Qur'ānic verse 5:27.

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words, *"I will tell you the interpretation (ta'wīl) of that which you were unable to bear patiently."*

It is said in the commentary regarding these signs which occurred to Mūsā that they were evidence (*hujja*) against him, not something to be astonished at (*'ajab*). That is because when Mūsā disapproved of the scuttling of the boat, a voice was heard saying, "O Mūsā, where was this desire of yours to direct things when you were cast into the river in a box?"[82] Then when he disapproved in the matter of the boy, it was said to him, "Where was your disapproval and judgement when you struck the Copt?"[83] Then when he disapproved of the repair of the wall, a voice was heard saying, "Where was this when you removed the stone from the well for the daughters of Shu'ayb without any recompense?"[84]

While we saw evidence in al-Rāzī of a rather personal portrayal of the message of the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir in his comparison of Mūsā's struggle with the travails of a theology students and their teachers, al-Qurṭubī's homiletical asides are more conservative, being carefully aligned with the earliest authorities.

Like the traditionalist al-Bukhārī, al-Qurṭubī finds a general exhortation to seek knowledge in Mūsā's search for al-Khaḍir.

In this is instruction for the scholar's travel seeking increase in knowledge, seeking help for that by means of service and association, and seizing the opportunity to meet with the learned and scholarly even if they live in far-off lands. That was the custom of the pious predecessors (*al-salaf al-ṣāliḥ*). Because of that, those who travel are more fortunate and successful in their endeavors since their feet are rooted in different types of knowledge (*'ulūm*). It is right for them to be renown and to be compensated. Excellence is the best of fortunes. Al-Bukhārī said, "Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh would travel for a month to learn a single *hadīth* from 'Abd Allāh b. Anīs.[85]

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[82] See Qur'ānic verses 20:38-9 and 28:7.

[83] See Qur'ānic verses 28:15-21.

[84] Al-Qurṭubī 11:33. Cf. al-Tha'labī 129. See Qur'ānic verses 28:23-4 for the story of the well and the daughters of Shu'ayb.

[85] Al-Qurṭubī 11:11. Al-Bukhārī's chapter on "setting out in search of knowledge" in the "book of knowledge" section of his *Saḥīḥ* consists of the hadīth regarding Jābir b. 'Abd Allāh quoted here and

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Following the early commentator al-Qatāda (who is quoted in al-Ṭabarī's *tafsīr* as well), al-Qurṭubī finds a message in the story to have patience in adversity.

> In the *Ṣaḥīḥ* of Muslim there is a an aspect of wisdom in making a hole in the boat and that is his saying, "When the one who would exploit it comes, he would find it ruined and pass it by. Then they could fix it with a plank of wood." What is obtained from this exhortation is patience with misfortunes for benefits are hidden within what is disliked. This is the meaning of His words, *It may be that you dislike a thing in which is good for you* (2:216).[86]

Regarding the parents who lost their son, he writes

> The benefit to be derived from this verse is to make easier the misfortunes of losing children even though they were most certainly the main part of ourselves. The end result for the one who submits to God's decree will disclose the white hand.[87] Al-Qatāda said, "His parents rejoiced when he was born and became sad when he was killed. If he had remained alive, their ruin would have been through him. So it is necessary to be content with God's decree in all things, for God's decree for the believer in that which he dislikes is better for him than His decree in that which he loves."[88]

As in al-Rāzī, the impact of these homiletical comments are somewhat lessened by the fact that they are buried within the wealth of other material. Al-Qurṭubī does not comment on the occasion for the revelation of the story, as did al-Ṭabarī and al-Rāzī, both of whom highlighted their interpretation of its message by placing their comments at the beginning or the end of the exegesis.

Al-Qurṭubī's linguistic and philological comments basically repeat the work of his predecessors. However, one area in which he clearly presents his own opinion

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the *hadīth* of Ubayy b. Kaʿb concerning the reason for Mūsā's search for al-Khaḍir (*The Translation of the meanings of Sahih al-Bukhari* 1:65-6).

[86] Ibid. 11:36.

[87] A reference to one of the miracles Mūsā performed before the Pharoah and his people, drawing his hand from his breast and it shone white (Qurʾān 20:22, 26:33, 27:12, 28:32).

[88] Ibid. 11:37-8. Cf. al-Ṭabarī 16:4, translated above.

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concerns the issue of *majāz* (figurative language) in the Qur'ān. Repeating many of the examples given in al-Ṭabarī regarding the usage of the verb "volition" (*irāda*) with regards to the wall which al-Khaḍir repairs, al-Qurṭubī sides with al-Zamaksharī, saying that this verse proves the existence of *majāz* in the Qur'ān, an opinion which he says is the majority opinion. His notes that there are some who deny this, saying that if God had spoken with *majāz*, he would have described His speech as such, for the renunciation of the true sense (*ḥaqīqa*) would weaken the truth. But al-Qurṭubī states that there are many examples of this kind of metaphor in Arabic speech, a fact which he demonstrates with quotes from the Qur'ān and *ḥadīth*.[89]

Al-Qurṭubī also shows an interest in theological issues, although to no where near the degree that al-Rāzī does. On the issue of whether or not al-Khaḍir was a prophet, al-Qurṭubī briefly notes the different opinions before siding with those who believe he was, an opinion which he claims is held by the majority.[90] He confirms the differences between the types of knowledge of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir without much elaboration.[91] What is more distinctive in al-Qurṭubī's *tafsīr* is his juridical interest in defining proper belief and action. Sometimes he uses the narrative to make legal points, such as when he uses al-Khaḍir's scuttling of the ship to establish the right of a guardian to bribe a ruler with some of his ward's money if necessary to preserve

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[89] Ibid. 11:25-7.
[90] Ibid. 11:16, 17, 39.
[91] Ibid. 16, 17.

the balance of his ward's wealth.[92] In other places, he uses the narrative to criticize

the behavior and beliefs of other Muslims. Noting that Mūsā brought along the fish

as food in his search for al-Khaḍir and requested food from the villagers, he chastises

"ignorant Ṣūfīs" who insist upon relying on God alone for provision.[93] But this is

only a mild rebuke when compared to the extreme censure he directs towards those

who would use al-Khaḍir to justify their belief that knowledge can be received from

means other than the prophets and who claim that this special knowledge frees them

from the need to follow the religious law.

> Our shaykh, Imām Abū 'l-'Abbās said that the esotericist heretics (zanādiqa al-bāṭiniyya) are of the opinion that travelling a path requires these religious precepts but they say, "These general religious precepts are only imposed upon the stupid and the common. As for the friends of God (awliyā') and elect (ahl al-khuṣūṣ), they don't need these texts; the only thing meant for them is what happens in their hearts and they are ruled by whatever seizes them in their thoughts." They say, "That is because of the purity of their hearts from all kinds of turbidity and the freedom of their hearts from all others, so that the divine kinds of knowledge (al-'ulūm al-ilāhiyya) and lordly realities (ḥaqā'iq al-rabbāniyya) are disclosed to them and they understand the secrets of created things. They know the principles of individual things and by means of them they are able to dispense with universal religious principles just as happened with al-Khaḍir. Because of what was disclosed to him from different types of knowledge he was able to dispense with the understanding Mūsā had of these things." Included in what they have transmitted is, "Seek the legal opinion of your heart even if the Muftis give a legal opinion on you."
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> Regarding them, our shaykh said that this is the talk of heresy (zandaqa) and infidelity (kufr), the proponent of which should be killed without being given a chance to seek repentance, because it is a denial of what is known from the religious laws. Truly God has imposed his practice (sunna) and implemented his wisdom through his precepts which can only be known by means of His messengers who mediate between Him and His creation. They convey His message and word from Him explaining His religious laws and

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[92] Ibid. 11:19.
[93] Ibid. 11:13, 24.

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precepts. They have been chosen for that just as He said, *God chooses messengers from angels and from men. Truly He is Hearing, Seeing* (22:75). And He said, *God well knows where to place His message* (6:124), and *Mankind was a single community and God sent prophets to give glad tidings and warn* (2:213) in addition to other verses.

In sum, definitive knowledge (*al-'ilm al-qat'i*), necessary certainty (*al-yaqin al-daruri*) and the consensus (*ijmā'*) of the pious predecessors and descendants all agree on the fact that there is no way that anyone can have knowledge of the precepts of God referring to His command and prohibition except by way of the messengers. And the one who says, "Here is another way by which to know His command and prohibition without the messengers," so that he dispenses with them, is an infidel (*kāfir*) who should be killed. His repentance should not be sought and there is no need for questions and answers from him. It is a belief in the perpetuation of prophets after our Prophet whom God has made the seal of His prophets and messengers. There is no prophet or messenger after him.[94]

Al-Qurṭubī would seem to be denying the possibility of what al-Rāzī and al-Ghazālī

defended, *'ilm laduni* received by those who are not prophets, at least with regards to

knowledge of God's commands and prohibitions. But al-Qurṭubī does not deny the

possibility of there being friends of God (*awliyā'*) to whom charismatic acts

(*karamāt*) occur. Although he agrees with those who say that al-Khaḍir was a

prophet, al-Qurṭubī nonetheless uses him as a basis for discussing charismatic acts

(*karāmāt*) occurring to individuals who are not prophets, and the question of whether

or not it is permissible for a friend of God (*wali*) to know he is a friend of God.[95] In

the latter discussion, al-Qurṭubī quotes Ṣūfī hagiographical material approvingly,[96]

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[94] Ibid. 11:40-1. Cf. Ibn Taymiyya's similar statement at the end of Part I.

[95] Ibid. 11:28-32.

[96] Material which al-Maybūdī uses as well in his discussion of the same topic in his *Kashf al-asrār*, 20:232, as part of his commentary on the miraculous and instantaneous transporting of the throne of the Queen of Saba' to the court of Sulaymān (Qur'ān 27:38).

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showing that his criticisms of some Ṣūfīs should not be taken as implying a general condemnation of Ṣūfism.

Turning from al-Qurṭubī to Ibn Kathīr, what is most striking about the commentary of the latter is what is not there. The material he includes has been rigorously pruned down to only that which can be most authoritatively attributed to the pious predecessors (salaf). The result is largely repetitive of al-Ṭabarī's exegesis, with the exception of some additional material taken from al-Bukhārī and Ibn Kathīr's rejection of the tradition regarding the immortality of the boy who accompanied Mūsā.[97] He addresses few of the complicated linguistic and theological issues which al-Zamaksharī, al-Rāzī and al-Qurṭubī took on, and then only minimally. For example, with regards to the linguistic problem presented by the use of the verb "volition" (irāda) with the wall as its subject, he simply says, "irāda is attributed here to the wall by way of metaphor (istiʿāra)," without mentioning the controversy concerning the use of figurative language in the Qur'ān.[98] He mentions the differences of opinion concerning al-Khaḍir, saying that he has been identified as a prophet (nabī), a messenger (rasūl), an angel (malak) and a friend of God (walī), but offers no opinion of his own, saying only "but God knows best."[99]

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[97] We have already seen the criticisms al-Qurṭubī quotes concerning this tradition. Ibn Kathīr's rejection of the tradition is based on content and source. In content, he claims the boy has been definitively identified as Yūshaʿ b. Nūn who, as leader of the Israelites after Mūsā, could not have been sent out to sea for eternity. As for the tradition's source, Ibn Kathīr judges its chain of transmission (isnād) weak.
[98] Ibn Kathīr 3:103.
[99] Ibid. 3:105.

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Ibn Kathīr is somewhat more interested in refuting the claim that al-Khaḍir was immortal, saying that none of the traditions reported from the pious predecessors (*salaf*) are sound.[100] Instead, he approvingly quotes the arguments of those who reject this claim. Their belief in al-Khaḍir's death is based on the Qur'ānic verse, *and we have not granted immortality to any human being before you* (21:34), a *ḥadīth* from the battle at Badr where the Prophet said, "O God, if this group perishes there will be no one left worshipping on earth," and the *ḥadīth* that no one living at the time of the Prophet's death would be alive one hundred years hence. Additionally, there is the lack of any transmitted report of al-Khaḍir having come to the Prophet, nor of his having fought with him. If al-Khaḍir had been living, he would have followed the Prophet because he was sent to both men and jinn. The prophet said, "If Mūsā and ʿĪsā were living, it would have been impossible for them not to have followed me."[101] Aside from these few comments, Ibn Kathīr offers little of his own opinion regarding the details, the meaning, or the implications of this story, preferring to let the *ḥadīth* and *salafī* material speak for itself.

Sūfī commentaries

The greater part of the exoteric exegesis of the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir is comprised of the identification and amplification of narrative details, and discussions of issues raised by the text, discussions which are usually presented in the style of

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[100] He follows here the opinions of Ibn al-Jawzī and Ibn Taymiyya (Massignon 148).
[101] Ibid.

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argument and rebuttal. The first of these exegetical elements is almost entirely absent in Ṣūfī commentaries on this story, while the second exists but presented in a different way. For example, the term "God-given knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*)" was addressed by al-Rāzī only after his long point by point rebuttal of those who believed al-Khaḍir to be a prophet. He sought to legitimate the concept of *'ilm ladunī* by situating it within existing epistemological theories. Al-Qurṭubī argued that *'ilm ladunī* can only refer to the special knowledge revealed to prophets. In contrast, the earliest fragments of Ṣūfī commentary on the story of al-Khaḍir and Mūsā present God-given knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*) as a fact. The task is not to defend the concept as the Ṣūfīs understood it, but to define it, often with definitions which raise as many questions as they answer. Nonetheless, certain basic beliefs distinctive to the Ṣūfīs can be deduced. For example, there is no doubt that they understood this term as referring to knowledge which is accessible to those who are not prophets. Sahl al-Tustarī equates it with inspiration (*ilhām*) and certain types of revelation (*waḥy*).

> His words, *and to whom We had taught knowledge from Our very presence (ladunnā)*. I heard it from Manṣūr b. 'Abd Allāh who heard it from 'Anbarī who heard Sahl b. 'Abd Allāh [al-Tustarī] say: Inspiration (*ilhām*) acts as a substitute for revelation (*waḥy*), just as He said, *and your Lord revealed (awḥā) to the bees* (16:68)[102] and *We revealed to the mother of Mūsā* (28:7).[103] Both of these were inspiration (*ilhām*).[104]

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[102] The complete verse reads, *And your lord revealed to the bees, "Take houses for yourselves from the mountains, trees, and from what they build."*

[103] The complete verse reads, *And We revealed to the mother of Mūsā, "Nurse him, but when you are afraid for him, cast him into the river. Do not be afraid nor grieve, for We will return him to you and We will make him one of the messengers.*

[104] Sulamī, *Ziyādāt ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr* 84. Quoted in Rūzbihān al-Baqlī's *'Arā'is al-bayān* without the chain of transmission (*isnād*) 1:592. This interpretation is not included in the edition of Sahl al-Tustarī's *tafsīr* used for this study.

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Others defined *'ilm ladunī* by means of other important Ṣūfī terms. Ibn 'Atā (d.922)

mentions unveiling (*kashf*, pl. *kushūf*) and witnessing (*mushāhada*).

> [It is] knowledge by unveilings (*kushūf*), not by the dictation of letters.
> Rather, the place to encounter it is in witnessing (*mushāhada*) the spirits
> (*arwāḥ*).[105]

Al-Qāsim[106] contrasts *'ilm ladunī* with knowledge obtained through the rational

mind.

> The knowledge of deduction (*istinbāṭ*) comes with exertion (*kulfa*) and
> intermediaries but *'ilm ladunī* comes without these.[107]

It is knowledge which brings a total absorption in God.

> Al-Shiblī[108] said, "*[and to whom We had taught] knowledge* which made him
> preoccupied with Us from anything other than Us." It is said that "it directs
> him to Us and cuts him off from created things or anything concerning
> them."[109]

As the Ṣūfīs sought to define *'ilm ladunī*, other distinctive concepts arose. One of

these concepts is the idea that man is in a constant state of flux as he continually

moves through states (*aḥwāl*) and stations (*maqām*).[110] The fact that al-Khaḍir

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[105] Rūzbihān 1:591. The use of the word *kashf* to describe the unveiling of certain realities has its
basis in the Qur'ānic verses *You were heedless of this but now We have removed (kashafnā) your
veil* (50:22) and *That which is imminent becomes imminent. No one but God can unveil (kāshifa) it*
(53:58). In his *Risāla*, al-Qushayrī describes three stages of increasing nearness to the truth: presence
of the heart before God's signs (*muhāḍara*), unveiling (*mukāshafa*), and direct witnessing
(*mushāhada*). For this and other examples of the term *kashf* in Ṣūfism, see Gardet's article "*Kashf*"
in EI².

[106] Abū 'l-'Abbās al-Qāsim b. Mahdī al-Sayyārī (d.953-4).

[107] Ibid.

[108] Abū Bakr b. Jaḥdar al-Shiblī (d.945).

[109] Sulamī 84-5.

[110] See Gardet's article, "*Ḥāl*" in EI². This concept was one of the things Ibn al-Jawzī criticized the
Ṣūfīs for in his *Talbīs Iblīs*. He writes, "Abd al-Karīm b. Hawāzin al-Qushayrī wrote a book, *Al-
Risāla*, for [the Ṣūfīs] in which he makes extraordinary remarks on "annihilation (*fanā'*) and
subsistence (*baqā'*), contraction (*qabḍ*) and expansion (*basṭ*), the moment (*waqt*) and the state (*ḥāl*),
ecstasy (*wajd*) and existence/finding (*wujūd*), gathering (*jam'*) and separation (*tafriqa*), sobriety

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possessed *'ilm ladunī*, but Mūsā did not, at least not at that point in his life, relates to

their different stations.

> Fāris[111] said: *Mūsā* said, *"God willing"* about himself in *"You will find me*
> *patient, God willing,"* but al-Khaḍir did not do the same when he said, *"You*
> *will not be able to be patient with me,"* because the knowledge of Mūsā at
> that time was the knowledge of what religious law has prescribed (*takhlīf*)
> and deduction (*istidlāl*), but the knowledge of al-Khaḍir was God-given
> knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*) from one unseen to another. Mūsā was in the station
> (*maqām*) of learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*) while al-Khaḍir was existing in
> the station (*maqām*) of unveiling (*kashf*) and witnessing (*mashāhada*).[112]

What is appropriate in one station may not be appropriate in another. The point of

Mūsā's meeting al-Khaḍir is to learn proper behavior but this cannot be achieved by

asking questions. In response to al-Khaḍir's request to Mūsā, *If you follow me, do*

not ask me anything until I myself mention it to you, al-Ḥuṣrī[113] is said to have said,

> There was no way to learn the knowledge of al-Khaḍir from a place of
> questioning. Mūsā came to him to learn proper behavior (*ta'dīb*), not for
> instruction regarding any particular state (*ḥāl*).[114]

Another example of how early Ṣūfī commentators responded to the Qur'ānic text can

be seen in their exegesis on the shift in pronouns in the Qur'ānic narrative as al-

Khaḍir explains his actions to Mūsā, moving from *"I wanted"* to *"we wanted"* to

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(*ṣaḥw*) and intoxication (*sukr*), tasting (*dhawq*) and drinking (*shurb*), obliteration (*maḥw*) and affirmation (*ithbāt*), self-disclosure (*tajallī*), presence of the heart before God's signs (*muḥāḍara*) and unveiling (*mukāshafa*), flashes (*lawā'iḥ*), rising stars (*ṭawāli'*) and glimmers (*lawāmi'*), originating (*takwīn*) and consolidating (*tamkīn*), the religious law (*sharī'a*) and the truth (*ḥaqā'iq*) and so on–all that from a delirium without any basis, and his *tafsīr* is even more incredible." *Mukhtasar talbīs Iblīs* 150; English trans. (1936) 357.

[111] Fāris b. 'Īsā al-Dīnawarī al-Baghdādī (d.951)
[112] Rūzbihān 1:593.
[113] Abū 'l-Ḥusayn al-Ḥuṣrī (d.981)
[114] Ibid.

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"your Lord wanted." In this case, a narrative oddity is used to question the reality of

human volition.

> Ibn 'Aṭā said: When al-Khaḍir said, *"I wanted,"* it was revealed to him in the
> innermost heart (*sirr*), "Who are you that volition (*irāda*) should belong to
> you?" Then, in the second situation he said, *"We wanted,"* and it was
> revealed to him in the innermost secret, "Who are you and Mūsā that volition
> (*irāda*) should belong to you?"[115] They he came back and said, *"Your Lord
> wanted."*[116]

Al-Ḥallāj explains these as different stations.

> The first station (*maqām*) is the total mastery (*istīlā'*) of God (*al-ḥaqq*). The
> second station is conversation (*mukālama*) with the servant. The third station
> is a return to the inner understanding (*bāṭin*) of [God's] supremacy in the
> outer world (*al-ẓāhir*) ... because to get closer to something by means of egos
> (*nufūs*) is to get farther away while to approach [the supremacy] by means of
> [the supremacy] itself is to draw near.[117]

What al-Ḥallāj seems to be describing here is a change in awareness as the mystic

draws nearer to God. Initially, al-Khaḍir said, *"I wanted,"* because he perceived the

distance between himself and the all-powerful Creator and therefore judged himself

as a separate entity acting on his own volition.[118] When he said, *"We wanted,"* he

judged the intimate conversation between himself and his Lord as indicating a kind

of partnership in action, but this was an illusion which kept him from true nearness.

Finally, when he said, *"Your Lord wanted,"* he returned to the awareness of God's

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[115] Ibn 'Aṭā's assumption here that *"We wanted"* refers to al-Khaḍir and Mūsā is an unusual reading.
[116] Rūzbihān 1:595; Al-Maybudī 16:730.
[117] Ibid.
[118] Rūzbihān, as we shall see, understands this first station as one of mystical union, but I don't
believe that is what al-Ḥallāj means by the total mastery (*istīlā'*) of God.

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Omnipotence, achieving true intimacy by recognizing the secret of His pervasive

agency and allowing his own ego to be eclipsed.[119]

This kind of exegetical approach, in which key terms and issues raised by the

Qur'ānic text are explained by the Ṣūfīs without reference to the *salafī* material or

beliefs of other Muslims is continued in the later commentary of al-Qushayrī. Al-

Qushayrī, who is generally more conservative in his writings, does not comment on

al-Khaḍir's shift in pronouns, but he does continue providing explanations and

definitions of the term "God-given knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*)" and he explicitly links it

to the station (*maqām*) of learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*). Regarding *'ilm ladunī*,

he confirms that it is inspiration (*ilhām*) which is obtained by means other than the

workings of the rational mind. He adds that it is knowledge reserved for God's elite,

but only for the benefit of all believers.

> It is said that knowledge from the very presence (*min ladun*) of God is
> something which is obtained by means of inspiration (*ilhām*) without being
> burdened by seeking (*taṭallub*).
> One can say that it is that which God (*al-ḥaqq*) teaches the elite (*khawāṣṣ*)
> among His servants.
> One can also say that it is something which God (*al-ḥaqq*) teaches His
> friends (*awliyā'*) according to what is appropriate in it for His servants.
> It is said that it is something whose benefit does not belong to its possessor,
> but rather that which is in it from the truth of God belongs to His servants.
> One can also say that it is something which its possessor cannot find a way
> to deny. Evidence (*dalīl*) of soundness would be what one finds definitively,
> but if you were to ask him about his proof (*burhān*) he will not be able to
> produce any evidence (*dalīl*), for the most powerful kinds of knowledge are
> those which are farthest from evidence (*dalīl*).[120]

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[119] Al-Maybudī's own comment is: For whoever is able to sacrifice his own qualities (*ṣifāt*) on the
holy path We will paint the secrets of the different types of knowledge of the real in his heart for *We
taught him knowledge from Our very presence (min ladunā)* (16:728).
[120] Al-Qushayrī 4:79-80.

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Although God-given knowledge (*'ilm laduni*) is defined as knowledge which cannot

be obtained by seeking, al-Qushayrī does indicate that one can prepare oneself to

receive it through the difficult process of learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*). Like al-

Tha'labī and al-Qurtubī, al-Qushayrī explains that the different stages in Mūsā's life

reflect different experiences of difficulty and ease.

> In this journey Mūsā was the one who carried a burden (*mutahammil*). It was
> a journey to learn proper behavior (*ta'dīb*) and to endure difficulty because he
> had gone to ask for greater knowledge, and the state (*hāl*) of seeking (*talab*)
> knowledge is the state (*hāl*) of learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*) and a time
> for bearing difficulty. Because of this he was overwhelmed by hunger and
> said, *"Truly fatigue has overwhelmed us on our journey."*
> When he fasted at the time of waiting to hear the Word of God he was
> patient for thirty days and neither hunger nor difficulty overcame him,
> because his journey was to God and so he was the one who was carried
> (*mahmūl*).[121]

> One can say that this was a journey for learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*) and
> he had been sent back to endure the difficulty. This is not as it was when he
> watered [the animals] for the daughters of Shu'ayb, for the toil and hunger
> which afflicted him [in the search for al-Khaḍir] was greater. In that time he
> was the one who was carried (*mahmūl*) while this time he was the carrier of
> the burden (*mutahammil*).[122]

Al-Qushayrī, like al-Qurtubī, does not fully develop the edifying potential of this

kind of exegetical analysis. The most complete realization of that potential occurs in

the Persian commentary of al-Maybudī who often shows his originality in

amplifications of al-Qushayrī's commentary which he liberally quotes without

attribution.

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[121] Ibid. 4:78.
[122] Ibid. 4:83.

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Al-Maybudī makes it clear that the experiences in Mūsā's life provide lessons for all believers. The lesson of his meeting with al-Khaḍir tells those who seek God-given knowledge ('*ilm laduní*) that they must first undertake a similar journey of toil (*ta'ab*). Al-Maybudī explains this in the context of the other journeys of Mūsā's life, each of which present different lessons.

Mūsā had four journeys. The first was the journey of escape (*harab*) just as God told in the story of Mūsā, *"So I fled from you when I feared you"* (26:21). The second was the journey of the search (*talab*) at night for fire: *When he came to it, a voice cried from the right shore of the wādi* (28:30). The third was the journey of rapture (*tarab*) *when Mūsā came to Our appointed time* (7:143). The fourth was the journey of toil (*ta'ab*): *Truly fatigue has overwhelmed us on our journey* (18:60).

As for the journey of flight (*harab*), it was the affair in the desert when he had fled from the enemy and had turned his face towards Madyan. He had killed the Copt, just as the Lord said, *Mūsā struck him and killed him* (28:15). How remarkable was the salvation and victory in God's solicitude in forgiving him that killing! Mūsā said, "The hand of him who has struck reaps the harvest," but He said to Mūsā, "There was no sin in that. The sin belonged to the devil and that act was from him." *He said, "This is the work of Satan"* (28:15). Thus the believing servant is excused by His grace and receives His pardon. He said, *Satan made them slip in some of what they earned but indeed God has forgiven them* (3:155). God overlooked their sin because that was the whispering of Satan and the work of the devil.

After this there was the journey of searching (*talab*), the night when Mūsā went in search of fire, a fire which was such that all the world would be extinguished by it. Every place where the tale of the fire of Mūsā has gone, all the world falls in love with it. Mūsā went in search of fire and found light while the spiritual warrior (*javanmard*) went in search of light and found fire. If Mūsā received the sweetness of hearing the word of God (*haqq*) without intermediary, how amazing is it that the smell of that reaches his friends (*dūstān*)? If the fire of Mūsā was manifested publicly, the fire of these spiritual warriors is hidden. And if the fire of Mūsā was in the bush, the fire of these spiritual warriors is in the soul (*jān*). He who has this fire knows that it is such. All of the fires of the body burn and the fire of the friendship of the soul cannot endure the soulburning fire.

As for the journey of rapture (*tarab*), it has been mentioned previously in [the commentary on] His words *when Mūsā came to Our appointed time* (7:143).

The fourth journey of Mūsā was a journey of toil (*ta 'ab*). It is an allusion (*ishāra*) to the journey of aspirants (*murīdān*) in the beginning of their desires (*irādāt*),[123] the journey of discipline (*riyāḍa*), bearing difficulty, and the polishing (*tahdhīb*) of three things: the soul (*nafs*), the disposition (*khūy*) and the heart (*dil*).

Polishing the soul (*nafs*) consists of three things: replacing complaining with giving thanks, forgetfulness with wakefulness, and extravagance with sobriety. Polishing the disposition (*khūy*) also consists of three things: replacing irritation with patience, niggardliness with generosity, and vengefulness with forgiveness. Polishing the heart (*dil*) also consists of three things: replacing the danger of security with fear, the misfortune of despair with the blessing of hope, and the tribulation of the distraction in the heart with thanksgiving of the heart.

The substance of this polishing consists of three things: pursuing knowledge, [eating] permissible food, and persistence in litany (*wird*). The fruit of it consists of three things: an innermost heart (*sirr*) which has become adorned with knowledge of the Lord, a soul (*jān*) set ablaze by the sun of eternity, and God-given knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*) found without intermediary.[124]

Al-Maybudī also expands the lessons of the narrative by using its characters, things and events as symbolic indicators of the stages of the soul in its progress towards attaining knowledge of higher realities. The boat which al-Khaḍir ruins represents the poverty one must embrace in order to escape the notice of Satan who is attracted to prosperity and the outward display of one's religion.[125] The boy he kills is an allusion (*ishāra*) to the desires and opinions that shoot up in the field of spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*) and struggle (*mujāhada*) which must be cut off because this "offspring" will become a disbeliever as it grows.[126] Finally, the wall which al-

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[123] In his *Risāla* al-Qushayrī calls the station of desire (*irāda*) the first station of those who seek God (Principles of Sufism, 175).
[124] Al-Maybudī 16:726-8.
[125] Ibid. 16:728-9.
[126] Ibid. 16:729.

Khaḍir rebuilds is an allusion (*ishāra*) to the soul at peace (*nafs mutma'inna*)[127] which must not be destroyed. The purpose of spiritual effort is to purify it, not annihilate it, for the Prophet said, "Your soul has a right over you."

> The treasures of the secrets of eternity have been placed underneath it. If the wall of the soul becomes ruined, the treasure of the lordly secrets will fall upon the desert and any feeble idiot will covet it. The secret of these words is that the treasure of reality has been placed in the human qualities and the natural manners of dervishes have been built upon this partition. This is the very thing which that spiritual warrior (*javanmard*) has said:
>
> > Religion for dervishes is searching (*talab*) because
> > it is the custom of kings to always
> > bury treasures in deserted places.[128]

In contrast to al-Maybudī's very readable and didactic style, Rūzbihān's commentary on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir is mostly commentary on the commentary of his predecessors, written in a difficult style made all the more obscure by unexplained terminology and concepts. For example, the interpretation of Mūsā's journey to al-Khaḍir as a journey of toil mentioned in al-Qushayrī was used by al-Maybudī to address the practical aspects of the spiritual path which must be undertaken before mystical knowledge can be attained. Rūzbihān's interpretation of the same is less practical than esoteric. It is followed by a complete quote of al-Qushayrī's interpretation.[129]

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[127] A reference to Qur'ānic verse 89:27-8: *O soul at peace return to your Lord, well pleased and well-pleasing.* The Ṣūfīs believed in a potential progression of the soul from that which commands evil (*al-nafs al-ammāra*) as in Qur'ānic verse 12:53, *truly the soul commands evil unless my Lord has mercy*, to the soul which blames (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*) as in Qur'ānic verse 75:2, *Nay, I call to witness the blaming soul*, to the soul at peace (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna*) (Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions* 112). For al-Kāshānī's definition of these three stages see below.
[128] Ibid. 16:729-30.
[129] Quoted above.

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When [Mūsā and his boy] mistook their way, they did not proceed with the heart (*qalb*) and fatigue affected them. That was God's way of teaching them that they had disregarded intuition (*hads*) and the heart (*qalb*). Perhaps he knew the order (*hukm*) of the Unseen, but the heart and intellect ('*aql*) did not so the soul (*nafs*) suffered on account of ignorance. If the heart (*qalb*) and the soul (*nafs*) had known just as the innermost heart (*sirr*) knew, the effects of fatigue would not have overcome them. The fatigue overcoming them was because of their being in the station (*maqām*) of struggle (*mujāhada*) and trial (*imtihān*).

If Mūsā had been the one who was carried (*mahmūl*)[130] there by the good fortune of witnessing (*mushāhada*), then he would have been as he was on Mount Sinai when he did not eat food for forty days yet weariness did not overcome him. This is the state (*hāl*) of the people of intimacy (*uns*) while the first is the state of the people of desire (*irāda*)...When he was seeking an intermediary he was veiled from the station (*maqām*) of witnessing (*mushāhada*), and he was tested with struggle (*mujāhada*) by means of which God taught him proper behavior (*addabahu*) until nothing of the different types of knowledge of realities entered into his mind, for God is jealous of the one whom He entrusts with reaching the secret of secrets for the sake of which he draws him out to learn the knowledge of the Unseen.[131]

Another example of Rūzbihān's style of elaborating on the interpretations of his Sūfī predecessors occurs in his comments on al-Khadir's shifting use of pronouns. Here, Rūzbihān's comments are followed by the interpretations attributed to Ibn 'Atā and al-Hallāj.[132]

These expressions of volition (*irādāt*) are in different forms but in truth they are one because volition (*irāda*) is the volition of God since desires (*irādāt*) emanate (*sadarat*) in their various types from His volition. His words, "*I wanted*"tell of the source of gathering ('*ayn al-jam*') and unity (*ittihād*). His words, "*We wanted*"tell of taking on the attributes (*ittisāf*) and becoming expanded (*inbisāt*). His words, "*Your Lord wanted*"tell of the separation of eternity (*qidam*) from the temporally originated (*muhdath*), and the obliteration of temporality (*hadath*) and the annihilation of the one who declares God one (*muwahhid*) in the unified (*muwahhad*).

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[130] The expression "the one who was carried (*mahmūl*)" is used in al-Qushayrī.

[131] Rūzbihān 1:590.

[132] Quoted above.

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In its quality (*waṣf*) this volition (*irāda*) is the inward dimension (*bāṭin*) of will (*mashi'a*) and the inward dimension of will is that which is the unseen of the attribute (*ṣifa*). That which is the unseen of the attribute is the secret (*sirr*) of the essence (*dhāt*) and the secret of the essence is that which is the unseen of all Unseen things. When al-Khaḍir moved from the quality (*waṣf*) of unity (*ittihād*), jealousy (*ghayra*) cut him off from pure unity to the source of gathering ('*ayn al-jam*'), and cut him off from the gathering (*jam*') to taking on the attributes (*ittiṣāf*), and from taking on the attributes to becoming expanded (*inbisāṭ*). Then it drowned him in the sea of divinity and annihilated him in its depths from any vision (*ru'ya*), knowledge ('*ilm*), volition (*irāda*), act (*fi'l*), and allusion (*ishāra*). By his act (*fi'l*) God (*al-ḥaqq*) spoke in the first, second, and third case and nothing remained in the explanation except God.[133]

Like al-Rāzī's *tafsīr*, this is commentary for a select audience who have the

background to understand it.

What distinguishes the commentaries of al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī from

earlier Ṣūfī exegetes is their almost exclusive use of allegoresis as a method of

interpretation. Al-Kāshānī explicitly refers to such in his initial comments on the

narrative of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir.

> *And when Mūsā said to his boy.* The external sense (*ẓāhir*) of it is in accordance with what has been mentioned in the stories and there is no way to deny the miracles. As for its inner sense (*bāṭin*), it can be said: "*when Mūsā*, the heart, *said to his boy*, the soul, at the time of the attachment to the body, "*I will not stop*," i.e., I will keep on travelling and journeying "*until I reach the junction of the two seas*,"i.e. the intersection of the two worlds, the world of the spirit ('*ālam al-rūh*) and the world of body (*jism*). They are the sweet and the bitter[134] in human form and the station (*maqām*) of the heart (*qalb*).[135]

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[133] Ibid. 1:595.

[134] A reference to Qur'ānic verses 25:53, *It is He who has let forth the two seas. This one is sweet and thirst-quenching, and the other is salty and bitter*, and 35:12, *The two seas are not alike. This one is sweet, thirst-quenching and pleasant to drink and the other is salty and bitter.*

[135] Al-Kāshānī 1:766.

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While al-Maybudī used allegoresis sparingly in his commentary in his interpretation of the three actions of al-Khaḍir, al-Kāshānī applies it consistently and extensively throughout his exegesis of the Qur'ānic narrative. Also distinctive is his use of terminology and concepts from Ibn Sīnā which he combines with those of the Sufīs.[136] Mūsā's search for al-Khaḍir, according to al-Kāshānī, is a search for the holy intellect (*al-'aql al-qudsī*) which is necessary to achieve perfection.[137] Mūsā's saying, *"God willing, you will find me patient,"* is testimony to his own aptitude or preparedness (*istī'dād*) and perseverance in searching. The path to perfection requires devotion to spiritual exercises until the soul is disengaged (*mujarrad*) from the body. Only then can one become acquainted with deeper realities.

> *If you follow me* in travelling the path of perfection *do not ask me anything*, i.e., you must practice emulation (*iqtidā'*) and following the path by works (*'amāl*), spiritual disciplines (*riyāḍāt*), moral traits (*akhlāq*), and struggles (*mujāhadāt*). Do not seek realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) and meanings (*ma'ānī*) *until* its time comes and *I myself mention it to you*, i.e., I tell you that knowledge of unseen realities upon your disengagement (*tajarruduka*) by means of transactions (*mu'āmalāt*) of the body and heart.[138]

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[136] Al-Kāshānī, as has been mentioned, was a follower of the ideas of Ibn 'Arabī, but in this passage his allegiance to Ibn Sīnā is far more apparent. Ibn 'Arabī adopted some of Ibn Sīnā's terminology and concepts, but adapted them to his own thought far more extensively than al-Kāshānī does here; al-Kāshānī's interpretation of the Mūsā and al-Khaḍir story follows Ibn Sīnā's theories of the soul and knowledge closely. Summaries of these theories can be found in Afnan's *Avicenna: His Life and Works* 136-67 and Heath's *Allegory and Philosophy* 53-106.

[137] Elsewhere al-Kāshānī uses the term Holy Spirit (*rūḥ al-qudus*) to describe al-Khaḍir (*Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* 160; English trans. 111). In Ibn Sīnā's terminology, the "holy intellect (*al-'aql al-qudsī*)" refers to a soul which is blessed with the highest level of intellectual aptitude, an aptitude reserved for prophets (Heath 89-90).

[138] Ibid. 768-9. Ibn Sīnā also made spiritual discipline a prerequisite for obtaining higher knowledge in his *Al-Ishārāt wa 'l-tanbīhāt*, although he does not mention emulation of another nor does he use the term "heart (*qalb*)." English trans. 85.

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The ship which al-Khaḍir scuttles represents the body (*badan*) in the sea of matter

(*hayūlā*) travelling to God. The poor people who own it are the animal and vegetable

faculties (*al-quwā 'l-ḥayawāniyya wa 'l-nabātiyya*).[139] The ten brothers mentioned

in tradition represent the five external and five internal senses (*al-ḥawāss al-ẓāhira*

wa 'l-bāṭina). The boat of the body must be ruined by spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*) so

that the king of the commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammāra*) will not seize it and use it

for his passions and demands.[140]

The youth which al-Khaḍir kills also represents the commanding soul (*al-nafs*

ammāra) whose qualities of anger and passion veil the heart. His parents, the spirit

(*rūḥ*) and the corporeal nature (*al-ṭabī'a al-jismāniyya*), will be consoled with the

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[139] Ibn Sīnā understood the human soul as comprised of three parts: the vegetative (*nabātī*) or natural (*ṭabī'ī*) soul which governs the natural processes of the body; the animal (*ḥayawānī*) soul which governs instinctive and voluntary movement, the latter being based on desire or anger, and perception through five external and five internal senses; and the rational (*nāṭiqa*) soul, unique to man, which is made up of the practical ('*amalī*) and theoretical (*naẓarī*) intellects which enable men to seek moral and intellectual perfection (Afnan 136-9; Heath 60-5).

[140] Ibid. 769, 772. We have already mentioned the different stages of the soul in al-Maybudī's allegorical interpretation above. Al-Kāshānī defines these three stages as follows. "The commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammāra*) is that which leans towards the bodily nature (*al-ṭabī'a al-badaniyya*) and commands one to sensual pleasures and lusts and pulls the heart (*qalb*) in a downward direction. It is the resting place of evil and the source of blameworthy morals and bad actions. God said, *truly the soul commands evil* (12:53). The blaming soul (*al-nafs al-lawwāma*) is that which has been illuminated by the light of the heart to the extent that it awakens from the habit of forgetfulness. It becomes watchful and begins to improve its state, wavering between the two directions of lordliness and creaturelinesss. Whenever something bad emanates from its unjust temperment, the light of divine awakening overtakes it and it begins to blame itself and to turn from it, asking for forgiveness and returning to the door of the Forgiving and the Compassionate. Because of this, God mentions it in oaths: *Nay, I call to witness the blaming soul* (75:2). The soul at peace (*al-nafs al-mutma 'inna*) is that whose illumination has been perfected by the light of the heart so that it has lost its blameworthy qualities and become shaped by praiseworthy morals. It has turned towards the direction of the heart altogether, following it in rising up to the abode of the world of holiness ('*ālam al-qudus*), freed from the abode of uncleanliness, diligent in acts of obedience, dwelling in the presence of the highest of degrees until its Lord addresses it, *'O soul at peace, return to your Lord, well pleased and well-pleasing. Enter among my servants and enter my Garden* (85:27-30)' of the absolute (*tajarrud*)" (*Iṣṭilāḥāt al-ṣūfiyya* 77-8; English trans. 56).

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birth of a new child, the soul at peace (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna*).[141] The wall which is

about to fall down represents the soul at peace as well.

> The wall which *was about to fall* is the soul at peace (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna*).
> It is expressed as a wall because it came into being after the killing of the
> commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammāra*) whose death was by means of spiritual
> discipline (*riyāda*). It became like an inanimate object without movement in
> its soul or desire (*irāda*). Because of the intensity of its weakness, it was
> almost destroyed, so its state is expressed as being about to fall. His fixing it
> is its being altered by moral perfections and beautiful virtues by the light of
> the faculty of rationality (*al-quwwat al-nutqiyya*) until the virtues take the
> place of its vices.[142]

The two orphans are the possessors of the theoretical and practical intellects (*al-'āqil*

al-nazariyya wa' l-'amaliyya) cut off from their father whom al-Kāshānī identifies as

either the Holy Spirit (*rūh al-qudus*) or the heart (*qalb*).[143] The treasure is knowledge

which can only be obtained in the station (*maqām*) of the heart (*qalb*) because it is

here where all of the particulars and universals are combined in actuality when

perfection is achieved.[144]

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[141] Ibid. 770, 772.

[142] Ibid. 770.

[143] According to Ibn Sīnā, the rational soul is made up of the practical and theoretical faculties or intellects. The practical intellect mediates between the vegetal and animal souls and the theoretical intellect, using the rationality of the latter to control the appetites and passions of the former by fostering ethical behavior. The practical intellect deals with the particulars of the external material world while the theoretical intellect has the potential to understand universal concepts received from the Active Intelligence (*al-'aql al-fa''āl*), either through a slow process of applied logic or immediate intuition (*hads*), a potential which may or may not be actualized. Al-Kāshānī adopted Ibn Sīnā's conception of the practical and theoretical intellects (Lory, 76) and viewed the Active Intelligence as the equivalent of the angel Gabriel or the Holy Spirit (*rūh al-qudus*) (Lory 55).

[144] Ibid. 773. Elsewhere, al-Kāshānī states that the heart (*qalb*) is what the philosopher (*al-hakīm*) calls the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nātiqa*) (*Istilāhāt al-sufiyya* 141; English trans. 97).

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Although there are similarities between the interpretations of al-Kāshānī and

al-Naysābūrī, the latter is far more careful to emphasize the role of the Ṣūfī shaykh in

the process of attaining perfection.

> *And when Mūsā said to his boy.* In this is the fact that the traveller must have
> a companion on the path. There is also the condition that one of them must
> be a commander and the other the one who is commanded. The companion
> must know his resolve and intention so that he understands the [nature of] his
> companionship and does not become fed up with the hardships of the journey
> before he succeeds in his goal. His intention should be to seek a shaykh to
> emulate, for seeking a shaykh, in truth, is seeking God (*al-ḥaqq*).
>
> *The junction of the two seas* is the junction of the sanctity (*walāya*) of the
> saint and the sanctity of the aspirant (*murīd*). There is the real spring of life.
> When a drop of it fell upon the fish, the heart (*qalb*) of the aspirant, it came to
> life *and took its way* in the sea of sanctity (*walāya*) *as in a tunnel.*
>
> *When they had gone on.* There is an allusion (*ishāra*) in this to the fact that
> if the aspirant becomes weary in the course of his travels, his heart will
> succumb to exhaustion and he will allow himself to be seduced into
> relinquishing the companionship of the shaykh, thinking that his goal can be
> obtained by other means. What an idea! This is false and worthless thinking
> if the divine solicitude does not reach him and return the sincerity of desire
> (*irāda*) to him.[145]

The knowledge which al-Khaḍir possesses is knowledge of the inner nature of things

(*bawāṭin al-ashyā'*) and their realities (*ḥaqā'iq*), a knowledge which cannot be taught

but can only be obtained by the purification (*taṣfiya*) of the soul and the

disengagement (*tajrīd*) of the heart from corporeal attachments. This process is

illustrated by the allegorical interpretation of al-Khaḍir's actions.

The scuttling of the ship represents the destruction of one's outward

reputation and one's pridefulness in devotional acts, for only devotional acts

performed in a spirit of brokeness and humility are safe from Satan. The youth killed

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[145] Al-Naysābūrī, 16:17.

by al-Khaḍir is the commanding soul (*al-nafs al-ammāra*) killed with the knife of

spiritual discipline (*riyāḍa*) and the sword of struggle (*mujāhada*). His parents are

the heart (*qalb*) and spirit (*rūḥ*) who will receive a better child in his stead, the soul at

peace (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna*). The wall is the attachment (*ta'alluq*) which acts as a

barrier between the rational soul (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*) and the world of disengaged

things (*'ālam al-mujarradāt*). Al-Khaḍir's fixing the wall is the strengthening of the

body and kindliness shown to the different faculties (*quwā*) and senses (*ḥawāss*), just

as it is said, "Your soul is your mount, so be kind to it." The two orphans are the

soul at peace and the inspired soul (*al-nafs al-mutma'inna wa 'l-mulhama*) and the

treasure waiting for them is the obtainment of theoretical and practical perfections

(*al-kamālāt al-naẓariyya wa 'l-'amaliyya*). Their father is the discerning intellect (*al-*

'aql al-fāriqa) who wanted to protect this treasure until they matured under the

instruction of the shaykh and his kindly and indulgent guidance.[146]

Although the content of al-Naysābūrī's interpretation remains more faithful to

Ṣūfī terminology and concepts, the style is very much like al-Kāshānī's. Both of

their commentaries on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir resemble the kind of

allegoresis practiced by Ibn Sīnā in the few examples we have of his Qur'ānic

exegesis.[147] It is a style which seems to limit the meaning of the text. However this

is an observation which must be reconciled, at least in the case of al-Kāshānī and al-

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[146] Ibid. 16:18.

[147] For an discussion of Ibn Sīnā's style of commentary, see Heath, *Allegory and Philosophy*, 182-6 and "Creative Hermeneutics" 190-200, 205-9.

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Naysābūrī, with the Ṣūfī belief in the infinite meaning to be found in the Qur'ān. We have already seen this belief clearly stated in the introduction to al-Kāshānī's tafsīr.[148] Al-Kāshānī also writes here that interpretation (ta'wīl) is a never-ending process (in contrast to tafsīr). It "never ceases because it varies according to the states of the listener and his circumstances in traveling and his different phases. Whenever he rises from a station, a door of new understanding is opened to him and he beholds by means of it the subtlety of a ready meaning."[149] According to the Ṣūfīs, the meaning of the Qur'ānic text is not something which is discovered once and for all but is something which is uncovered continually in a dynamic relationship with the changing states of the reader.

What is common to all the Ṣūfī commentaries studied here, despite their differences in style, is the focus on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir as a learning tool for those seeking God-given knowledge ('ilm ladunī). The fact that receiving God-given knowledge ('ilm ladunī) is a possibility for those who are not prophets is accepted without question. But it is knowledge which can only be gained by arduous self-discipline and, according to al-Naysābūrī, the mediation of a shaykh. What one is capable of knowing is dependent on the stage or station which one is in. Knowledge of the true nature of the divine-human relationship, as seen in the shift in

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[148] See the section on "The plenitude of discoverable meaning" in Part I above.
[149] Al-Kāshānī, 1:5. For the entire passage, see "Al-Naysābūrī and al-Kāshānī and the method of esoteric interpretation (ta'wīl)" in Part I.

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pronouns in al-Khaḍir's speech, is an especially significant example of this potential evolution of knowledge.

This reading of the text is radically different than that of the exoteric commentators, whose concerns range from the identification of the characters and details of the story and the philological and linguistic clarification of the text to the resolution of narrative inconsistencies and the development of a comprehensive theology and law. Although the *ḥadīth* and early traditions cited are often unmistakably homiletic, the classical commentators are sparing in their comments on the significance of the story for their readers. In al-Ṭabarī and Ibn Kathīr, this reticence is most likely due to a belief in the adequacy of the comments found in the *ḥadīth* and *salafī* material and a desire to avoid material of questionable authority. Commentators such as al-Zamaksharī and al-Qurṭubī did incorporate some of the latter, but nevertheless seem to have rejected homiletics as a primary goal in exegesis. Al-Rāzī, more than any of the others, demonstrates a willingness to draw lessons from the story, but he nonetheless focuses more on issues of narrative consistency and theology. Although he mentions the Ṣūfī conception of God-given knowledge (*'ilm ladunī*), al-Rāzī is more interested in developing a comprehensive epistemology than in exploring the implications of the story for those who seek such knowledge.

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8. VERSE 24:35 (THE LIGHT VERSE)

God is the light of the heavens and the earth. The similitude of His/his light is as a niche in which is a lamp and the lamp is in a glass, and the glass is like a glittering star lit from a blessed olive tree neither of the east nor the west, whose oil would wellnigh shine even if no fire touched it. Light upon light. God guides whom He wills to His light and strikes similitudes for mankind, and God has knowledge of all things.

The Light Verse has often been closely associated with Ṣūfī thought because of al-Ghazālī's well-known commentary on it and because of its importance in other Ṣūfī writings. Goldziher somewhat questionably stated that the verse is one of the few in the Qur'ān which are amenable to mystical thought.[1] It has been selected for discussion here because it is a verse which seems to require metaphorical interpretation, raising issues faced by all Muslims concerning how one can speak of God and His attributes.

Al-Tabarī

Al-Ṭabarī's commentary once again provides us with the interpretations transmitted from the Companions and the Followers along with al-Ṭabarī's clear statement of his own preferences. He begins with three interpretations of the first part of the verse, *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.* (See Table 2).

1) These words mean, "God is the guide (*hādī*) of the people of the heavens and the earth," according to Ibn 'Abbās.[2] A similar interpretation is attributed to Anas b.

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[1] Goldziher, *Die Richtungen* 180-5.
[2] Al-Ṭabarī 18:135. God is called "the Guide (*hādī*) in Qur'ānic verses 22:54 and 25:31.

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Table 2.
Al-Ṭabarī's listing of *salafī* interpretations of *God is the light*

God is the light of the heavens and and the earth	Guide (*hādī*)
	Governor (*mudabbir*)
	Light (*ḍiyā'*)

Mālik (d.709-11).[3] This is al-Ṭabarī's preferred interpretation because he judges it to be the logical continuation of the preceding verse, *We have sent down to you signs making things clear, as a similitude of those who passed away before you, and as an admonition for those who are Godfearing.*

2) Its meaning is God "governs (*yudabbiru*) the affair (*amr*) with regards to [the heavens and the earth], their stars, sun and moon."[4] This interpretation is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and Mujāhid.

3) What is meant by "light (*nūr*)" is "light (*ḍiyā'*)".[5] According to Ubayy b. Ka'b, God begins in this verse with the mention of his own light in *God is the light of the heavens of the earth* and then mentions the light of the believer in *the similitude of [the believer's] light.*

As is clear in this last interpretation, not all commentators understood the pronoun in *The similitude of His light* as referring to God. Al-Ṭabarī gives four

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[3] A servant of Muḥammad and one of the most prolific of the traditionalists.

[4] Ibid. Qur'ānic verses 10:3, 13:2, and 32:5 state that God "governs the affair" (10:3, 13:2, 32:5).

[5] According to Lane's *Arabic-English Lexicon*, *ḍiyā'* is sometimes used as a synonym for *nūr*, but may also have a more intensive signification. In the latter usage, the difference between *ḍiyā'* and *nūr* would be like the difference between the sun whose light subsists by itself and the moon whose light subsists by some other thing, 1809. *Ḍiya'* is not something attributed to God elsewhere in the Qur'ān; it is described instead as something which God gives to the sun, Mūsā and Hārūn, and mankind (10:5, 21:48, and 28:71).

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Table 3.
Al-Ṭabarī's listing of *salafī* interpretations of *The similitude of His/his light*

His/his light	the believer's faith and the Qur'ān in his breast
	God's Prophet Muḥammad
	God's guidance, i.e. the Qur'ān
	the obedience of the heavens to God

different views regarding the referents to "his" and "light." (See Table 3).

1) The pronoun "his" refers to the believer and the "light" to his faith and the

Qur'ān. Ubayy b. Ka'b used to read the verse as *the similitude of the believer,*

saying, "It is the believer who has placed faith and the Qur'ān in his breast."[6]

Similar interpretations are attributed to Sa'īd b. Jubayr and al-Ḍaḥḥāk b. Muzāhim

(d.723-4).

2) The pronoun refers to God and the "light" to Muḥammad. This is attributed to

Ka'b al-Aḥbār and Sa'īd b. Jubayr.

3) The pronoun refers to God and the "light" to His guidance and clear explanation,

i.e., the Qur'ān. This interpretation, attributed to Ibn 'Abbās, al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī, Ibn

Zayd, and Zayd b. Aslam (d.753-4),[7] is the correct interpretation according to al-

Ṭabarī.

4) The pronoun refers to God and the "light" is obedience to Him. This

interpretation, also related on the authority of Ibn 'Abbās, is connected to an

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[6] Ibid. 18:136.
[7] Zayd b. Aslam was a student of Ubayy b. Ka'b.

occasion where some Jews came to Muḥammad and asked him how the light of God could be considered beyond that of the heavens when God has used this as a similitude for His light. Muḥammad is said to have replied that this is a similitude which God has struck for obedience to Him, and He has called this obedience "light". Thus, he has given the name "light" to several things.[8]

The interpretations of these first two issues are further developed in the comments on the meaning of the *niche (mishkāt)*. Although there are six different interpretations here, the differences between interpretations two, three and four are not substantial. Basically, there are three ways in which the niche is interpreted: metaphorically as Muḥammad or the believer (see Table 4), and literally as a container for physical light.

1) The *niche* is Muḥammad, the *lamp* is his heart (*qalb*), and the *glass* is his breast (*sadr*) according to Ka'b b. al-Aḥbār.

2) The *niche* is the breast (*sadr*) of the believer, the *lamp* is the Qur'ān and faith (*īmān*), and the *glass* is his heart (*qalb*) according to Ubayy b. Ka'b. *The blessed olive tree neither of the east nor the west* represents the believer who is like a tree surrounded by other trees. The tree is luxurious and green because it is not bombarded by the sun's rays. Similarly, the believer is protected from life's vicissitudes by the strength which God gives him.

He balances four characteristics: if he receives he is grateful; if he is afflicted

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[8] As in verse 41:11, where it was said to the heavens and the earth, *"Come willingly or unwilling." They said, "We come in obedience."*

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Table 4.
Al-Ṭabarī's listing of metaphorical *salafī* interpretations of *the niche*, etc.

niche	Muḥammad	the believer's breast (*sadr*)	the believer's belly (*jawf*)	the believer's heart (*qalb*)
glass	Muḥammad's breast (*sadr*)	the believer's heart (*qalb*)		
lamp	Muḥammad's heart (*qalb*)	Qur'ān and faith	the believer's heart (*fu'ād*)	Qur'ān
tree		the believer's virtues		

he is patient; if he expresses an opinion he is fair; and if he speaks he is truthful. Among other men he is like a living man walking amidst the graves of the dead. *Light upon light* he freely moves about in five different kinds of light. His speech is a light, his action is light, his private affairs are a light, his public affairs[9] are a light, and his ultimate destination will be the light on the Day of Resurrection in the Garden.[10]

Also placed within this category is Ibn 'Abbās' interpretation that this part of the verse means "the similitude of His guidance in the heart of the believer,"[11] and his story of the Jews being told that this similitude refers to obedience to God.

3) The *niche* is the belly (*jawf*) of the believer and the *lamp* is the pericardium of the heart (*fu'ād*) according to Ibn 'Abbās and Mujāhid.

4) The *niche* is the heart (qalb) of the believer and the *lamp* is the Qur'ān according to Ibn Zayd. The believer recites it until he reaches a *blessed* tree. Then he is

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[9] The Arabic in al-Ṭabarī means literally "entrance (*madkhal*)" and "exit (*makhraj*)". Al-Rāzī writes that al-Rab'ī asked Abū'l-'Āliya (d.708-9 or 714) about these words and he said they meant his private and public affairs (*sirruhu wa 'alāniyatahu*), 23:237. Lane states that the words can mean "a way of acting or conduct," 1:720, 861.
[10] Ibid. 18:138.
[11] Ibid.

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illuminated by [the Qur'ān's] light, and he observes and practices it so that he also

suffers no diminishment. This is al-Ṭabarī's preferred interpretation, and he

paraphrases the verse accordingly.

> This is a similitude which God has struck for the Qur'ān in the hearts of those
> who have faith in it. So He said, "The similitude of the light of God by
> which the path of rectitude is illuminated for His servants is that which He
> has sent down to them, and they have faith in it and give their assent to what
> is in it. In the hearts of the believers is the similitude of a niche...*in which is
> a lamp*...a similitude for what is in the heart of the believer of the Qur'ān and
> clear explanatory signs. Then He said, *the lamp in a glass*...and that is a
> similitude for the Qur'ān...Then breast, in its being freed of infidelity and
> doubt by God, and its illumination by the light of the Qur'ān and the signs
> and evidence of his Lord and its exhortations regarding them, is likened to *a
> glittering star*. He said *a glass* and that is the breast of the believer whose
> heart within is like *a glittering star*.[12]

In this interpretation the literal definition for the word "*niche (mishkāt)*" is explained

as a windowless opening in the wall, as the English word "niche" implies. It is a

definition which suits the metaphor for the believer's heart which is protected within

the body. Al-Ṭabarī's last two interpretations give two additional literal definitions

of the word *mishkāt*.

5) The *mishkāt* is a column in which there is a candle or lamp (*qandīl*), according to

one report from Mujāhid. Another report has him defining it as the brass which is

inside (*fī jawf*) of the lamp (*qandīl*).

6) The *mishkāt* is the iron from which a lamp (*qandīl*) hangs. This is also

attributed to Mujāhid.

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[12] Ibid. 18:140.

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Table 5.
Al-Ṭabarī's listing of *salafī* interpretations of *neither of the east nor the west*

a blessed olive tree neither of the east nor the west	receives sun all day
	tree in the middle of a grove
	tree not of this world

The last issue concerning this verse which will be included here is the interpretation of the phrase *neither of the east nor the west*. We have already seen Ubayy b. Ka'b's interpretation of the phrase as referring to balanced believer. Al-Ṭabarī adds three more interpretations here.[13] (See Table 5).

1) The phrase refers to an olive tree positioned in such as way so that it receives sunlight all day long. This interpretation is attributed to 'Ibn 'Abbās, Mujāhid, and Ikrama,[14] and is al-Ṭabarī's preference because these are the conditions which would produce the best quality oil and therefore the most intense light.

2) It refers to an olive tree in the middle of other trees, neither east nor west. This interpretation is attributed to Ibn 'Abbās.

3) It refers to a tree which is not of this world. This interpretation is attributed to al-Ḥasan.

After al-Ṭabarī

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[13] Ibid. 18:141-2.

[14] 'Ikrima (d.723-4) was a *mawla* of Ibn 'Abbās and one of the main transmitters of his Qur'ānic interpretations.

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Al-Zamaksharī's commentary on this verse is concerned with the problem of

God being referred to as "Light". He suggests that this is like our saying "Zayd is

generous and munificent" (*Zayd^{un} karam^{un} wa jūd^{un}*) and then saying, "He revives

men with his generosity and munificence" (*yun'ashu al-nās bi-karamihi wa jūdihi*).

The first sentence does not mean that Zayd is generosity and munificence per se, but

rather that Zayd possesses these attributes. Similarly, the meaning of the verse,

according to al-Zamaksharī is

> the possessor of the light of the heavens and the owner of the light of the
> heavens. The light of the heavens and the earth is the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*) which
> can be compared to light in its manifestation and clarification, just as He
> says, *God is the friend of those who believe; He brings them forth from the
> shadows to the light* (2:257), i.e., from the false to the Truth (*al-ḥaqq*).[15]

Al-Zamaksharī, like other Mu'tazilīs, was intent upon protecting the unity of God by

denying that there could be a plurality of eternals, i.e., a power, a knowledge, or a

light which have existed independently with Him for all eternity. Their preferred

manner of expressing the relationship between God and His attributes was to say that

God is powerful, knowing, etc. by His very essence. In other words, the attributes

are not distinct from His essence, but neither are they equivalent to it. One can say,

"God is powerful," but not "God is Power," because this would be likening God to a

created thing. Therefore, Qur'ānic phrases such as *God is the light of the heavens*

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[15] Zamakshari 3:67.

and the earth must be interpreted to show that God is not like anything created, in this case light.[16]

Al-Rāzī's treatment of this issue is more comprehensive than that of al-Zamaksharī and demonstrates an attempt to reconcile theological and traditional viewpoints. As we saw in the discussion of Qur'ānic verse 3:7, al-Rāzī believes that the abandonment of the probable meaning of any expression in the Qur'ān requires a clear-cut indicator (*dalīl munfaṣil*) which demonstrates the absurdity of the apparent sense (*ẓāhir*).[17] Al-Rāzī applies his methodology to this verse, setting forth argument after argument proving the absurdity of calling God "light". He begins by explaining various definitions of the word "light" (in its physical sense), and then demonstrates the absurdity of applying any of these definitions to God.

Further evidence to support his rational arguments is drawn from three Qur'ānic verses, one of which is the Light verse itself. Al-Rāzī finds a contradiction between the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* and the phrases *the similitude of His light* and *God guides whom He wills to His light* because the first phrase appears to equate light with God's essence while the other phrases imply that light is attributed (*muḍāf*) to God. One of the ways in which al-Rāzī attempts to resolve this seeming contradiction is by reference to the Arabic language. He quotes the same sentences found in al-Zamaksharī regarding Zayd's attributes of generosity

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[16] The Muʿtazilī doctrine concerning the attributes of God is one of the most significant differences setting them apart from their Ashʿarī counterparts who labeled them *muʿaṭṭila* for supposedly denying the existence of the attributes of God, leaving God as an abstract symbol of unity. See the section on the attributes of God in Gardet's article "Allāh" in EI².

[17] Al-Rāzī, 7:181-2.

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and munificence, although he does not mention al-Zamaksharī by name. Like al-Zamaksharī, al-Rāzī understands the verse as meaning that God is not "light" per se but rather the possessor and creator of light. Al-Rāzī finds additional support for this view in verse 42:11, *There is nothing like him.* According to al-Rāzī, if God were a light, then this verse would be false because all lights resemble one another. Nothing resembles Him and therefore He cannot be called light. Another verse al-Rāzī quotes to support his view is verse 6:1, *He made the shadows and the light.* According to al-Rāzī, this verse proves that the quiddity (*māhiyya*) of light was created by God, making it impossible that the divine being could be a light.[18]

Based on this rational and Qur'ānic evidence, al-Rāzī insists that the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* must be interpreted (*lā budda min al-ta'wīl*). His preferred interpretation is the one attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and "the majority" which states that the verse means "God is the Guide of the heavens and the earth." Al-Rāzī mentions several Qur'ānic verses which support this interpretation.[19] He considers it the best interpretation because the last part of the Light Verse, *God guides whom He wills to His light,* "indicates that what is meant is the light of guidance to knowledge and action."[20] Other interpretations which al-Rāzī briefly

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[18] Ibid. 223-4.

[19] Qur'ānic verses 2:257, *God is the friend of those who believe. He brings them out of the shadows into the light*; 6:122, *Why, is he who was dead and We gave him life, and made a light for him like him who is in the depths of darkness from which he cannot come out?*; and 42:52, *But We made it a light by which We guide those whom We will of Our servants.*

[20] Ibid. 23:224.

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mentions are God as governor (*mudabbir*),[21] arranger (*nāzim*)[22] and illuminator (*munawwir*).[23]

This brief synopsis of traditional interpretations is followed by an extensive summary and expansion of the first part of al-Ghazālī's commentary on the Light Verse entitled *Mishkāt al-anwār*, a commentary which will be discussed in greater depth in the section on Sūfī commentaries. In it al-Ghazālī states that light is a word used for many different kinds of phenomena. The relationship between these different kinds of phenomena is a hierarchical one, and lights which are higher are more worthy of the term "light" than lights which are lower. The light of the physical eye is inferior to that of the intellect (*'aql*), a fact which al-Ghazālī proves by listing seven imperfections of physical sight when compared to rational insight; al-Rāzī expands this list to a total of twenty imperfections. Even higher than the light of rational insight is the light of God. According to al-Ghazālī, the perfection of His light is such that He alone is worthy of the term "light." God is light in reality (*ḥaqīqa*) while all other light is metaphorical (*majāz*) in relationship to His light; in truth there is no light but He.[24]

At first glance this view would seem to be antithetical to that of al-Rāzī who began his own exegesis by arguing that God cannot be called light. Nonetheless, al-Rāzī concludes after his long summary of al-Ghazālī that no contradiction exists

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[21] Al-Rāzī attributes this view to al-Aṣamm and Abū Isḥāq Ibrāhīm b. al-Sarī al-Zajjāj (d.922 or later).
[22] Al-Rāzī does not specify whose interpretation this is.
[23] Al-Rāzī attributes this interpretation to Ubayy b. Ka'b, al-Ḥasan, and Abū'l-'Āliya.
[24] Ibid. 23:224-30.

between al-Ghazālī's interpretation and the traditional interpretation of light as "Guide," al-Rāzī's preferred interpretation.[25] Al-Rāzī's acceptance of al-Ghazālī's interpretation makes more sense when seen in the context of discussions of God's attributes. A precedent for al-Ghazālī's statement that God is light in reality (*ḥaqīqa*) while all other light is metaphor (*majāz*) can be found in the work of the Muʿtazilī theologian al-Nāshiʾ al-Akbar (d.906) who attempted to solve the problem of anthropomorphic descriptions of God in the Qurʾān by the theory that the attributes of God, when applied to God are "true" (*ḥaqīqa*) but when applied to men are "metaphor" (*majāz*). The more common way to solve anthropomorphic problems was to say the opposite, that attributes are *majāz* with regards to God but *ḥaqīqa* with regards to mankind. But, as Heinrichs points out, either theory works as well to solve the problem of anthropomorphism. However, the first theory raises an additional issue; does Nāshiʾ al-Akbar understand the distinction between the real (*ḥaqīqa*) and metaphor (*majāz*) to be on an ontological or a linguistic level?[26] Nāshiʾ al-Akbar's view is ambiguous, but al-Ghazālī's is not. He clearly asserts that God's light, like His existence, is the only real Light and Existence.[27] Al-Rāzī's position is less clear; while he repeats al-Ghazālī's emphatic phrase "There is no light but He," he omits key passages explaining what al-Ghazālī means by this. It would appear

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[25] Rosenthal understands al-Rāzī's exegesis as a rebuttal to al-Ghazālī's view (*Triumphant Knowledge* 160), but this reading does not take into account the fact that al-Rāzī clearly states that there is no contradiction between his own preferred view and that of al-Ghazālī.

[26] Heinrichs, "On the Genesis" 136-7 and "Scriptural Hermeneutics" 256-7.

[27] The fact that al-Ghazālī is making an ontological statement here will be shown in more depth in the section which follows.

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that while al-Ghazālī's primary goal is to communicate something about the nature of man and God's existence, al-Rāzī is more concerned, at least in this work, with eliminating any possibility of equating God with the physical phenomenon we call light.

Section two of al-Rāzī's commentary contains a brief summary of al-Ghazālī's commentary on the Veils Ḥadīth. Al-Rāzī expresses no opinion of his own here, although it is possible that he is editing and even altering al-Ghazālī's work in order to make his views more acceptable to 'Asharī doctrine.[28]

Section three deals with the various interpretations of the meaning of *the similitude of His/his light* and *the niche*, etc. Al-Rāzī combines interpretations here which were treated as two separate issues in al-Ṭabarī. In Tables 6 and 7 al-Rāzī's interpretations have been rearranged according to al-Ṭabarī's format, for purposes of comparison.

1) The light means guidance. Al-Rāzī explains that the purpose of the extended metaphor of the niche is to describe a pure and perfect light, thereby describing, by analogy, the perfection of God's guidance. This is al-Rāzī's preferred interpretation, as it was al-Ṭabarī's, although al-Rāzī neglects to mention its source.

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[28] Ibid. 23:230-1. The Ḥadīth is "God has seventy veils of light and darkness. If he were to unveil them, the glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyesight perceived Him." The commentary on this Ḥadīth comprises section three of al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt al-anwār*. For Landolt's suggestion that al-Rāzī may be altering al-Ghazālī's work, see his "Ghazālī and 'Religionswissenschaft,'" 65-72.

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Table 6.
Al-Rāzī's listing of interpretations of *The similitude of His/his light*

His/his light	God's guidance
	God's Qur'ān
	God's Prophet Muḥammad
	knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God and the religious laws (*sharā'i*) in the heart of the believer
	the believer

2) The light means the Qur'ān, as verse 5:15 states, *there has come to you a light and a manifest Book.* Al-Rāzī attributes this interpretation to al-Ḥasan, Sufyān b. 'Uyayna (d.811) and Zayd b. Aslam.

3) The light is the Prophet because verse 33:46 describes him as a *light-giving lamp.* According to al-Rāzī, this is the interpretation of 'Aṭā'.[29]

4) The light is knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God and the religious laws (*sharā'i*) in the heart of the believer. The evidence for this interpretation is in Qur'ānic verse 39:22, *Is he whose breast God has opened up to Islam so that he has a light from his Lord...* and *in order that you might bring mankind out of the darknesses into the light* (14:1). This interpretation is attributed to Ubayy b. Ka'b and Ibn 'Abbās.

5) The niche, glass, lamp, tree and oil are the five levels (*marātib*) of the human perceptual faculties (*al-quwā 'l-mudrika*).[30] Al-Rāzī summarizes here al-Ghazālī's

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[29] It is unclear to me who al-Rāzī is referring to here. Perhaps he means 'Aṭā b. Abu Rabāḥ (d.732).
[30] This is not the terminology used by al-Ghazālī; in his *Mishkāt* he refers to "levels of luminous human spirits" (*marātib al-arwāḥ al-bashriyya al-nūrāniyya*), 36. Al-Rāzī is consciously or unconsciously changing al-Ghazālī's terminology, bringing it closer to that of Ibn Sīnā's.

interpretation from section two of his *Mishkāt al-anwār*, an interpretation which will be discussed below in the section on Ṣūfī commentaries.

6) The niche, glass, lamp, tree and oil represent the five levels of perception (*marātib idrākāt*) of the human soul as defined by Ibn Sīnā.[31] The *niche* is the material intellect (*al-'aql al-hayūliyya*) which possesses the potential for perceiving universal kinds of knowledge. The *glass* is the habitual intellect (*al-'aql bi-l-malaka*) which combines intuitive types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-badīhiyya*) in order to connect with theoretical types of knowledge (*al-'ulūm al-naẓariyya*). If this connection is accomplished with difficulty, it is the *tree*. If it is accomplished easily, it is the *oil*. The faculty which is very powerful is the *glass* which is like *a glittering star*. If it is the sanctified soul (*al-nafs al-qudsiyya*) of the prophets, then its *oil would wellnigh shine even if no fire touched it*. The *lamp* is the actual intellect (*al-'aql bi'l-fi'l*), the possessor of which has the power to obtain theoretical types of knowledge from necessary types of knowledge whenever he wills. When this potential is actualized, it is the acquired intellect (*al-'aql al-mustafād*) which is *light upon light* because the habitual intellect is a light and what it obtains is another light.

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[31] Al-Rāzī's summary of Ibn Sīnā's interpretation is taken from the latter's *Al-Ishārāt wa 'l-tanbīhāt*, 2:353-4. (An English translation of this can be found in Yazdi's *Principles of Epistemology* 193-4 n.16). A similar interpretation can be found in Ibn Sīnā's *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt* 49-52 (English trans. by Marmura, "On the Proof of Prophecies 116-7). 'Aṣī published another *tafsīr* on the Light Verse attributed to Ibn Sīnā based on a single manuscript in Istanbul; the interpretation in this *tafsīr* is completely different from the other two and may not be authentic (*Tafsīr al-Qur'ānī* 84-8).

Table 7.
Al-Rāzī's listing of interpretations of *the niche*, etc.

	al-Ghazālī	Ibn Sīnā	Sūfīs	Muqātil	anonymous
niche	sensory spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥassās*)	material intellect (*al-'aql al-hayūliyya*)	breast (*sadr*)	loins of 'Abd Allāh	Ibrāhīm
glass	imaginal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*)	habitual intellect (*al-'aql bi'l-malaka*)	heart (*qalb*)	the body of Muḥammad	Ismā'īl
lamp	rational spirit (*al-rūḥ al-'aqlī*)	actual intellect (*al-'aql bi'l-fī'l*)	gnosis (*ma'rifa*)	faith or prophecy in the heart (*qalb*) of Muḥammad	the body of Muḥammad
tree	reflective spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*)	reflective faculty (*al-quwwa al-fikriyya*)	inspirations (*ilhāmāt*) of the angels		prophecy and the message
oil	sanctified prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*)	sanctified soul of the prophets (*al-nafs al-qudsiyya alatī li-l-anbiyā'*)			

7) According to some Ṣūfīs, the *niche* is the breast (*sadr*), the *glass* is the heart (*qalb*), the *lamp* is gnosis (*ma'rifa*), and the *blessed tree* is the angels and their inspirations (*ilhāmāt*), *neither of the east nor the west* because they are spiritual (*rūḥāniyya*), *whose oil would wellnigh shine even if no fire touched it* because of the plenitude of their different types of knowledge and the powerfulness of their disclosure of the

secrets of the kingdom (*malakūt*) of God. Al-Rāzī adds critically, "It is obvious here

that the thing compared (*al-mushabbah*) is not the thing compared therewith (*al-

mushabbih bihi*)."[32]

8) It is a similitude for the light of faith in the heart of Muḥammad, so the *niche* is

like the loins of 'Abd Allāh,[33] the *glass* the body of Muḥammad, and the *lamp* faith

or prophecy in Muḥammad's heart. This interpretation is attributed to Muqātil.[34]

9) The *niche* is like Ibrāhīm, the *glass* Ismā'īl, the *lamp* the body of Muḥammad,

and the tree prophecy and the message. This interpretation is quoted anonymously.

10) The *similitude of his light* refers to the believer. The difference between this

interpretation and interpretation number four above is in the reading of the pronoun

as "His" or "his". Al-Rāzī mentions here that Ubayy b. Ka'b used to read the verse

as "the similitude of the light of the believer". He attributes the interpretation of the

pronoun in this manner to Ubayy b. Ka'b, Sa'īd b. Jubayr and al-Ḍaḥḥāk.

In the fourth section of his commentary, al-Rāzī mentions the interpretations

of the phrase *neither of the east nor the west* found in al-Ṭabarī, and agrees with him

that the best one is the understanding that the tree is located in a place where it

receives sunlight all day long thereby producing the finest oil. Al-Rāzī adds one

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[32] Ibid. 23:235.

[33] Muḥammad's father.

[34] Muqātil b. Sulaymān (d.767) is considered by Nwyia to be the first exegete to employ allegorical interpretation. His *tafsīr* was considered unreliable by many commentators and al-Ṭabarī did not include any of his exegesis in his *tafsīr*. He was quoted frequently, however, by al-Tha'labī in his *Qiṣaṣ al-anbiyā'*. Nwyia gives a complete French translation of Muqātil's interpretation of the Light Verse which adds that the *blessed olive tree* symbolizes Ibrāhīm, and *neither of the east nor the west* means that he turned neither to the east nor the west for prayer, like the Christians and the Jews, but towards Mecca. *Light upon light* means that Muḥammad is a prophet who came out of the loins of the prophet Ibrāhīm, *Exégèse Coranique* 9-10, 31, 94-7.

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additional interpretation which is that the *niche* is the breast of Muḥammad, the *glass* his heart, the *lamp* the religion in his heart which is *lit by a blessed tree* which is Ibrāhīm. Ibrāhīm was *neither of the east nor the west* because he did not pray in those directions like the Jews and the Christians but rather towards the Ka'ba.[35] Al-Rāzī does not give the source for this interpretation but it very much resembles that of Muqātil.[36]

Al-Qurṭubī is as concerned as al-Rāzī in explaining how God can be referred to as light, but addresses the problem in a different way. He assumes from the outset that metaphorical definitions of light are part of standard Arabic speech and gives examples of such from Arabic poetry. Al-Qurṭubī, therefore, finds nothing surprising in the use of this kind of language in the Qur'ān. It is permissible to say God has a light[37] by way of praise because he brings things into existence and all light has its beginning and origin in Him. The mistake of corporealists (*mujassima*), says al-Qurṭubī, is that they follow the external sense of this verse and *ḥadīth* which seem to suggest that God is a light.[38]

After making these comments, al-Qurṭubī describes the various interpretations of *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*, beginning with a curious passage which seems to attribute an interpretation along the lines of the

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[35] Ibid. 236-7.
[36] See above note for Muqātil's interpretation.
[37] Note that al-Qurṭubī says, "God has a light" (*li-llāh nūr*), not "God is a light."
[38] Al-Qurṭubī 12:206. Al-Qurṭubī quotes two of the *ḥadīth* which he believes are misunderstood by corporealists. One is a prayer of the Prophet: "O God, praise be to You, the Light of the heavens and the earth. The other *ḥadīth* concerns the Prophet's reply to the question, "How do you see your Lord?" He said, "I see a light."

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Nāshi' al-Akbar and al-Ghazālī *majāz-ḥaqīqa* dichotomy to early *salafī*

commentators.

> It is said that the meaning [of the verse] is that by means of Him and His
> power, the lights [of the heavens and the earth] illuminate, and their affairs
> are kept in order, and their workings are carried out. The words are an
> approximation for intelligence (*dhihn*), just as one would say, "The king is
> the light of the people of the country." That is to say, the provision for its
> affairs and overall wellbeing is through him because he acts in an appropriate
> manner regarding their affairs. With regards to the king, "light" is
> metaphorical (*majāz*) and with regards to the attribute of God it is absolute
> truth (*ḥaqīqa maḥḍa*) since He is the one who has originated created things
> and has created the intellect ('*aql*) as a guiding light. This is because the
> manifestation of an existent occurs by means of Him just as the manifestation
> of things which are seen occurs by means of light. Blessed is God, there is no
> Lord other than He. Mujāhid and al-Zuhrī[39] and others said something like
> this (*qāla ma'nahu Mujāhid wa 'l-Zuhrī wa ghayruhumā*).[40]

Al-Qurṭubī also mentions the interpretations of God as illuminator (*munawwir*),[41]

governor (*mudabbir*),[42] ornamentor (*muzayyin*),[43] and guide (*hādī*).[44]

In his discussion of the meaning of *the similitude of His/his light*, al-Qurṭubī

divides previous interpretations into those that understand the pronoun as referring to

something other than God, thus bringing forth an element not previously mentioned,

and those that understand the pronoun as referring to God, thus maintaining one

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[39] Muḥammad b. Muslim al-Zuhrī (d.742).

[40] Ibid. 12:257. The terminology used by al-Qurṭubī here is not terminology used by Mujāhid and al-Zuhrī (see the footnote on the terms *ḥaqīqa* and *majāz* in the previous chapter), a fact which al-Qurṭubī acknowledges by saying that they said something like it (*qāla ma'nāhu Mujāhid wa 'l-Zuhrī wa gayruhumā*).

[41] Al-Qurṭubī attributes this interpretation to Ibn 'Arafa (?), al-Ḍaḥḥāk, and Muḥammad b. Ka'b al-Qurazī (d.726-38).

[42] Attributed to Mujāhid.

[43] Attributed to Ubayy b. Ka'b, al-Ḥasan, and Abū'l-'Āliya.

[44] Attributed to Ibn 'Abbās and Anas.

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continuous similitude pertaining to God's guidance. Al-Qurṭubī does not indicate his

own preference.

More problematic for al-Qurṭubī are the allegorical interpretations of *the*

niche, etc. While he accepts some degree of metaphorical interpretation of this verse,

he objects to those interpretations which he deems to have gone beyond the obvious

sense. He quotes his teacher approvingly:

> Al-Qāḍī Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī said: It is strange that a certain jurist has said
> that this is a similitude which God has struck for Ibrāhīm and Muḥammad,
> and for 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib[45] and his son 'Abd Allāh. The niche (*mishkāt*) is an
> opening (*kuwwa*) in the Ethiopian language, and 'Abd al-Muṭṭalib is likened
> to the *niche* in which there is a candle which is the *glass*. 'Abd Allāh is
> likened to the candle which is the *glass*. Muḥammad is like the *lamp*,
> meaning from their loins, so that he is like *a glittering star* which is Jupiter.
> *Lit from a blessed tree* means the inheritance of prophecy from Ibrāhīm who
> is the *blessed tree*, meaning pure in faith (*ḥanīfiyya*). *Neither of the east nor*
> *the west*, neither Jewish nor Christian. *Whose oil would well nigh shine even*
> *if no fire touched it.* [The jurist] says, "Ibrāhīm would well nigh speak from
> revelation before it was revealed to him." *Light upon light.* Ibrāhīm then
> Muḥammad.
>   Al-Qāḍī said: All of this is an abandonment of the obvious sense (*ẓāhir*) and
> nothing in the process of striking similitudes (*tamthīl*) prevents one from
> expanding it.[46]

Al-Qurṭubī's teacher is drawing attention to what he perceives to be the danger

inherent in metaphors, their openness to endless interpretation. In his reply, al-

Qurṭubī explains why, then, metaphor is used in the Qur'ān. Metaphor is necessary

because man can only understand that of which he already has some knowledge,

namely himself and his world.

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[45] The Prophet's grandfather.
[46] Ibid. 12:263

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This [verse] is a similitude which God has struck for His light. It is only possible to strike a similitude for His exalted light as an exhortation to His creation by some part of His creation, because men, due to their limitations, can only understand by means of themselves. If that were not so, no one would know God except He Himself. Ibn al-'Arabī said it.[47]

The commentary of Ibn Kathīr on this verse will not be discussed here because it is so repetitive of al-Ṭabarī's, the only significant exceptions being Ibn Kathīr's omission of any interpretation of *His/his light* as Muḥammad and his citation of two additional relevant *ḥadīth*.[48] Instead we will look at the commentary of his teacher, Ibn Taymiyya, a commentary which is quite different than that of his student's because it is structured as a rebuttal to what appears to be a specific writing of an unnamed adversary.[49] While Ibn Kathīr's commentary includes very little of his own opinion, Ibn Taymiyya's commentary is polemical to a degree unprecedented in the other commentaries studied here. Al-Rāzī is as argumentative as Ibn Taymiyya but he is far more accepting of viewpoints other than his own. Ibn Taymiyya accuses his opponent of distorting (*taḥrīf*) the Qur'ān, apostasy (*ilḥād*)

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[47] Ibid. 264.

[48] Ibn Kathīr 3:289-92. One *ḥadīth* which Ibn Kathīr cites in three different versions is "God created His creation in darkness, then cast His light upon them. Whoever He hit with His light was guided and whoever He missed went astray." Wensinck states that this *ḥadīth* can be found in al-Tirmidhī, Imān 18 and Aḥmad b. Hanbāl 2:176, 197. The other *ḥadīth* is "There are four kinds of hearts: the heart which is open like a lamp which shines, the heart which is closed and bound up in its own covering, the heart which is inverted, and the heart which is layered. The open heart is the heart of the believer within which is his lamp and his light. The closed heart is the heart of the infidel. The inverted heart is the hypocrite who has come to know but then denies. The armored heart is the heart in which there is faith and hypocrisy. The faith in it is like greenery nourished by water and the hypocrisy in it is like the an ulcer expanded by blood and pus. Sometimes one is predominant, sometimes the other," 291-2.

[49] Many of the arguments Ibn Taymiyya quotes from his adversary are arguments found in Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's *Tafsir al-kabīr* and the section on *Nūr* in his *Sharḥ asmā' Allāh ta'ālā wa 'l-ṣifāt*, 346-8. The wording is similar enough to suspect that his opponent is al-Rāzī, but the fact that some of the arguments Ibn Taymiyya quotes are not found in either of these two books of al-Rāzī's, at least not in the passages studied here, makes it difficult to definitively identify him as such.

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with regards to God signs and names, lying (*kidhb*), iniquity (*zulm*), and enmity

towards the rights of God.[50]

Ibn Taymiyya's commentary is a point by point rebuttal which highlights

both the contradictions in his opponent's arguments and their pervertedness (*fasād*).

For our purposes, the most important material pertains to Ibn Taymiyya's response to

the claim that the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* must be

interpreted. Ibn Taymiyya not only rejects the necessity of interpreting this phrase,

he insists that the majority of Muslims do not interpret it, this being the view of the

first generations (*salaf*), the Attributionists (*sifātiyya*)[51] among the theologians,

jurists, Ṣūfīs and others. The interpretation of God's Attribute "Light", according to

Ibn Taymiyya, goes back to the *jahmiyya*[52] and the Muʿtazilī.[53]

Ibn Taymiyya's opponent claims that the phrase *God is the light of the*

heavens and the earth must be interpreted because "light is a mode of being

(*kayfiyya*) existing in corporeality which is the opposite (*didd*) of darkness and far be

it from God (*al-ḥaqq*) to have an opposite. If He were a light, then He would not

attribute it to Himself [as He does in *the similitude of His light*]."[54] Ibn Taymiyya

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[50] Ibn Taymiyya 5:422.

[51] This is what the Ashʿarīs and Ḥanbalīs called themselves because they believed that they alone affirmed God's attributes.

[52] The *jahmiyya* were an early sect, said to have been founded by Jahm b. Ṣafwān (d.746) who, like the Muʿtazilī, denied the distinct existence of God's attributes, and who therefore resorted to their interpretation (*ta'wīl*).

[53] Ibn Taymiyya 5:425, 439.

[54] Ibn Taymiyya, *Al-tafsīr al-kabīr* 5:421. Cf. al-Rāzī, in his *Sharḥ al-asmāʾ*: "Know that light is the name of that mode of being (*kayfiyya*) which has darkness as its opposite, and it is impossible that God (*al-ḥaqq*) could be that for several reasons. The first is that this mode of being (*kayfiyya*) comes and goes but it is inconceivable that God (*al-ḥaqq*) could be like that. The second reason is that bodies (*ajsām*) are alike in corporeality but different with regards to light and darkness, so that light is

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understands the term "light" as a word possessing different meanings appropriate to different contexts. He disagrees with the definition of light as a mode of being (*kayfiyya*) existing in corporeality, stating instead that created light can be either an essence ('*ayn*) or an accident ('*arāḍ*). An example of the first is fire while the second would be the reflective light of the fire on a wall. Only the second can be said to be a "mode of being existing by means of a body" as in Ibn Taymiyya's opponent's definition of light. In other words, sometimes the word light refers to a substance (*jawhar*) and sometimes to a quality (*ṣifa*). Similarly, the names of God sometimes refer to His essence and sometimes to His attributes. As an example of this, Ibn Taymiyya quotes a *ḥadīth*: "You are the Real (*al-ḥaqq*), Your Speech is the real (*al-ḥaqq*), the Garden is real (*ḥaqq*), the prophets are real (*ḥaqq*) and Muḥammad is real (*ḥaqq*)."[55]

As in this example of *ḥaqq*, Ibn Taymiyya understands the verse as meaning that light is part of God's essence as well as being one of His attributes, that is, God both is light and possesses light. Therefore, there is no contradiction between the first phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* and the second phrase *the similitude of His/his light*, and it would be wrong to interpret the first phrase to mean

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a mode of being in need of a body in which to exist, but the Necessary Existent (*wājib al-wujūd*) could never be like that. The third reason is that light is the contrary to darkness, and far be it from God (*al-ḥaqq*) to have an opposite (*didd*) or an antagonist. The fourth reason is that God said, *the similitude of His light*, so he attributed light to Himself. If he were a light then this attribution of a thing to Himself would be inconceivable. Therefore, God is not a light, nor is He a thing qualified by this mode of being because this mode of being can only be understood as established in bodies." 346-7. See also al-Rāzī's *Tafsīr al-kabīr* 23:223.
[55] Ibn Taymiyya 5:430.

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"God is the possessor of light," as do al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī. Ibn Tamiyya finds

further proof for accepting the Qur'ānic wording as it is in the *ḥadīth*: "O God, praise

be to You, light of the heavens and the earth and what is in them," and the Prophet's

reply to the question of how he saw his lord, "I see a light."[56] As for his opponent's

statement that God cannot have an opposite, Ibn Taymiyya points out that many of

God's attributes have opposites.[57]

Ibn Taymiyya's insistence that God is light, however, does not mean that he

rejects the comments of the first generations (*salaf*) regarding this light, comments

which he does not call *ta'wīl* but rather *tafsīr*. According to Ibn Taymiyya, saying

that God is the "Guide of the heavens and the earth" does not negate the fact of God

being Himself a light. Using many of the same examples that he uses in his

Muqaddama fī uṣūl al-tafsīr, Ibn Taymiyya explains that the custom of the first

generations (*salaf*) was to use different expressions and examples to explain the

meaning of the Qur'ān. When they said, "God is the Guide of the heavens and the

earth," they were making a statement regarding one of the meanings of *God is the*

light of the heavens and the earth, a statement which did not invalidate its other

meanings. Likewise, when they said, "God is the illuminator (*munawwir*) of the

heavens and the earth," they were not contradicting the fact of His being a light,

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[56] Ibid. 5:429. These are the *ḥadīth* which al-Qurṭubī says are misunderstood by corporealists.
[57] Ibid. 5:431.

because part of the definition of light is being something which illuminates

something else.[58]

One of the contradictions which Ibn Taymiyya points out in his opponent's

arguments is his acceptance of a Ṣūfī interpretation and rejection of a *salafī*

interpretation, interpretations which Ibn Taymiyya insists mean the same thing.

Interestingly, Ibn Taymiyya does not object to the Ṣūfī interpretation:

> Among the sayings of the gnostics (*'ārifūn*) is that *the light* is that which
> illuminates the hearts of the sincere by its declaration of God's unity (*tawḥīd*)
> and illuminates the innermost hearts (*asrār*) of the lovers by its confirmation.
> It is said that it is that which enlivens the hearts of the gnostics by the light of
> its knowledge (*ma'rifa*) and the souls of the worshippers by the light of its
> worship.[59]

According to Ibn Taymiyya, this Ṣūfī interpretation is the meaning of "the Guide" in

the *salafī* interpretation which his opponent calls weak.[60] After identifying this

contradiction in his opponent's arguments, Ibn Taymiyya comments on the

legitimacy of the Ṣūfī interpretation.

> This is the talk of some shaykhs who speak in a manner of admonition
> without verifying [what they say]. Shaykh Abū 'Abd al-Raḥmān in *Taḥqīq*

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[58] Ibid. 435-8, 440.

[59] Ibid. 422. Cf. al-Rāzī: The portion of the servant in [God's name light]: Know that the light of the heart is an expression for knowledge (*ma'rifa*) of God who said, *Anyone for whom God does not appoint a light has no light* (24:40). The shaykhs have said that light is that which illuminates the hearts of the sincere by its declaration of God's unity and illuminates the innermost hearts of the lovers by its confirmation. It is said that it is that which beautifies human beings by giving form (*taṣwīr*) and the innermost hearts (*asrār*) by illumination. It is said that it is that which enlivens the hearts of the gnostics by the light of its knowledge and enlivens the souls of the worshippers by the light of its worship (*Sharḥ al-asmā'* 348).

[60] In his *Sharḥ al-asmā'* al-Rāzī says the following after relating the interpretation of God as "Guide of the heavens and the earth": "Know that the commentary on the verse in this manner would be good (*ḥasan*) if not for the commentary on Light among the ninety-nine names. If it were to be "the Guide," then the mention of "the Guide" after it would be a complete repetition," 347. Ibn Taymiyya does not see this as a repetition because he does not accept a set number of names for God, and he insists that "the Guide" is only one of the meanings of "Light", 425, 428, 436.

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al-tafsīr[61] mentions allusions (*ishārāt*), some of which provide useful lessons and some of which come from invalid or rejected transmitted material. The allusions of the Ṣūfī shaykhs can be divided into allusion by state (*ishāra ḥāliyya*) which are their allusions by means of hearts, and it is this by which they are characterized, but this is not the case here; and allusions connected to teachings such as they take from the Qur'ān and the like. These allusions are in the category of consideration ('*itibār*), analogy (*qiyās*), and appending that which is not in a text to that which is in the text (*ilḥāq mā laysa bi-manṣūs bi'l-manṣūs*). These are like the consideration and analogy which jurists use in legal judgements. But the Ṣūfī shaykhs use them for inspiration (*targhīb*) and warning (*tarhīb*), virtuous deeds and degrees of men, and things like that.[62] If the allusion (*ishāra*) is considerative (*i'tibāriyya*) by virtue of a sound type of analogy (*qiyās*), it is good and acceptable. If the analogy is weak it is judged accordingly. If it is a distortion (*taḥrīf*) of the words beyond their [acceptable] interpretation, it is the type of sayings of the *qarāmiṭa*, the *bāṭiniyya*,[63] and the *jahmiyya*.[64]

Ibn Taymiyya distinguishes himself from al-Qurṭubī here in his forthright acceptance of some kinds of analogy made on the part of the interpreter,[65] although it would be a mistake to overestimate the license Ibn Taymiyya gives, since one assumes that what he meant by sound analogies are those which can be clearly substantiated by means of Qur'ānic verses, sound *ḥadīth*, and *salafī* interpretations. Regarding those

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[61] This title appears to be an error since Ibn Taymiyya is clearly referring to al-Sulamī's *Ḥaqā'iq al-tafsīr*.

[62] Ibn Taymiyya's choice of words here shows that he is following the teachings of Aḥmad b. Ḥanbal with regards to using material which is judged weak in transmission. Elsewhere, Ibn Taymiyya quotes Ibn Ḥanbal as saying, "'If a tradition deals with *ḥalāl* and *ḥarām* (legal matters) we are strict regarding chains of transmission and if it deals with *targhīb* and *tarhīb* we are lenient.' Ibn Taymiyya points out that this is one of the reasons why the 'ulamā' use *al-ḥadīth al-ḍa'īf* (weak tradition) for *faḍā'il al-'amal* (virtuous deeds). By so doing, they do not intend, however, to make them the basis of legal suggested deeds (*istiḥbāb*) for *istiḥbāb* is an Islamic legal matter which should be based on an Islamic legal argument (*dalīl shar'ī*)" (Syafruddin, 68; the quote from Ibn Ḥanbal is found in Ibn Taymiyya's *Majmū' fatāwā Ibn Taymiyya: al-ḥadīth*, vol. 18, 65 Rabat: Maktabat al-ma'ārif, n.d.).

[63] On the *bāṭiniyya*, see Part I, note 30.

[64] Ibid. 5:423.

[65] As we saw in Part I, Al-Qurṭubī makes an explicit statement rejecting the use of analogy in interpretation. Responding to al-Ghazālī's mention of those who say that Pharoah represents the hard heart, al-Qurṭubī wrote, "it is prohibited because it is an analogy (*qiyās*) in language which is not permitted," *Al-Jāmi' li-aḥkām al-Qurān* 1:33.

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analogies which should be rejected, Ibn Taymiyya and al-Qurṭubī are in agreement that these contain what Ibn Taymiyya calls "distortion (*taḥrīf*)" of the Qur'ānic text and al-Qurṭubī and Abū Bakr b. al-'Arabī call "abandonment of the obvious sense (*zāhir*)."

Sūfī commentaries

While exoteric commentators were careful to limit the permissible ways of understanding the meaning of light in this verse, the Ṣūfīs had no difficulty with expanding it. Ja'far al-Ṣādiq provides a long list of the varied manifestations of God's light and the hierarchy of those who possess it, God, Muḥammad, and the believers.

> *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*....Ja'far b. Muḥammad said: The lights are different. The first of them is the light of the protection of the heart, then the light of fear, then the light of hope, then the light of recollection, then vision by the light of knowledge, then the light of modesty (*ḥayā*'), then the light of the sweetness of faith, then the light of Islam, then the light of doing beautiful acts (*iḥsān*), then the light of blessing, then the light of grace, then the light of benefits, then the light of generosity, then the light of affection, then the light of the heart, then the light of comprehension (*iḥāṭa*), then the light of awe, then the light of bewilderment, then the light of life, then the light of intimacy (*uns*), then the light of uprightness, then the light of humility, then the light of tranquillity, then the light of grandeur, then the light of majesty, then the light of power, then the light of might,[66] then the light of divinity, then the light of oneness, then the light of singularity, then the light of eternity, then the light of endless time, then the light of eternity without beginning or end, then the light of permanence, then the light of sempiternity, then the light of subsistence (*baqā*'), then the light of universality, then the light of He-ness (*huwiyya*).
> Each of these lights has a people, a state (*ḥāl*), and a place (*maḥall*) and all of them are part of the lights of God (*al-ḥaqq*) which God mentioned in His

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[66] Nwyia's edition repeats majesty (*jalāl*) here, so I have used "might" (*ḥawl*) from Rūzbihān al-Baqlī's version 2:84.

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words, *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.* Each one of His servants is drinking from one of these lights and perhaps has a portion of two or three lights. These lights will not become complete for anyone except Muṣṭafā because he stands with God by virtue of being rendered sound in servanthood and love (*tashīḥ al-'ubūdiyya wa 'l-maḥabba*). He is a light and is in a light from his Lord (*huwa nūr wa huwa min rabbihi 'alā nūr*).[67]

Ja'far al-Ṣādiq's comments can be seen as an amplification of the tradition attributed

to Ubayy b. Ka'b describing five different kinds of light in the believer.[68] Ja'far al-

Ṣādiq explicitly links these lights to God, saying "all of them are part of the lights of

God," and describes Muḥammad as possessing these lights to perfection, so much

that "he is a light."

Sahl al-Tustarī's recorded comments on the Light Verse follow some of the

salafī interpretations we have already seen.

> *God is the light of the heavens and the earth,* meaning the one who adorns (*muzayyin*) the heavens and the earth with lights. *The similitude of his light,* i.e., the similitude of the light of Muḥammad. Al-Ḥasan al-Baṣrī said: What is meant by that is the heart of the believer and the light of the declaration of God's unity (*tawḥīd*) because the lights of the prophets are more illuminated than can be described by the similitude of these lights. He also said: The light is the similitude for the Qur'ān,the lamp of lamps, and its lamp is gnosis (*ma'rifa*) and its wick is the obligatory duties. Its oil is sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) and its light is the light of joining (*ittiṣāl*). Whenever sincerity increases in purity, the lamp increases in brightness, and whenever the obligatory duties increase in reality, the lamp increases in light.[69]

Al-Tustarī prefers here the interpretation of *the similitude of His/his light* as referring

to Muḥammad. As we saw in al-Ṭabarī, this was the interpretation of Ka'b al-Aḥbār

and Sa'īd b. Jubayr, and al-Rāzī records another version attributed to Muqātil.

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[67] Ja'far al-Ṣādiq 211-2. Also quoted in Rūzbihān 2:84.

[68] Al-Ṭabarī 18:138; Ibn Kathīr 3:291. Ubayy's comments are quoted above in the description of al-Ṭabarī's commentary on the Light Verse.

[69] Al-Tustarī 68.

Because Muḥammad is described as "a light-giving lamp (*sirāj munīr*)" in Qur'ānic

verse 33:46, the interpretation is not a controversial one. What distinguishes al-

Tustarī's exegesis, however, is his description elsewhere of the role of light in the

creation of Muḥammad and the believers. Commenting on verse 7:172 which tells of

the primordial covenant between God and mankind,[70] al-Tustarī describes three types

of seeds representing future mankind which existed primordially. The first type of

seed was Muḥammad who was created directly from God's light.

> God Most High, when he wished to create Muhammad (the blessings and
> peace of God upon him), manifested some of his light. When it attained the
> veil of majesty, it bowed down in prayer before Allah. Allah created from
> the position of prayer a great column like a glass of light, as both his interior
> and exterior. In it is the *'ayn* (very being, essence, source, eye) of
> Muhammad, God's blessings and peace upon him. He stood in service before
> the lord of the two worlds for one thousand thousand years with the
> dispositions of faith, the beholding of faith, the unveiling of certitude, and the
> witness of the lord.[71]

The second type of seed was Ādam who was created from the light of Muḥammad.

The third type of seed was mankind, the children of Ādam. Those who are guides,

who "are desired" (*murādūn*) were created from the light of Muḥammad, while those

who are seekers (*murīdūn*) were created from the light of Ādam.[72] For al-Tustarī, we

are created directly or indirectly from Muḥammad's light,[73] and we will return to the

divine light.[74]

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[70] The verse is: *When your Lord took from the children of Ādam their seed (dhurriyya) and caused them to bear witness concerning themselves, "Am I not your Lord?" They said, "Yes, we bear witness." That so they may say on the Day of Resurrection, "We forgot this."*

[71] Al-Tustarī 40-1, The English translation here is that of Sells, *Early Islamic Mysticism* 11.

[72] Ibid. 41. A full English translation of this passage can be found in Sells 93-4 and is discussed in Böwering 153-4.

[73] As a later Ṣūfī, Farīduddīn 'Aṭṭār (d.1220), put it in his *Muṣībatnāme*:

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The concept of the light of Muḥammad continued in the writings of al-Ḥallāj, who was a disciple of al-Tustarī for a brief period of time. However, like al-Tustarī, these views are not found in the commentary attributed to him regarding the Light Verse. Instead, he repeats many aspects of al-Tustarī's theory of Muḥammad's light in the first chapter of his *Kitāb al-ṭawāsīn*.[75] The fragments recorded of al-Ḥallāj's exegesis of the Light Verse pertain to the two other members of the hierarchy of those who possess light, God and the believers; al-Ḥallāj associates the first part of the verse with the manifestations of God and the second part with the qualities of the believer.

> The evidence (*shawāhid*) of His lordliness and indications of His oneness are manifested in the cosmos (*kawn*) by means of the subtleties of His lights which He causes to appear within them. If this were not so, then He would not have said, *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.* [Al-Ḥallāj] also said: He compared the heart to a candle whose water is certainty (*yaqīn*), and whose oil is patience (*ṣabr*) and the sincerity (*ikhlāṣ*) which develops from it, and whose wick is trust in God (*tawakkul*), and whose light is contentment

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The origin of the soul is the absolute light, nothing else,
That means it was the light of Muhammad, nothing else.
(Trans. by Schimmel in her *Mystical Dimensions* 215). The concept of the Muḥammadan light (*nūr Muḥammadī*) was a controversial one, with some scholars such as al-Ghazālī and Ibn Taymiyya rejecting the notion of Muḥammad's pre-existence, instead interpreting the primordial creation of Muhammad as referring only to predestination. A less controversial term which later Ṣūfis adopted to describe Muhammad's primordial nature was the Muḥammadan reality (*ḥaqīqa Muḥammadiyya*), a term often discussed with reference to the Light Verse (Rubin, "*Nūr Muḥammadī*" in EI²).

[74] Böwering, on the basis of his reading of al-Tustarī's entire Qur'ānic commentary, summarizes al-Tustarī's vision of the relationship between God, Muḥammad, and man as follows: "God is light that issues forth in its radiance and articulates itself in the primordial light of Muḥammad the primal man and archetypal mystic. This divine light pervades the whole universe of the this-worldly and other-worldly realities and represents the hidden marrow of their existence....The primordial Muḥammad represents the crystal which draws the divine light upon itself, absorbs it in its core (the heart of Muḥammad), projects it unto mankind in the Qur'ānic scripture, and enlightens the soul of mystic man....Man issues as an infinitely small particle of divine light in pre-existential eternity and achieves his final fulfillment as he is engulfed by the divine light in post-existential eternity (*Mystical Vision* 264-5).

[75] Al-Ḥallāj, *Al-Dīwān* 119-22; English trans. by al-Tarjumana, 19-23.

(*riḍā*). If it is characterized by this quality, the flavor of life can be found in its light.[76]

God made submission (*islām*) a light for His people, and faith a light for His people, and assent (*taṣdīq*) a light in the heart of the believer. Knowledge (*'ilm*), intelligence (*'aql*) and insight (*baṣīra*) are lights. All of the moral traits (*akhlāq*) of the believers are lights. All of the acts of worship are lights and the nearness of the servants to God is in proportion with their lights.[77]

God is both "the light of light" (*nūr al-nūr*)[78] and "the illuminator (*munawwir*) of

your hearts until you come to know and find (*wajadtum*)."[79] At this point the

believer becomes full of light.

In the head is the light of revelation (*waḥy*), and in the two eyes is the light of intimate dialogue with God (*munājāt*), and in the ears is the light of certainty (*yaqīn*), and in the tongue is the light of clarity (*bayān*), and in the breast is the light of faith (*īmān*), and in the natural properties (*tabā'i*) is the light of glorifying God (*tasbīḥ*). When something catches fire from these lights it overwhelms the other light and incorporates it into its authority. When it has subsided the authority of that light returns and you are increased by what happened. When everything catches fire it becomes *light upon light. God guides whom He wills to His light.*[80]

Another distinctive element of these early Ṣūfī interpretations of the Light

Verse is the comparison made between the macrocosm of the universe and the

microcosm of man, a type of analogical thinking which is pervasive in the later

commentaries of al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī. Ibn 'Aṭā, al-Ḥallāj's contemporary,

explains what it is that God illuminates in the *heavens and the earth.*

God adorned (*zayyana*) the heavens with the twelve signs of the zodiac, and they are the Ram, the Bull, the Twins, the Crab, the Lion, the Ears of Corn (Virgo), the Scales, the Scorpion, the Archer, the Sea Goat, the Water Bearer,

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[76] Al-Sulamī 105.

[77] Ibid. 106.

[78] Rūzbihān 2:85. Also in Massignon, *Essai* 385.

[79] Ibid. Massignon 385.

[80] Ibid. Massignon 385-6. Also quoted in Maybudī, 6:546-7.

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and the Fish. He adorned the hearts of the believers with twelve characteristics: the mind (*dhihn*), attention (*intibāh*), explanation (*sharh*), intelligence (*'aql*), knowledge (*ma 'rifa*), certainty (*yaqīn*), understanding (*fahm*), insight (*basīra*), the life of the heart (*qalb*), hope, fear and life. As long as these signs of the zodiac exist the world will be in order and abundance. Similarly, as long as these characteristics exist in the heart of the gnostic (*'ārif*), there will be the light of the gnostic and the sweetness of worship.[81]

Al-Wasītī shows how the microcosm, man, is illuminated directly by God.

God created the spirits (*arwāh*) before the bodies (*ajsād*). He illuminated them by His attributes (*sifāt*) and addressed them by means of His essence (*dhāt*), so they are illuminated and receive light by means of the light of His sanctity (*quds*). He told of it in His words *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* because He is the illuminator (*munawwir*) of the spirits (*arwāh*) by the perfection of His light.[82]

The believer is both created from light and engaged in an ongoing process of

receiving light. To reach the higher states of *light upon light* the believer must be

determined in his resolve to avoid man's natural tendency towards laziness, to allow

himself to respond to the different states through which he travels, using the tension

between them to motivate himself to continue in his exertions. This is how the

phrase *neither of the east nor the west* was understood by Ja'far al-Sādiq:

Neither the fear which imposes despair nor the hope which brings about delight. One should stand between fear and hope.[83]

The interpretation is reminiscent of the tradition attributed to Ubayy b. Ka'b where

he compares the *blessed olive tree neither of the east nor the west* to the believer who

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[81] Ibid. 2:83.
[82] Ibid. 2:85.
[83] Ja'far al-Sādiq 212.

balances four characteristics in response to life's vicissitudes.[84] However, Ubayy b.

Ka'b's version describes a state of moderation and equilibrium while the Ṣūfī

interpretations are characterized by a sense of movement and tension. This is most

obvious in al-Qushayrī's interpretation which begins with a reference to one of the

exoteric interpretations.

> *Neither of the east* so that the sun would reach it in the morning but not the
> evening, *nor the west* so that the sun would reach it in the evening but not the
> morning, but rather the sun would reach it throughout the day in order to
> perfect the ripening of its olives and perfect the purity of its oil.
> The allusion (*ishāra*) in it is to the fact that the fear in their hearts should
> not be separate from the hope so that one would come close to despair.
> Neither should their hope be separate from fear so that one would come close
> to complacence. Rather the two should be balanced so that one does not
> prevail over the other. Their awe (*hayba*) should come together with their
> intimacy (*uns*), their contracted state (*qabḍ*) with their expanded state (*basṭ*),
> their consciousness (*saḥw*) with their effacement (*maḥw*), their subsistence
> (*baqā'*) with their annihilation (*fanā'*), their performance of the manners
> (*ādāb*) of the religious law (*sharī'a*) with their realization (*taḥaqquq*) of the
> all-comprehensive reality (*jawām 'i'l-ḥaqīqa*).[85]

The aspirant proceeds in this state of flux, a process which combines both his efforts

and God's grace. *Light upon light* appears to him in his different states until he

reaches a stage where words can no longer describe what has been unveiled to him.

Al-Qushayrī is usually thought of as a moderate Ṣūfī, but what he describes at the

end of this passage appears to hint at the controversial understanding common to

many Ṣūfīs of God's unity.

> It is said that the effect of the light of the heart is the continuance of a state
> of agitation which does not allow one to remain lazy. One comes to his

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[84] Al-Ṭabarī 18:128; Ibn Kathīr 3:291. Quoted above in the description of al-Ṭabarī's commentary on the Light Verse.

[85] Al-Qushayrī 4:284.

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journey by the use of his reflection (*fikr*) and God nourishes him by the light of the success He grants (*tawfiq*) until none of the obstacles to spiritual effort (*ijtihad*) can hold him back, neither love of leadership, nor the inclination to evil, nor indulgence. When the truth of one's forgetfulness is disclosed and vision takes hold of his situation, knowledge will be most certainly obtained. Then he will continue to increase in certainty (*yaqin*) upon certainty based on what he sees in the interaction of contraction (*qabd*) and expansion (*bast*). The reward and compensation is in the increase of unveiling (*kashf*) upon the increase in effort (*juhd*) and the obtainment of ecstasy (*wajd*) upon the performance of litany (*wird*).

Then after it there is the light of interaction (*mu'amala*), then the light of the mutual waystation (*munazala*), then the broad daylight of the connection (*muwasala*). The suns of the declaration of unity (*tawhid*) shine and there are no clouds in the sky of their secrets and no fog in its air. God said, *light upon light, God guides whom He wills to His light.*

It is said that the light of appeal (*mutalaba*) appears in the heart and prompts its owner to settle his account. When he has seen his record and his prior disobedience, the light of examination (*mu'ayana*) comes to him and he reverts to blaming himself and drinks cups of remorse. Then he rises up from this by persistence in his goal and purification from what remained with him from the times of his lassitude. When he has become upright in that which was revealed by the light of observation (*muraqaba*), then he knows that God watches over him. After this is the light of beholding (*muhadara*) which are flashes (*lawa'ih*) which appear in the innermost hearts (*sara'ir*). Then after that is the light of unveiling (*mukashafa*) and that is by means of the self-disclosure (*tajalli*) of the attributes (*sifat*). Then after it is the light of witnessing (*mushahada*) and his night becomes day, his stars moons, and his moons full moons, and his full moons suns.

Then after this are the lights of the declaration of oneness (*tawhid*) and at that time disengagement (*tajrid*) is realized by the qualities of single-mindedness (*tafrid*). Then no expression ('*ibara*) can encompass it and no allusion (*ishara*) can comprehend it. Explanations at that point become silent, evidence is effaced and the witnessing of another is absurd. This is the point *when the sun will be wrapped up, when the stars will become dull, when the mountains will be set moving, and when the pregnant camels will be neglected* (81:4) and *when heaven will be split asunder* (84:1) and *split open* (82:1). All of these are different parts of the universe and that which was from nonexistence in them will end up in nonexistence. That which subsists through them is other than them and that which exists through them is other than them. Unity (*ahadiyya*) is exalted, everlastingness is sublime, perpetuity (*daymumiyya*) is sanctified, and the divinity is unblemished.[86]

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[86] Ibid. 4:285-6.

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At this point it becomes clear that we are a far way from the exoteric understanding

of light as a symbol of God's guidance. The solid boundaries of man and the

universe are called into question by al-Qushayrī's description here of man as process

viewing a world which is dissolving. The focus is on the mystery of God's unity

rather the guidance he sends to man. When exoteric commentaries speak of light as

God's guidance, it is plain what is meant by the metaphor. In Ṣūfī interpretations of

the Light Verse, however, it is unclear exactly what is meant by the term "light" and

al-Qushayrī goes so far as to suggest that language is useless to describe the ultimate

nature of things.

Al-Maybudī's commentary begins with a simple explanation of what is meant

by the term "light".

> *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.* God is a light and light, in
> truth, is what illuminates something else. Anything which does not
> illuminate something else cannot be called light. The sun is a light, the moon
> is a light, and a lamp is a light, not because they illuminate themselves but
> because they are the illuminators of other things. The mirror and the jewel
> are examples of things which we do not call light (even though they are
> themselves illuminated) because they do not illuminate anything else. The
> reality of this is known by the fact that *God is the light of the heavens and the
> earth.*[87]

The distinction al-Maybudī makes here between essential and accidental light is the

same as that made by al-Rāzī and Ibn Taymiyya although he does not use the

philosophical/theological terminology they use.[88] Unlike them, however, al-

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[87] Al-Maybūdī 6:542.
[88] Al-Rāzī 23:223; Ibn Taymiyya 5:429.

Maybudī continues his definition with an additional distinction between the outward

(*zāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) lights which are given by God to the universe and man.

The outward lights of the universe will eventually disappear but the inward lights of

the believer will remain forever.

> God gives light to the heavens and the earth, the believers and the friends; he
> is the fashioner of forms (*ashbāḥ*) and the illuminator of spirits (*arwāḥ*). All
> lights are from him and the arrangement of everything is in two parts, some
> of it outward (*zāhir*) and some of it inward (*bāṭin*). Regarding the outward
> He said, *We have made a blazing lamp* (78:13) [i.e., the sun], and regarding
> the inward He said, *Is one whose breast God has opened to Islam so that he is
> in a light from his Lord...* (39:22).
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> Even though the outward light is bright, it is the follower and servant of the
> inward light. The outward light is the sun and the moon and the inner light is
> the light of the declaration of oneness (*tawḥīd*) and gnosis (*ma'rifat*).
> Although the light of the sun and the moon is beautiful and shining, it is
> eclipsed at the end of the day and tomorrow, at the Resurrection, they will
> become dull and wrapped up as in His words, *When the sun is wrapped up*
> (81:1). But the sun of gnosis (*ma'rifat*) and the light of the declaration of
> oneness (*tawḥīd*) which arise from the ascension of the hearts of the believers
> will never be eclipsed or become dull. Their rising is without setting, an
> unveiling without eclipse, an illumination from the station of longing
> (*istiyāq*). It is recited:

> > The sun of the day sets at night
> > but the sun of hearts never disappears.[89]

The inner lights of the believer are detailed in a passage very much like the

interpretation of Ja'far al-Ṣādiq, and like him, al-Maybudī states that Muḥammad

possesses the totality and perfection of these lights.

> Know that the inner lights are different in their respective degrees. The first
> is the light of submission (*islām*) and with submission is the light of sincerity
> (*ikhlāṣ*). Another light is faith (*īmān*) and with faith is the light of
> truthfulness (*ṣidq*). Another light is doing beautiful acts (*iḥsān*) and with
> doing beautiful acts is the light of certainty (*yaqīn*). The splendor of

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[89] Al-Maybudī 6:542.

submission is in the light of sincerity and the splendor of faith is in the light of truthfulness and the splendor of doing beautiful acts is in the light of certainty. These are waystations (*manāzil*) on the path of the religious law (*sharī'a*) and stations (*maqāmāt*) of the general believers. There is another light and state (*ḥāl*) as well for the people of truth (*ahl al-ḥaqīqat*) and the spiritual warriors (*javanmardān*) of the way (*ṭarīqat*), the light of perspicacity (*firāsat*) and with perspicacity is the light of unveiling (*mukāshifat*). There is also the light of uprightness (*istiqāmat*) and the light of witnessing (*mushāhadat*). There is also the light of declaring God's unity (*tawḥīd*) and with declaring God's unity there is the light of nearness (*qurbat*) in the presence of "withness" (*'indiyyat*).

Until the servant has been in these stations (*maqāmāt*), he will be a captive to his own way. From here the allurement of the truth (*ḥaqq*) begins again, a divine attraction (*jadhba*) which unites and connects the lights, the light of grandeur, the light of majesty, the light of subtlety, the light of beauty, the light of awe, the light of jealousy, the light of nearness, the light of divinity, and the light of he-ness (*huwiyyat*). These are those of which the Lord of the Worlds said, *light upon light.*

The situation reaches the point where servanthood (*'ubūdiyyat*) becomes invisible in the light of lordship (*rubūbiyyat*). In all the world these lights have only reached perfection and nearness to the possessor of majesty in the Arab Muṣṭafā.[90] Everyone has a part of these but he has the whole because he is entirely perfect, the totality of beauty and the *qibla* of virtues.[91]

The similitude of his light. One group of commentators has said that the pronoun "his" refers to Muṣṭafā, since his character was light, his robe of honor light, his lineage light, his birth light, his witnessing light, his interactions light, and his miracle light. He himself was in his own essence *light upon light.* His superiority was such that in his face was the light of mercy, in his eyes the light of admonition, in his speech the light of wisdom, in the space between his shoulders the light of prophecy, in his palms the light of munificence, in his feet the light of service, in his hair the light of beauty, in his disposition the light of humility, in his breast the light of contentment, in his secret the light of purity, in his essence the light of obedience, in his obedience the light of declaring the unity of God (*tawḥīd*), in his declaring the unity of God the light of realization (*taḥqīq*), in his realization the light of God's good fortune (*tawfīq*), in his silence the light of exaltation, in his exaltation the light of declaring surrender (*taslīm*). A poem:

The messenger has a sword by which he is illuminated

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[90] One of the epithets of Muḥammad which means "the chosen one".
[91] Ibid. 6:542-3.

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A sword of Indian steel drawn from amongst the swords of God.[92]

In these passages, al-Maybudī combines many of the themes distinctive to previous Sūfī commentaries on this verse: a comparison of outward (*zāhir*) and inward (*bāṭin*) types of light belonging to the universe (or macrocosm) and man (microcosm), an extensive use of the term "light" to describe the states and virtues of the believer, and a description of Muhammad's perfection in this regard. Where al-Maybudī distinguishes himself from the others studied here is in the way he uses *hadīth* and traditions to illustrate the reality of the light which the believers possess. The first of these illustrations is a *hadīth* which demonstrates the superior light of those believers who have suffered the most.

> It is related that Abū Saʿīd al-Khudrī[93] said: I was among a group of poor emigrants, some of whom were veiling others from their nakedness. We were listening to the recitation of the Qur'ān. The Prophet came up and stood over us. The reciter saw him and became silent. He greeted him and said, "What are you doing?" We said, "O Messenger of God, the reciter is reciting to us and we are listening to his recitation." The Messenger of God said, "Praise be to God who has made those in my community towards whom I have been commanded to make myself patient." Then he sat down amidst us in order to occupy himself with us....The faces [of the poor emigrants] became illuminated...The Prophet said, "Rejoice you who have nothing! You will enter the garden in perfect light before the wealthy believers by half of a day whose reckoning will be five hundred years."[94]

The next *hadīth* which al-Maybudī cites is a variation of the one found in Ibn Kathīr:[95] "God created His creation in darkness, then cast some of His light upon

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[92] Ibid. 6:546.
[93] A Companion of the Prophet who died ca.682-3.
[94] Ibid. 6:543.
[95] See above.

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them."[96] Al-Maybudī understands the *hadīth* both as referring to a light which

became part of man in primordial time and a light which may be cast into the

believer's heart during his lifetime in this world.

> The similitude of this light is such that Muṣṭafā has said, "God created the creation in darkness then sprinkled upon them some of His light." Mankind was a handful of dust remaining in their own darkness, a darkness whose quality had become bewilderment, remaining unaware in the veil of creation. Everything in the pre-eternal heavens received the rain of the lights of eternity. The dust became narcissus, the stone became the jewel, the color of the heavens and the earth followed in each other's footsteps. It is said that the quality of "dustness" is everything which is darkness and a quality is everything which should be bright and pure. A subtle substance (*laṭīfa*) became joined to that quality, and the expression for that subtle substance is found in "He sprinkled upon them some of His light." They asked, "O Messenger of God, what are the signs of this light?"[97] He said, "When the light is made to enter the heart, the breast expands." When the standard of the just sultan enters the city, no seat remains for the crowd. When the breast becomes open with the divine light, the aspiration (*himma*) becomes high, the sad becomes tranquil, and the enemy the friend. Dispersion becomes union (*jam'*) in the heart, the carpet of subsistence (*baqā'*) is spread out while the mat of annihilation (*fanā'*) is rolled up, and the cloister of the anxiety is bolted while the garden of union (*wiṣāl*) is opened.[98]

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[96] Al-Ghazālī refers to this *hadīth* in a passage from his autobiography explaining the experience which led him to Ṣūfism: "At length God Most High cured me of that sickness. My soul regained its health and equilibrium and once again I accepted the self-evident data of reason and relied on them with safety and certainty. But that was not achieved by constructing a proof or putting together an argument. On the contrary, it was the effect of a light which God Most High cast into my breast. And that light is the key to most knowledge....And it is this of which the Apostle–God's blessing and peace be upon him!–said: "God Most High created men in darkness, then sprinkled on them some of His light. From that light then, the unveiling of truth must be sought" (trans. by McCarthy, *Freedom and Fulfillment* 66). Al-Ghazālī also refers to this *hadīth* in his *Mishkāt al-anwār*, 12.

[97] In a similar passage of his commentary al-Maybudī writes, "A shaykh was asked, 'What is the sign of that light?' He replied, Its sign is that through that light the servant knows God without finding Him, loves Him without seeing Him, turns away from being occupied with and remembering himself through being occupied with and remembering Him. He finds ease and rest in His lane, he tells secrets to His friends and asks favors from them. By day he is busy with religion's work, by night intoxicated with certainty's tidings. By day he dwells with creatures of good character, by night with the Real, fixed in sincerity." (7:455; English trans. by Murata, *Tao of Islam* 27).

[98] Ibid. 6:543-4.

Al-Maybudī's last illustration is a long story which he says is taken from the

traditions concerning an unnamed scholar who was one of the Followers. The

scholar had been captured while participating in one of the military campaigns

against the Roman army and had remained among the Romans for some time. One

day he was present amongst some thirty thousand Romans who had gathered in the

desert to hear a bishop who came out of his monastery once every four years to give

advice to the people. The bishop ascended the pulpit but stood there without

speaking. Finally he told his audience that he was unable to speak to them because

of the Muslim amongst them. The people did not know who this was and the

Muslim was afraid to identify himself, but the bishop was able to find him by

looking closely into the faces of the people. He asked him to come speak with him.

[The narrator of this tale said]: He said to me, "You are a Muslim?"
I said, "Yes, I am a Muslim."
He said, "Are you among those who are knowledgeable or ignorant"
I said, "Regarding that which I know I am knowledgeable and that which I do not know I am a student. I am not one of the ignorant."
He said, "I have three questions I would like to ask you and have you answer."
I said, "I will give you the answers on the condition that you tell me how you recognized me and on the condition that I may ask you three questions." The two made a pact and a promise.
[The narrator continued.] Then the bishop put his mouth to my ear and softly whispered in a voice hidden from the Romans, "I knew you by the light of your faith. I recognized the light of faith and unity in you which shone from your face." Then, in a loud voice he questioned me. "Your messenger has said to you that Paradise is a tree of which every lofty chamber is a branch. What is the similitude of that in the world?"
I said, "The similitude of that tree in the world is the sun, with an orb every ray of which is a branch."
The bishop said, "You have spoken truly." He asked the second question: "Your messenger said that the people of Paradise consume food and drink but

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no defilement comes out of them. What is the similitude of that in the world?"

I said, "The embryo in the womb of its mother who eats but does not defecate."

The bishop said, "You have spoken truly." He asked the third question. "The messenger of God said that on the Day of Resurrection every morsel, atom, and grain of alms will be like a great mountain in the Scales. What is the similitude of that in the world?"

I said, "When the sun rises at daybreak or sets in the evening it causes the ruins of a house which is in reality short to appear tall."

The bishop said, "You have spoken truly."

Then the Muslim asked him, "What is the number of the doors of the Gardens?"

He said, "Eight".

He said "What are the number of the doors of Hell?"

He said, "Seven".

He said, "What is it that is written on the door of the Garden?"

The Muslim said that when he asked this of him, the bishop was unable to give an answer. The Romans called out to him to give an answer so that this stranger would not say that the bishop did not know. The bishop said, "If this answer is forced, it will not bode well for the belt (*zunnār*)[99] and the cross." He tore open his belt and threw down his cross and said in a loud voice, "It is written on the door of the Garden that there is no God but God and Muḥammad is the messenger of God!"[100]

When the Romans heard this they began to throw rocks and insults at the bishop.

The bishop wept and called out to tell the people that seven hundred angels were coming to carry seven hundred martyrs to their deaths, and it did come to pass that seven hundred Romans joined the bishop that day in becoming Muslims and were killed by their fellow Romans. Al-Maybudī tells us that

the point of this tale is that the light of that one believer who declared the unity of God shone amongst the handful of fighters and infidels so that the bishop saw and did what he did.[101]

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[99] The *zunnār* was a belt or girdle worn about the waist by Eastern Christians.
[100] Ibid. 6:545.
[101] Ibid. 6:546

In this story the inner light of the believer is not merely a metaphor for faith, but a perceptible light which can be seen, at least by some.

Al-Maybudī began his exegesis with a definition of light and a distinction made between outward and inner light. These are topics which al-Ghazālī addresses in a more comprehensive and systematic way in his *Mishkāt al-anwār*. He explains the various interpretations of the Light Verse by examining the different definitions of light they presuppose. The understanding of light found amongst the Ṣūfīs is judged to be superior to that of other interpretations, but it is not an interpretation that should be widely broadcast. As we saw in commentaries on verse 3:7, the Ṣūfīs asserted that the Qur'ān contains both public knowledge which should be disseminated and private knowledge which is made deliberately obscure except to those few intended to receive it.[102] Al-Ghazālī refers to this principle in the introduction to the *Mishkāt* and furthermore explains why, then, he has revealed some of this private information.

> What is more, not every mystery (*sirr*) is to be unveiled and divulged, and not every reality (*ḥaqīqa*) is to be presented and disclosed. Indeed, "the breasts of the free (*aḥrār*) are the graves of the mysteries." One of the gnostics has said, "To divulge the mystery of Lordship (*rubūbiyya*) is unbelief (*kufr*)." Indeed, the Master of the First and the Last [the Prophet] said, "There is a kind of knowledge like the guise of the hidden; none knows it except the knowers of God. When they speak of it, none denies it except those who are arrogantly deluded about God."[103] And when the people of arrogant delusion become many, it becomes necessary to protect the coverings upon the face of the mysteries. But I see you as one whose breast has been opened up by God through light whose innermost consciousness (*sirr*) has been kept free of the darknesses of delusion. Hence, in this discipline I will not be niggardly

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[102] See above.

[103] This *ḥadīth* is not found in Wensinck's *Concordance*.

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toward you in alluding (*ishāra*) to sparks (*lawāmi'*) and flashes (*lawā'iḥ*) or giving symbols (*ramz*) of realities (*ḥaqā'iq*) and subtleties (*daqā'iq*), for the fear of holding back knowledge from those who are worthy of it is not less than that in disseminating it to those who are not worthy of it.

> He who bestows (*manaḥa*) knowledge on the ignorant wastes it,
> And he who withholds it (*mana'a*) from the worthy has done them wrong.[104]

With this said, al-Ghazālī proceeds to the first section of his treatise on the definition of different types of light, and his interpretation of the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth.*

Al-Ghazālī asserts that the term "light" is understood in three different ways. The first usage (*waḍ'*) is that of ordinary people ('*āmmī*) and indicates manifestation (*ẓuhūr*) to visual perception. "Light" here "is an expression for what can be seen in itself and through which other things can be seen, like the sun."[105] Now, perception (*idrāk*) depends on both the existence of light and the existence of an eye which sees. According to al-Ghazālī, the term "light" is more appropriately applied to the seeing eye than to the seen light because the eye perceives and through it perception takes places whereas seen light is merely the place where perception takes place.[106]

This second definition of the term "light" referring to the organ of perception involved occurs among the elect (*khawāṣṣ*). But the perception of the eye is not without defect, and al-Ghazālī suggests that a more perfect perceiver would be more

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[104] Al-Ghazālī, *Mishkāt al-anwār* 2. The English translation here is that of Buchman 1-2, although I have added some of the transliterated Arabic.

[105] Ibid. 4.

[106] Al-Ghazālī's provides several examples of the use of term "light" for the seeing eye in the Arabic language, e.g. the "light of the eyesight of the bat is weak" (*fa-qālū fī'l-khuffāsh inna nūr 'aynihi ḍa'īf*) 4.

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worthy of the term. This more perfect "eye" is the intellect (*'aql*), a term itself which requires definition.

> Know that there is an "eye" in the heart (*qalb*) of men whose quality of perfection is this [freedom from the defects of the physical eye]. It is this which is sometimes referred to as the intellect (*'aql*), sometimes the spirit (*rūḥ*), and sometimes the human soul (*al-nafs al-insāniyya*). Leave these expressions aside for if they multiply the person of weak insight thinks there are many meanings. We mean by it the meaning whereby the rational person (*'āqil*) is distinguished from children, animals and the insane. So let us call it "an intellect" (*'aql*) in keeping with the terminology of most people.[107]

In order to demonstrate the perfection of the intellect, al-Ghazālī describes seven

ways in which the perception of vision is defective in contrast to the insight of the

intellect. Al-Rāzī, as we have already noted, expanded this list to twenty. The

intellect's perfection, however, is only realized when it has become disengaged

(*tajarrud*) from the covering of illusion (*wahm*) and imagination (*khayāl*).[108] What

appear to be errors of the intellect are, in fact, errors in imaginings, illusions and

beliefs which have nothing to do with the intellect. Because of the perfection of the

intellect, it is more worthy of the term "light" than the seeing eye. Just as the sun,

the moon, and the stars are manifestations of light to the "light" of the perceiving

eye, the Qur'ān[109] and the substances of angels (*jawāhir al-malā'ika*)[110] are

manifestations of light to the "light" of the intellect. The Prophet combines both of

the definitions of light because he allows others to see while seeing himself and

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[107] Ibid. 5. The translation here is my own. Later on in the *Mishkāt* al-Ghazālī changes his terminology to "spirit" (*rūḥ*) in his discussion of the five elements of the niche.
[108] Ibid. 9.
[109] Ibid. 10.
[110] Ibid. 19.

others. In other words, he is both a perceiver of light and a manifestation of light and

it is for this reason that God calls him *an light-giving lamp (sirāj munīr)* (33:46).[111]

This lamp is kindled from a *fire* which is the Spirit (*al-rūḥ*) which brings the

revelation.[112]

The third usage of the term "light" is that of the elect of the elect (*khawāṣṣ al-*

khawāṣṣ) and refers to the First Light (*al-nūr al-awwal*) which is the Real Light (*al-*

nūr al-ḥaqq) because it is the only light which does not borrow its luminosity from

something else. The use of the term "light" for anything other than this Real Light is

metaphor (*majāz*).[113] God is light, there is no light but He, and He is the totality of

lights and the Universal Light.[114] God is hidden from us because He is pure light. In

everything other than God light is mixed with darkness, allowing us to see, but God

has no opposite, no darkness mixed with His light, and He is therefore veiled from

His creation by the very intensity of His manifestation. He is everywhere but cannot

be seen.[115]

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[111] Ibid. 13. Al-Ghazālī adds that this is true as well to a lesser degree for the other prophets and scholars (*ulamā*).

[112] Ibid. 30.

[113] Ibid. 15. As we have already noted, theologians such as Nāshi' al-Akbar used the linguistic strategy of calling attributes real (*ḥaqīqa*) when applied to God and metaphorical (*majāz*) when applied to man to avoid anthropomorphism. Al-Ghazālī, however, is clearly going beyond the issue of anthropomorphism to address an issue of ontology. This is demonstrated by the discussion which immediately follows his statements regarding the real and metaphorical usages of the term "light".

[114] Ibid. 19.

[115] Ibid. 22-4. Al-Rūmī writes in his *Mathnawī*, "The light which gives light to the eye is in truth the light of the heart; the light of the eye is produced by the light of the hearts. Again, the light which gives light to the heart is the Light of God, which is pure and separate from the light of intellect and sense. At night there was no light; thou didst not see the colour; then it (the light) was made manifest by the opposite of light (by darkness). (First) comes the seeing of light, then the seeing of colour; and this thou knowest immediately by the opposite of light (darkness). God created pain and sorrow for the purpose that happiness might be made manifest by means of this opposite. Hidden things, then,

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Just as the Real Light (*al-nūr al-ḥaqq*) is God, the Real Existent (*al-mawjūd al-ḥaqq*) is God. And just as our light is "borrowed", so is our existence "borrowed".[116] Once one has recognized what is real and what is metaphor, then one understands that "there is nothing in existence except God" and *Everything is being annihilated except His face* (28:88).[117] The state (*ḥāl*) of seeing this is attained either by cognitive gnosis (*'irfān 'ilmī*) or "tasting" (*dhawq*).[118] In the latter case there is an intoxication (*sukr*) which overcomes the intellect and gives rise to such statements as those made by al-Ḥallāj and Abū Yazid al-Basṭāmī (d.875)[119] but when the state ends the intellect knows that it was a state which was not the reality of unification (*ḥaqīqat al-ittiḥād*) but the ambiguity of unification (*shubha 'l-ittiḥād*).[120] The possessor of this state has been annihilated (*faniya*) from himself and annihilated from his annihilation (*faniya 'an fanā'ihi*) because he has lost all consciousness of himself.

> In relation to the one immersed in it, this state is called "unification" (*ittiḥād*), according to the language of metaphor (*majāz*), or is called "declaring God's unity" (*tawḥīd*) in the language of reality (*ḥaqīqa*).[121]

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are manifested by means of their opposite; since God has no opposite, He is hidden." The English translation here is that of Nicholson 1:1126-31.

[116] Al-Ghazālī uses the term *isti'āra* (metaphor; literally, "borrowing") interchangeably with *majāz* here.

[117] Ibid. 16.

[118] Ibid. 17.

[119] Al-Ghazālī mentions these quotes anonymously: Al-Ḥallāj's "I am the Real" and "I am He whom I love and He whom I love is I" and Abū Yazid al-Basṭāmī's "Glory be to me! How exalted is my situation!" and "There is nothing in my robe except God."

[120] Ibid. 18.

[121] Ibid. 18. The English translation here is Buchman's.

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For ordinary people the declaration of God's unity (*tawḥīd*) is "There is no god but God," but for the elect the declaration of God's unity is "There is no he but He."[122]

Al-Ghazālī expresses his concern that what he has said will be misunderstood and suggests that those who cannot grasp this kind of knowledge should avoid it.

> It may be that some people will fall short of understanding the innermost meaning of these words. Hence, they will understand our words, "God is with everything, just as light is with the things," to mean that He is in each place—high exalted and holy is He from being ascribed to place! Probably the best way not to stir up such imaginings is to say that He is before everything, that He is above everything and that He makes everything manifest. Yet, in the knowledge of those who possess insight, that which makes manifest cannot be separate from that which is made manifest. This is what we mean by our saying that "He is with everything." Moreover, it is not hidden from you that the manifester is above and before everything made manifest, although it is with everything in a certain respect. However, [the manifester] is with [everything] in one respect and before it in another respect, so you should not suppose that this is a contradiction. Take an example from sensory objects, which lie at your level of knowledge: Consider how the movement of a hand is both with the movement of its shadow and before it. He whose breast cannot embrace knowledge of this should abandon this type of science. There are men for each science, and "the way is eased for each person to that for which he was created."[123]

The second section of al-Ghazālī's *Mishkāt* is divided into two parts. The first part, which was discussed in Part I of this work, deals with al-Ghazālī's cosmology and hermeneutical theory. There are two worlds, the corporeal (*jusmānī*) and the spiritual (*rūḥānī*),[124] which are interrelated; what exist in one serves as a similitude for what exists in the other. The similitudes of the Qur'ān can be

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[122] Ibid. 20.
[123] Ibid. 24. The English translation here is Buchman's. The *ḥadīth* at the end of this passage can be found in Bukhārī, Tafsīr Sūra, 92, 93; Bukhārī, Adab 120; Bukhārī, Qadar, 4; Bukhārī, Tawḥīd, 54; and Muslim, Qadar, 6-8,
[124] Also called the sensory (*ḥissī*) and rational ('*aqlī*), or high and low, 25.

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understood by understanding the relationship between these two worlds. Al-Ghazālī

gives many examples of this, one of the most significant being that of man. Man

was created "in the form of the Merciful," an allusion to a ḥadīth which al-Ghazālī

understands as referring to man as a microcosm of the universe.[125]

> God showed beneficence to Adam. He gave him an abridged form (sūrat
> mukhtaṣar) that brings together every sort of thing found in the cosmos
> ('ālam). It is as if Adam is everything in the cosmos, or an abridged
> transcription (nuskha mukhtaṣar) of the world.[126]

When the perfect person (kāmil) understands the similitudes of God, he does not

make the mistake of believing that the obvious sense of the Qur'ān and ḥadīth may

be abandoned. Instead, he understands both their outer (ẓāhir) and inner (bāṭin)

commands.[127]

The second part of this second section is an interpretation of the elements of

the niche, a similitude which al-Ghazālī believes represents the layers (ṭabaqāt) of the

spirits (arwāḥ) of the human clay (al-ṭīnat al-bashariyya) and degrees (marātib) of

their lights. It is an interpretation which al-Ghazālī links to those of Ibn Masʿūd,

whom he quotes as saying "the similitude of His light in the heart of the believers is

like a niche," and Ubayy b. Kaʿb, whom he quotes as saying "the similitude of a light

in the heart of one who has faith."[128]

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[125] The ḥadīth which al-Ghazālī quotes here is not the version found in the standard sources, although
he refers to it as "sound" (p.32). The version "Verily God created Adam upon His own form" quoted
in the first section of the Mishkāt (p.6) can be found in Wensinck 2:71.
[126] Ibid. 31. The translation here is Buchman's.
[127] Ibid. 33.
[128] Ibid. 25.

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The first of the "luminous human spirits" (*al-arwāḥ al-bashariyya al-nūrāniyya*) is the sensory spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥassās*) which is found in animals and infants. It is like the niche because its lights come out of different holes like the two eyes, ears and nostrils, etc. The second is the imaginal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*) which is capable of remembering and is found in older children, adults, and some animals. It is like glass, a dense substance which can be purified to channel light. The third is the rational spirit (*al-rūḥ al-'aqlī*) which comprehends meanings outside of the senses and imagination and is found only in human beings. It is like the lamp. The fourth is the reflective spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*) which combines parts of rational knowledge to derive a higher form of knowledge. Because it begins from this root and then branches out it is like the tree. The fifth is the sanctified prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*) which belongs only to the prophets and some friends of God (*awliyā'*) and is beyond the intellect ('*aql*). It is the *oil which would well-nigh shine even if no fire touched it* because there are those among the friends of God who could almost do without the help of the prophets, and there are prophets who could almost do without the help of the angels.

The third section of the *Mishkāt* is an interpretation of the *ḥadīth* "God has seventy veils of light and darkness. If He were to unveil them, the glories of His face would burn up everyone whose eyes perceived Him."[129] The interpretation synthesizes the points made in the first two sections by demonstrating how the

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[129] A *ḥadīth* stating "His veil is light" is listed in Wensinck's *Concordance* 1:424.

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perceptions of the lower spirits of man lead to faculty conclusions regarding the nature of God. Al-Ghazālī defines three kinds of people who are veiled from the truth in various ways.

To summarize his categories briefly, the first type are atheists (*mulḥida*) veiled by darkness; they include materialists and egotists, the latter being further subdivided into hedonists, predators, materialistic people, and status seekers.

The second type are those people who are veiled by light and darkness. Their veils correspond to the levels of the spirit described in section two. Some of them are veiled by sensory darkness, meaning that they can only understand God as an object perceived by the senses. The objects which they perceive as divinities range from precious substances such as gold or silver, to beautiful human beings, to fire, the stars or the sun, or unlimited light. More advanced than those are those who are veiled by imaginal darkness, who can only understand God as an imagined being sitting on a throne, having a body, existing in a certain place, etc. Finally, there are those who are veiled by the darkness of faulty rational comparisons who can only understand God in relation to their own attributes.[130]

The third type are those veiled by lights.[131] Among these are those who understand that God's attributes cannot be compared to those of humans.[132] More

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[130] Ibid. 45-50. Landolt succinctly identifies the three groups of the second type as polytheists, monotheist corporealists and Muslim Attributists, "Ghazālī and '*Religionswissenschaft*'" 33. For his discussion of the subcategories of these three groups, see 33-8.

[131] Ibid. 50-1. The fact that those veiled by lights represent a spectrum of philosophical beliefs has provoked a good deal of discussion because these groups are ranked above the more "orthodox" theologians in the second type veiled by lights and darkness. Landolt points out that Fakhr al-Dīn al-Rāzī's commentary reverses the order of al-Ghazālī, placing the theological attributists in a class

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advanced would be those who recognize that God is the Mover (*muḥarrik*) of the

furthest celestial sphere which envelops the lower celestial spheres moved by

angels.[133] Most advanced are the third type.

> The third type climbs beyond these and says, "Putting bodies into movement
> by means of direct contact necessitates that there be a service rendered to the
> Lord of the worlds; worship of Him, and obedience toward Him by one of
> His servants, called an angel. The angel's relationship with the sheer divine
> lights is the relationship of the moon among the sensory lights." They
> suppose that the Lord is the one who is obeyed (*muṭāʿ*) in respect of this
> mover and that the Lord is a mover of everything by means of command
> (*amr*), not direct contact. Then, in the classification and quiddity of that
> command, there is an obscurity before which most understandings fall short
> and for which this book does not have the capacity.[134]

Those who have arrived (*wāṣilūn*) have found God to be beyond any of these

descriptions. They look beyond the "one who is obeyed" (*muṭāʿ*) to the creator of all

things.

> Therefore, they have turned their faces from the one who moves the heavens,
> from the one who moves the furthest celestial body, from the one who
> commands moving them, to Him who originates the heavens, originates the
> furthest celestial body, and originates the one who commands moving the
> heavens. They have arrived at an existent thing that is incomparable with
> everything that their sight had perceived. Hence, the august glories of His
> face–the First, the Highest–burn up everything perceived by the sights and

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higher than the philosophers. A Persian work by al-Rāzī, however, which discusses the same retains
al-Ghazālī's order, suggesting that al-Rāzī may have been modifying al-Ghazālī's work depending on
the audience he was addressing, 67-72.

[132] Landolt suggests that the "anti-'anthropomorphism' of these 'philosophically-minded groups'
would have to be located somewhere between the Muʿtazila and Philosophy," 39.

[133] Landolt suggests that this description is "doubtless intended to represent the Peripatetic cosmology
of the Islamic 'Philosophers' in general," 40.

[134] Ibid. 51. The English translation here is that of Buchman. Landolt understands this category as
including the Neoplatonic element lacking in the previous groups, the introduction of another, single
figure between God and the Universe so that God's unity is not compromised by direct involvement
with plurality. He furthermore suggests that al-Ghazālī may be referring here to Neoplatonic Ismāʿīlī
philosophers, 40-9.

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insights of the observers. Thus, they find Him too holy for and incomparable with all that we described earlier.[135]

Some who reach this stage remain as perceivers and yet what they perceive completely disappears. Others, the elect of the elect (*khawāss al-khawāss*), cease to observe themselves as well; in other words, the perceiver himself disappears, as in *Everything is being annihilated except His face* (28:88).[136] This self-disclosure (*tajallī*) of God occurs in stages for some, as was the case with Ibrāhīm, and for others all at once, as was the case with Muḥammad.[137]

Al-Ghazālī's commentary differs from that of earlier Ṣūfī interpretations in that al-Ghazālī's interpretation addresses the problem of defining man's perceptual faculties and what it is he perceives at different stages in his development, including the final stage beyond sense perception and the intellect where both the perceiver and the perceived disappear. The epistemological and ontological theory he develops based on the Light Verse explains the ecstatic statements of early Ṣūfīs and anticipates the discussions of later Ṣūfīs concerning the concepts of "declaring the

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[135] Ibid. 51. The English translation here is that of Buchman.

[136] The state of annihilation (*fanā*) described in section one of the *Mishkāt*.

[137] Ibid. 51-2. Landolt suggests that the "attainers" are "mystics in the Neoplatonic sense of the term—and in the sense in which Avicenna may be said to have been a mystic. Being the only ones, among all the groups surveyed in the 'Veils-section,' to distinguish between the cause of universal motion and the cause of existence itself, they are, in fact, in line with the truly Neoplatonic tradition which is the one followed by Avicenna in his nobler' proof of the existence of God, 'from existence' itself; and it should be noted that Avicenna himself in the Ishārāt points out that this 'nobler' proof is the one which distinguishes the 'saints' (*al-ṣiddīqūn*)," 50-1. The issue of whether or not al-Ghazālī is accepting here the very philosophical theories which he criticized elsewhere has been discussed by such Arab philosophers as Ibn Tufayl (d.1185) and Ibn Rushd (d.1198) and modern Western scholars such as Gairdner and Watt. Based on the Neoplatonic content of the third section of al-Ghazālī's work, Watt doubted its authenticity. For an excellent summary of and references to previous studies of the *Mishkāt*, studies which have primarily focused on the problems of this third section, see Buchman's Introduction to *The Niche of Lights* xxvii-xxxii.

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unity of God" (*tawhīd*) and the "oneness of existence" (*wahdat al-wujūd*).[138]

Included in al-Ghazālī's theory is the statement of a correspondence between man as microcosm and the universe as macrocosm, a correspondence which explains the similitudes of the Qur'ān and *hadīth*. Al-Ghazālī does not address the many intermediate states and stages which the Ṣūfī passes through before "arriving," states and stages which were described as "lights" in previous commentaries. Nor does he mention the kind of specific cosmic function for Muḥammad as elaborated by Sahl al-Tustarī in his theory of the light of Muhammad (*nūr Muḥammadī*).[139] Other than these matters of content, al-Ghazālī's commentary differs from that of his Ṣūfī predecessors in terms of style. In the arguments he puts forth and the systematic way in which he presents his views, al-Ghazālī proceeds in the manner of a theologian even though the content of his discussion is mystical.

Al-Ghazālī considered his own interpretation consistent with the *salafī* interpretations. He explains that the Qur'ān is a light for the intellect ('*aql*) just as the sun is a light for the physical eye,[140] and that light means guidance.[141] By prefacing his interpretation of the similitude of the niche with reference to *salafī* interpretations of the same, al-Ghazālī suggests that his own interpretation is merely an elaboration of their interpretations of the niche as the heart of the believer.[142] As

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[138] For a history of the problematic term "oneness of existence" (*wahdat al-wujūd*) see Chittick's "Rūmī and *wahdat al-wujūd*" and Gramlich's "Mystical Dimensions of Islamic Monotheism."
[139] Although Nicholson suggested that the "one who is obeyed" (*mutā'*) represents "the archetypal Spirit of Mohammed," *The Idea of Personality in Sufism* 44-7.
[140] Ibid. 10.
[141] Ibid. 41.
[142] Ibid. 25.

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we have already seen, al-Rāzī agreed, finding no contradiction between his own preferred *salafī* interpretation and the interpretation of al-Ghazālī.[143] But al-Rāzī was selective in what he presented of al-Ghazālī's interpretation. He quotes extensively and elaborates upon al-Ghazālī's arguments for the superiority of the intellect's insight over physical sight, then all but ignores al-Ghazālī's discussion of the states beyond the reach of the intellect and his conclusions regarding the nature of God and His involvement with the world.

Another issue here is the relationship of al-Ghazālī's interpretation of the Light Verse to that of Ibn Sīnā. Al-Ghazālī was clearly influenced by Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the various elements of the niche in the latter's *Al-ishārāt wa 'l-tanbīhāt* and *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*,[144] but although the similarities between the two interpretations are undeniable, al-Ghazālī makes a few modifications. While the five elements described in Ibn Sīnā's version are all parts of the theoretical intellect (*'aql nazarī*) which only man possesses, the first two elements of al-Ghazālī's version are faculties shared with animals.[145] This change enables al-Ghazālī to classify faulty notions of God based on whether the possessor of these beliefs is bound by the limitations of animal or human perceptions. The other difference between the two

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[143] Al-Rāzī 23:230.

[144] Described above in the section on al-Rāzī's commentary of the Light Verse.

[145] In the first section of the *Mishkāt* al-Ghazālī uses the term "intellect" (*'aql*) which is the term common to all five elements of Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of the niche, but he then switches to the term "spirit" (*rūḥ*) in the second section when presenting his own interpretation of the niche. The term "spirit" (*rūḥ*) is one which Ibn Sīnā uses more generally to refer to either the vegetable, animal or human souls within man, as opposed to the "intellect" (*'aql*) which is reserved for humans alone.

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interpretations is that Ibn Sīnā identifies the fire as the Active Intelligence ('*aql fa' 'āl*) while al-Ghazālī identifies it with the less controversial Spirit (*al-rūḥ*).

Ibn Sīnā does not address the first part of the Light Verse in his *Isharāt*, but does so in *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt*, taking a linguistic stance opposite to that of al-Ghazālī. Like al-Rāzī, Ibn Sīnā declares physical light the "essential" meaning of light whereas the use of the term "light" in the Qur'ānic phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* is "metaphorical".

> I say: *light* is an equivocal term (*mushtarak*) partaking of two meanings, one essential (*dhātī*) the other metaphorical (*musta 'ār*). The essential stands for the perfection of the transparent inasmuch as it is transparent, as Aristotle said. The metaphorical meaning is to be understood in two ways: either as the good, or as the cause that leads to the good. Here, the sense is the metaphorical one in both meanings. I mean that God, the Exalted, is in Himself the good and the cause of everything good.[146]

In this respect Ibn Sīnā has more in common with exoteric exegesis on this verse than with al-Ghazālī's interpretation, because he assumes that the meaning of the term "light" can be easily understood. Al-Ghazālī, on the other hand, insists that the term "light" has levels of meaning, all of which are not so easily understood. The true meaning of "light" contains a secret regarding the ambiguous status of man's existence. Al-Ghazālī finds further evidence for this ambiguity in his discussion of the meaning of the Qur'ānic verse *You did not throw when you threw but God threw* (8:117). The verse was revealed after the Battle of Badr and refers to a moment in the battle when the Prophet threw dust at the enemies of the Muslims.

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[146] Ibn Sīnā, *Fī ithbāt al-nubuwwāt* 49; The English translation here is that of Marmura, "On the Proof of Prophecies 116.

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The external sense (*zāhir*) of this verse is clear but the truth of its meaning is obscure (*ghāmiḍ*) since it both affirms and negates the throwing. This is contradictory in the external sense unless one understands that he threw from one point of view and did not throw from another point of view, and from the point of view in which he did not throw God threw...The reality of this is taken from the vast ocean of the knowledges of unveiling (*'ulūm al-mukāshafāt*). The external sense (*zāhir*) of the commentary will be of no use.[147]

Al-Ghazālī's emphasis on this ambiguity is what distinguishes his view from the monism of Ibn Sīnā. We have already noted the distinction al-Ghazālī makes between the "reality of unification" (*ḥaqīqat al-ittiḥād*) and the "ambiguity of unification" (*shubhat al-ittiḥād*), the reality (*ḥaqīqa*) and the metaphor (*majāz*). He quotes a poem attributed to Ṣāḥib b. 'Abbād (d.995)

> The glass is clear, the wine is clear,
> the two are similar, the affair confused,
> As if there is wine and no glass,
> or glass and no wine.[148]

and adds, "There is a difference between saying 'The wine is the cup' and 'It is *as if* the wine is the cup.'"[149]

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[147] *Iḥyā'* 5:173-4; English trans. 102. Chittick indicates that this same verse drew the attention of Ibn 'Arabī who cites it more often than any other verse to show what Chittick calls the "radical ambiguity of existence," *Sufi Path of Knowledge* 113-4. Ibn Taymiyya rejected this interpretation because he understood it to be a complete equation of the actions of man with God, be they praiseworthy or blameworthy, Instead, he asserted that the verse merely indicates God's power, (Syafruddin, 28).

[148] Al-Ghazālī, 18. The translation here is that of Buchman.

[149] Ibid. It was just this kind of ambiguous statement which troubled critics like Ibn Taymiyya who rejected the distinction between the reality and metaphor of unification (*ittiḥād*) and therefore could only see these ideas as heresies, a denial of God's complete transcendence. Ibn Taymiyya believed that this denial was at the root of both the ecstatic utterances of the early Ṣūfīs and their philosophizing successors, hidden beneath the deliberate ambiguity of Ṣūfī terminology and style. Ibn 'Arabī described the state of bewilderment (*ḥayra*) which occurs in the mystic when he realizes the ambiguity of existence, but Ibn Taymiyya declared this merely confusion, the result of the logical absurdities of the mystic's thinking. (For these and other criticisms Ibn Taymiyya made of the Ṣūfīs, see Chittick, "Rūmī and *waḥdat al-wujūd*" 85-7, Knysh 87-111, and Michel 5-14, 24-39).

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The *Mishkāt al-Anwār* represents a new type of Ṣūfī writing which uses the language of philosophy and theology to describe a view of reality based on the Ṣūfī experience of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*). Although Ibn 'Arabī has often been considered the originator of this theoretical form of Sufism, the *Mishkāt* demonstrates that al-Ghazālī was clearly his precursor.[150] The Ṣūfī commentaries of al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī presuppose the reader's familiarity with the content and style of this kind of Ṣūfī theorizing. Their brief and referential style lacks the power of al-Ghazālī's *tour de force*.

Like al-Ghazālī, al-Kāshānī begins his interpretation of the Light Verse with a definition of light intended to show the appropriateness of describing God as light. It is a brief definition which appears to reference al-Ghazālī's more comprehensive explanation in the way it links the terms light (*nūr*), manifestation (*zuhūr*) and existence (*wujūd*).

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[150] For example, Böwering writes, "Ibn al-'Arabī's theory transformed the early Sufis' psychological experience of mystical union into an ontological speculation on the unity of being, propelling the idea of *tawḥīd* to a dynamic conclusion," "Ibn al-'Arabī's Concept of Time," 75. In his "Bewildered Tongue" Sells remarks that "The move from the *dialogical* language of union found in Hallaj and Bistami to the mystical *dialectic* of Ibn 'Arabi need not be seen, as it often has been seen, as a decadent movement from genuine experience to intellectual abstraction...Mystical union transforms philosophical and other objective or scientific discourse, even as the philosophical language offers a new dimension of critical self-awareness and logical precision to the mystical," 116. One of Ibn 'Arabī's critics,Sa'd al-Dīn al-Taftāzānī (d.1389 or 1390), acknowledged an outward similarity between the metaphysical views of al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī and his followers, but insisted that a closer examination of their works demonstrated the orthodoxy of the former and errors of the latter. He identifies the latter as being those who distort the Ṣūfī concepts of annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*), mistakenly understanding subjective mystical experience as indicative of the objective reality of things, (Knysh, 150-3). The differences between the metaphysical theories of al-Ghazālī and Ibn 'Arabī is an area which warrants further investigation, but the fact remains that al-Ghazālī preceded Ibn 'Arabī in making ontological statements based on mystical experience and adopting philosophical and theological language and terminology to systematize the view of reality alluded to in earlier Ṣūfī statements and writings.

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God is the light of the heavens and the earth. Light is that which is manifest in itself and through which [other] things are made manifest. In its nondelimited sense it is one of the names of God as an expression of His manifestation (*zuhūr*) and the manifestation of things through Him, as it is said:

> Because of the intensity of the manifestation He is hidden.
>> The eyes of people are blinded from perceiving Him.
> The portion which blue eyes[151] can perceive from His face
>> is powerful even for those who are bleary-eyed.

Because He exists (*wujida*) by His existence (*wujūd*) and is manifest (*zuhira*) by His manifestation (*zuhūr*), He *is the light of the heavens and the earth*, i.e., the place of the manifestation (*mazhar*) of the heavens of the spirits (*arwāh*) and the earth of the bodies (*ajsād*). He is nondelimited existence (*al-wujūd al-mutlaq*) through which existents and light-giving objects exist.[152]

We have already seen how al-Ghazālī adapted Ibn Sīnā's interpretation of *the similitude of His/his light* for his own theory on the hierarchy of perceptual faculties in man, ranging from the base sensory organs shared with animals to the sanctified prophetic spirits found only in prophets and some friends of God. Al-Kāshānī's interpretation suggests a familiarity with the interpretations of both al-Ghazālī and Ibn Sīnā. He explains the elements of the niche as the integrated physical and spiritual elements of man which combine to enable him to achieve perfection.[153] The *niche* represents the dark body (*jasad*) which is illuminated by the *lamp* of the spirit (*rūh*). The *glass* represents the heart which is both illuminated by the spirit and illuminates things other than itself.

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[151] Blue eyes can also mean blind eyes in Arabic. See Lane 1:1227.

[152] Al-Kāshānī 2:139-40.

[153] Only a summary of this interpretation will be given here. For a complete English translation of this passage, see Murata's *Tao of Islam* 299-300.

The *glass* is likened to *a glittering star* because of its openness (*bisāṭa*), its extreme luminosity, its high position, and the plenitude of its rays, as this is the state (*ḥāl*) of the heart (*qalb*).[154]

This *glass* of the heart is *lit from a blessed olive tree* which is the sanctified soul (*al-nafs al-qudsiyya*) whose faculties grow up out of the earth of the body through the space of the heart to the heaven of the spirit. Its fruits are morals, works and perceptions. Every kind of mystic knowledge and states are dependent upon it. It is *neither of the east nor the west* because "the soul is more subtle and luminous than the body and more dense than the spirit."[155] Its *oil* is its preparedness (*istiʿdād*) which *would wellnigh shine even if no fire*, the Active Intelligence (*al-ʿaql al-faʿʿāl*), *touched it*.

In the interpretations of Ibn Sīnā and al-Ghazālī each and every element of the Qurʾānic verse is explained by a single term. This interpretative method of one-to-one correspondances is one of the most distinguishing characteristics of the commentaries of al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī as well. (See Table 8 for a comparison of the interpretations of al-Ghazālī, al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī). Al-Naysābūrī's commentary on the niche gives two different levels of interpretations, one of which corresponds to the "world of horizons" and the other of which corresponds to the "world of souls."[156] The first interpretation refers to the macrocosm, the Cosmos.

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[154] Ibid. 2:140. In his *Isṭilāḥāt* Kāshānī writes that the "heart" is what is meant by the philosophical term "rational soul" (*al-nafs al-nāṭiqa*), 141; English trans. 97.

[155] Ibid. 141.

[156] Al-Naysābūrī 18:119. The reference is to Qurʾānic verse 41:53 which was used by al-Simnānī as well to describe the correspondence between the macrocosm and the microcosm. See the section on "Al-Simnānī and commentary on the seven inner sense," Part I.

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Table 8.
A comparison of Ṣūfī interpretations of *the niche*, etc.

	Al-Ghazālī	Al-Kāshānī	Al-Naysābūrī (macrocosm)	Al-Naysābūrī (microcosm)
niche	sensory spirit (*al-rūḥ al-ḥassās*)	body (*jasad*)	world of bodies (*ajsām*)	body (*jasad*)
glass	imaginal spirit (*al-rūḥ al-khayālī*)	heart (*qalb*)	the throne	heart (*qalb*)
lamp	rational spirit (*al-rūḥ al-'aqlī*)	spirit (*rūḥ*)	the footstool	innermost heart (*sirr*)
tree	reflective spirit (*al-rūḥ al-fikrī*)	sanctified soul *al-nafs al-qudsiyya*	tree of the kingdom	spirituality (*al-rūḥāniyya*)
oil	sanctified prophetic spirit (*al-rūḥ al-qudsī al-nabawī*)	preparedness (*isti'dād*)	world of spirits (*arwāḥ*)	human spirit (*al-rūḥ al-insāniyya*)

The *niche* is the world of bodies (*ajsām*). The *glass* is the Throne, the *lamp* is the Footstool, and the *tree* is the Tree of the Kingdom (*malakūt*) which is the inward part (*bāṭin*) of the world of bodies. It rises neither to the east of eternity and timelessness nor to the west of annihilation (*fanā'*) and nonexistence. Rather it is created for the everlastingness in which annihilation never occurs.

Whose oil, which is the world of spirits (*arwāḥ*), *would well-nigh shine*, i.e., become manifest from nonexistence into the world of engendered form ('*ālam al-ṣūrat al-mutawallida*) by means of the pairing (*iztidwāj*) of the world of the unseen with [the world] of witnessing *even if no fire*, the fire of the divine power, *touched it* and that is because of the nearness of its character to existence.

Light upon light. The first is the light of the merciful attribute and the second is the light of the Throne, as in His saying, *The Merciful sat upon the throne* (20:5). His words, *God guides whom He wills to His light* is an allusion (*ishāra*) to the fact that the emanation (*fayḍ*) of the light of

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mercifulness is divided amongst everything which God wills to bring into existence from the Throne to that which is under the earth.[157]

The second interpretation refers to the microcosm, man. Like his predecessors, al-Naysābūrī understands the different elements of the niche as referring to the various faculties of man which must be developed in order to achieve perfection. Al-Naysābūrī understands this perfection as a state in which man realizes the ambiguous relationship between God and man. While a significant portion of the *Mishkāt al-anwār* is devoted to the explanation of this concept, al-Naysābūrī merely alludes to it through the famous *ḥadīth* of supererogatory acts (*al-nawāfil*), a *ḥadīth* understood by Ṣūfīs as referring to the states of annihilation (*fanā*) and subsistence (*baqā*).[158]

> The *niche* is the body, the *glass* is the heart, the *lamp* is the innermost heart (*sirr*), and the *tree* is the tree of spirituality (*al-rūḥāniyya*) which has been created for subsistence (*baqā*) as has been described.[159] The *oil* is the human spirit (*al-rūḥ al-insāniyya*) which is profoundly receptive to the light of gnosis (*irfān*) and the *fire* is the fire of God's self-disclosure (*tajallī*) and guidance in eternity. When it is combined with the light of the intellect (*'aql*) it becomes *light upon light*. When the *lamp* of the innermost heart (*sirr*) of *whom He wills* becomes illuminated by the light of timelessness, the *glass* of the heart and the *niche* of the body become illuminated. Their rays emerge from the

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[157] Al-Naysābūrī, 18:119-20. The last line is a reference to verses 20:5-6: *The Merciful sat upon the throne. To Him belongs what is in the heavens and the earth, and what is between them, and what is under the earth.*

[158] See Sells, 87. The *ḥadīth*, which appears in al-Bukhārī, Riqāq 38, is translated in full by Graham in his *Divine Word and Prophetic Word in Early Islam*: "God said, 'Whoever treats a friend of Mine as an enemy, on him I declare war. My servant draws near to Me by means of nothing dearer to Me than that which I have established as a duty for him. And my servant continues drawing nearer to Me through supererogatory acts until I love him; and when I love him, I become his ear with which he hears, his eye with which he sees, his hand with which he grasps, and his foot with which he walks. And if he asks Me [for something], I give it to him. If indeed he seeks My help, I help him. I have never hesitated to do anything as I hesitate [to take] the soul of the man of faith who hates death, for I hate to harm him," 173. Graham provides numerous references for Ṣūfī works which cite this *ḥadīth*, 173-4.

[159] Presumably al-Naysābūrī is referring to a previous discussion in his commentary.

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aperture of the physical senses (*ḥawāss*) and the earth of humanity (*al-bashariyya*) is illuminated, just as He said, *the earth will shine with the light of its Lord* (39:69). This is the station (*maqām*) of the *ḥadīth* "I am his hearing, his seeing..."[160]

Al-Naysābūrī's interpretation seems to suggest that, having experienced annihilation (*fanā'*) and subsistence (*baqā'*), the perfected man is both illuminated by the light he receives through the fire of God's self-disclosure (*tajallī*) and in turn illuminates others by this light which emerges from the "aperture of the physical senses (*ḥawāss*).

As with his predecessors, al-Naysābūrī's description of this light appears to be more literal than metaphorical. The preference among all the exoteric commentators was to interpret the light mentioned in the Light Verse as a metaphor for guidance, truth, or faith. Ibn Taymiyya insists that the wording *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* means that God is a light, but he does not explore the implications of this statement. His arguments concern methodology more than meaning, since, like his predecessors, he seems to understand the verse primarily as referring to God's guidance. For the Ṣūfīs, on the other hand, the light referred to in this verse is not understood as metaphor, but rather as something real although not in the manner of the light perceived by the physical eye. As al-Ghazālī says, it is this perceived physical light which is mere metaphor. According to al-Tustarī, Muḥammad was a column of light in pre-eternity and the believers were created from this light. The light of believers can be perceived by those with the inner eyes to see

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[160] Ibid. 120.

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it, as al-Maybudī tells us in the story of the bishop and the Muslim. God is a light as well, but a light which is even more hidden than the light of believers because it is not mixed with any darkness. This explains how it is that God can be everywhere and yet cannot be seen. For the Ṣūfīs, the Light Verse explains the nature of God's intimate involvement with the world and the potential of man to perceive this involvement through his capacity to receive light.[161]

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[161] For an examination of "experiences of the mystic light" in different cultures and religions, see Eliade's *The Two and the One*, 19-77.

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CONCLUSION

The Text

The differences between exoteric and Ṣūfī commentators begin with their different viewpoints on the nature of the Qur'ānic text. The main assumption made by exoteric classical commentators is that most of the Qur'ānic text is clear and unambiguous. The Qur'ān is a message of salvation to all mankind, and if man is to be held accountable for the commands and prohibitions contained in this text, there can be no doubts concerning them. As al-Ṭabarī says, an incomprehensible message would be meaningless; it would be like giving a message to animals who cannot understand human speech. Al-Ṭabarī's belief in the absolute clarity of the Qur'ān led him to define its self-proclaimed ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) in the narrowest possible way. The commentators after him preferred to define the ambiguous verses as those capable of more than one interpretation and often identified these verses as those which portray God in anthropomorphic terms and verses which concern man's free will or lack thereof. However, although most of the commentators after al-Ṭabarī accepted this broader category of ambiguous verses, their position regarding the text as a whole remains consistent with his position. Ibn Kathīr states that the possibility of different meanings is only with regards to language and syntax, not the intended meaning. Al-Rāzī accepts the possibility of a kind of Qur'ānic double-speak which addresses both the limited capacities of the masses and the more sophisticated intellects of the few, but, like Ibn Kathīr, he believes in one underlying

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meaning. For him, as for al-Zamaksharī and al-Qurṭubī, the ambiguous verses represent an opportunity for the praiseworthy efforts of scholars. For each exoteric commentator studied here the message of the Qur'ān is clear, but this clarity is not always apparent without the explanations of religious scholars.

Ṣūfī commentators accepted the idea that the Qur'ān contains a clear and unambiguous message for all mankind, but insisted that this is only the beginning, a fact which they illustrated with the metaphor of the endless bounties of the sea and justified with reference to the *ḥadīth* transmitted from Ibn Mas'ūd and the traditions from 'Alī and Ja'far al-Ṣādiq. The clear verses (*muḥkamāt*) contain the public message for all and correspond to the majesty of the law (*sharī'a*). The ambiguous verses (*mutashābihāt*) contain the private message for the few prepared to understand their many meanings and correspond to the beauty of reality (*ḥaqīqa*). Ambiguity is an essential attribute of these verses because they represent the entanglement (*iltibās*) of the divine and the human. Those who understand the ambiguous verses correctly see God in everything, while *those in whose hearts is a turning away* see the multiplicity of the world without perceiving the underlying divine unity and therefore create discord rather than harmony in the community.

Knowledge and Interpretation

The next area of divergence between exoteric and Ṣūfī commentators is epistemological. For al-Ṭabarī, the interpreter exercises independent judgement (*ijtihād*), basing his judgements on his knowledge of the most authentic *ḥadīth* and

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the Arabic language. The soundness of his interpretations is verified by their agreement with the interpretations of the first generations (salaf) and the consensus of the community (ijmā'). Al-Ghazālī accepts this as a basis from which to start but does not accept salafī interpretation as definitive. Instead, his focus shifts to the acceptable parameters of independent judgement, governed by the human faculty which al-Ghazālī identifies it as the intellect ('aql). The intellect is capable of ascertaining problems of contradiction not only in the transmitted salafī interpretations but also between Qur'ānic verses themselves and between Qur'ānic verses and that which is known by the intellect. But although the intellect can determine when the apparent sense of a Qur'ānic verse is absurd and must be interpreted, it does not necessarily know the correct interpretation, this being a type of knowledge reserved for the Prophet, his leading Companions, saints (awliyā), and those firmly rooted in knowledge (rāsikhūn fī l-'ilm). Al-Rāzī adopted this view as well and both he and al-Ghazālī wrote laws of interpretation (qānūn al-ta'wīl) specifying the circumstances under which the abandonment of the apparent sense of a Qur'ānic verse is permissible. Al-Zamaksharī was more confident in the ability of the intellect to resolve seeming contradictions by producing an appropriate interpretation.

Ibn Taymiyya accepted the role of the intellect in interpretation as well, and, like his predecessors, believed that revelation and reason will never contradict one another. What distinguishes Ibn Taymiyya's view is his insistence that there are no

real contradictions between Qur'ānic verses and authoritatively transmitted prophetic and *salafī* interpretations. He therefore rejects the concept of abandoning the apparent sense of any Qur'ānic verse or rejecting any authoritatively transmitted tradition. What exists are only seeming contradictions which can be resolved by the correct textual analysis of the Qur'ān, the Prophetic *hadīth*, and the *salafī* traditions. This is demonstrated in Ibn Taymiyya's analysis of the Light Verse where he claims that there is no contradiction in the verse itself: God both is light and possesses light. There is also no contradiction in the *salafī* interpretations: some of the meanings of *God is the light of the heavens and the earth* are that He is the Guide or the Illuminator of the heavens and the earth. Ibn Taymiyya accepts later interpretations such as the Ṣūfī one he quotes, provided they are consistent with the *salafī* interpretations.

Despite these differences, Ibn Taymiyya, al-Ghazālī and al-Rāzī share common ground in their belief that the basis for exoteric exegesis is knowledge which comes either from transmission (*naql*) or the intellect (*'aql*). The variation between commentators in these area has to do with the extent to which they rely on *salafī* interpretations, the degree to which they include or exclude weak traditions, and the degree to which they develop their own conclusions. Interpretation here is essentially a scholarly activity based on the citation and verification of *hadīths* and traditions and conclusions made by logical deduction.

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The story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir is understood by all commentators, exoteric and Ṣūfī, as a story of Mūsā's search for knowledge. Al-Qurṭubī refers to a tradition recorded in al-Bukhārī which approvingly mentions a scholar who used to travel an entire day's journey to learn a single *ḥadīth*. But this is not the kind of knowledge which the Ṣūfīs associated with Mūsā's search. Instead, they probed the meaning of the knowledge which the Qur'ān says al-Khaḍir possessed, "God-given knowledge (*'ilm laduni*)." Knowledge by transmission (*naql*) and the intellect (*'aql*) is acquired by means of study, but *'ilm laduni* is bestowed directly by God upon those who have prepared themselves through spiritual disciplines and efforts. To seek this knowledge, Mūsā must undertake a difficult journey of learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*). What is asked of him is patience and complete acceptance of al-Khaḍir's actions even though they horrify him until he learns their greater purpose. *'Ilm laduni* does not always correspond to the expectations of the intellect and its acquisition makes very different kinds of demands on the individual than knowledge of the intellect. Knowledge of this sort is inseparable from spiritual practice.

Contradiction is a problem for exoteric commentators because the intellect cannot allow it. It is not a problem for Ṣūfīs, however, because they view man's situation as being one of constant movement from one state and station to another. What is appropriate knowledge at one moment is not necessarily appropriate in the next, this being in contrast to the notion that all knowledge is beneficial to all and should be widely disseminated. This is why there can be so many different

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interpretations among Ṣūfīs of Qur'ānic verses, because each will find what corresponds to his state. Although false interpretations exist and must be rejected, the true and correct interpretations represent a kaleidoscope of meaning in contrast to the one meaning which can be grasped by the intellect. Every reading becomes a new reading. The authority of any given Ṣūfī interpretation cannot be verified by the means of exoteric verification, authentication of transmitted material and correct deduction; presumably, their veracity can only be confirmed by the same process which is their source, 'ilm ladunī. Although its critics would classify Ṣūfī interpretation as an act of self or Satanic creation, the Ṣūfīs saw its source in divine inspirations which are beyond the control of the individual, even though preparation through spiritual discipline is required.

Language and Style

The language and style of classical exoteric exegesis reflects the belief of the commentators that their primary role was the explanation and clarification of the philological, theological and legal issues raised by the Qur'ānic text. The language they used was almost exclusively the language of systematic reasoning, exposition and argument. The logical voice of the commentator is interrupted only when quoting the voices of others, these others being either the earliest commentators, including the Prophet himself, or the early storytellers. Ironically, the search for clarity among exoteric commentators sometimes had the unintended consequence of leading the reader into a complicated maze of philological, theological and legal

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subtleties, whereas the early sources they quote are far more likely to explore the homiletic opportunities of the Qur'ānic text. This is not to say that exoteric commentators did not appreciate these elements in the sources they quote. Al-Zamaksharī and al-Qurṭubī include such embellishments of storytelling and preaching even when it comes from less than reliable sources.

The style of each exoteric commentator is remarkably consistent regardless of the nature of the Qur'ānic verses being interpreted. Thus, the statements made in verse 3:7 regarding the clear and ambiguous verses, the narrative of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, and the Light Verse are addressed in very similar ways. The language is paraphrased and key words are defined sometimes with the help of pre-Islamic poetry. There is an attempt to identify details. What are the clear and ambiguous verses? Who are *those in whose hearts is a turning away*? Which Mūsā went in search of al-Khaḍir? Where is the junction of the two seas where they met? What is the *blessed olive tree neither of the east nor the west*? After al-Ṭabarī, as the problem of seeming contradictions within the Qur'ānic text and between different interpretations becomes an area of concern, commentators attempt to create narrative and theological consistency. How could Yūsha' have forgotten to mention the miracle of a dead fish coming to life and swimming away? How could a prophet of Mūsā's stature go to someone else for knowledge? How can God be called a light when *There is nothing like him* (42:11)?

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The metaphorical language which occurs in the Qur'ān poses a challenge for exoteric commentators because of its inherent ambiguity. Accordingly, even a seemingly simple Arabic idiom such as *a wall which was almost falling down* (literally, "a wall which wanted or intended to fall down") provokes extensive commentary. Al-Ṭabarī gives many examples from Arabic speech to demonstrate that this is normal usage. Al-Zamaksharī and al-Qurṭubī see the phrase as confirmation of the existence of figurative language (*majāz*) in the Qur'ān, in opposition to those who denied it as a challenge to the Qur'ān's absolute clarity and veracity. Al-Zamaksharī finds the inclusion of figurative language a sign of the Qur'ān's inimitability (*i'jāz*) because such language indicates rhetorical excellence.

More complicated than this phrase of the wall, however, is the problem of interpreting the Light Verse. Al-Zamaksharī and al-Rāzī find it necessary to abandon the obvious sense (*zāhir*) of the verse altogether. Al-Zamaksharī uses an example from Arabic speech to justify re-writing the verse to read "God is the possessor of the light of the heavens and the earth." Al-Rāzī argues at some length attempting to demonstrate the absurdity of the obvious sense of the verse, and then accepts the metaphorical *salafī* interpretation also preferred by al-Ṭabarī, "God is the guide of the people of the heavens and the earth." This is also al-Qurṭubī's preferred interpretation but, contrary to al-Rāzī, he argues that the interpretation is part of the obvious sense of the verse because light understood as guidance is part of standard Arabic speech. The use of metaphor in the Qur'ān is necessary, he argues, because

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man only understands things by means of what is familiar to him. But he makes a distinction between a metaphorical interpretation such as "God is the guide" which reflects standard language usage, and metaphorical interpretations which do not, such as the interpretations which consider the various elements of the niche as metaphors for Muḥammad, his father, grandfather, and Ibrāhīm. Al-Qurṭubī claims that it is only the latter which abandons the obvious sense of the verse and is therefore unacceptable. Ibn Taymiyya also rejects the concept of abandoning the obvious sense of the verse. Like al-Qurṭubī, he finds the metaphorical interpretation of God as guide part of the obvious sense because it is one of the meanings of light in standard Arabic usage. But Ibn Taymiyya is more careful to retain the original wording of the verse and stresses that this interpretation is only one of the meanings of *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*. He accepts interpretations based on analogy (*qiyās*) so long as the analogy is sound and does not distort the wording of the text (*taḥrīf*).

Classical Ṣūfī commentaries are by their very nature selective because they contain only that with which the exegete has been inspired and commanded to reveal. The meanings which are expressed take on forms of both clear and ambiguous discourse. Allegoresis is the type of interpretation most closely associated with Ṣūfī interpretation and it is the most controversial because it appears to abandon the obvious sense of Qur'ānic verses. The strictures against abandoning the obvious sense somewhat explain the inconsistencies in al-Ghazālī's various attempts to

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justify and define acceptable metaphorical interpretation. Allegoresis in Ṣūfī interpretation is based on a theory of correspondances between the spiritual and the material world, and between the macrocosm of the universe and the microcosm of man.

But allegoresis represents only one of the many types of discourse used in Ṣūfī interpretation, the others being poetry, wordplay, narrative, myth, preaching, theology and philosophy. An example of this variety of approach can be seen in the Ṣūfī commentary on verse 3:7. Al-Maybudī presents a poem taunting those who have no real understanding of the ambiguous verse:

> Do not stroll around the royal curtain of secrets!
>   What can you do since you are not a warrior?[1]

Al-Qushayrī uses a metaphor to compare those who have knowledge of the Qur'ān's meanings to those who do not, those "illuminated by the rays of the suns of understanding" and those who "are swept away in the wadis of doubt and deception."[2] Al-Kāshānī's interpretation of the same verse appropriates theological and philosophical discourses to explain Ṣūfī theories regarding unity and multiplicity, while al-Naysābūrī details a mythic vision of man's loss and rediscovery of his primordial knowledge.

Although some Ṣūfī commentaries remain relatively inaccessible due to their specialized technical vocabulary, many capitalize on the homiletic opportunities of

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[1] Al-Maybudī 3:24. Quoted above in the section on verse 3:7.
[2] Al-Qushayrī 1:233. Quoted above in the section on verse 3:7.

the Qur'ānic text in ways that exoteric commentaries, bound by different objectives, can not. In commenting on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir, the Ṣūfī commentaries are far more focused than their exoteric counterparts on the meaning of the narrative for individual believers. Al-Qushayrī points out the connection between seeking greater knowledge and learning proper behavior (*ta'dīb*). Al-Maybudī expands the topic into an edifying sermon containing concrete suggestions for the aspirant to God-given knowledge. For al-Kāshānī and al-Naysābūrī the characters and elements of the story represent the physical and spiritual anatomy of the believer and his struggles. Although the style of these commentators is quite different, the objective is the same, what al-Ghazālī calls applying the Qur'ānic text to oneself (*takhṣīṣ*).

The response of the Ṣūfī commentators to the Light Verse is noteworthy for the fact that, unlike most of the exoteric commentators, the Ṣūfīs adopt a rather literal understanding of the phrase *God is the light of the heavens and the earth*. Al-Ghazālī does this explicitly by calling physical light metaphor (*majāz*) in relation to the real light of god. Following *salafī* interpretations, Ṣūfī commentators extend this light to Muḥammad and believers as well. Again, it is light understood in a literal manner, as can be seen in the story narrated by al-Maybudī in which the one believer in a crowd of 30,000 Romans is recognized by the bishop who is able to perceive his light.

The variety of style and content in Ṣūfī commentary reflects their belief in the plentitude of meaning to be found in the Qur'ān. Genres such as poetry and

storytelling which were treated with some suspicion in exoteric Islam are accepted wholeheartedly here, and if anything, the elements of metaphor, wordplay and narrative take precedence over logical explanations. The connection between other kinds of Ṣūfī writing and the Qur'ān becomes clearer when one recognizes that these kinds of language acts represent an integral part of the Ṣūfī response to the Qur'ānic text.

APPENDIX

Allegory, Symbol, and Imagination in Ṣūfī hermeneutics:
a survey of Western scholarship

The first Western scholar to discuss Ṣūfī exegesis was Goldziher in his *Die Richtungen der islamischen Koranauslegung.*[1] Goldziher approached the material from the point of view of one who firmly believed that Ṣūfī thought is radically different from what he calls "der ursprungliche, traditionelle Islam,"[2] apparently having concluding that there is little basis for Ṣūfī beliefs in the Qur'ān. Not surprisingly then, he views Ṣūfī exegesis as an attempt to reconcile these different belief systems and to justify the Ṣūfī worldview within an Islamic framework, and the methodology which best suits this purpose is allegoresis. Goldziher felt that the Ṣūfīs were influenced in this by Platonic thought which contrasts the world of appearances with the world of Ideas, just as Ṣūfī exegetes distinguish the exoteric (*ẓāhir*) from the esoteric (*bāṭin*) levels of meaning in the Qur'ān. While Ṣūfīs insisted that they were uncovering deeper meanings of the Qur'ān, Goldziher finds them reading ideas into a text essentially alien or even hostile to their system of thought. However, while Goldziher writes as if his comments are broadly applicable to all Ṣūfī exegesis, the sources he discusses are in no way representative of the diversity of content in this genre. He begins his discussion with the writings of the

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[1] Goldziher, *Die Richtungen*, 180-262.
[2] Ibid. 180.

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Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā',[3] writings whose connection to Ṣūfī exegesis is less obvious than

Goldziher would have us believe. These syncretic writings, however do provide

extensive evidence of the use of the foreign ideas which Goldziher defines as alien to

the Qur'ānic text. Goldziher then presents the commentary of Ibn 'Arabī as the

prototype of the exegesis of Islamic mystics. The commentary Goldziher refers to is

actually the work of one of the followers of Ibn 'Arabī, 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kāshānī.

Kāshānī's extensive use of philosophical vocabulary foreign to the Qur'ān and his

style of making abrupt and sometimes seemingly arbitrary equivalencies between the

Qur'ānic text and man's spiritual psychology does provide some evidence of

Goldziher's view of Ṣūfī exegesis. However, it is far from clear that Kāshānī is the

prototype of Ṣūfī exegesis, as Goldziher suggests.

Massignon disagreed with the conclusions of Goldziher and attempted to

show through an analysis of early Ṣūfī vocabulary that it was the Qur'ān itself,

constantly recited, meditated on and practiced which was the origin and genuine

source for the development of Ṣūfism.[4] Nwyia continued Massignon's research,

focusing particularly on the mystical commentary attributed to Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq.

Nwyia concluded that Ja'far aṣ-Ṣādiq's commentary was the result of a dialogue

between personal, mystic experience and the text of the Qur'ān. The vocabulary

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[3] The Ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā' were a secret society in 10th century Basra, Iraq which published a book known as the *Rasā'il ikhwān aṣ-Ṣafā'*. The work represents an attempt to address most of the sciences of the Islamic and Hellenic worlds from an Ismā'īlī and Neoplatonic point of view. See Marquet's article "Ikhwān al-Ṣafā'" in EI[2].
[4] Massignon, *Essai*. Massignon based his conclusions on an analysis of the works attributed to Ḥusayn b. Manṣūr al-Ḥallāj.

found in this commentary marks the beginning of the development of specific Ṣūfī

terminology which was not derived from foreign ideas and concepts but rather

created to describe this dialogue originating from and remaining within a Qur'ānic

context.[5] Both Massignon and Nwyia insist that the Qur'ānic text remains primary

for the Ṣūfī; that is to say, the Muslim mystic does not impose his own ideas on the

Qur'ānic text, but rather discovers ideas in the course of his experiential dialogue

with the text.[6]

The experiential basis for Ṣūfī exegesis has lead some scholars to make a

distinction between the terms "allegory" and "symbol." According to Corbin,

> Allegory is a more or less artificial representation of generalities and
> abstractions which can be perfectly well grasped and expressed in other ways.
> A symbol is the only possible expression of that which is symbolized, that is
> to say of the thing signified with which it symbolizes. It can never be
> deciphered once and for all.[7]

> To penetrate the meaning of a symbol is in no sense equivalent to making it
> superfluous or abolishing it, for it always remains the sole expression of the
> signified thing which it symbolizes.[8]

While symbols may display cosmological information which is equivalent to what

can be found in philosophical works, Corbin insists that the function of symbolic

works is different because they concern the transmutation of the soul.

> The *ta'wīl* of texts supposes the *ta'wīl* of the soul; the soul cannot restore,
> return the text to its truth, unless it too returns to its truth (*ḥaqīqat*).[9]

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[5] Nwyia, *Exégèse Coranique*.

[6] The experiential methodology of the early Ṣūfīs is confirmed as well in the study of Sahl al-Tustarī by Böwering, *The Mystical Vision* and Heath's analysis of Ibn ʿArabī in "Creative Hermeneutics."

[7] Corbin, *History of Islamic Philosophy*, trans. Sherrard, 13.

[8] Corbin, *Avicenna and the Visionary Recital*, trans. Trask, 30.

[9] Ibid. 31.

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Corbin is saying here that even when an equivalence is found between a symbol in a text and a philosophical abstraction, the symbol nonetheless has an additional function and meaning and that the true understanding of a symbol necessitates an experiential participation and transmutation of the soul encountering it.

Gutas objects to Corbin's definitions of "allegory" and "symbol," finding no basis for his distinctions in the dictionary definition of these terms and traces Corbin's definitions back to his "obsession with what he perceived to be the allegedly ineffable Iranian spirituality."[10] But while Corbin can certainly be criticized for failing to distinguish between his own ideas and those of the authors he studies, he makes important points about the nature of hermeneutics. His comments are not entirely original but echo discussions begun in the 19th century by European philosophers and literary theorists. The English poet and philosopher Samuel Taylor Coleridge (d.1834) attempted to define the terms "symbol" and "allegory" particularily with regards to the problem of allegorical interpretation of scripture. Like Corbin, he uses the term "allegory" to refer to reductionistic interpretations which in no way reflect what he feels are the profound and multivalent "symbols" found in the Bible. Coleridge also distinguishes between "allegorical interpretations" which he defines as interpretations which artificially read extrinsic

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[10] Gutas, *Avicenna and the Aristotelian Tradition* 299. Gutas' objection to Corbin's use of terminology is related to his objection to Corbin's interpretation of the nature of the works of the philosopher Ibn Sīnā. Whereas Corbin sees Ibn Sīnā moving beyond knowledge obtained through rational discourse alone to knowledge gained through mystical experience, Gutas insists that Ibn Sīnā's use of symbolic discourse is merely a tool within a thoroughly rational system of thought. For another analysis of the use of symbolic discourse in Ibn Sīnā, see Heath's *Allegory and Philosophy in Avicenna (Ibn Sīnā)*.

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ideas back into scripture, and "allegorical applications" which he defines as interpretations based on sound theological reasoning combined with textual and historical evidence.[11]

Gutas particularly objects to Corbin's use of the word "symbol" to refer to something which cannot be expressed in any other way. Izutsu adds something to this discussion in an article on metaphorical thinking in Iranian Ṣūfism. He begins his essay with Aristotle's definition of metaphor from the *Poetics*, a definition which he takes to mean that metaphor is a linguistic sign functioning in a dual role by pointing simultaneously to a literal or conventional meaning and to another non-conventional or figurative meaning. Izutsu suggests that this is a problematic definition for Ṣūfis because, for them, what would ordinarily be the figurative meaning is, in fact, the more literal or "real" meaning and correspondingly, the conventional meaning is the more figurative. The example Izutsu chooses to illustrate this is that of light. When the mystic experiences spiritual light, he is not perceiving something similar to light, but rather sees a light far more powerful and "real" than physical light. The mystic does not choose a metaphor to describe his visionary experience because the metaphor or symbol does not point to something other than itself but rather is an indicator of its own self and the mystic has merely perceived this reality. Seen from the outside, the mystic's description of this reality appears to be a metaphor, but this is only because the observer has not grasped the

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[11] Gatta, "Coleridge and Allegory."

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true nature of things. Izutsu is not saying that Ṣūfīs never use metaphors in the ordinary sense of the term, but he distinguishes these from what he calls "archetypal metaphors" like light and darkness. Archetypal metaphors are not artificially or artistically created but rather are the result of mystic experience. Knowledge of the ways things truly are is gained by "unveiling (*kashf*) not "deduction (*istidlāl*)."[12] Elsewhere Izutsu calls this kind of thinking "mythopoetic" or "imaginal" thinking.[13]

What is imaginal thinking? In another work which analyzes Ibn 'Arabī's *Fuṣūṣ al-ḥikam* with the help of 'Abd ar-Razzāq al-Kāshānī's commentary, Izutsu writes that Ibn 'Arabī's definition of imagination differs from our ordinary definition which signifies "the faculty of producing in the mind a deceptive impression of the presence of a thing which is not actually there in the external world or which is totally non-existent."[14] In contrast, Ibn 'Arabī's understanding of imagination is as a function of the mind which makes the state of affairs in the higher planes of Being visible. To understand imagination in Ibn 'Arabī, we have to understand his spiritual geography. There are things which exist in the World of Images (*'ālam al-mithāl*), an intermediary realm between the corporeal and spiritual worlds. These things are not like Platonic Ideas because they are not pure intelligibility, but rather share some of the sensible characteristics of the material world. The images which appear to ordinary people from this other world are usually deformed and are therefore rightly

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[12] Izutsu, *Creation and the Timeless Order of Things.* Cf. al-Qushayrī's similar statement in the section on the story of Mūsā and al-Khaḍir above.

[13] Izutsu, "The Archetypal Image of Chaos in Chuang Tzu" and the article "Ishraqiya" in *Encyclopedia of Religion.*

[14] Izutsu, *Sufism and Taoism* 12.

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called products of imagination in the ordinary sense of the term. However, even ordinary people experience the faculty of imagination functioning in the proper way when they dream in sleep. The images which come to a person from this world are always in need of interpretation, just as dreams need interpreting in order to be understood. Some extraordinary people, such as prophets and gnostics, are able to perceive the images of this other world both in dreaming and in waking states and have the ability to interpret what they have seen. Furthermore, they experience the world of the senses in a like manner, as if they were perpetually in a dream and they are able to interpret sensible things just as they interpret images from the other world as manifestations of Divine self-disclosures.[15] The knowledge which is obtained through unveiling or imaginal thinking is not antithetical to the knowledge which is obtained through reason, but rather complements it. The two modes of understanding correspond to the concepts of God's transcendence (*tanzīh*) and His immanence (*tashbīh*). If a man tries to gain knowledge through reason alone, he will see only God's distance from Creation. If he tries to understand through the concrete imagery of imagination alone, he will see only God's nearness. Only when he combines these two modes of understanding will he understand the true nature of things and this is only possible through the experience of unveiling (*kashf*). The right attitude is a realization of the *coincidentia oppositorum* which Ibn 'Arabī calls perplexity (*hayra*). In this state, however, imagination is superior to reason.[16]

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[15] Ibid. 7-22.
[16] Ibid. 48-88.

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The concepts of imaginal thinking and imagination in Ṣūfī thought and

Islamic theosophy were first studied in the West by Corbin.[17] While his works are

fascinating in the material he sets forth and the issues he raises, Corbin is a confusing

author to follow unless one is able to recognize and understand all the references he

makes to other intellectual worlds, the "allegory-symbol" discussion mentioned

above being a good case in point. Fortunately, the difficulties presented in Corbin's

approach to this material have been greatly redressed in two books by Chittick, *The*

Sufi Path of Knowledge and *Imaginal Worlds.*

Chittick acknowledges and respects the importance of Corbin's work in this

area while pointing out that Corbin's wholehearted concern with his own

philosophical agenda and his selective use of Ibn 'Arabī for the same make it very

difficult to separate his thought from that of Ibn 'Arabī unless one has read all the

primary sources oneself.[18] Chittick's works, on the other hand, reflect an exhaustive

reading of the original sources along with careful analysis. In his *Imaginal Worlds*

Chittick comments on the relationship of cosmic imagination and poetic discourse by

means of an analysis of Ibn 'Arabī's *Dhakhā'ir al-a'lāq*, a commentary on his diwan,

Tarjumān al-ashwāq, as well as selections from the *Futūḥāt al-makkiyah*. Although

the source material is not in the specific genre of Qur'ānic exegesis, the discussion is

relevant because it addresses the use of poetry and symbolic discourse by Sufis, and

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[17] Corbin's first book on the subject was *Creative Imagination in the Sufism of Ibn 'Arabi* and the
second was *Spiritual Body and Celestial Earth*, an examination of imagination in the writings of
Shihābuddīn Yaḥyā Suhrawardī (d. 1191), Ibn 'Arabī, and later Ṣūfī and theosophist writers up to the
nineteenth century.
[18] Chittick, *Sufi Path of Knowledge* xix.

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it is exactly this kind of creative compositional writing which characterizes much of their exegetical works. Ibn 'Arabī presents his poetic imagery as descriptions of the Divine self-disclosures he has witnessed in the invisible world. The poetic imagery is not an equivalence for abstract ideas but rather ideas in a sensory form. Images predominate in these writings just as they predominate in revelation over abstract rational ideas. When rational thinkers try to manipulate the Qur'ānic text by interpretation (*ta 'wīl*) so that it will correspond to their abstract and rational way of thinking, they replace the predominance of God's similarity (*tashbīh*) in the revelation with His transcendence (*tanzīh*). Ibn 'Arabī does not use the word *ta 'wīl* to describe his own meditation on God since for him, *ta 'wīl* always has this negative connotation. For Ibn 'Arabī, exegesis has more to do with understanding the ontological referents in the text than in resolving ambiguities which, in and of themselves, correspond to the ambiguous nature of higher realms.[19]

If this is how we are to understand Ibn 'Arabī's concept of allegoresis, his concept of allegorical composition can perhaps be understood by his comments on the striking of similitudes (*ḍarb al-amthāl*). He mentions that God forbids man to strike similitudes for Him because of man's ignorance (quoting the Qur'ān, 16:64), but qualifies this by saying that the prophets and the friends of God may do so because they have knowledge of Him. The friend of God does not really create by

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[19] Chittick, *Imaginal Worlds* 67-82.

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himself, but rather witnesses the similitudes struck by God and merely describes them.[20]

Chittick suggests that Ibn 'Arabī uses the poetic mode of discourse for several reasons. If the subject of the poetry is really God and not beautiful women, why doesn't he just speak of God? Firstly, Ibn 'Arabī is not writing from a vision he had of God Himself but rather a vision he had of a divine self-disclosure (*tajallī*) which is related to the world of created beings. Secondly, the writer wants to express what he has seen in language which will be understood; rational and abstract language would distort the perception of the Divine self-disclosure. Thirdly, he wants to use language and images which will attract and awaken his readers to the realities of the spiritual life, and souls are enamored by erotic discourse. Lastly, the proper courtesy (*adab*) of speaking of God is not to refer to Him directly but rather obliquely through His creation.[21] According to Murata and Chittick, the poetic discourse used by the Sūfīs helps explain the broad appeal of their writings.

> If Kalam writings are mainly abstract, as befits a rational approach, Sufi writings tend in the direction of concreteness, as befits the imaginal perception provided by unveiling. This helps explain why Sufism has been far more pervasive a presence in Islamic civilization than either Kalam or philosophy. Many Sufi theoreticians made full use of the possibilities of imagery, symbolism, and storytelling, and hence they were able to speak to everyone. Anyone can understand a story, even if the point of the story is a subtle theological or metaphysical teaching, but very few people can understand the abstract reasoning involved in the typical arguments of the Kalam specialists and the philosophers.[22]

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[20] Ibid.
[21] Ibid.
[22] Murata and Chittick, *The Vision of Islam* 263-4.

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Rahman does not agree with Ṣūfī's view of himself as a witness who merely

describes what he has seen, instead seeing evidence of secular creativity. In an

article reviewing the historical development of the concepts of imagination and the

"world of images (*'ālam al-mithāl*)," Rahman traces the attempts of Ṣūfīs to explain

the seemingly illogical events of the Afterlife by means of these concepts without

allegorizing them as some of the philosophers did. Rahman takes a critical view of

the Ṣūfīs' claims to mystical experience.

> Once the flood of imagination is let loose, the world of figures goes beyond
> the specifically religious motivation that historically brought it into existence
> in the first place and develops into the poetic, the mythical, and the
> grotesque: it seeks to satisfy the relatively suppressed and starved artistic
> urge. Much of the contents of the *'ālam al-mithāl*, as it develops later, has
> therefore, nothing to do with religion but indirectly with theater.[23]

Ibn 'Arabī claims he is a witness rather than a participant in God's creative acts, but

Rahman recognizes only the results of human creativity and not descriptions of

theophanies.

To what degree is the Ṣūfī acting as an artist? Bürgel believes that the arts

flourished in the Islamic world because of Ṣūfīsm. While orthodox Islam criticized

and sometimes condemned poetry, representational art and music, seeing in their

power an attempt to rival the creativity and power of God, two aspects of Ṣūfī

doctrine laid the groundwork for the acceptance and even encouragement of artistic

activities. The first one was the theory of emanation, a Neoplatonic idea adopted

early on by Muslim mystics which views the world of multiplicity, the Creation, as

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[23] Rahman, "Dream, Imagination, and *'Ālam al-mithāl*" 415.

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an emanation from the One, God. In loving two *ḥadīth* in particular, "I was a hidden treasure and wanted to be seen," and "God is beautiful and loves beauty," Ṣūfīs showed their belief in Creation as a place whose phenomena could be seen as manifestations of God's beauty. Their theory of the Perfect Man views man as potentially God-like in his ability to manifest the qualities of God, including His ability to create and imagine. By means of these theories acts of creativity become what Bürgel calls "licit magic."[24] The emphasis of orthodox Islam on God's trandscendence leads to seeing God as completely separate from Man and His creation and considers Man's attempts to create as dangerous acts of hubris and even idolatry. In contrast, Ṣūfīsm's emphasis on God's immanence allows the mystic the possibility of witnessing and participating in the manifestations of God's beauty.

In contrast to Bürgel's "licit magic," Dabashi examines the history of the Persian Ṣūfī poetical tradition and concludes that the Ṣūfīs appropriated the discourse of poetry, subordinating the artistic impulse to a mystical worldview. Persian Ṣūfī poetry developed within the context of a competition for authority among jurists, philosophers, court politicians and the Ṣūfīs. Each group sought to legitimize and propagate their respective worldviews through various forms of writing; one of the genres Ṣūfīs adopted was poetry. In doing so, Dabashi suggests that poetry lost its independent claim to truth.

> When poetry qua poetry—not poetry as versified occasion for mystical reflection—forfeited its autonomous address/access to a truth coexistent with its own reality, it lost precious territory to Sufi ideas. Poetry became

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[24] Bürgel, *The Feather of Simurgh* 16-9.

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subservient to the mystical cause and almost forgot that it had an independent claim on reality. But Sufism benefited greatly from this subservience of the poetic imagination. The attempt to argue that poetry and mysticism have something quintessentially in common with each other does not reduce the autonomy of one to the authority of the other. The intrusion of Sufism into poetry is a simultaneous provision of a ready-made answer to enduring questions that must and does constantly animate poetry. When poetry propagates and celebrates the answers that Sufism, as a body of established and self-evolving doctrines, has independently reached outside poetry, it robs itself of its own access to its own answers.[25]

Dabashi is suggesting that when the Ṣūfīs began writing poetry, or when poets became Ṣūfīs, they became propagandists for their mystical doctrines rather than poets first and foremost.

Lewisohn draws a similar conclusion but from a very different point of view. According to Lewisohn, there is no "art for art's sake" in Persian Ṣūfī literature. Art is always subordinated to its spiritual roots.[26] But whereas Dabashi sees competing discourses, Lewisohn sees poetry which invites the reader to share in the experience from which it arises, that of *dhawq*, a word which he translates as "creative intuition" and "a faculty of heart-vision that can 'savour' truths beyond the physical senses"[27] (literally, the word *dhawq* means "tasting"). Ṣūfī poetry is best understood in the way Lewisohn claims the Ṣūfīs themselves understood it, as an expression of

archetypal logopoeia, that is to say, as a communication derived from the imaginal world (*'ālam-i mithāl*) or the realm of archetypal meanings (*'ālam-i ma'nā*), understanding it as an expression of precise symbolic meanings working systematically at a supra conscious associative level.[28]

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[25] Dabashi, "Historical Conditions of Persian Sufism" 169.
[26] Lewisohn, *Beyond Faith and Infidelity* 19.
[27] Ibid. 176.
[28] Ibid. 175.

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Lewisohn questions the validity of approaching Ṣūfī poetry from an aesthetic and literary perspective alone, for it is this kind of approach which leads to viewing Ṣūfī motifs as allegories rather than as metaphysical referents which can only be grasped experientially.

Sells suggests that to describe Ṣūfī poetry as an appropriation of a profane literature is to diminish the creative clash of cultures which gives the poetry its power. The topic of mystical union in Sufism amply demonstrates what Sells calls "the interpermeability and interfusion of discursive and cultural worlds" which is a central aspect of classical Islamic culture.[29] Sells does not directly address the issue of whether or not the Ṣūfī acts as an artist; instead his research demonstrates the interplay between languages worlds through an analysis of five different modes of discourse used by the Ṣūfīs to describe their experiential knowledge. Ṣūfī poetry borrowed themes and structures from the Arab *qaṣīda*, a borrowing for which Sells gives examples, but this use of poetic discourse is but one of the several modes of discourse he finds used by Ṣūfīs to give expression to their mystical experiences.

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[29] Sells, "Bewildered Tongue," 88.

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